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# PEDAGOGY & PROFESSION

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*University of Virginia, U.S.*

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# Reflections on Editing *New Literary History*: An Interview with Bruce Holsinger

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## Abstract

Bruce Holsinger reflects on editing the journal *New Literary History*.

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**How and when did you become editor of *New Literary History* (NLH)? Can you say something about the journal's history?**

My term started in early 2018, so by the time this appears I will have been in the position for about four years. The editorial appointment process was fairly straightforward and began when Rita Felski, my immediate predecessor as editor, announced that she would be stepping down at the end of the 2017 calendar year. A committee was formed to select a new editor from within the English faculty. An important bit of context here is that I'm only the third editor of the journal, which was founded by Ralph Cohen as part of the Sesquicentennial Celebration of the University of Virginia in 1969 as a forum for emerging work "devoted to theoretical and interpretative problems of literary history," as he put it in the first issue (3).

**To what extent does your training as a medievalist play a role in your editorship of this journal? Not only in terms of how you perceive your mission as editor but also how you are perceived (to your best guess)?**

I'm not sure my training as a medievalist has played a role, though certainly my identity as a medievalist has. *NLH* has always been a journal that emphasizes literary theory and interpretation in addition to literary history, but in assuming the editorship I have wanted to tilt a little more toward the *history* in our title. Our recent and forthcoming special issues include new approaches to Romanticism, race and periodization, and a number of other historical/historiographical approaches, and that's a trend I intend to continue. Following Rita Felski as editor is a bit humbling, as we receive so many submissions engaging her work on postcritique as one of the motivating forces in literary studies today (Felski 2015). At the same time, Rita was an incredibly ecumenical editor, with interest in widely varying approaches and methods, and I am trying to continue in that spirit.

**How would you describe the mission of the journal?**

This is the mission statement that appears on our homepage: "*New Literary History* focuses on questions of theory, method, interpretation, and literary history. It welcomes contributions from a wide range of intellectual perspectives. The distinctiveness of *NLH* lies in its commitment to scrutinizing the principles and procedures of interpretation, to rethinking theory and method, and to reassessing the current buzz-words and by-words of scholarly argument" (2010-2021). There's not much I would add to that, though I would emphasize the range and diversity of perspectives published in the journal. There is no house approach and never has been. I am always on the lookout for new and exciting approaches to the subjects we traverse. I do wish we received more submissions from scholars in non-literary disciplines: musicology, philosophy, religious studies, classics, art history, and so on. I've done a fair amount of solicitation in these areas and I'm hoping those efforts will bear fruit in the coming years.

**What are you doing as editor in terms of practical day-to-day workings?**

Much of my own time as editor is spent soliciting reader reports, making decisions about the disposition of submissions, strategizing on special issues, and—above all—line editing revised essays before they go into production. The workflow took a while to get used to but by now, approaching my fifth year as editor, I have a pretty good handle on issues of timeline, calendar, and so on. I also work with the associate editors and our wonderful managing editor in planning out future special issues, and we have a decent slate of events that we put on both in person (in non-covid times) and, more recently, online.

**How would you describe your journal's relationship to medieval literature and medievalists? From its founding until now, under your guidance?**

*NLH* has published several important special issues on medieval literature over the decades of its existence. The founding editor, Ralph Cohen, put together a conference and special issue back in 1979, "Medieval Literature and Contemporary Theory," that included what are still very influential essays, such as "The Alterity and Modernity of Medieval Literature" by Hans Robert Jauss and Timothy Bahti and "Mervelous Signals: Poetics, Sign Theory, and Politics in Chaucer's *Troilus*" by Eugene Vance. In 1997, an issue titled "Medieval Studies" edited by D. Vance Smith and Michael Uebel included essays by Louise (now Aranye) Fradenburg, Steven Kruger, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, and others that I still see cited all over the place. Recently we published a cluster of short essays and responses on "Medieval Fictionalities" that came about as a result of independently submitted pieces by Michelle Karnes and Julie Orlemanski (2020). We've just published what I hope will be a very important special issue, "Race and Periodization," edited brilliantly by Urvashi Chakravarty and Ayanna Thompson, that emerged from several #RaceB4Race conferences and includes several major contributions by medievalists.

**What kind of financial support do you get as editor (stipends, assistants, etc.)? Where does it come from?**

We have a part-time managing editor and several student assistants whose wages are funded through the annual payment we receive from Johns Hopkins University Press, our publisher. The editor receives a teaching reduction and a summer stipend.

**In what ways has the financial situation of the journal changed either in its history or under your tenure as editor?**

We are lucky enough to remain stable. Our subscription base largely funds our operations, and we have the ability to put on events such as conferences, forums, and symposia on a somewhat regular basis.

**What do you see as the future, both for this particular journal and scholarly publishing more generally?**

Hard to say. In my small field alone I've seen so many excellent new journals emerge over the course of my career: *Exemplaria*, *New Medieval Literatures*, *postmedieval*, *Digital Philology*, and the list goes on. We're in a state of perpetual crisis in the humanities and no one sees that ending. But publication of great work is the lifeblood of our research lives, and I hope it remains strong in the years and decades

ahead. I do see a lot of innovation in the digital realm, with greatly enriched interfaces and platforms for those who come to journals seeking a different kind of reading experience, and I hope that trend continues despite obvious financial and institutional constraints.

**What was the most surprising thing you discovered on editing this journal?**

Perhaps the biggest surprise to me was the extraordinarily diverse quality of the submissions we get. On the one hand, spectacular essays from early career scholars that ask broad questions of the sort that will reshape how we understand interpretation, literary practice, literary history. On the other, unrevised seminar papers from M.A. students that still have the course title and instructor's name in the header! No question that *NLH* is highly selective—last time I checked we publish about 4% of submissions we receive—but I always tell those interested in submitting that the bar is lower than they think: a polished, well-written essay intelligently framed will go a long way in the review process. For early career scholars, that process itself is crucial for learning how to improve your writing and conceptualization so that your work will be published regularly.

Another surprise was the transformation of the journal's content and style over the fifty-odd years of its existence, and here I'm thinking about the journal's original dedication to experimenting with the form and format of its contributions. *NLH* has always been ecumenical in its approach to literary theory and literary history, open to a wide variety of methods and schools. What surprised me, though, in studying its history was its equal openness to a wide variety of forms and genres of criticism: not just the standard footnoted article of about twenty to thirty pages, but also very short polemics, experimental pieces by poets and writers and even composers such as John Cage, whose work appeared in our pages in 1971, and more essayistic contributions with little or no scholarly apparatus. This realization in turn has inspired me to experiment with the forms and modes of criticism—for example in a recent number, "In Brief," which I coedited with Irina Dumitrescu (2019). The issue presents thirty short essays on short forms, creating an intimacy between its subject and its mode of presentation. We asked our contributors not to mimic encyclopedia entries or information-packed *Cambridge Handbook to X*-type contributions; rather, we wanted them to explore the creative and critical capacities of their *own* brevity in presenting their chosen forms to an audience of scholars and fellow writers. Speculative, experimental, provocative, a few of them irreverent: these essays resonate with the concise and pithy spirit of the objects they scrutinize, celebrate, and reimagine.

I want more of this experimental kind of work in the journal, and I hope to see this reflected in submissions in the coming years.

**What else do you think our readers would like to know about your journal, scholarly publishing, and/ or trends in medieval studies that you have learned from being editor?**

I would say the same thing to early career scholars looking to publish as I would to fiction writers I speak to who are trying to find an agent: don't write to trend! The most innovative work we get is the most unusual and idiosyncratic. Papers on postcritique or descriptive criticism or distant reading can make it through the review process, but I'm always looking for contributions that push in new directions, or revisit old questions from refreshing points of view. This holds true in medieval studies as well: the essays we've received from medievalists over the last four years have been some of the

most innovative and provocative of our submissions because they've broken new ground. As I've argued many times, medieval studies has always been on the cutting edge of humanistic scholarship, and I sometimes wish those in more recent (and often presentist) fields would take some lessons from the history and practices of our discipline.

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