



City Research Online

City St George's, University of London

Citation: Gibbs, J. (2024). The Chapter: A Segmented History from Antiquity to the Twenty-First Century. By Nicholas Dames. English, 72(279), pp. 215-216. doi: 10.1093/english/efae002

This is the accepted version of the paper.

This version of the publication may differ from the final published version. To cite this item please consult the publisher's version.

Permanent repository link: <https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/32518/>

Link to published version: <https://doi.org/10.1093/english/efae002>

Copyright and Reuse: Copyright and Moral Rights remain with the author(s) and/or copyright holders. Copies of full items can be used for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, unless otherwise indicated, provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way. For full details of reuse please refer to [City Research Online policy](#).

The Chapter: A Segmented History from Antiquity to the Twenty-First Century. By Nicholas Dames. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2023. ISBN 9780691135199. Hb. 384pp. £30.

It is one of the most intuitive and least theorised aspects of reading: the pause, in bed at night, when you finish a chapter of your book and consider whether you'll read on, or reach for your bookmark. You check the time, and your own sense of tiredness or readiness for sleep, and perhaps when your alarm's set for in the morning; you flick forward to see how long the next chapter is, and weigh how committed you are to the story – how much you *need* to know what happens next, *now*. All of which takes no more than a second or two, but it's the author's job to make the decision as hard as possible – to encode into the book's vaguely occult interface the equivalent of the TV streaming mechanism that announces: 'Next episode plays in 10... 9... 8... seconds.'

It's not that no one has written on the history and evolution of the chapter before (Genette considered them, and Dames also alerts us to work by Philip Stevick, George Mathieu and Marshall Brown, among others), but certainly never as comprehensively as Nicholas Dames does here. If it's not exhaustive in its analysis (and I shudder to think of the book that is), then it throws down a formidable gauntlet to anyone who thinks they can do better. In its origin it may be a response to the contingent oddity of the novelistic chapter – why it still (or even) exists, and what it can tell us about the separate but linked *times* of the reader and the written – but Dames goes back past Tolstoy, Austen and Sterne to explore the chapter's origins as an aid to navigating non-linear texts – treatises, legal documents and the like.

The book divides into three sections: the latter two consider the chapter in the novel and in the book before the novel, while the first sets out ten premises Dames will explore in what follows. These move from the innocuous-but-useful (the chapter is 'stylistically distinct' from segments found in, e.g. music or drama (p. 17); it is 'so ubiquitous as to be almost invisible' (p. 20)) to the intriguing-but-plausible ('it is resistant to wholeness, autonomy, being excerpted' (p. 26)) and on to the refreshingly stimulating: 'Its long history is that of a shift from utility to aesthetic form, or from indexicality to significance – but it never quite sheds its relation to utility, which remains available for use in either sincere or parodic modes' (p. 31).

This is an erudite and thoroughly researched book, that is as happy discussing the division of biblical books into chapters across various European countries, and the slow movement of the indexical 'heading' from the contents page to the individual chapter heads in classical texts, as it is the serialisation of Victorian novels, or the metafictional hi-jinks of *Tristram Shandy*, with its famous 'Chapter upon Chapters'. One problem Dames faces is that chapters are so pervasive in the long and broad history of literature that he must pick examples, but under his always intelligent probing these can end up seeming less *characteristic* of broad passages in the chapter's biography than singular, seminal, even freakish instances. That he does acknowledge this tension from the outset doesn't fully excuse it: as when he pulls the neat trick of using Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters* to stand for the Victorian serial novel – before revealing that its chapter breaks are not hers at all, but were put in by the editors of the *Cornhill Magazine*.

This insistence on the chapter's slipperiness as the subject of analysis makes it harder to simply nod along when Dames surfaces from his diligent close reading to pronounce on the chapter's relationship to its historical moment. Is the loss of definition he

finds in the use of the chapter in *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* (1789) and other slave narratives really linked to the politics of 'domination and emancipation'? (p. 163) Can we see in the chaptering of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1795–96) the effect of European revolution? Call these interpretive flourishes, rather than definitive statements, and there's no loss to what is, page by page, an unstintingly fascinating and illuminating read.

And an invigorating one. Dames is a distinctive stylist, and sometimes a mischievous one, not above drolly deploying the very tactics he explicates: he titles one chapter 'In Which an Object is Proposed for Analysis', and his use of the cognate term *capitulation* is never less than judiciously ironic. He rolls up analyses into handy maxims: 'the chapter break's tendency [is] to enact a more or less tactful withdrawal from the fever of absorption' (p. 195) – which speaks to the novel-reader's bedtime quandary – or 'Whenever the chapter takes on the shape of a natural unit of time, it is inevitably reflecting on collective experience' (p. 239). Modern analogies to dolly shots, gated reverb and in-car GPS ensure the metaphors used to characterise the chapter move on from Fielding's 'inn or resting place' (p. 142) to more familiar environments.

Nor is Dames above some number-crunching. One of his most persuasive sections looks at *Middlemarch* (1871) not just in terms of its chapter wordcounts, but in terms of what he calls its 'circadian rhythm' the number of 'story days' held within the chapters over the length of the book (p. 228). Dames finds a circular pattern, with the novel's opening and closing parts often matching a day to a chapter, but the middle parts of the book stretching so that chapters skate over multiple days. More than this, though, for Dames, Eliot's chapters 'negotiate' on behalf of her characters, between the diurnal demands of their lives and the 'epochs' of their desires – their desires to be able, essentially, to narrate their own

lives. He looks at how chapter endings don't just bound an action, but move away from it: gentle veerings, as much as dangle off a cliff – with the leaps across chapter breaks performing what he elsewhere calls 'the enjambement of narrative prose' (p. 29).

It is characteristic of the book's boldness that Dames jumps from Eliot to Jon McGregor's *Reservoir 13* (2013), with its yearly chapters but similar sense of 'chronocommunity' – of characters sharing a temporal association, bounded by chapter breaks, that they are necessarily unaware of (p. 238). Later come the innovations of B.S. Johnson, Jennifer Egan and László Krasznahorkai. The omissions are near-infinite, and all infinitely excusable. But if the chapter in the end evades complete taxonomic description then *The Chapter* remains a superb attempt to account for the unaccountable, a fitting panegyric for this humblest of literary fixtures.

JONATHAN GIBBS

City, University of London