Down with Dante and Chaucer?
Navigating a Great Books Curriculum as a Medievalist

Sarah Harlan-Haughey, University of Maine

When I accepted my job as a joint hire between an English department and an Honors College that used a fairly conventional Great Books curriculum, I was excited to have a job and to be teaching the classics as well as my own research interests. But I quickly learned that there are some dangers and stressors in being the only person who works on anything remotely premodern in a four-semester curriculum that dwells a year on ancient Roman and Greek classics, hurtles over the Middle Ages after two or three short weeks with Dante and Chaucer, and comes to rest heavily in the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. I quickly found myself saying things that surprised and even scared my colleagues as we discussed our curriculum and book lists every year with hopes of improving or innovating the hundred years’ culture war that is a Great Books curriculum.¹ “Why not teach a

¹ The Great Books system was introduced by John Erskine at Columbia after the First World War. For a succinct overview, see Joan Shelley Rubin’s Cultural Considerations: Essays on Readers, Writers, and Musicians in Postwar America (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013), 150–52. Rubin notes: “The Great Books curriculum consisted of a systematic, text-based
saga instead of Dante?” I might say. Or: “Can we replace Chaucer with Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, or even Piers Plowman?”

“No, I do not feel comfortable lecturing on the political climate that led to the creation of Virgil’s Aeneid — that’s why we need a classicist.” “Can’t we add another medieval text and remove The Golden Ass? Marie de France can cover a lot of the same ground.” And so on. My colleagues have come to look upon my perpetual war for a non-standardized view of the Middle Ages, for readings from saints, weirdos, and outliers with exasperated good humor and a quick vote to maintain the status quo: a week of the Inferno, a week of Chaucer’s greatest hits. Done, and done. I never thought I’d argue the things I have in this job as strongly as I have argued them.

The following is an autobiographical sketch that I hope may amuse and ring true for other medievalists caught in traditional Great Books curricula (or other traditionally organized or canonical curricula) and ask some perennial questions: why is it so hard to get colleagues to think outside the box about the Middle Ages? Why do Americans want a prepackaged, easy view of the past? How can we lone medievalists help each other fight the good fight when reality can be so inert and seemingly unchangeable? I hope to share some of my winning strategies as well as some of my more spectacular failures. I conclude with an argument that we lone medievalists must fight to reposition ourselves not as guardians of “cultural literacy,” but as participants in a post-colonial dialogue that explores the web of interconnectedness of all human (and non-human) ontologies. We can help modern students think outside of their post-Cartesian, approach to the ‘best’ Western literature and nonfiction. The idea that good reading could be sorted from bad was not in question. Another central premise of the Great Books ideology was that the best books were older texts that had survived generations of rereading because they addressed large questions about the human condition” (150). This basic argument continues to justify Great Books curricula — and sustain humanities departments — worldwide. See also Thomas J. Tomcho, John C. Norcross, and Christopher J. Correia, “Great Books Curricula: What Is Being Read?” The Journal of General Education 43, no. 2 (1994): 90–101, esp. 90–91.
post-industrial worldview and can offer access to medieval systems of being that are analogous to other non-dominant ontologies like those of indigenous and non-western peoples. For this we are valuable, not just because we might know more about Dante than other people.

So why'd you hire me?

In the current academic crisis in the United States, honors colleges and programs have cannily positioned themselves as the

---

2 It is perhaps important to note that the dominant interpretation of the Enlightenment as a polar opposite to the “Dark Ages” is not historically accurate: while part of the Enlightenment paradigm did valorize “historical progress, the rational, the universal, the male,” Enlightenment thinkers, particularly Rousseau, who “saw in the ‘first age of mankind,’ equated with the medieval, a powerful antidote for the ills of modern, corrupted society.” Thus, as Alice Montoya argues, Enlightenment thinkers maintained the medieval. “In the foundational rhetorics of modernity, the medieval stood in for the superseded, the irrational, for the bodily and the emotive, and for the female,” that is, as an alternate form of modern reality. See her Medievalist Enlightenment: From Charles Perrault to Jean-Jacques Rousseau (Marlsham: Boydell and Brewer, 2013), 222. Thus, in their focus on the paradigm shifts of the Enlightenment, survey courses, including our four-semester Civilizations course at UMaine, underemphasize the Enlightenment thinkers’ interest in the medieval.

3 But see Arthur Krystal’s editorial in the Chronicle of Higher Education for a recent defense of the classics. He argues: “[T]he prevailing mood welcomes fiction and poetry of every stripe, as long as the reading public champions it. And this I think is a huge mistake. Literature has never just been about the public (even when the public has embraced such canonical authors as Hugo, Dickens, and Tolstoy). Literature has always been a conversation among writers who borrow, build upon, and deviate from each other’s words. Forgetting this, we forget that aesthetics is not a social invention, that democracy is not an aesthetic category; and that the dismantling of hierarchies is tantamount to an erasure of history” (Arthur Krystal, “What we Lose if we Lose the Canon,” The Chronicle of Higher Education [5 January 2015], https://www.chronicle.com/article/What-We-Lose-if-We-Lose-the/150991). For a sense of the vitriol that is still generated by this issue, check out the comments thread… if you dare! See also Kevin J.H. Dettmar’s “What’s so Great about the Great Books?” in The Chronicle Review (11 September 1998), https://www.chronicle.com/article/whats-so-great-about-great/11135.
last bastions of the liberal arts, using the rhetoric of medieval warfare. The honors college becomes a little city-state within the heterogeneous landscape and balkanization of the American University. It defends the quadrivium and trivium. It champions the values of the liberal arts, held hostage by the accelerating instrumentalization and vocationalization of post-secondary education. It preserves ancient forms of tutelage—preceptorials, tutorials, and seminars abound. It teaches the same authorities that medieval scholars encountered, either in digest versions or in whole cloth—the Old and New Testament, Virgil, Aristotle, Ovid, Augustine, Apuleius, Homer. It advocates rumination, isolation—cloistering?—from the more frenetic specializations of the worldly modern academy and promises revelation. And—against its will, I hope—it has been a bastion of class privilege, as, historically, scions of families in the wealthier echelons of American life were the ones recruited to honors programs.

This championship for the past can make honors colleges a great refuge for people trained as medievalists, as jobs dry up elsewhere. And, in fact, medievalists have often become invaluable members of honors colleges. Their skills as interdisciplinarians, linguistic knowledge, wide-ranging historical expertise, and ability to make connections between the ancient world and the early modern one are all useful resources for a Great Books community. Such was the justification for the creation of my job as a joint hire between the English department at the University of Maine and the 88-year-old Honors College. I have often been called upon to aid in the defense of a Great Books

4 Susan Yager organized a panel discussion on the phenomenon of many medievalist becoming members or leaders of their universities’ honors programs at the National Collegiate Honors Conference, entitled “Why Honors Programs Need Medieval Studies” (13 November 2015). While Susan Yager, Tara Williams, Mickey Sweeney, and I came prepared to defend Medieval Studies as an important component of any honors program, we found we were preaching to the choir; a surprising number of the audience self-identified as medievalists.

5 A detailed description of the rationale behind the creation of my joint appointment can be found in Robert W. Glover et al., “The Genesis of an
Curriculum—when I often find the rationale for the curriculum unconvincing. This false position is, I suspect, a common one for medievalists hired in such positions, who may be happy to hold jobs with such promise, but may not be willing to embark on quests as defenders of the western canon as it was understood by advocates of the “Great Books.” This short essay will be an anecdotal account of my own experiences teaching in a Great Books curriculum and my struggles as a representative of the past that can often be too narrowly-defined by entrenched college traditions. I believe it will strike a chord with others in similar positions.

Why do you hate Chaucer?

In a National Review article, conservative journalist John Zmirak identified University of Maine as a “Blue collar Ivy” for various reasons including that the “humanities programs are less ideological than at most state schools” (whatever that means) and that students have “very good options” for their Western Tradition gen-eds, including “History of Ancient philosophy” and an “Introduction to the Jewish Bible.” Zmirak notes that the “pickings are slimmer” in the “required Cultural Diversity and Population and Environment subcategories,” which he disapprovingly notes include “Sex and Gender in Cross-Cultural Perspective.” He does crow elsewhere in his list of the “strong points” of the university that the “women’s studies department may close for lack of student interest.” One of the foremost reasons for Yale-educated Zmirak’s inclusion of UMaine in his list

---


7 It is unclear where Zmirak got some of his information. His description of courses offered seems to rely on out-of-date course catalogs, and the Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Program (never a department) is going strong under the joint leadership of Elizabeth Neiman and Maisie Hough.
of “Ivies” was the Great Books curriculum offered by the Honors College, the “jewel in the crown” of the university. Zmirak argues that “The thesis project, a well-chosen adviser, and some of the excellent course material offered (the *Odyssey*, the *Republic*, Greek dramas, the *Aeneid*, Augustine’s *Confessions*, Dante’s *Inferno*, Renaissance art, the Bible, *The Prince*, Shakespeare’s plays, *The Social Contract*, the works of John Locke, Darwin, Freud, Nietzsche, and much more) make the honors sequence the best choice for an undergraduate at UMaine.”

This kind of good press troubles me. I do believe it is important for students to learn about the past and to read classics, yet I am uncomfortable that these great works are all written by men, are pressed into service as bulwarks of political conservatism, and are seen as somehow better than other options. I am happy to teach Chaucer, Dante, and Shakespeare, but I would like to see a curriculum that includes more voices and works that have not come to stand for the values of a single political philosophy. Moreover, I am troubled that these works have been forced into such a static position and that we promise our students a “rigorous and unified approach to the liberal arts core.” A unified approach to a core seems a monolithic way to think about a body of temporally and philosophically diverse texts.

For these reasons, I have been arguing rather vociferously for a review of the entire curriculum, and horror of horrors, to eliminate famous authors in favor of lesser known — or even (gasp!) anonymous ones. This stance has surprised some of my colleagues, who had assumed that I would be grateful just to have medieval texts on the docket. One of my colleagues, horrified at my suggestion that we read *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and Julian of Norwich instead of the *Canterbury Tales*, said: “Why do you hate Chaucer?” He then went on to argue, quite passionately and with great eloquence, that to deprive students of the privilege of hearing the poetry of the “Father of the

---

8 This is a quotation from current honors dean François Amar’s welcome letter to prospective students in his “Dean’s Welcome,” http://honors.umaine.edu/deans-welcome/.
English Language” in the original was to deny them part of their inalienable right to “their Honors Journey.” I backed down at that curriculum meeting, and I have not suggested that particular sacrilege again.

**Fighting the Hundred Years War, again**

The University of Maine Honors College has been using a Great Books curriculum for many years. Our curriculum centers on the Western tradition and spans millennia. Our decisions about readings are a result of conscious choice and yearly deliberation, taking into account the charges leveled against Great Books curriculum in the academic battles of the 1970s, ’80s, and ’90s. While we do include some subaltern voices, the bulk of our curriculum consists of famous, dead, named, white males. Concerns with such underrepresentation of diverse voices have been hashed and rehashed in the academy, and we do it every year in our faculty meeting about the Great Books curriculum. We academics are all familiar with “the intensely serious and frequently quite wearing debates” about curriculum into which faculties “fling themselves, generation after generation, with seemingly undiminished ardor”; and we all know it’s better to steer clear of such debates if possible, if only for the sake of our personal sanity — curriculum reform is a Sisyphean labor.9 But, as the Great Author Shakespeare so memorably noted, “this all the world knows, but none knows well” — generation after generation of well-meaning academics like me get pulled into the debate.

In spite of my deep desire to stay out of campus politics as much as possible, I find myself wound up in the same old endless fight: what and how should we teach? And as I am uncomfortably aware, “Opinionated champions of a particular curriculum are often advocating the importance of knowing what they know. All curriculum champions bring profoundly subjective

---

9 This is a quote from Francis Oakely, a former Williams College president, included in Victor Ferrall’s discussion of curricular reform in his book *Liberal Arts at the Brink* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 148.
judgments to their cause, no matter how artfully they cloak them in claimed fundamental, albeit perhaps ineffable, truths.” But in spite of all this self-knowledge and cynicism about the possibility for real improvement or change, my sense of unease is not generated simply by the representative texts we have (carefully) chosen; my deeper concern is the much less explored, and thus more insidious. Such a curriculum leads students to see the past as a series of graded steps leading to the present.

Dante and Chaucer are made to stand as either pillars of humanism in a dark age or, conversely, illustrations of the darkness of said age. In our “long view” of western cultural history, Chaucer’s social satire is (erroneously) presented as the first secularism or the first anti-fraternal, proto-protestant literature, in an age that was so oppressively Catholic (read: superstitious). Dante’s *Inferno*—read in isolation from the rest of the *Divina Commedia*—often stands in for orthodox Catholicism, and Dante’s *Inferno* is interpreted by students to be an accurate representation of the hell that all medieval Europeans imagined and believed in. The vision of the Middle Ages preserved here in our honors college is one that has been out of style in our disciplinary circles for over seventy years. It pains me to see these authors boiled down to talking points: medieval religion=oppressive and superstitious; medieval people and characters=wooden; medieval science=backwards. This sort of packaging of medieval material proves that Régine Pernoud was right when she noted that the “Middle Ages is privileged material: one can say what one wants about it with the quasi-certitude of never being contradicted.”

I love Dante and Chaucer, and like many literary medievalists, was led to become what I am by my first shocking encounters with the miraculous richness and complexity, the alterity and intense aesthetic beauty of these great works. Thus I find

---

10 Ibid., 149.
12 For this first inspiration to set off on our dubious and delightful career path, I am most indebted to another “lone medievalist,” my mentor and friend Ashby Kinch at the University of Montana, my undergraduate institution.
myself constantly arguing for my students to have the chance to see what I saw when I was in their position: for them to have a richer, more meaningful encounter with these artifacts. I’d like the medieval readings not to be placed in explicit (and unfavorable) contrast to the “breath of fresh air” that is the Renaissance as presented by our old-fashioned curriculum.

I argue often for different texts. When my honors colleagues claim that there are no women who wrote in the Middle Ages (our curricular discussions often hand-wring over the marked lack of diversity in our readings — and someone always asserts as a justification for maintaining the status quo, “well, that’s just the way things were back then; women didn’t have a voice until recently”), I cite Marie de France, Christine de Pizan, Julian of Norwich, Teresa de Ávila, Hildegard von Bingen, Héloïse, Margery Kempe, and many, many others.¹³ I also note that greatest medieval poet of all, Anonymous, who must have been a woman, at least sometimes. When my honors colleagues claim that medieval writing is overpoweringly moralistic and religious, I argue that the sagas, the early Irish and Welsh material, the fabliaux, the travel narratives, the romances, the framed narratives of Boccaccio, Manuel, and Chaucer, and many lyric poems can be remarkably secular. When my honors colleagues claim that there was no science in the Middle Ages (and we must always appeal to our greatest demographic, STEM students, at least seventy percent of our current honors population), I point out that Aquinas refined the science of deductive reasoning, that medieval logicians built the framework for critical thought that is still such a prominent learning objective today, that medieval scientists and scribes in North Africa and Spain preserved and refined ancient mathematics, that Grosseteste’s and Bacon’s optics provided the groundwork for modern physics, and that medieval medicine was a holistic system similar to Ayurveda and

¹³ Tomcho et al. note that “the composition of these GB lists contains very few women, racial minorities, or non-Western contributors. For example, only 2 of the 55 most common authors (Virginia Woolf and Jane Austen) were women” ("What Is Being Read," 99).
traditional Chinese medicine, which westerners revere as alternatives to western medical approaches today.\(^\text{14}\) When my honors colleagues claim that the classical and early modern periods are simply better, because they are more in line with our modern world and our priorities of progress and innovation, I throw up my hands in despair.\(^\text{15}\)

**Swimming Upstream: Strategies that (sometimes) work**

Change happens slowly and is often a matter of gradually introducing new literature and concepts to non-specialists. I haven’t succeeded in eliminating the two “greats” from the curriculum, but I have eased them into a richer context. I have argued for a unit on Chaucer that contextualizes his work within the broader tradition of European storytelling so that he becomes less of an anomaly in a “dark age” — we read Apuleius’s *Golden Ass* earlier


\(^{15}\) Milton McC. Gatch has an eloquent rebuttal to such a claim, however: “Perhaps at the core of many of the social, economic, educational, and intellectual problems that face us today is our deep, nearly unconscious commitment to the notion that history is progress, that the human community moves inexorably and endlessly towards betterment, sophistication, wisdom, happiness, and that the future will be preferable to the past. With progress, we have committed ourselves to its illegitimate children: the notion that technological change is evidence of progress and the belief that growth (not only macroeconomic growth but also the growth of my university, my department, my program, my grant, and my salary) should be infinite if we are not to be plunged backwards beyond even the darkness of prehistory. Those of us involved in historical studies need to be introducing cautions about the doctrines of progress. It should be stressed that past cultures were sophisticated in ways that often outstrip us. It might even be appropriate to dwell on the apocalyptic assumption of times past: the deep belief that things must get far worse before the world is turned to right” (“The Medievalist and Cultural Literacy,” *Speculum* 66, no. 3 [1991]: 591–604, at 595).
in the term, and I added several *lais* by Marie de France. Both of these earlier raconteurs offer stories of complexity, ambiguity, satire, and humor arguably equal to Chaucer’s, and, moreover, one is one of those nonexistent female medieval writers!

I argued vociferously that if we must read the *Divina Commedia* in a week (or, if we’re lucky and the breakneck pace of the curriculum allows it) we should at least read selected cantos from all three canticles — then, hopefully, the students’ impression of Dante will not be all hellfire and damnation. It’s not an ideal situation, and I will continue to strive to try to amplify the medieval curriculum, developing a more diverse set of readings, but each change will need to be piloted, and only one text can reasonably be piloted in a given year. When I take my own long view, I can imagine a transformed curriculum in ten years or so.

One-offs are also a strategy; though our curriculum is at times hidebound and traditional, we have some open spaces from time to time for experimentation. After we lost our classicist to retirement (due to the budget constraints of a state school, she will not be replaced), I and others argued that the space that used to be devoted to Greek drama, the last reading of the first semester, might become a forum for exploring new texts, but specifically ones that offered students an alternative to a package tour of the past. I started this new “tradition” with readings from Old Irish narratives — in particular selections from the *Táin* cycle. My rationale was that the warrior society

---

16 At time of press, I must note that the during the most recent curriculum meeting on May 18, 2016, the honors faculty were leaning towards returning to a reading of the *Inferno* alone. I stalled, but the writing’s on the wall for next year.

17 Ours is not the only hidebound Great Books curriculum. In their nationwide survey of Great Books curricula, Tomcho et al. find that “for better or worse, the canon has evidenced little change since 1952” (“What Is Being Read?” 93). The most read books (between 60% and 40% representation across the board in Great Books programs) have all been included in our curriculum in the last four years: “Bible 69% Iliad (Homer) 62% Divine Comedy (Dante) 59% Aeneid (Virgil) 49% Odyssey (Homer) 46% Confessions 44% (St. Augustine) The Prince (Machiavelli) 44% Canterbury Tales 41% (Chaucer) The Republic (Plato) 41%” (96).
portrayed in these narratives looks a lot like the world of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*—warbands with tribal kings, chariots, a gift economy, and iconic women as plot catalysts (just compare Dierdriiu of the Irish tale with Helen of Troy, and you’ll see what I mean). I used my lecture on the Irish material to talk about all the cultures that existed on the margins of the Roman Empire— and grew into the cultures we know today. I discussed the ways in which the Roman attitude towards Gauls and other Celtic peoples (as exemplified in the famous sculpture of the dy-ing Gaul) modeled later colonial British attitudes towards the Irish, Welsh, and Scots in both the medieval and modern periods. Instead of allowing the new readings to become part of the curriculum, I argued that the space should turn over to another experimental text, and this year, we are reading the Bhagavad Gita—another eye-opening perspective on the ancient world, different from the centralized authorities of Greco-Roman classicism and Mediterranean basin monotheism.

Other strategies I’ve tried are offering talks and workshops to faculty to let them know about the diversity and complexity of medieval literary culture, providing different and unique lectures every year within the curriculum so faculty are exposed to new ideas and approaches to medieval literature and do not fall into a rote approach to the material, and sharing news and journal articles on the medieval world that challenge conventional wisdom on the subject.

One of the most successful ways I have found to counteract a gross misunderstanding of medieval culture is to focus on student learning. There are currently more than 600 honors students in UMaine’s program. If I can find a way to speak directly to them, and draw them in, they become agents of curricular change. This happened, for example, when I first introduced the

---

18 A note on the idiosyncrasies of UMaine’s honors curriculum: we offer small seminar-style classes of under 13 students, but we supplement these with weekly lectures on the current reading delivered by an expert in the field— if we can find one at UMaine, Bowdoin, Colby, or Bates — before an auditorium filled with honors students. Classicists are even harder to find than medievalists.
Marie de France readings to the preexisting Chaucer unit. Several of my colleagues were not sure what to make of the overt romanticism and supernaturalism of the stories, but many enthusiastic students did get it—and argued that it should remain in our curriculum to their preceptors. I offer a Medieval Reading Group, which meets once a week in the academic year and allows anyone to dabble in medieval language and read wild new things. Students gravitate to the medieval—its alterity, familiarity (a result of the pop medievalism that suffuses our culture), and its challenges—and enjoy coming to the weekly meetings. Currently, long-term medieval enthusiasts and I are forming a new club on campus—the UMaine Medieval Club—and plan to host at least five events a year that raise awareness of the past. We will have a celebration of medieval readings in December, a movie night in February, a historical ball in March, and a Maying in the first week of May.

The past in the future

I have tried all these aforementioned strategies, with mixed results, as you can see. I have come to believe that as long as we teach medieval texts in this Great Books curriculum (or any traditionally “canonical” curriculum) as part of a chronological long view of western culture, faculty—and many students—will never be able to see the Middle Ages as anything but a benighted pit-stop in between the great periods of the Renaissance and the classical world.\(^{19}\) I believe the only real solution would be to start again and create a Great Books curriculum that is thematically, not temporally, oriented.\(^{20}\) If we had four-semester modules that

\(^{19}\) David Matthews discusses the common misconceptions about the Middle Ages, as well as how the era serves as a repository for any perceived “barbarism” of the western world, even when many of the perceived barbarisms were more a feature of the ancient or early modern world than the medieval one, in his *Medievalism: A Critical History* (Martlesham: Boydell and Brewer, 2015), 13–17.

\(^{20}\) I made a lengthier argument for a non-teleological curriculum in my article, “Against Teleology in an Honors Great Books Curriculum,” in *Honors in
explored topics like “science, technology, and magic,” “nature and society,” “religion and ritual,” and “what is the good life,” to pick four viable examples at random, medieval texts could be placed in conversation with works from many places and times, without an overwhelming sense of “progress.” Faculty would be more open to curriculum modifications, and students would not be searching for “takeaways” from each text, quickly separating the wheat from the chaff, and applying all lessons learned to their mental map of progress in the western world.21

I believe medievalists — especially medievalists who are not surrounded by like-minded humanists and scholars of premodern culture, but rather those who might not immediately see the relevance of what we know to the modern academy — are in a unique position as we continue to rethink “the canon.” I believe that we can help break the iron grip of universalism. We no longer think of ourselves as defenders of patriarchal knowledge and outmoded western ideals; we know ourselves to be stewards of a valuable, and increasingly rare, alterity that is enlightening for everyone. As Gatch puts it, “the world we study can be made forbidding, distant, deplorable, or it can be presented as an intriguing place and state of being, different from our own but also clarifying our sense of the present by putting forth contrasts.”22 But the outer world still sees us as gatekeepers to privileged, prestigious western ideals, and we must fight tirelessly to change that old-fashioned view of our work or face

21 In order for this to work, a sense of history must be preserved by selection of texts within each thematic semester that span more than a few centuries’ time — and more than one continent. For I agree wholeheartedly that there is “one curriculum content imperative: history. None of us can live safely in the world without the ability to identify the risks and dangers a course of conduct poses. To take only one example, before one assumes that an invading army from the West will be greeted in Iraq or Afghanistan as liberators, the safety of the world demands that leaders have some understanding of the thousand-year history of such invasions. Global security is put at risk by leaders ignorant of, or who chose to ignore, history.” Ferrall, Liberal Arts at the Brink, 153.

22 Gatch, “Cultural Literacy,” 597.
obsolescence. And that would be a great loss to the academy. In his impassioned manifesto for a development of a post-colonial curriculum that allows for multiple ontologies in dialogue with one another, Kincheloe says it best:

In a counter-colonial move critical ontologists raise questions about any knowledges and ways of knowing that claim universal status. In this context they make use of this suspicion of universalism in combination with global, subjugated, and indigenous knowledges [here I also read “traditional,” more broadly defined] to understand how they have been positioned in the world. Almost all of us from Western backgrounds or non-Western-colonized backgrounds have been implicated in some way in the web of universalism. The inevitable conflicts that arise from this implication do not have to be resolved immediately. At the base of these conflicts rest the future of global culture as well as the future of research and pedagogy. Recognizing that these are generative issues that engage us in a productive process of analyzing self and world is in itself a powerful recognition. The value of both this recognition and the process of working through the complicated conceptual problems are treasured by critical ontologists.23

We medievalists, I am convinced, need to resituate our field for other academics — especially when we are alone in an institution, as our positions are seen at times as luxurious or irrelevant to current academic exigencies. We are not valuable because we represent a single pearl on the teleological thread of “Western Civilization” or because we hold the keys to “cultural literacy”; we are valuable because we can strengthen the web of knowledge that transcends discipline and can help students make connections between past and present, self and other, and become

more empathetic, thoughtful members of the modern world because they better understand the alterity of the medieval world (and other premodern or traditional worlds like it) as a thing valuable in itself. My experiences in this Great Books curriculum have convinced me that becoming part of a less monolithic interdisciplinary conversation is not only a way to preserve our own (inter)discipline, but radically to transform it. We lone medievalists, often the lone voice for a thousand-year period of art, culture, and history on our college campuses, have a long hard battle ahead of us, but it’s worth the fight.