A Study of the Unexpected: The Advantages of Being the “Lone Medievalist”

Nikolas O. Hoel, Northeastern Illinois University

The challenges facing the academy are great and have in many ways been well documented in recent times. As a general trend, enrollments are slipping at many institutions and state legislatures are cutting funds to state universities in the name of reduced spending. Individual academics face mounting issues as well. Teaching loads continue to grow, while funding for research is dropping, not to mention the decrease in hiring. Particularly hard hit are the humanities, which are seen by many as unnecessary in a climate in which preparation for the job market is hailed as the paramount concern. The atmosphere is so hostile in many sectors that some writers have seen the need to present a “defense” of a liberal arts education.1 While vocational training is an important tool for many, the liberal arts remain a cornerstone of the American educational system.

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The medievalist faces all of these issues with their colleagues, but in many cases he or she confronts another challenge: isolation. At most colleges and universities, the medievalist is the “lone medievalist.” A survey of websites from American institutions of higher learning reveals that, at most schools, departments in the humanities, such as history, English, the Romance languages, philosophy, and the like only have one medievalist each on the faculty. In many cases, there is only one medievalist in the whole university. This condition may appear to have dire consequences for the professor as well as for students. Discussions of issues that are specific to the time period cannot occur amongst scholars, who have similar training and academic backgrounds. Students may not get the diversity in course offerings that are present at larger schools that do have multiple medievalists on staff. In some cases, the medievalist is the only pre-modern Europeanist, which further limits course offerings, as he or she must teach everything from Greece and Rome through every medieval period and there are only so many slots in the course listings for a particular semester. The list of complications could go on. It would seem, then, that although the title of this volume is *The Ballad of the Lone Medievalist*, on the surface, it might as well be called the “Plight of the Lone Medievalist.” Yet, as we examine the situation more closely, there may be advantages to being the “lone medievalist” whether in a department or at a school.

I would argue that the number one advantage of being a “lone medievalist” is that it allows one to truly be an interdisciplinary. “Interdisciplinary” is one of those academic buzzwords that is in common parlance today. It seems that everyone is trying to achieve an interdisciplinary approach in their work, either on their own or in collaboration with other scholars. One needs only to look at recent academic job ads to realize that departments across the country are trying to find scholars who take an interdisciplinary approach to their work. Being the only medievalist at a school or in a department allows us to truly apply that approach to our teaching and to our research. To give students a full understanding of the Middle Ages, we stand alone and can-
not rely on other medievalists to fill in the gaps we might leave out. We must cross fields, genres, and disciplines. In teaching a course on English History to 1688, when there is no medieval philosopher or specialist in Anglo-Saxon literature on staff, Bede must be taught alongside *Beowulf*. In the same course, the professor must look at the Bayeux Tapestry and the works of Anselm of Canterbury. It would be a disservice to the student not to teach as interdisciplinarians; we must assign letters, chronicles, pieces of art, and literature to give a fuller picture of the medieval world when we are the only one to teach about it. “Lone medievalists” reap the benefits of this approach. Their bookshelves are filled with primary sources of various types and from many periods. Eusebius sits next to Ockham; an anthology of Crusade sources abuts one of troubadour poetry. The secondary material can be just a diverse. Peter Brown’s seminal work on Late Antiquity shares space with Tolkien’s article on the monsters in *Beowulf*; for the “lone medievalist,” it is not odd to teach Jane Schulenburg’s studies of hagiography and Zachary S. Schiffman’s *Birth of the Past* in the same semester.² The academy’s interdisciplinary focus can truly play into the research and teaching of the “lone medievalist.”

Although isolated from other medievalists, we should not feel isolated in general. Colleagues exist within our departments. Granted, they study different periods, topics, and may use different methodologies, but they are in fact there. I suggest that we can turn to them in order to enrich our teaching and our research. In talking with our Americanist friends, new ideas are bound to arise. We can ask new questions that we never would have thought of before. Talking to a scholar of pre-modern China may lead to a comparative project that would not have been possible if we limit ourselves to discussion with other medievalists.

This leads to a more general point. The “lone medievalist” can ask new questions in our research and teaching. We are not pigeonholed as “early medievalists” or “late medievalists,” as “Anglo-Saxonists” or “Chaucerians.” We become medievalists in general. True, we have our specialties, but in many ways we are allowed to step outside traditional boundaries and explore a wider range of topics. Research need not be confined by narrow categories and neither should teaching. The same professor can teach both the Vikings and the Crusades. Most of us had to take field or preliminary exams in all areas of the Middle Ages in graduate school; being a “lone medievalist” allows us to use that knowledge and pass it on to our students.

The students may well be one of the greatest resources that the “lone medievalist” has. As “lone medievalists,” professors must trust their undergraduates in a way that may not be found at institutions with multiple medievalists. Undergraduates, whom we inspire to take more of our courses and to study the Middle Ages, become the other medievalists at our institutions. There is nothing to say that advanced undergrads cannot participate in intellectual discourse that will intrigue us as faculty. Their thoughts can provoke new ideas and research projects. I do not exaggerate when I tell my students that I care more about what they have to say in class than about what I do. I stress that I cannot tell them how much I learn from them in exchange for the knowledge I teach. As a result, we as “lone medievalists” can learn so much from the classroom discussions we lead, from the research papers we read, and from the honors theses we direct. We may be perceived to have the training to be professors and instructors, but that training does not mean we have a monopoly on ideas and thinking. We must share the stage with our undergraduates and trust them to play their roles with great success.

In addition to the concepts they help the “lone medievalist” to explore, students can help the faculty member maintain his or her skills. Reading groups in Latin, Old Norse, or paleography can be formed in order to impart these proficiencies to the student. Although, in many cases, this means extra work for the professor leading these groups, it allows him or her to sharpen
languages or skills that may otherwise fall into disrepair. The “lone medievalist” can indeed gain much from their students by trusting them and learning from them.

Finally, being “lone medievalists” means that we can train our students for better success. Our experience facing the realities of the field can be used to advise those who will come after us. We know that most of them, if they survive graduate school and are able to get a job, will become like us, that is, they will become “lone medievalists.” We can shape our students to have greater success by having them study a wider range of topics, for example by encouraging them to be pre-modernists, instead of simply early medievalists.

In addition, we should not ignore technology. No longer is any scholar, no matter the field or discipline, truly isolated, given the nature of our interconnected, global world. The Internet is filled with resources that can open up the discussion of medieval studies. With chat rooms, Facebook groups, and the advent of the listserv, discussions of topics ranging from geometry in the Middle Ages to hagiography can occur in an instant and at any time of the day. Further, email allows for the connection of people in the field at a moment’s notice. The world we live in ensures that the “lone medievalist” may be a faulty concept.

What I have said may well be true of all medievalists, maybe even all faculty in the humanities, but in the end it is particularly true of those of us who face the challenge of not having colleagues in our fields in the places at which we teach. It is clearly possible to lose all of the advantages that I have laid out amongst the issues that present themselves in our isolation. Yet, I want to be a cheerleader and show that being a “lone medievalist” is not necessarily a bad thing.