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Editors' Introduction: Teaching, Scholarship, and the Living Archive

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Editors' Introduction: Teaching, Scholarship, and the Living Archive

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Abstract

The topic for this issue's primary cluster was inspired by *The Teaching Archive: A New History for Literary Study* (2021) by Rachel Sagner Buurma and Laura Heffernan. Our Teaching Archive cluster presents four essays documenting the long-term influence of four medievalists: Aranye Fradenburg Joy, Clifford Flanigan, Joaquin Martínez Pizarro, and Derek Pearsall. This issue also includes a recap of the longstanding undergraduate conference at Moravian University and short histories of three scholarly societies: the Society for Medieval Feminist Scholarship, the John Gower Society, and the International *Piers Plowman* Society. We continue our two standard features with "How I teach..." contributions on Christina Fitzgerald's edition of *The York Corpus Christi Play* (2018) and David Lawton's edition of *The Norton Chaucer* (2019), and a "Conversations" response to the Medieval Studies and Secondary Education cluster in *New Chaucer Studies: Pedagogy and Profession's* Fall 2022 issue.

The idea for this issue's cluster topic came during one of the innumerable online seminars and talks we attended during 2020-2021. A year into the pandemic, many of us still maintaining resolute isolation and pining for lifelines to others, Rachel Sagner Buurma and Laura Heffernan presented their recent study, *The Teaching Archive: A New History for Literary Study* (2021), positioning the classroom as an overlooked resource. Rather than finding the history of literary study in the usual places—"famous monographs and seminal articles"—they argued that classrooms "at both elite and non-elite institutions" have made major contributions to literary scholarship (2–3). Indeed, they maintained, the classroom has been a fruitful laboratory where "students and teachers have invented and perfected the core methods of literary study" (3).

In their study, Buurma and Heffernan reverse the relationship between classroom practices and the development of theoretical methods. In their account, pedagogical practicalities contribute to theoretical insights, rather than theoretical paradigms shaping pedagogical practices. Their demonstration of the classroom as the seedbed for developing transformative theoretical frameworks came at an opportune time. Many of us already recognized and benefited from the cross-pollination of classroom *praxis* and theoretical interpretation; being locked out of our classrooms—as well as being discombobulated by new modes of distance teaching and learning—made that awareness more acute.

Sensing the value of Buurma and Heffernan's claim that the "true history of English literary study resides in classrooms" filled with students (2), we wondered how others thought about the relationship between these two aspects of our journal's title, "pedagogy" and "profession." Of course, students are necessary to the teaching part of our professional lives, but how often do we consider the role of our classrooms and the students filling them in shaping our scholarship? Moreover, how does that role shift when those students attend open-admission community colleges rather than an elite research university? Does the background of our students shape our scholarship in different ways? Does it matter that for many students the course in medieval literature fills a degree requirement, while for only a few, the course provides the foundation for the rest of their careers? What is the best way for all of these students—and those who teach them—to contribute to an inclusive story of the "true history of English literary study"? Inspired by Buurma and Heffernan's reminder that the work happening in the classroom is accompanied by a corpus of "syllabuses, handouts, reading lists, lecture notes, student papers, and exams" (2), we set out to uncover the archive that could provide an enlarged sense of our professional lives.

Not certain what submissions we would receive, the call went out for essays thinking about the ways classroom practice informed theoretical developments in medieval studies.

We were fully aware that a generation of significant scholars was retiring, and many were passing from our lives. Ever the medievalists intrigued by "the archive," we wondered what had been preserved and what it could tell us. Before the final documentary remnants disappeared, we wanted to understand the ways classroom practices had provided fertile ground for scholarship of the past half century. As we soon learned, our call often came too late. In many cases, senior medievalists had found themselves unceremoniously retiring mid-pandemic, forced to vacate offices and to empty cabinets of teaching notes and to toss personal libraries into the nearest trash bin. In other cases, families of deceased medievalists—seeing no value in the manila folders of class lectures or the beat-up, heavily annotated copies of *The Riverside Chaucer*—had thrown out those records of decades of

teaching along with useless floppy disks and dried pens. Whoosh. Just like that. Into the dumpster or paper recycling bin. Consequently, our initial inquiries were met with regrets accompanied by stories of hasty disposal and irretrievable shredding. Without fanfare, much of our own history was evaporating. The teaching archive from the past fifty years—that hotbed of scholarship and innovation in medieval literary studies—was already disappearing. Consequently, this issue has been as much about “recovery and rescue” as it has been about analysis.

And what a recovery and rescue it has been. We ended up receiving submissions from non-medievalists as well as medievalists, reminding us that reproducing ourselves is not the most significant aspect of our work. Or, if that work is to reproduce ourselves, it is something more than or different from the title “medievalist.” “Curiosity” and “engagement” were some of the keywords that kept popping up as our authors recounted the value of what they learned from a beloved medievalist. From Kathy Lavezzo (University of Iowa), we received a fascinating interview with Aranye Fradenburg Joy (University of California, Santa Barbara) reflecting not only on the fruitful conversation between teaching and scholarship but also on the ways Fradenburg Joy’s colleagues at multiple institutions had contributed to that conversation. Lavezzo frames the interview with the perspectives of two of Fradenburg Joy’s students who became medievalists, Maura Nolan (University of California, Berkeley) and herself. From Jean Kane (Vassar College), we received a gentle meditation on the ways Clifford Flanigan (Indiana University) shaped her as a student and, later, inspired her as a fledgling instructor. After first identifying an affinity between Flanigan’s “bodily pedagogy” and his scholarly interests in performance, Kane then describes the consolations that literature and literary study can provide, a lesson she learned from him and has passed on to her students. From Edward Currie (Queens College, CUNY) and Jaclyn Geller (Central Connecticut State University), we received an account of Joaquín Martínez Pizarro’s career, from both his early years at Oberlin College and his culminating years at Stony Brook University—as well as a fabulous photo of their beloved professor interviewing Jorge Luis Borges in 1983. Their lively account illustrates the continuities and the developments in the career of a scholar whose far-ranging passions ignited sparks in his students’ minds. From David Hirsch (Yale University), we received not only an account of Derek Pearsall (Harvard University) as a teacher and scholar, but also a meditation on loss and recovery: even when the paper archive disappears, when our careers diverge from their initial path, and when few memories are recoverable, Hirsch concludes that we continue to embody what we learned from our teachers and mentors. Moreover, we carry the charge to pass along what we have been given. In one way or the other, all four submissions recognize that bestowing the gifts of scholarship and pedagogy to the next generation of students is the best way we can repay our debts.

Despite what has been lost, these essays reveal what remains, for *we* are the archive. Repeatedly, authors recount the classroom practices of their medievalist mentors, while also describing how those practices reverberate in their own teaching, scholarship, and lives. Kane recounts reaching back to Flanigan’s remarks about despair in Spenser’s *Fairie Queene*. Lavezzo and Nolan gladly confess how their classroom practices have been shaped by Fradenburg Joy’s, while Currie and Geller follow Martínez Pizarro’s bid by asking their students “What else can we say?” Rather than finding either competition or discipleship in their mentors’ classrooms, these contributors found (and have tried to recreate) what Hirsch identifies as a conversational ethos: “*a way of living together...that invokes a mutual turning or bending with the other (con + versare)*” (46). Repeatedly, our contributors model how they

learned to create an environment that nourishes, as Hirsch reminds us, the humanities' fundamental question "What do you think about it?" (Biesta 2006, 150).

As it became clear when the contributions arrived, what is truly recoverable, whether or not the physical (both paper and digital) archive survives, is the history of *learning* for which each student becomes the physical, embodied archive. Each contribution to the Teaching Archive cluster exemplifies that process. All the authors submit themselves as living evidence that the long-term consequences of student learning can eclipse all other aspects of the medievalists' profession. Hirsch is the only contributor to take explicit issue with Buurma and Heffernan's claim that the "value of literary study inheres in the long history of teaching as it was lived and experienced" (6), with his focus on "learning" as opposed to "teaching."

Freshly aware of how easily the histories of individuals integral to our professional lives can disappear, we invited early founders of societies devoted to the study of medieval literature to recount and preserve *their* early histories, and we asked the organizers of an undergraduate conference to conduct a post-mortem before closing the books. Elizabeth Robertson, Robert Yeager, and Louise Bishop each provide us with an account of circumstances that brought (respectively) the Society for Medieval Feminist Scholarship, the John Gower Society, and the International Piers Plowman Society together, and they regale us with stories of how they thrived. Similarly, Sandy Bardsley and John Black recount their collective endeavor to initiate and sustain the Moravian Undergraduate Conference in Medieval and Early Modern Studies. By happenstance, some of the questions, issues, and insights raised in *The Teaching Archive* appear in these histories, though these contributors were not explicitly invited to respond to Buurma and Heffernan's thesis. For instance, Beth Robertson's history of the Society for Medieval Feminist Scholarship mentions that the initial impetus behind the group was not just what kind of scholarship they would pursue but also what their classroom reading lists and syllabi would look like. This group of women fought to change not only research practices but also teaching practices.

This issue also continues the journal's standard features. For the third and fourth contributions to our "How I teach..." series, we invited Emma Lipton (University of Missouri, Columbia) and Elizabeth Scala (University of Texas, Austin) to describe how they (respectively) integrate Christina Fitzgerald's edition of *The York Corpus Christi Play: Selected Pageants* (2018) and David Lawton's edition of *The Norton Chaucer* (2019) into their classroom practices. Both (again, by happy coincidence) deal with the value of teaching medieval texts to students who probably are not gravitating to their courses for their medieval content. Both also deal with the question of whether or not to use a translated text. In Lipton's case, she outlines a graduate course she has developed that introduces significant theoretical issues to students using the translated texts and supplementary material in Fitzgerald's textbook. She demonstrates that Fitzgerald's translation does not detract from student learning; rather it grants students "a richer understanding of medieval drama, late-medieval English culture, and multiple theoretical paradigms than a course using a Middle English text" (86). In Scala's case, she describes how she employs slow-reading methods and extensive *OED* explorations to help students work beyond their difficulty with Chaucer's language in order to grapple with the complexity of his verse. In this way, Scala provides to the "translation or not?" question an answer distinctively different from Sheila Fisher's answer, while still considering the implications of that choice (Fisher 2022).

For our “Conversations” feature, Alex Mueller (University of Massachusetts, Boston) shares a response to Medieval Studies and Secondary Education in *New Chaucer Studies: Pedagogy and Profession's* Fall 2022 issue, a cluster co-edited by Kara Crawford and Lisa Lampert-Weissig. Mueller eloquently guides us away from anxieties about the absence of Medieval Studies in secondary-school curricula and points us toward promoting the professional health and intellectual joy of our overburdened colleagues in middle and high schools, especially those in public schools. He builds on the cluster's numerous suggestions by advocating that our undergraduate programs develop mentorship structures that connect prospective and practicing teachers with medievalists in educator-preparation programs.

Here, too, were the unexpected cross-connections between the topical clusters (“The Teaching Archive” and “Histories of Learned Societies”) and the ongoing features (“How I Teach...” and “Conversations”). Across all sections, we found expressions of the joys as well as the hard realities of our chosen professions, the consolations of our intellectual communities, and the values of the body of knowledge we inherit and then pass down to the next generation of students and scholars.

Having read this account of how our current issue developed, no one will be surprised that this issue is tinged with a sense of loss, an inevitability when recalling valued colleagues, mentors, and learning communities. We are losing beloved friends. Even as we readied for publication Bob Yeager's essay recounting the John Gower Society's history, we learned of the deaths of two of the society's co-founders, Russell Peck and Pete Beidler, exemplars of scholars whose publications were grounded in effective teaching and student learning. We are losing our place in the academy. The job pool for medievalists continues to shrink, and many well trained, vibrant medievalists are forced to leave the profession. Moreover, we seem to be losing our value within our larger communities. Along with others in the humanities, obsolescence lurks around every corner, with the job creators (big tech), the job eliminators (artificial intelligence), and the job police (censorship laws) eager to push us aside.¹

Of course, medievalists, as much as any others in the humanities, are familiar with these conversations. Throughout our careers, we have heard the threats about being supplanted by newer, more relevant, literature. We know the pressures to innovate and disrupt. We witness students' fears of overwhelming debt and underpaying job prospects if they focus their studies on literature.

The latest rationale against our field goes like this. Our programs graduate students with so-called soft skills rather than those job-ready skills that our colleagues in sciences and engineering are credited with conveying. Because no readily apparent jobs await to snatch up humanities graduates, our programs cannot appeal to incoming students concerned about post-graduation jobs and (in the US) student debt. Then, because our enrollments are declining, we are judged an unwarranted investment of public higher education's limited resources. In this argument for sidelining the humanities, the death of medieval studies seems a small loss.

¹ The gravity of these threats varies daily, it seems. More than 157,000 employees in the tech sector were laid off during the first quarter of 2023 (Rogers 2023). Artificial intelligence is predicted to replace humans in such jobs as marketing and legal services, fields frequently filled by humanities majors (Johnson 2023). In late March 2023, the US House of Representatives passed H.R. 5, legislation (according to communication from Connecticut Representative Jahana Hayes) that would open the door to censorship and banning books in schools. Next quarter might tell a different story.

A decade ago, Aranye Fradenburg Joy argued against the truism that the humanities were dying. No, she claimed, they were being murdered by those who do not want a well educated workforce and savvy voting population. Those corporate forces desire, instead, a more malleable, less intellectually agile population of workers (2013, 1–2). More recent assessments continue Fradenburg Joy's clarion call. Responding to Nathan Heller's March 2023 *New Yorker* article, "The End of The English Major," Sarah Blackwell counters that funding for the humanities is shrieking not because students do not value the humanities but because "*universities* do not value the humanities" [our italics], a message that students (and their parents) hear loud and clear (Blackwood 2023). This disinvestment in the humanities has effectively transformed universities and colleges into "vocational schools narrowly focused on vocational training" at exactly the time we need to heed the opening salvo of the 1948 report from the [US] President's Commission on Higher Education for Democracy (Devereaux 2023). It is a "commonplace of the democratic faith," the report declared over seventy-five years ago, that widespread and accessible education in the liberal arts is "indispensable to the maintenance and growth of freedom of thought, faith, enterprise, and association" (President's Commission 1948, 5). While what constitutes that education now embraces a more diverse, more inclusive curriculum and student body, those who teach in the humanities must resist easy surrender.

Joining this chorus of voices in support of the humanities, this issue's essays provide a strong rejoinder to Heller's *New Yorker* article, which dominated conversations in the hallways and the twitterverse. As many quickly recognized, the title's "the English Major" was a synecdoche for "the Humanities"—and as many others pointed out, the article *ends* with a quotation from two Arizona State University students. One shares his decision to apply to graduate school in literature because it would "be really *cool* to study English literature really specifically" (39). Another student confesses to switching to the English major because she has great ambitions to be a novelist (39). Whereas others might advise the first student against wasting his time and money studying English literature in graduate school, and others might snicker at the second student's dreams, the students themselves each seem to recognize the value of the English department: it is a place (again, David Hirsch reminds us) that resonates with students because we (and the books we read) engage with them and their perspectives. "What do you think?" Despite this somewhat positive conclusion, Heller's article has elicited lots of hand-wringing from academics, from "See, the sky is falling" to "They don't get us." Truthfully, some points in Heller's article merit our attention. For instance, there is something comforting *and* exciting about training for a good-paying job with big tech where all the "next big things" seem to be happening. It is difficult to condemn students for listening to its lure. And there might be lessons we can learn from Arizona State University's approach to the liberal arts, whose dean of humanities, Jeffery Cohen, is a medievalist (Mentz 2023).

Indeed, the origin story of *New Chaucer Studies: Pedagogy and Profession* reflects its co-editors' conviction that our classroom and professional work is both necessary and threatened. Concerned about whether our field could maintain a viable presence outside the most elite universities, we wanted a forum for discussing not only the needs the 1948 President's Commission recognized, the portents Fradenburg raised, and solutions Cohen offers, but also many urgent questions. When medievalists retire, will the position be thrown out with the books and notes? Can graduate programs ethically admit students into medieval studies when there are no academic positions on the other side of the dissertation? How do we attract enough students to our undergraduate courses so that the classes can

be offered? Once the students are in our classes, how do instructors at non-elite institutions, places where students work full-time jobs and see their classes as an extra-curricular activity, create that sense of belonging that is the hallmark of humanities programs? They cannot treat students to dinners at their home (the students work full-time jobs) or escort them to museums or plays (the students work full-time jobs) or invite the students to gather for a reading circle (the students work full-time jobs).

With these limitations (and perhaps opportunities) in mind, *Pedagogy and Profession* will continue to investigate how the field of medieval studies has been shaped (and will continue to be shaped) by pedagogical practices at non-elite institutions.² Similarly, the journal wants to know how medieval studies have been shaped by scholars at teaching institutions whose portfolios of projects by necessity occupy smaller spaces yet also open up spaces otherwise overlooked.³ How does this renewed vitality—the result of teaching exigencies—keep the profession fresh and open to new questions? These and other conundrums and paradoxes of our discipline are multiple. Many are beyond our ability to solve. All must be acknowledged and grappled with.

We are therefore left with the need to make a good-faith effort to teach the students we find in our classrooms, to pursue the insights those students provide, and to take joy in the exchange. In this way, our disciplinarity—which to many might appear narrow and rigid—becomes a site of pleasure, generative energy, and community across generations, territories, and languages.

Before we close this introduction, we want to acknowledge the support we received from Sofia Guimarães and Xuan Truong, graduate-student interns at the University of Freiburg. In addition to supplying valuable hands-on duties proofreading, formatting, communicating with contributors, and uploading to the journal's eScholarship platform, they provided the novice reader's irreplaceable feedback by helping us spot those places that might perplex future readers unfamiliar with the many names and institutions easily recognizable by most of our current readers. With their help, we have included "Editors' Notes" to supply this information.

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² See, for instance, the energetic work of Kisha G. Tracy (with Sexton 2018; 2022).

³ See, for instance, projects such as Global Chaucers, Hoccleve at Home, *Piers* without Tears, and Borderland Chaucers (Barrington and Hsy 2015; IHS 2021; Steiner 2022; Schirmer 2022).

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