The Ballad of the Lone Medievalist

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Embracing the Medievalist Margin

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What a loaded phrase it is, “the Middle Ages.” What does it denote, exactly? Medievalists have long critiqued the terminology as an empty — and intellectually partisan — marker of otherness.1 Certainly, the term is useful for historicists, classicists, and modernists as a delimiter of the end of the age of Antiquity and the beginning of the Renaissance. Yet, the phrase is tainted for researchers in the medieval trenches, actively working to dem-

onstrate the fecundity and importance of the period to intellectual and cultural history. The formulation itself, “the Middle Ages,” deflect us from the temporal period supposedly under study: what are those ages in the “middle” of? The Middle Ages, paradoxically, take center-stage in their function as the margins of other more exciting periods of study. Without the essential instrument of “the Middle Ages,” modernists and Classicists would struggle to frame their own work. Even the adjectival form, “medieval,” offers us few benefits. As Margreta de Grazia notes, the term “medieval” “works less as a historical marker than a massive value judgement, determining what matters and what does not”:

To research the Middle Ages, to be a medievalist, is to be irrevocably tied to “a millennium of middleness,” and to exist “in the [marginalized] middle” in our professional academic lives.

The middle is a tricky thing. The *Oxford English Dictionary* can’t really offer us a shoulder to cry on here. That which is “middle” is “situated at the center, central,” but also “intermediary,” of middling quality, of arguable value, or worse — that ultimate academic slur — average. Being “in the middle” is no less problematic. We are, apparently, “in the midst of,” surrounded by crowds of (receptive?) people — the life and soul of an intellectual party, at last. Let’s not get ahead of ourselves yet: working “in the middle,” we are also “in a difficult, dangerous, or untenable position; in trouble.” Medievalists, alone in the whirling academic crowd: so often isolated in our institutions, unable to profit fully from inter-disciplinary collaborations, with our outputs ultimately warehoused adjacent to “properly relevant” research. After all, the fruits of medieval research are “difficult,” “inaccessible,” “arcanse.” And won’t anybody think of the children? Apologies, I misssoke: won’t anybody think of the students? How will medieval studies ever draw in big enough crowds of undergraduates to help sustain the university coffers? And so, as medievalists,

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2 De Grazia, “Divide,” 453.
we find ourselves “in the middle,” in that strange (dis)location of betwixt and between, of being both in some sense central and at almost all times marginal.

Medievalists have long struggled with such professional and institutional problems; our current situation is — sadly — nothing new.\(^4\) Nothing short of tectonic shifts in institutional and intellectual praxes will remedy such circumstances. I’m not naïve enough to believe that all will be peachy keen in academe if medievalists just “bootstrap” ourselves out of this quagmire. Be more commercial! Teach all the things! Don’t sleep! But, I do think that we can ameliorate our current situation in the status quo, and speed the advent of desperately needed changes in our industry, if we strategically embrace — dare I say weaponize? — our marginality. Not just any marginality: a specifically medieval kind of marginality, drawn from the hermeneutic power of manuscript margins. Operating in this critical space, for a time at least, will ultimately allow us to de-marginalize ourselves, and medieval studies as a discipline.

In 1992, Michael Camille brought medieval margins front and center.\(^5\) Developing earlier (scant) research into images found in the margins of medieval manuscripts from scholars such as Lilian M.C. Randall and Lucy Freeman Stadler, Camille was the first to theorize on a grand scale the power dynamics at play between “central” texts and the images which surround them.\(^6\) For Camille, the margin of a medieval manuscript is a “powerful” place: marginal annotations, glosses, and images often “interact[] with and reinterpret[] a text which has come to

\(^{4}\) See, for example, ibid., 107–8. Patterson summarises medievalist angst relating to relevance and accessibility to other disciplines dating to the 1920s and 1940s.


be seen as fixed and finalized.” The margins are a site of potential resistance to proffered textual significations, spaces for dissent and discussion of that with which the reader is presented, the textual status quo. In this way, then, marginal inscription(s) are “radical” as they challenge the concept of any singular totalitarian signification. As Rosemarie McGerr remarks, medieval margins are discursive and dialogic:

The margins of medieval manuscripts can thus be read as spaces of ambiguity and dialogue that allow for interrogation of constructions of otherness, hybrid areas resistant to traditional systems of classification.

What if we acknowledge our “marginal” position as medievalists in such terms? The medievalist borderlands become a fertile, provocative zone for breaking free from traditional research paradigms and methodologies, for pushing ourselves — and our colleagues — beyond comfortable disciplinary lines. Our job in the medievalist margins, then, is to trouble the dominant narrative(s), to push for alternate analytical perspectives and advocate for neglected objects of study. What if we embrace our medievalist marginality on our own terms, and glory in challenging the central texts and praxes which govern our intellectual work? A marginal image, found in an English Book of Hours from ca. 1300, illustrates the capacity of the margins to manipulate the central text. Owing to a forgetful or overworked scribe, perhaps, Psalm 127 in this manuscript is missing its fourth verse. Help is at hand from the margins, however. A man extends him-

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self on tip-toe just to the left of the text column. The forgotten verse has been inserted at the bottom of the page, and the man hoists it forcefully into its correct place in the main text. We, like this “textual construction worker[,]” are in a position to supplement, correct and extend the “central text” of academia itself.  

The margins, it turns out, are crowded and noisy places. Catherine Brown chronicles her experience reading a twelfth-century manuscript of Augustine’s Confessions, seemingly “reading with”—and reading as—a medieval commentator who littered the text with marginal notes. By reading with/as her medieval colleague, Brown and the commentator become two subjects with connected consciousness united in a moment of unsettling simultaneity. The marginal space enables potent moments of connection and community, even across wide temporal divides. What if we consider ourselves as annotating the “central text” of academia, as laying down our tracks in the margins for others to find? Acting as “lone medievalists,” we each leave marginal marks of our experiences as medievalists—vastly different in terms of, say, career development, institution, research priorities and so forth—on the central text of academe which unites us. The margins are a space for heterogeneity—for nonsense doodles, corrections, scholarly glosses, obscenae, the works—but all that exists in the margins are bound together by the “off-centre” relationship to the main text. If we work to read each other’s marginal notations, to read with—and in some instances as—each other despite our myriad differences, then we may unite “in the middle,” finally, of a welcoming crowd. I’m advocating, then, for a conscious push to establish supportive inclusive networks for and of medievalists, interlocutors in the

12 Brown, “Middle,” 551–68, in particular 551–53. She refers to Augustine, Confessions, Chicago, Newberry Library, MS 12.7, fol. 22r.
13 I draw upon Brown’s experience to theorize the ways in which contact with manuscripts facilitates cross-temporal communities of readers and collocutors, a process I term “coresthesia,” in more depth in Spencer-Hall, Medieval Saints and Modern Screens: Divine Visions as Cinematic Experience (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018), 136–45.
margins with whom we find much-needed fellowship.\textsuperscript{14} I see the present volume as a vital step in establishing the kind of energetic community frameworks that will enable us, ultimately, to move to the center of the academic page.

Margins are not just a space for reflections on and of the “real” world. Images of bizarre monsters and fanciful hybrids, for example, are commonplace. The marginal space is “a site of reworking of the imaginary,” a territory to imagine not just social changes, but alternate psychological possibilities too.\textsuperscript{15} Marginal monsters enable an individual to visualize different versions of the self, of the known world, and of humanity itself. Alongside finding academic interlocutors in the medievalist margins, we may also find the strange specimens that populate our own intellectual imaginations, fanciful flanges of our analytical priorities which tend to overspill into all areas of an academic’s life. Instead of rejecting such specters as unimportant—marginal—to our bread-and-butter medieval research, I affirm that we should actively welcome these random stragglers into our intellectual life. In my office, I have two such marginal imaginary friends who have come to symbolize for me the power of medieval marginality: a giant poster of Jessica Fletcher, the heroine detective from \textit{Murder, She Wrote},\textsuperscript{16} and a soft toy unicorn head (called Hildegard) that hangs above my desk. Somewhat bizarrely, I admit, Jessica and Hildegard operate as two members of an intellectual community which encourages

\textsuperscript{14} In a keynote paper I delivered at the 21st Gender and Medieval Studies Conference (Corpus Christi College, University of Oxford, UK; 8–10 January 2018), I urged for the development of a medievalist-feminist politics of professional and personal visibility, predicated on practices of genuine inclusivity of all kinds of academic bodies and lives, and supportive action for colleagues of all career stages. Much of that paper’s content is relevant to my comments here. For the full text of the paper, see “Hagiography, Media, and the Politics of Visibility,” \textit{Medieval, She Wrote} (blog) (5 February 2018), http://www.medievalshewrote.com/blog/gms2018-fulltext.

\textsuperscript{15} Camille, “Glossing the Flesh,” 249.

me to confidently and provocatively engage within and beyond medievalist circles. Camille urges us “to stand on the margins with the monsters and see what vantage point that reveals.”\(^{17}\) What does it mean for me “to stand” with Jessica and Hildegard? Frankly, I’m not sure that I can answer such a question precisely.\(^{18}\) At the very least, these marginal “monsters” remind me of my wider identity in the world, offering me a way out of medievalist solitary confinement. Perhaps more importantly, they remind me to reach ever outward in my research—to push beyond facile concrete categorizations, and to work to raze boundaries separating medievalists from other academics, and academics from the general public.

A note of warning is necessary. Whilst marginalia can and often do challenge and reshape their central texts, they are nevertheless ineluctably “tethered to texts which they can ‘play’ upon but never replace.”\(^{19}\) Indeed, Camille notes that the viva-cious blossoming of Gothic marginalia in the late twelfth to the late fourteenth century is directly related to the “absolute hegemony of the system it sought to subvert.”\(^{20}\) Once that “system” was actively being dismantled, such marginalia went into rapid decline. As the center depends on the margins, the reverse is also true. Though the strenuous efforts of the marginal man in the Book of Hours that I described above meaningfully interacts with the central text, he hauls into place a textual fragment that should already have been in the Psalm, rather than introducing genuinely challenging material. In other words, marginal activity can work to reinstate coherent dominant narratives just as much as it can succeed in offering necessarily audacious correctives to traditional paradigms. Inhabiting the “medieval marginal” should not be an excuse for us to isolate ourselves from

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17 Ibid., 255.
19 Camille, Image on the Edge, 47.
20 Ibid., 160.
collaborating across disciplines, sharing our knowledge with the public, taking on the unglamorous administrative work which underpins access to institutional power, or actively working to reshape that which forces us to reclaim “the marginal” as a position of power.21 “Medieval marginality” is—or at least should be—a transitional state: a means of advocating for ourselves and our work on the long road to definitive change in institutions and intellectual frameworks. If we must be marginal, then let’s be mediavally marginal.