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Embracing Our Marginalism: Mitigating the Tyranny of a Central Paradigm

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Embracing Our Marginalism: Mitigating the Tyranny of a Central Paradigm

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Not many texts as famous as the *Divine Comedy* have had such a rough start or so thoroughly exemplify the viscosity of centrality and marginalism, and perhaps none so overtly reminds us to remain flexible as we refine medievalism studies. When Dante began writing it in approximately 1305 he was an exile in disgrace; eight years after his death in 1321, which is the *Commedia*'s presumed terminus ante quem, a Dominican canon condemned it for its political views; and that same year a papal legate ordered it to be burned for its "heretical" content.¹ Yet, over the next three centuries, the *Commedia* was copied by hand at least 800 times, published in 29 editions, painted in at least 2300 miniatures, illustrated in 36 cycles of prints, frescoed by Michelangelo, lectured upon by Boccaccio, read aloud on the steps of churches, sung by peasants, and commented upon, imitated, adapted, and alluded to by countless scholars, playwrights, and others.² Its popularity did not last, however, and during the seventeenth century only three new editions of it were printed; only one artist completed a major illustration of it; and critics savaged Dante for "His sleek lines, forced rhymes, various improprieties, insufferable obscenities, frequent affectations, and, to be brief, his horrid, stupid, licentious style, along with endless other errors of learning and art, [which] show clearly that [he] was a worse than awful poet."³ Fortunately, his reputation weathered this storm, and his popularity began to return in the eighteenth century with a dozen new editions of the

¹ Though it is possible that the *Commedia* was completed by someone else after Dante's death, this view is not widely held and is not even mentioned in many surveys of Dante's life, such as that by Giuseppe Mazzotta in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, ed. Rachel Jacoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 1-13. The Dominican canon was Guido Vernani da Rimini, as discussed by Nevio Matteini, *Il più antico oppositore di Dante: Guido Vernani da Rimini. Testo critico del "De reprobatione Monarchie"* (Padua: CEDAM, 1958), 93. Shortly thereafter, in 1335, Vernani's Dominican brethren at Santa Maria Novella in Florence forbade the reading or study of "poetic books composed in the vulgate by the one called Dante," as noted in *Acta capitulorum prov. rom.*, ed. Thomas Käppeli, O.P., *Monumenta Ordinis fratrum praedicatorum historica*, XX (Rome: Institutum Historicum Fratrum Praedicatorum, 1941), 286. The papal legate was Bertrando del Poggetto, as discussed by S.A. Chimenz, "Dante," in *Letteratura italiana*, 2 vols. (Milan: C. Marzorati, 1956), I:76.

² For the most thorough catalogue of *Commedia* manuscripts, see Marcella Roddewig, *Dante Alighieri, "Die göttliche Komödie": Vergleichende Bestandsaufnahme der "Commedia"-Handschriften* (Stuttgart: Hiersemann, 1984). For over 1200 *Commedia* miniatures, see *Illuminated Manuscripts of the "Divine Comedy"*, ed. Peter Brieger, Millard Meiss, and Charles Singleton, 2 vols. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969). For an introduction to the oft-discussed *Commedia* allusions in Michelangelo's fresco of the Last Judgment, see Bernadine Barnes, "Metaphorical Painting: Michelangelo, Dante, and the 'Last Judgment,'" *The Art Bulletin* 77 (1995): 64-81. For Boccaccio's lectures, see his *Esposizioni sopra la "Comedia"*, ed. Giorgio Padoan (1965; repr. Milan: Arnoldo Mondadori, 1994). For a reference to the *Commedia* being read outside the church of San Vigilio in Siena by the scholar Giovanni di ser Buccio da Spoleto, see John Pope-Hennessy, *Paradiso: The Illuminations to Dante's "Divine Comedy" by Giovanni di Paolo* (New York: Random House, 1993), 13. For early references to it being sung by peasants, see John Ahern, "Singing the Book: Orality in the Reception of Dante's *Comedy*," in *Dante: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Amilcare A. Iannucci (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1997), 214-39. And for discussions of other forms in which the *Commedia* has appeared, see Fugelso, "Engaging the Viewer: Reading Structures and Narrative Strategies in Illuminated Manuscripts of the *Divine Comedy*" (diss. Columbia University, 1999), esp. 183-99.

³ For the quote, see Paolo Beni's *Il Cavalcanti* of 1614, as recorded in Michael Caesar's *Dante: The Critical Heritage, 1314(?)-1870* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 314-15. The illustration to which I refer is a four-page, copper-plate engraving executed in 1612 from a drawing by Bernardo Pocetti. For more on that image, see Ludwig Volkmann, *Iconografia Dantesca* (London: H. Grevel, 1899), 121.

Commedia, paintings by major artists such as Joshua Reynolds, and compliments, albeit backhanded ones, such as Giovanni Mario Crescimbinì's remarks on *Per quella via* as a representative of all of Dante's poetry:

In appearance [this poem] unmistakably resembles [a riddle], thanks to the eccentricity of the plot, the coarseness of the structure, the confusion of concepts and philosophical sentiments and, above all, the obscurity with which the Poet expressed these same sentiments. But if, on the contrary, we reflect carefully on what lies within, we shall find that the more difficult and displeasing this Sonnet turns out to be on the outside, the more it is recognizable as rich and graceful within.⁴

Indeed, by the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, grudging respect had given way to direct and unreserved acclaim, as the Italians began to portray Dante as an originating "genius" of modern European culture, as Germans such as Friedrich Schelling, August Wilhelm Schlegel, and Friedrich Schlegel pushed their audiences to seek themselves in the Middle Ages as embodied in the *Commedia*, and as the English began to celebrate Dante's text for what William Hazlitt describes as its ability to interest us "by exciting our sympathy with the emotions by which [the author] is himself possessed."⁵ And by the time Romanticism and European nationalism matured in the mid-nineteenth century, the *Commedia* was well established as what has often been termed a "cornerstone" of Italian, Western, and perhaps global literature.⁶

Of course, that status and the very possibility of a literary cornerstone have come under considerable fire since the 1960s. But perhaps a more fundamental problem may be the metaphor behind those ideas. As demonstrated by the *Commedia*'s roller-coaster ride in both popularity and stature, membership in the center of literature, or of anything else, may be highly fluid. Even if the content of a center's constituents remains the same, which already requires us to believe that content can be defined apart from the contexts in which it is interpreted, the criteria for their membership are inevitably subjective. These criteria are almost certainly chosen from a much wider pool of possibilities and are almost certainly chosen by agents who are themselves selected from a pool of possibilities. Moreover, the application of these criteria represents an additional layer of judgment, as might the agents who apply them, particularly if these agents are not the same as those who chose

⁴ For the quote from Crescimbinì's *La bellezza della vulgar poesia* of 1700, see Caesar, 334.

⁵ For the reference to Dante as a genius of modern European culture, see the translated excerpt from Melchiorre Cesarotti's *Saggio sulla filosofia delle lingue* (1785) in Caesar's introduction, 47-48. For a quote in which Schelling explicitly pushes readers to seek themselves in the Middle Ages as embodied in the *Commedia*, see Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's 1850 translation of Schelling's "Über Dante in philosophischer Beziehung," in Caesar, 419. And for the quote from Hazlitt, see his "Lecture 1. Introductory.—On poetry in general," from his *Lectures on the English Poets*, as transcribed in Caesar, 437.

⁶ For more on these and the earlier developments discussed above, see Fugeslo (sic: Fugelso), "Regional Medievalisms in Academia: Pictorial vs. Textual Responses to the *Divine Comedy*," *The Year's Work in Medievalism* 23 (2009): 51-61.

the criteria in the first place. That is to say, bias can enter the process at multiple points and is almost certain to influence the outcome of that process.

This was not a problem in the eyes of many scholars prior to the 1960s, and in some corners of academia it still is not. But while the acknowledgment of subjectivity has often been welcomed since the 1960s, the subjectivity itself, especially if it is not particular to the interpreter, has increasingly been condemned. Often reacting to egregious applications of prejudice outside of purely academic interactions, many scholars have sought a system in which all voices are equal and all forms of expression can be aired, a system so open that it has no center, other than perhaps the fact it has no center.

Owing to a lack of resources, however, such a system has hitherto been impossible. Even internet sites have limits as to how much information they can host, and the problem is far more severe for traditional outlets, such as *Studies in Medievalism* and other print journals. There simply is not enough time, space, energy, and money to air everyone's work, much less give it equal billing, much less make it easily accessible.

We therefore must make choices. We have to establish criteria and to accept that, until we can move to a completely open-source format, they will be determined and applied by one or more select groups. In the case of *Studies in Medievalism*, I, as editor-in-chief, have tried to expand the number of judges by increasing the number of reviewers for each submission from one or two to at least three. But my effort has been hamstrung by the limited number of experts for each paper in our highly diverse field, and by the time-constraints imposed upon me by our publisher, particularly their insistence that I complete each volume by the end of the calendar year.

I have had a bit more luck with a second strategy that expands on earlier trends in *SiM* and in other academic publications: embracing our margins and marginalism. In many ways, we are undeniably a marginal discipline, not only because we are comparatively small, fluid, and heterodox but also inasmuch as we are located at the intersection of many other fields. Many of us, perhaps especially those that come from one of those fields, have long welcomed the chance to escape their limitations. We find great purpose in linking those fields in new and unexpected ways, and we revel in looking at them from the outside, in commenting from the catbird seat on methods, materials, theories, and agents that may be invisible or beyond criticism from inside a discipline.

Of course, this is not to say that we or any other medievalists have always acknowledged our marginalism, much less our margins. We as individuals and as a collective have sometimes ignored the fact that our field, too, has a fringe, one that echoes and often directly overlaps those of other disciplines. At the expense of recent non-western responses to the Middle Ages, we favor older European and American medievalism. At the expense of computer art and other new forms of expression, we favor such traditional media as paper books, Hollywood movies, and opera. And at

the expense of thematically driven studies of multi-tiered medievalism, we favor chronological exposition of how medievalists have directly adapted the Middle Ages. Very rarely do we work back and forth across time while examining, say, the manner in which twenty-first-century Japanese game-designers have built their work from late twentieth-century Hong Kong movies that resonate with the ways in which nineteenth-century missionaries adapted medieval literature.

But I think we should. I think we should pursue such possibilities in our own work and should shape our expressive outlets to fuel such approaches by others. Particularly through the essay sections I instituted in *Studies in Medievalism* and through the Boydell & Brewer book-series *Medievalism*, which I co-edit with Chris Jones, I, like other editors in our field, have reached out to scholars who take such approaches and encouraged them to submit their work for publication. But that is not enough. We should not only invite but also sponsor such work. We should devote whole issues or volumes to such approaches and perhaps even launch websites that cater to them, not least because we ourselves have benefited from a long line of outliers who embraced their marginalism and sometimes even called into question the very concept of a margin.

As noted by Michael Camille and many other scholars, much of what we consider to be marginal was perceived quite differently during the Middle Ages.⁷ Whether chimeras as disruptions of religious order, gargoyles as embodiments of fears and temptations, scatological drawings as manifestations of crisis in the chivalric class, or *charivari* as ritual reinscriptions of social norms, expressions on the edges of medieval culture operated somewhat outside of complete opposition between inner and outer—not to mention high and low or sacred and profane—to play a critical role in resisting, inverting, and transgressing, but never completely undermining and sometimes even bolstering, authority, in stabilizing the center, even as they apparently subvert it.

And, of course, many post-medieval figures on the margins of their culture have exploited the Middle Ages as an alternative to much more dominant paradigms, particularly classicism. J. R. R. Tolkien was an obscure, young scholar of Anglo-Saxon until his tale of a marginal, furry-footed little humanoid spawned a commercial empire. And rather than compete with the many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century engravings of classical texts, Gustave Doré turned to the *Divine Comedy* as the vehicle for his largely unsuccessful attempt to launch engraving, illustration, and him into the stratosphere of fine art.⁸

Indeed, the study of such medievalists as medievalists was largely founded by mavericks who were not afraid to challenge centers of academic power, prestige, and tradition. Leslie Workman was a bit of an academic vagabond when, by his own account, he helped establish medievalism in 1976 and

⁷ Camille, *Image on the Edge: The Margins of Medieval Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

⁸ On Doré's ambitions, begin with Aida Audeh, "Gustave Doré's Illustrations for Dante's *Divine Comedy*: Innovation, Influence, and Reception," in *Studies in Medievalism XVIII: Defining Medievalism(s) II*, ed. Karl Fugelso (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2009), 125-64, esp. 127-28.

initiated *Studies in Medievalism* in 1979.⁹ His personal and professional collaborator Kathleen Verduin was an assistant professor at Hope College when they met in 1980, but she, too, chose a far steeper path than necessary. And my immediate predecessor at *Studies in Medievalism*, Tom Shippey, built much of his considerable fame on Tolkien's fiction, which at the time Shippey began was perhaps best known as a major inspiration for Led Zeppelin.

Of course, the advantages of such an approach, of operating on the margins of, and sometimes looking in on, such well-established disciplines as Medieval Studies, quickly become apparent when we consider the achievements of Workman and his colleagues. Despite meeting resistance from many of the authorities in other fields, medievalism soon built a comparatively large contingent of young scholars who were looking for new approaches to those fields while striving to erect a separate discipline of their own.¹⁰ And they succeeded. Indeed, they established not only many colonies in those fields but also a new focus for research outside of them. By aggressively exploring margins, they paradoxically wound up creating and contributing to many major centers.

And they attracted a great deal of censure for doing so, for hypocrisy in becoming exactly what they were supposedly resisting. But to those critics who complain that we have forsaken the heritage of our maverick forebears, I would point out that we have never and can never completely eliminate centrism, for any coordinated action—even trying to avoid coordinated action—can be categorized as a center. And I would maintain that the spirit of our forerunners is still very much alive in many of our conversations, presentations, books, and papers, including, I hope, this one. Though the traditions and expectations of our discipline are inevitably expanding, we continue to question them and to explore new corners of our ever-growing margins. Without abandoning previous subjects and methods, we remain open to new ones, and, if they meet the basic requirements of solid scholarship, we often adopt them. We have perpetuated a foundation for pressing further, for going beyond merely welcoming such work to instigating and sponsoring it, to actively ensuring that we remain the “edgy” discipline that I believe we always have been and always should be.

⁹ On the roles Workman (and his personal and professional partner, Kathleen Verduin) played in the founding of medievalism and the launching of *Studies in Medievalism*, see Verduin, “The Founding and the Founder: Medievalism and the Legacy of Leslie J. Workman,” in *Studies in Medievalism XVII: Defining Medievalism(s)* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2009), 1-28, esp. 2-18.

¹⁰ On that resistance, see Verduin, esp. 6-12.