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Being a Medievalist in the Age of the Pandemic

Matt Clancy
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1787-6274
Birkbeck, University of London, United Kingdom

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Matt Clancy
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1787-6274
Birkbeck, University of London, United Kingdom

Abstract

Matt Clancy writes about how the pandemic shaped his career choices on completing his PhD, and argues that the present challenges facing the profession mean that we should reconsider how we define ourselves as medievalists. He affirms that it is possible to finish a PhD in a pandemic and tentatively begin a career, and that an apparent lack of correspondence between experience as a medievalist and seemingly non-medievalist employment diminishes neither his identity as a medievalist, nor his engagement with the field. The pandemic has made ever more apparent that being a medievalist cannot be limited to those with academic positions clearly marked as 'medieval'. Clancy further suggests that the enforced change from teaching in person to teaching online is well-suited to the skills medievalists have already developed through teaching Chaucer and other medieval texts, since both present a strange version of the familiar.

I completed my PhD in medieval literature in spring 2020, and one year later, I find myself ready to reflect on how my career has developed in unexpected ways, overshadowed by the pandemic as much as the wider challenges faced by our profession.[1] Clearly, I am far from alone in having reassessed my own plans and ambitions in light of the difficult circumstances in which I entered the job market, and it is my hope that this reflection might provide inspiration for colleagues facing similar challenges. In the year since I completed my PhD, my work has moved incrementally from teaching Chaucer and the medieval literary canon to the development of digital education tools. As a result, I find myself fascinated by how the skills that we develop in teaching medieval literature can consequently strengthen and feed into the skills we need to teach online, and *vice versa*.

How to Finish a PhD in a Pandemic

When we teach the works of Chaucer and other medieval writers, we are presenting students with texts in a language and form that is at once both different and familiar: Chaucer's works are English literary texts, most often studied as part of an English Literature degree, but not written in the English we and our students speak and read in our day-to-day lives. Middle English is the same language but different, with the differences heightened for undergraduate students reading it for the first time. There is a clear parallel with teaching online, which arguably has the same value and importance as if it were taking place in person, but with differences which affect us as teachers just as much as our students. It is a format with which most people are not yet fully comfortable, and that is understandable: many of us hope that we never have to become any more familiar with the changes we have lived with throughout the pandemic.

The transferable skills we develop through our research and teaching can open up new opportunities for medievalists looking for work both within and outside our traditional idea of our profession. I encourage all medievalists (whether they work inside or outside of the higher education sector to any degree) to recognize that our skills need not be limited to classrooms focused on medieval topics. I hope it is uncontroversial to suggest that there are more medievalists than medievalist jobs, and that in academia in particular, the field of medieval studies is endangered by shrinking enrolment and funding (Lampert-Weissig et al. 1). I cannot pretend that I was under any illusion about the prospects of employment after completing my doctoral research. I was fortunate, however, in that I was a mature student, and I had other experience to fall back on if needed. Throughout my research, I remained optimistic that the key skills developed in completing a PhD (research, time management, organisation) would stand me in better stead than if I had not returned to study, as suggested by academic career service studies (University of Michigan and Jobs.ac.uk).

However, this sense of cautious optimism fell with the arrival of the pandemic, the cost of which is still being counted even as vaccinations are rolled out around the world. Many of the impacts we

[1] This article describes my experience of job-hunting in the UK, having completed my PhD in medieval literature during the first wave of the pandemic. I was fortunate to receive support from friends and colleagues during this time, and many of their ideas and suggestions are reflected in this work. My thanks are due to Anthony Bale, Julia Boffey, Isabel Davis, Lou Horton, Eva Lauenstein, and Megan Leitch.

have felt in the profession have been closely interrelated: witness the loss of livelihood, the closure of heritage sites and archives, the restructuring and increased precarity of the jobs that have survived. The reports of Historic England and London Economics for the University and College Union ('UCU', the UK's largest trade union for workers in the higher education sector) show just some of the impacts in the UK. The substantive difficulties faced by the higher education sector in the UK pre-date the pandemic, but have been heightened by it: the contraction of the sector has accelerated, and there are even fewer jobs in teaching and research, with the positions that are advertised being almost exclusively short-term contracts (UCU 2019). London Economics' report estimates that the sector has lost income of £2.5 billion due to the pandemic; the UK's Institute of Fiscal Studies suggests the total may be even higher (Fanning).

For context, there have been three national lockdowns in the UK in response to the pandemic since March 2020, with the third ongoing at the time of writing, and at no point in between has life returned to any semblance of 'normality' (as per Gov.uk 2021; a critical timeline of the UK government's changing policies is collected by Elgot). My own PhD examination came during the first such lockdown. Writing now from a safe distance twelve months on, I am relieved to report that I passed the exam and have gained full-time, albeit precarious, employment.

Ironically, my PhD research, on agency in Arthurian material culture in late-medieval England, prepared me to think productively about the new world brought by the pandemic. My focus was on the ways in which both real and imaginary objects invoked Arthurian cultural traditions in Western Europe, encouraging their users and audiences to enact Arthurian narratives themselves. Building on earlier scholarship (Carley, Loomis and Loomis, Vale, and others), I found that medieval sources suggested a performative belief in Arthur, which English monarchs such as Edwards I and III encouraged their supporters to enact, whether or not those followers truly shared those beliefs (Clancy). There are clear echoes of this medieval treatment of Arthur in the 'fake news' and 'alternative facts' that we have seen emerging as key Western political issues (McIntyre 1-15), perhaps most closely associated with the election of Donald Trump in the USA, and the Brexit vote in the UK, both in 2016, the year I began my research.

The similarities between medieval political propaganda and modern-day appropriations of medieval iconography are significant, as pro-Brexit campaigners and right-wing activists used George, the patron saint of England, as a figurehead. Anthony Bale notes that Robin Hood, "the persona of radical justice and truth to power", would make a viable alternative to George, himself "a highly contested image of victory" (Bale 2020: 14-15). So, too, would Arthur, another British heroic figure leading a narrative tradition of nationalistic military exploits. The medieval use of Arthur for nationalist propaganda clearly parallels the appropriation of George as emblematic of the political campaign to leave the European Union in the UK. The medieval crusader motif[2] is also adopted by the right-wing British *Daily Express* newspaper, which has repeatedly referred to its pro-Brexit campaigning as a "crusade" (Lister; see Bale 2019 on the implications of this choice of terminology).

I submitted my thesis for examination in January 2020, in what seemed at the time to be entirely 'normal' circumstances. I was concerned about looming industrial action in the higher education sector

[2] For further reading, see Vanessa Jaeger's article on the subject of Crusader ideology in the white nationalist agenda, 39-48 of this issue.

and local flooding in the UK (UCU 2020; BBC News February 27, 2020). It felt like there was no reason, at that time, to believe seriously that the UK or Western Europe would be affected by the virus in the ways that we were hearing reported from China: at that time, the UK's Chief Medical Officer upgraded the risk level from "very low" to "low"; less than two weeks earlier, the World Health Organization had stated that there was "no clear evidence of human to human transmission" of COVID-19 (BBC News January 23, 2020; World Health Organization). The UK ultimately entered its first national lockdown in March 2020 (BBC News March 24, 2020). For me personally, the anxiety of this time was exacerbated by my own unemployment, with the funding I had been fortunate to secure concluding as I submitted my thesis, and the income from my part-time teaching work not sufficient to live from. The question which loomed large, for both myself and the wider world, was what would happen next.

Medieval Literature and the Digital Academy

Like many PhD students, I taught undergraduate modules during my research. In the UK, the system varies between universities, but the School of Arts at Birkbeck, University of London, where I completed my thesis, offers this opportunity primarily for current PhD students, who are trained and remunerated for the work (sadly, neither of these is guaranteed at all institutions; Birkbeck 2021). I am grateful to have had this experience, particularly since the subsequent move to online teaching meant there were fewer such opportunities in the 2020-21 academic year. Having enjoyed my teaching work, I found myself considering how best to develop these skills further after my contract expired, particularly given the sparsity of teaching jobs available.

I am in no better position to offer solutions to the cruel cuts to teaching medieval literature than any of my colleagues (the most recent example in the UK at the time of writing was at the University of Leicester in January 2021; the NCS's response is summarised on its website, New Chaucer Society 2021). However, I have been thinking about the skills that we develop through teaching and research, and how these can be transferred in ways which are desirable to employers in a highly competitive job market. In a global recession caused both by the pandemic and by the choices our governments have made in response to it, we inevitably find fewer jobs available for more job seekers, turning a long-standing problem for medievalists into a global challenge. I base my comments here on the situation in the UK, but the available statistics suggest this has been a consistent picture across Western Europe and the USA. During the UK's first national lockdown, its economy contracted by 19.8%, and its unemployment rate stood at 5% as of January 2021 (Office for National Statistics 2021). In the European Union, unemployment was at 7.5% in November 2020 (Eurostat), while in the US it was 6.7% in December 2020 (Bureau of Labor Statistics).

In teaching medieval literature, we use our communication skills, our linguistic skills, and our abilities to explain complex information and to engage and inspire our audiences. In researching, we use our planning and organisational skills, our ability to manage our own time, to think creatively and objectively, to advocate for our ideas, and to identify details that others may have missed. Whilst we may prefer to apply these skills to the study of medieval literature, they are all skills which are welcomed in any number of careers: civil services, heritage management, teaching and research outside of universities, and a wide variety of graduate recruitment schemes for corporate careers. If we present our achievements and abilities in terms of the skills developed, rather than focusing on the sometimes

insular specifics of our research outputs, then we find that medievalists are adaptable, and are welcomed far beyond the confines of the field within universities.

I do not wish to romanticise the experience of job-hunting. As the summer of 2020 progressed, I would happily have taken any available work regardless of context, in the interests of being able to pay the rent. However, I tried to keep in the back of my mind that whatever I was doing now did not have to be forever; if I was working entirely apart from our profession, then this did not have to be a permanent separation. Indeed, there was every indication that the UK, like other Western European nations, was in a position to return to economic prosperity with relative speed as lockdown restrictions eased (the UK economy grew 16% as it gradually re-opened in summer 2020: Office for National Statistics 2021). It follows that increasing unemployment rates should also be transitory, rather than a permanent decline. Troublingly, however, the same cautious optimism cannot be applied to employment in teaching and researching medieval literature at UK universities.

In this context, an ability to be flexible, taking on freelance work as and when it arose, proved to be invaluable, bolstered by not having to travel to different employers. There were some ideas which provided positive results quickly, and which I would recommend to colleagues facing similar challenges. Crucially, the essential functions of universities have continued throughout the pandemic: teaching and research inevitably moved online but continued unabated. This meant that there were still opportunities to be had in hourly-paid teaching and guest lectureships, as well as freelance examining work (while the UK cancelled its annual A-Level and GCSE exams for 18 and 16-year-olds, other qualifications such as the International Baccalaureate continued. The UK's approach, much criticised and frequently revised, is available at Gov.uk 2021). I also found fulfilling work in providing academic proof-reading, just as peer review and editing have continued: all jobs that can be safely completed from home. These are all different facets of the work that we might expect to undertake as part of full-time academic employment, but any one of these aspects alone has potential to provide income and experience if we are proactive in seeking out opportunities, and lucky enough to secure them.

Birkbeck took the pragmatic approach of deciding in advance that all its teaching would be accessible online for the 2020-21 academic year (Birkbeck *Coronavirus Information* 2020). Birkbeck is unique amongst UK higher education institutes in that it provides teaching in the evenings, enabling students to work during the day to support their studies. As a result, the college's student body is atypical in the UK, being more diverse by almost every metric (diversity at Birkbeck is addressed by Bale 2020, 13; the underlying data is published as Birkbeck *Transparency Information* 2020). As cases of COVID-19 in the UK dropped in summer 2020, the college's strategy may have seemed overly cautious, but the subsequent resurgence of the virus, and the difficulties experienced by universities which attempted to resume in-person teaching only for it to be quickly cancelled again, have shown the wisdom of the approach taken (Ferguson and Helm).

Moving the entire college's teaching output online necessitated an enormous amount of work at short notice, by both academics and administrative staff, and demanded a high level of resilience and adaptability on the part of students. Equally arduous but essential projects took place at other universities around the world at the same time (Times Higher Education 2021). In this climate of uncertainty, Birkbeck, in association with its local branch of the UCU, set up a 'Job Protection Scheme', through which staff, including hourly-paid lecturers such as myself, might be redeployed to

alternative roles, rather than being made redundant if their job was discontinued because of the shift to online working (Birkbeck *Job Protection Scheme* 2020). The loss of several existing positions was therefore mirrored by the creation of new roles essential to support the transition to teaching online. Birkbeck set up its own digital education transformation project (the college has published an overview of some of the progress made, Birkbeck 2017-20), and with it created a number of vacancies for 'Digital Education Associates', tasked with supporting academic staff in transforming their existing teaching materials into online resources, for example by providing tuition and technical support for the various digital learning tools the college had invested in: using Moodle as its underlying platform, with additional software such as Panopto for hosting videos, Blackboard Collaborate and Microsoft Teams for live teaching, H5P for building interactive activities for students, and Turnitin for online assessments.

I was fortunate, then, in being able to find work through this scheme, and I joined Birkbeck's Digital Education team at the start of the academic year on a short-term contract, which has been extended as the pandemic continued. I am conscious that on a CV the move from teaching and researching medieval literature to working in digital education perhaps sounds like a great leap, but in reality it has been a small sidestep, because I had already developed the necessary skills by engaging with the available software as a teacher during my PhD. This is why it is so important that we frame our experience as researchers and teachers in terms of our skills, rather than the specifics of studying medieval literature, because doing so enables us to broaden the horizons of where we might find work. This increases our chances of securing future income and stability, which may in turn support our ability to continue researching and teaching if we wish to do so.

Redefining Our Profession

Whether consciously, willingly, or neither, we have developed new skills through the necessity of adapting teaching so that it succeeds when we cannot meet our students in person. As medievalists, we are particularly well-placed to do this, though by no means uniquely so. We can draw on, and benefit from, the parallels between teaching medieval literature and teaching online that I have suggested earlier in this reflection. There are familiar teaching resources which remain as useful as ever when modifying our teaching, because they are already online: the Harvard interlinear translations of Chaucer's works, for example, or the *Middle English Dictionary* (Harvard University and University of Michigan; the NCS website has a comprehensive overview of online teaching resources, New Chaucer Society 2021). Other approaches to teaching can be approximated using the kinds of software mentioned above; group discussion can be facilitated using 'breakout group' functions in online meeting platforms, and the information conveyed in a 'live' lecture can be conveyed in a recording. Inevitably, however, there are aspects of our teaching that we cannot reproduce or approximate online: primarily (but not exclusively) the sense of community and companionship we feel when we meet in person, which no amount of Zoom calls can replicate (Jiang).

However, the skills that we have developed during the pandemic are adaptable. They can present new opportunities for us as medievalists, and perhaps lead us to redefine how we consider our profession, and our place within it, particularly those of us who must seek new employment at this challenging time. Some may wonder whether a medievalist is still a medievalist if they are not actively involved in the pursuit of research or teaching, whether due to the pandemic, or the many other

challenges facing the profession. I strongly believe that they are, for to close the door on colleagues now working outside of traditional academia would leave us with a rapidly dwindling profession. If we actively consider and include all colleagues (and I include myself here) who have experience and interest in medieval studies, then we will have a broader and richer profession, and perhaps even one that is growing rather than shrinking. The NCS has a strong track record of inclusivity, which is sadly not reflected by all the professional bodies to which we might belong. Hopefully other institutions can follow the NCS in widening the boundaries of our profession (New Chaucer Society 2017-19).

There is much that we can learn from our experience of teaching online during the pandemic, and which we can take forward as we hope to see our lives slowly return to normal. It seems unlikely that any university will stop making use of the learning technologies we have grown familiar with over the past year, even once it is possible to safely resume in-person teaching. There are clear benefits to students in terms of the flexibility and accessibility of online teaching, just as there are many opportunities for us to develop our skills in terms of finding new ways of reaching students (the initial response to these changes from students at Birkbeck has also been largely positive: Birkbeck *IT Services* 2020). Similarly, responding to the pandemic has helped us develop skills that create new opportunities in areas of work we may not have foreseen.

I have three specific intentions in sharing my experiences here. First, to reaffirm that it is possible to finish a PhD in a pandemic and tentatively begin a career, however precarious those first steps feel. I understand that a lot of NCS members in the early stages of their careers are facing similar challenges, and I hope that sharing our experiences in this ongoing conversation will enable us to learn from each other. Secondly, to suggest that the enforced change in our work from teaching in person to teaching online is well-suited to the skills we have already developed through teaching Chaucer and other medieval texts, because teaching online, like Middle English, is something that is at once both familiar and strange. Finally, that we should think about how we define 'medievalist' as a profession, in view of the rapidly changing circumstances we now work in. I certainly think of myself as a medievalist, and medieval studies do not have to be part of my regular paid employment to meet that definition. I hope that I am not alone amongst NCS members in taking this view.

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