April 12, 2013

Dear Professor Hirsch,

Thank you for your recent e-mail soliciting the Division of Old English Language and Literature’s ideas to assist in the Executive Committee review of the current structure of the MLA divisions and discussion groups. We offer our thoughts with great interest and concern. Your e-mail asks that we respond to a number of different issues, including our Division’s participation and leadership in various new comparative divisions, as well as our thoughts on the merits of an “English” versus “British” designation. These are important questions and can be addressed at a future date. The present letter focuses entirely on what the Division believes is the most pressing, and indeed deeply disturbing, issue that has been put before us: whether we would consider consolidating with the two Middle English groups, Middle English Language and Literature, Excluding Chaucer (DO22), and Chaucer (DO23). In short, we would not and we strongly advise the Executive Committee against such a course of action for a range of reasons, intellectual, representational, and professional.

Intellectual/Content Based:

1. Old English and Middle English are mutually incomprehensible languages. Consolidating them would be a bit like consolidating modern Spanish and classical Latin.

2. Old English covers over a 600-year period (ca. CE 450-1100), Middle English almost 400 (1100-1485). That means, for example, that as a matter of chronology, the Canterbury Tales is as close to Northanger Abbey as it is to Beowulf; and that Malory, the last medieval Arthurian author, is closer by a couple of centuries to Pynchon, Morrison, and Rushdie, than he is to Gildas, the Middle Ages’ first Arthurian author. Old English and Middle English already constitute the two longest periods in literary study. Your proposal would create a Division comprising a millennium. It is hard for us to imagine a sound intellectual rationale for such a structure. As a practical matter, it is our view that such a scheme would simply be unworkable, and our informal conversations with the Middle English Divisions satisfy us that they are likely to feel the same way. It simply will not be possible to offer sessions with the coherence or rigor to attract participants and audiences. The end result would be that Anglophone medievalists will be forced to look for other venues to present their work—a result that surely will be good for no one. It would be more rational to consolidate Shakespeare (D025) and Seventeenth Century (D026); or all literatures 1700–1850, D027, D028, D029 and D030.
3. Under Section X, A, 1 of the MLA Constitution, the Division of Old English Language and Literature is permitted a division delegate to the Delegate Assembly. Consolidation will diminish the representation not only of Old English, but also of the medieval languages and literatures of Britain generally.

4. It is not clear from the MLA Constitution, section 7, that the Executive Council is responsible for a rearrangement, consolidation, or culling of the official Divisions. It may, according to Section 7.B.8, "establish and discharge committees and commissions of the association," but a Division is not a committee, and any consolidation of Divisions must be put forward in the Delegate Assembly as a motion.

Professional:

5. MLA Divisions in English literature tend to mirror hiring specialties and have done so for a very long time. Indeed, many universities and liberal arts colleges look to the MLA and to its divisional structures for intellectual leadership on hiring practices. By consolidating Old and Middle English, the MLA would be offering clear endorsement for conflating two distinct fields. It seems to us that the MLA should tread very lightly to avoid any appearance, however unintentional, of restructuring field specializations from above.

Proportionality, and Equity:

6. We find ourselves a little uncertain as to the exact meaning of the term “disproportionate” in your query. Does it simply mean that there are many more Divisions in English than there are for other languages? Or does it refer to the relation between Divisions and the interests of the membership? Without knowing the numbers, we suspect that the preponderance of Divisions in English may simply reflect an analogous preponderance in the membership. For the record, as individuals we support the MLA’s efforts to increase its engagement with African and Asian languages, and we suspect most of our colleagues will feel the same way. But the drastic nature of your proposal makes us worried that you are expecting scholars of Old and Middle English literature to bear more than their fair share of the burden for this change. The MLA has maintained an excellent reputation for protecting minority fields. We do not see what will be gained if the MLA exchanges the marginalization of medievalists for the marginalization of African and Asian fields.

7. Although Division names such as “Old English” and “Middle English” imply attention to the English language alone, scholars in these fields are actually responsible for works produced in other, even less represented tongues, such as Anglo-Latin, medieval Latin more generally, Old and Middle Irish, and Anglo-Norman. The Old and Middle English Divisions should rightly be seen as umbrellas for a number of smaller fields. They foster multi-lingual study, and thus help to work against monolingualism, an important concern of the MLA. Indeed it may be advisable for the Old and Middle English Divisions to discuss further whether the current names of the Divisions reflect the state of our fields accurately and to think about possible alternatives.
In summary, consolidating the Old and Middle English Divisions makes no sense intellectually and offers no apparent advantages toward furthering our understanding of the rich and diverse culture, as well as the vast period of time, we call the Middle Ages. It would also diminish representation and participation of the early period-fields at MLA—the most powerful and important professional organization for literary study—and ultimately work to rob both MLA and the profession of historical depth, and of knowledge about the earliest surviving texts in the English language. Such knowledge is crucial to the future health of literary and cultural studies. We are glad to engage in continued dialogues with the EC on new divisions and configurations, but urge the Committee to put the idea of consolidating the entire Middle Ages to rest.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Stacy S. Klein
Chair, Executive Committee, Division of Old English Language and Literature
Associate Professor, Department of English
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey
ssklein@rci.rutgers.edu

Kathleen Davis
Secretary, Executive Committee, Division of Old English Language and Literature
Associate Professor, University of Rhode Island

Stephen J. Harris
Member, Executive Committee, Division of Old English Language and Literature
Associate Professor, University of Massachusetts, Amherst

Elaine Treharne
Member, Executive Committee, Division of Old English Language and Literature
Professor, Stanford University

Samantha Zacher
Program Chair, Executive Committee, Division of Old English Language and Literature
Associate Professor, Cornell University