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Surviving and Thriving in Secondary Schools: A Response to the Cluster on “Medieval Studies and Secondary Education”

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Abstract

This essay responds to the cluster “Medieval Studies and Secondary Education” by suggesting that we shift our attention away from our understandable, but often unproductive, anxieties about the obsolescence of Medieval Studies within school curricula and towards the promotion of the professional health and intellectual pleasure of the exhausted and harried secondary school teacher. In addition to lauding the efforts of medievalists to enhance and expand the appeal and relevance of our disciplines through immersive activities and the provincialization of Europe, this response explores and evaluates the feasibility of proposals to offer online and in-person summer seminars on medieval topics, to augment easily accessible online resources for teaching the Middle Ages, and to develop mentorship structures within universities and professional societies that connect prospective and practicing teachers with medievalists in educator preparation programs.

...language—informed, shaped, reasoned—will
become the hand that stays crisis and gives creative,
constructive conflict air to breathe, startling our lives
and rippling our intellect.

Toni Morrison, “Grendel and His Mother”

My point is not to reduce the arts to ‘survival’
practices, but rather to expand our understanding of
survival practices themselves as including and being
included by the arts of thriving and enjoyment.

L. O. Aranye Fradenburg, *Staying Alive*

As I finished reading the emboldening cluster on “Medieval Studies and Secondary Education” (2022), I found myself thinking about survival. By the time I began crafting this response, I found it impossible to consider the importance of these essays outside of the introductory context the journal editors provide: namely, the impoverished working conditions and accessibility challenges that inspired both this issue and the founding of *New Chaucer Studies: Pedagogy and Profession* (Lampert-Weissig, Little, von Contzen, and Barrington 2022, 1-5). Like the editors, I worry about the sustainability of our underappreciated premodern fields, especially given our rapidly declining academic job market and consistently declining enrollments in the humanities.

To some extent, I believe we can see Medieval Studies as a synecdoche of all humanistic disciplines, which are waning in popularity among students and university administrators who do not perceive these areas of study to lead to personal or institutional “revenue generation.” Yet, even within the humanities, medieval subjects are often thought to be outdated and inappropriate for increasingly diversified curricula seeking to dismantle the white supremacy that sanitizes the teaching of the history of colonialism, enslavement, and oppression, both in the United States and throughout the world. Consider, for example, the lament of an Advanced Placement (AP) colleague of the cluster’s co-editor and high school teacher, Kara Crawford: “The guy before me actually taught *The Canterbury Tales*!” (Crawford and Lampert-Weissig 2022, 39). I would guess that we have all heard some version of this sentiment from our postmedievalist colleagues in a department meeting. If we wonder why, I recommend that we start by reading another article in this issue, Rachel Moss’ “Teaching Medieval Chivalry in an Age of White Supremacy” (2022), which relates her own experience teaching the history of far-right British extremism, as well as offers a helpful bibliography of additional scholarship on racist and fascist appropriations of medieval symbols and tropes. Given the long-standing and pervasive construction of the whiteness of the Middle Ages, it should be no surprise that many of our colleagues do not see us as allies in antiracist revisions of the curriculum. As a first step, we must confront and repudiate the white supremacist entanglements within our fields if we want Medieval Studies to survive.

I fear, however, that we often focus too intensely on our own survival. This myopic pursuit of an escape route from the burning houses (or dumpster fires) within our fields makes me, particularly

as a tenured medievalist, feel like another Aeneas securing his own fate, leaving friends and family behind to contend with their own precarity, and possibly their own destruction. As Achille Mbembe puts it, our desires for security frequently feed a “logic of survival,” in which

the horror experienced upon seeing death turns into the satisfaction that the dead person is another. It is the death of the Other, the Other’s physical presence as a corpse, that makes the survivor feel unique. And each enemy killed makes the survivor feel more secure. (2019, 88)

Within this Squid Games logic, the frightened medievalist would be tempted to embrace the white eurocentrism of their field as means to survive within an AP curriculum that has recently attempted to abandon and erase the significance of much of Black history, including any focus on the colonization of Africa, reparations for slavery, and Critical Race Theory (Jaschik 2023). The ideologies of American exceptionalism are driven by this survivalist disposition, which requires the dehumanization and sacrifice of another, who is too often the immigrant, the indigenous person, or the person of color. In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have also become all too willing to sacrifice the health and livelihood of the primary and secondary school teacher, all in the name of survival. Whether they have been compelled to learn (immediately and without training or compensation) to teach within remote modalities or whether they have been forced to risk their lives to teach in person, the wellbeing of these teachers has been radically compromised. And now, with the claims about “learning loss” and the rush to resume testing reaching a crescendo, the pressure on the teacher has only increased, leaving them without the water necessary to beat back a political firestorm, asking them to pursue educational justice while restricting their access to the very teaching material that would allow them to achieve that goal. My apprehensions about the future, then, are less about the place of Medieval Studies in the curriculum than they are about the place of the teacher in the curriculum. Recent surveys indicate that K-12 teachers in the United States are seeking to leave the profession in droves, and less than half of US teachers would encourage young people to go into teaching careers—low wages for a high workload are continually cited as the primary factor (Walker 2022; Kurtz 2022). If teachers are forced to leave the profession because of financial, physical, and mental exhaustion, our focus on our own survival will lead not just to the demise of Medieval Studies, but also to medievalists, themselves.

The pressing question, then, is how can we, as teachers working in higher education, help our secondary-school colleagues survive? If there is a manual for this, I would argue it is L. O. Aranye Fradenburg’s *Staying Alive: A Survival Manual for the Liberal Arts*, which makes the claim that survival depends upon pleasure, the capacity to find delight and joy, even within the most mundane or quotidian of life’s pursuits. In thinking about what she calls the “artistry of everyday life,” she observes, “[a]rt does in fact capture attention by, say, making us see or feel the creamy or gleaming character of rock rather than its overfamiliar immobile lumpiness” (2013, 109). This aesthetic reorientation of our surroundings helps us to recognize the ornamental among the ordinary. The liberal arts, by extension, offer us ways of seeing and being in the world that can help us understand that our survival depends upon what Fradenburg calls “the arts of thriving and enjoyment” (110). Medieval Studies, if it is to have a place within secondary schools, must work to transcend “its overfamiliar immobile lumpiness” and offer its teachers ways to see and enjoy the “creamy or gleaming character” of this Stone Age of

a field. This does not mean, of course, that we deemphasize its unsavory elements—its patriarchal histories, its imperialistic legacies, or its racist representations. In fact, an understanding of a Middle Ages that includes these features would enable secondary educators to grapple with how such constructions of the “Dark Ages” have become ossified over time, reducing the medieval to an unteachable, untouchable, or irrelevant object, unworthy of study or attention. Arthurian romance, for example, a genre that has served as a fantastical vehicle of readerly pleasure across the centuries, offers what Geraldine Heng calls a “safe space and a supple vocabulary that induces pleasure, not pain, to enable the consideration of historical crises and traumas . . . so as to surface rather than deny the exigencies of history” and to supply “a space of freedom for the discussion of the difficult and the undiscussable” (2021, 126-27). If we are able to embed within school curricula a teaching of the Middle Ages that, for example, centers African sovereignty instead of European imperialism (Terry 2022), uses troubadour music to help students confront the literary histories of misogyny (Stokol 2022), or brings back the wonder of “Chaucer’s World” through its surviving objects and places (Turner, Baker, Casey, Cory, Harris, Perkins, and Richer 2022), I believe the medieval can achieve the “gleaming character” that will enable it to thrive.

How can we do this? One possibility is immersion: creating the material conditions for students to experience the Middle Ages as if they are doing so in what we might call “simulated” real time. One compelling option is described in the cluster through a collaborative set of Canterbury-styled “tales,” which detail the adventurous efforts of pedagogical pilgrims Marion Turner, Eleanor Baker, Rodger Casey, Clare Cory, Jim Harris, Nicholas Perkins, and Charlotte Richer to recreate “Chaucer’s World” for secondary school students, who encounter Chaucer within his literary, historical, and material contexts (2022, 70-78). In addition to engaging with this work through this essay, I had the opportunity in June of 2021 to view part of this initiative through a Zoom “window” into Charlotte Richer’s classroom at the Cherwell School Academy. I subsequently followed over Twitter (@CherwellEnrich) the resulting work of her Year 11 students, who eventually curated their own digital manuscript exhibitions, which are available here: <https://thekeystage4review.wordpress.com/medieval-illuminations-and-marginalia/>. Richer also shared this experience on the “Teaching Chaucer in the High School” panel that the cluster’s co-editor Kara Crawford and I organized for the New Chaucer Society Expo21 (papers and materials are available here: <https://ncsexpo2021.wordpress.com/2021/04/23/teaching-chaucer-in-the-high-school/>). Among the panelists was another contributor to this cluster, Deborah Stokol, who composed for our session what she calls a “troubadourial style” piece, “The Wife of Bath: Alyson’s Tale,” which both translates Chaucer’s iambic couplets into 1960s-70s folk song rhythms and inserts commentary that applauds and critiques both the Wife’s perspective on her relationship to her husbands in the prologue and the fate of the rapist in the tale itself (Stokol 2022, 59). The arts of enjoyment pervade this pedagogical work, immersing students in the illuminated pages and crowded marginalia of manuscripts and the ludic cadences and ethical questions of Chaucerian verse.

How else might we help the secondary-school teacher thrive? Another possibility is decentering Europe. Following the longstanding, but still urgent, calls of scholars such as Dipesh Chakrabarty to challenge or “provincialize” the eurocentrism of our historical gaze (2000), secondary-school teachers such as John Terry have developed instructional strategies that establish and authorize histories which disrupt colonialist narratives about the past. I particularly admire Terry’s efforts to center Medieval

Africa because many secondary-school textbooks treat Africa as a place without history while states such as Florida are actively working to dislodge Africana Studies from curricula altogether. Terry recognizes these obstacles “to teaching the previously unfamiliar” and urges teachers to “choose discrete sources, texts, and geographies by utilizing open-access resources” (2022, 45), which are generously hyperlinked throughout his essay, not to mention linked to his own set of impressive lesson plans he developed to teach the Global Middle Ages (2021). As Terry’s essay emphasizes, even if our respective areas of study or teaching do not address Africa directly, we can use African texts or objects as means to reverse or challenge our colonial inclinations.

When I last taught my “Myths of King Arthur” course to my University of Massachusetts Boston students in the spring of 2021, I tried to unsettle the Eurocentric default setting of the course and confront the insidious white supremacist legacies of Arthuriana by having us read the decolonial theory of the Cameroonian philosopher, Achille Mbembe, alongside Arthurian texts, such as Marie de France’s *Lanval* and Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Wife of Bath’s Tale*. Students, after all, have become conditioned to expect the optimism of the “Once and Future King,” the knightly quests for chivalric glory, and the pleasurable escape that this adventurous story world offers. Arthurian literature does indeed deliver all of that, but at a significant cost. Such readings lead to nostalgic fantasies of a Britain that was great once and could be again, leading political leaders such as Winston Churchill to conclude, “Let us then declare that King Arthur and his noble knights, guarding the Sacred Flame of Christianity and the theme of a world order, sustained by valour, physical strength, and good horses and armour, slaughtered innumerable hosts of foul barbarians and set decent folk an example for all time” (1956, 53). On the one hand, Churchill aptly captures the imperialistic drive of many Arthurian texts, ranging from Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *History of the Kings of Britain* to the alliterative *Morte Arthure*. On the other, even the more playful romances, such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, emphasize “boþe blysse and blunder” (Andrew and Waldron 1996, 18), often highlighting the violent cruelty that underpins every act of chivalric courtesy. To maximize their engagement with these readings and our discussions, I asked students to assume three roles: annotator, facilitator, and scribe. As annotators, students read the assigned texts and added their comments to our Perusall site, which hosted both discussion forums and spaces for social annotation. As facilitators, students led in-class discussions that situated the Arthurian works within the history of what Mbembe calls “necropolitics,” or the desire for imperial violence that has driven the current rise in totalitarianism and white nationalism. As scribes, individual students documented these in-class discussions and posted them to our course blog, providing opportunities to connect previous conversations with subsequent readings. By asking students to assume these roles, students strove to immerse themselves in scribal manuscript practices of marginal annotation and confront the racialized violence that accompany celebrations of Arthur’s political authority over the past and future of British sovereignty.

While many medievalists have been doing this decentering work through their scholarship and teaching for a long time, I have encountered very few secondary-school teachers, like John Terry, who are aware of it. When I was a high-school English teacher in the late 1990s, I certainly never considered teaching Chaucer or *Beowulf* through decolonial frameworks, even though I frequently taught Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958) to my eleventh-grade World Literature students. And over this last decade as the Director of English Teaching at UMass-Boston, I have worked with very few secondary teachers who, for example, would initially believe that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* could offer any

critique of English imperialism. I therefore jump at any opportunity to decenter these established narratives of the medieval, particularly with teachers who are eager to reinvigorate their curricula with new material. For instance, I happily shared my experience of teaching that “Myths of King Arthur” course in November of 2021 on another panel, “Premodern Literature and Antiracist Teaching,” that Kara Crawford and I once again joined forces to organize, along with the kind encouragement, participation, and sponsorship of NCS Executive Director, Tom Goodmann. This time we sought out one of the largest US venues for this work, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) convention, which was originally set to take place in Louisville, Kentucky.

Our NCTE session was inspired by Toni Morrison’s (then) recently published essay, “Grendel and His Mother,” which reads *Beowulf* through the experiences of its marginalized monsters, who are racialized and demonized by the Scandinavian warrior who conquers them. As an alternative to a masculine narrative of heroic whiteness, Morrison turns instead to John Gardner’s *Grendel* (1971), a retelling of the story that examines the interior motivations of the rebellious antagonists, challenging readers to confront the present-day implications for accepting Grendel and his mother as silent outcasts. By giving them a voice, Morrison argues that Gardner’s novel makes the political claim

that language—informed, shaped, reasoned—will become the hand that stays crisis and gives creative, constructive conflict air to breathe, startling our lives and rippling our intellect. I know that democracy is worth fighting for. I know that fascism is not. To win the former intelligent struggle is needed. To win the latter nothing is required. (2019, 262)

Taking up Morrison’s call to engage social conflict through literary language, we proposed a roundtable session as an opportunity for teachers and writers to share strategies for responding to premodern texts through antiracist frameworks. One framework was contemporary retelling: a modern revision, translation, or adaptation that re-engages readers with the original through “creative, constructive conflict” that centers the voices of the racially marginalized. Such texts range from mainstream fiction, such as Kazuo Ishiguro’s re-imagining of Arthurian Britain in *The Buried Giant* (2015), to modern drama, such as Toni Morrison’s mystical revision of Shakespeare’s Othello in *Desdemona* (2012), to young adult novels, such as Anna-Marie McLemore’s *Dark and Deepest Red* (2020), which centers a queer girl of color living in 1518 Strasbourg, and Kim Zarins’ *Sometimes We Tell the Truth* (2016), a teenage bus-ride version of Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*. Another framework was critical disruption, which challenges the white supremacy that undergirds most literary curricula by offering antiracist avenues of inquiry into premodern texts. These approaches include the pairing of literary texts, such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, with the work of critical theorists of race such as bell hooks and Achille Mbembe; immersive strategies such as role-play, which asks students to “become” characters and retell the stories from their perspectives; and reflective activities that encourage students to acknowledge their own privilege, identify their positionality, and recognize antiracist reading as a social act that may, channeling Morrison, “startle their lives” and “ripple their intellects.” This NCTE roundtable was designed to host a conversation between authors of contemporary young adult retellings of premodern texts and middle, secondary, and college teachers of premodern literature. Unfortunately, the rising COVID-19 infection rates prevented this conference from occurring in person, which caused our panel to be pushed online and eventually

relegated to an “on-demand” session. This meant that our roundtable, originally designed for engagement with a live audience, was reduced to a pre-recorded panel, which restricted the conversation to the panelists and left all contributors wondering what kind of an effect the video had on its viewers, if the session had any viewers at all.¹

Reflecting upon the experience of organizing the NCS and NCTE panels within the context of this cluster, I cannot help but notice the absence of one particular, and vitally important, figure: the public-school teacher. Not one of the speakers in these sessions or contributors to the cluster teach in a public secondary school. I find this fact, on the one hand, tremendously unsettling, because it suggests a lack of investment in Medieval Studies, either by the public-school teacher or public-school system. On the other hand, I find this absence promising because it may also indicate that we have not yet identified the appropriate strategies, opportunities, or structures necessary to reconnect with these public-school colleagues. As the cluster suggests, this failure to connect has not always been the case. David Raybin and Susanna Fein testify to the consistent popularity of the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) Summer Seminars on *The Canterbury Tales* for K-12 teachers, which included “[t]eachers from inner-city schools with high school-lunch eligibility and from elite private academies where hunger is a non-issue; from underfunded rural schools and high-tech suburban schools” (2022, 88).

Teachers flocked to these gatherings to engage with Chaucer until the political and xenophobic forces in the United States Senate defunded them in 2014 based on the claim that the seminars were an extravagant expense because they largely occurred overseas (2022, 90-91). As a former high school teacher who was drawn to Medieval Studies through my experience teaching Chaucer, I would have jumped at the opportunity to join other secondary-school educators in learning, reading, and discussing Chaucerian Middle English abroad in London with Fein and Raybin, or in any domestic US location for that matter, from New Haven, Connecticut to Aberdeen, South Dakota, previous sites of the seminars led by Lee Patterson and Jay Ruud (2022, 87-90). I have no doubts that I would have thrived as a student and teacher within these environments, and if my desire to “glady . . . lerne and gladly teche” (Chaucer 1987, 1.308) was the only determining factor, I surely would have. In my case, my low teaching salary meant that I simply could not afford to *not* teach summer school, which prevented me from participating in most professional development opportunities during the summer months. As Raybin and Fein note, secondary-school teachers have only sparsely attended New Chaucer Society congresses over the years, despite the outreach efforts of NCS leadership. They end the essay by encouraging “American Chaucerians” to “flood the NEH with proposals” for seminars on medieval literature, which is certainly one promising option that has proven successful in the past (2022, 92). I would heartily agree, but I fear the pandemic has altered the professional development landscape, perhaps forever, so I would suggest that we consider some alternatives that require less time and effort from our exhausted secondary-school colleagues.

We should start by checking out the stunning set of resources available at *Middle Ages for Educators (MAFE)*: <https://middleagesforeducators.princeton.edu>, the subject of an important essay in the cluster (Eisenberg, McDougall, Morreale 2022). This incredibly timely and easily accessible website is

¹ The recording was only available for a limited time to conference registrants. We have no idea whether anyone watched the video after we recorded it.

the brilliant brainchild of Merle Eisenberg, Sara McDougall, and Laura Morreale, who (dare I say serendipitously?) co-founded *MAFE* during the initial stages of the COVID-19 lockdown in March of 2020. This site now hosts a variety of resources for teaching medieval topics, including videos, lesson plans, primary texts, critical readings, and prompts for conversations with students. Given the pandemic origin of its creation, *MAFE* naturally has quite a few materials related to plague and disease, but its resources are incredibly capacious, especially given its adolescent stage of development. Rather than remain content to play the classic hits, the site bravely pushes the boundaries of traditional understandings of the “medieval,” addressing time periods as early as 300 CE and as late as our current moment, hosting important materials that trace the insidious legacies of the Blood Libel legend and Anti-Asian racism, histories that demonstrate how imperative it is that we grapple with the virulent xenophobias of the past to understand the persistent hatreds of the present (2022, 80, 82-83). For the secondary-school educator who has little time and energy to enliven and enrich their premodern curricula, this site offers a lively set of resources that can be easily accessed and used within a variety of English Language Arts and Social Studies classrooms.

MAFE also includes helpful discussions of teaching strategies, which are particularly well suited for our rapidly changing teaching modalities, in-person, online, or hybrid. For example, the site now features the videos of the New England Medieval Consortium (NEMC) conference, “Pandemic Lessons: Post-Pandemic Pedagogy,” which Sean Gilsdorf, the Harvard University Director of the Committee on Medieval Studies, and I co-hosted and co-organized during the fall of 2021 (<https://middleagesforeducators.princeton.edu/pandemic-lessons-and-post-pandemic-pedagogy#:~:text=pandemic%20lessons>). While other conferences like NCTE were forced to make the abrupt transition back to virtual meetings in wake of the 2021 Delta variant, NEMC president Meriem Pagès and its Steering Committee made the prescient decision to avoid this eventuality and to conduct a kind of “unconference” on Zoom, one that would deviate from past practice and offer more opportunities for conversation than the normal “presentation” or “lecture” conference structure would afford. Moreover, it seemed important to take this opportunity to reflect on our experiences of trying to teach the literature, culture, and history of the Middle Ages, periods often defined by plague, within the midst of a pandemic. For some of us, this had meant converting our face-to-face courses to online ones, for some others, it had meant, despite the increasing health risk, attempting to carry on teaching in person, and yet for some others, it had meant a bit of both, teaching “hyflex,” a combination of face-to-face and online teaching. Our panelists, from a range of institutions throughout the Northeast US, shared their experiences of doing so, which did not always result in instructional innovation, but at least led to pedagogical revelation. We designed three “Pandemic Lesson” sessions: “Teaching Literature,” “Teaching Material Culture,” and “Teaching History.” Each session began with presentations by two panelists, who shared their teaching tools or strategies that they tried during, what my colleague Sean Gilsdorf aptly called, the “Age of Covid” or “The Long 2020.” Then a moderator led a facilitated discussion, asking the panelists to respond to questions such as, “What have you learned about your students during pandemic teaching?”; “What you have learned about yourself as a teacher?”; “What have you learned about your subject?”; and, “How do you believe your teaching will change going forward?” Each session ended with an open discussion, when we invited the audience to ask questions and share their own “pandemic lessons.” Following the three sessions, we concluded the conference with a roundtable discussion with all panelists, which gave them an

opportunity to talk across sessions and begin to define what a “post-pandemic pedagogy” might mean for us and our students.

When I consider the kinds of impact *MAFE* and other types of online learning might make on the teaching of medieval subjects in secondary schools, I feel both hopeful and unsettled. For instance, I believe we could adapt or supplement Raybin and Fein’s recommendation to propose NEH seminars to include online formats like the 2021 NEMC conference, which would lower the threshold for participation while promising a significant payoff for future teaching. Yet, the conviviality, one of what Fradenburg calls “the arts of thriving and enjoyment,” that the in-person seminars foster would likely be lessened, resulting in lower levels of engagement. Moreover, the reduction of teaching to remote modalities risks the uncritical acceptance of online education as the best and most democratic means of access to knowledge, a prevailing assumption within many arguments to push more secondary-school and university instruction online. As Henry Giroux suggests, “more recently, educational discourse is dominated by a technocratic rationality obsessed with methodological considerations regarding online teaching and learning” that enables what he calls “pandemic pedagogy,” a “pedagogy of containment and disappearance,” in which “the mechanisms of oppressive power become indivisible” and “disposable groups are relegated to spaces of social abandonment” (2021, 6-7). Many of us witnessed the effects of this “containment and disappearance” when the 2020 lockdowns forced many schools to remote instruction, abandoning students who did not have reliable wireless access, compatible devices, or private spaces to participate in class over Zoom.

While NEH seminars and digital resources like *MAFE* are promising options for helping Medieval Studies survive, I want to end this response by proposing that we expand our focus beyond the teachers and students in private or elite institutions, specifically towards the teachers and students in public schools and universities. I certainly understand the many obstacles that prevent us from doing so, particularly the low levels of funding in public institutions and the vocational motivations that drive low-income students away from the humanities disciplines. As someone who has spent his entire life learning and teaching exclusively within public school settings, I am more than familiar with these challenges, but I am also more than convinced that these environments are spaces where Medieval Studies do and can thrive. At Boston’s only public university, UMass Boston has a student population of fifty-six percent students of color and sixty-two percent first-generation college students, including many who are eager to pursue the humanities and critically engage with the premodern histories that have impacted their lives (Office of Institutional Research 2021). In my English department, our medieval-themed courses, which range from provocative topics, such as “From *Beowulf* to Beyoncé” and “Vikings!,” to more traditional ones, such as “Chaucer” and “Medieval Literature,” are often well enrolled and filled with enthusiastic students. For these students, connecting the present to the past is not a luxurious pursuit—it is an investigation of their histories that offers invaluable insight into their very livelihoods, including the health, history, and future of their families and their cultures.

More specifically, I believe we can reach these students in public secondary-school classrooms through teaching mentorship programs. In my role as the Director of English Teaching, I regularly encounter in my graduate-level “Teaching Literature” and “Teaching English with Digital Technology” courses practicing secondary school teachers from the Boston area who see the potential of teaching, for example, Chaucer’s *The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale* along with Patience Agbabi’s

Telling Tales (2015) to their eleventh-grade students, or the promise of having ninth-grade students use social annotation platforms to write line-by-line commentaries on Marie de France's fables and lays. These teachers then bring these texts and practices into their public-school classrooms in Brockton, Cambridge, and Watertown, engaging students with medieval materials that help explain the historical and literary basis for constructions of class, gender, race, and sexuality that they witness all around them. Over the past few years, I have developed a teacher-mentorship program that connects current secondary-school teachers, who graduated from UMass Boston, with prospective teachers in my classrooms, both undergraduate and graduate students pursuing their teaching licenses. These students present their pedagogical projects (such as, lesson plans, curriculum units, and digital tools) to these teachers, who then offer feedback and advice for revising or adapting the projects for particular teaching environments. This mentorship structure situates the student work in the actual classrooms of their mentors, who then serve as a bridge between theory and practice, becoming thereby potential career contacts who guide these students as they progress into their own classrooms.

I believe this looping structure, in which teachers reach back and mentor those who follow in their footsteps, provides the kind of personal and practical support that teachers desperately need and desire, especially given the pressures of the current climate. If we, as medievalists, can use our own positions, both individually at our institutions and collectively through organizations like NCS, to connect with and offer mentorship to teachers in teaching licensure and professional development programs, we can ensure that the texts, materials, and methods of our fields, as they are so brilliantly presented in this essay cluster, can become embedded within secondary-school curricula. Once these structures are established to help teachers thrive, I believe we can make a long-lasting impact that will help Medieval Studies not just survive, but also continue to—in the words of Toni Morrison—“startl[e] our lives and rippl[e] our intellects” (2019, 262).

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