The Ballad of the Lone Medievalist

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I have been a lone medievalist for eight years—longer than some, but not nearly as long as many in our profession. Sometimes, when I am introducing myself to new faculty members or participating in one of the countless academic rituals that require an introduction and declaration of specialty, I am tempted to acknowledge my lone medievalist status after stating my name. As a way of giving an account of myself, I think this would be highly effective. Not only does it provide the necessary identifying information, but its similarity to the ritualized language of some twelve-step programs would alert my colleagues to the nature of my situation. “Ah,” they would whisper to each other. “That explains quite a bit. At least he can admit he needs help.” Of course, being a lone medievalist is not a condition for which one needs to seek treatment, despite what our colleagues may sometimes think. Yet, many of us who are lone medievalists have, at one time in our career or another, felt as if we are suffering from some sort of affliction that isolates us from the rest of our colleagues and causes us to be misunderstood by those with whom we share our academic lives. Such was certainly my experience as I began my tenure-track position at a small, private, liberal arts college, and, I must say, it initially threw me for quite a loop.
While my colleagues in the English department understood and supported my work as a scholar and teacher, none were specialists in medieval literature or had any experience teaching medieval texts. The rest of my colleagues knew very little about the Middle Ages or the work I did with medieval British literature. This was in stark contrast to the community of medieval scholars and fellow graduate students I was immersed in during my time in graduate school. As I endeavored to find my footing as the lone medievalist at my institution, I came to understand that not only did I need to educate my students about the Middle Ages, I needed to educate my colleagues as well.

From my current vantage point, it is easy to see how fortunate I was to complete my graduate work at a midsize research university whose English department housed, on average, three medieval scholars during my time there. In addition, I was part of a small cohort of graduate students who were also specializing in medieval literature. Given this level of contact and collaboration with established and emerging medievalists, I assumed — with the naïveté of the newly-minted PhD — that I would enter a similar environment when I began a tenure-track job. After accepting a position at a small liberal arts college, whose student enrollment was between six hundred and seven hundred and whose number of full-time faculty hovered around fifty, my expectations naturally shifted. Hired to teach classes in British literature before 1800, I knew I would be the only medievalist in the English department. When I learned that the college had a History department consisting of only two full-time faculty members, who specialized in American and modern European history, no Philosophy department, no foreign languages, no archaeology courses, and a part-time Religious Studies instructor who did not specialize in the Middle Ages, I realized I would be it — I would be the lone medievalist. Despite this, I was confident that my new colleagues, like those in the English department, would possess at least a basic understanding of the nature and value of what I did. After all, these were intelligent, well-educated individuals who surely were exposed to the Middle Ages in some form over the course of their education.
I began to be disabused of this belief almost as soon as I arrived on campus. The first opportunity to introduce myself to my colleagues came at a faculty convocation that opened the academic year. As we all mingled before the beginning of the program, I was approached by a member of the biology faculty. The usual pleasantries were exchanged, and then she inquired about my area of specialty and my research. I explained that I worked primarily in medieval British literature and focused on issues of masculinity and grief in medieval romance. As I warmed to the subject, I saw a glazed look enter her eyes and noticed that she was looking over my head, into the crowd of faculty behind me, searching for someone to rescue her from my enthusiastic discourse on medieval literature. Identifying her out, she politely excused herself and slipped away to join some colleagues from the Math and Science division. Hers was the panic of coming face to face with the medieval, and I admit I was sympathetic; it can be overwhelming for those with little experience. For many, the Middle Ages are disconcertingly foreign, offering little in the way of connection to modern lived experience. I imagine part of the biologist’s reaction was rooted in her belief that there was no common ground between my work and her own, between her experiences, interests, and understanding of the world and the distant, and therefore “other,” past. In contrast, I noticed that the other new faculty present at the convocation, whose fields included criminal justice and political science, did not face the same challenges when speaking about their areas of expertise. Indeed, their areas proved easily relatable to other faculty, who could discuss the local correctional facility or the current political landscape. Such easily identifiable points of connection, however, proved elusive to my colleagues when it came to my own area, and the biologist’s response set the tone for most of my interactions with my colleagues that day. While few were as extreme as that, they were all characterized by a lack of awareness of the nature of medieval studies, as well as a certain benign dismissiveness. One colleague asked if I owned any armor and seemed genuinely surprised and disappointed when I replied that I did not (I decided not to reveal that I did, however, own
a sword). Another suggested that, apart from *The Canterbury Tales*, there were not many medieval British texts, so my job should be relatively easy.

I do not believe these comments were made with intentional malice, but they were common, especially during my first few years. It was as if all but a few of my colleagues simply could not wrap their heads around the idea that someone would choose to spend so much time reading and thinking about the past, attempting to better understand an era so far removed from our own. Many assumed it is impossible to get students to read texts that posed so many challenges, particularly in terms of language and context, and, despite my arguments to the contrary, offered their deepest sympathies for the frustration I must experience every day in the classroom. The tenuous nature of my colleagues’ understanding of my work reached its absurd pinnacle during my pre-tenure review. At a meeting to review my pre-tenure dossier, attended by my division chair and several members of the personnel committee, my division chair noticed one of the personnel committee members growing increasingly perplexed as he read through my dossier. After several minutes, he asked why, if I was a member of the English faculty, I was attending and presenting at so many medical conferences. My division chair was naturally confused by the question, but after a brief exchange realized that the member of the personnel committee had been reading the word “medieval” as “medical.” It was as if “medieval” was such a foreign concept for him that, in order to make any sense of it, he had to translate it into a more recognizable word. Once his error was pointed out to him, however, he seemed to be even more perplexed than before, unable to envision what a medieval conference would even look like or what one would do there. I like to imagine his mind was filled with images of otherwise staid and respectable scholars giving in to their bloodlust during the mêlée portion of the Saturday evening banquet, but this would require knowledge of medieval tournaments which he probably does not possess. And while this story almost certainly benefitted from some embellishment when my division chair shared it with me, it nevertheless illus-
trates just how perplexed many of my colleagues were by a medievalist in their midst.

Long before I learned about the incident at my pre-tenure review meeting, I realized that I needed to help my colleagues better understand my work as a medievalist. Some of these people would be sitting on the personnel committee when I came up for tenure, so it was vital for them to be able to knowledgeably evaluate my teaching and scholarship. Beyond this, though, it was important to me that my colleagues understood how the study of the Middle Ages fit into the larger mission of a liberal-arts education, that they viewed the study of the Middle Ages as just as valuable and necessary as the study of biology, history, mathematics, or psychology. I do not fault my students for their lack of knowledge when it comes to medieval literature or history; it is my job, after all, to teach them about this. I decided that if my colleagues were similarly uninformed, I would teach them as well. One of the ways I approached this was through informal conversations with my colleagues. My aim in these conversations was to present the Middle Ages not as a long-past, “dead” time period, but rather one that laid the foundations for many of the ideas that we consider to be “modern,” one that is still very much alive in its influence on the world in which we live. I sought to build connections with my colleagues working in political science, history, art, theater, the social sciences, and the sciences, to help them see the traces of the medieval in their own fields. In doing so, I often returned to Umberto Eco’s expertly articulated explanation of the connections between the medieval and modern:

[A]ll the problems of the Western world emerged in the Middle Ages: Modern languages, merchant cities, capitalistic economy (along with banks, checks, and prime rate) are inventions of medieval society. In the Middle Ages we witness the rise of modern armies, of the modern concept of the national state […] the struggle between the poor and the rich, the concept of heresy or ideological deviation, even our contemporary notion of love as a devastating unhappy
happiness. I could add the conflict between church and state, trade unions (albeit in a corporative mode), the technological transformation of labor.¹

Almost all of the issues we face and the questions we ask as modern scholars originated in the Middle Ages, and it is this point I wished to make to my colleagues.

In addition to these informal interactions, I engaged my colleagues, and the local community, with my work as a medievalist in more formal ways. In my first few years, I took advantage of my institution’s monthly faculty colloquium to present my own research, giving a talk on the construction of chivalric masculinity in medieval literature, as well as a talk on Harry Bailey and marginal space in *The Canterbury Tales*. These presentations introduced my colleagues to the practice of literary criticism as it applies to medieval texts. More importantly, perhaps, they forced me to consider the best way to present this material to, and engage with, an audience of non-specialists. As in my informal conversations with colleagues, I highlighted in these talks the various ways my work intersects with disciplines such as history, gender studies, art history, and sociology. I sought to reinforce the idea that my work as a medievalist, like medieval studies as a whole, does not exist in a vacuum, that it engages issues addressed by scholars in a variety of fields. The presentations were well received and accomplished what I set out to achieve — my colleagues gained a better understanding of my work and began to view the Middle Ages as less foreign than they previously imagined. I broadened this type of outreach by taking part, in my second year, in an academic seminar organized by the college for members of the community. Examining the questions of human origins before and after Darwin, the seminar featured several members of the college faculty exploring the topic from the vantage point of their individual disciplines. My portion of the proceedings introduced the semi-

nar attendees to several ancient Greek cosmogonies and their influence on and connection to medieval European thoughts about human origins, and how those, in turn, influenced more modern conceptions of humankind and its place within the universe. Once again, I wanted to both introduce the audience to the practice of medieval scholarship and reveal the connections between past and present. Like the presentations to my colleagues, this engagement with the larger community proved successful in exposing a wider audience to the medieval.

I also enlisted the help of my students in reaching out to the wider community and teaching them about what it means to be a medieval scholar. One of the assignments in an honors course I teach, which explores the ways the Middle Ages influence our modern imagination, particularly through popular culture, requires the students to organize a “medieval” film festival open to faculty, staff, and students. The students are responsible for choosing the films, which must be set in the “Middle Ages” or otherwise explore medieval themes, promoting the event, introducing each film, and leading a discussion of each film after its screening. The discussions focus on a number of issues, including the ways the Middle Ages are portrayed in the film, what this reveals about our modern understanding of the past, and how the medieval past offers a lens through which modern issues are addressed. These have been well attended, both by faculty and students, and have provided wonderful opportunities to discuss not only how we continually reinvent the Middle Ages, but also why the medieval exerts such a powerful influence over modern thought.

Eight and a half years after that faculty convocation where I was confronted with the reality of being the only medievalist at my institution, I think my efforts to educate my colleagues about the Middle Ages have been successful. I am no longer asked if I own armor, nor is my area of study casually dismissed as too far removed from contemporary concerns and, therefore, irrelevant. Over time, my colleagues have gained a better understanding of how the study of the Middle Ages contributes to a liberal arts education; they have come to see that in
order to understand our present, we must ask questions about our origins. In order to get to this point, however, I needed to perform a kind of public service for my colleagues and institution. I had to become what Richard Utz has recently described as a “public medievalist,” relating “the Middle Ages to postmedieval times,” connecting the medieval to students, colleagues, and the general public. The difficulty, distance, and strangeness of the Middle Ages is often what separates our students, colleagues, and the general public from a better understanding of the time and of what we, as medievalists, do. But it is also what is so attractive about the medieval, as those of us who work in the field already know. Indeed, the current bloom of popular medievalism—from recent television shows such as Game of Thrones, The Last Kingdom, and Beowulf to the enduring popularity of The Lord of the Rings—attests to the allure of the medieval. Helping others uncover the medieval foundations of these works of the modern imagination will lead, perhaps, to a greater appreciation of the continuing relevance of the Middle Ages and of the work we do as medieval scholars. My efforts as a public medievalist at my institution have allowed me to reveal to my students, colleagues, and the community that, yes, the Middle Ages are difficult, distant, and strange but they are also pleasurable, provocative, and relevant. In doing so, I found a way to avoid the sense of isolation and frustration that undoubtedly plagues many lone medievalists. Now, when I am asked to give an account of myself, I am no longer tempted to respond in the language of a twelve-step program. Instead, before driving my sword deep into the conference table, I confidently proclaim that I am a Lone Medievalist.