The Medievalist’s Soliloquy: 
Struggles and Advice for Lone Medievalists

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Many scholars of medieval studies enter their first job after leaving supportive graduate programs where other graduate students understood their woes. Once teaching at an institution where scholarly studies may not be a priority, many quickly discover that they do not have much time, especially for research and writing. Moreover, they lack the supportive community that they once had.¹ As a lone medievalist, the struggle to produce scholarship and writing is difficult and complicated. Creating classes, curriculum planning, committee work, etc., all eventually become routine. Sadly, the same cannot be said of research. From lack of library resources, to the reliance on oneself as an audience, the research process proves to be difficult. Despite these obstacles there are a number of ways to better facilitate researching and writing while still performing one’s teaching du-

¹ The lack of community is compounded for those individuals who do not teach graduate classes and do not have the pleasure to engage with more advanced students.
ties as the lone medievalist. The solutions and advice—focusing on the categories of research and collegiality—draw from *The Rule of Saint Augustine*. The solitary medieval monk serves as a surprising parallel to modern lone medievalist.¹

Rule four of the Augustinian Rule instructs the brothers to “call nothing your own, but let everything be yours in common.”² Embrace teaching survey courses. Many professors at teaching-oriented institutions dread the teaching of generalist courses when they should not. Survey courses provide the opportunity to develop teaching techniques that can be refined in the upper level courses. Survey courses also provide commonality and create collegiality. Be it activities, teaching techniques, or even stories of being in the trenches, the survey classes belong to the entire department are shared “in common.” Moreover, teaching broadly about one’s subject area and teaching other subjects outside one’s research focus provide professors with knowledge and context both inside and outside of their field of interest, which helps one to become a better specialist.³ While some classes will

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¹ Many thanks to Rebecca Stephenson, Jennifer N. Brown, Mary Valante, Maire Johnson, William H. Campbell, Janet Snyder, and Janine Larmon Peterson who provided suggestions for those who struggle to complete research at teaching-oriented institutions. As part of this project I created a dialogue on the Facebook page “Teaching in the Middle Ages” to gather suggestions from faculty who not only value teaching but who have also managed to complete research. Each offered sound advice and each comment provides proof that there are support groups and people out there willing to help. See “Teaching in the Middle Ages,” Facebook page (24 September 2015), https://www.facebook.com/groups/219963604761327/.

² As an exercise of my own advice, I am using the *Rule of Saint Augustine* as a basis for the categories of discussion. The brothers and sisters of the thirteenth century Hospital of Saint John in Brussels followed this Rule. My research centers on the Hospital of Saint John, and I am currently writing the early history of the institution. See Tiffany A. Ziegler, “Medieval Healthcare and the Rise of Charitable Institutions: The History of the Municipal Hospital” (unpublished manuscript, Palgrave Macmillan, August 2017).


⁴ Jennifer N. Brown put forth this idea, and I can fully agree with her. Teaching Western Civilization I and II provides a necessary context that better
be unavoidably limited in scope, such as your Western, World, and American surveys, others will be open to more development. For upper level and special topics courses, create classes that overlap with your research and will allow you to engage with your research material while teaching simultaneously. In addition, the classroom provides a venue for the discussion of your findings. Even the simplest discussions of your research topic can be fruitful: although lectures, readings, and discussions will have to be adjusted to the students’ level, focused explanation of complex topics proves to be an excellent way to give voice to your work before you send it on to more advanced colleagues.

Time is precious for those at teaching-driven institutions. Survey courses, upper division classes, student advising, and committee work all take precedence over research. Thus, it is important that you schedule research as part of your weekly plan, but then it is imperative to keep to your plan: Rule eleven warns that “no one should do anything other than that for which was intended and from which it also takes its name.” This means not scheduling committees, student meetings, and other items of business during the time that you have set aside to research and write. When are you most productive and creative? Be honest with yourself and “figure out the two hours out of the day that you are most productive. Ensure that you write during those two hours,” otherwise you are wasting your time and ef-

6 The Rule of Saint Augustine, 2.
7 Rebecca Stephenson and Maire Johnson both argue for setting aside a specific time and for not allowing anything to come between you and that time. “Teaching the Middle Ages,” Facebook page (25 September 2015), https://www.facebook.com/groups/219963604761327/.
8 Rashawn Ray, “Prepare for the Unexpected: Surviving Your First Year on the Tenure Track” Conditionally Accepted (12 September 2013), http://conditionallyaccepted.com/2013/09/12/prepare-for-the-unexpected/. Many of the sources provided here relate to first year experiences. The advice for the first year applies to later years as well.
forts. Then, treat those times as work hours, just as you would treat hours in the classroom or office hours.

Moreover, in a profession with such limited blocks of time, you must capitalize on the little that you have. For example, “if I teach a 3 credit hour class, it may appear that I’m only working 3 hours/week. […] You also have student office hours […] , time grading assignments […] and exams, and professional development […]. So, a 3 credit hour class can easily take 15–20 hours/week. Depending on the school, a full-load might be two or four classes. So, it’s pretty easy to get to 30–40 hours/week with just two [emphasis added] classes.”9 You must be firm and you must not be “hindered by those who think something else must be done.”10 If the regular schedule during the week is not enough, consider spending breaks, such as Spring and Summer Break, writing. Make a research plan and stick to it.11 The research plan provides direction and a semblance of a planned timeline. Without a deadline, it becomes easy to give up your research time for other needs as they arise. You can also consider working on multiple projects at once to vary your focus and to “help to keep your research line flourishing in case there are setbacks on any one project.”12

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10 Rule 11, The Rule of Saint Augustine, 2.


12 Stephen Reysen and Lacy E. Krueger, “How to Survive and Thrive During Your First Years in a Tenure-Track Job” Observer 26, no. 1 (January 2013), http://www.psychologicalscience.org/index.php/publications/observer/2013/january-13/how-to-survive-and-thrive-during-your-first-years-in-a-tenure-track-job.html. Although this work is directed at psychologists, it provides fundamental advice that can be used across disciplines. The article also has a fairly extensive bibliography from which other ideas can be drawn. A similar article can be found at Inside Higher Ed: Shari Dinkins, “Surviving the First Year,” Inside Higher Ed (16 August 2007), https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2007/08/16/dinkins. If this advice is not enough,
Rule fifteen wisely suggests that “when you come to table, listen until you leave to what is the custom to read, without disturbance or strife. Let not your mouths alone take nourishment […]” Attendance at conferences and professional meetings is a great way to create a network of people who can aid you in your research and writing, not to mention a good way to vent about your work to a more specialized group. My policy is to do at least one conference a year, but I often do as many as two or three. Go. Present. Listen. Bring ideas back. Most importantly, though, make professional acquaintances, especially with those people who do research that is similar to yours.

While some professors may be the only Europeanist in their department, others will have the good fortune of a community of early modern or even ancient scholars to whom you can reach out. These early and later European periods tend to overlap, and more likely than not your peripheral colleagues will have done

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13 Rule of Saint Augustine, 2.

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14 International Congress on Medieval Studies at Kalamazoo (https://wmich.edu/medievalcongress), International Medieval Congress at Leeds (http://www.leeds.ac.uk/arts/info/125137/international_medieval_congress), Medieval Academy of America (http://www.medievalacademy.org/), Haskins Society (http://www.haskinssociety.org/), Society for Medieval Feminist Scholarship (http://list.uiowa.edu/scripts/wa.exe?SUBED1=MEDFEM-L&A=1), etc. Many of these groups offer additional benefits, such as receiving a subscription to *Speculum* as part of the MAA membership. Janet Snyder also suggested MAHS, AVISTA, and SECAC. “Teaching the Middle Ages,” Facebook page (26 September 2015), https://www.facebook.com/groups/219963604761327/.

15 Often scholars working on similar topics are willing to share sources. Maire Johnson suggested that “if you know someone who is working on things that you are working on, or even something ancillary to your own project, it’s worth seeing if you can get pdfs and other [sources] from them.” Maire Johnson, “Teaching the Middle Ages,” Facebook page (6 October 2015), https://www.facebook.com/groups/219963604761327/.
some work in medieval Europe. They may not be able to speak directly to your particular scholarship, but they are there to help. The prudent advice from Rule twenty of walking “together, and when you reach your destination, stay[ing] together” suggests the importance and benefits of cooperation. In addition, reach out beyond your university to other medievalists in nearby communities. Online support groups, writing workshops, and blogs create a semblance of togetherness even when you find yourself all alone in your department.

The most important factor in successful research is your ability to acquire the sources you need. Some institutions and faculty are restricted by the size of the library, the size of the collection, the scope of the collection, and especially limited funding. All too often, the lone medievalist experiences a struggle similar to that of a medieval monk: “books are to be requested at a fixed hour each day, and anyone coming outside that hour is not to receive them.” At your institution, take some time to meet your librarians. Introduce yourself and your research. Be nice to them, especially when it comes to Interlibrary Loans and book funds. If your library cannot facilitate your needs, you can look for a nearby institution that may have a bigger collection or even better databases. Take a weekend or evening to visit outside libraries and use them to your benefit. If these options fail,

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16 The Rule of Saint Augustine, 3.
17 Janine Larmon Peterson furthers this point when she argues that creating a community will reaffirm your scholarship, but it will also “energize” you to work. See Janine Larmon Peterson, “Teaching the Middle Ages,” Facebook page (25 September 2015), https://www.facebook.com/groups/219963604761327/.
18 See, for example, Lois Huneycutt, “Conference Report, ‘Beyond Exceptionalism,’” Royal Studies Journal (blog) (5 October 2015), https://royalstudiesjournal.wordpress.com/2015/10/05/conference-report-beyond-exceptionalism/. This post in particular was an overview of the recent conference, “Beyond Exceptionalism.” Other blogs include discussions of an Overview of Kalamazoo 2015 and interviews of various medieval scholars.
20 Rule thirty-nine, The Rule of Saint Augustine, 6.
consider research, reading, writing groups, and source-sharing groups. A wonderful network of scholars is out there; many are willing to share ideas and sources because they too know the struggle.

Researching and writing as the lone medievalist can be a challenge, one that can even be compared to that of the life of a medieval Augustinian monk. It is not, however, impossible. Manage your time, make your research a priority, and reach out to others. If there is anything that the Augustinian monks can teach us, it is to work together as a community. If a medievalist decides to keep something “secretly [...] given to him,” that is his or her prerogative. She/he will not be “judged guilty of theft” as a monk might. If, however, we choose to function as more of a community and help each other out, we naturally advance the progress in the greater field of study.

21 See, for example, “Medieval History Reading List Crowdsourcing,” Facebook page (24 September 2015), https://www.facebook.com/groups/292481914241580/. Teaching the Middle Ages is another group where the focus is on teaching. Get ideas from similar groups to better facilitate teaching so that you have more time to write. See, “Teaching the Middle Ages,” Facebook page (25 September 2015), https://www.facebook.com/groups/219963604761327/.

22 A word of advice for graduate students entering the job market regarding sources: try to have your records readily available, be it in digital or printed form when you leave your degree-granting institution.


24 Ibid.