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Lowering the Drawbridge

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Lowering the Drawbridge

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It seems the infamous academic culture wars have been resurrected yet again thanks to a recent *Wall Street Journal* article in which political commentator Heather Mac Donald dramatically declares, “The Humanities have Forgotten their Humanity.”¹ Mac Donald blames the academy’s sacrifice of Shakespeare, Chaucer, and Milton on the altar of race, sexuality, gender, and class studies for the decline of the humanities itself (and not, for instance, the sacrifice of Shakespeare, Chaucer, and Milton on the altar of the Business Major, which I imagine would not go over quite as well in *The Wall Street Journal*). This stale rallying cry strikes me as presenting a false dichotomy: How does one read Shylock’s intimate plea for the humanity of Jews, “If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us do we not laugh?” in “The Merchant of Venice,” encounter Milton’s blushing angel who speaks of genderless celestial beings mixing “Flesh with Flesh” and “Soul with Soul,” or wonder with Chaucer’s Wife of Bath, “Who peyntede the leon, tel me who?” without considering race, gender, class, or sexuality, and without knowing that the best authors contemplated these matters themselves?² Indeed, the ability for a professor to create access to great books hundreds of years after they were written, and for those authors to speak across time to diverse audiences, is part of what makes such books ‘great.’ But students do need bridges, particularly today’s students who are taught that anything not immediately relevant to their financial success, or to the great technological vacuum into which they inevitably will be sucked, is a waste of their time and tuition money. These students are pressed to forget the past and look toward the future, toward STEM majors and Wall Street and cell phones and cubicles and away from the quiet musings of a writer with the time, space, and leisure to contemplate the essence of the human condition.

Medieval vs. Medievalism

The academic practice of finding enemies where we should find friends is hardly limited to the culture wars: the same predicament sometimes divides Medieval Studies and Medievalism Studies. Studying the Middle Ages proper, the academy implies, involves Serious Scholarship: language, philology, manuscripts, and an intimidating intellectual distance.³ Studying medievalism, on the other

¹ Heather Mac Donald, “The Humanities have Forgotten their Humanity: When Shakespeare lost out to ‘rubrics of gender, sexuality, race, and class’ at UCLA, something vital was harmed,” *The Wall Street Journal* (3 January 2014), <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702304858104579264321265378790>. See also Rebecca Schuman’s response, “Alas, Poor Shakespeare,” *Slate* (7 January 2014), http://www.slate.com/articles/life/education/2014/01/ucla_english_department_eliminate_shakespeare_requirement_conservatives.html.

² *The Merchant of Venice*, *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, ed. David Bevington, 4th edition (New York: Longman, 1997), 198.60-2; *Paradise Lost*, *The Riverside Milton*, ed. Roy Flannagan, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), VIII.628; and “The Wife of Bath’s Tale,” *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), 114.692.

³ For the long and well-recorded history of this division, see Kathleen Biddick, *The Shock of Medievalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 1–15; Clare A. Simmons, Introduction to *Medievalism and the Quest for the “Real” Middle Ages* (Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 2001), 1-28; Gwendolyn Morgan, “Medievalism, Authority, and the Academy,” *Studies in Medievalism* XVII (2009): 55-67; Richard Utz, “Medievalitas Fugit: Medievalism and Temporality,” *Studies in Medievalism* XVIII (2009): 31-43, 33; and Richard Utz, “Coming to Terms with Medievalism,” *The European Journal of English Studies* 15.2 (August 2011): 101-13.

hand, is little more than fandom with pretensions of rigor and requires nothing but a television and way too much time on one's hands. And while recently medievalists themselves have warmed up to studying medievalism, academic institutions have not. Although Medievalism Studies is a blend of at least two accepted disciplines—Medieval Studies and Cultural Studies—it finds a welcoming departmental home in neither place.⁴ Too antiquated for the cultural relativists, and too undisciplined for the philologists, medievalism lingers in the margins between the academic and the popular, the present and the past, quietly kept from challenging the integrity of the Literary Period or the Theoretical School.⁵

And yet, most scholars who would dabble in medievalism improper also inhabit the Medieval Studies wing of the ivory tower and must defend the relevance of studying the Middle Ages to students, scholars in flashier literary areas, and occasionally complete strangers. In such moments, it feels as though Medieval Studies is the Rodney Dangerfield of fields, downsized out of departments that think a decent Shakespearean can take care of Chaucer and even snubbed by the MLA, which awarded its most prestigious prize to an author who declared the Middle Ages an intellectual wasteland.⁶ Given the marginalization medievalists feel both inside and outside the academy, why would we hesitate to lower the convenient drawbridge that allows others into our castle? For the world is awash in medievalism: *Vikings*, *Arrow*, *Merlin*, *Skyrim*, *Dragon Age*, *Robin Hood*, and yes, *Game of Thrones*. This is the cultural food on which our students and our peers subsist, and whether we like it or not, these are the paths most likely to lead students into Medieval Studies. Gamers who go on a quest for a fragment of the Edda in *Skyrim* want to read the real one; they are intrigued when they encounter Thomas Malory's lecherous Merlin instead of the boyish hero they loved on the BBC. *Dragon Age* taught them about the Hundred Years War by analogy and *Game of Thrones*, love it or loathe it, fuels their desire to interrogate the façade of chivalry, rumors of royal incest, and the treatment of women and the disabled in medieval Europe.

But the pertinent point here is that medievalism is not just a bridge—that once we have students, we encase them in manuscripts, teach them to replace PC console codes with Ð, æ, þ, ð, ʒ, and make them memorize the date 1066 and recite the Henrys and Edwards in their sleep. Nor is the point that the study of the contemporary should subsume the study of the past. It is, instead, that an

⁴ As Karl Fugelso notes in this issue, marginalization seems inevitable because medievalism is “located at the intersection of so many other fields.” See Fugelso, “Embracing Our Marginalism: Mitigating the Tyranny of a Central Paradigm,” in this issue 28 (2013) of *The Year's Work in Medievalism*. I should note with gratitude that my own institution has welcomed my participation in both Medieval and Medievalism Studies, though mine is a relatively rare experience.

⁵ See Utz, “Medievalitas Fugit,” and “Coming to Terms with Medievalism,” and Carolyn Dinshaw, *How Soon is Now? Medieval Texts, Amateur Readers, and the Queerness of Time* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012) for the challenges medievalism can pose to periodization and time.

⁶ For two responses to Stephen Greenblatt's MLA award for his 2011 book *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern*, see Jim Hinch's review in *The Los Angeles Review of Books*, 1 Dec 2012, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/review/why-stephen-greenblatt-is-wrong-and-why-it-matters#>; and Jeffrey J. Cohen's post, “Stephen Greenblatt's *The Swerve* and the MLA's James Russell Lowell Prize,” on *In the Middle*, 5 December 2012, <http://www.inthemedievalmiddle.com/2012/12/stephen-greenblatts-swerve-and-mlas.html>.

inextricable continuity exists between Medieval Studies and medievalism: in order to understand one, one has to know the other, just as the Shakespearean keeps up with contemporary performances no matter how tiring it is to see Henry V in a World War II uniform for the 100th time. Shakespeare's influence, and therefore Shakespeare himself, is more fluid than fixed: the reception and performance of "As You Like It" by a local theatre group informs the scholar's reading of the past just as comprehensive knowledge of Shakespearean texts informs the reception of its performance in the present. The academy accepts without hesitation that a Shakespearean will do this, but not the medievalist, who struggles to prove her cultural relevance while working on her culturally-relevant interests quietly and on the side. Rather than defining Medievalism Studies in opposition or addition to studying the Middle Ages, scholars might begin to stress the symbiosis between these two areas, which taken together create a broader understanding of human culture.

But while repositioning Medievalism Studies as part of a natural academic continuum for medievalists will edge us into the open to a certain extent, if we are to unpack all of medievalism's baggage, we have to probe the most deep-seated resistance to its study: its threat to the border between the expert academic and the amateur, the scholar and the fan, and between labor and pleasure. Ironically, it is the very accessibility and openness the study of medievalism facilitates that relegate it to the margins.

The Ivory Tower vs. The Madding Crowd

Why is it that non-academics and former academics seem to be the major voices discussing what is wrong with academia? Why are Heather MacDonald, layperson, and Rebecca Schuman, who claims that "Getting a literature Ph.D. will turn you into an emotional trainwreck, not a professor," the major voices in the latest iteration of the culture wars?⁷ Why do graduate students turn for job and early career advice to "The Professor Is In" (a former academic who left because her "soul was dying") instead of consulting their own professors or colleagues?⁸ Why do administrators, legislators, and even the President of the United States have so much to say about what education is doing wrong without feeling at all compelled to consult actual academics on such matters?⁹

⁷ Rebecca Schuman, "Thesis Hatement," *Slate* (5 April 2013), http://www.slate.com/articles/life/culturebox/2013/04/there_are_no_academic_jobs_and_getting_a_ph_d_will_make_you_into_a_horrible.html.

⁸ Karen Kelsky, former professor, started a business offering career advice to students and tenure-track faculty after leaving academia: <http://theprofessorisin.com>. For a full description of the death of her soul, see <http://techtintranslation.com/guest-post-death-of-a-soul-on-campus>.

⁹ See, for instance, President Obama's proposed new ranking system for universities based on offering the "best value": Tamar Lewin, "Obama's Plan Aims to Lower the Cost of College," *The New York Times* (22 August 2013), http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/22/education/obamas-plan-aims-to-lower-cost-of-college.html?_r=0; a plan which, as the AAC&U and APLU (among others) have pointed out, perceives "value" as entirely economic rather than educational. See the Association of American Colleges and Universities website for its 11 November 2013 response at <https://www.aacu.org/about/statements/2013/ratings.cfm>; and Michael Stratford, "Ratings Alternative," *Inside Higher Ed* (23 January 2014), <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2014/01/23/public-universities-propose-alternative-obama-ratings-plan>.

Recently, Nicholas Kristof inflamed the digital academic universe with a *New York Times* op-ed entitled, “Professors, We Need You!” Wondering at the loss of public intellectuals in American society, Kristof claims that “Ph.D. programs have fostered a culture that glorifies arcane unintelligibility while disdaining impact and audience.”¹⁰ Responses to Kristof’s piece ranged from eloquent to outwardly hostile, as academics brought up a number of compelling arguments for their (perceived) lack of engagement in public discourse, including a lack of access to lay publication venues, the reliance of those venues on corporate rather than academic expertise, the growth of anti-intellectualism in this country, the hostile reception women and minorities are likely to receive online, and the fact that so many potential public intellectuals are having the life drained out of them doing adjunct work.¹¹ Many also pointed to their own blogs and Twitter feeds as a defense against Kristof’s argument.¹²

Perhaps the reason Kristof’s suggestions were so controversial is that he touched something of raw nerve when he accused academia of intentional insularity, writing that:

...academics seeking tenure must encode their insights into turgid prose. As a double protection against public consumption, this gobbledygook is then sometimes hidden in obscure journals—or published by university presses whose reputations for soporifics keep readers at a distance.¹³

As Bruce Holsinger points out, the clear- versus purple-prose debate shapes the main objection to reaching out to a lay audience: the fear is that we will be “dumbing down” our ideas, stifling our creativity and ingenuity, scrubbing the sheen off of our glossy theoretical brilliance.¹⁴ Indeed, sharp divisions between the scholar and the amateur, the academic journal and the popular blog, the conference and the Ren Faire, suggest that academia takes a degree of pleasure in inhabiting the margins. Nowhere is this more evident than on a tenure and promotion committee, which idolizes the university press and throws collective shade at any publication tainted with filthy lucre or worse,

¹⁰ Nicholas Kristof, “Professors, We Need You!” *The New York Times* (15 February 2014), http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/16/opinion/sunday/kristof-professors-we-need-you.html?_r=0. Kristof’s op-ed and its responses emerged after I submitted the original draft of this essay, and I am deeply grateful to the editors for the opportunity to revise and include the current debate.

¹¹ The *Chronicle of Higher Education* provides a convenient list of responses at <http://chronicle.com/blogs/ticker/a-column-lamenting-the-disappearing-public-intellectual-touches-a-nerve-2/72935>, as does <http://justpublics365.commons.gc.cuny.edu/2014/02/19/roundup-kristof-professors-public-sphere/>. One of the most interesting responses is Jonathan Senchyne’s, which points out that public venues, including the *New York Times* itself, generate content by consulting corporate rather than academic experts in “Disrupting the Higher Education Content Cycle,” *Avidly* 19 February 2014, <http://www.avidly.org/2014/02/19/disrupting-the-higher-education-content-cycle>.

¹² See, for instance, Erik Voeten, “Dear Nicholas Kristof: We are right here!” 15 February 2014, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2014/02/15/dear-nicholas-kristof-we-are-right-here/> and the Twitter responses at #engagedacademics.

¹³ Kristof, “Professors”; see especially Joshua Rothman, “Why is Academic Writing so Academic?” *The New Yorker* (21 February 2014), <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/books/2014/02/why-is-academic-writing-so-academic.html>.

¹⁴ See Holsinger’s 24 July 2013 post, “Expertise and habits of mind: a medievalist’s IPO” at Burnable Books, <http://burnablebooks.com/perr/> where he provides links to trace this debate through the last two decades.

lay readership. At most universities, speaking to a tiny audience of other academics is the most prized achievement; teaching less so, and service assumes the lowest status.¹⁵ The tenure and promotion committee priorities represent an academic pattern of communicative priorities: our responsibility as educators lies first in speaking to one another, second to paying students, third to administrators (but only under duress and in incomprehensible workload forms, grant proposals, and “strategic plans”)—and finally, if it cannot be avoided, to the outside world. This leaves us in a precarious position, especially when, as David Perry, medieval historian and columnist for CNN, explains, “the general public perceives faculty members as isolated from reality, holding cushy jobs, and uninterested in open communication,” and “we are all working at a time when the value of academic knowledge is under attack.”¹⁶ Yet we continue to cultivate the same professional norms, prioritizing work that is invisible, inaccessible, or irrelevant to the very people who make decisions about our funding.

But here again, academia tears itself in two with another false opposition. We are all, or should all be, well-versed in translating ideas for multiple audiences. Surely, if we are good professors, many of us also know how to approach the same text at multiple student levels in addition to writing about them for our colleagues. Unless we are in such a plum position that we interact solely with graduate students who desire only to become our clones, we do it every week. There is and always will be a need for sophisticated discussions among experts in specialized publications; writing for a lay audience is a different kind of writing, but it is not an ‘easier’ pursuit any more than studying medievalism is less intellectually rigorous than studying the Middle Ages. Condensing information, translating debates about obscure points, refining prose, and engaging reluctant readers present a different set of challenges, but they are still challenges that require skill and expertise.

It is not as though I think all academics should set fire to their journal collections and express all of their insights in tweets. But scholars who are not inclined to make overtures to the public in serious and sustained ways should be more supportive of those who are. Academic insularity is a systemic problem, to be sure, but individual professors are part of that system. We sit on tenure and promotion committees, filter job applications, review books, and mentor and observe our peers. It is here, at the peer-review level, that academia needs to chip away at its tower walls: to encourage those individuals who do reach outside its borders – who consider themselves the world’s professors, not just their particular university’s – and to recognize, reward, and value both specialized professional communications and the translation of those ideas for the general public.

¹⁵ See Rothman, who argues that “to build a successful academic career you must serially impress very small groups of people (departmental colleagues, journal and book editors, tenure committees),” “Academic Writing.”

¹⁶ David Perry, “My Initial Public Offering,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (22 July 2013), <http://chronicle.com/article/My-Initial-Public-Offering/140407/Lollardfish>.

Leading the Charge

Kristof ends his op-ed with this plea to professors: “don’t cloister yourselves like medieval monks—we need you!” It is just this kind of reflexive (and inaccurate) medievalism that should draw both medievalists and medievalism-ists into public discourse.¹⁷ If we peek outside the classroom, we will realize that the world is full of potential students, eager to learn, particularly about the past. As Carolyn Dinshaw argues, amateurs indeed “have something to teach the experts...that some kind of desire for the past motivates all our work, regardless of how sharp-edged our researches eventually become.”¹⁸ But at the moment, there are few spaces in which amateurs and experts can share that desire without being fully absorbed into one another’s worlds. Consider, for instance, the passionate popular response to *Game of Thrones*, for which the Internet, blogosphere, and even the ebook markets are awash in amateur commentary.¹⁹ The academic response to the show and to Martin’s *Ice and Fire* novels will very likely ignore the popular responses and amateur analyses, apart from scholars like Helen Young who make a study of medievalism and popular reception.²⁰ Amateur *Game of Thrones* fans clearly want to have conversations about the text and its representation of the past but are denied access to academic journals, if not through jargon, then at least through exclusionary paywalls or library access restrictions; experts may be drawn to the arguments in amateur sources but unable to use them in respectable research. But could academics use these shared passions as an opportunity to raise the level of public discourse rather than speak only in its terms?²¹ Could we encourage lay audiences to push past questions of authenticity (Was it really like this in medieval times?) and clear, black and white morality (Is Danerys a good character or a bad one? What about Tyrion? Is George R. R. Martin a sexist or a feminist?) and explore popular renditions of the Middle Ages with intellectual complexity, the ability to ‘read’ culture in the past and present, by lending our voices to venues that such enamored amateurs are likely to access, or even by creating new ones designed for this purpose?

I am inspired by scholars who have made strides in this direction, including Holsinger, Perry, and Richard Utz, whose *Medievally Speaking* review site compiles reviews of the best recent literary scholarship alongside reviews of Disney films.²² And I think it is appropriate that medievalists lead the academic insurgence into the wider world specifically because this is our moment: not only do we have endless sources of entertainment being produced in neomedieval settings, but we inhabit a

¹⁷ As Peter Buchanan points, out, medieval monks were, of course, public intellectuals. See “Nick Kristof Needs Me!” on Phenomenal Anglo-Saxons, 16 February 2014, <http://phenomenalanglosaxons.wordpress.com/2014/02/16/nick-kristof-needs-me/>.

¹⁸ Dinshaw, *How Soon is Now?*, xiv.

¹⁹ Along with countless websites and blogs with running commentary on the show and the novels, there is even a book written in the style of an academic companion but composed of essays by fantasy writers, bloggers, and fans: *Beyond the Wall: Exploring George R. R. Martin’s A Song of Ice and Fire*, ed. James Lowder (Dallas, TX: BenBella Books, 2012).

²⁰ See Young’s “‘It’s the Middle Ages, Yo!’: Race, Neo/medievalisms, and the World of Dragon Age,” *The Year’s Work in Medievalism* 27 (2012): 2-9.

²¹ Perry calls this the “habits of mind” academics bring to social issues, “Public Offering.” See also Holsinger, “Expertise.”

²² Encouragingly, *Studies in Medievalism* and *The Year’s Work in Medievalism* have just made themselves more available by opening up access to their publications online.

world in which text is displaced by icons and images, serial television shows unfold in complex interlaced narratives, and “reboots” featuring famous heroes dominate fiction and film; in other words, this is a world we can understand better than anyone. And those are just the pleasant medievalisms to which we might lend our expertise: we also have to contend with increasing income inequality, global religious conflict, and corporate feudalism. As Tom Shippey, a scholar who himself understands the importance of leaning out the ivory tower window, has argued:

There are...many medievalisms in the world, and some of them are as safe as William Morris wallpaper: but not all of them. Here, as much as anywhere in the academic world, scholars have a duty to trace connections, to expose errors, and above all to make their voices heard inside and outside the academy.²³

²³ Tom Shippey, “Medievalisms and Why They Matter,” *Studies in Medievalism* 17 (2009): 45-54 (52).