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Editing *JEGP*: some (ambivalent) reflections

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Editing *JEGP*: some (ambivalent) reflections

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Abstract

Editors Robert Meyer-Lee and Matthew Giancarlo offer some personal and historical reflections on the work of editing a contemporary scholarly journal in medieval literary studies, *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*. This essay considers some of the ambivalences and challenging assumptions involved in editing a journal that has been established for a long time in our field of scholarship.

Journal editors are, of course, stewards of the research that in some essential ways defines our field and underwrites our professional identities. As Middle English section editors (Giancarlo currently; Meyer-Lee from 2015–2019) of a journal whose issues stretch back nearly a century and a quarter, we have found this very tangible contribution to the collective enterprise of medieval literary scholarship to be deeply satisfying. Yet, as most editors will likely admit, the task also has its problems and frustrations, beyond the mundane busyness and stress that it inevitably entails. Assuming the role of editor interpellates one into the general institution of scholarly publishing, as well as the specific institution of the historically accumulated traditions of a particular journal. Both of these institutions are far from perfect in ways that, in our experience, become increasingly apparent during one’s editorship, and these faults are compounded by the fact that they may not be straightforwardly disentangled from the essential service to the field that the institutions provide. In this essay, we reflect on this ambivalence as we have experienced it in our work with the *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* (*JEGP*).

Publishing in peer-reviewed venues is such a core part of what we do that it is hard to imagine our professional lives without it. At the same time, it is difficult—if not impossible—to avoid the anxieties, the perceived and real inequities, and the overall frustrations with systems of assessment that can appear like little more than institutionalized gate-keeping or, at worst, merely random or even spiteful judgments. Not without reason was the recently completed tongue-in-cheek “Monument to an Anonymous Reviewer” shaped like a giant die with the judgments “Accept,” “Minor Changes,” “Major Changes,” “Revise and Re-submit,” and “Reject” etched on the different sides (Davis 2017). Every submitter to a peer-reviewed journal has had this sense of the aleatory nature of journal publishing, and this is perhaps the only practical aspect that unites research scholars across the sciences and humanities in their day-to-day experience. As editors, we find it sobering to know that one has crossed over, so to speak, from the side of the judged to the side of the judging, and to seek to maintain—as we believe the vast majority of editors sincerely try to do—a commensurate sense of both fairness and rigor, the necessity of both openness and standards. For the immediate challenge one faces in this regard, as most editors are also likely to admit, is that fairness, rigor, openness, and standards are far from tidy categories. Each submission to a journal involves an extensive series of judgments, large and small, with evaluative criteria and interpretive lenses inevitably colored by editors’ individual experiences and the biases of the myriad intersecting systems, scholarly and otherwise, in which they dwell. It is very likely, for example, that Giancarlo and Meyer-Lee would not in every case make precisely the same decisions (say, about the implications of a reader’s report) about the same submission. Nonetheless, we both remain committed to ideals of editorial neutrality and scholarly quality, ideals that have guided our work with *JEGP* even while we know them to be at best imperfectly attainable and at worst simply, if unintentionally, discriminatory.

With *JEGP* specifically, this ambivalence also manifests in a fraught relation with the journal’s deep history. *JEGP* was launched in 1897, making it one of the oldest continuously publishing venues for non-classical literary and linguistic scholarship in North America.¹ (*PMLA*, for example, began in

¹ For a Janus-faced reflection on the first hundred years of the journal, see Guibory and Kalinke 1997.

1884, *Speculum* in 1926, *Medium Ævum* in 1932.) The journal has long been associated with the University of Illinois, where it was brought by its founder, the German-American philologist Gustaf Karsten, whose scholarship focused largely on French historical philology. For the first several years it was published as *The Journal of Germanic Philology*, and then with the fifth volume, published in 1903–5, the title remit was changed explicitly to include “English,” even as the journal continued its policy of publishing in “Philology” broadly conceived. Indeed, upon looking into the history of the journal—in which we had both published prior to our editorships—we were particularly impressed by the historical scope of its coverage. *JEGP* printed scholarship on Germanic, Scandinavian, and English language and literature from the Old English period through the Renaissance and modern periods, with articles and reviews written in English and German, on everything from *Beowulf* to Shakespeare to Ibsen to Goethe to Grillparzer, Schiller, and Hofmannsthal (*JEGP* 1916), from “The Compound Past Tenses in High German as Represented by Heinrich von Veldeke, Gottfried von Strassburg, and Wolfram von Eschenbach” (Church 1916) to “Stevenson and the Classics” (Chislett 1916) to “Pronunciation of –tu– in English” (Lotspeich 1916) to a study of “An Early Romantic Novel” (Hughes 1916), just to select subjects and titles at random from the issues in an early volume. Volumes in later decades were even more capacious, including work on American literature and modern twentieth-century literature as well. Reading through the early numbers, one comes across scholarly names still familiar to the literary medievalist today—Klaeber, Thorndike, Cook, Kittredge, D’Evelyn, Root—and the scholarship and reviews include work from a fair number of women from the earliest volume onward, at least as far as is evident from the names of the contributors. The tables of contents across the decades contain titles still cited today, along with the mass of work either unfamiliar by field or subsumed by time.

Interestingly, for a journal initially dedicated to the shared tradition of Germanic literatures and cultures across the North Atlantic, there appears to have been no overt acknowledgement of the strains on that tradition during the war years 1914–18 and 1939–45. (Admittedly, we did not read the content of these war-year issues, so some mention could be made therein, directly or indirectly.) Rather, scholarship marches on in its pages, under the guidance of a changing but steady cast of editors, both sensitive to history but also, at least on the surface, either oblivious or unwilling to allow the problems of its own present to intrude upon the work at hand. This ellipsis, we suspect, is not unrelated to the notion of philology that has characterized the journal from its inception, one that simultaneously insists upon a scrupulous recognition of the distinctiveness of the past from the present even while remaining invested in an idea of transtemporal cultural value. The very character of the journal, then, seemed to have functioned in the war years as a kind of covering up of one eye so that the other’s partial view becomes clearer. A journal’s strength, or at least its character, may thus also be a weakness. Inasmuch as editors recognize this, they face the decision of how much to let go of the former to remedy the latter. Given its founding mission of publishing research in a shared Germanic heritage, and given the role of that heritage in Germany’s early twentieth-century nationalist, imperialist, and militarist ideologies evident even at the time, in what way ought *JEGP* to have recognized military conflicts with Germany?

That question, however retrospectively provocative it may be, prompts further ones in regard to the deep history of the journal that are rather more fraught today. In contrast with *JEGP*, most of the excellent periodicals in our field (e.g. *SAC*, *YLS*, *Exemplaria*, *The Chaucer Review*) were started well

within living memory and have developed with a certain determinate or guiding sense. From the start *JEGP* has been less determinate than these, but it does possess a character, not only from its variable focus on a changeable scholarly habitus—philology as it is understood at any given time—but also from a cluster of folk-memories and even folk-practices, the things inherited from the past, taken up as best practices or even just as the way we do things around here, but with only a shadowy sense of their history and justification.

It was, for example, only with the 2004 volume that *JEGP* narrowed its focus to the Middle Ages with specific section editors for three areas, Old English, Middle English, and Germanic/Scandinavian, while at the same time expanding its editorial coverage to include the various languages and cultures of medieval Britain, e.g., Celtic and Anglo-French.² For a literary field that had, by the turn of the century, become much more theoretically diverse and highly ramified into new and emergent subfields, the old umbrella notion of philology no doubt seemed, to those with responsibility for the journal working in other periods, a quaint facet of the dusty corner of medieval studies. The resulting shift in the journal's mission was thus a sort of systolic-diastolic motion, contracting the temporal focus of the journal while simultaneously expanding its lingual and cultural coverage into geographically and historically related fields. The scholarly habitus of philology in turn dovetailed with the historicist approach to medieval literary study, broadly conceived, that marked the subfield in the decades leading up to that shift. These changes were less determinate or prescriptive than just the readiest way for the traditions of the past to find their way down the rocky slope of literary study into the present. And since these aspects of the journal's character had affinity with our own research when we assumed our respective editorships, neither of us gave much thought to the journal's character or mission at the time, but almost as a reflex just perpetuated them according to our internalized, half-perceived grasp, busying ourselves instead with learning the administrative procedures of our roles. Meyer-Lee remembers well, perhaps a year or so into his editorship, being asked by a colleague about the direction he wanted to take the journal and about its mission; he began to answer, before realizing, mouth open, that he had never really considered the question.

This aporetic moment, however, does not mean that Meyer-Lee's transition into the editorship was unaccompanied by discussion of the journal's purpose and character. In fact, just prior to assuming his editorship, Meyer-Lee made a visit to the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) to meet with current and former editors and with representatives of the journal's publisher, University of Illinois (UI) Press. They generously provided him with something of an oral history of the journal, along with a document that compiled information gathered and decisions made over the years regarding editorial practices and policies. Yet, because of the journal's aforementioned affinity with his own research and, more crucially, the sheer limit on the hours that he would be able to devote to the editorship, Meyer-Lee quickly turned his available energy to learning and performing the tasks that would simply ensure that articles and reviews in his area would continue through the pipeline into

² The current remit of the journal is as follows: "*JEGP* focuses on Northern European cultures of the Middle Ages, covering Medieval English, Germanic, and Celtic Studies. The word 'medieval' potentially encompasses the earliest documentary and archeological evidence for Germanic and Celtic languages and cultures; the literatures and cultures of the early and high Middle Ages in Britain, Ireland, Germany, and Scandinavia; and any continuities and transitions linking the medieval and post-medieval eras, including modern 'medievalisms' and the history of medieval literary scholarship." (University of Illinois Press 2021)

print. As in many analogous situations, a scarcity of resources may translate into a blinkered focus on the work at hand.

Indeed, no doubt like other journals, *JEGP* operates without any formally allocated budget whatsoever. In the early years *JEGP* appears to have been financed and coordinated directly by Karsten himself, with the generosity of a small group of patrons from Indiana and Illinois, before it was formally picked up by UI Press in 1907–1908. Since then, it has been affiliated directly with the University of Illinois. The College of Liberal Arts & Sciences at UIUC has long provided a graduate student assistant, and this support has proven essential, ensuring, among other things, the centralization and coordination of many basic editorial tasks. The English Department at UIUC has also underwritten mailing costs associated with articles and reviews, but any other cash expenses are paid out of a very small fund raised by UIUC faculty selling books that they no longer need. All income generated by the journal itself from subscriptions and databases goes into the general operating fund of UI Press. And even this modest level of institutional support is fragile, as now only one of the journal's three editors is faculty at UIUC. This change actually returns the journal to its early profile of having its scholarly labor distributed across several institutions, but it loosens the connection between the journal and its home institution. We are thus increasingly dependent on the good will of UI to support a journal no longer as tightly associated with it. And this is a trend that will almost certainly continue, since, with the journal having “gone medieval,” the pool of faculty eligible for editorships at UIUC is considerably narrower. Moreover, while enlarging the pool to include medievalists at other institutions may further editorial diversity, built-in biases remain in the selection. Since candidates for editorships usually work in fulltime faculty positions, they must be able either to adjust their current work or personal life, or to secure the institutional support necessary to take on the editorship, whether in the form of research assistantships, course reductions, or other modes of indirect sponsorship. The profile of a potential editor is thus generally limited to scholars who can make these professional and personal adjustments, and to those at institutions interested enough in the cultural capital of *JEGP* to provide the necessary financial backing. For Meyer-Lee, for example, it was only an unusual employment situation prompted by the recruitment package of his partner that enabled him to assume his editorship. Once he returned to a more typical situation, he—probably like most faculty at small liberal arts institutions—was no longer able to devote the time required for the job.

The inherited administrative traditions and inevitably constrained resources of *JEGP* editorships have therefore encouraged a kind of myopia about the journal's larger history and purpose. Given, then, this opportunity to step back from the immediate tasks at hand and consider this larger picture, we discover that we both continue to affirm that *JEGP*'s distinctiveness—as a literature and language journal focused on the Middle Ages, in contrast to a broader medieval studies journal such as *Speculum*; as a journal specializing in the North Atlantic region, regardless of language; and as a trim quarterly with each issue containing three-to-five articles, plus some number of reviews, covering the three areas of Germanic/Scandinavian, Old English, and Middle English—is useful and intellectually justifiable. We believe that the notion of philology continues to serve as a valuable, increasingly unusual conceptual umbrella, encompassing—in just a single, recent issue, 119.4, October 2020—articles that make use of critical race and queer theory alongside studies of Richard Rolle's Latin manuscripts and a Middle High German chronicle. The unstable and elusive notion of philology, we find, provides a

material stable core to the journal's identity, be it linguistic, literary, or cultural. We find that stability-in-instability to be satisfyingly protean, as Karsten himself suggested at the very start. And it is fascinating to see the shifts and changes of that practice work themselves out over the *longue durée* of published scholarship. Nevertheless, in a current climate animated by scrutiny of the social practices and assumptions inscribed into the core ideas of our institutions, we must also recognize the problematic status of the idea of philology that was baked into the very founding of the journal, as reflected in its name. In particular, the special relation or historical connectedness of Germanic literatures and languages reads troublingly today, or at the very least, it may not so unproblematically be assumed as it once may have been. More than just its nationalist leanings and Eurocentric biases, the imperialist and racialist underpinnings of the whole philological endeavor, from the mid-nineteenth century onward—in which the Germanic literatures and languages were understood as manifest expressions of what was then called the Germanic race and its global ambitions—simply cannot be avoided if one is to recognize properly and soberly the historical conditions that underlie the work that we do.

The kind of scholarship that *JEGP* has championed over the decades can hence be seen as predicated on determinate modes of exclusion or devaluation. We offer one small but telling example from the founding years of the journal. Several essays and lectures by Gustaf Karsten were published in a memorial number of *JEGP* upon his premature death in 1908 (*JEGP* 7.2). As described by the *In memoriam* account published in his honor, Karsten was a man of great integrity, an intellectual *Kämpfer* (“fighter”) and a founding force at the Universities of Illinois and Indiana, where his academic research was limited by heavy teaching and administrative responsibilities (Lessing 1908). (*Plus ça change.*) He is also praised for founding and editing the journal, which was among the first, as the eulogist writes, to put American published scholarship on the same level as German (Lessing 1908, 2). Several of his unpublished pieces were gathered and published in his honor, including an occasional essay on “Folklore and Patriotism,” read before the Phi Beta Kappa society at Northwestern in 1906, where he also later taught. In it, Karsten (1908) provides a brief history of the study of folklore especially in the English and German traditions, and a consideration of how folklore studies relate to the question of “patriotism,” that is, to sectional national commitments as expressed through scholarly research and publication. Here we find high humanistic idealism and cosmopolitanism coupled with race-language that is at once recognizable and discomfoting:

Is there, then, in scholarly work, no room at all for the manifestation of patriotism? Indeed, there is. Only it depends upon what we call patriotism. Is it the barbarous, destructive desire to hurt someone else, or is it the ill-directed attempt to help one's own party by trickery and fraudulent procedure, which has found its classical expression in that famous, infamous saying: “Our country right or wrong?” Scholarship can have nothing to do with that spurious patriotism which indulges and easily exhausts itself in vicious destructiveness or in dishonesty, private or public. But if patriotism means honest, productive work for the uplifting and the happiness of the race, if he is a good patriot who does his own appointed work and duty conscientiously and efficiently, be it whatever it may, in peace or war, in commerce, trade, profession or handiwork, then the true scholar's work is public service indeed. And we may even

say that, while from an ethical point of view his work stands no higher than that of any other man who does his duty well, it is probably true that, as a matter of real value to the nation, the scholar's work stands supreme, for all success, all progress of the race, depends upon the acquisition of new facts and true principles. (62–63)

The scholarly aversion to “spurious patriotism” is coupled with an appeal to “true” racialism, for which scholarly work is the highest service toward “all progress of the race.” Karsten goes on (as noted) to give a fascinating history of the progress of folklore studies in the traditions of English “lore” and German “*Volkskunde*,” “old traditions and legends and folksongs” (64), from Addison and Percy onward in England, and the later but more vigorous folkloric inspirations and love of *Volkslieder* (“folk songs”) expressed by Herder and Lessing, especially the cultivation and love of these songs as manifestations of the *volkstümlich* (“of the people”) and the *Volksgeist* (“the spirit of the people”) (71–72). While Karsten critically distinguishes Herder's antiquarianism and primitivism—he even clearly critiques these primitivist assumptions while maintaining the beauty and worth of popular folksongs—in the end Karsten himself lapses into a vigorous, even dyspeptic condemnation of popular music that has racist undertones in a new, American context:

Altogether, our American people do not yet sing enough, and what they sing is not the good, old, hearty and wholesome folksong, but rather the pernicious catches which an unscrupulous trade is constantly throwing out upon the market, and which with their brazen hardness, their desolate smartness, their insinuating, lowering influence, work an incalculable amount of harm with the character, the very backbone of the people. For we must remember that it is the vague, unconscious, subtle influences surrounding us which shape our lives most powerfully. The influence of music upon our nerve-brain apparatus is being studied in our psychological laboratories and is only gradually coming to be understood; but we all can see that it is a matter of no small consequence whether a man has his nature, his whole being and rhythm of life, tuned to the measure of some strong, virile, elevating ennobling melody, or whether he is made to respond to the beat of some tavern catch, a “Hot Time in the Old Town,” or similar sickening vulgarities, against which every nerve, every fibre, at first protests, but which will have their way in the end, when forced upon us constantly, and which will, of course, all the more easily get the better of the poor, unresisting masses whose attention and strength are engaged in hard work for their daily bread, and who therefore are more open to all outside influences than the calm, strong, self-possessed and watchful man of culture. (78)

There is so much going on here, from so many directions, that this concluding paragraph itself requires a kind of philological glossing. Americans do not sing (at least, not yet) healthy folk songs, but marketed mass music, harmful to the masses. The reference to “the influence of music upon our nerve-brain apparatus” appeals to the trend of (pseudo)-scientism and supposedly objective psychologism evident in some of Karsten's other writing as well as other essays in early issues of *JEGP*. At the same time his use of “catches”—“pernicious catches,” “some tavern catch”—is almost Elizabethan, harking back to Shakespeare's use of the term in, say, *Twelfth Night*, to describe popular songs. And the popular song in question—which “has its way” with the “poor, unresisting masses”—

is, by a trick of modern technology, both easily identifiable and readily accessible to us: it is the delightful old tune “There’ll Be a Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight” (1896) (Wikipedia 2021), which became a popular jazz standard (Armstrong 1964) but was probably heard by Karsten in a more subdued early phonograph version (Metz et al. 1904), and which was adopted as the first fight song for the University of Wisconsin (University of Wisconsin Marching Band n.d.).³ The song was early associated with popular minstrel shows and parades, urban taverns, Black revivals and African-American music, apparently the sources of the kinds of “sickening vulgarities” that are, according to Karsten, better avoided by the “strong, virile” man of (Germanic) culture.

Now, it may be easy to pick out an example like this, from over a hundred years ago—from a different time, a different place, a different sensibility—and find a cranky old white guy who condemns popular art and music in the name of high culture. And we are perhaps heaping an injustice upon an injustice by highlighting specifically *this* aspect of Gustaf Karsten’s work and legacy, out of so much that he did and for which we are still directly indebted to him, as we are to other scholars and teachers of his era. But the deeper conundrum is not so easily ignored, namely, that here he renders his judgments not just in the name of culture, but specifically of “folksongs,” which stand here for his idea, even fantasy, of an earlier, purer form of popular music. His philological sensitivity to and appreciation of one kind of historical popular culture, of folksongs, is not just contrasted with, but seems to be predicated upon the angry dismissal of, the other, the popular music of his own time. In that dismissal, all kinds of untenable assumptions—about gender, race, voice, regionality, temporality—come bubbling to the surface. As sensitive as he may have been about nationalism, here we find a big blind spot, but one he probably never would have thought of *as* a blind spot.

This returns us to where we started, serving as a micro-example of the general observation that such blind spots are a constitutive part of an editor’s habitus and interpellated condition. The lesson to be taken from Karsten’s comments is not, therefore, the self-congratulating one that we are now more enlightened about how, say, the category of race has functioned within the conceptualizing of philology in particular and the practice of medieval studies in general (although we certainly hope that the field has made progress in these respects). Rather, the lesson is that, in editing a journal, we cannot evade the likelihood that we may be doing harm, in ways in which we are not aware, in our very attempt to perform an essential service for our fellow researchers. Of course, this realization in some respects is a mere truism, applying in a general way to everything from, say, teaching to parenting to making lunch for a friend. Yet that very banality, we insist, also contains a gesture of encouragement, for none of those activities are ones that we would be willing to abandon simply because of their inescapable ambivalence. And they are all ones about which we believe that close—even philological—attention to the past, with a wakeful eye to the present, opens one path toward doing justice, however partial, to both.

³ And, as we learned from our fellow editor Dr. Renée Trilling (U. Wisconsin BA ‘97) in personal correspondence, while it is no longer the official UW fight song, “‘Hot Time’ is still part of the UW Band’s repertoire, and all Badger fans know the dance that goes along with it.” Thus the “pernicious catch” that so troubled Karsten with its vulgarity has endured as a part of the popular and historical legacy of one of the finest public universities in North America.

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