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Editors' Introduction

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Abstract

The beginnings of *New Chaucer Studies: Pedagogy and Profession* are found in many energetic conversations about the state of our field and our profession at the New Chaucer Society's 2018 Congress in Toronto. Concerned about the sustainability of medieval studies, the editors imagined a journal that not only addressed these pressing issues but also helped diminish the isolation many medievalists feel. Most of all, they sought to rethink how different forms of academic labor are defined and valued. The resulting journal rests on two pillars of accessibility: **open access** and **peer review**. Available through the University of California's eScholarship publishing platform, the journal is freely available regardless of institutional affiliation. And by encouraging a peer-review process of constructive criticism and intellectual dialogue, the journal promotes fresh perspectives. The journal's first issue presents timely and thoughtful contributions by Anthony Bale, Andrew James Johnston, Dan Kline, and Carolyn Dinshaw.

The idea for *New Chaucer Studies: Pedagogy and Profession* emerged from conversations at the vibrant and welcoming 2018 New Chaucer Society conference in Toronto. These conversations were fueled by a sense of urgency shared by many of the conference presenters, including Carolyn Dinshaw and Anthony Bale (contributors to this inaugural issue), by editor Candace Barrington (who advocated resistance to complacency by roaming outside professional and nationalist categories), and by editor Katie Little. In particular, Little’s paper, “Chaucer and the Crisis of the Humanities,” addressed the alarming phenomenon of plummeting enrollments and sparked a series of discussions among us on funding (and de-funding), adjunctification, student needs, the relationship between teaching and research, and the interests of the general public.

Briefly put, we were then—and in light of the pandemic, are more so now—concerned about the sustainability of medieval studies. All of us teach at public institutions of higher learning, which have suffered for some time now from decreased funding in most areas but especially in the humanities. Curricular decisions seem to be driven by enrollments rather than by a coherent vision of educational goals. The ever-dwindling employment opportunities are not only devastating for emerging scholars, but for the field itself, which has been shrinking. Last, but certainly not least, we fear the impact of rising nationalism and xenophobia (exemplified by various executive orders from the Trump administration in the U.S., hardline immigration policies in Australia, and by Brexit in the U.K.).

As we returned home from Toronto, we wanted to continue these conversations and draw more people into them. One of the (perhaps less-noted) effects of our shrinking profession is our sense of isolation. There are quite simply fewer of us, and the need for collaboration and sharing across institutions is even more crucial now than when the New Chaucer Society was founded in 1979. We saw this new collaboration as necessarily global, and editor Eva von Contzen joined the editorial team. Our [Advisory Board members](#) in Africa, the Americas, Asia, Australasia, and Europe further ensure our global outreach. Most especially, we wanted to acknowledge that our conversations about the state of our profession are a form of labor—not just “shop talk”—and to bring that labor into a public forum. By creating an open-access journal of brief essays, by scholars from throughout the world, on all the kinds of work that we do, we seek to lessen our isolation and to offer effective solutions to the pedagogical and professional dilemmas we face.

After all, for many of us the day-to-day experience of our work—such as the committee meetings, the teaching preparations, and the advising of students—does not match the official language our colleges and universities use to describe that work. Editor Lisa Lampert-Weissig recalls an Academic Senate meeting at UC San Diego during which her attention was drawn to an odd sight: a squat, three-legged stool perched on the top of a corner filing cabinet. Standing to stretch during a pause in the three-hour meeting, she made her way gingerly over to the stool and saw a small sign: “the three legs of the stool.” A colleague informed her that the little stool was a prop sometimes brandished at tenure and promotion committee meetings to illustrate the “three legs of the stool”—research, teaching and service. She wondered, however, why all three legs were identical. Shouldn’t the research leg be longer, or perhaps, at least, made of solid gold? In our experience, some forms of academic labor are much more highly valued than others, and we wanted to examine how that disparity defines our work.

While we began this project long before the pandemic, the consequent, abrupt shift to remote work has made uncompensated and largely invisible work all the more visible. We hope that this forum

will increase not only the visibility but also the value of this type of labor. Pedagogical and professional matters comprise a significant portion of our workload. Writing about these matters is also a challenging, time-consuming task. Keenly aware of the effort many scholars, especially emerging scholars, devote to writing for public and digital platforms, we sought to create a space that allows colleagues to share their knowledge and insights—and their time and effort—in a way that also enhances their career development both within their own institutions and within the field of medieval studies. In creating this platform, we hope to highlight these important discussions and to formalize them so that they happen not only when some of us are lucky enough to meet at conferences, but also consistently throughout the year, whatever our location.

Our journal has identified two pillars of accessibility: open access and the peer-review process. The first is fairly self-explanatory. We have partnered with the University of California’s [eScholarship publishing program](#) so that our journal is available to everyone regardless of institutional affiliation. Thanks to work by editor Candace Barrington and CCSU intern Andrew Jacobs, we also have a [newsletter and blog](#) freely available. The idea for the newsletter was born in the spring of 2020 in immediate response to the pandemic. It began as a *Pedagogy and Profession* group on Facebook where users could exchange ideas about teaching and information on institutional support. The group attracted almost 200 users in no time and had a very lively phase of activity amidst the first particularly difficult weeks of teaching under Covid-19.

The second pillar of our accessibility is the peer-review process. While we are well aware that peer review has its own problems and is by no means infallible or even consistent, we also want to use it to ensure that the essays for this journal “count” in reappointment, promotion, and tenure. We seek to create a peer review process that offers constructive criticism and promotes dialogue, intellectual exchange, access, and fairness. Our guidelines for submission and peer review can be found on [Pedagogy and Profession’s eScholarship homepage](#).

Related to our pillars of accessibility is our firm belief in maximum flexibility when it comes to language and the rules of academic writing. Given the international focus of our journal, we do not want to prescribe a practice bound to a British, American, or other academic tradition of formatting, or to one model of spelling conventions. Instead, we ask our authors to write within their chosen framework. Our ground rule is internal consistency: each contribution will be consistent in its stylesheet and spelling. We have decided, however, to use simplified parenthetical citations and a Works Cited list (following the *Chicago Manual of Style*, 16th edition, guidelines). In these ways, we hope to do justice to the breadth of our contributors’ academic conventions while maintaining clearly identifiable sources.

This short origin story for our project began, as we noted, in the summer of 2018, driven in part by the urgency of our changing profession. For that reason, we invited four colleagues, who together could offer an international and also outward-facing perspective to kick off the journal with their essays. That is, we chose colleagues who had extensive and varied teaching and administrative experience, colleagues who have had to defend and justify medieval studies and the humanities more generally within their institutions and across their university systems. With their generous agreement in hand, we then approached the New Chaucer Society with our ideas. We are grateful to Tom Goodman and Ruth Evans, as well as the Society’s Board of Trustees and to Stephanie Skenyon for their support and assistance in our efforts. Our pursuit of an open-access platform led us to

eScholarship, a publishing venue run by the University of California system. We would also like to acknowledge here the librarians in the UC system who have made this venture possible. Rachel Lee, Katie Fortney, Katherine Mitchell, and Justin Gonder of the eScholarship team have been wonderfully helpful. At UC San Diego, Erik Mitchell (Audrey Geisel University Librarian), Roger Smith, and especially Allegra Swift have provided and continue to provide support and expert advice. We see the Open Access movement, which our librarian colleagues have long been instrumental in championing, as vital to the future health of humanities disciplines.

The pandemic has certainly thrown a wrench into our plans, but we are more than delighted that our contributors rose to the occasion. We are proud to introduce these timely and thoughtful contributions from Anthony Bale, Carolyn Dinshaw, Andrew James Johnston, and Daniel Kline.

Anthony Bale begins his essay, “Reflections on Chaucer, Pedagogy, and the Profession of Medieval Studies,” by thinking through his identity in relation to (the assumptions of) Medieval Studies, thus reminding us how personal our research and teaching can be. Turning to the current situation in the U.K., Bale problematizes the exclusionary forces of the educational system that pertain to Medieval English Studies as a subject, and he makes a case for decolonizing the curriculum. Such a move is even more urgent given the new challenges introduced by Brexit. While many of these challenges cannot be foreseen at this stage, the impact will likely be dire, not least since many of the EU’s funding options will need to be negotiated.

The contributions by Daniel Kline and Andrew James Johnston provide nuanced analyses of the current working conditions for medievalists in two very different parts of the world, Alaska and Germany. While each takes up a focus particular to their region and therefore somewhat foreign to the other, General Education in Kline and national research funding in Johnston, together they demonstrate the importance of a global perspective on the financial and social systems that shape our institutions and our employment.

In “Chaucer and *Beowulf* in Germany and the Survival of International Medieval Studies,” Johnson’s metaphor of the different kinds of boats sailing on “the oceans of post-imperial Anglophone scholarship” should be both an uncomfortable reminder of the vast differences in material circumstances that govern the working lives of medievalists and an optimistic formulation for what is shared. The “luxury liners,” “super tankers” and “rubber dinghy” all float on the same sea, the shared interest in medieval texts.

Kline’s essay, “U.S. Public Higher Education, General Education, and the Medievalist,” similarly underlines the importance of seeing what is shared. The devastating budget crisis Kline describes is in many ways particular to Alaska, but the faculty response provides an illuminating and inspiring example of cross-disciplinary cooperation. In this way, the Alaskan situation is exemplary: it underscores that faculty must remain vigilant stewards of the systems that sustain teaching and scholarship. In defending the shared governance between faculty and administration, Kline gives a clear sense of the urgency of service work, exactly the kind of work this journal will feature.

Our collective goal as founding editors has been to create a platform that will be both sustaining and sustainable. This journal is an experiment founded on hope, and in using that term “experiment,” we refer you to Carolyn Dinshaw’s powerful essay “Notes on Experimentation, June 2020,” which eloquently describes what we need now. She sagely characterizes “the deep stream of experiment” as “resourceful, imaginative, original, inventive, responsive, yet uncertain, tentative, and prone to failure.”

In this spirit, we invite you to read these inaugural essays, to respond to them and, most of all, to let them spark your own contribution to the conversation.