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The Once and Future Relevance of Medieval Studies

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The Once and Future Relevance of Medieval Studies

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Abstract

In this essay, I discuss the relationship between my teaching and my scholarship in medieval studies as a lone medievalist at a public regional institution in the South. I argue that there are many possibilities as well as limitations associated with this role, and I offer several suggestions about how the field as a whole might better reflect those experiences in our publication venues.

I cannot predict the future, whether that of the profession of medievalists or of the universities themselves. If you had told me in graduate school that my academic career would take place in institutions that might seem relatively indifferent to the medieval (and the humanities more generally), I probably would have laughed. After all, I began work as a graduate student at an R1 university with a thriving medieval program, but then I did a three-year stint as a postdoctoral fellow at a STEM-heavy university with no English Department and ended up in a tenure track position as the “lone medievalist” in an interdisciplinary department at a regional university (Tracy and Sexton 2018).

If you had told me that my medieval-themed courses would consistently fill at all three of the institutions at which I have taught, however, I would not have been that surprised. My approach to the Middle Ages has always been “medievalists did it first,” whether the “it” in question refers to contemplating the existence of monsters or figuring out the best way to offer pointed social commentary with minimal pushback. Those of us interested in the earliest periods of literary history are, after all, used to taking the long view on a lot of things, making connections between past and present that might appear uncomfortable at first, and navigating a variety of foreign languages and cultural mores to do so. In short, we are used to having to carefully justify and explain our fields of study, inside the classroom as well as out, to students, other faculty members, administrators, and a larger public in a way that many of our colleagues in higher education are not necessarily. Those of us who do this work alone perhaps feel the effects of this juggling act more keenly than our colleagues who work with other medievalists.

In what follows, I will discuss how my experiences teaching medieval and medieval-inspired materials at a public regional university have led me to better appreciate what can be gained by approaching medieval studies as a field of distinct yet related experiences for students and scholars alike. The more I have learned to embrace my position as a lone medievalist, challenging though it can sometimes be, the more I have come to the conclusion that there is no single correct form for engaging the medieval past. Medievalists cannot all teach the same way, since our students vary significantly in terms of their educational backgrounds, interests, and aspirations, among other things. Nor can we all do research the same way because the institutions at which we work vary greatly as to how workloads are assigned and how resources are allotted to faculty. One way to bridge some of these gaps, I would argue, is to accept medievalism as a mode of academic thought that invites diverse audiences with different needs to learn about the Middle Ages.

My teaching, like that of many medievalists, includes more courses outside of my area of expertise than within. Indeed, the only exclusively medieval class I teach is part of the pre-1800 requirement for English majors and minors, which is offered every semester with different focal periods (medieval, early modern, eighteenth century). In addition to other non-medieval upper division courses, I also regularly teach 2000-level classes, many of which are required for English majors and minors but also function as core humanities requirements for the general student population. Thus, the prep work I do for teaching rarely directly overlaps with the research I might be doing at a given moment. I find ways to include medieval texts in most of my classes, however, in addition to designing courses around themes and methodologies of interest to me in my own scholarship. When I teach women’s literature at the 2000-level, for example, I assign several of Marie de France’s *lais*. Marie is not an author I write about, but the focus of that class, “Gender and Rage,” grew from my work on gendered violence in Middle English romance. That work has a contemporary relevance, albeit an unpleasant one, for both

myself and my students, since many of the ways women's bodies and behaviors are publicly policed today are evocative of the practices modeled by the premodern texts in which I specialize.

As part of upper division electives, I've taught *The Awntyrs off Arthur* in a class on ghost stories and *Saint Erkenwald* in a class on time travel. Although these are texts that I have written about, they make up less than ten percent of the material. The topics of temporal disruption and nostalgia are both central to my scholarship, though, and revisiting them with students never ceases to provide new inspiration for my own thinking about them. It is fascinating to see how my students relate to Guinevere's and Erkenwald's confusion about what to make of the literal and figurative ghosts of the past, for example. This form of "affective medievalism" makes the past more accessible in the present and has led to some remarkably insightful conversations about not only how knowledge is created but also how it is (or is not) understood (Prendergast and Trigg 2018; Burger and Crocker 2019).

When I do have the opportunity to teach an elective that is mostly medieval, like Arthurian literature or Chaucer, I make sure to include more modern material as well. My Arthurian class, which is subtitled "Whose Once and Future King?," covers medieval Welsh, Latin, French, and English texts, including all of Malory in Middle English (yes, it is possible!), but it also covers Tennyson, Twain, twenty-first century poetry and short stories alike, *Black Panther*, and the Netflix series *Cursed*. My Chaucer class, entitled "Cannibalizing Chaucer," covers most of the *Canterbury Tales*, *Troilus and Criseyde*, and select dream visions, alongside *A Knight's Tale* and poetry by Lavinia Greenlaw and Patience Agbabi. Moreover, both classes include a creative project in which students either adapt a text for modern audiences or pitch a contemporary text for inclusion on future iterations of our syllabus. Even my medieval literature course, which is subtitled "#Medievalediditfirst," formally encourages connections between past and present in the form of presentations: students are asked to focus on topics relevant to our readings, such as social order and misogyny, put those readings into conversation with modern texts and occurrences, which recently have included the Boots Riley film *Sorry to Bother You*, incel culture, and music by Taylor Swift.

Encouraging students to see the interconnections between what the world is or has been and what it might be is one of the central functions of the humanities in higher education. Doing so at institutions like mine, where a large portion of the student population is first-generation and almost everyone works to pay for their education, is vitally important. Located on a semi-rural campus about an hour outside of Atlanta, the University of West Georgia is the seventh largest public school in Georgia and one of the four comprehensive universities within the state system, offering bachelor's, master's, specialist, and doctoral programs as well as post-baccalaureate and post-master's certificates. In 2019, 47.6% of our undergraduate population was Pell eligible. In 2020, only 25.43% of our undergraduates finished their degrees in four years, with 44.35% doing so in six (University of West Georgia 2019-2020, 2). And in 2022, only 43% of our first-year students were enrolled full-time (University of West Georgia 2023, 9). Taken together, these numbers speak to a student population that needs to work while pursuing their degrees. They value their education as evidenced by how hard they work for it, but they are not members of the "ivory tower" elite about whom so much ink has been spilt in public discussions of higher education. They are working toward the future they want for themselves, often paycheck-by-paycheck, and they care deeply about understanding how each of their classes contributes to that future. If I did not introduce students to medieval texts in my core courses and electives, many would graduate without knowing anything about the so-called Middle Ages. And

if I do not take the time to show my students why engaging with the past is important to our sense of the present, then reading the medieval text or texts they are assigned would most likely feel like a necessary obligation instead of a meaningful opportunity. Since I rarely have the luxury of time in most of my classes, I have learned how to be creative without ignoring the historical complexities that drew me to study the Middle Ages in the first place.

My interests in Arthuriana and medievalism as distinct yet related subjects of study have been especially helpful in this capacity. Both provide a wide array of possible source materials, at least some of which are known to students. They might not know Malory, but they tend to know the television show *Merlin* and/or the *Kingsman* and *Black Panther* films. These contemporary instances become a useful starting place first for piquing interest and then for drawing students into discussions about the inherently intertextual and fan fiction nature of the larger legend since its inception. Such examples of contemporary medievalism also raise important questions about what we mean by historical accuracy as well as who has access to and interest in the legend as creators and consumers alike. After all, one of the biggest objections students articulate to studying anything “old timey” (their words, not mine) is relatability. Helping students navigate the linguistic and cultural differences inherent in the legend’s medieval origins can go a long way toward demystifying the past, which is important. This demystification cannot, however, make the medieval Arthurian canon (or any other) less centered on white, straight, able-bodied men. Including texts that privilege the experiences of non-white, queer, disabled, and female characters, even if imperfectly, is, in my experience, one of the best ways to do this. Thankfully there is a growing body of scholarship dedicated to making these types of connections (Sévère 2021 and Sévère 2023). Such work is vitally important to the future of medieval studies since most public institutions increasingly serve students who do not see themselves broadly represented within the literary canons with which they are being asked to engage. In 2020, 47.2% of the student population at the University of West Georgia identified as a minority and 67.1% identified as female (University of West Georgia 2019–2020, 1). To expect them to ignore the racial stereotypes and misogyny embedded in specific texts because those texts are deemed historically important is a huge disservice to those students. But, so too is excluding students from these conversations in the first place. Indeed, if we do not have conversations with students about what these texts mean to them, and their specific circumstances, we underline the students’ sense that such texts, and the humanities more generally, are not relevant to them and perhaps inadvertently fence them off for the privileged few. And this elitism, in turn, feeds the crisis in the humanities, intentionally or not, by limiting the perceived applicability of what we do.

To teach the Middle Ages in all its complicated fullness, then, always-already necessitates acts of negotiation: between us and our students first and foremost on what material is worth studying and why, between us and any number of larger audiences who might claim some insight into how or why the past should be taught, and within ourselves, as teachers, about the best way to encourage students or how to model what matters. I work hard to ensure that my course evaluations are not full of “this class is pointless for my future goals” rhetoric. I am routinely told that my classes are a lot of work, but despite that complaint—because it is meant to be a complaint—my students seem to understand why they are being asked to do the work that they are doing. In other words, after our time together, they understand, begrudgingly maybe, why medieval texts are both demanding and worthwhile and how engaging them through a variety of different types of projects helps build valuable skill sets, such

as perseverance and collaboration in addition to written and oral communication. I would credit these successes to taking seriously students' concerns about their futures and their fears about the difficulties associated with studying medieval texts specifically. Most of my students are surprised to learn that there are multiple forms of English that predate Shakespeare, for instance, and they tend to find their first attempts at reading Middle English frustrating. When I taught a genre course on Romance, my students were clearly expecting versions of the modern rom-com instead of Chrétien de Troyes through George Lucas, and my Arthurian Literature students are stunned to learn that Lancelot did not factor much into the medieval British legend before Malory. But we work through these frustrations and surprises together, frequently using the lens of medievalism to do so and pausing to reflect on how moving beyond their comfort zones will help prepare students for many of life's challenges, professional as well as personal.

To help my students understand the variety that is Middle English, we explore digital resources that model how the language was most likely pronounced in different parts of what we now refer to as the United Kingdom: these resources help introduce the students to the idea that Middle English, like Modern English, was a living language with multiple dialects and socio-political connotations. We also discuss why writing in English for many medieval authors was anxiety-producing for many of the same reasons that writing academic prose is for students; a lot is at stake when developing an authorial voice that can and will be read by a variety of audiences, some of whom have considerable power over your present and, by extension, your future. By the end of our time together, most of my students are capable of producing excellent Middle English recitations. They are also capable of making compelling arguments about how Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton* follows the good-bad-better trajectory typical of medieval romance to comment on America's fascination with "newness" as well as the extent to which Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* embodies an idealized and, ultimately, a destructive form of masculinity reminiscent of many an Arthurian narrative. Both types of learning are possible because I do not dismiss their lives and interests outside of the classroom when we are in it. In fact, I frequently share my own experiences and enthusiasms, whether they happen to be centered around a tv show that just came out or a text I happen to be writing about. Simply put, I have learned that as a lone medievalist, being as transparent as possible about the many ways that I engage the past while still being active in the present is one of the most compelling arguments I can make about why what I do matters.

For me, the ability to position myself simultaneously as a medieval scholar and as a modern participant in medievalism has been an invaluable tool. Yes, I know more than the average student about Chaucer and the origins of Arthuriana, but there is a lot I do not know or can only make educated guesses about precisely because I am, like my students, a product of the century in which I live. My desire to keep guessing is motivated in no small part by a fascination with the long afterlives of subjects like chivalry or gendered expectations and is, therefore, as firmly planted in the present as it is inspired by the past. By not immediately privileging one temporality over the other, I encourage my students to think critically about the assumptions and aspirations associated with both. And by modeling the many ways in which I engage the medieval—from the scholarship I am reading and producing outside of the classroom, to the discussions we have in class about texts as seemingly different as *Yvain* and *Star Wars*—I am teaching them about the power of nuanced engagements with the past in a wide variety of contexts. We work together on the puzzle that is the Middle Ages, drawing

on our distinct yet related experiences to do so. Empowered by the realization that they, too, have experiences with “the medieval” on which they can draw, my students become increasingly willing to probe the past instead of simply accepting it as “over and done with.” And once the Middle Ages start to lose the stigma of being fundamentally unknowable, they begin to become more relevant to the way students conceptualize their experiences as twenty-first century human beings. Indeed, by recognizing medieval texts as dynamic sources capable of speaking meaningfully to the present, students become personally invested in a broader perspective of history that informs their thinking about the future, regardless of their particular academic trajectory or career path. In this way, they learn to value the work they are doing even if they do not always like it, and to respect the process of inquiry as much as the product. As I frequently tell them, if you can learn to connect Chaucer to Annie Proulx through the lens of marriage or to read Middle English in a single semester, imagine what you can do throughout your life as a whole. Medievalism, in other words, has allowed me and my students to shift some of the “post-crises” focus on banal questions like “why study the Middle Ages” to the far more interesting “whose Middle Ages are we studying?”

The most common assumption about medieval studies from students is a version of the popular supposition that it is too old, too distant, or too foreign to be a relevant subject of study in the twenty-first century. At the same time, medievalism is, by contrast, too personal, fannish, or enjoyable to warrant “serious” study. Given this huge gap between medieval studies and medievalism it is not particularly surprising that students are confused about what they are studying. In other words, too much history is bad; not enough is suspicious. Medieval literature is deemed too old to be of use to contemporary students while medievalism is deemed too popular to be worth formal study (all degrees must be professional, after all). Unfortunately, a version of this tension exists within publishing as well. Many of the most well-respected journals and book series in the field publish research directed at other medievalists, which, while understandable, does very little to challenge or supplement non-medievalist understanding of our work. And the publication venues that do encourage research on medievalism and/or writing for more general audiences are rarely afforded the same prestige when it comes to the job market, external fellowships, or promotion, because academics collectively still tend to think of this work as naïve, derivative, or simplistic in nature. Publications focused primarily on pedagogy are deemed less important than scholarship for other medievalists as well, which is ironic given the common belief that there is a symbiotic relationship between the two within the academy and the fact that most American medievalists do not work at R1 institutions that support research as much as—if not more than—teaching. Put another way, much of the scholarship most easily produced under the working conditions which the majority of medievalists face is deemed of lesser value than the work that takes the time and financial support most of us do not have. Those of us with heavier teaching loads who do manage to publish in traditionally well-respected venues tend to take longer to do so, at a pace that can be viewed negatively, both externally and, in some cases, within our own institutions.

Medievalists are not without blame for this particular quandary. The emergence of medieval studies as a valid field in the late nineteenth century relied heavily on its ability to claim engagement with an authentic past, distancing it implicitly if not explicitly from the more immediate pleasure associated with reconstructing, reinventing, or simply imagining the medieval. But as scholars who study a period that is the creation of post-medievals for the purposes of privileging the present,

medievalists are also uniquely situated to recognize periodization as a fictional construct. It is possible to challenge those linear accounts of progress that tend to accompany this period-specific vision of history, as Carolyn Dinshaw (2012) reminds us in her masterful *How Soon is Now?* Much medieval scholarship of the last thirty or so years has started to do precisely this. Indeed, medievalists have become increasingly aware of the fact that from our chronologically distant vantage point all medieval studies engage in some form of reconstruction and, by extension, are intimately intertwined with medievalism. Moreover, as one generation of scholars' work gives way to another, it becomes easier for us to see each other's work as scholarly forms of medievalism, and to put our reconstructions of the past into meaningful conversation with communities and occurrences taking place outside of the academy. It is particularly frustrating, then, that so many of our venues for publication remain slow to embrace these changes in one form or another. What might the field look like if we collectively decided that our scholarship, like our teaching, can range broadly and in new directions while also remaining deeply engaged with the medieval past? I, for one, think it would be more reflective of our diverse experiences as medievalists and better serve the varied communities with which we are engaged.

Like my pedagogy, my scholarship has grown as a result of my experiences working at different institutions and with different people. The more time I spent away from graduate school, the more I came to realize the importance of diverse audiences and accessibility to information, for example. As I learned to communicate effectively with new student populations, I began to recognize that similar strategies might also help me better respond to the thousands of well intentioned "what do you do exactly?" queries at weddings and holiday parties, to say nothing of explaining my work to colleagues outside of my department or university.

In addition to writing about medieval texts, I now write about medievalism and pedagogy. I choose my venues for publication carefully so that my work is written for and available to different audiences, and I balance individually authored work with collaborative efforts in order to contribute to a broad definition of academic community as well as remind myself of my role in that community, which goes a long way to combat any sense of isolation that might come with being a lone medievalist.

My scholarship over the last ten or so years has, therefore, included single-authored pieces on Malory, *Amis and Amiloun*, nostalgia in *King Arthur* and *Camelot*, the premodernities of *Outlander*, the role of the Orkneys in medieval Arthuriana, and the medievalisms in *How to Train Your Dragon* and contemporary Robin Hood films. This work has been published in such diverse venues as *Arthuriana*, *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, *Year's Work in Medievalism*, *Studies in Medievalism*, and a De Gruyter Festschrift for Thomas Hahn. I have also co-edited a special issue of *Arthuriana* as well as co-written pieces on teaching N-Town for *The Once and Future Classroom* and an introduction to Malory for *Oxford Bibliographies*. And my forthcoming work includes a co-edited volume for the Middle English Text Series and a chapter, "King Arthur in North American literature since 1900," for *The Cambridge Companion to Arthurian Literature and Culture*. All of this scholarship reflects my interests and experiences as a medievalist at different moments in my career, and I am proud of all of it. I do not think one publication is inherently more valuable than the others. In short, I have learned, like my students—and because of them—to broaden my perspectives on what is or should be possible for my own work.

More than anything, my time as a lone medievalist has encouraged me to make the Middle Ages as accessible as possible without losing the intellectual precision associated with careful, critical engagement with the past. My students and non-medievalist colleagues have become central to my

thinking about what needs to be understood about the Middle Ages inside the classroom as well as out, and they regularly inspire me to come up with creative ways to help make this understanding feasible for as many audiences as possible. Yes, the nature of this work necessitates intellectual and ideological shifts that can sometimes be exhausting, but it also, I think, has made me both a better scholar and a better teacher. Thus, I do think there is an important relationship between my scholarship and my teaching, even if it is not the one idealized by the larger profession at present. And since most medievalists' experiences are closer to mine than those of our colleagues at R1 institutions, I think it is well past time that we acknowledge as a field that teaching and studying the Middle Ages varies a lot by institution. Challenging the common narrative about the nature of the relationship between teaching and research in medieval studies in and of itself is important, but so too is rethinking how we evaluate meaningful scholarship.

The humanities will continue to exist within higher education only as long as we continue to challenge ourselves to find innovative ways of making them not just interesting but also relevant to our students and our colleagues alike. As medievalists, I think we are well poised to do exactly that. I have had the privilege of working with and learning from medievalists who are doing remarkable work as teachers and scholars committed to an inclusive, dynamic, and rigorous field. My appreciation of this work has only grown with time as I have gained first-hand experience of what it is like to attempt to produce such work under a variety of different professional circumstances. Collectively we must work together using the circumstances available to us at our different institutions to combat the belief that humanistic inquiry into previous eras bears no influence on the present or future. What is past is prologue, after all, and as we lone medievalists know, one voice can make quite the difference when given the opportunity to do so. We should be amplifying these voices and creating opportunities for multiple forms of scholarly exchange, not privileging certain forms of knowledge production while denigrating others.

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