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# PEDAGOGY & PROFESSION

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# **And Gladly Edit: *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 1997–2003**

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## **Abstract**

Larry Scanlon reflects on editing *SAC* from 1997 through 2003.

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## Loomings

In 1996 my colleague Susan Crane was asked to take over as Executive Director of the New Chaucer Society (NCS). The circumstances of this request had nothing to do with the management of the journal and there was some talk of *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* (*SAC*) remaining in its current location (Ohio State University). The Society was less than twenty-years old at that point and from its founding the entire organization had always been hosted at a single institution. For that reason—and others—Susan thought it best to move the journal to Rutgers University as well. She asked me if I was willing to become its editor. Editing a journal was not something I had ever thought of doing but Susan made a persuasive case and I said yes. Not that I took all that much persuading. With an insouciance I find remarkable in retrospect, I did not expect the job to be that interesting, but I also did not expect it to be excessively time-consuming. I was wrong on both counts. Editing *SAC* turned out to be a big job, but I also found it absorbing and very satisfying. I discovered that I very much enjoy the nuts and bolts of academic editing, and I flatter myself that I was pretty good at it. My reflections on my time as editor follow. But before I get to them I want to say a little bit about the broader landscape of Middle English during that period. *SAC* produced its inaugural issue in 1979. The year before, according to the MLA database, 120 articles or books concerning Chaucer appeared. The largest single venue was *The Chaucer Review*, the only journal focused exclusively on Chaucer and later medieval England. Twenty years later, in 1998, my first full year as editor of *SAC*, that number had grown to 196, a sixty percent increase. Those two decades also saw the establishment of three new journals: *Exemplaria*, *The Yearbook of Langland Studies*, and *New Medieval Literatures*, which all became almost immediately premier outlets for Middle English scholars. In short, it was a great time to be a journal editor.

### An editor is not a potted plant.

Many of the most successful journals in the humanities—perhaps a majority—were founded by a single editor or a small group of like-minded scholars with a particular vision. (I have just mentioned two examples in our field: *Exemplaria*, founded by R. A. Shoaf, and *New Medieval Literatures*, founded by Rita Copeland, David Lawton, and Wendy Scase.) Such journals generally have advisory boards but the driving force is still the editor or editorial team. A journal like *SAC*, sponsored by a society, obviously differs in that the editor must ultimately be responsible to the society's membership. Nevertheless, *mutatis mutandis*, in my view, an agenda, a vision, a sense of where the field has been and where it is going remains crucial if the editor is actually to deliver a journal sufficiently vibrant to respond to a membership's needs. As it happened, I was already personally acquainted with the founders of two notably successful journals. I was Gordon Hutner's colleague at the University of Wisconsin when he founded *American Literary History*, and a few years earlier I had been lucky enough to be on a post-doc at Wesleyan University the year Khachig Tölölyan founded *Diaspora*. To the extent that I had given the matter any thought beyond admiring their examples that would have gone back to my time as a graduate student when I worked as Stanley Fish's research assistant. I was quite taken by a brilliantly contrarian piece "No Bias, No Merit: The Case Against Blind Submission," he drafted at that time (Fish 1998). As Fish explains, "Blind submission is the practice whereby an author's name is not revealed to the reviewer who evaluates his or her work" (739). It is also called *double-blind*

*submission*, because the name of the reviewer is also generally not revealed to the author. *Publications of the Modern Language Association (PMLA)* adopted the policy in 1980, and it quickly became standard practice for the vast majority of scholarly journals in literary studies. It was already the practice at *SAC* when I took over.

The sentence I particularly associate with this essay was a declaration to the effect that *An essay by Northrop Frye is of scholarly interest by virtue of the very fact that Northrop Frye wrote it*. I say “associate” because that sentence does not appear in the published version of the essay, and I cannot now say for sure that it was in some draft I saw at the time, that it was something Fish said in seminar in summarizing the piece, or that it was simply my own impressionistic construction. However, even if it was my own construction, it was still true to the spirit of Fish’s argument and what I took away from it. Fish’s larger focus was the irony that a notion of intrinsic merit was common to both sides in the debate over *PMLA*’s editorial policy of blind submission—to both the conservatives who opposed it and to the reformers who had instituted it. What impressed me at the very time I was beginning to understand how professional scholarship actually worked was Fish’s insistence that critical trends had a determinate shape because they were always produced by particular people under particular circumstances. Any prospective contribution of any value necessarily defined itself against what came before—drew its conditions of intelligibility from what came before—even in the rare instances when it constituted a complete break. This principle has always guided by my own scholarship and my own teaching. Not surprisingly, it also informed my approach to editing, though only in a fairly *ad hoc* way. Up until that point, my only professional experience that was at all relevant was organizing conference panels, something I did a lot of in my first decade as a professor. In those days, my way of applying what I sometimes thought of as Fish’s *Frye principle* was to follow a time-tested principle I learned very early on. If a panel’s main point is showcasing new work and/or younger scholars, one needs to anchor it with at least one more established scholar. That helps get the panel accepted and—more importantly—gets the new work a bigger audience.

Lisa Kiser, my immediate predecessor as *SAC* editor, was gracious and helpful. We had a long conversation in the early summer of 1997 out of which a couple of challenges emerged. One challenge was the so-called empty drawer problem. I think it fair to say this issue is a perpetual source of anxiety to journal editors. It can mean either not enough competitive submissions, or not enough of them representing all the aspects of the field the journal covers. In the case of *SAC*, it was mainly the latter. The other challenge involved the book reviews, which Lisa found took up an increasing amount of her time. (That was the first inkling I had that this job was going to be bigger than I anticipated.) Lisa was rightly committed to reviewing all books relevant to the field—i.e., Middle English literary studies—and all books produced by members of the society.

In retrospect, one can easily relate these two issues to larger developments in the field. Medieval Studies was never the myopic bastion of reaction its critics have traditionally treated it as. Nevertheless, the 1970s saw an impressive revival in the field that carried on for the rest of the century, and arguably continues to the present day. The case can be made that it was at least as receptive to the explosion of new approaches—feminism, Marxism, new historicism, post-structuralism, and the like—as any other subfield in literary studies. It also received increasing support from the discipline as a whole, at least in English. As English came out of its first job crisis around the same time—a crisis that now seems relatively mild compared to what the field has been living through for the last fifteen years—it brought

Middle English studies with it. (Old English did not do quite so well.) In the early 1980s openings for medievalists in English departments in North America were in the low teens. By the late 1990s they got as high as the low forties in the best years. There were lots of jobs, comparatively speaking, lots of new medievalists, a growth of publications in the field, and a growth of outlets. Hence the increasing number of books for *SAC* to review. Likewise, the empty drawer problem increased—or at least some portion of it. The 1980s and the 1990s were the hey-day of the critical anthology, which like as not would organize itself around some new approach, or some thoroughgoing revision of a longstanding problem. For a scholar of any established standing the practical advantages of this form of publication were considerable. The initial commitment was not more than a short abstract, and one did not need to begin work on the piece until the anthology had secured a commitment from a press. That essentially meant that one did not need to begin work until publication was basically guaranteed. By contrast, sending work to a journal on spec, and trusting the vagaries of editors and readers, double blind or not, was less attractive, everything else being equal.

The solution to the review problem was simple. I decided we needed a book review editor. I prevailed upon Christine Chism, at that point my junior colleague, to take the job, and she agreed. Susan got us funding for an extra position, and *SAC* has had a book review editor ever since. Chris and I also instituted and enforced strict word limits—a very useful editorial tool for keeping reviews business-like and minimizing extraneous pontificating. To address the empty drawer issue, I decided I wanted to commission some pieces. I cleared this idea with both Mary Carruthers, outgoing President of NCS at the time, and Paul Strohm, the incoming President. They both assented. I remember Mary remarking that in her understanding, the President and Trustees had always considered editorial policy the province of the editor. I also remember Paul saying something to the effect that the reason *SAC* established itself almost immediately as a premier journal in Middle English studies was the robust vision its founding editor, Roy J. Percy, had for it. (Among the many pleasures of my tenure was bringing out a piece by Professor Percy in the final volume I edited. The essay came over the transom, and I assume I sent it out to readers. But there was never a question of not publishing it.) If memory serves, I solicited a total of seven essays of the forty that were published in the four volumes I edited. The process was extremely informal, and it was always an add-on. That is, I never eliminated an otherwise publishable essay to make room for one I had requested. Still, the practice occasioned some discomfort among a couple of trustees when it came to light in my first biannual report. Their concern was an obvious one: as *SAC* is the organ of a society, editorial commissions risked abuse of what was ultimately a representative position. My response was not particularly repentant. I certainly recognized the concern in an abstract sense. But my conviction then, as it is now, is that the possibility of arbitrariness is in fact one of the conditions that defines any representative position. Journals need editors. Editors have to edit. The possibility of an arbitrary judgment shadows every choice an editor makes. The prospect of an editor operating in bad faith is a constant, whether we are talking about in evaluating readers' reports, suggesting changes in the staging of an argument, pointing out infelicities in phrasing, insisting on the citation of relevant bibliography, all the way down to the placement of punctuation.

For me, commissioning essays was only one part of my larger aspiration to make *SAC* as representative as possible, both in relation to its field of inquiry and to the membership of NCS. I felt then, and I still feel now, that the last quarter of the twentieth century was a particularly productive

moment for Medieval Studies generally and Middle English studies in particular, and I wanted as much of the latter represented in pages of *SAC* as possible. In relation to content that meant new approaches or subfields that interested me personally or that I was participating in, e.g. feminism, new historicism, the fifteenth century, queer theory, medievalism. But that also meant work in subfields undergoing significant revival that I was only connected to as a consumer, such as manuscript studies or vernacular devotional traditions. Then there was the question of the contributors. I wanted to encourage prominent senior and established figures for reasons I have already mentioned, and just as obviously I wanted contributions from the bumper crop of younger scholars entering the field at that time. Finally, I had been very taken by Lisa's conviction that *SAC* owed a review to every member of the Society who published a book, and I wanted that to extend to the essay section of the journal. Thus, I was always on the lookout for essays from less published scholars who had something appropriate for the journal. The end result was a marked increase in the number of essays relative to previous volumes. Reactions to that change were mixed: some good-natured teasing from Paul Strohm about how "fat" my volumes looked lined up on his bookshelf; a more dour complaint from a single trustee about their "appalling" length. But—as at least Paul understood—the issue was never the length of the volume; it was the quality of the scholarship. On that point I think one would be hard pressed to demonstrate there was any noticeable diminution. The quality was comparable. There was just more of it.

I made one other notable change. I was very taken with a heavy-hitter panel on the *Monk's Tale* that Jim Rhodes organized in 1998 for the NCS Congress in Paris, and I was able to convince each of the panelists (Stephen Knight, Terry Jones, Ann Astell, H. A. Kelly, Richard Neuse) to submit longer versions of their presentations *en masse* and to get Helen Cooper and L. O. Aranye Fradenburg Joy to write responses. I was so pleased with the result that I decided to include a colloquium in each of my two succeeding volumes. It has been a semi-regular feature of *SAC* since then.

### Lessons learned

Editing *SAC* deepened my appreciation of the profoundly communal nature of literary scholarship. Part of that was certainly the privileged view any editor of any major journal gets of a subdiscipline at work: in the submissions, in the books received for review, the impressive variety of quality work from an impressive variety of perspectives and subfields. But the real revelation came in the form of a person who in the *PMLA* debates on blind submission was hiding in plain sight. I refer to the reader. While editorial work for humanities journals is largely uncompensated and invisible, especially as compared to that done by editors of scientific and medical journals, who are paid directly by the publishers, the work of readers is completely uncompensated and invisible. And they are the engine that makes everything go. It is not exaggerating to say that without readers humanities journals as we know them could not function. Since my time as *SAC* editor, I have read with some bemusement the denunciations and putative exposés of peer review that appear in trade journals like *Inside Higher Education* or major newspapers like *The New York Times* (Lin 2012; Mueller 2016). For all I know, peer review in other fields is as corrupt, incompetent, and dudgeon-justifying as many of these accounts breathlessly declare. What I can say with certainty is none of that is true about our field. During my tenure at *SAC* the overwhelming majority of the many colleagues I asked to review submissions performed their duties conscientiously, fairly, and thoroughly. Very occasionally—maybe two or three

times in the entire five-year span—I would get a review that said something to the effect that “I cannot recommend this essay for publication as it completely ignores/fails to appreciate the importance of the groundbreaking contributions of X” when X was the name of that reviewer. These were easy to ignore, and I just never asked X to review again.

I also learned quickly that ideas of rigor varied noticeably from subfield to subfield and that part of my job was to take the variations into account as I made decisions about revisions and acceptances. That editorial fact of life further complicates ideas of intrinsic merit and does not so much constitute some scandalous secret as demonstrate that honest and forthright peer review must always assume and depend on editorial discretion. Here I want to go back briefly to the blind submission debate to point out a weird irony. The focus on intrinsic merit reduces the process of peer review to the sole question of acceptance or non-acceptance. That both truncates and misrecognizes the reader’s role. The decision on acceptance always ultimately lies with the editor, no matter how strictly editorial policy constrains their choices. Peer reviewers make recommendations, yes, but only as the final element of process best understood as interpretive. They interpret the standards of their field in the course of deciding what a submission might bring to it and offer that interpretation to editor and author alike, as well as suggesting changes that might make the fit between field and submission tighter and more productive. Northrop Frye did not become Northrop Frye because he burst on the scene immediately burning in perpetuity with a hard, gemlike flame while everyone else looked on in stupefied wonder. He got to be Northrop Frye by attracting readers who considered, accepted, rejected, modified his ideas and put them to their own uses. Peer review is the mechanism that gets that process started and the engine that keeps it going. Few literary scholars would now dispute that the legacies of the greatest writers are ultimately the product of their readers. It is a little weird that we do not recognize that the same thing is true of scholarly achievement. This is the secret journal editors know, and I am happy that I was able to share it for a while.

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