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Pandemic Pedagogy:
Teaching Medieval Studies with Medievalism and Baseball

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For most of the last decade, a first-year introduction to the Middle Ages has formed part of my annual teaching assignment at the University of Western Ontario in Canada, along with service as program director for our small interdisciplinary program in Medieval Studies. The course draws about 75 students in most years; in 2020-2021, during the pandemic, it was one of the few courses offered in-person at Western, and it attracted about the same number of students as usual. These students, however, were different in two ways: first, there were more mature students than average, including retirees looking to broaden their horizons; and second, students were from much farther afield geographically than the norm. I gradually realized that this second group had used my course as their justification for attending Western and being in residence in London, Ontario. Because Western advertised itself as being in-person that year but actually was not providing many elements of in-person delivery on the ground, they were signing up for my class in order to have a "normal" university year.[1] The province of Ontario's social distancing rules required students to be masked and to sit six feet apart from each other. We had as our classroom the former Convocation Hall of the university in one of its two original buildings, finished in 1922 (University College, modelled on the Princeton central quad buildings, and thence on the Oxbridge style). For all its wood paneling, stained-glass windows, and soaring ceilings, however, it was still rated for only 30-40 students (the number varied during September and settled at the higher end in October, wobbly like so many other things were in that time). This meant a hybrid classroom with staggered attendance, a model for which did not exist at Western, so I invented a plan. By the point in the term at which it was working, half the students attended the ninety-minute Monday class at 5:30 p.m. and the other half on Wednesdays. Every student therefore attended via Zoom for every second class. Even the Zoom component was variable: in the first term, we enjoyed a semi-professional approach donated by one of our audio-visual experts in the faculty; in the second term, we used my laptop, which was precariously balanced on a pile of books on a fold-out table in front of me.

[1] For those wondering why I might choose to offer in-person teaching during a pandemic, I had two reasons. The major one was that I was one of four faculty members on the Board of Governors at Western, and when the president decided to advertise Western as being "open" with in-person elements, I felt I should support the cause. A second reason was concern that students needed some structure in their lives, and having to attend an in-person class, with appropriate precautions, would be useful for them. This reaction, one based on my years of teaching, does have some support in the literature; see, for example, https://www.universityaffairs.ca/features/feature-article/7-missing-pieces-why-students-prefer-in-person-over-online-classes/ (accessed July 20, 2022).

The result of this complex organizational choreography was a strange hybrid reception of the Middle Ages, medievalism in practice. Inside the room we had the medieval world of professor and students in a large room made cozy by its execrable lighting (and by the tape blocking off most of the seats), in which I, at the front, had little choice but to lecture since I was also tied to the computer screen. I certainly felt like a medieval scholar forced to point at one word at a time on a lectern; only once or twice in a class (and not spontaneously) could I step forward to connect directly with the students in front of me. At the same time, half of the class was watching benevolently from the screen behind me (well, most of them had their cameras off so the watching was more mysterious than benevolent), zooming in from their basements or their residence rooms. The result was a disconcerting mix of live and video, present and un-present, flesh and screen, synchronicity and distance-viewing of the telescopic, not the panopticon, variety. On the one hand the result was surreal and distancing, and on the other it offered a peculiar kind of intimacy—sometimes a result of the shared adversity and the problem-solving it required, sometimes because students who caught COVID-19 felt obliged to disclose it. In other words, because COVID was a danger to the whole community in ways that other personal illnesses are not, a strange kind of intimate-but-communal disclosure developed. This became more intimate because, after I had told the class of the first COVID diagnosis in their midst and given them the option of remaining on Zoom for the next two weeks, the Dean's office informed me that I had erred in this disclosure and should not in future advise the class of any COVID diagnoses: the argument was that physical distancing and masking were sufficient enough that the virus could not be transmitted in the classroom or the building, and this was the university's primary concern. The issues then became complicated and legal in ways that struck me as very like medieval negotiations between public and private spaces. My choice was to advise the class (obviously without names) of any COVID cases in their midst; after the first, which rightly caused significant concern, the in-person attendance dwindled to the hardy retirees and firmer-minded first-years. Later scares, which I continued to apprise them of over e-mail, occasioned far less withdrawal and concern.

Our Medieval Studies 1022 course, therefore, existed in a kind of living quarantine, with students, tutorial assistant, and professor expecting to be struck down by illness at any moment, fearing the results but also not knowing exactly how the disease would strike. In addition, here we were studying the origins of Christianity and Islam, the major events of the Middle Ages, early monasticism and asceticism, courtly love and the rise of the knight, the Black Death, and the fall of Constantinople: in some respects, during that year, it felt like the issues we were addressing were being replicated outside our doors. More tellingly, the fact that ours was one of the very few classes happening in-person on the campus, with most of the eateries closed, free parking everywhere, many buildings including the libraries closed and locked or accessible only at certain hours, and the only

people to be seen the staff, the critical personnel. All this meant that the students were moving through an unreal landscape. And, since many of them were first-year students, they had no standard for comparison; this surreal experience seemed a new norm. A university campus from September to April is a bustling and living space, with classes almost the least noteworthy happening. From March 2020 onwards, the best term for most university campuses would be “dead space.” The students were certainly gone until September 2021, and even then the return was spare and uncertain, with interruptions for further COVID outbreaks.

All of this might not seem like an issue relevant to medievalism and its concerns. I believe that the university dead space is relevant, however, because it calls into question problems of time and authority and space. My students found themselves unmoored in time and space. Given the egalitarianism of Zoom, they also lost track of issues of authority; my name was displayed as “Jane Toswell” not as Dr. or Professor, and so the distance between us (a millimeter at best on the screen) was narrowed and eliminated, and what authority I had as the instructor for the course was eroded by the very technology that was allowing us to continue learning together. Everything was confusing for them. At best, they were in the classroom once a week, but during the three lockdowns of varying lengths that year they were not even able to have that much contact. Mostly, over Zoom they looked down upon the classroom from the large screen at the front, looming over their colleagues from remote redoubts and fortifications. They were, effectively, locked in their own castles and unable to breach the fortifications of the university during lockdowns, and subject to stringent border controls even when the university declared itself open. The medieval European university system of a tutor sleeping at the foot of a staircase, with students obliged to pass by his rooms on their way up to their own, offered significant parallels to the controls and constant questions of staff, and the locked doors of the university.[2] Students felt and feel closed in and closed down, hemmed in and trammeled about; the messages we would like to send students, about how the world is opening for them and willing to engage with them, are subsumed under the avalanche of uncertainty and fear that is the true legacy of their university years.

How, then, do I see these issues playing out in my Medieval Studies classroom? Four elements of the course demonstrate the extent to which it became living medievalism, not just the learning of medieval studies. The first element was the room itself: wood panels, high ceilings, and dim lighting. Convocation Hall was built as part of University College, dedicated in 1922 as the first convocation and dining hall for the University of Western Ontario. For a time later on it was also the library, and later yet was draped in fabric and reconfigured into a theater space for workshopping new plays and presenting them. About

[2] In June 2022, it took fully three campus security officers to get a booked room open for a final examination in my intersession course, so unused were the powers-that-be to the concept of being open for business.

25 years ago the then-Dean decided to restore the room to its original purpose, taking down the racks of lights and reinstalling the original hanging chandeliers, installing a new hardwood floor, cleaning the stained-glass windows, and taking down the blackout curtains and all the fabric enswathing the walls. The result was one of those rooms that looks quite stunning but in practice is not all that utile. As a meeting room it was a pure failure, because without all the fabric the acoustics are terrible. As a teaching room, it works best with the “sage on a stage” approach except that the seating ends about fifty feet away from where the low stage lip used to be—a lip removed after yet another renovation. The room looks good, but it serves best as a locus for fancy announcements or photographs, where the audience can listen to a single speaker at a podium with a microphone and then clap. It has a very narrow minstrel’s gallery running its length opposite the stained-glass windows, and a deep balcony. Gothic-style ornamentation abounds, with pointed stone arches, and filigree tracery in both stone and wood, and even niches for statues set high above the floor on each side of the stage. The soaring windows have the coats of arms of every university existing in Canada at the time when the windows were completed. The wood paneling runs up about 14 feet, giving a real sense of occasion to the room. The hall thus offers a splendid pastiche of medievalizing elements, set in a building supporting the iconic Middlesex Memorial Tower, dedicated to the soldiers and medical personnel who died in the First World War, and serving as the most frequent image for the university’s brand.

University College is a limestone building most certainly in the “Collegiate Gothic” architectural mode, with the verticality of the central Middlesex tower and the tall windows of Convocation Hall, but also narrow windows pointing upwards on the rest of the facade, and barrel vaulting (now destroyed by renovation) down the long central corridor. University College is Western’s iconic medievalizing building, and Convocation Hall is its centerpiece. The result for my course was that the students realized that their university experience, and not just our class, was taking place in a world of living medievalism. Many of them concluded this was something to be rid of, I suspect, as it provided an explanation for many antiquated concepts (faculty members who thought they were in charge of marks, too many lectures, and not enough community learning activities that would get them jobs). Others had some appreciation of the history and culture of a university, and of the somewhat ceremonial and dignified appurtenances that a room such as Convocation Hall provided for their learning experience. This ranged from the relatively shallow taking of a selfie in the room to a more serious engagement with the room as emblematic of medievalism and a particular, very traditional and conservative, approach to higher education.

The second element was that in the opening months of the course I introduced at least one saint per week, as a way to help the class connect to individual medieval persons,

but particularly to introduce religious figures since they are generally the most alien elements of the Middle Ages to modern Canadian students. More synergies appeared than I expected. Hildegard of Bingen appealed, not surprisingly, but less for her music or her philosophy or her botany or her political interventions than for her steely backbone in lying on the floor of the nave for the bishop to step over until he finally granted her a foundation for her nuns in the place she wanted. St. Francis of Assisi, somewhat to my surprise, did not particularly appeal despite his foolish youth, extreme shift to piety, and deep love for animals and birds. My impression was that the instant I mentioned his applicability, with the current pope having taken his name for his papal name, students reared back in horror—"too relevant," they seemed to say. Somehow this made (modern) Catholicism too real: the Middle Ages were supposed to remain somewhere in the distant past, not touch the world today as some kind of decision-making point. St. Dymphna, however, was popular, partly because of her Irish origins deep in late antiquity, and also for her apparent creation of a particular approach to mental health in the community in Geel. That kind of applicability, with its empathetic engagement with human beings in mental and emotional crisis, worked for students. Joan of Arc they had mostly heard of already, so I came to her very late in the course, after we had already discussed the differences in medieval and modern thinking about theology and sin. We focused on the role of the saints who spoke to her in her mind, exhorting her and commanding her, as the most apparently alien feature of her sanctity, and left her prowess in battle and remarkable self-confidence to one side—though we did discuss her lowly origins at some length. Her special gift of hearing voices could only make sense after prior discussion of the saints as intermediaries, as stepping-stones towards divinity.

Most appealing to the class, somewhat to my surprise, was St. Simeon Stylites (both of them, since they tend to get elided). The extremes of asceticism, the various heights of the pillar on which he lived, his rejection of his mother until after her death, the sheer athletic self-punishment of his life: all these elements found favor because of the strangeness of his behavior, but also because his desire to be alone with his god, separate and different, chimed with their current isolating experiences. When we shifted into discussing this kind of extreme devotion as a human endeavor, a surprising number of students had examples of bizarre and even apparently mad acts of this kind, not just pandemic-related. Most people do have an antisocial relative, it seemed. With the saints, then, students first embraced the strangeness and difference of these early Christian icons, and later their essential humanity. When we finally came to the flagellants and other unusual figures during the Black Death, students were able both to distance themselves from these extreme practices and study them with some sense of the space and time that lay between that extraordinary pandemic and the one they were experiencing. Students could also recognize that these odd and unusual practices had parallels in modern extremism and fear. The underlying terror of mortality marked both

experiences in ways the students could both identify and study.

The third element was manuscripts. In March of the second term, the class was able to receive an in-class visit from Western's Special Collections librarian, who came with a good selection of medieval manuscript materials. The library was not just closed for COVID but also closed for extensive renovations, so we could not bring the students to the manuscripts, and we were particularly lucky that Deborah Meert-Williston (and colleagues) was willing to bring them to us. We spread the manuscripts, one per desk six feet distanced, at the front of the classroom. For the first part of the class, I moved from one to the other pointing out what the class might want to look at: features of the layout, the script, the illumination, the text, and so forth. And then we cut loose. I've never had such a successful manuscript-based class. The students swarmed the manuscripts but were truly careful to maintain distance. One would open the case while three others grouped around, and then they would take turns stepping in to look, and then they would start to talk. The librarians and I circulated among them, again carefully, and sometimes I would move in to point to something, then move back, and the students would move in. The ninety-minute class was still going an hour after the scheduled end, and by then I had realized they were so thrilled to be doing "real university stuff," in person, and working with each other that they were prepared to stay long enough to visit each of the twelve desks, and some students circulated more than once. They also moved off to the side of the room to talk, to chat with each other, to figure out in-person people they had been seeing on Zoom and "chatting" with in the ether. They found their community, and connected strongly with each other, and with the opportunity they were enjoying to examine manuscripts, engaging directly and personally with the medieval materials we had been discussing. Because of their isolated year, the manuscripts were a lifeline to engagement, to finding their way in the course, to enlightenment in a very physical and real way.

Usually, in this class, I take a manuscript fragment to the first class to use as a teaching support. Students can hold and touch something that is six hundred years old; they can easily tell hair from flesh, see the plummet lines under the fairly simple illuminated initials, and be introduced to a liturgical manuscript right away in the first class. I had always thought of this as a defamiliarizing technique, something reminding them that the Middle Ages were a long time ago, and emphasizing that sense of the trajectory of history that students seem to have lost. In September 2020, however, the manuscript was a doubly defamiliarizing element, as I had to leave it on a front desk and suggest that students could come up and touch it (each in a different place) during the break or at the end of class. The opportunity in March 2021 to touch and feel several medieval manuscripts was therefore much more meaningful, and now familiarizing, since it was clear that COVID did not transmit by touch and students could safely handle the materials. For me as a

medievalist, it was strange to be changing protocols for handling the fragments and manuscripts, since these had been the same for so very long—another issue of defamiliarization. But the manuscripts class, as I think of it, was infinitely more meaningful in the COVID-stained year, and several students have found volunteer opportunities with our Special Collections and Archives, or have worked out independent research projects to keep learning about these manuscripts.

The fourth and final element is teaching medieval liturgy; this is a challenge. I found my way first, some years ago, with discussions of modern rituals, including high-school graduations (a recent memory for most of my students) and university convocations. These analogies were useful, and pointing out the medieval elements in these—the need to ascend steps onto a stage in order to get one's diploma because graduating is about ascending a *gradus*, a step; the wearing of livery, speeches, use of music as an integral part of the ceremony—helped. However, my best comparison of medieval liturgy to a modern equivalent comes with baseball games. Other athletic endeavors have some of the pomp and circumstance that is useful for my purposes, but really not enough. Baseball is the sport that is imbued with history and tradition, but has the same adaptability as a liturgy.[3] The many permutations of a liturgy, with its fixed elements, and the ones that change according to the saints' day, the festival, the purpose of the service, and so on: these correspond very well to the highly fixed liturgical structure of a baseball game. The profound sense of the importance of ritual is also present in a deep and striking way. Baseball is often called the "cathedral" of sports, or the "Sunday service" in America today; but it is also losing its deep hold on the American imagination and American spirituality, sometimes in favor of another sport (religion) or simply nothing (atheism). But, while it is present, it bears comparison to medieval liturgy very well indeed.

We start with the rituals that open the game. Students are quick to identify the singing of the anthem, the ritual of the first pitch tossed by one of the changeable elements (a person famous or special in some way), perhaps the exchange of lineup cards by the managers in front of the chief umpire, and the beginning of the game. They also tend to know the seventh-inning stretch, which offers a longer pause, and which was changed after 9/11 always to include the singing of a patriotic American anthem, as well as the usual standard "Take Me Out to the Ball Game." Some mention the fireworks at the end of a win for the home team, or the various entertainments put on by the stadium. Those who have done some prep work on liturgy speak about the uniforms which are specific to each team and

[3] The expert on the subject of baseball and medievalism is Angela Jane Weisl; see *The Persistence of Medievalism: Narrative Adventures in Public Discourse* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), especially chapter 1 on Mark McGwire's elevation to near-sainthood before his fall from grace (I mention this in my discussion of saints as celebrities), and chapter 2 on Wade Boggs as a knightly figure who errs and searches for redemption.

colorful, but also can vary according to set rules (commemorative numbers, for example on Jackie Robinson day to acknowledge the first time a Black player was allowed on a Major League field, or socks that reflect a particular cause). They might also speak to the importance of music, with each ball player choosing their own “walk up to bat” song, or the organ music that energizes the crowd in many ballparks. Some notice the trappings of the game, the pennants, retired numbers, statues, hawkers of food and drink and souvenirs. Most recognize that a baseball stadium has many points of comparison to a church or a cathedral: set times for services (games); a sense of majesty and grandeur as one enters, the way in which each church (stadium) is distinct and individual while also having the same elements—many churches and stadiums align to the rising and setting sun. Eventually, using baseball only, we come up with most of the features of the Christian liturgy: pattern and structure, elements that individualize each service, music, repetitive language, a sense of place and time as somehow elevated and dignified, color and processions and movement, appeals to all the senses (popcorn as incense!), and much more.

Liturgy is such a foreign concept to students that when they realize they are surrounded by rituals and little liturgical elements as constants in their everyday lives, they find the idea both shocking and illuminating. When we delve a bit deeper, into why the human mind so appreciates the familiar and so craves patterns and structures that are deeply set in memory and not to be tampered with, the class becomes really interesting. Sometimes a couple of students will wander off in discussions of the designated hitter or pitcher speeds to the plate, but mostly they start to see the set patterns and structures of the game within which are the opportunities for difference and originality that make every game a celebration of a set and familiar pattern within which are relevant and meaningful variations. Some even recognize that the peculiar shorthand language of baseball, in movement and words, parallels nicely against the Latin mysteries of the mass. Both entities offer a spiritual experience, although one covers only eight months of the year (including spring training) and the other is year-round. Both require lifelong commitments, though. Some would even say both offer salvation.

It is a truism, often repeated, that medieval studies is heavily imbricated with medievalism. Most scholars of medieval studies started their journey towards knowledge with a book, a movie, a videogame as their touchstone leading them into the field. It is also a truism that medievalism often demonstrates only a superficial connection to the "real" medieval, and the two fields historically have tended to face in different directions, the one ferociously scholarly and engaged with the teaching of Latin and a broad array of interdisciplinary materials, the other a lot more fun and focused on modern re-creations of medieval paradigms and concepts, often with a theoretical inflection derived from studies in modern literary or philosophical disciplines. And it is also a truism that some

scholars of medievalism think medieval studies is a subset of medievalism because every scholar brings a bias to the field that distends and affects the subjects studied and approaches taken, just the same as scholars of translation studies consider the entire field of comparative literature as a subset of their field.

Taxonomy aside, the important question here for me is the intersectionality at work. Intersectionality itself is a term coined by a legal scholar to dig at some deep and overlapping issues of identity that impede an individual's right to fairness in the world, issues now often trivialized as being purely about race or gender or gender identity.[4] Intersectionality has now, rather sadly, become a shorthand term about age, level of education, class, socioeconomic background, and other overlapping approaches to our scholarship and teaching. When I think about teaching medieval studies, the sheer intersectionality necessary to give students a sense of the depth and breadth of the field is what comes to mind. Medievalism is a principal overlapping construct, and a critical one, but in the last COVID-riddled years, the unmooring of students in space and time offered a different and equally powerful approach through which to teach the surprising connections of the medieval to the modern, and to allow students to draw their own conclusions about how our intersectional and interdisciplinary approach led them to a deeper appreciation of their own environment and thought patterns.

As a coda, let me note that for me as a practitioner of medievalism, the pandemic was something of a lost opportunity in the classroom. In the short term, when I spoke of the Black Death in 2020-2021, and when we looked at the mortality rates there and thought about what living through that pandemic must have been like, the students and I were on the edge of being too traumatized to continue. The topic emerged twice in the fall of 2020, and I responded to extemporaneous questions, but, as I looked around the room, I saw eyes shutter and brains overload. The question was too close to the bone, even though mortality rates were generally so different. When we actually arrived at the Black Death in my chronological organization of the course, in mid-March 2021, we worked through the material very carefully and without any outside references at all. Bloodlessly, in fact. At that point in the year, exhaustion had set in, as well as the realization for many of the students that the pandemic was real, and real for them in their everyday lives, affecting relatives and friends. What had been an exercise in looking backwards at a long-distant past, a course that had no real points of contact with each individual student, had become a course in which students felt the relevance so much in their bones and their blood that

[4] A review of the history of the term anatomizing its original specific meaning for black women doubly discriminated against because of both race and gender, and its gradual shift into the mainstream where the term now is a hashtag referring to the ways each individual sees their overlapping influences and origin stories, is Merrill Perlman, 'The Origin of the Term "intersectionality"' (October 23, 2018); see https://www.cjr.org/language_corner/intersectionality.php.

any direct reference to their living and breathing the reception of the Middle Ages was well-nigh unbearable. Because I did not realize just how much this effect would change the class dynamic, I could not prepare for it, nor could I find a good way to use it pedagogically except with very short sidelong references. Sometimes, the best pedagogy is to leave the really big lessons for students to figure out on their own.