Burn after Reading: Vol. 1, Miniature Manifestos for a Post/medieval Studies + Vol. 2, The Future We Want: A Collaboration

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BURN(ED) BEFORE WRITING:
THE LATE STAGES OF A LATE MEDIEVAL PHD
AND CURRENT ACADEMIC REALITIES

David Hadbawnik

SCENE ONE

Facebook friend Jeffrey Jerome Cohen posts the following remark on September 13, 2011:

The JIL [Job Information List of the Modern Language Association] is out today, and it looks to be another grim year for jobs in medieval and early modern studies. Best wishes for all who are on the market.

This draws a number of comments from chagrined job-seekers and faculty in short-handed departments.
SCENE TWO

On September 15, Jim, one of the numerous assistant VPs in the research office where I am employed in a public Research I university, shoots me a little look as he explains that I’m to proofread the proposal he just e-mailed me, which is due tomorrow. A typical example of the language of the proposal is as follows:

The lowest transverse-electric (TE₁) mode of the PPWG can exhibit intrinsic (ohmic) losses in the dB/km range, when it is over-modeled. Furthermore, it should be possible to excite this mode exclusively, by careful mode-matching at the input facet. Additional calculations indicate that diffractive losses [...] To be successful and ultimately attain financial self-sufficiency, the NERC will work to (i) engage industry and the business world in the highest-level interaction by minimizing the above uncertainties, and (ii) incorporate future needs (markets) for NERC products in the evolving focus of the Center. The exposure of Center students and faculty to industrial needs (so-called market pull) will produce engineering graduates with the depth and breadth of education needed for success in technological innovation, and for effective future career leadership.

I realize that the style of this proposal—with its mixture of scientific and business jargon, its seemingly random use of font features to emphasize esoteric terms, its use of unexplained acronyms—constitutes a genre completely foreign to the discourse of humanities (which, of course, has its own jargon). But what had never struck me before was how the very messiness of it, its seemingly needless convolutions, signals something important, contained in the little look Jim gave me in his office: “We’re too busy to worry about proper grammar and formatting conventions ... we’re inventing stuff and making money.” This attitude, in
light of the hardships apparent across all academic disciplines, demands a grudging respect, even if I ultimately don’t agree with it.

**SCENE THREE**

That same day, in a graduate seminar, we are looking at Robert Pogue Harrison’s amazing book *Forests*, and the professor tells us, “This is one of my favorite books, but it’s a book you absolutely can’t write today.” He explains that the wide range of texts and periods covered by Harrison—everything from *Gilgamesh* to Dante to Joseph Conrad—would simply appear too eclectic on the job market. I am often told things like this, even as I’m also told that to survive, the humanities must become more “interdisciplinary,” which seems a contradiction. Taken altogether with the above scenes, how can we begin to reconcile these messages for those hoping to complete their first projects and begin looking for a job?

With this in mind, I want to briefly outline three concrete suggestions for expanding the discipline, while encouraging students to maintain a sense of adventure in their projects that might actually help rather than limit their opportunities on the job market.

**Embrace theory.**

Traditional medieval studies has regarded theory with suspicion, and indeed, an overreliance on theory or following trends too slavishly can make one appear to lack “rigor.” But psychoanalysis is perfect for exploring medieval romance (and vice-versa); Object-Oriented Ontology has proven fruitful in rethinking the materiality of and in medieval objects and texts; biopolitics and ecocriticism can provide insights into the development of power and partitioning of land and sea during the medieval and early modern periods. Moreover, departments increasingly seek candidates who can talk and teach theory in combination with a traditional period in the discipline. As the recent announcement of four tenure-track positions in Trans-
gender Studies at Arizona State University over the next two years suggests, the demand for versatility in such backgrounds will only continue to grow.

Get creative.

Medieval conferences often include panels on the fiction of J.R.R. Tolkien, J.K. Rowling, and George R.R. Martin, but as a new generation of medievalists who also have MFAs emerges, there are no programs I know of that offer period-informed approaches to creative writing; usually, students in such classes are discouraged from so-called “genre” writing because it is not literary enough. Yet creative writing is one of the few “growth areas” in English departments, and popular medieval-inflected fiction is in large part what drives that interest. A highly popular course taught by Tim Machan at Marquette University, which houses a large Tolkien archive, addresses the creative and scholarly sides of Tolkien’s work. More could be done—imagine a hybrid course that combines serious medieval literary scholarship with creative assignments. Such a course would tap into the demand for creative writing while expanding interest in medieval studies.

Go digital.

Like theory, Digital Humanities is a contentious term, with even some forward-thinking medievalists suggesting it’s a fad not worth pursuing. They couldn’t be more wrong. For one thing, digitization means democratization in research. There is an urgent need for rare texts to be made available to more scholars and the broader public. Such work is precisely the kind of project that VPs like Jim in my research office would recognize and reward; indeed, the Tesserae project (a digital search engine that compares Classical texts for allusions), developed at University at Buffalo, has drawn National Endowment for the Humanities research dollars to the school. Similarly, Dorothy Kim is co-leading the Archive of Early Middle English project, which will create a searchable database of
severely understudied manuscripts, with encoded information on names, places, intertextual elements, philological, paleographical and material features—opening the texts to a much broader range of scholars with new analytical tools offered by technology. Such projects also provide students with the opportunity to get in on the ground floor of important new research, co-authoring articles with tenured faculty after the fashion of STEM research publications. Experience in such projects is a great boon on the job market, as more and more departments seek fluency in this field.

All of the above suggestions are aimed at expanding on what medieval and early modern literary studies already do well. There could be more, and I have not even addressed the need for the concept of job placement to be modernized and expanded beyond traditional (and ever-dwindling) academic options. The language and mindset of university research centers—where dollars flow and institutional success stories are shaped and told—might seem antithetical to the humanities, but the disciplines we care about must grit their teeth, smile, and embrace them, at least a little. At stake is the future of those disciplines as viable parts of a university’s research mission, not to mention the viability of its students as candidates in a brutally competitive job market.