The Ballad of the Lone Medievalist

Kisha G. Tracy, John P. Sexton

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G. Tracy, Kisha and John P. Sexton.
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THE LONE MEDIEVALIST AS SCHOLAR

OPUS CLAMANTIS IN DESERTO
Despite the title of this essay, I am not going to spend much time in the monk’s cell—this regardless of the common habit of equating academics with monks, generally with negative connotations. This image was evoked by Nicholas Kristof in his much-discussed (by academics at least) New York Times article, “Professors, We Need You!,” advocating for public engagement by academics in less arcane language. He ends with the cry, “So, professors, don’t cloister yourselves like medieval monks—we need you!”1 Earlier, he defines what this “cloistering” means: “A basic challenge is that Ph.D. programs have fostered a culture that glorifies arcane unintelligibility while disdaining impact and audience. This culture of exclusivity is then transmitted to the next generation through the publish-or-perish tenure process. Rebels are too often crushed or driven away.” Essentially, he is denigrating, if not the lone medievalist by name, then certainly the lone academic. With due respect to Mr. Kristof, he clearly has not been a student of medieval studies. Peter Bu-

chanan offers a reply to Kristof’s article on his blog Phenomenal Anglo-Saxons that cannot fail to make a medievalist smile — if not smirk. He writes, “And since my PhD is in medieval studies, it’s not clear that he would want me […] although I could at the very least let him know that medieval monks were often active figures in their world, preserving and transmitting knowledge, producing art and literature, and serving as public intellectuals shaping the course of local and international political affairs.”

Of course, such a discussion would necessarily get into eremitic vs. cenobitic monastic traditions, the various rules of orders, and the determination of the effects monks had on public life. Nonetheless, Buchanan’s response is well-aimed.

Not all comparisons between monks and academics are negative, at least in the sense of condemning the latter. A few years ago, I was reading an article in The Chronicle of Higher Education — “The Professor and the Would-Be Monk” by David Evans. While necessarily brief in its ruminations, I found much to consider in the article. Evans’ main point concerns his reading of Pierre de Calan’s Cosmas, or the Love of God and how the title monk — a modern, not a medieval, one — struggles to reconcile his ideal expectations of his calling with its reality. Evans equates this with encountering reality upon embarking into the academic profession. His definition of reality is probably familiar to most lone medievalists: committee responsibilities, the demands of teaching, departmental and university politics, and the general claims on an academic’s time beyond the quest for knowledge. Some of these issues I will address further in a moment. The comparison between the calling of monkhood and the calling of academia (most poetically, medieval studies) — the passion, commitment, fit of personality, seclusion, to name a few


characteristics—has possibilities. Indeed, John Van Engen likens members of a university to “members of religious orders.”

As I thought about Evans’ comments, it made me curious. How much has academia changed? As an academic, and a lone medievalist in my department at a university, it is both interesting to note the origins of my profession as well as illuminating to think about the requirements, realities, challenges, and rewards of university life. What can we learn about ourselves and what we do by exploring the history of intellectuals and teachers? How do we define ourselves today, particularly as medievalists and teachers of medieval studies? Especially at a time when, as Richard DeMillo states, educators are “on a path to marginal roles in a much different world than they are designed for”? Perhaps being lone medievalists gives us much-needed perspective, not to mention practice.

Rather than turning to the monastery, I’m going to turn to the medieval university. “Every society,” Van Engen states, “has devised means to educate its young and to prepare a next generation of leaders. Not every society has had universities. These guilds of scholars and students, the invention of twelfth-century Europe, receive the highest acclaim from modern scholars.” Perhaps much of this acclaim is related to our genealogical link to these institutions. Perhaps it is also a sense of kindred spirit. Anthropologists at Boise State University are studying what they call *Homo academicus*, and an article summarizing their current findings appeared in an online journal dedicated to “bridg[ing] the worlds of academia, journalism and the public interest.” While their sample size is at present small, their findings are nonetheless intriguing in considering the shape of the modern academic:

[F]aculty spent approximately 17 percent of their workweek days in meetings. These meetings included everything from advising meetings with students (which could be considered part of teaching or service depending on the department) to committee meetings that have a clear service function. Thirteen percent of the day was spent on email (with functions ranging from teaching to research and service). Thus, 30 percent of faculty time was spent on activities that are not traditionally thought of as part of the life of an academic. Twelve percent of the day was spent on instruction (actual lectures, labs, clinicals etc.), and an equal amount of time was spent on class preparation. Eleven percent of the day was spent on course administration (grading, updating course web pages, etc.). Thus, 35 percent of workweek days was spent on activities traditionally thought of as teaching. Only three percent of our workweek day was spent on primary research and two percent on manuscript writing.7

This in a nutshell is who we are. The study also determined that we are solitary creatures: “The surprising finding was the amount of time spent alone (57 percent). Only 17 percent of participant time was spent doing activities with colleagues and 15 percent of our time was spent doing activities with students. Being a faculty member appears to be a lonely occupation.”8 This statistic might explain, more accurately than Kristof’s assumptions, why we are


8 Ibid. See also Maggie Berg and Barbara Seeber, The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016).
often likened to the popular conception of secluded monks. It certainly quantifies the world of the lone medievalist.

And, yet, is this solitary lifestyle as surprising as Ziker intimates? Let us consider it in light of the first of the holy triumvirate: research. The question often arises about what a scholar needs in order to be a scholar. Stephen Ferrulo in his article on the medieval university recounts the story of University of Paris chancellor Peter Comestor who was overlooked for the position of prelate because he “wasn’t suited for the active life” and eventually resigned the chancellorship to enter the abbey of St. Victor [as he] seems to have preferred the life of a “reclusive scholar.”9 In this case, the active life and the scholar’s (reclusive) life are at odds with each other. Consider Piers Plowman and Haukyn the Active Man, although his plight is not that of the distracted scholar, or The Cloud of Unknowing. Ferrulo’s article title — “Quid dant artes nisi luctum?” [What do the arts give other than trouble?] — is taken from a 12th-century poem by Walter of Chatillon, who laments, as he cannot find a job, the years of “self-denial” in being a “poor scholar.”10 Turning again briefly to the monastic, the Rule of St. Benedict states, “there shall certainly be appointed one or two elders, who shall go round the monastery at the hours in which the brothers are engaged in reading, and see to it that no troublesome brother chance to be found who is open to idleness and trifling, and is not intent on his reading; being not only of no use to himself, but also stirring up others.”11 The implication is clear. Study requires concentration, focus. Other people are a distraction. Here I am reminded of Francis Bacon, although a bit beyond the medieval period, who implies much the same in his essay “On Marriage and Single Life,” asserting pithily that the best works have come from

10 Ibid., 1.
those who are not married and have no children—or perhaps those who do not teach 4/4 loads.

To return to the findings of the Boise State study, the time we spend alone, at least during the school year, is less about research and more about the second area of academia: teaching. Class preparation, email with students, grading—solitary activities (we can argue out whether or not e-communication is actually time alone). The nature of teaching and the amount of solitary activity, including the types of activity, have changed since the work of our medieval counterparts. Although, as John Scott points out, “In today’s universities, the basic teaching mission and many features of the medieval model from Europe remain intact. This pattern exists worldwide in the Americas, Asia, Africa, and Australia. Major organizational features are the power to confer degrees, curriculum, examinations, commencements, as well as colleges.”¹² This rather sweeping statement is reductive, particularly, as “[i]n most universities […] these matters [teaching or the curriculum, the textbooks used, the schedule of lectures and disputations, or the stages of advancing to the master’s degree] seem to have been regulated by unwritten customs, by practices imprinted upon the collective memory of the institution by the regularity of their occurrence.”¹³ There is much that we cannot know.

Perhaps what we can say with certainty then is simply that teaching was key to the roles of university faculty from the beginning. James Weisheipl finds that “the bachelor was a practice-teacher, an apprentice to a master whose obligation was to teach and hold disputations … Actual teaching, therefore, was an essential part of a cleric’s education. He had to teach in order to merit the grand title of Master.”¹⁴ He claims that “[a]t the time of inception the young candidate had to take an oath that

¹³ Ferrulo, “Quid dant artes nisi luctum?” 5.
he would lecture in that faculty for at least two years … One
who failed to fulfill his oath to teach was a perjurer and could
not rightfully claim the title of master.” The exact nature of this
apprenticeship is an intriguing topic. The amount of emphasis
that faculty today put on being teachers depends on many fac-
tors, not the least of which is their institution’s teaching load
and departmental and institutional attitudes towards teaching.
To be faculty, according to the medieval model, is to teach, and
yet college teachers today often receive little to no training in
teaching. Further, teaching is often marginalized. Ken Bain, in
What the Best College Teachers Do, argues that successful college
teachers perceive teaching as “an important and serious intel-
lectual (or artistic) act, perhaps even as a kind of scholarship,”
one that requires “the attention of the best minds in academia.”
Also, he remarks that “a teacher should think about teaching
(in a single session or an entire course) as a serious intellectual
act, a kind of scholarship, a creation.” Thinking of teaching as
scholarship is a field that has been developing for decades, and
yet we often do not consider it in the same category as our dis-
cipline-specific research. Teaching is, as Bain states, an “intel-
lectual act,” deserving of the same attention and application of
process as our other work.

The developing field of teaching and learning scholarship has
much to offer us as we think about the medieval connection. On
one hand, we can argue that the new research and pedagogical
techniques are a significant sign of progress from the medieval
university. Scott remarks that certain scholars are “call[ing] for
revitalizing the ‘collegiate ideal’ [set by the medieval model] of
traditional residential institutions: student development, active
learning pedagogies, and integration of academic and experien-
tial learning.” Another angle is to apply understanding of the
changes faced in medieval education to our own current situ-

15 Ibid., 267.
16 Ken Bain, What the Best College Teachers Do (Cambridge: Harvard Univer-
sity, 2004), 49.
17 Ibid., 169.
ations. For instance, William Courtenay writes that, in medieval universities, the “emphasis on the written record may have resulted from the difficulty of proving heresy on the basis only of reports of oral teaching. Yet one has the sense that accusers found the written form of heresy to be particularly offensive, perhaps because it gave the elevated status of the written word to those views and had the power to spread them through manuscript copies.”¹⁹ I will revisit the concept of heresy in a moment. With respect to the development of the written record as opposed to oral teaching and the complexities as related to teaching, I cannot help but think of the innovative practice now of recording oral lectures, particularly in flipped classrooms. Can we not see another shift occurring and can we not look to our medieval counterparts and their adaptation to the written word to shed light on what are surely going to be complexities — positive or negative — we need to address?

A third avenue of thought is considering how the study of the Middle Ages can influence current scholarship of teaching and learning. In a volume entitled *Burn After Reading,* which is a collection of miniature manifestos concerning Post/medieval studies, Joshua Eyler discusses another way we might approach the (seemingly endless) fight to argue for the value of the humanities:

> Brain-based learning theories, which lie at the intersection of cognitive neuroscience and the scholarship of teaching and learning, have made tremendous gains in articulating what physically happens in students’ brains when they learn. Using this methodology, I have begun a project to try to show that the humanities profoundly and permanently affect the structures of students’ brains in a way that is different from

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other fields and, thus, these modes of inquiry cannot be replaced.20

Eyler demonstrates that learning involves the brain translating material into “stories and metaphors,” which he argues makes medieval studies “well positioned to contribute to our knowledge here, if we take advantage of the multiple kinds of narratives embedded in our field to study how our students are learning.”21 Personally, I find the idea that medievalists—especially lone medievalists who teach a considerable amount of liberal arts courses—could hold a significant key to the humanities debate delightful. Additionally, we could also use the structure of the medieval university to make a supplementary argument that the humanities, at least in its incarnation as the medieval “Arts,” was and is the foundation of all other study: “When the universities were finally organized in the thirteenth century the arts faculty was a prerequisite to the three higher faculties of theology, medicine and law. Without preparation in arts at some recognized studium, no one could matriculate in one of the higher faculties; at least this was the general rule.”22 Of course, this line of thought does fall back into what Eyler addresses, that our arguments tend to revolve around proving that the humanities are “important,” rather than proving that they are “necessary”—thus, his persuasive and alternative approach outlined previously.

From teaching, let us turn to the third traditional area of academia: service. Generally, service (at least in contracts and by tenure committees) is broken down by service to the campus community and service outside the university. I will focus here on the latter, particularly its incarnation as public engagement, which brings us back to Nicholas Kristof’s concern for academ-

21 Ibid., 26.
22 Weisheipl, “The Structure of the Arts Faculty in the Medieval University,” 263.
ics’ involvement in (or, in his opinion, lack of involvement in) public concerns. Consider this concept from the medieval angle. Were medieval university faculty interested in and engaged in public discourse? The short answer is yes. Ferrulo comments, “chancellors and other masters ‘were not academic recluses living in isolation from the wider world of affairs’ … The tensions and conflicts that did arise were about the responsibility and the accountability of the university to society.”23 What about, some might ask, the influence of the institution of the Church, especially as it was heavily involved in and heavily invested in the university’s production of students versed in theology? There is no doubt that the Church asserted its influence over the universities. We can look at this from different perspectives. We can consider this restrictive, and, to return to the concept of heresy, there were certain teachers who were accused and condemned for their teachings, which supports considering the Church’s influence in this light. We can also consider other possibilities, such as the effect of this influence on the university responsibility to society. Jacques Verger states, “[T]he church imposed on universities the idea that the mere love of science, the pure research of truth, could not be the only aim of learning. Learning had to carry out two other requirements: it had to be socially useful [...] and it had to respect and even support religious orthodoxy as defined by the papacy.”24 Here we have these two ideas in one context. Learning had to go beyond study for the sake of study and it had to support orthodox beliefs — service to the community and restriction at one and the same time. Weisheipl emphasizes this: “Masters could lecture on any book they chose and they could hold any opinion not directly opposed to the Christian faith. Students could choose any master they wished

23 Ferrulo, “Quid dant artes nisi luctum?” 17.
to work under.”25 The sense of academic freedom exists in the ability of teachers to shape their own curriculum and of students to choose their own instructors, not to mention the prominent practice of university personnel maintaining autonomy and authority over their own members, but with the caveat that the opinions expressed must not oppose “Christian faith.” The “tensions and conflicts” that Ferrulo mentioned arising out of the university’s responsibility to society are reflected in the circumstances surrounding certain punishments of masters and students. Courtenay argues:

[T]he most serious penalties were imposed or were attempted in those cases in which a bachelor or master allowed or encouraged his controversial views to influence a wider public [...]. The issue was whether a scholar knowingly and willingly maintained views contrary to the faith (which most did not), whether his views were disseminated outside the university, and, if so, whether or not he could rely on political protection.26

It is important to note the emphasis on dissemination of ideas outside of the university to a “wider public.” This seems to be the crux. Faculty were responsible for engaging with the public and yet that act could rebound on them, placing them in a precarious position. Has all that much changed?

Many of the discussions concerning university faculty and public engagement center on the idea that what actually needs to change is the acceptance of public engagement within the university itself. By gaining support and approbation (particularly from those reading our tenure files), the argument is that more academics would be so engaged. Here is where we can see the clearest adjustment from the medieval. Faculty sought less the

25 Weisheipl, “The Structure of the Arts Faculty in the Medieval University,” 271.
approbation from within and more the approval from without. This is a result of changes in purpose. As Ferrulo comments:

In view of their impressive record of worldly success, the masters must not have been any less ambitious for social advancement or any more reluctant than their students to make practical use of their learning when the right opportunity presented itself. [...] A mastership in the medieval university was not regarded as a permanent, lifelong profession. The masters did not seek nor did they want tenure. The value of the title magister rested above all in the prestige and promotion that it likely would bring someday outside the schools.27

This appears contrary to modern academia. The anxiety to complete portfolios, including the requisite and “correct” research, often comes first for practical reasons if nothing else. This anxiety can have consequences to the mission to be “socially useful.” David Perry, himself a medievalist and frequent writer for The Chronicle, asks in a post on his blog responding to Kristof, “How would you count public engagement in your field and institution?”28 His question arises from the concern as to how public engagement factors in tenure and promotion decisions. The formula is not an easy one, particularly if an institution does not consider public work in the same light as scholarship. Perry speculates on examples such as, “Does a ‘well-read’ [...] blog equal a conference presentation? Do 6 op-eds for national media equal a lower tier journal article?”29 These are not easy questions. Add in the argument by Valéria Souza, a PhD in Bra-

27 Ferrulo, “Quid dant artes nisi luctum?” 18.
29 Ibid. For further discussion of this subject, see also Margaret A. Post, Elaine Ward, Nicholas V. Longo, and John Saltmarsh, eds., Publicly Engaged Scholars: Next-Generation Engagement and the Future of Higher Education, (Sterling: Stylus, 2016).
zilian studies, on her blog *It’s complicated* that public engagement is only thus when it serves no ulterior motive and seeks no exterior reward, such as “counting” towards tenure,\(^\text{30}\) and the complexities build even further. Do we even have the time to be truly publicly engaged?

The question of public engagement also must consider opportunity and access. Ferrulo states that “the masters whose subsequent careers did bring them worldly success were far more likely to be remembered, and to have their scholarly writings preserved, than those who spent their entire lives teaching.”\(^\text{31}\)

This sentiment is echoed in a *Chronicle* article by Perry:

> [T]he general public perceives faculty members as isolated from reality, holding cushy jobs, and uninterested in open communication. The public has little access to the broad diversity of knowledge, experience, and background inside higher education, because those academics who do achieve broader platforms generally come from only the most elite universities.\(^\text{32}\)

Perceived worldly success continues to drive the supposed public face of academia, as does the belief in a hierarchy of publication venues. In yet another response to Kristof’s article, Corey Robin, a professor of political science, posted, “[Kristof] only reads *The New Yorker*, and then complains that everyone doesn’t write for *The New Yorker*. He doesn’t see the many men and women who are in fact writing for public audiences. Nor does he see the gatekeepers — even in our new age of blogs and little

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31 Ferrulo, “Quid dant artes nisi luctum?” 9.
magazines — that prevent supply from meeting demand.”

The truth is, despite concerns about how it will “count” in tenure and promotion, not to mention the fear of public scrutiny — which our medieval counterparts faced as well — there are many faculty members of institutions of all kinds who do engage in public discourse. Lone medievalists have often commented that they find public engagement, at local, regional, and national levels, an effective method of bridging the gap between their scholarship and non-medievalists, those within academia and without. Arguably the most significant to medieval studies is the rise of the digital humanities as medievalists are some of the foremost leaders in this field, not to mention that they are platforms that medievalists spread out all over the world use to stay connected and involved. Why is this so important? As Perry comments, “Although many of those public intellectuals [who come from elite universities] are brilliant writers and speakers, they represent only a tiny percentage of the expertise available in the academic world. That expertise lies not just in our subject fields but also in the habits of mind we bring to bear on countless other kinds of issues.”

Bruce Holsinger, on his blog *Burnable Books*, comments on Perry’s article: “[E]xpertise is not just discipline-based, limited to the immediate subjects of our research, but the product of more general ‘habits of mind’ cultivated within and by the institutions of higher education in which we teach and work.” We, as lone medievalists, have a great deal to offer in multiple arenas and that without sacrificing quality and rigor.

So what can we learn from studying our medieval academic ancestors? For me, it is that we defy definition. We are individuals and institutions. Teachers and researchers. Experts and students. Centralized and marginalized. Restrained and limitless. Bloggers and peer-reviewed article writers. Medievalists and

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34 Perry, “My Initial Public Offering.”
generalists. Praised and condemned. Rebels and stereotypes. Academic and popular. Public intellectuals and cloistered scholars. Alone and in communities. We occupy all of these spaces, even the contradictory ones, simultaneously. We may have defined responsibilities, but how we shape those responsibilities is our choice. An understanding of our professional genealogy and its roots in the medieval university, beyond providing a sense of belonging and kinship, can help us determine these choices, shaping us both as lone medievalists and academics in general.