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Editing the *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* as a Hub of Publishing in a Local Academic Community

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Editing the *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* as a Hub of Publishing in a Local Academic Community

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Abstract

Journals circulate the life blood of academic publishing: authors need editors to help them present their work in its finest form, while readers need editors to deliver the most welcome reading, and editors need both authors and readers for their journals to thrive. Michael Cornett reflects on his career at the center of this symbiotic relationship as managing editor of the *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*. The institutional stability afforded by Duke University Press as the publisher of *JMEMS* and Duke University's Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies as the campus home for the journal has allowed Cornett to develop an active hub of publishing that integrates the journal within a local academic community, while maintaining the public-facing connection to the wider world of publishing. Editing at its best is collaborative, community-based, knowledge-building work.

I profess editing; I edit the profession

This heading is a bold statement, but a necessary one.¹ Scholars depend on editors to run and sustain the journals in which they publish and to help them present their work in its finest form. Though the readers of academic research may not think about it much, they too need editors to deliver timely articles that welcome reading, that spare them from earlier, rougher versions. In this essay I reflect on my editing of the *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* (*JMEMS*) and my professional identity as a journal editor, as well as editorship more generally. I have found that the long-term stability of my work in the role of managing editor of *JMEMS* and as associate director of Duke University's Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies (CMRS) has allowed me to develop a hub of publishing within the institutional framework of a university program. My overarching goal has been to integrate all my professional aptitudes and abilities in serving my local academic community, as well as scholars worldwide.

After being published for twenty-five years by Duke University Press as the *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, which was edited by Marcel Tetel, Department of Romance Studies, from 1971 to 1995, the journal was completely transformed in mission and organization and renamed the *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* in 1996. David Aers, who had just arrived as a medievalist in the English Department, and Annabel Wharton of the Art and Art History Department were the architects of the new interdisciplinary direction of the journal, publishing (according to our statement of purpose) work that is “grounded in an intimate knowledge of a particular past” while being concerned with “theoretical and methodological issues involved in interpretation,” especially work that “seeks to overcome the polarization between ‘history’ and ‘theory’ in the study of premodern Western culture” (*JMEMS* n.d). Two of three issues each year are focused on special topics, and one is an open-topic issue. The editorial board is composed of Duke faculty across humanities departments who assist the journal's work as colleagues with a shared commitment to a thriving study of medieval and early modern culture at Duke. Part of the transformation of *JMEMS* was its restructuring and reorganization from a one-person operation to a team effort of many faculty, none of whom is compensated for his or her involvement. This new arrangement required professional editorial management. I was brought in to run the journal as its managing editor; I had five years of experience as the editorial intern for *Studies in Philology* while a graduate student at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and my MA and PhD work was in medieval and early modern studies. Duke Press provides stability for the journals it owns by hiring full-time managing editors and supporting them with a full range of publishing professionals in production, design, marketing, and sales. Duke Press currently publishes sixty journals, two-thirds of which produce financial net surpluses for the journals

¹ My thanks to Joanna Murdoch for her helpful response to an earlier version of this essay. All the aphoristic subheadings in this essay are quoted from the creative “Coda” (Cornett 2009) that serves as a commentary on the special collection of eleven essays written by journal editors, “The Profession of Journal Editing and the Intellectual Life of the Academy,” featured in the 2009 issue of the MLA journal *Profession* (Argersinger and Cornett, eds., 2009). This is the only collection, until now with this special issue of *New Chaucer Studies: Pedagogy and Profession*, that approaches journal publishing from the distinctive perspectives of editors themselves.

program.² My position is unique, in that I was also hired by Duke's College of Arts and Sciences to manage CMRS. My dual position is a happy example of an alternative academic track that has led to a stimulating and satisfying twenty-six-year career, and counting. David Aers has also served as the director of the program through most of this period. He and I have formed an especially close team—and a friendship that I treasure—as we have integrated the journal within the institutional framework of Duke's Medieval and Renaissance Studies program. That longevity in our roles has afforded a storehouse of time to develop and nurture a vision, step by step, for *JMEMS* and CMRS to flourish together.

Indeed, from the very beginning of *JMEMS*'s transformation, the journal and CMRS were linked. In a letter dated January 12, 1995 (eight months before I was hired), the CMRS executive committee wrote to the dean of humanities stating their wish to sponsor *JMEMS*:

This sponsorship will allow both the Center and the journal to become highly visible symbols of the innovative and interdisciplinary work that is being done in this area at Duke. At the same time, it will enable the journal to become a more effective vehicle for bringing together at the Center the many Duke faculty members, including especially some of the younger scholars, who work in this area in various departments, but rarely have the opportunity to work actively with each other across the disciplines.

The journal's interdisciplinary vision and the center's composition of faculty from departments across Duke united in a way that has mutually transformed both. Over the years, many of the journal's special issues have been edited by various Duke faculty, and that activity has enriched the intellectual life of faculty and their students in the classroom.

Such stability is rare in any field. It has allowed me to reach a high level of editorial expertise after closely editing to date well over sixteen thousand pages of *JMEMS* articles in eighty-one book-length volumes. Then there are all the submissions to the open-topic issues that I shepherd through the peer-review process, and submissions not selected to advance to peer review for which I write detailed critiques. I also serve as a consulting editor for the guest editors of the special issues. I didn't start out doing all this—I can still recall my early years barely keeping up with the process of getting issues to the press on time, FedExing manuscripts back and forth with authors. I grew into this level of work over a long horizon. When I began my work as program coordinator for CMRS—while juggling those early journal responsibilities—the program had become moribund, and there was little job description, almost a blank slate. I now wear multiple hats as associate director: those of academic program coordinator, director of undergraduate studies, undergraduate and graduate student advisor, leader of program assessment, university policy wonk, business manager, website designer and editor, conference and lecture organizer, publicity director, workshop instructor (on paleography, on publishing). The journal can be found at the center of our academic offerings. For example, as a special issue is evolving, its contributors might come to campus to present their work at a symposium or

² I use the term “net surplus” rather than “profit” advisedly, since the press is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit but has to generate revenue to cover costs and reinvest in the press. The journals program has historically subsidized the books program, though the recent significant increase in the sale of e-books is changing that relation. The press hires managing editors for the journals it owns; the majority of the journals published by Duke Press are not owned by the press, though managing editors are often hired by other institutions that own journals that the press publishes. My thanks to Rob Dilworth, Duke Press journals director, and Erich Staib, associate journals director, for providing this information.

within a writing workshop, receiving feedback before publication; or guest editors of a special issue hot off the press might be brought to campus to discuss the volume and its ramifications for further research. Many scholars who have published in *JMEMS* have presented their work as part of the CMRS guest lecture series.

The connection to the Divinity School at Duke has also enriched the *JMEMS*/CMRS community. David Aers has long taught in the Divinity School, and our center’s programming actively includes Divinity School faculty and ThD students. Indeed, *JMEMS* has found a special niche in publishing work that takes seriously the role of religion—devotion, theology, polemics, reform—in medieval and early modern culture. The “turn to religion” in premodern studies may have overcome outright hostility in the wake of the theory revolution in the later twentieth century and allowed secular scholars to take an interest in the historical meanings of religion. But as Aers points out, this new space for studying religious culture has not often led to exploration of the “deep theological filiations” in medieval and early modern writing, the continuities as much as the discontinuities across medieval and early modern periods (Aers and Pfau 2021, 263–65). *JMEMS* has been a home for such work. I suspect that few journals would have taken on some of the special topics we have published, such as “English Bibles and Their Readers, 1400–1700”—winner of a Best Special Issue Award from the Council of Editors of Learned Journals. This collection delves deeply into the complex ways that the Bible was read, used and reused, translated, adapted into poetry, and illuminated—in sum, how readers participated in the material transmission of the Bible through bibles (Fulton 2017). Another example is the forthcoming “Imagining the Virtues: Medieval and Early Modern Histories” (Aers and Beckwith 2022), which will explore what happens to the habits, practices, and conceptualizations of virtue and the virtue tradition as a result of the Reformations. Another is the forthcoming “Remapping British Protestant Thought in the Long Reformation” (Ha and Stylianou 2023), which will recover diverse traditions, discourses, and languages that continued to shape the contours of Protestant thought well past the sixteenth century. *Eruditio et Religio*—the motto of Duke’s Trinity College could be read as a crux of interpretation in the pages of *JMEMS*. We expect articles to grapple with the desire to understand the varied patterns of likeness and difference between the religious past and our contemporary world and also to consider the ability of that past to speak to and illuminate our scholarly preoccupations and neuroses.

An invisibility of editors, a necessity of editors

Young scholars seeking to publish their work must traverse the arduous road from student writing to publishable article, and the training for most graduate students and assistant professors does not prepare them specifically for that journey. They end up discovering the topography as they go: from writing for a single reader (seminar instructor) or close-knit cohort (dissertation committee)—whose purpose is to help students develop intellectually, meet standards of PhD education, prepare for a career after graduation—to composing a publishable article for scholars in the mysterious sphere of academia, whose purpose is to be valuable as new knowledge. While academic departments insist that tenure-track faculty publish articles, which are evaluated for tenure and promotion, “academic departments—the scholars’ employers—seldom provide a resource to help with this crucial aspect of the scholar’s job. Except indirectly, in the form of the journal editor” (Cornett 2009, 175). Young

authors must publish articles in journals before publishing a book with a press, and journal editors make a significant investment of time serving the profession by walking alongside inexperienced authors, showing them paths to take, warning of dangers to avoid, reinforcing strengths to harness, helping them arrive at successful publication. In a way (to extend the metaphor), journals serve as training centers and base camps for many would-be authors who require the professional expertise of editors. An astonishing amount of editorial work, invisible to the public but intensive for authors, goes on in the offices of journals. It can be rugged and ragged. James Simpson (a frequent contributor to *JMEMS*) and I once contemplated—in all fun, and seriousness—the prospect of the editor/author exchange:

To Au: My talons swoop across your paragraphs, seeking prey to devour in my aerie of editorial thoughts . . .

To Ed: Alas, too readily I imagine that aerie, high upon the editorial cliff: strewn with the skeletal remains of innumerable authorial rats.

We were imagining this phantasmagoria from the nervous author’s view, but editors typically are motivated by a genuine desire to help others and would rather be thought of as “talent scouts” than “cranky gatekeepers” (Cornett 2009, 178). Editors by their experience are strategically positioned between authors and readers to offer their service to the profession. It’s not pure altruism either: journals do need material. For this reason, *JMEMS* has encouraged younger scholars, publishing many first articles by graduate students and new PhDs. Indeed, our commitment to younger scholars is reflected in the fact that the \$22 student subscription to the journal has never been raised since its 1996 inception.

The effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the ability of scholars to produce new work has actually made this need more acute for many publications, and the ongoing drastic reduction of tenure-track jobs in academia might correspondingly reduce the number of authors seeking to publish in our journals. I imagine it’s only a matter of time before some niche journals that have depended on a narrow author base will close shop; others will necessarily expand their mission to embrace a wider range of authors. More than ever before we are likely to invest the time it takes to nurture younger authors toward publication. Or we risk not having enough to publish!

Over the last decade-plus, I have come to think of the *JMEMS*/CMRS association as a hub for providing opportunities to both undergraduate and graduate students affiliated with this community to gain skills and work experiences that will help them diversify their CVs. For every PhD who manages to land a tenure-track job in a research university, seven others will not, yet graduate school education trains all eight students the same way (Cassuto and Weisbuch 2020). We are all too aware of the radical shift in academe toward non-tenure-track contingent labor, which now constitutes over seventy percent of the instructional labor workforce in the US (AAUP 2018; “Percentages of Full-Time Faculty Members Who Were Non-Tenure-Track” 2021). A recent Medieval Academy analysis starkly describes the situation as “a job lottery, not a job market” (Eisenberg et al. 2021). It should be no surprise that job postings have changed, too, since more than two-thirds of instructors being hired are not following the traditional path toward tenure. Rather than seeking an assistant professor of English, specializing in Middle English, a posting is much more likely looking for someone who can teach literature broadly, while slotting into other roles such as managing digital

humanities projects, advising students, writing grant proposals, or supporting academic programs and publications—being a Jack or Jill of all trades is the new calling card in the “humanities ecosystem” (Eisenberg et al. 2021; Seltzer 2018). Yet many of these desirable skills are not gained in graduate seminars and by researching and writing a dissertation.

I have created assistantships and internships with *JMEMS*/CMRS that give students the chance to develop some of these skills, and they are all compensated positions. The journal (through its Duke Press budget) pays for some and the center pays for others (through its College of Arts and Sciences budget). *JMEMS* is proofread by a graduate assistant, whom I train intensively to become a professional I can rely on to help ensure the integrity of publication. That assistant (who typically retains the position for a few years, developing solid expertise) bears the weight of discovering and correcting errors and glitches on proofs, and I challenge her to improve the comprehensibility of sentences by making small but significant changes that do not upset the lineation of a page. The individual authors review their own proofs as well, but everyone knows that authors are not the best proofreaders of their own work, and that axiom is borne out by the fact that my graduate proofer typically corrects more than an author does, and authors often ask me to thank my proofreader for catching errors and suggesting wording that improves the clarity of sentences. Some assistants who prove especially competent are given the chance to copyedit. The experience gained over time is substantial, qualifying the student to compete for an opening at an academic press. Many PhDs might hope to find positions in the publishing field, but very few of them have the requisite experience to get through the door. Another assistant helps to compile my “New Books across the Disciplines” feature, a bibliographic resource that facilitates a cross-disciplinary survey of recent book publications. From handling packages and keeping track of books that arrive at the office to cataloguing entries according to a specific style guide and classifying them by topic, the intern is steeped in bibliographic form while keeping tabs on the most current topics of scholarship in the field and the publishers who produce the books. My assistants get to inhale, so to speak, the atmosphere of academic journal publishing, and I expect they must gain insights on their own connections to this world. Jessica Schubert McCarthy candidly discusses the value of working in a journal office and being mentored as a graduate editorial associate for *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance* and *Poe Studies/Dark Romanticism* (Argersinger, ed., 2009, 148–54). One of my undergraduate assistants a few years ago, who took a special interest in *JMEMS* and worked on “New Books across the Disciplines,” landed a summer internship at Yale University Press, and she turned her experience in publishing into a job at University of North Carolina Press, which she started two months before her May graduation. She was better qualified (I was told by her employer) than all the graduate students who had applied for the position in books editorial.

The same assistants also help me in various capacities with running CMRS at Duke. They organize and manage conferences and symposiums; create publicity for sponsored events; handle the technical side of course scheduling; lead undergraduates on enrichment excursions to museum exhibits, plays, or concerts; manage the websites for both program and journal; write front-page news features for the program website; and compile course enrollment data and other crucial statistics. They also contribute to my special projects, such as *British Medieval Manuscripts on Microfilm: A Location Guide*, which catalogues over ten thousand manuscripts available in published microfilm collections that are almost entirely invisible in library cataloguing, and an online directory of journals publishing in the

field called *iMEMSj: The Index of Medieval and Early Modern Studies Journals*, which will provide a searchable inventory of English-language journals that publish in medieval and early modern studies. Student assistants are glad to get paid for their work, but more valuable to them is the broadening of their experiences and skills in the humanities that could end up decisively tipping the scales toward being hired for a specific job after graduation.

I have come to see my combined role as managing editor and associate program director as that of an educational guide or coach for the undergraduate and graduate students affiliated with CMRS. I teach workshops on campus about turning dissertation chapters and conference papers into journal articles and on the nuts and bolts of submitting articles and dealing with journals. In long-term working groups, I've also shared my expertise in paleography with students who wish to pursue manuscript research. My extensive work with both medieval manuscripts and early modern printed books also comes into play when editing articles for *JMEMS*; I frequently consult primary sources cited in articles to sort out complications and confusions.

When I served as vice-president and then president of the Council of Editors of Learned Journals (CELJ) from 2000 to 2004, I started to consider the bigger picture of journal publishing and developed a concern to advise students and young professors beyond the Duke campus. After designing and organizing CELJ's first "Chat with an Editor" program at the annual meeting of the Modern Language Association, I had no idea that there was such a felt need for this kind of advice. "Chat with an Editor"—which pairs journal editors and advisees in twenty-minute, one-on-one sessions to discuss anything on an advisee's mind about publishing in journals—has been on a continuous run at every MLA convention ever since, and CELJ is now planning to sponsor virtual chat sessions apart from the convention. In 2014 I held a "Chat with an Editor" program at the International Congress on Medieval Studies at Kalamazoo, and other editors have started to do the same at regional conferences. Like many journal editors, I have also spoken at numerous conference sessions on how to get published—those sessions are always standing-room only. If there is one thing about journal publishing that has not changed over time, it is the voracious appetite of younger scholars to glean insights into publishing from journal editors. Editors know this, and many make extraordinary efforts to reach out to authors. Recent CELJ sessions at MLA have addressed topics such as adopting more inclusive peer review processes, editing for a non-tenure-track majority, and maintaining journal quality in a downsized humanities. The CELJ board has recently approved a new code of conduct, and on the organization's listserv member editors deliberate on issues of editorship that are currently challenging for journals. CELJ has evolved to become the "conscience" of the editorial profession, pushing editors like myself to embrace an ethics of care (CELJ n.d).

A singing quire of editors

Editors sing for their quires. They employ an array of talents on behalf of their journals: designing editorial visions; soliciting material from various quarters of academia; processing submissions and conducting them through peer review; editing to improve argument, development, and presentation; and proofreading to achieve an attainable perfection that matches the painstaking credibility of scholarly research; they survey the newest book publishing and put together book review features; adopt and adapt technology for running operations and designing websites; manage publicity,

subscriptions, and finances; supervise editorial staff; and look toward the future reimagining, reconstructing, and revitalizing of their journals to keep them relevant and vibrant (Argersinger and Cornett 2009, 107). Some editors have substantial help in these endeavors from their publishers, but some are doing it all as proverbial Renaissance men and women. The upshot for authors is that they will most likely experience the best editing of their work when publishing articles in journals, because the editors of journals work with zeal for the publications in which they themselves have an explicit stake in their success. For example, journal editors by and large jealously handle copyediting in-house for their journals (Fretz 2017). As Jana Argersinger (2009) puts it, “our professional well-being is closely bound up with the well-being of our contributors. . . . [journal] editing is a profoundly relational enterprise” (144). The copyediting and proofreading of books, by contrast, is now routinely outsourced by for-profit academic presses to freelancers who know little about a book’s subject, lack the time to focus on the sentence level, and have a minimal commitment to the press as an institution; and some presses are even phasing out these essential layers of work between manuscript submission and typesetting (Salaz 2013). University presses distinguish themselves by offering book authors higher quality of services, but it is still the norm for copyediting and proofreading to be handled by freelancers, who at least might be assumed to be well vetted.

Changes to the profession will also change the nature of publication. That is, tenure-track jobs, which typically require monographs, are decreasing. As a result, publishing journal articles will become even more critical for performance review and promotion. If non-tenure-track and contingent-contract instructors—the majority of college faculty—are to contribute to their departments *as faculty members* and not be exploited as a mere source of cheap labor, they need to be able to participate in scholarly conversation and have the opportunity, if not requirement, to pursue research that is commensurate with their employment commitments. Publishing articles in journals and alternative forms of scholarly communication like blogs and podcasts is the most realistic way to do this without requiring the massive amount of resources (small teaching loads, sabbaticals, travel and research funds, publisher subventions) involved in publishing a book (Gaillet and Guglielmo 2014). In 2009, Lindsay Waters, executive editor for the humanities at Harvard University Press, questioned whether the monograph could be sustained as a gold standard for scholarship in an age of economic crisis in scholarly publishing. That charge still resonates. Indeed, the time now is even riper for “the well-wrought, slowly gestated essay” to take ascendancy (Waters 2009, 133; see bibliography in Argersinger and Cornett 2009). Acknowledging the decrease in tenure-track faculty and, consequently, a decreasing emphasis on publishing books for tenure, we will likely come to see that the publication of journal articles plays a much greater role in standards of reward and promotion for the vast majority of academics. Journal editors will be there, as they always have been, to collaborate with authors in the publishing process. Editing at its best is collaborative, community-based, knowledge-building work. If journals can also embed themselves within local academic programs and constituencies, their impact and significance will be felt all the more richly as hubs of publishing.

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