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Farina, Lara
Seaman, Myra

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Editing *postmedieval*: a journal of medieval cultural studies

Lara Farina

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6418-8722>

West Virginia University, U.S.

Myra Seaman

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8299-0292>

College of Charleston, U.S.

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Editing *postmedieval*: a journal of medieval cultural studies

Lara Farina

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6418-8722>

West Virginia University, U.S.

Myra Seaman

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8299-0292>

College of Charleston, U.S.

Abstract

For the past eleven years, *postmedieval*, a multi-disciplinary journal devoted to the study of both medieval and medievalist cultures, has published quarterly issues aimed at an international audience of scholars, artists, and writers. Having recently celebrated the journal's one-decade anniversary, we reflect here on our work as two of the editors who launched a new journal and/or kept it afloat through changes in its ownership, marketing, and management. Our observations about editing pertain to commercial publishing as a venue for scholarly and creative works, and we emphasize our experiences reconciling corporate publishing practices with the production of an innovative, accessible, equitable, and rather bespoke journal.

For the past eleven years, *postmedieval*, a multi-disciplinary journal devoted to the study of both medieval and medievalist cultures, has published quarterly issues aimed at an international audience of scholars, artists, and writers. The journal grew out of the creative energies of the BABEL Working Group, which was a loose collective of scholars and writers, many (but not all) of whom were medievalists, and most of whom were eager to experiment with new approaches, contexts, and styles for scholarship. Above all, BABEL cultivated community, be it the conference sessions it sponsored, the symposia and conferences it hosted, or the edited collections that such in-person transformations generated. The journal provided a continuous gathering space (that was also institutionally supported, in all senses) for such experiments (BABEL Working Group 2021). Having recently celebrated the journal's one-decade anniversary, we reflect here on our work as two of the editors who launched a new journal and/or kept it afloat through changes in its ownership, marketing, and management. *postmedieval* has always been published by a commercial press, Palgrave, which was purchased in 2016 by Springer Nature, a much larger, multi-national company. Our observations about editing pertain to commercial publishing as a venue for scholarly and creative works, and we will emphasize our experiences reconciling corporate publishing practices with the production of an innovative, accessible, equitable, and rather bespoke journal.

Origin and Mission

The BABEL Working Group always preferred voluntary and often spontaneous collaboration over the officer centered structures of recognized scholarly societies, so it is difficult to date the group's beginning precisely. It was well established by 2005, sponsoring conference sessions, generating edited collections, and producing special issues in academic journals; it also administered a regional conference for an established organization (Southeastern Medieval Association, 2008), later hosting four of its own biennial meetings. Around 2008–09, energy swirled around the possibility of establishing a journal that would provide a regular venue for sharing the work of BABEL participants while also making connections well beyond that community. Eileen Joy and Myra Seaman, who were then doing the lion's share of BABEL's organizing, approached Palgrave with the following objectives for a journal, writing, in a proposal dated June 2008:

[We hope] to develop an inter-disciplinary, cross-temporal, and socially interventionist medieval cultural studies journal that would bring medieval studies into mutually beneficial critical relations with scholars working on a diverse array of post-medieval subjects, including critical theories that remain un- or under-historicized. [...] A] concerted focus on the question of the relations between the medieval and modern in different times and places will help us to take better stock of the different roles that history and various processes of historicizing have played in the shaping of the various presents and futures. [...] BABEL is also concerned to further develop new methods for approaching and articulating all of the ways in which the medieval past remains both intransigent and silent, yet is also voluble and variable...

At the time, there were just three journals in medieval studies dedicated to theorized approaches to medieval literature or theoretically-inflected historicisms: *Exemplaria*, *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, and *New Medieval Literatures*. None of these had a mission focused on integrating medieval studies with work in other disciplines or with more contemporary periods. As Myra and Eileen put it in their proposal:

It is therefore also our intention to engage with scholars working in all periods over the question of periodization itself and of the ways in which the production of disciplinary knowledges is bound up with historical chronologies and teleologies that have become sedimented over time. It is our aim to problematize these teleologies and to also work toward innovative modes of temporal thinking that would be productive of new critical theories for better understanding the relations between past, present, and future.

Besides their commitment to multi-disciplinarity, rethinking historical periodization, and methodological experimentation, Eileen and Myra also sought to further BABEL's purpose of fostering an inclusive scholarly community. In service to that ethic, the editors of *postmedieval* have endeavored to work against the damaging habits of academic publishing, in particular journals' role as gatekeepers for the profession. First, we have showcased the work of graduate students, independent scholars, and para-academics, requiring that at least one essay per issue be authored by a graduate student. Second, we have done our best to make the review process as humane and considerate as possible. We select reviewers based not only on their position in the field but equally on their commitment to equitable practices and a collegial scholarly community. When necessary, we disregard hostile reviews and exclude harmful reviewer comments. Third, recognizing that social inequalities greatly impinge on access to scholarly resources and opportunities for publication, we have solicited guest issues edited by and featuring scholars from under-represented groups, such as our two anniversary issues in 2020 (*postmedieval* 2020). We feel it urgent that those of us affiliated with or interested in medieval studies not only read the provocative and necessary work of queer and trans scholars, scholars of color, working-class scholars, and the academic precariat, but also hear what those authors tell us about the conditions of their work. As we have learned to think more critically about the legacies of nationalism and colonialism operative in North American and European medieval studies, we have realized that the editors of *postmedieval* have more work to do in evaluating the journal's disciplinary orientations and accessibility to potential readers and contributors living in other locations, particularly in the Global South.

Publication Model and Support

postmedieval was launched by Palgrave-Macmillan as a new title in 2010. Although Palgrave was purchased by Springer Nature in 2014, the publisher's role in financing the journal remained fairly consistent from 2010–2020. Eileen and Myra, as the first two editors of the journal, received a stipend of \$2000–3000 per year in compensation. Lara Farina joined as another editor in 2015, when Eileen needed to devote more time to running punctum books and Myra was anticipating becoming chair of her department. The three of us split the annual editorial stipend. Two Book Review Editors, first Holly Crocker (2010–2016) and then Julie Orlemanski (2016–2020), joined the editorial team and

received a smaller stipend for their work. The journal was also underwritten by Lara’s and Myra’s universities in the form of course releases for editorial work, though in Myra’s case, this compensation wasn’t continuous. For the first six years of her work with the journal, Myra received one course release per year from a 3/3 teaching load. Because her university sets a limit on teaching reassignment, she lost the release when she received new reassignments as chair of her department. Lara received one course release per year from a 2/2 (plus graduate supervision) teaching load, which was calculated by her university as a significant cost (approximately \$13,000–\$14,000 per year). Eileen was working independently for most of her time at the journal, so her only compensation came from the editorial stipend.

Our work as editors required significant amounts of time and labor. In the title’s early years, Palgrave offered support in the form of advice and training provided by the journal’s publishing editor, who also guided the journal’s publicity very effectively. However, from 2010 to 2020, *postmedieval* did not have copy-editing services, paid editorial assistants, or a managing editor responsible for administrative duties. Rotating graduate students served as editorial assistants, but lack of pay and the time required for training inclined us to keep their numbers and hours at a minimum. Our own editorial responsibilities included: soliciting individual essays and proposals for special issues, managing peer review, communicating with authors and guest-editors, providing both developmental editing and copy-editing, checking proofs, finding and securing permissions for cover art, and conducting promotional activities such as journal-sponsored conference panels and essay contests. Since *postmedieval* was published quarterly, with each issue usually containing between six and ten essays (around 65,000 words), the absence of copy-editors or paid editorial assistants meant that the editors spent a lot of time on both project management (ensuring that authors and editors followed instructions and met deadlines) and detailed work with authors’ submissions.

Commercial Publishing

The original proposal for the journal went to Palgrave because it was a well-known venue for medieval scholarship in the form of its New Middle Ages book series. Many BABELers had found Palgrave a supportive home for their first monographs, and the journal publishing team was very responsive to Myra and Eileen’s inquiries. At the time, we weren’t as attuned to the differences that might exist between academic and commercial journal publishers, nor had opportunities for open access publication made their way into academic journal publishing. Palgrave provided a reliable and supportive home for the journal in its first years, with an exceptionally talented and committed publishing editor, Roz Pyne. During that time, we received individualized support. For example, in the journal’s first two years, we made adaptations—including shifting to an exclusively guest-edited special issue model—that required flexibility from Palgrave, and they actively supported our editorial vision. But given the changes in academic publishing over the past decade, we think the support that helped us establish the journal is no longer available from commercial publishers.

When Palgrave Macmillan was purchased by Springer Nature, *postmedieval* was added to the portfolio of a global behemoth that publishes over 3,000 scholarly journals, with a touted emphasis on “science, technology, medicine, and social sciences” (Springer Nature 2021). The buyout is reflective of the past decade’s trends in scholarly publishing, which has seen the predominance of

increasingly fewer and larger presses, as smaller companies and university presses have folded, been absorbed, or lost institutional support in an era of tightening budgets. In its current state, commercial publishing presents a number of obstacles to innovation and adaptation: restricted accessibility; rigid standardization of processes and format; refusal to decentralize proprietary processes; and corporate structures that defer decision-making.

Academic journals continue to be available to those who have institutional access to university library subscriptions. Non-academic authors and readers, who are important to our journal's mission, face difficulty accessing journal content. In *postmedieval*'s early years with Palgrave, we tried to remedy this by offering a reduced price on individual subscriptions to anyone involved with the BABEL Working Group. This was more of a challenge than it might be for traditional academic organizations, since BABEL didn't collect annual dues, require registration, or even have a mailing list or record of membership to share with Palgrave. Instead, to get a discount, individuals used a special access code that BABEL shared publicly on the group's website. Palgrave was remarkably flexible in working with us to suit the values and mission of the organization. However, we later struggled to get the publisher to honor the discount, and, after the Springer Nature purchase, the practice effectively disappeared through neglect and intransigence. Our publisher, be it Palgrave or Springer Nature, has always been most invested in academic library subscriptions, but, today, even a large number of our academic readers lack access to these. Bundling, or the practice of forcing libraries to buy an entire package of journals from a (large) publisher rather than buy only those individual titles they want, substantially increased libraries' costs. Large publishers have also refused to disclose the sales prices they have negotiated with other universities; this lack of transparency makes it difficult for libraries to establish any kind of fair market value. With declining budgets, university libraries have been reducing their journal subscriptions. It has become a common dilemma that our authors and guest editors do not have institutional access to their work once it is published.

The larger the publisher, the more standardized its processes. In the case of academic journal publishing, this tends to mean that procedures and formats that suit STEM journals become the standard, to which smaller arts and humanities journals are expected to conform. For instance, despite the fact that *postmedieval* published only special issues oriented primarily toward the look and feel of the print issue (with electronic access available but not prioritized), with the transition to Springer Nature, we were pressured to move to a rolling publication schedule, releasing individual articles whenever they made it through the production process. As this would mean a special issue would not be released as a unit, we continually resisted and eventually were allowed to maintain our orientation toward the whole issue. In addition, our aesthetic choices mattered to us, because, as humanists, we believe that form shapes content. Our choice of sidenotes, for instance, was both an echo of medieval manuscript design and intended to discourage authors' use of long or overabundant notes. We know that information is contoured differently when it is in a note or in the body of an essay. We had to insist on this point continually when Springer Nature repeatedly tried to get us to use standardized layouts tailored to publication in science and medicine. At the same time, the journal's physical appearance degraded as a result of the move to Springer Nature: the quality of the paper, in particular, was much higher during the journal's first years, and there was then active support of our inclusion of images (despite the attendant costs) within each issue.

More broadly, the rigid standardization (from layout to marketing) that large commercial publishers rely on to reduce costs actively discourages and, ultimately, prevents innovation. Had we not had a number of features already well established for the journal, Springer Nature would not have supported them. As noted above, there are ways in which distinct features of *postmedieval* have been modified or lost as a result of that standardization. Furthermore, changes—major as well as relatively minor—at the publisher can have many direct impacts on the life of a journal. Some of the effects of that won't be readily seen by readers or authors, but as editors, you're acutely aware of the ways you are required to alter your internal processes to suit theirs. Other changes affect everyone immediately. For instance, the journal's website is maintained exclusively by the publisher. In the case of *postmedieval*, Palgrave encouraged us to make suggestions and offer alternative content, though over the years, the website gradually was more and more like all of their other journal websites, reflecting the distinctiveness of the journal less and less. With Springer Nature, the website could not be modified by us at all, and it became quite useless for offering potential authors or readers meaningful information. It was simply an archive through which to access an individual article.

The structure of a large multinational corporation hinders responsiveness and quick decision-making, and more so when the contacts for a journal, like production and publication managers, are at the bottom of that corporate structure. From 2015 to 2020, we had five different publication managers and three different production managers, most of them clearly responsible for more titles than was reasonable. With their post-merger workloads, they scarcely had time to publicize the journal, much less think creatively about how we might find new audiences or experiment with different media, forums, or projects. And the time we spent bringing each new manager up to speed on our processes took away from our own ability to innovate, as did our having to chase solutions to problems through managerial networks spanning three continents (while we were in the US, our publication managers were in the UK, the production management moved to Germany, and typesetting was done in India).

Re-launch

After a combined total of sixteen years editing the journal, Lara and Myra were ready to hand that opportunity off to a new editorial team. The timing was right for a reboot of *postmedieval*, following a pair of anniversary issues in 2020 recognizing the journal's first decade. However, given the array of obstacles that we continued to face with the publishing team at Springer Nature, often challenging even despite our years of experience working with the publisher, we were very reluctant to saddle a new editorial team with those burdens. Since Springer Nature owns the journal and the *postmedieval* name, moving to a different publisher was not an option, and the best course seemed to be ending the journal's run. Yet, once we notified Springer Nature of our plan to cease publication, they organized meetings that included senior leadership, with whom we had not been in direct contact before. The optimism and openness expressed by the leadership team were very encouraging, and we established a new set of structures for moving forward, one of the most important being the addition of a paid managing editor for the journal. After an extensive open search, one informed by recommendations for equitable editorial practices, the new editorial team was announced in early 2021, and the first new issue, *postmedieval* 12.1, appeared in December 2021 (RaceB4Race Executive Board 2020).

This editorial transition and the publication hiatus over most of 2021 provided the opportunity to revise the journal's mission, refine its processes, and appeal to additional audiences. The new content editors' work is informed by their prior experience with *postmedieval* as authors and readers. They are working in coordination with an entirely new editorial board, which they curated to support the journal's new mission and goals, among them expanding the journal's disciplinary, geographic, and professional reach. Because *postmedieval* is now well established, the editorial board's purpose is to help the editors steer the journal into the future (rather than to offer their professional reputation to a new journal, as was necessary when first establishing the journal). Even over the relatively short life of *postmedieval*, the situation of humanities scholars has changed extensively, so that whereas in 2009 our concern was to ensure full access to graduate students, today the limitations on access extend to PhDs without institutional affiliation and in many cases working outside of academia entirely. For instance, many of the graduate students who have published in *postmedieval*—perhaps even the majority—have not moved into full-time tenure-track positions. Rather than simply narrowing its focus to the remaining few authors and readers in traditional academic posts, the journal is working to expand accessibility through a new website, recently launched, hosted by the journal (rather than by the publisher) to serve as a venue for para-publication. Material from each issue will appear on the website (remediated as videos, interviews, and so on), and the website also hosts material in formats other than those published within the journal itself—such as the interview with Yang Xiubo, an associate professor at the College of Foreign Studies, Guilin University of Technology, who researches Shakespeare and Zhuang Minority literature and culture (Yang n.d.).

Journal Publishing: What to Know

Despite the challenges of our work as journal editors, editing *postmedieval* was enormously satisfying for us. It was a pleasure to help authors make their writing the best it could be, and most of our contributors were truly appreciative of the time we spent on suggestions and edits. We were able to see and assist the development of exciting research projects and collections. We could extend welcome to younger and marginalized scholars. And we take pride in creating and maintaining a space in medieval studies for untried experiments and underexplored methods. These rewards made the investment of our time and energies worth it. For would-be editors and authors, we offer the following advice in the hopes that it will facilitate the fair treatment of editorial work.

If you are considering starting a new journal with a commercial press, be aware that:

- Unless you negotiate otherwise, commercial publishers (and some university presses) will own the title, including the name, back content, and pending submissions. This means you cannot simply move to a new publisher if you are unhappy with the one you have. Explore the possibility of ownership by a scholarly society or organization.
- Bundling, large fees for Open Access, or other ways of increasing prices will restrict your readership, which, in turn, will have an impact on your submission rate. So inquire about whether the publisher does this.

- Journals need a paid managing editor and/or editorial assistants, preferably staff who are qualified to copy-edit accepted submissions. There are many highly qualified PhDs looking for paid editorial work (we received over 70 applications for our new managing editor position), and currently content editors are absorbing far too much of this labor.
- You will be pressured to standardize everything from the processing of submissions to layout to online access. Automated processes, like e-proofing systems, are often sub-par for humanities publications. Decide what is important to retain control over, but be mindful that large presses may be ill-equipped to handle bespoke processes.
- Ask about the resources that will be devoted to publicizing the journal. This is an area where commercial publishers have an advantage, but only if the journal's contact at the press has the time for it.

If you are considering joining an already established journal as a new editor:

- Find out about the journal's pricing and policies for access. Do your best to get information about subscriptions and production costs, so you have some sense of the publisher's profit or loss. This information is often kept confidential, but the more you know, the more you can assess the possibility of getting additional support for editors, authors, or journal initiatives. Working for a mercenary press is soul-destroying, so be wary of unethical marketing practices.
- Ask about the support services for the journal, so you will know how much time you'll spend on things like copy-editing, assisting with image permissions, or fixing layout problems.
- Ask about the journal's initiatives and plans for the future. Will there be room for you to innovate or adapt to changing readerships? Has the journal made such changes in the last ten years?
- Evaluate the interpersonal dynamic of the editorial team. Editing is collaborative work: find out how tasks are distributed and how the team addresses disagreements about workload, mission, or public relations.
- Try to negotiate a course release if you are teaching. It helps to know how your institution calculates the cost of these. You might explore ways to use an editorial stipend to buy yourself out of a class.

If you are an author who publishes or intends to publish in a scholarly journal, knowing the following can improve your collaboration with journal editors:

- The amount of editorial support varies enormously across journals. Journals may have a large team of editors, editorial assistants, copy-editors, and

proofreaders, or they may have one or two people who do everything. Do not assume that paid staff will take care of copy-editing, proofreading, or reference checking. And remember that editors tend to be teaching, researching, and performing service alongside their editorial work.

- Many processes have automated elements, such as chaser emails to encourage authors and reviewers to meet deadlines. Honor these wherever possible, but bear in mind that editors can be unaware of some pieces of communication you receive from the journal. Where necessary, contact the editor(s) directly for clarification or to request alternatives.
- It is better to find out about accessibility (copyright, Open Access policies or prices, shareable PDFs, subscription prices, etc.) before submitting.
- Editors appreciate when potential contributors know something about the journal's content, disciplinary range, and social/professional commitments.

Addendum from the new editors of *postmedieval* as of 2021, Shazia Jagot, Julie Orlemanski, and Sara Ritchey

As fledgling Editors-in-Chief of *postmedieval*, we couldn't be more excited to continue the legacy of conceptual adventure, stylistic experiment, and political and ethical urgency that was so powerfully established over the last decade by the journal's previous editors as well as its many guest-editors, whose visions over the years transformed what a journal of medieval cultural studies could be. Over the course of 2021, the three of us (Shazia, Julie, and Sara), together with our managing editor, Dr. Francesca Petrizzo, assembled a new editorial board, built a digital platform, called for submissions, negotiated the ethics of peer review, corresponded with authors, read brilliant articles-in-process, and tested new possibilities for scholarly encounter and expression. In the midst of these tasks, we've also found ourselves reflecting on academic publishing and our place within it. Those reflections have been bound up with the day-to-day tasks of journal editing, and we appreciate Myra and Lara's frank and direct discussion, above, of how they negotiated these tasks during their years at *postmedieval*.

We'd like to emphasize how important it has been in our tenure so far to have the support of a managing editor, who is paid a salary by Springer Nature that allows for an average of fifteen hours of work per week. It is this administrative support that has allowed us to pursue a handful of new initiatives. These have included the assembly of an international and multidisciplinary editorial board; biannual (virtual) board meetings; a new website under editorial control; and the development of new genres of scholarly writing that we plan to feature in *postmedieval*. We've also shifted *postmedieval* to publishing one or more open-topic issues per year. For some authors, publishing in open-topic issues is more accessible: they're not required to tailor their work to specific themes, and pieces submitted for immediate peer-review often find their way to print more quickly. At the same time, special issues remain important to the journal's mission because of the field-changing role that they have played. We will continue publishing guest-edited issues on specific themes, and these will be complemented by smaller guest-edited clusters, which will appear within open-topic issues.

We look forward to following the example set by previous editors of *postmedieval*—of pursuing forms of intellectual inquiry that don't quite exist yet, that are in the process of being reinvented, while staying true to values of solidarity, experimentation, inclusion, and adventure. That pursuit necessarily takes place within the material and social realities that determine conditions of labor, remuneration, and access in academic publishing and higher education at large. Acknowledging and analyzing those realities (as Myra and Lara do, above) can aid all of us in figuring out how to build the futures we seek.

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