The Unicorn Learns Accountability

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In the spring of my first year at Lewis-Clark State College in Lewiston, Idaho, I stood before a standing-room-only crowd in the on-campus coffee shop, prepared to give an informal talk as part of the Humanities Division’s ongoing colloquium series. Other professors had run small but intellectually substantial discussions about, for example, tigers in Romantic poetry. I was here to talk about monstrous women, Middle English romance, and the fairy Melusine. I had a set of PowerPoint slides. I had a packed audience, composed not just of my colleagues and seminar students but, I suspected, other students earning extra credit. Giving this talk on my research felt like a good way to introduce myself as the new assistant professor of English. It felt like a good way to give students a small taste of medieval literature that might lure them into further study. It felt like one of the many ways I was still attempting to prove, to the division and to myself, that, though the hiring process was long complete, I was indeed the right person for this job.

I have a history of being the only X in the room. The only woman in the department manager meeting at the bookstore. The only female in the board room when my consulting team met with the client. The only non-traditional student in the
creative writing class, then the only creative writer in the Old English literature class, then the only combination MFA/PhD candidate in my cohort at Cornell. I had learned to assimilate, to switch codes, to volunteer for everything, and to put forth extra effort while adopting a pose of humility.

When I interviewed for the pre-1800 English literature and creative writing line at LCSC, however, all my differences were prized. I began to recall “The Unicorn in Captivity” tapestry hanging in The Cloisters in New York. My predecessor had been a combination medievalist and fiction writer, and the search committee worried they’d never find another one, or at least not a person trained in, published, and equally committed to both fields. (There are more of us than anyone suspects.) As a young(er) female, I was welcomed by my older, mostly male colleagues for adding to the diversity profile. They were all feminists already, but happy to defer to my claims of representation. I wasn’t just the lone medievalist in the Humanities Division; I was the only medievalist on campus, as the historians over in Social Sciences were all Americanists. In fact, apart from the professor whose position I was filling and our linguist, who taught Nez Perce as well as HEL, I was the only medievalist for miles.

But, unlike many others in my position, I was fortunate enough to start my assistant professorship knowing my place was secure. The English program took pride in its rigorous curriculum, which included the early Brit Lit survey as a lower-level requirement and one pre-1900 lit seminar at the upper level. I wouldn’t have to fight to defend my territory, since the praxis exam for secondary education majors still included a segment on early English lit. I would get to teach Beowulf, Chaucer, Malory, and Marie de France in the fall, and in the spring, the Medieval or Renaissance Lit seminar along with the Shakespeare course. That unicorn in the enclosure started to feel rather full of herself: petted, well-fed, and safe.

I had vaguely anticipated, as the lone medievalist, that I would need to find ways to make my work and my field intelligible to my department and accessible to students who had never read anything earlier than The Scarlet Letter. That proved not
to be the case, at least where my literature colleagues were concerned. They were all generalists by necessity, versed in teaching everything from ancient Greek tragedy to the contemporary novel; any of them could have taught Chaucer, and likely better than I could. My first year as an assistant professor was not so much about learning how to be the Early Lit Guy and a creative writing teacher than it was about learning how to become a professional: in short, how to go from a senior graduate student fortunate enough to have a job and a dissertation prize to a professor, an advisor, a faculty member, division member, college employee, and tenure-track medievalist with a book. I learned to worry about things that graduate students never have to think about: how to recruit bodies into upper-level seminars, how to properly mentor a senior research project. Advising can expand to fill all available time. So can committee work, especially if, as the new hire, you volunteer for all the committees. Learning how a division, a college, an administration, and a State Board of Education operates takes time, observation, and a measure of delicacy. Three—or four—different class preps can fill your whole day, particularly when you have been ambitious enough to add an entirely new class to the curriculum, for instance a seminar on literary theory.

For the first time, I was designing syllabi without direct supervision or approval, though I did have to submit copies for my file. I felt the heady glee at creating my first Renaissance Lit course infused with self-doubt and panic—what did I know about Milton, anyway? My dissertation committee was no longer there subtly urging me to reframe my focus, deepen my analysis, or test my argument when my colleagues asked wonderful questions about my research. When I rambled at length about monstrous women and medieval romance, no one seemed to challenge my methodology, question my argument, or urge me to check my facts. At my talk for the colloquium, my anticipated 40 minutes stretched to an hour-and-a-half-long question-and-answer session, for which even the extra-credit seekers stayed to listen. It struck me then that my colleagues had given me a dangerous gift. I had to become the expert, even when I had so
much yet to learn. I no longer had a dissertation committee or fellow students to cover my errors or fill the gaps in my knowledge. The unicorn had to perform. And she was in charge of her own professional development, now.

This is not to say I lacked support or oversight. My division chair was a wonderful mentor and gave excellent advice. Sylabni and student evaluations went on file for annual reviews; statements and letters of recommendation were necessary for the tenure committee. But it was my colleagues to whom I felt accountable, and my students who were evaluating me. As LCSC was a teaching college and I had accepted a 4/4 load, my job description anticipated that I would spend about 70% of my time teaching and advising. About 10% I could expect to devote to committee and service work, with 20% of my effort dedicated to creative writing and scholarship. As the unicorn, I still wanted to scatter some sparkle about the field of medieval literature, but I had to be a workhorse, too. I threw myself into becoming a better teacher, to live up to the high standards my colleagues had set.

This effort was greatly supported by a collegial division climate that welcomed collaboration and exchange. I audited classes like History of the Novel or the Modernist seminar so I could learn new subject matter and new pedagogical approaches. I invited other teachers to guest lecture in my seminars. I accepted every invitation to give talks in other classes, whether it was stage production in Shakespeare’s time or applying feminist theory to Wuthering Heights, and when colleagues audited my classes, I followed up by asking for a letter for my personnel file. These were always glowing commendations, because those are the type of people I worked with, but I read with care to determine what about my teaching style might be working, and what I might continue to improve. After every class, I jotted down notes about what was going well and what problems I needed to address.

As a one-woman field, I realized that I needed to provide my own content and my own oversight. I started the habit of creating a typed self-review of each class at the end of the semester.
It was a simple document: a brief description of my philosophy and approach, a narrative of the semester, a list of aspects I’d reinforce the next time I taught the class, a list of things I’d change, and sometimes quotes from the narrative evaluations I asked my students to write. It began as a tool for personal development and then, to have a hard copy backup, I started putting it in my file. This simple document was hugely welcomed by my chair, my annual reviewers, and, in time, my promotion review committee. My chair once asked if she could share examples with the division, to encourage them to keep similar documents on file.

I created extra course evaluation tools, short essays and the like, so I could get detailed feedback from students on what they were learning. I frequently asked students permission to keep copies of their papers — with my comments — that I could use in future classes, and I put copies in my annual review file. When the time came, my promotion portfolio filled a 2 ½” binder — the recommended size was 1” — but it sailed through the review process. I still keep it on display in my office, not just as a record of what I accomplished, but of all I learned.

Going from a deeply-integrated, on-site graduate medieval community to a department of one responsible for English literature from its beginnings to 1800 meant, as most lone medievalists find, I had to find ways to keep up with developments in my fields. I signed up for a lot of listservs. I went to conferences and attended as many panels as possible in fields I taught, to learn what new work was being done and make contacts who could share syllabi, pedagogical tips, and favorite teaching resources. I felt very pushy at first, approaching strangers at talks and conferences, but once I could put faces to the other medievalists in my region, my sense of community grew, and so did my joy in my work.

The largest sense of accountability I felt was toward my students. While I could rely on their learning sound techniques of literary analysis from my literature colleagues, and good creative writing practices from the other writers, there was little chance someone else would fill the gaps on the subject matter. The sur-
vey gave me one chance to show students the heroic beauties of *Beowulf*, the ironies and provocations in Chaucer, the gender ideology at work in Malory and Marie. In the upper-level seminar, whether it was Shakespeare or Spenser, Marlowe or Milton, I had to make sure our English lit majors could hold their own in graduate school, in conferences, and in publication. Any failures of our education majors with the pre-1800 questions on their praxis exams would be laid at my door. My colleagues were well-versed in many periods and far more well-read than I, but if our seniors were writing their thesis on anything before 1800, their logical mentor was me. I felt an intense responsibility to make sure my secondary criticism was broadly informed, my arguments were up to date, the analyses I introduced in class were sound, and my comments on papers pointed students to research extending their interests. For everything from Cynewulf to Virginia Woolf, I had to know my stuff.

Added to that challenge was my growing sense that some anticipatory defense-building was called for. If the administrative axe were ever directed to my areas — and there was talk among the Idaho Board of Education about changing our core curriculum — I would need proof of rigor and evidence of worth to defend the outposts of my medieval kingdom. It wasn’t enough just to be the unicorn; I had to be able to prove why the unicorn was needed, even indispensable. Outside of the classroom, I jumped at every chance to make my work more visible to the college and beyond. I donated my book to our library (which felt so self-aggrandizing, but I did it), gave talks at colloquia, and participated in conference panels organized by my colleagues. Each year for the Women’s History Month programming, I volunteered to give a talk on medieval women. Some of these activities felt like trying to create a cult of personality — love me, love medieval lit. But engaging broad-based support for the study of literature was necessary to justify the importance of work in the humanities to local and state-wide governance bodies that seemed frequently suspicious, if not overtly hostile to the work of higher education, at least when it was not business, nursing, or STEM.
The price for all this extra activity and accountability was steep. The 80% of my job allotted to teaching, advising, and service spread to 85, then 95, then 99% of my time, including nights and weekends. As I prepared my promotion portfolio, I noticed that while my CV had expanded in other places, my recent publications were all things I’d developed in graduate school and revised since then. Some of my conference talks came from my teaching—for instance, a paper on domestic utopias in early modern women’s writing, which evolved from the Renaissance Lit class—but for the most part, I was still mining research from my monograph. The one short story I’d published was an old one I produced upon request for LCSC’s student-run journal. Despite starting and abandoning a new novel over every vacation break, I’d written one new short story in four years, and it was still unpublished. As it happens, my trickle of publications didn’t impede my promotion to associate professor, and the effort I invested in teaching paid off in other ways: in the spring of 2012, I was awarded the President’s Award for Excellence in Teaching. It was a deeply humbling honor, and I proudly display that plaque in my office, too.

I missed my writing, though, and my own research. When my husband received a job offer that would substantially increase his professional happiness as well as move us closer to our families still living in the Midwest, we decided to take it. I left LCSC to become a truly lone medievalist in the sense of being an independent scholar, which requires that one work even harder to find community, and that one make good friends at the nearest research library. For an independent scholar, there is truly no one to hold you accountable for your work, either in rate of production or in quality.

Looking back, I believe that the kindness, collegiality, professionalism, and support from my colleagues was the single most important factor in my survival as the lone medievalist at LCSC. This, of course, does not translate into useful advice for a job seeker, who can only hope she lands in a department full of fantastic people. But the tactic of finding or creating a supporting
network of medieval scholars, using technology where we must, is, I think, key for any lone medievalist to survive in the wild.

My own experience has convinced me that the other most useful strategy to our survival, and happiness, is to make our fields accountable in both senses of the term: answerable to the broader objectives of the curriculum and the college’s goals for students, and able to be explained to administrators and students not just in terms of numbers but of value. The best way I found to foster visibility and produce interest in medieval scholarship was through frequent exchange within classes and at events both on and off campus. I integrated medieval lit into my literary theory class and referenced it in my surveys, my early modern seminars, and my creative writing courses. I kept as samples, and included in my review file, student papers that incorporated “The Wife of Bath’s Tale” or Gawain and the Green Knight into their analysis. In many ways I felt I was simply butt- ing my unicorn horn in everywhere I could find an opening. But I made these efforts to show students — as well as annual reviewers, colleagues outside the division, and hopefully also the college administration and Board of Ed — that the study of medieval literature was just as rigorous and yielded as much to scholarly analysis as any other literary field, as well as offering all the traditional, oft-rehearsed benefits that learning in the humanities provides to the minds and well-being of a citizenry.

While the devotion to teaching meant a sacrifice of time and energy for my own research, true, I also felt that I reached more students through my teaching than I did through my articles or books. Many of us in teaching-focused institutions find that our work in the classroom constitutes our major contribution to medieval scholarship, even when we bring students to medieval lit through the gateway of medievalism, and even when their knowledge of the history and literature of the period only marginally informs the work that eventually earns their keep. Most of our major medieval associations think in some ways about teaching, and many sponsor awards for excellent scholarship, but I wonder if there ought to be more recognition in the field
of the contributions of teaching, to recognize that the students, not the profession, are really the ones we serve.

And I often wonder if we do need to kill the unicorn after all. By this I do not suggest that we eliminate or absorb medieval studies but that we resist the entrenchment that periodization creates. If the unicorn escapes the silken bridle and the golden corral to trample at will over other less-contested fields — those considered less dusty — she just might leave her hoofprint on them. We should not feel alone, isolated, or embattled in our medieval outposts; we are ambassadors from a vibrant and important part of history that bears deeply on the other conversations about literature, meaning, relevance, and humanity taking place within our departments.

The most satisfying thing about designing my classes at LCSC was that I truly felt that medieval lit was not treated as a special case, an adumbration of our curriculum that showed our commitment to a fading nineteenth-century ideal of a university. Early lit was considered an integral piece of our curriculum, a body of work essential to students’ larger understanding of the scope and meaning of English literature. My territory tended to seem more distant and superficially strange, but students quickly realized that Chaucer, Petrarch, and Christine de Pisan were having lively discussions about problems still relevant in our own time. Rather than the exotic pet, a proof of departmental wealth in that they can afford to house and feed us, medievalists need to be considered an essential voice, if not a core foundation, of a healthy conversation about what literature is and means, what history means and does. It is this sense of accountability to our students, our schools, and the work of the humanities that will, I believe, best ensure the longevity of our field and the survival of the unicorns.