A lack is continuously re-emerging where identity should be consolidated. . . . the politics of identity formation, can only be understood as a politics of impossibility.

Yannis Stavrakakis, *Lacan and the Political*

“Come, let us go down and confound their speech.”

*Genesis 11:5–8*
A real state of emergency and catastrophe is not new to anybody living in the Middle East, in the middle of things. Troubling intellectual inquiries about “the end” and what is “after the end” become real as they are embodied in a site where past, present, and future encounter one another, where ends are beginnings and beginnings are ends—Jerusalem. Many of my memories are from the Western Wall in Jerusalem, which at the time of my childhood was believed to be only about 60 meters long. But a summer’s visit to the most recent excavations of the Western Wall’s Tunnels reveals that the majority of the wall is hidden underground; the tour under the old city of Jerusalem exposes the Western Wall in its full length. The end of the open-air Western Wall is actually the beginning. Maybe it is not without insignificance that a wall, the sign of a barrier, an end to a space, has revealed itself as a beginning.  

It is this problematization of boundaries that my essay explores so as to discuss questions of “ends.” Questions about endings and “what is after” unravel deeper questions about psychic structures and our search as medievalists for identity formation in a new world-order where boundaries receive new meanings.

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Discourse about “ending” is entwined with a discussion about binary oppositions, such as between the body of text and margins, intellectual research and autobiography, external and internal, public and private, and life and death. Kellie Robertson, in her “Medieval Materialism: A Manifesto,” sums up the origins of such philosophy of binary oppositions in her survey of “Cartesianism,” and/or “mind-body dualism.” By now, scholars in various fields have rejected the traditional divisions and suggest alternative ways to examine such relationships. In 1992, art historian Michael Camille, who investigated the cognitive play of marginality in medieval culture and spaces (sites of power such as cathedrals and courts, books and art) in the production of meaning, suggested we see the traditional polarization between center and edge as a dynamic locus of dialogue. Marginalia (corrigenda, bas-de-page in books but also in sculptural compositions in the capitals and tympana of churches) is not seen as isolated from the text, but integral to its meaning: “gothic marginal art flourished from the late twelfth century to the late fourteenth century by virtue of the absolute hegemony of the system it sought to subvert.” According to Camille, “margins” are not, as a Bakhtinian analysis would have it, areas of resistance to the

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official order. Nor is it the space for Marxist-inspired class rivalries.⁴ Camille states rather that “gothic marginal art and images at the edge work to reinstate the very models they subvert.”⁵

Camille’s understandings of margins are illuminating, as they reestablish our understanding of what has been conceived as boundaries. Yet these conclusions are confined to the realm of artistic creation, to art and to writing. Such an insight and diffusion of boundaries take place in other disciplines, such as among the study of the brain and the nervous system and history. Daniel Smail, in his book *On Deep History and the Brain*, makes a case for bringing neuroscience and neurobiology into the realm of history so as to create a new way of looking at the past: “the new science of the brain cannot make sense without history”—we want to follow the histories of women and men and their pattern of sexuality. However, we also want to understand why our brains and bodies work the way they do. *That* understanding is impossible without history.”⁶

⁴ See Mary Carruthers’ review of Camille’s book, *Image on the Edge: The Margins of Medieval Art*, *The Medieval Review* [TMR] 94.04.02: https://scholarworks.iu.edu/dspace/bitstream/handle/2022/3956/94.04.02.html?sequence=1. I would like to thank Mary Carruthers who some time in a past conversation introduced the text to me without knowing the impact it would have on my future writing.


“Culture is wired in the brain,” Smail writes, and “cultural practices can have profound neurophysiologic consequences.”

It is this blurring of boundaries between disciplines that we also see in the style of academic discourse. Carolyn Dinshaw derives the title of her book *Getting Medieval* from a line in a male-on-male rape scene in Quentin Tarantino’s 1994 film *Pulp Fiction* where the victim, after being rescued, looks at his rapist and says, “I’m gonna git Medieval on your ass.” Dinshaw’s use of this line from Tarantino’s script as the basis for a scholarly method that brings present and past into tactile contact with each other is relevant to my essay because Dinshaw sees “getting medieval” in the sense of “creating relations with the past . . . in our efforts to build selves and communities now and into the future.” As Ruth Evans suggests, “Carolyn Dinshaw’s *Queer History* is about the desire to touch the past and for the past to touch us.” Much like Dinshaw, who ends her book with apprehensions about chronology, Daniel Smail ends his book with the

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7 Smail, *On Deep History and the Brain*, 201.
assertion that “the deep past is also our present and future.” If the past is our present and future, then the “post” “is simultaneously present, future and past, and the past is correspondingly folded into the ‘post.’” This concept of the past in its “atemporal historicity,” in Aranye Fradenburg’s astute words, is the underlying perception from which this essay is written.

Such view of the past carries a comforting message for medievalists looking from the past into the present and the future. Yet the real good news is that the origin of the concept of the Middle Ages as a “mobile category,” as the nucleus of this “traffic” between past/future, science/history, or autobiography/research rather than fixed in a certain time in the past, is in deep psychological structures theorized by Jacques Lacan in his study of topology. I am referring to the “Moebius strip” (bande de Moebius), which, studied by Lacan in his use of Topology, “is

necessary in order to escape the common ravings about a psychism supposedly located in a biopartition between interior and exterior.” The Moebius strip,” as described by Lacan, “is a three-dimensional figure that can be formed by taking a long rectangle of paper and twisting it once before joining its ends together. . . . Locally, at any one point, two sides can be distinguished, but when the whole strip is traversed it becomes clear that they are in fact continuous.” Moreover, “it is only because the two sides are continuous that it is possible to cross over from inside to outside.” Thus, oppositions are seen to be as continuous with each other.

Such oppositions manifest themselves in one of the fundamental activities of human beings: waking and sleeping, reality and dream. Geoffrey Chaucer, who lived through the nightmare of his era and through one of the worst catastrophes humanity has known, the Black Death, wrote a poetic dream that helps us to grapple with ques-

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17 Evans, An Introductory Dictionary, 116.
tions of boundaries. I am referring to the dream in the “Legend of Hypermnestra,” one of the legends following Chaucer’s oneiric Prologue in *The Legend of Good Women*. Chaucer’s personal childhood experience that exposed him to the effects of the plague makes him relevant to a discussion about catastrophes in the sense of the famous declaration by Michel de Montaigne: “I am myself the matter of my book.” Chaucer’s experience of living through one of the nightmares of the Middle Ages may have reproduced in writing a “literary nightmare,” a symptom of a stress level he experienced in his early life during the plague. In other words, a life threatening experience in Chaucer’s past may have produced an anxiety manifested in the nightmare produced in the legend that (significantly?) appears as the last one in the oneiric *Legend of Good Women*.

In the “Legend of Hypermnestra,” Hypermenestra’s father, Aegyptus, orders his daughter to kill her newlywed husband on their wedding night because of a bad dream, a nightmare he had, foreboding her son would kill him:

“I nil,” quod he, “have noon exceptioune;”
And out he caughte a knyf, as rasour kene;
“Hyd this,” quod he, “that hit be nat y-sene;

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And, whan thyn husbond is to bedde y-go,
Whyl that he slepeth, cut his throte a-two.
For in my dremes hit is warned me
How that my nevew shal my bane be.”
(2656–2659)\(^{19}\)

Initially, Hypermnestra, in order not to arouse her father’s wrath, chooses to tell him she will obey his command to kill her husband and put him into an eternal sleep:

She graunted him; ther was non other grace.
And therwith-al a costrel taketh he,
And seyde, “herof a draught, or two or three,
Yif him to drinke, whan he goth to reste,
And he shal slepe as longe as ever thee leste.”
(2665–2669)

The dream here initiates a chain influencing a number of people. A dream motivates Aegyptus to order Hypermnestra to kill her husband. Hypermnestra initially responds to this oneirically motivated order. And she responds by promising to carry out this order with “narcotiks and opies” (2670) in a way that will transport her husband into the domain of sleep. Within the “Legend of Hypermnestra,” the text folds into an oneiric *mise-en-abyme*.

In the “Legend of Hypermnestra,” Hypermnestra initially obeys the order emanating from

\(^{19}\) All quotations of Chaucer’s works are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, gen. ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd edn. (Houghton Mifflin, 1987), cited by line number.
her father’s dream. Similarly, in the prologue providing the framework for the entire Legend of Good Women, the poet presents himself as writing the legends in a response to an order he receives from the god of Love in a dream. The two responses in waking life to orders emanating from a dream suggest an oneirics more radical than Freud’s in which dream-thoughts determine waking cognition in addition to being conditioned by this cognition.20

I would like to conclude my discussion with the beginning, that is to say, why we are all here in this volume and how it all started: we were assembled in November 2010 by the BABEL Working Group because, to use Sara Ahmed’s wording in her critique of the so-called “New Materialism,” “things got messy”21 in the catastrophic era and in the world in which we live, as well as for us as medievalists. We were assembled in Austin, Texas to answer questions such as, “what can be said about the ‘style’ of academic discourse?” Thus, I would like to remind us of the origin of the name “Babel.” It is derived from

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ancient Hebrew, “balal,” meaning “to jumble.” That’s when things “got messy” in the world: God’s punishment for the hubristic act of building the Tower of Babel was to confound human speech. Ever since the Great Flood, we are no longer a united humanity speaking a single language. So God said, “Come, let us go down and confound their speech.”

Our academic discourse and research are unique just because we each bring in our individual style. “Style” can be seen not as supplemental to scholarly substance, but as the “prism,” the optical device, the method with which each individual approaches scholarly substance. The style of a scholar is a part of the individual identity of a scholar, an identity that, by definition, is always in the making and a neverending process as long as we remember that, as it is stated in *Lacan and the Political*: “A lack is continuously re-emerging where identity should be consolidated. . . . the politics of identity formation, can only be understood as a politics of impossibility.”

Chaucer’s style of merging the personal experience of dreaming (and potentially subconsciously the anxiety he experienced as a child during the plague years) with the professional anxieties of being a poet is not merely returning

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to the Aristoteleian dialogic nature of matter and form. Such style as we have seen in the analysis of the bad dream within a dream in *The Legend of Good Women* can be theorized. It is what Chaucer produces in his work centuries before Lacanian psychoanalytical theory that allows me to end this essay with an invitation to view ending as a beginning, as a site of possibility and potency to define and redefine ourselves as medievalists.