The Ballad of the Lone Medievalist

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Reflections of an Embarrassed Medievalist

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While many medievalists find themselves alone in their departments, ranging from History to English, etc., many medievalists often find themselves just as alone, lonelier in some cases, among other medievalists, especially in professional contexts in which shared specialization ought to help them feel they belong. Lone medievalists in their academic departments, though they may feel a sense of isolation, may find that acclimation to teaching, service, and other responsibilities has its own separating effect, an effect that makes the lone medievalist feel doubly alone among other medievalists, especially at conferences, at which the expectation to make significant, independent, meaningful contributions to further medieval studies can be stifling. Such an expectation, frankly, may not be entirely reasonable. This may seem shocking, but many, if not most, medievalists do not have the personal resources to offer the kind of discipline-changing studies tacitly expected from them (from any scholar, really). At least it is shocking to say it out loud. The custom among academics is to refrain from saying what most are thinking and experiencing in the hopes that somehow one will stumble into something that peers will claim is brilliant; it has been
my custom, anyway, and I know from candid conversations with others that I am not alone.

What is more reasonable to expect, given the limited resources and energy of a scholar trying to get by in the world, is the desire to share ideas and feel a sense of belonging than stumble into something seemingly brilliant. More often than not, I have an idea that seems to me like an odd piece belonging to some larger puzzle, and I am anxious that what looks odd may seem insignificant to others. What if they have seen the puzzle put together already, and I make a fool of myself trying to make sense of my piece? Should I be shamed for not having done my research, for not having found time in the midst of grading papers from multiple first-year composition courses, serving on institutional committees, taking care of my family, maintaining a home, among other things? I find myself alone among medievalists, those with whom I should feel most free. I am no longer like them; I am an outsider. But perhaps a change in perspective can actually reveal belonging during those times but in different ways. That has been my own growing experience, even if the experience itself has not always been easy.

Years ago, I never imagined while I was going through the process of completing and defending my dissertation that my zeal for medieval literary study would ever diminish.¹ At that point I thought I was at the top of my game, and I wanted to invest more and more of myself into my interests. I imagined that my search for a tenure-track job would be the next step in establishing my own enclave where I could cloister myself and focus on this or that work of medieval literature and produce astonishingly brilliant works of scholarship about it. Sure, I would have to emerge occasionally and teach a class, likely, I thought, in my area of specialization, but I would be professing my discipline and specialization all along. My search had been built on my assumption that my medieval scholarship was my best asset, and the teaching experience I had only relevant insofar as

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¹ My PhD is in English with an emphasis in medieval literature, and I have an interdisciplinary certificate in Medieval Studies as well.
it was related to medieval topics. The search for an academic job, however, quickly opened my eyes for the need to be flexible with my expectations. (I laugh when I think about how I understood flexibility at that time — expecting more acquiescence of others than of myself.) I realized that in order to get a tenure-track position, I would have to teach outside of my area. No matter, I thought: I would still be able to cultivate my expertise as a medievalist at conferences among my peers. My expectations were perhaps still not as flexible as they needed to be.

Long months of fruitless job searching and rejection after rejection left me wondering if I had anything to offer, if there were any place I belonged as a medievalist. During the times of fruitlessness, the main support my medievalist colleagues offered was more often personal than professional, which was frankly what I needed most. I noticed, moreover, that I had begun to pour most of my time into looking for jobs rather than keeping up with scholarship or maintaining my specialist interests. Already, I was on the path towards feeling out of touch with my discipline. Were my doctoral studies, my dissertation, a fluke? Did I belong in academia as a medievalist, or was I only valuable as a commodity, someone who could dispense course content to a mass of educational consumers who care little or nothing for medieval studies? When I found a job, then, the very one I still have now, I felt I belonged in the academy, even in a place where being the only medievalist meant mainly teaching courses in composition and literature up through the eighteenth century — and sometimes beyond. Perhaps it was okay to cultivate the generalist in me, one who could teach a variety of literatures to students. Being a teacher could be as fulfilling as being a researcher; both are scholars, I thought.

I felt a sense of belonging, as I said, of a different sort. I settled into my new place and finally started teaching, but I secretly wanted the same fellowship I found with my medievalist colleagues. I had only experienced a sense of belonging with my fellow medievalist colleagues based on what I thought was our discipline. What I found in my new job was an entire cadre of people who needed me for other reasons. My departmental
teaching load included and still includes teaching courses ranging from significantly before to significantly after my own area of specialization, and for medievalists such loads are often no different. For example, I may find myself teaching literature courses covering material of the classical period or material through the eighteenth century, and this spring I actually taught the later American Literature survey — post-Civil War through the present. Still, I have found such duties rewarding. I am proud of the contribution I make to my department. Developing close relationships with other members of a department has been a positive outcome of such a workload. Often because such workloads are the result of small departments needing to cover a lot of material with few teachers; a kind of professional closeness can develop among such a small group.

I experience such professional closeness at my own institution, and I even see my training as a medievalist not only as something I bring to our department, but also something that endears me to its members. Indeed each of our specializations seems to endear each of us to the others. My colleagues needed me because none of them were medievalists and were uncomfortable teaching literature from the eighteenth century back. And there was a personal facet to such need. They needed someone to rescue them from the dread of teaching literature they did not know so well, and they were happy to say as much. Their delight at my arrival was very congenial to me. I thrived and soon found myself part of an integrated department, a band of sisters and brothers fighting the good fight of literary study and championing its cause as a necessary component of students’ intellectual and personal, indeed holistic development. There was no sense of being an outsider. We all belonged together. My identity as a medievalist was fading into the background.

Many will be familiar with such experience. Teaching requirements that force one to cover expansive time periods and materials, especially at institutions that emphasize teaching over research, can dissipate a medievalist’s working knowledge of the things that set her apart in the first place. Unless one finds oneself in a position to teach a 2/2 or maybe a 3/3 load,
most of one's professional time is spent in duties such as course preparation, grading assignments, serving on committees, and other non-specialist tasks. The medievalist in such a position may find it hard to keep up with scholarship current in her own field, creating a kind of embarrassing scholarship lag, even lapse. Some may trade satisfaction in specialization for satisfaction in fulfilling departmental or institutional obligations, sometimes grudgingly and sometimes happily. Some may do so without knowing it. Such a trade of satisfaction often brings about a new feeling of belonging. In a sense, one becomes a specialist of the institution, which is not necessarily bad. Nevertheless, the net effect of such redirection is that many once-alone medievalists, now integral parts of their departments, find themselves in a conundrum where they feel alone amidst the very colleagues who share their original scholarly interests. The medievalist integral to a department may feel like the lone incompetent among other medievalists.

Indeed, I found myself losing much of the specialized knowledge that had given me a sense of purpose. As I kept up with the demands of a 4/4 teaching load being my department’s only Early British Literature “specialist,” much of the minutiae I had proudly learned in preparing and defending my dissertation seemed to fade into the general landscape of my mind. Preparing to teach courses such as Milton and the Seventeenth Century, Western Literary Tradition, and first-year Composition courses preoccupied me. No longer did I need my knowledge of Middle English exercised and standing by in case a point of language should come up in class. No longer did I need to remember who was ruling England during the time the Pearl Manuscript was compiled. I did not even need to remember, scandalous as it may seem, that the Normans had conquered the English in 1066. Instead, the most useful information to have at hand was why a sentence did or did not convey enough information in a student's personal narrative, how heroism is defined and portrayed differently in modern popular culture from ancient Mediterranean cultures, or how to disentangle the syntax of the opening sentence of Paradise Lost (or any sen-
tence of *Paradise Lost* for that matter). Readiness for the classes I taught had to be in the forefront of my mind if I was to show myself a valuable member of the department’s faculty, and so the readiness I needed to discuss why Boethius was relevant to understanding poems in the Exeter Book (or how even to read the poems in the Exeter Book) seemed no longer a readiness but a diversion, a misplacement of personal academic and scholarly resources. Even in teaching the Early British Literature survey, class discussions focus on general liberal-arts concerns, how a work might evince qualities valued in the study of humanities at large. Although I might read something like *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in an original language edition, how people experience the kinds of anxieties that Gawain experiences (even if the details of the experience are not our own) were the kind of discussion most fruitful to my students, not whether or not they could detect characteristics of a West Midlands dialect.

I found myself discharging a responsibility to teach large numbers of students how to succeed in their university studies in general. Discussions with colleagues centered on things like the best ways to maximize peer review experiences in College Composition and in Research and Academic Writing. My colleagues began seeing me as more than someone mercifully teaching early literature, but as one indispensable for carrying out our department’s contribution to the general development of the university’s students. Rather than focusing on deepening knowledge in a smaller pool of study, I developed students’ breadth of knowledge. I pushed students, and myself, to see, for instance, how knowing a poem by Robert Herrick might help them understand a general human admiration for asymmetry, perhaps even a psychological need for it.

In fact, what occupies my academic thoughts most of the time is not medieval at all. While discussions about Ricardian courtly customs may be on the lips of a colleague at a large conference, on my mind may be recent preparation for teaching the Cavalier Poets, or Dryden, or, horror of horrors, American Lit. And though conversation about Ricardian courtly custom may have seemed like an anticipated balm, the reality is that a me-
dievalist such as myself may have more to say about Penshurst, Thomas Shadwell, or Brooke Farm than about fourteenth-century aristocrats. Among other medievalists, I may feel more like the lone generalist, the lone jack-of-all-trades—early trades at least—in a moment poised on the edge of panic: does one admit to having nothing new or interesting to say about one’s medieval specialization? Surely there have been classes to cover, committees to serve on, and papers to grade; but as surely too is the understanding that such things are the very things one has come to think of as excuses for not keeping up with one’s discipline. Having legitimate excuses or not, the medievalist in me may believe that he is no longer as qualified to participate in his specialization as he once was.

Such a feeling, often associated with “imposter syndrome,” however, need not be an alienating force. While the idea of the imposter syndrome should not be denied to have some power (real or imagined), the feeling that one has real gaps in one’s knowledge can open opportunities for building networks and advancing scholarship based on interpersonal interestedness. The sense of being an imposter in one’s own field is more widespread than one might imagine and should encourage medievalists to find ways to connect with each other in order to share openly their anxieties and also to cross-pollinate, as it were, to build ideas that might lead to fruitful scholarship and other work in the specialization. Doing so is still risky, and often implies a kind of weakness, that one is not ready to be counted among the perceived elite in the discipline. Indeed, one must acknowledge the reality of elitism among academics, a way to confirm biases about what passes as aptitude or legitimacy. Elitism can have devastating effects on specialists trying their best to get along, to fulfill institutional, professional, and personal obligations. I have felt on the fringe of medieval studies, out-

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side the fold, so to speak, not knowing which medievalist/academic custom to cultivate in a given situation. I have made my awkward attempt at aloofness and feigned confidence only to find myself reverting back to the earnestness that drove me into medieval studies in the first place. That earnestness has elicited many an awkward glance, meant to be recognized by me as a warning shot over the bow of my enthusiasm: “Watch out,” it implies, “Your zeal reveals your ineptitude.” Such elitist attitudes can be found in any profession and will always be a barrier to advancing one’s own professional development, but the barrier need not be insurmountable. I believe, in fact, one of the best ways to deal with elitism is not only with a healthy sense of self-purpose but also an equally healthy sense of apathy toward trying too hard to be perceived as being elite. Frankly, I have given up trying to fit among others as a professional medievalist and tried to engage others as my colleagues (and they are my colleagues whether they think so or not), as people I might like to get to know personally. This practice has been cultivated by my experience as the lone medievalist in an English department where the common bond is not so much time-period specialization in literature as it is the need to band together and work as a team, supporting each other both professionally and personally. Indeed, such a disposition helped me establish the connection with my colleagues I discussed above. I refused to be alone. The perception of being alone was a powerful catalyst for breaking its influences. Such an experience should not be surprising in theory, or even in practice. Indeed, medievalists within their departments may find that there is much help available to

Craig M. Rawlings et al., “Streams of Thought: Knowledge Flows and Intellectual Cohesion in a Multidisciplinary Era,” Social Forces 93 (2015): 1715–18, found that cohesion can be found among faculty in diverse disciplines when they engage in collaboration, and, although the collaboration under discussion is inter-/multi-disciplinary, such collaboration furthermore seems to strengthen a sense of unity among members of an institution. It should be noted that the study focused mainly on the intellectual cohesion formed among faculty at Stanford University, which may or may not reflect possibilities for cohesiveness and unity at other institutions (1718).
them from other departmental colleagues, and such help—be it pedagogical, institutional, personal, etc.—can go a long way to building in one a sense of belonging that might ameliorate the trauma of being separated from a previous cohort of specialists. In my own experience, a thriving reading group of medievalists at Saint Louis University, Woode Walkers, helped me quite a bit in navigating through the academic rigors of my doctoral studies, but their support was based on their personal connections to me, connections that replaced initial shared interest in medieval matters. When going on to the job market, I found myself nervous that I would not be able to find the same sense of supportive community that I did among them, the ones who saw me more as a person than merely a medievalist. But I did find such community. I found a strong sense of departmental unity went a long way to match much of the support structure I had among the Woode Walkers. I felt a sense of belonging in my new department, initially by my knowledge of medieval material and willingness to teach beyond it, but eventually by my getting to know them as people.

Still, I could not deny that I was able to get a good position teaching in a university in part because of my medieval specialization, and the evolution from medievalist to institutionalist was not easy. Learning to belong in a different context was a hard lesson. After being steeped in the responsibilities that attend teaching a lot outside my specialization, my knowledge of medieval things seemed to gather dust without me realizing it. Going to conferences reminded me again that although my academic pedigree is primarily as a medievalist, what occupies my thoughts is rarely exclusively medieval. I did not realize, therefore, that the first academic conference I would attend as a me-

David A. Wicks et al., “An Investigation into the Community of Inquiry of Blended Classrooms by a Faculty Learning Community,” The Internet and Higher Education 25 (2015): 59–60, at 62, reveal that the sense of being in the same boat with others, so to speak, can move from mere collaborative unity, toward a sense of holistic unity. Their study suggests that when faculty are more engaged in learning communities within their own institutions, they are more likely to experience professional satisfaction, even “fun” (59).
dievalist since starting my work as a university professor might expose knowledge lapses to other medievalists. Thank goodness for alone time in my room to fret without witnesses before giving my paper. Such alone time, though, did not alleviate my stress at realizing just how dissipated my specialist knowledge was. Wasn’t there a point of language I had been so hung up on before that might be relevant to my discussion at this conference, and how do I find it again? Who was reigning during the great heathen army’s incursions into the English landscape, and did the invasion coincide with Beowulf’s composition, or was it with the preparation of the manuscript, Cotton Roman-Emperor-or-Other A (it’s often A) Roman-Numeral-Something? Yikes! Relief, alas, must come at the merciful end of my session, when, hopefully, no one would ask a question that might expose my self-consciousness about widening gaps in my knowledge. Perhaps the end of the conference will offer the additional relief of returning to and covering courses in one’s department.

Though I have experienced such relief before and since, it was not to be the case in my first conference as an assistant professor, however. I had delivered my paper without embarrassing incident, so I looked forward with some relief to the remainder of the conference. In an unusual turn of events, however, I found myself in the audience of a very popular session at this very popular international conference of medievalists. The session was meant to be humorous, a way to unwind from the stress of academic performance anxiety, and I suspect I was not alone in needing such relief. One of the presentations included a number of slides with session titles on them, actual session titles from the very conference we were all attending. While the presentation was being given, however, I could not tell if the titles were made up or not. I laughed along with the audience, and at one point I must have checked my phone for something, because after the session was over, a friend of mine asked me about how I felt that my paper title was included among those most laughed at. I was floored. I had not seen my paper title on the slide, but everyone else had. The humorous session had certainly not been meant to lampoon me specifically, but I had
no idea that the unimaginative title of my own paper would be made an exemplar of the kind of thing one might ridicule as academically pedestrian. To this day I do not believe that the presenter meant any tremendous harm, and, of course, I survived both the night and the conference. What I realized, however, was just how alone one could feel among one’s peers. And, paradoxically, I was not alone. I was one of only a few people among hundreds of presenters, an inverted elite, whose paper titles were meant to represent, among other things, what may seem ridiculous about those trying their best to build or maintain their specialist knowledge. We were all alone together, none of us knowing the others, and I did not even know if I was the only one who had taken the joke badly.

Despite being quite embarrassed, however, that experience helped me realize that I did belong among my peers, but that my peers were not necessarily medievalists, and I do not mean that in a backhanded way. Perhaps I was an outsider at that conference, but I was still making meaningful contributions. I just did not realize where those most important contributions were being made: at home, at my institution, among my friends, and in other places where people actually know me. In a way, it was, and is, probably a mistake to think, as I did, of any abstract group as one’s peers. Abstract groups often give me the impression that their members matter less than the abstraction for which they stand. There are no peers in abstractions. Instead, I now realize that my peers are those interested in my personal and professional development and welfare. They include the faculty members in the department where I teach, who have lunch with me and wonder how my classes are going. They include my medievalist colleagues in the Woode Walkers, who still want to know how my family and I are getting along. They included close friends, who help me when life gets unavoidably crowded with responsibilities.

The irony is that I had been an imposter when I most feared I might become one, and it took a semi-public embarrassment during a time when I was in an important life transition to realize it. I had staked my identity on a professional abstraction, a
group identified by a specialized academic interest. I never really belonged to that group, and I am not sure that any actual people can ever be part of it anyway, which is for the best really. Specialized academic interest is necessary, but it in no way validates the personhood of those pursuing it. None should feel like an imposter because their pursuit reveals limitations to their knowledge; that is a positive side effect of scholarship and should be seen as such. Those I see at conferences should not feel alienated from each other. They belong to those around them who care for them and their well-being. Perhaps we can be more mindful of appropriately caring for those trying to see how their small puzzle piece might fit into something larger, not because of any contribution it may make to our specialization, but for the contribution it will make to them and to us.