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What Does It Mean to Be Exemplary?: Reflections on Editing *Exemplaria*, Part I

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Abstract

A brief diary of the founding of *EXEMPLARIA: A JOURNAL OF THEORY IN MEDIEVAL AND RENAISSANCE STUDIES* with the history of the journal 1987-2008.

EXEMPLARIA was founded out of a single impulse that could not be avoided or in any way suppressed: Medieval Studies in the latter third of the twentieth century was showing constant signs of disappearing from North American universities, lapsing into irrelevance, as more and more courses in more contemporary disciplines and interests claimed positions of prestige in academic departments. In response to this crisis, I developed the concept of the journal and coined the title **EXEMPLARIA** in November 1986.¹ I envisioned the journal as a venue in which pre-modern literature and newer theories, such as deconstruction, psychoanalysis, and feminism, could challenge each other in ongoing dialogue and arguments for the vitality and relevance of the pre-modern. I then proposed the journal to various authorities in February and March of 1987. The first issue appeared in late spring 1989, and the journal has been continuously published since then.

I had moved to a state university in 1985, but I had already seen from the mid 1970s, when I secured my first position in an English department, that the fate of Medieval Studies as a discipline hung by a very slender thread. Not to worry the metaphor too much, that thread is even slenderer now—if not also about to be replaced by the nooses of Medievalisms which hang over contemporary American and European cultures. Not only Medieval Studies but also the humanities in general are in precarious straits. Just consider the recent scorched-earth policy of the University of Leicester and its many superannuation decisions (Regan 2021). I would not personally want to be tasked with predicting the outcome of the current tribulations. But thirty-five years ago, my much younger, and probably more idealistic, self had resolved not to give up without a fight. Medieval Studies could be, and was, as contemporaneous and fluent in the human sciences as any other humanistic discipline. I still believe this.

Many are the people who joined me in the late 1980s to realize the initiative and the spirit of **EXEMPLARIA**. Most especially I should name the late Julian N. Wasserman, Professor of Middle English, Loyola University in New Orleans; Mario A. Di Cesare, founder and publisher of Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies (MRTS); Melvin New, chair of the Department of English, University of Florida; and Charles F. Sidman, Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, University of Florida. Everything I initiated in those years depended on them and the support that they offered, most especially the financial support—nothing gets done without money.

And, in particular, money was made available for Judy Shoaf to serve as Managing Editor of the journal, a significant development since we had just joined a state institution with rigorous anti-nepotism rules—the days of so-called spousal hires still off in the future. She served as Managing Editor (not a faculty line) for all twenty years of operation under my editorship, and without her, nothing would have come to pass. She took the work as seriously as I did, though from the institution's margins.

We recruited a distinguished board of advisors and we solicited essays not only indirectly through advertising but also directly at conferences. We were greatly encouraged by the number of people who wanted to participate in the journal's initiative by submitting first-rate work to us, much of which is

¹ A professional artist and calligrapher hand-lettered the title **EXEMPLARIA** at the beginning of our initiative, and we tried to preserve this distinctiveness whenever and wherever we could, as with all capital letters as well as italics, or even photographic reproduction in situ of the artwork.

still cited in the scholarly literature. It should go without saying, but I say that in order to say this emphatically: they were as important to the journal's initiative as anyone else.

No one reading this brief diary of *EXEMPLARIA*'s history is unaware that the times are parlous and that I do not exaggerate the situation in which the humanities in general and Medieval Studies in particular find themselves. Nor is anyone reading this brief diary naive enough to deny that the issue is one of money, the radical and ongoing diminishment of funds in all but the most elite universities for such narrow and highly specialized fields of studies. In many smaller colleges and universities and, alas, in the general public, the old cynicism seems to win out, that scholarship is more and more about less and less for fewer and fewer. And who wants to pay for this?

The Academy has numerous answers and rebuttals to such cynicism. This is not the place to rehearse those answers, but neither is it the place to forget that historical scholarship does represent a long and honored tradition of preserving and interpreting the past against such parochialism and boorishness—we must never lose sight of that.

We of *EXEMPLARIA* never lost sight of it. We worked to honor both past and present—they are equally history—and we understood our work as open and accessible if often in need of additional context and explanation as authors imported varying methodologies and theories into their readings of medieval poetry. Our interest in the new theories of deconstruction, psychoanalysis, and feminism generated some negative responses among the more traditional medievalists: we were often scorned for our liberal humanism, for seeing medieval literature as amenable to conversation with these new theories. This scorn seemed to come especially from hard-core materialists, Christians, and “cradle-of-European-civilization-trained” scholars for whom philology was a thinly veiled façade for nationalism and native-language jingoism. But we mistrusted their bias as much as they ours alleged by them. And we persisted.

In particular, we developed several practices which, if not original with us, were certainly new on the scene when we put them into play. For example, we did all exchanges with relevant parties by e-mail whenever possible, and we used then available protocols, FTP, e.g., to transfer files and pursue editorial interventions. Further, we early began a practice of loading electronic preprints of forthcoming articles onto our website, which was hosted at the time by the University of Florida on its servers (1990s). This practice met with immediate success and regular expressions of satisfaction by numerous scholars from different fields, both in North America and abroad. We learned how to prepare the preprints to make them maximally accessible, and, although the WWW files were crude by today's standards, they still worked well enough. Then, too, we early on introduced sponsored sessions at the International Medieval Studies Congress in Kalamazoo, and over the course of the first ten years of the journal, these sessions were extremely well attended, sometimes by as many as 150 conference-goers. Near the end of my tenure as Senior Editor, we also hosted open bars and/or parties not only in Kalamazoo but also in Leeds at the Medieval Congress there.

One other initiative deserves separate mention if only because it is a sort of index to the current condition of the humanities in North America and abroad. In 1991, I assumed the vice-presidency of the Council of Editors of Learned Journals (CELJ), and in 1993, I succeeded to the presidency of the Council, succeeding in 1995 to official ombudsman for the Council. During these years of service for CELJ, I saw firsthand the trials and tribulations of journal editors all across America and Canada and in a few European venues. In every case the major issue was the absence of an adequate checking

account, reducing editors and their colleagues in many cases to the status of jury-riggers trying to keep a ship afloat that was taking on serious water. It may well be that in future, we will see that the elite institutions were able to protect journals, not only by buying subscriptions for their libraries but also by funding the journal operations in which their scholars, departments, programs, etc. take part. But even this, so it seems to me, is a risky prediction—witness the number of libraries right and left canceling subscriptions to journals even as I write. And these libraries are often affiliated with handsomely endowed institutions. I will openly admit it is almost enough to make me mourn.

EXEMPLARIA continued with our protocols until 2002 when Pegasus Press disintegrated into chaos, and the ongoing publication of **EXEMPLARIA** became threatened. Pegasus Press had split off from MRTS when the latter was moved to Arizona State University. Pegasus Press then continued at the University of North Carolina-Asheville until 2002. At that particular moment of mismanagement and economic crisis, I began to search for a new publisher for **EXEMPLARIA**. This effort consumed much of the next four years until we received an offer from Maney Publishing, in Leeds, UK, to assume publication of the journal. Although Maney offered a new and different format, it provided enough continuity in appearance that everyone could clearly see and understand that **EXEMPLARIA** was in good health and continuing to appear on a regular basis with the same level of quality for which it had become widely known and respected. It took the following two years to return to a completely current schedule, with every issue up to date and all protocols in place. This became the occasion, then, in 2008, that I chose to resign the Senior Editorship. I turned the journal over to a group of new editors—Patricia Ingham, James Paxson†, Tison Pugh, and Elizabeth Scala—whom I had recruited earlier during this rocky interim (Ingham and Scala continue currently as Trustees of the journal [Taylor & Francis Online, n.d.]).

I prepared as best I could a system and a set of formats for the new editors to follow as they prepared issues and shared this with them as they assumed their duties. I made myself available for questions and discussions whenever they saw fit. But, all my life (I'm now 73), I've harbored a fear of what I call King-Lear-syndrome, and, with **EXEMPLARIA**, as with other initiatives I have been involved in, when I left, I left. Period. It is now over twelve years since I have had any input in the operations of **EXEMPLARIA**. This is, I think, as it should be.

There are numerous details, events, small happenings, which I could include in this brief diary of **EXEMPLARIA**, but I choose to forego those narratives to conclude the diary on a different note which, however, continues the main thrust of what I have been writing up to this point.

I first went on what we call the job market in 1975. (I note that that was 46 years ago.) I was on the market again often during the next several years, which were memorable for many urban legends, rumors, general absurdities, etc. But one that stands out for me as unforgettable transpired one November before the annual meeting of the Modern Language Association, where American colleges and universities traditionally conducted job interviews. During that November we heard that there had been a job advertised in American studies at a major state university for which, allegedly, there had already been 975 applications. If you raise an eyebrow at this, I hardly blame you. I'm not sure I myself have ever believed it. But that is not the point. Whether believable or not as a fact, the claim is certainly believable as a commentary on the state of the Academy in North America in the final third of the twentieth century. This was the age of taxi drivers with PhDs (possibly even an MA or two into the bargain). Something had gone terribly wrong. I don't see how anyone could dispute that. I

recognize, however, that legions could and would dispute exactly what had gone wrong and why. I have no interest in entering into such a *mêlée* as that. What interests me rather is a very specific point that can only really be understood under the magnifying glass of such a cultural moment as this of the mid-70s, whether or not this particular fact was actually true.

That specific point is simply this: everywhere during these years, faculty of all persuasions in all disciplines in all manner of institutions could be heard lamenting what they generally considered, though they usually said it *sotto voce*, the corruption of the Academy by theory and theorists (especially feminists and Marxists). These theorists were allegedly suspect people with suspect motives who—wouldn't you just know it?—came, as a rule, from foreign lands. And they and others were glutting if not also gutting the Academy. I listened to such self-defensive and ostracizing rants my entire career. I set my face against them. I did everything I could to counteract the xenophobia, sexism, and jingoism implicit in them. I absorbed a great deal of abuse in the position I took for the values that I supported. And, of course, that's the way things go. And then, too, isn't this why so many in the Academy are desperate to find a patron to usher them into the inner sancta where supposedly they will succeed as sanctioned and not have to go slumming in part-time-ism or expository-writing-course overloads or what people then considered the lunatic fringes, such as feminism. (I'm actually old enough to remember when feminism was a lunatic fringe).

I have no regrets about the decisions I made. I founded a journal that I believe was worth founding. I edited it for twenty years to the best of my ability. I cooperated with as many professionals as would cooperate with me, in some cases including those who, I knew, had been my meanest, severest backbiters every chance they got—"keep your friends close but your enemies closer." The shortest way to say all this is that I believed in what I was doing. I tried things that failed; I know. I tried things that succeeded; I also know. But what remained and remains throughout these nearly five decades is an irremovable pall of cynicism hanging over the entire Academy and not just the humanities. If ordinary academics are as vicious as ordinary politicians—and, generally speaking, they are—then how can they expect to be treated any differently by, or expect any different responses from, the public who pay taxes to support them (and politicians, alas, too), a public who also find politicians of all flavors repugnant, reprehensible, untrustworthy, two-faced, and self-aggrandizing—unless, of course, they march to the same bummer [sic] as they do? What price trust?

I personally know of departments where Chaucer continues to be a part of the curriculum because of feminist studies, Marxist studies, postcolonial studies, and queer studies. I believe that **EXEMPLARIA** contributed to this ongoing inclusion of Chaucer in English syllabi by publishing essays that demonstrated his extraordinary contemporary relevance using the vocabularies, the insights, and the methods of numerous literary, social, and political theories. I take pride in having helped to transform the field and in having established a platform that will ensure future transformations. And it is thus that I feel empowered to say to the backbiters and those who would use our dire circumstances to pit medievalists against each other, that I hope that it is such generosity, as represented by **EXEMPLARIA** over the past thirty-two years, that will persist and continue to shape our field.

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