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Bale, Anthony

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Anthony Bale

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8248-9476>

Birkbeck College, University of London, U.K.

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Reflections on Chaucer, Pedagogy, and the Profession of Medieval Studies

Anthony Bale

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8248-9476>

Birkbeck College, University of London, U.K.

Abstract

Bale's doctoral research on the representation of Jews in medieval English literature led him to realize that he turned to the late-medieval period seeking not its hospitality but rather its challenges, especially the questions it forces us to ask about ourselves. For Bale, an important question deals with who is allowed within the precincts of Medieval Studies. As the data bears out, the UK's educational system has been a gatekeeper effectively limiting who takes our courses and, eventually, who teaches our courses and conducts research in our field. To ensure greater access to Medieval Studies, Bale suggests such practical steps as being aware of attainment gaps, avoiding exclusionary behavior, requiring unconscious bias training, and targeting funding for intersectional exclusions. Unless educators remain focused on access issues, Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic will too easily distract them and aggravate the disparities. Rather than looking for ourselves in the medieval past, we must see that its alterity requires we seek out alternate perspectives.

Preamble with the Prioress

In the mid-to-late 1990s, as a graduate student in the UK [United Kingdom], I embarked on what would become my doctoral research and eventually my first book, an extended reading on the representation of Jews in medieval English literature. This included a study of Chaucer's own brilliantly multifaceted examination of the seductions of hate speech, 'The Prioress's Tale' from *The Canterbury Tales*, in which a devoted nun describes the murder by Jews of a devout little Christian boy, a 'clergeon', in an Asian city.

When I told people what I was working on, they would ask, 'Are you Jewish?' This question perplexed me: people researching *Troilus & Criseyde* were not asked, 'Is your family from Troy?' Those who were studying *fabliaux* were not asked about their own sexual predilections. Why, I wondered, did questions about my personal origins intersect with my critical object of study so quickly whenever the Prioress and her tale were mentioned? I bridled at this question, because I felt that my interest in the Prioress was driven by my own critical enquiry and scholarly interests: one doesn't need to be Jewish to seek to understand the Prioress's prologue and tale which were, after all, written by a Christian poet in a Christian country which, at the time, had no Jewish community living in it. The question, 'Are you Jewish?' seemed to me to suggest that only someone with a personal investment in Jewish identity would bother to explore the ethical entailments of such a challenging piece of writing.

Like almost all students, I frequently felt 'imposter syndrome'—that I was a fraud in the academy—and I perceived that this question served to mark me out as such, insofar as it suggested, to my mind, that I had a personal axe to grind rather than a 'proper' scholarly focus. But I now realise that, more accurately, the question touched a nerve about what educational theorists and ethnographers call 'stereotype threat': the psychosocial phenomenon of feeling at risk of confirming negative stereotypes about one's own social group (the original definition is in Steele and Aronson; see too Aronson, Quinn and Spencer; Schmader). Aware of the negative stereotypes associated with a particular social group, the person who feels 'stereotype threat' then feels compelled to contradict those stereotypes. In other words, questions about one's own identity and its relation to one's scholarly work underscore internal anxieties about how to navigate relationships and about how to perform against external judgements—the very kinds of judgements that constitute the academy. Many junior scholars, faced with stereotype threat, will seek to focus on scholarly pursuits that *do not* touch their own identity, in order proleptically to counter the suggestion that they are doing their subject incorrectly. According to 'stereotype threat' theories, I had assumed or assembled a norm through which the question 'Are you Jewish?' served to exclude me. How had I, internally, constructed an academic 'norm' from which I was disqualified? If I wasn't the right kind of medievalist, who was?

Over time, I came to understand the situation rather differently. I think I was being asked about my identity because many of my fellow medievalists, both students and faculty, were themselves deeply invested in their object of study as an emanation of their identity (though many of them would have refused to admit this or have thought in these terms). Some felt an affinity with Chaucer and his *Canterbury Tales*, seeing them as the fountainhead of English culture, and him as the vernacular, humanist poet of ribaldry and ironic wit. By working on 'The Prioress's Tale' I think some of these people felt I was challenging the universal humanism, tolerance, and appeal of Chaucer's poetry, as if I were in danger of saying something that was better left unsaid. Others were Catholics, who saw in late medieval culture a direct continuity with their own subjectivity—and I wondered if, by

foregrounding the pre-Reformation abuse of Jews, I was alighting on a topic that they would have preferred to leave unexplored. Others were committed Protestants who saw in Wycliffitism and ‘Lollardy’ a recognisable Protestant history, an early Reformation, to think back through, a familiar congregationalism that chimed with their own experience of England more than the Catholic majority experience. By looking at Christian representations of Judaism, was I challenging a Christian teleology by exploring those outside of Christianity, and therefore in danger of telling a different story which challenged the centrality of their topic to the field?

Thinking about these issues for this piece caused me to return to the writings of Sister Mary Madeleva (Mary Wolff, 1887-1964), who devoted much of her critical output to defending the character of Chaucer’s Prioress. Madeleva’s approach was to understand the Prioress as a historical individual rather than a literary character, reading her directly through the lens of her own calling as a nun. Madeleva writes,

I can well understand how Chaucer might have misinterpreted [the Prioress’s] over-daintiness, and how critics have found it affected, even “a little ridiculous.” But none of them ever wore a religious habit, nor had the least idea of what real distress a Sister feels at getting a spot on her habit, especially at table. (14)

Madeleva thus saw the Prioress as a direct ancestor, an accurate portrait of herself, one that she was especially well-placed to understand; critical ambiguities about the Nun were ‘misinterpretations’ both by the critics and by Chaucer himself! Madeleva said, ‘One would have to live in a convent to appreciate fully what Chaucer has really done in these sixty lines of the *Prologue*’ (16), a bold claim of hermeneutic ownership of Chaucer’s poetry. Madeleva staunchly defended the Prioress from twentieth-century critics—especially, if implicitly, non-Catholic critics; her defence of the Prioress was not rooted in rehabilitating the violence and stereotypes of ‘The Prioress’s Tale’, but rather that the tale represents an authentically and conventionally Catholic practice which persisted into Madeleva’s own early twentieth-century American convent:

I like to think of Chaucer, the child, a “little clergeon” himself perhaps ... listening again and again to the stories of the childish singer of the *Alma Redemptoris* They are just the stories that Sisters are telling to the smaller and even the grown children in Catholic boarding schools the world over to-day; they are the stories that the children clamor for again and again and never tire of hearing. It was there that I heard them before I knew of Geoffrey Chaucer. (37)

The anti-Jewish culture of the twentieth-century Catholic church has been well described elsewhere, as has Madeleva’s critical entanglement with Catholic antisemitism (see David 155-7; Blurton and Johnson 19-20). The feature of Madeleva’s engagement with Chaucer that I want to foreground here is her conceptualisation of the role of Chaucer in devotional pedagogy—teaching appears in her account as a joyful activity in which the past is seamlessly reiterated. Her students are inculcated into a system of thought which, in her account, is transhistorical. In this way Madeleva speaks to some of the difficulties of our present moment: should we encourage our students to find themselves, and even to find joy, in the materials we study with them—even when these materials are estranged from us in context, ideology, or affinity? Or should we rely—could we ever rely?—on a critical consensus in which scholarship can be separated from identity, and thus nurture in our students a dispassionate critical

gaze that seeks to understand medieval sources on their own terms? Our knowledge of the past is inevitably marked by power relations. Madeleva's critical practice and her perceptions of Chaucer's Prioress relied on the elision of the agency and identity of the Jews from 'The Prioress's Tale'—indeed Madeleva never once wrote the word 'Jew' or 'Jews' in her 1925 essay, 'Chaucer's Nuns', on the Prioress.

When I was a postgraduate student in the late twentieth century, Madeleva's writings caused me to investigate the ugly affects, unpredictable feelings, and buried memories in 'The Prioress's Tale', and how they connected to my own moment. How could our readings of the 'Tale' be so different? What was at stake in introducing my own students to this piece of writing, and how would they react? Madeleva's writing helped me confirm that I am not a medievalist because I seek a Middle Ages concordant with my own experience; Madeleva proved useful in helping me frame my teaching practice as a way of encountering difficulty rather than concordance with the past. To my mind, the medieval past does not promise or owe us hospitality; rather, the strangeness and difficulty of the age of Chaucer issues provocative challenges to our present, rather than its confirmation.

Medieval English Studies in the UK: an exclusionary discipline?

The difficulty of our sources from the past should not mean that the contemporary academy is inhospitable. For the remainder of this discussion, I focus on the present moment rather than Chaucer's, not in terms of my own identity but in terms of the discipline of Medieval Studies. Academic disciplines vary by context, and 'diversity' and 'inclusion' have their own local modalities. Popular medieval imagery has been violently weaponised, especially in the United States, in recent years and has an ambiguous and dynamic relationship with academic teaching and research (see, for example, Albin *et al*; Kim; Whitaker and Gabriele). Beyond the headlines, how far can we say that Medieval Studies in the UK is an exclusionary discipline, and what might be the role of professional educators in this context?

It is crucial to begin any such discussion with regard to the UK by observing that, as has been long and widely recognised, educational inequality is inherent in and fundamental to the British education system: in general, children's educational opportunities are strongly linked to their parents' socio-economic background. Educational opportunity and performance is highly contingent on each child's family's ability to pay for education (just under 7% of British children attend private schools), their religious faith (Anglican, Catholic, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, and Sikh schools account for about one third of all state-funded schools in the UK), their geography (different local authorities operate vastly different school systems with different admissions procedures, including use of selection exams, especially at age 11), and their parents' willingness or ability to navigate this vast range of choices of types of school. As shown by research done by the Sutton Trust (a British charity that campaigns for educational equality and social mobility), the variance in outcomes between young people from low- and middle-income backgrounds significantly affects their social mobility for the rest of their lives, their access to the most competitive careers, and especially their access to many kinds of university education (Sutton Trust). Funding per state-school pupil varies massively across the country: at the time of writing, funding per pupil is £6,879 in the London borough of Hackney, whereas it is £4,427 per pupil in South Gloucestershire (Department for Education) – 35% less. Yet such funding does not neatly map onto 'class' or social background: South Gloucestershire is a wealthy, rural area, its inhabitants 95% white, with a below-average unemployment rate of 3.1%, whereas Hackney is a highly

urban and ethnically diverse area (55% white) with a higher-than-average unemployment rate (5.7%) (see South Gloucester Council; London Borough of Hackney). Such disparities in funding may be further drivers for parents in sending their children to private schools. In turn, tertiary education, doctoral study, and academic careers are at the end of this pipeline and carry with them the many inequalities and exclusions that are inherent in the British system. Almost all British universities are state universities under the direct governance of the Department for Education and regulated by the Office for Students.

It would be easy here to present a barrage of statistics, so I have chosen only a few to show how educational inequality is entrenched in the UK, and how advantage and disadvantage are intersectional and embedded. In what follows I use the most recent figures available, from the 2018 report of the Equality Challenge Unit, to show how university level education in the UK inherits and cements some key inequalities.

- At British universities, 78.4% of white students receive a top degree classification (I and II.i), compared to 63.4% of students from ethnic minorities (an awarding gap of 15%). Within the latter figure, Chinese, Indian, and mixed students were more likely to receive a Class I or II.i degree; students who defined as Black African, Black Caribbean, Gypsy, Traveller, or Irish Traveller were the least likely to receive these degrees.¹
- Students from ethnic minorities transition at high rates from undergraduate (BA) to MA (Master's) level study but not to PhD studies, especially in the Arts & Humanities. The main public funding body for Arts research, the Arts & Humanities Research Council (AHRC), funds both PhD and academic research. In 2016-17, only 3% of its new PhD studentships were awarded to ethnic minority students, as opposed to 73% to white students (AHRC; 22% did not disclose); about 14% of the UK population is non-white (gov.uk). It is, statistically, harder for a non-white person to receive research project funding from the AHRC: in 2016-17, 8.2% of applications for research funding were from ethnic minority applicants, but only 6.5% of awards were made to ethnicity minority researchers. Correspondingly, 79.2% of applications were from white researchers, who received 79% of awards (AHRC). Put simply and without controlling for other variables, 34% of white applicants (just over a third) were successful, whereas 27% (just over a quarter) of ethnic minority applicants were successful; had their acceptance rate been equal to that for white candidates, about five further ethnic minority applicants would have had their research projects funded.
- White men are far more likely to be university professors in all disciplines than any other group (68.4%), followed by white women (22.3%), making up over 90% of the UK professoriate; 7.3% of UK professors are ethnic minority men, and 2% are ethnic minority women.
- The median annual university salary (for UK nationals working in the UK) is £34,956 for white people, and £34,270 for ethnic minority people; however, this latter figure

¹ I have followed Bunglawala on terminology here; she advises against the frequently-used acronyms BAME [Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic] and BME [Black and Minority Ethnic], which are often misunderstood, are not associated with White ethnic minorities (for example, Traveller and Irish Traveller groups), and do not reflect how ethnic minorities refer to themselves.

disaggregates strikingly, with a median salary for those from a Chinese background of £40,523 compared to £31,016 for those from a Black background.

It is worth noting, and may surprise some readers, that ‘positive discrimination’ and many kinds of affirmative action are illegal in the UK and the European Union [EU], and so the interventions available to institutions are rather different from those in North America. ‘Positive action’ is lawful, which allows employers like universities to promote opportunities to candidates from demonstrably disadvantaged and under-represented groups in the recruitment process.

If we drill down yet further, we can get a more modulated view of our own discipline. In some subjects, ethnic minority academic staff are well-represented—for instance, in Medicine 21.5% and in Business 14.6% of academic staff come from a minority ethnic background (about 14% of the UK population describes itself as being from an ethnic minority). However, in English departments, only 5.7% of academic staff come from an ethnic minority background, and in History departments the figure is just 3.6% (Equality Challenge Unit). Using these simple headline figures alone, we can see that the study of literature and history has a diversity problem in British universities. The same statistics show that these areas are somewhat more balanced in gender and much more balanced in terms of disability.²

Universities are in part responsible, and some ways of thinking about remedies are explored below, but it is also the case that universities inherit broken pipelines from educational and social systems. If we take a look at the student body in English and History, we can see that ‘Historical and Philosophical Studies’ (the closest subject area to embrace literature and history) has strong representation of disabled students (17% compared to an average across all disciplines of 12.4%) and a reasonable balance in terms of gender (54.2% of students are female, compared to an average across all disciplines of 61.1%). However, only 11% of students in historical and philosophical studies are from an ethnic minority, as opposed to an average of 21.8% across all disciplines (rising as high as 34.1% in Law).

The availability of such statistics is valuable, but they are a blunt instrument. The element they cannot account for is social class and structures of distinction; social class, in the UK, does not map straightforwardly onto wealth, but rather combines wealth with historic cultures of privilege and entitlement as well as established networks and prejudices. For the 6.5% of children who are privately-educated in the UK, access to university places is disproportionately greater: according to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA 2019), 42.2% (Courtauld Institute of Art, London), 41.8% (Oxford University), and 39.6% (University of St Andrews) of new undergraduates attended a private school.³ In terms of the disciplines of medieval studies, this has a specific valence, since subjects like Chaucer’s poetry and early literature, Latin language, medieval history, and History of Art are far more likely to be taught in better-resourced private schools than in the state sector. Thus privately educated pupils gain a kind of cultural literacy that the majority of their peers do not and cannot acquire. Cultural ‘push’ factors also need to be taken into account, in which communities value certain subjects over others—that is, an element of self-selection is at work, based on the perceived uses of one subject over

² Gender: 56.2% of English Language & Literature academics are female, 41.6% of History academics are female, with a sector average of 49.8%. Disability: 4.9% of English Language & Literature academics are disabled, 3.8% of History academics are disabled, with a sector average of 4.8%.

³ Unfortunately, the HESA data does not drill down to subject-level.

another and perceived exclusions from these subjects. The epistemology of ‘national’ literatures and their attendant markers of prestige and value are deeply conservative and exclusive, whilst ‘English literature’ was used instrumentally in the British colonial project (see Dinshaw). If subjects like English and History are considered to be ‘white’, ‘privileged’, and/or ‘closed’, then it stands to reason that these subjects will find it harder to recruit a truly diverse cohort of students.

In recent years, a widespread way of tackling such perceptions has involved ‘decolonising the curriculum’, in order to unmake the hegemonic legacies with which scholarly subjects like Medieval Studies are freighted. Medieval English literary studies continues to yield some distinct challenges with regard to ‘decolonising the curriculum’, not least in that the body of medieval primary material in the English language is exclusively white and Christian, and largely male, in terms of its authorship. Yet the apparently monocultural nature of the medieval authors we study must not be understood as equating to a monocultural curriculum: our sources from medieval England yield a huge diversity of geographical and cultural perspectives, can be an excellent starting-point for comparative studies, can disrupt contemporary national geographies, and can be of great use in studying the premodern histories and ontologies of racism and cultural power. In other words, medieval English sources can be useful in both tracing back and querying subsequent forms of cultural imperialism, historical inequality, and cultural prestige. It is not unusual for university teachers of the Middle Ages now to embed questions of power, stereotyping, empire, and suchlike into their curricula. Moreover, it is incumbent on educators to ensure that their reading lists and citational practices are themselves not racist or exclusive; our students should be able to become familiar with a range of scholarship in which the scholar’s identity is not read (or misread) as a marker of their scholarly contribution.

Even as decolonizing the curriculum initiatives are rapidly becoming widespread in higher education, they must not be a ‘tick-box’ exercise, in which the person convening a course of study is able merely to state that they are aware of inclusivity. Rather, decolonizing the curriculum requires teachers to acquaint themselves with new sources, often in unfamiliar language traditions or scholarly silos with which they are not confident. In other words, decolonizing the curriculum requires thought and explicit design and must itself be recognized by universities as a kind of essential labor, rather than a desirable but voluntary addition. Diversifying cultural-historical curricula was the focus of a project, *Our Migration Story: The Making of Britain*, to which I was honored to contribute. The project was developed by the Runnymede Trust, the UK’s foremost think-tank working on racial equality. Aimed at teachers of all aspects of the British past, *Our Migration Story* presents accessible and pithy primary and secondary materials about immigration and diversity since 43 CE, the year the Romans invaded the British Isles. It includes teaching resources on a huge array of topics, including accounts of ‘Ipswich Man’ (a man of African origin who was buried in a Suffolk friary in the thirteenth century); The Egyptians Act of 1530 (a response to the arrival of Romani in England); and the arrival in England in 1616 of ‘Pocahontas’ (also known as Amonute and ‘Lady Rebecca Rolfe’). My own contribution to *Our Migration Story* led directly out of my experience of teaching Chaucer’s ‘Prioress’s Tale’ to students at various levels. Students would often assume that medieval England was monocultural or, if they were aware of the medieval Anglo-Jewish community, they used stereotypes about usury or projected twentieth-century antisemitism back into the Middle Ages. In my short piece for *Our Migration Story*, I focussed on making the poetry of Meir ben Elijah accessible, so students of the past could approach this remarkable source; Meir was a Jew of Norwich, the son of a rabbi, who, in the later thirteenth century, wrote more than twenty Hebrew poems of lamentation (*piyyutim*). Through an accessible

translation of one of Meir's poems alongside a brief contextualizing essay about both Meir and the English Jewish community, students and their teachers can diversify their understanding of the English past without having to develop a whole new expertise. At the same time, the resources of *Our Migration Story* could easily be used as an ancillary resource for teaching topics like Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Marlowe, as well as for historians who wish to add multiple voices to their impression of life in Norman England.

The institution at which I work as Dean of the School of Arts, Birkbeck College in the University of London, is something of an outlier with a distinctive history in terms of educational access and equality. Birkbeck was founded in 1823 as the London Mechanics' Institute by the liberal social reformer George Birkbeck (1776-1841) and was explicitly and controversially committed to widening participation in university-level study. Today, 41% of students at Birkbeck are from an ethnic minority (compared to 40% of London's population), whilst 18.6% of academic staff at Birkbeck are from an ethnic minority, compared to a UK benchmark of 7%. A key challenge area remains in that the student body in the Arts is diverse but the professoriate is not, whereas the professoriates in Law and Business are much more diverse. Blaming structural inequality and 'pipelines' is valid, but it is not enough. Academics must acknowledge our own complicity in structural racism and other structures of exclusion as well as our collective reliance on tokenism in managing this situation so far. As the educationalist Kalwant Bhopal writes, 'A failure to acknowledge racism results in a failure to act upon it and to instigate change' (160), and this is true too of other patterns of exclusion.

More constructively, educators in arts and humanities can take some straightforward steps in addressing this situation. In terms of our student body, British universities need to move from a 'reward' model of admissions to a future-orientated model, in which ambition, commitment, talent, and willingness to learn are rewarded over prior attainment. This may involve rethinking indicators of prestige, moving towards an academy that values dedication to learning rather than relying on past attainment. Each and every university department should research its attainment gaps and make all staff aware of them, accompanied by an explanation of what the university is doing to address such gaps and disparities. Students, recent graduates, and a wide range of stakeholders should be given paid roles in helping to redesign the student experience (based on their own familiarity of systems of exclusion and their perceptions) in a form of reverse mentoring. Academic staff should avoid taking certain kinds of knowledge—for example, of classical or religious literature, or of languages—for granted, as if 'everyone' knows it. They should refrain from exclusionary behaviour on social media by showing off their erudition: tweeting self-congratulatory and highly self-referential literary puns, for example, or uploading examples of students' errors, each serving to show the expert's scornful and haughty positioning. Throughout any university's procedures, a wide range of staff need to be involved, and visibly so, in decision-making and in senior roles, not only to work towards better transparency in recruitment and progression, but also to move away from a conservative and exclusionary idea of 'what an academic looks like.' At Birkbeck, we have introduced mandatory unconscious bias training for senior staff and for those on hiring panels, in order that colleagues are aware of, and better able to admit to and identify, their biases. We have also developed targeted funding streams (for example, to ex-prisoners, diagnosed dyslexics, refugees, and forced migrants) that map onto intersectional exclusions rather than relying on one-off or tokenistic gestures (which privileged groups can easily co-opt). There are many other things individuals and institutions can do.

Above all, it is incumbent on educators to embrace change, to avoid confirmation bias, and to develop open and flexible ideas of what it is to be a medievalist.

The challenge of the present

The current British government is hardly an advertisement for inclusive education: 64% of the members of the 2019 Cabinet were educated at private schools (bear in mind that only about 6.5% of British children attend private school), and 45% went to just two universities: Oxford and Cambridge (as opposed to 24% of Members of Parliament from all parties – still a remarkable statistic, given that less than 0.5% of the adult population of the UK graduated from these two universities) (see Walker). This government's business, and British public life in general, has been dominated by two topics in the last few years: Brexit (the consequences of the June 2016 referendum to leave the EU) and, in 2020, the coronavirus/Covid-19 crisis. As I write, we are still in the midst of the latter, and it is impossible to predict how this will change higher education; educators must be vigilant to maintain equality and access work as a priority and not let it become a 'discretionary' activity, relegated in importance by the contingences of the pandemic.

We are, however, in a position to make some observations about Brexit and its ramifications for higher education. The Brexit debate has, for the last five years or so, been configured around sentimental nationalism, competing notions of heritage, and myths of origins and migration; as such, it has frequently, if unpredictably, engaged with medievalist and popular historical discourses. I have written elsewhere about the language of crusading in the Brexit debate (Bale). In their pursuit of a mythical medieval figurehead for the Brexit project, Brexiteers might have been expected to alight on the English folk hero Robin Hood—the persona of radical justice and truth to power. They did not, but rather focused on St George, a highly contested image of victory and, since the later Middle Ages, the patron saint of England. For a long time St George, and St George's Day, have been implicated in English nationalist rhetoric (and Brexit has been, to a considerable degree, an English rather than British enterprise); for instance, a pro-Brexit protester draped in a St George's flag disrupted Eurostar trains from London to Brussels and Paris in 2019 on the day of a pro-Brexit march (see Stubley), whilst the pro-Brexit 'Get Britain Out' campaign tweeted, alongside a Victorian Medievalist picture of St George slaying the dragon,

Happy St George's Day to all of our English Supporters. Lets [sic] hope our Politicians act with this [sic] same courage as St George and slay the EU dragon #Brexit #StGeorgesDay. (@GetBritainOut, April 23, 2019)

Symbolic figures like St George are always fraught and the saint has never, at least in my lifetime, enjoyed a universal appeal (and as medievalists we will do well to remember that in Chaucer's England other English patron saints were available, like St Edmund and St Edward the Confessor, who offer different versions of heroism, masculinity, and nationhood). But, more broadly, social anthropological researchers found that, on Facebook during Brexit debates,

The [Roman and medieval] past was leveraged in relation to certain issues more than others, and especially to the movement of people, their subsequent interactions and the threats and opportunities caused by these dynamics in terms of identity and law and order. Mobility is the thematic origin and trigger of the heritages of Brexit and one

of the contemporary issues to which Western societies relate by drawing upon the past.
(Bonacchi, Altaweel, and Krzyzanska 180)

Terms like ‘British Isles’, ‘Norman Conquest’, and ‘Rule Britannia’ were adduced in pernicious arguments that sought to use the past to confirm the present. On the one hand, a white, ‘nativist’ rhetoric claimed only true ‘Brits’ (a descriptor that many British people would never use for themselves, and which has specific exclusionary connotations in Northern Ireland) as those who could claim ancestry from the post-Roman period; on the other hand, a cosmopolitan rhetoric showed how ‘Britain’ has always been constituted by European people, from the Romans to the Saxons to the Normans. The whole debate—both at the national level and as conducted on social media—was startlingly simplistic and historically lazy. Given that the UK left the EU in early 2020, what might this mean for our academic subject-area and for access to education?

So little detail has been released about what Britain’s future outside the EU might look like that it is hard to say. At the time of writing, the future involvement of the UK in the EU’s huge programme of academic research funding is imperilled, as is its involvement in student- and academic-mobility programmes such as the ERASMUS student mobility programme. Such changes will have an effect on all disciplines, and are likely to see collaborative, international projects suffer most. Beyond this, the EU funding system has encouraged and rewarded transnational modes of working, whilst a British-based system is much more likely to reward national goals and be more easily co-opted by politics and by privilege. Students of the Middle Ages may well find themselves drawn to more attractive doctoral programmes in Europe, which leverage greater funding opportunities and can harness a pan-European network (and, put simply, PhD tuition is free in countries such as Finland, Germany, and Sweden, which also have very well-resourced universities, exceptional historical assets, and conduct much of their research activity in English). Britain is likely to see—and probably is already experiencing—a ‘brain-drain’ in all disciplines, as it has, as a country, erected barriers to knowledge and made our global enterprise as scholars less attractive and more cumbersome. At the same time, it is easy to worry that our research agenda as publicly funded scholars could be co-opted by the government’s nationalism. It is simply too soon to be sure what the effects of Brexit will be on UK higher education, but with such an unequal, imbalanced educational system at present, it is crucial to redouble our efforts to work in a more open and representative set of professional structures.

Medieval Studies is not its own closed structure but rather a part of other ecosystems—such as higher education and educational policy, funding bodies, publishing, and the heritage industry. But Medieval Studies—along with some other disciplines such as Shakespeare Studies, Religious Studies, or Archaeology—is particularly susceptible to being considered a part of one group’s cultural or national patrimony, valued in specific and exclusionary ways. If we simply try to diversify Medieval Studies by looking for ourselves in the medieval past, we are likely to be disappointed; instead, we must acknowledge that our object of study is not one group’s property, that it is open to many and varied kinds of interpretation, and that the alterity of the past, rather than concordance between the past and our own experience, is one of the things that makes it enduringly worthy of study.

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