



Re-: An Errant Glossary, ed. by Christoph F. E. Holzhey and Arnd Wedemeyer, *Cultural Inquiry*, 15 (Berlin: ICI Berlin, 2019), pp. 91–97

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Repetition

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ABSTRACT: Serial texts must repeat, so that they can be recognized, but they must also change, so that they can remain interesting. Unusual temporal manipulations can emerge in such texts in order to balance these contradictory demands. This essay studies two serial texts whose need for self-extension produces a suspension of historical time: the contemporary animated sitcom *The Simpsons*, and medieval romance as theorized by the twelfth-century poet Wace. I suggest that we might name this temporal constraint fiction.

Repetition

DANIEL REEVE

The Simpsons, the world's best-known animated sitcom, has a curious relation to time, as everyone who has seen it knows.¹ In any given episode, a remarkable sequence of events takes place: Bart may win an elephant in a radio phone-in competition,² or Homer may become the owner of the Denver Broncos as a result of the generosity of his supervillain boss,³ or Lisa may give a principled speech that results in the arrest of a corrupt politician).⁴ And yet the consequences of these life-changing happenings do not survive beyond the end of the episode in which they take place: the credits roll, the reset button is pushed, and the family returns to their sofa.⁵ At the beginning of each new

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- 1 *The Simpsons*, created by Matt Groening (Fox Broadcasting, 1989-).
 - 2 'Bart Gets an Elephant', season 5, episode 17, dir. by Jim Reardon (aired 16 January 1994).
 - 3 'You Only Move Twice', season 8, episode 2, dir. by Mike Anderson (aired 3 November 1996).
 - 4 'Mr. Lisa Goes to Washington', season 3, episode 2, dir. by Wes Archer (aired 26 September 1991).
 - 5 There is one major exception: the two-part episode 'Who Shot Mr. Burns?', season 6, episode 25, dir. by Jeffrey Lynch (aired 21 May 1995), and season 7, episode 1, dir. by Wes Archer (aired 17 September 1995).

episode, we are invited to forget the years of accreted narrative that precedes it, except when these accretions are played for laughs.⁶ Episode breaks thus function as a way of regenerating a state of near-endless potential for new stories, unencumbered by the need for continuity. This state of potential is maintained equally by another strange temporality. We know that *The Simpsons* takes place in a universe in which time passes. The show frequently depicts flashbacks to the characters' younger selves (notably, Homer's sung recollection of his life as a beer-seeking seventeen-year-old in 'Duffless'⁷), or flash-forwards to older versions of its protagonists (Bart as a good-for nothing divorcee, and Lisa as a successful businesswoman, in 'Holidays of Future Passed'⁸). However, none of the characters have aged in the main narrative sequence since the beginning of the show's run in 1989. True, the present-day time in which the show takes place has moved forward in pace with the production date of each episode — so an episode first aired in 2002 is understood as taking place roughly at that time — but the overall effect of this presentness is to sharpen further this sense of stasis. We should not understand *The Simpsons* as existing within historical time; instead, the show's situatedness in a roughly present time should be taken as a guarantee that it is *not* historically placed. The show exists inside historical time, but isolated from its flow. I want to suggest that we must understand the events of *The Simpsons* taking place, impossibly, within

6 For instance, the exchange between Bart and Lisa in 'The Two Mrs. Nahasapeemepetilons', season 9, episode 7, dir. by Steven Dean Moore (aired 16 November 1997): '— I wish I had an elephant! — You did. His name was Stampy. You loved him. — Oh, yeah.'

7 'Duffless', season 4, episode 16, dir. by Jim Reardon (aired 18 February 1993).

8 'Holidays of Future Passed', season 23, episode 9, dir. by Rob Oliver (aired 11 December 2011).

the span of a single year — one in which Bart is ten, Lisa eight, and so on; and one which exists within a timeless, ahistorical present approximated by the vague nowness of the show's setting. This is, of course, a ridiculous thing to say about a text that does not require narrative or temporal consistency to function effectively as a piece of entertainment, but I want to insist on it for the time being.

The commercial benefits of the distinctive temporality outlined above are difficult to overstate. Long-running serial texts that depend on visible human performers have to contend with the fact that these performers tend to age and change out of pace with the text. Actors may die, quit, or otherwise change in such a way that they are no longer able to perform the role as written, and jarring, immersion-breaking means must be employed to explain their absence or altered appearance. *The Simpsons*, because it is animated, can operate over a much longer arc: it has a much greater capacity to convincingly reset itself (and, in doing so, to renew its potential for producing narrative) than live-action serial television. The show's attitude towards time solves, perhaps more successfully than any other work of television, the contradictory demands of serial textuality: the demand for innovation, for new stories, alongside the need for a stasis that guarantees recognizability and consistency.

A paradox emerges: to maximize the possibility of continued commercial success, a serially extended text must stay the same — stay recognizably itself, true to the core of its own original appeal — as its run continues through time. At the same time it must change, because of the demand for new stories within the established formulas, and because of an expectation that each iteration produce a sense of closure. Such texts must therefore change as little as possible; they must satisfy a need for new stories while

remaining, in quite a strong sense, themselves. The temporal oddities of *The Simpsons* are, I suggest, explicable as a response to these practical demands. *The Simpsons* is perhaps the exemplary case of a text that has, by means of these strategies, successfully ensured its own extended continuation, even in the face of the (widely acknowledged) declining quality of its writing.

Some observations follow from the above: (1) Human finitude presents a constant challenge to serial textuality, especially in a commercial situation that demands the extended reproduction of a profitable textual product, which must ideally remain self-similar in order to ensure its continued success. (2) Serial texts must nevertheless generate an impression of novelty, change or progress with respect to their prior iterations: total stasis is not an option. (3) Certain temporal strategies, as exemplified by *The Simpsons*, provide a space in which a middle ground between finitude and stasis can emerge. (4) The concept of seriality that emerges from this examination is one of pure iteration; one in which no element of a series exists in a consequential (i.e., historical) relation with another.

At this point I would like to return to the point made above about the impossibly capacious year in which the events of *The Simpsons* appear to take place, since this show is not the first serial cultural product to be established in a period of time set apart from the flow of history, both infinitely accommodating and firmly constrained. In the middle of the twelfth century, the Jersey poet Wace writes a history of the British people in octosyllabic couplets, beginning with the story of the founder of Britain, the exiled Trojan prince Brutus. The poem narrates Brutus's discovery of Britain, up to that point empty apart from a few giants (lines 1063–64), and recounts the deeds of successive kings of

Britain up to the end of their domination of the British Isles with the death of King Arthur. An important passage for the purposes of this essay comes in the middle of Arthur's reign, after his consolidation of power across the British Isles, but before his final and hubristic campaign of imperial conquest. Wace tells us that twelve years of peace elapsed between these two periods of historically significant events. He says:

For twelve years after his return, Arthur reigned in peace. No one dared to make war on him, nor did he go to war himself. [...] In this time of great peace I speak of — I do not know if you have heard of it — the wondrous events appeared and the adventures were sought out which, whether for love of his generosity, or for fear of his bravery, are so often told about Arthur that they have become the stuff of fiction: not all lies, not all truth, neither total folly nor total wisdom. The raconteurs have told so many yarns, the story-tellers so many stories, to embellish their tales that they have made it all appear fiction.⁹

This moment has been thought of as an origin story for medieval romance, a fictional narrative mode that recounts exactly the kind of fantastic adventures that Wace describes

9 Wace, *Roman de Brut: A History of the British*, ed. and trans. by Judith Weiss, rev. edn, *Exeter Medieval Texts and Studies* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2002), lines 9731–34, 9785–99: 'Duze ans puis cel repairement / Regna Artur paisiblement, / Ne nuls guerreier ne l'osa / Ne il altre ne guereia. [...] Que pur amur de sa largesce, / Que pur poür de sa prüesce, / En cele grant pais ke jo di, / Ne sai si vus l'avez oi, / Furent les merveilles pruvees / E les aventures truvees / Ki d'Artur sunt tant recuntees / Ke a fable sunt aturnees: / Ne tut mençunge, ne tut veir / Ne tut folie ne tut saveir. / Tant unt li cunteür cunté / E li fableür tant flablé / Pur lur cuntes enbeleter, / Que tut unt fait fable sembler.'

here.¹⁰ But, perhaps more importantly, we might note that these fictions come into being — perhaps fiction in general comes into being — by means of a temporal constraint. By retreating from historical time, with its necessary depiction of human finitude, fiction initiates the possibility of the infinite multiplication of incident within a single constrained temporal frame — Wace's twelve years of romance, or the single year of *The Simpsons*.

Though medieval romances were written by many different authors, I want to suggest that these texts nevertheless deploy similar strategies of generic self-perpetuation, markedly distinct from the standard self-referential gesture of historiographical writing in this period, which justifies the writing of new historical narratives by claiming that the new text is more accurate, or more complete, than all of its now-obsolete predecessors. Romance makes no such claim: it does not need to because of the infinite capacity of the twelve years in which all these texts (at least symbolically) take place. What romances do instead is reset themselves by means of a kind of return: each text ends where it began, with an originally disrupted stasis restored, and hence with the endless possibility of new disruptions and challenges, whether these will be faced by the original protagonist, his son, or another hero entirely.¹¹ As in the case of *The Simpsons*, this is seriality as pure iteration. No one element exists in a historical or consequential relation with any other; historical time expands sideways to accommodate endlessly iterable narrative.

10 See Dennis H. Green, *The Beginnings of Medieval Romance: Fact and Fiction, 1150–1220* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 192; and Ad Putter, 'Finding Time for Romance: Mediaeval Arthurian Literary History', *Medium Aevum* 63 (1994), pp. 1–16.

11 The protagonists of medieval romance are (almost without exception) gendered male.

I have argued that such a temporality involves definite commercial advantages in the case of *The Simpsons*, and the same is true of romance, which responds in its own way to the same problem of innovative stasis navigated by the form of the serial animated sitcom. Audiences demand novelty even as their tastes remain conservative. The temporal constraint of fiction represents a compromise between stasis and innovation; one which may have been prompted at various points in cultural history by a material need to produce a reliably consumable serial product. Emerging from this need, fiction instigates a mode of repetition distinct from both the bare repetition of sameness and purely formal repetition, which divides linear time into regular units irrespective of content. This mode of repetition contains the potential for infinite reproduction, endless self-similarity, but unlike the bare repetition of sameness, remains comprehensible within human frameworks of desire and politics by separating end from conclusion.¹²

12 On the politics of time, see Christiane Frey, 'Restrain'; for a sequel to this essay, see Daniel Reeve, 'Resolution', (both in this volume).

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