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Editors' Introduction: Creative Community-Building in Times of Crisis

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Editors' Introduction: Creative Community-Building in Times of Crisis

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Abstract

This issue includes a cluster on medieval studies and secondary education, contributions on pedagogy and teaching and learning centers, as well as contributions to two regular features: “How I Teach” and “Conversations.”

The coalition *MedievALLists in the Workforce* recently described the North American academic job market in medieval studies as being in a state of “large-scale collapse” (Miller 2002). The data gathered by the coalition supports what many of us already know: the field of medieval studies now provides not a job market but a “job lottery” (Eisenberg et al. 2021). *MedievALLists in the Workforce*’s use of the ecological term “collapse” is especially powerful. It reminds us that our field depends on many different institutional systems, all of which have long been undergoing significant stress. The contributions to this issue, which includes a special cluster co-edited by Lisa Lampert-Weissig and Kara Crawford, engage institutions beyond the university, institutions upon which the future of medieval studies depends. This issue brings together perspectives from colleagues contributing to medieval studies in secondary and post-secondary educational settings, as well as through museums, archives, journals, scholarly societies, web resources, national funding agencies, and centers for teaching and learning. They all share inspiring work and provide examples of resilience in the face of multiple crises.

Even while we celebrate their work, we want to acknowledge that demands on individuals for endless resilience and perpetual innovation are exhausting. Large-scale collapse can only be addressed collectively. So how do we even start? Our contributors discuss some paths forward, including ones that are informed by their work as medievalists. Art historian Kirk Ambrose recounts that while researching his dissertation in Vézelay, France, he was offered a free place to stay by the monastic Brothers of Jerusalem. Reflecting on the Brothers in the context of the history of Vézelay Abbey, Ambrose describes this order, founded in the 1970s, as bringing a “different kind of energy to the place” (22). This different energy and the shared space it created have shaped not only Ambrose’s scholarship but his work directing the Center for Teaching and Learning at the University of Colorado, Boulder. His experiences as a scholar inform his commitment to the space of the teaching “commons” (21) with its potential for “radical reform” from within (22).

Accounts of revitalizing and even remaking institutions from within run through the contributions in this issue. The essays by veteran educators John Terry and Deborah Stokol share their work teaching medieval history and literature in the high school classroom. Their thoughtful approaches are models of employing creativity within the highly structured environment of secondary school teaching, where an individual instructor’s curricular development plans must take into account the concerns and demands not only of a department or a school but also local, state, and even national guidelines and expectations.

While we may often think of our teaching as an individual, even solitary act, as Lee Shulman noted decades ago, we are always part of larger communities (1993, 1).¹ The glass-walled classrooms in Yale’s Poorvu Center for Teaching and Learning, described by Gina Hurley in her essay, literalize this interconnectedness through actual physical transparency. They remind occupants and observers of the communal nature of teaching. Secondary school educators likely need less reminding that teaching is always collaborative. Fundamental elements of their working conditions require them to breathe new life into inherited structures. Indeed, they often inherit not simply curricula but books

¹ Cited in this issue in Hurley (30).

and other teaching materials from previous faculty. Post-secondary efforts to recruit new students need to take this reality into account.

This issue provides some concrete examples of the programming and resources necessary not simply to attract students to medieval studies, but to keep the field alive both inside and outside of the academy. Eleanor Baker, Rodger Caseby, Clare Cory, Jim Harris, Nicholas Perkins, Charlotte Richer, and Marion Turner, the team behind the “Chaucer’s World” study days, collaborate across institutional and professional fields in order to bring the medieval to life for Oxford-area schools. In “How to Teach *The Canterbury Tales* in (My Own) Translation,” Sheila Fisher explains how she teaches her own translation of *The Canterbury Tales*, undertaken in order to make the work more accessible, while still keeping alive the poetic and linguistic elements that make Chaucer’s work so rich and compelling. Merle Eisenberg, Sara McDougall, and Laura Morreale provide an account of their creation of an important new teaching resource, [Middle Ages for Educators](#), built in response to the changed teaching conditions during the pandemic.

The creativity showcased in this issue includes and extends beyond a focus on medieval texts and cultures. Rachel Moss shares how she guides her students as they use the University of Northampton’s [Searchlight Archive](#) to explore legacies of medieval chivalry and the ways they continue to structure contemporary cultures, including the culture of white supremacy. Both Ambrose and Hurley discuss not only how their background as medievalists informs their work in centers for teaching and learning, but how at their institutions they have engaged with postgraduate students across a range of disciplines, including law. These emerging leaders intend not simply to revitalize but also to reform their fields by addressing the systemic inequities that have shaped them.

Even as many of us try to reshape institutions from within, we know that they can be dismantled from without. David Raybin and Susanna Fein’s discussion of their work directing National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) seminars for U.S. secondary school educators reminds us of the precarity of humanities programming. Our shared work is subject to political pressures on numerous levels, as well as to related economic agendas that are hyper-focused on narrow measures of profitability.

The real and manufactured conflicts between profit margins and the public good that animate debates around education greatly impact scholarly publishing, another crucial part of the medieval studies ecosystem. Continuing the conversation about publishing begun in [Issue 3.1](#), the editors of [Interfaces: A Journal of Medieval European Literatures](#) share an account of the journal’s founding and first years. *Interfaces*, like this journal, operates using the Diamond Open Access (DOA) model, which means no paywalls and no author fees. The Open Access movement began in the early 2000s in response to an academic publishing system in which a few conglomerates, such as Reed-Elsevier, Taylor & Francis, Wiley-Blackwell, Springer, and Sage, control the majority of academic and scientific publication venues (Hagve 2020, 2). This monopolization has led to spiraling costs for libraries, negatively impacting librarians’ ability to purchase scholarly monographs, for example, which has wreaked havoc on a market essential to our field (Holzman 2016, 178).

The for-profit publication system also severely limits access to scholarly publications for researchers and members of the general public not affiliated with large, well-funded research libraries. For-profit publishers exploit research results for which others have already paid twice over: first through institutional support for researchers and then through library subscriptions (Hagve 2020, 2).

The value added by these commercial publishers varies greatly and can be very minimal. The Open Access movement is a response to this state of affairs.

Open access publishing, however, while oriented toward the public good, is not “free.” The model currently relies heavily on voluntary labor and institutional support. For example, in addition to the work of its editors, staff, and peer-reviewers, *Interfaces* is supported by five separate European institutions. Similarly, *New Chaucer Studies: Pedagogy and Profession* has the institutional support of the [University of California](#). We rely upon the eScholarship platform and [California Digital Library](#) staff, as well as staff support from UC San Diego’s [Geisel Library](#). Programs at [Central Connecticut State University](#) and the [University of Freiburg](#) have allowed us to recruit interns to support our editing work. Interns gain work experience and in some cases course credit, but they are not paid.

Despite the growing popularity of open access models, commercial publishing will likely continue to have great influence over the dissemination of our research for many years to come. Even as we embrace these models, we need to acknowledge the continuing importance of other not-for-profit models of scholarly communication. In this issue, Ruth Evans’ essay highlights the critical role that scholarly society publications play in sustaining our field. Evans provides a cogent account of work done by the New Chaucer Society leadership to digitize *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, allowing for greater access to journal content through electronic databases. These databases are not open access, but revenue from this publication model, carefully detailed by Evans, supports access to the New Chaucer Society by sustaining and potentially even augmenting the travel grants that the New Chaucer Society provides for graduate students, early-career faculty, and unaffiliated scholars. The digitization model therefore sustains the Society itself while providing a high quality not-for-profit venue for disseminating scholarship.

Scholarly societies, we should remember, already help us to come together, and they can play and should play a key role in sustaining our field. The recent cooperation between the Medieval Academy of America and the MedievALLists in the Workforce coalition, which includes some funding for the coalition’s efforts, provides such an example. As the other contributions to this issue show, working collaboratively toward shared goals can take many forms. Wide dissemination of information about these efforts supports their sustainability.

A discussion among us about the sustainability of medieval studies was the catalyst for founding *New Chaucer Studies: Pedagogy and Profession*. We wanted to provide a forum to discuss the problems we face directly and to encourage medievalists to strategize together on solutions. Raybin and Fein conclude their essay with a call to action aimed at sustaining work they and others have carried out over decades. As Laura Morreale, contributor to this issue and Councillor of the Medieval Academy of America puts it, “universities are not going to save our field, so it’s up to us to decide what to do.”² The MedievALLists in the Workforce coalition calls for actions that will support emerging scholars, including funding to support the collection of jobs data and the creation of a repository of materials that promote advocacy for job creation. Most importantly, funding is needed to support the work of non-tenure track scholars who continue to make vital contributions to our field. There are many medievalists who want to do the work necessary to keep our field alive but need viable job

² Email communication from Laura Morreale to Lisa Lampert-Weissig, August 4, 2022.

opportunities in order to do so, as well as access to library resources, more equitable access to fellowship support, and greater acceptance of non-traditional pathways into academic positions.

There are also secondary school educators, medievalists among them, who very much want to ignite their students' interest in medieval studies. Given the many constraints under which secondary educators operate, these efforts need tangible support from post-secondary educators and institutions in order to survive. A sustainable future requires coordinated action by individuals as well as institutional support. And, of course, individuals have the potential to shape the institutions of which they are a part. Teachers, scholars, curators, editors, librarians, administrators, and students are all active participants in institutional life. Those of us with institutional access, especially access to the most well-funded institutions, share the responsibility for sustaining our field and creating access to it. We hope this issue generates further interest, discussion, collaboration, and collective action toward sustaining our field. We would like to invite you to submit accounts of the actions you and the institutions with which you are affiliated are undertaking to foster the field of medieval studies and to create the accessible spaces—the “commons”—that we need to keep our field healthy and vibrant.

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