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Chaucer and *Beowulf* in Germany and the Survival of International Medieval Studies

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Abstract

Johnston examines the lessons to be learned from the precarious position of Medieval English Studies in Germany. While German universities are attracting a growing number of English-speaking graduate students, Medieval English Studies in Germany has been increasingly modeling itself on programs in leading Anglophone universities and increasingly hiring non-"German" faculty. Consequently, the gap between the scholarly community in Medieval English Studies and that in Medieval German Studies has widened, leaving Medieval English Studies untethered to either German medievalists or Anglophone medievalists. Ironically, because funding mechanisms value cross-disciplinary collaboration, Germany's Medieval English scholars frequently work across departments and programs, establishing collaborations that they might otherwise overlook. Because a truly global Medieval Studies requires engagements outside nationalist interests and across multiple perspectives, the collaborations forged by German scholars focusing on Medieval English Studies may provide a model for ways we can actively engage with *and* learn from one another.

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Over the last decade or so, the teaching of medieval *English* literature in Germany has been affected by two developments in particular. The first is the increasing influx into the English departments of many German universities of students who are not native speakers of German. My own university–the Freie Universität Berlin, one of Germany's top research universities–seems to be an extreme case: About 90 per cent of the students taking their master's degree in English Studies come from outside Germany, and something close to two-thirds of these are native speakers of English, most of them British, Irish, US-American, and Canadian. This constitutes a revolutionary change and sets German English departments–and especially that of the Freie Universität Berlin–apart from other departments in German universities, where the average cohort of foreign students tends to make up no more than 10 per cent of the student body as a whole. Foreign students are attracted to the Freie Universität not only by the university's reputation but also, and possibly even more so, by the artistic and international flair of Berlin, by the city's comparatively low cost of living–though, due to rising rents, this is changing rapidly–and the fact that German higher education is free. The second development is that Germany is becoming increasingly attractive as a job market to academics from English-speaking countries, especially in the field of Medieval English Studies. To name only one example: Two years ago, a comparatively junior faculty position in Medieval English literature was advertised at our neighboring university, the Humboldt-Universität. A decade earlier, such a position would have almost inevitably gone to a native speaker of German and there would have been hardly any serious competition from the English-speaking world, since few English-speaking Chaucerians would have bothered even to apply. But this time things were very different. The three candidates who made it to the final round of the selection process for this position were either British or else products of the British higher education system. Not only did no 'German' candidate make it to the final round, but, at the final stage of the selection process, the three candidates still in the running were representatives of Anglophone Medieval Studies.[1]

It is before the backdrop of this rapid transformation of the conditions in which the teaching of medieval English literature is taking place in Germany that this contribution addresses the almost complete lack of exchange existing between the field of medieval English literature in the Anglophone sphere and that of medieval German literature as taught and studied in the German-speaking countries. There is a compelling reason to take a closer look at the relations between these two scholarly communities. While it is safe to assume that the academic discipline of Medieval English Studies is the largest body of scholars devoted to medieval literature–here understood primarily in its narrow and, admittedly, Eurocentric sense–in the world, it is equally safe to assume that Medieval German Studies comes in a fairly close second, owing primarily to the combined size and wealth of Germany, Austria, and Switzerland and the remarkably high survival rate of chairs of medieval German literature in these countries. The absence of dialogue between two such vast groups of scholars working in so closely related fields can only be seen as a waste, especially if we consider that medievalists have always prided themselves on their interdisciplinary outlooks.

[1] German laws regarding university hiring processes stipulate a high degree of confidentiality: As a member of the hiring committee in question, I would not normally be at liberty to divulge information pertaining to the selection process. I wish to state, therefore, that the facts mentioned here are not governed by the rule of confidentiality because the trial lectures by the candidates who make it to the final round take place in public.

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Professors of medieval English literature in the German-speaking world are, by contrast, in a far less advantageous position than their colleagues in the German departments. Currently, something like eight professors of medieval English literature remain active either on permanent or tenure-track positions, if one includes Switzerland, that is.[2] This in itself is a tragic state of affairs, since there are more than fifty English departments in German-speaking academia, the vast majority of which would have had at least one medievalist in their ranks fifty years ago–though usually one that would have been expected to represent both medieval language and literature. This is not the space for discussing the reasons for the dramatic decline of Medieval English Studies in Germany–it is a tedious subject, anyway.[3] The survivors find themselves wedged uncomfortably between the two massive institutional bodies already mentioned, neither of which is particularly interested in Medieval English Studies in the German-speaking countries. On one side, there is the majestic disciplinary fleet of Medieval English Studies with its Oxbridge and Ivy League luxury cruisers at the center, traversing the oceans of post-imperial Anglophone scholarship in what an outsider might easily perceive as serene self-centeredness. On the other side, the massive and highly efficient supertanker of Medieval German Studies in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland is similarly self-centered, though for very different reasons. In between, the rubber dinghy of Medieval English Studies in Germany is rocking precariously, ever in danger of capsizing. Not only are these two institutional giants happy to overlook Medieval English Studies in Germany–they also tend to remain overwhelmingly ignorant of each other. And that may, in the none too distant future, turn out to have been a tragic shame, since Medieval Studies as we have known it is under threat all over the world.

There are both institutional and scholarly reasons for the lack of exchange between Germany's medieval German literature scholars and English-speaking critics of medieval English literature, and it is not always easy to disentangle the two. For one, the disciplines devoted to the study of medieval English and of medieval German literature, respectively, were shaped by very different cultural and historical forces and traditions. In purely institutional terms, medieval English literature still bears the imprint of the canonical giants established in the nineteenth century, *Beowulf* and Chaucer. And although Anglophone English Medieval Studies has long been successfully expending considerable energy on re-structuring the field, bringing to the fore texts, genres, time periods, as well as theories and methodologies previously ignored or overshadowed by the traditional canon, a dominant historical focus on texts composed between the years 800 and 1000, on the one hand, and 1350 and 1480, on the other, remains firmly in place–not least since these are the periods when the vast majority of what counts as medieval English texts were produced.

Germany's medieval literary canon, by contrast, has its traditional peak right in the middle between England's early medieval era and the "Age of Chaucer," traditionally focusing on a

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[2] The actual number is difficult to assess, since in some cases it is a question of definition. There are still one or two scholars left in the old philological tradition who (at least officially) straddle the divide between historical linguistics and medieval literature. And there are some scholars whose principal interest is in medieval literature but whose positions are not officially designated as medieval studies chairs. Moreover, I consciously exclude from my count scholars who see themselves as historical linguists only. Thus, Medieval English Studies in the following refers to the discipline primarily dealing with the literature and culture of medieval England and Scotland, including both the early medieval and the late medieval periods.

[3] One likely factor is Germany's strong philological tradition, which led occupants of medieval English studies chairs in Germany to hover uneasily between (historical) linguistics and literature. From the early seventies onwards, whenever the holder of such a chair retired, they were succeeded by a modern linguist rather than a medievalist.

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comparatively narrow period beginning around 1180 and coming to an end ca. 1240. This period derives its canonical status not merely from an impressive wealth of highly sophisticated epics, romances, and courtly love poems, but also from the fact that the nineteenth-century German philologists who first defined this canon were deeply involved in an academic project of ideological nation-building which viewed the supposed grandeur of the Hohenstaufen emperors (1138–1254) as a historical source of legitimacy for the German Reich founded in 1871. Needless to say, this image of German Medieval Studies, like my previous sketch of English Medieval Studies, represents something of a caricature, because, just like its English counterpart, German Medieval Studies has for some time now been considerably expanding and reordering the canon, becoming more inclusive in terms of gender, genre, and timeframe as well as theory and methodology. And yet, in both disciplines the mentalities attached to the traditional ordering of the canon and the concomitant forms of periodization linger on in many, often merely semi-conscious, forms. This has resulted in very different scholarly traditions, approaches, and methods, with the scarcity of exchange between the two fields being exacerbated largely by pure lack of interest on the English-speaking side and by a certain degree of suspicion and anxiety of influence amongst scholars working in German-speaking German Medieval Studies. And this is unfortunate because, especially where theory and methodology are concerned, the two disciplines could easily and fruitfully benefit from dialogue. After all, both fields have participated in most of the major so-called 'turns' in the humanities, including, for instance, the spatial, the temporal, and the religious turns, as well as the material turn.

While it would obviously be dangerous to overemphasize both the differences between the two scholarly communities and their respective internal homogeneity, there are some specific characteristics to the theoretical and methodological approaches prevailing in the two camps that contribute to the lack of contact between them. German medieval scholarship tends to stress the alterity of its Middle Ages. Its critical toolkit contains a powerful narratological component and derives many of its key methodological concepts, if often obliquely, from structuralist notions, sometimes even reinforced by a sprinkling of Luhmannian systems theory. There is also a strong interest in reconstructing historical poetics and in the meta-poetic dimensions of the texts investigated.

By comparison, the methodological and theoretical landscape appears to be more diverse in the English-speaking world of medieval studies–with its generous doses of Queer Studies, Postcolonial Studies, Ecocriticism, New Materialism, etc. Less attention tends to be paid to strictly distinguishing between some of the key concepts of literary studies as they developed in the era of the New Criticism. To mention only one example: For many Anglophone critics of *Beowulf*, for instance, it is still fairly unusual to conceptually keep apart the epic's 'poet' and its 'narrator'–a state of affairs that would horrify the average German critic of, say, Gottfried von Strassburg's *Tristan* or of the *Nibelungenlied*, who, in all likelihood, would have had such distinctions drummed into them at an early stage of their training. At the same time, even though German-speaking medievalists are increasingly willing to engage with theories and methodologies *en vogue* in the Anglophone world, many of the theoretical approaches endorsed by their English-speaking counterparts are still greeted with a certain degree of suspicion, not least because of the threat of anachronism that they are supposedly associated with. More likely than not, in an interdisciplinary discussion on the basic principles of what makes medieval literature 'medieval', the colleagues from the German department will, with great confidence, list all kinds of features as typically medieval, while, with equal confidence, excluding others supposedly to be found only in modern literature–upon which the Chaucerian in their midst will timidly raise their

hand and point out that all these supposedly non-medieval features are, indeed, to be found in Chaucer, too (the author speaks from almost weekly personal experience).

If an exchange takes place between the two scholarly communities, at all, it remains extremely limited and usually fairly one-sided. Whereas German scholars can and do read English, only few British or American students of medieval English literature seem to know German, or, for that matter, feel that German views on medieval literature in general might be relevant to their own field. Moreover, even if German scholars do publish in English, their work is frequently ignored because it does not appear in particular university presses or peer-reviewed journals, this being due to the fact that academic prestige is accorded differently in the German-speaking humanities.

There is at least one further difference between the academic cultures that deserves mention. In present-day Germany, academics are, to a very large extent, evaluated on the basis of their ability to acquire third-party funding and to collaborate in large- to medium-scale interdisciplinary collaborative research projects outside of which such funding is difficult–though not impossible–to obtain. Indeed, the ability to secure third-party funding has now become the single most important criterion when it comes to selecting applicants for a professorship. Within the last quarter of a century, the role of third-party funding has become so dominant that German universities–practically all of which are public and therefore primarily funded by the Federal Republic of Germany's individual federal states–have come to depend heavily on it for their financial stability; this is especially true of universities in the less affluent federal states. In the humanities, the vast majority of third party-funding is provided by a single independent agency, the 'German Research Foundation' (*Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft*, DFG). In effect, the money flowing from the DFG's coffers derives from public funds withdrawn from the ordinary state-funding of the universities and then pumped back into the system through a highly competitive, but also very bureaucratic, process of grant applications.[4] And the more the universities have come to depend on this extra source of income, the more competitive has this process obviously turned out to be. The system favors interdisciplinary, collaborative work and is especially geared towards supporting doctoral students and postdocs, most of whom work under the supervision of tenured professors within the fairly hierarchical set-up of German academia. While this system makes possible all kinds of interesting and innovative transdisciplinary projects and also contributes to keeping alive smaller disciplines–for example, Dutch Studies and Byzantine Studies–that might otherwise be axed due to the small numbers of students they attract, there is also a downside.

For one, the system generates sharp distinctions in terms of power and prestige between researchers whose scholarly output would otherwise not be seen to differ in terms of academic quality. Scholars who, for some reason or other, are not included in the charmed circle of applicants for a specific grant, might easily be sidelined within their institution and become resentful. Moreover, the system forces scholars to align their own research interests with issues capable of providing a common theoretical and methodological denominator for scholars from very different disciplines working within widely differing traditions. This may result in highly fruitful encounters, but it can also translate into mutual incomprehension thinly disguised by a superficial rhetoric of collaboration. One way to

[4] For some time, Germany was forging ahead in this development, but the European Union was quick to establish a similar system of grants and nowadays there is a wide range of constantly changing European funding lines, such as the different types of ERC grants. Indeed, in Britain, too, the scholarly landscape has been changing along similar lines, and I have heard blood-curdling stories about deans exerting considerable pressure on scholars to apply for ERC or Leverhulme grants.

paper over the cracks evolving from such incomprehension is to invent new terminologies. Some of these may, indeed, offer vistas onto theoretical terrains hitherto uncharted, while others merely serve to camouflage the umpteenth reinvention of the wheel. New terminologies also help to satisfy the need for the constant innovation that drives the system, since each large collaborative interdisciplinary research project must at least *claim* to be promising a fundamental reconceptualization of the scholarly landscape. But this insistence on developing a novel terminology–*Begriffe*, a word whose meaning hovers between 'concept' and 'special term'–for every new collaborative research project can in itself present an obstacle to scholarly communication between the academic cultures, not least because the fine terminological distinctions so relevant in German academic discourse are not always easy to communicate to outsiders, even within German academia itself, let alone to translate into foreign languages. And, unfortunately, this is no different where such novel terms do, in fact, point to exciting new theoretical developments in the humanities, something which actually occurs more frequently than skeptics deem likely.

Before I proceed, a *caveat* is in order: My deliberately pointed depiction of the German third-party funding system serves a specific rhetorical purpose, and constitutes an attempt to see the German system from an outsider's perspective. This polemical sketch should by no means be mistaken for out-and-out criticism. Indeed, the opposite is true, as I myself have benefited considerably from the opportunities the system offers, both intellectually and career-wise. It has brought me together with inspiring colleagues from neighboring departments on a regular basis whose interests and ideas I would have remained much less aware of. And it made available the funds for a string of workshops and conferences that brought English-speaking colleagues to Berlin who might otherwise not have been interested in an exchange. And many of these contacts, established thanks to projects funded by the DFG, have had a beneficial impact on my own work and that of my junior colleagues and graduate students.

Now, as a scholar of Medieval *English* Studies operating in Germany, I could, theoretically, afford not to be overly concerned with the lack of contact between the fields of medieval English literature in the Anglophone world, on the one hand, and medieval German literature, on the other. Like most of my German colleagues working in the discipline of Medieval English Studies, in purely methodological and theoretical terms, I have long since decided to let my rubber dinghy bob up and down in the wake of the grand fleet of Anglophone Medieval Studies. In purely institutional terms, however, my loyalties must primarily lie with the Germans, or else I would not be able to participate in the all-important third-party funding activities. For the German student of medieval English literature, a certain institutional schizophrenia is thus almost unavoidable–and sometimes even fun, if only because it provides regular opportunities to indulge in the ritual of shocking my colleagues from Medieval German Literature.

Besides, the German system itself seems to have begun to tacitly acknowledge the chasm that divides the discipline of Medieval English Studies from the rest of medieval studies in Germany. As already indicated at the beginning of this article, the few remaining professorships of medieval English literature in the German-speaking countries are increasingly being filled, post by post, with scholars whose careers and intellectual outlooks have been shaped in British and/or North-American universities. And because Brexit, Donald Trump, and, more recently, Covid-19 have considerably raised the attractiveness of Germany as a place of work for native speakers of English in general, and for medievalists from Britain and America in particular, this development is bound to continue. Factor

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in a number of facilitating advantages, such as the German educational, pension, and health-insurance systems, and we can be certain that these conditions will increasingly draw high-quality scholars from English-speaking countries to Germany. This development will not be entirely welcomed by German graduate students who are compelled to witness how some of the time-honored rituals of the German university tradition (such as the *Habilitation*, the 'professorial dissertation'–similar, but not quite the same as a second book), rituals they are required still to adhere to, are tacitly being dispensed with as criteria in order to make things easier for applicants from other academic cultures. So, ironically, the comparative institutional irrelevance of medieval English studies in Germany could, in the medium term, come to an end due to a wholesale takeover of the field by appointees from Britain, the US, Canada, or Ireland, in effect amounting to an Anglophone appropriation of this particular section of German academia.

While such a development might, indeed, end the comparative institutional isolation of Medieval English Studies in Germany, it is by no means certain that it would in any way contribute to bridging the gap between the study of medieval English literature as practiced in Anglophone countries and the study of medieval German literature as practiced in Germany. Medieval English Studies in Germany would simply become an outpost of British and American academia with the divide between the two academic systems not running through the Atlantic Ocean, the English Channel, or the North Sea anymore, but rather within a given German university's humanities faculty itself, or, more specifically: in the hallway or staircase dividing the English department from the German department. And yet, this is where the German imperative to acquire third-party funding within large-scale collaborative research centers may actually become effective in new and unexpected ways. In the long run, even scholars reared in the way things are done in the English-speaking world might succumb to the pressures exerted by the German system and begin to enter into dialogue with their colleagues from neighboring disciplines. The consequences might be a greater degree of mutual understanding and quite possibly even a greater willingness to accept and tolerate scholarly mentalities and methodologies inherent in different academic cultures. The many students from the US, Canada, Britain, and Ireland doing their English master's degrees at the Freie Universität Berlin may already be contributing to such a development, since they force us teachers to adapt to the ideas and approaches that were instilled in them when they did their BAs in their home-countries, just as they find themselves being fascinated by some of the perspectives they encounter in Germany, especially if they learn German and bring themselves to leave the cozy confines of the English department, exposing themselves to the wider realms of German academic culture. And since there are always a few students who decide to return to the English-speaking world in order to acquire a PhD, they may even continue their roles as facilitators of dialogue between the different academic cultures. Pedagogy would thus be working bottom up just as much as top down.

In recent years, there have been calls for re-conceiving Medieval Studies as a global discipline; for instance by focusing on transnational entanglements, by scrutinizing the different borders and contact zones that shaped medieval cultural exchange, or by addressing the particular power structures prevailing between ca. 500 and 1500–power structures that rendered Britain marginal, especially if compared to its imperial position in the nineteenth century. Such a global Medieval Studies, I argue, should extend beyond the medieval phenomena we investigate and embrace an understanding of how our approaches to our objects of study came into existence in the first place. While it is definitely important to situate the study of Early Medieval and Middle English Literature within larger cultural

and historical contexts–contexts capable of showing us how inadequate the Eurocentric views are that contributed to shaping the discipline(s) of Medieval Studies–we must also realize that even as we reconceive the Middle Ages in global terms, we still often do so on the basis of very particular national preconceptions. And these national preconceptions remain so powerful precisely because they have become naturalized and are reinforced by institutional structures we rarely question as such, simply because we grew up with them. One way of understanding the degree to which our perspectives are shaped by the scholarly traditions and disciplinary blinkers of the academic systems we take for granted, is to expose ourselves to other scholarly approaches developed in other academic systems. Perspectives actually vary considerably even within the supposedly Eurocentric unity of Western Medieval Studies because the scholarly traditions they derive from prove to be so different. Regarding a truly global Medieval Studies, an understanding of the methodological fault-lines even within the study of the Western Middle Ages itself ought to become a fundamental goal of academic pedagogy. The current transformations Medieval English Studies in Germany is undergoing may eventually contribute to this goal.

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