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Editors' Introduction: Pandemic Experiences and Making the Medieval Relevant

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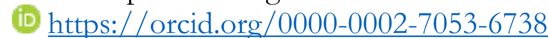
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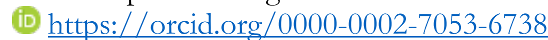
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Abstract

This issue brings together articles and essays that discuss, from different vantage points, the relevance of teaching medieval literature at a time of increasing global challenges and uncertainties. Marcel Elias and Ardis Butterfield, John Lance Griffith, Vanessa Jaeger, and Stacie Vos focus on different teaching and learning contexts by offering concrete suggestions for the classroom. Our special cluster on "Pandemic Experiences" features nine essays that reflect on what it meant (and means) to be teaching and researching amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, with contributions by Jonathan Fruoco, Kristine Larsen, David Lavinsky, Katrin Rupp, Kara Crawford, Kathy Cawsey, Suzanne Edwards, as well as Sandy Feinstein and Bryan Wang. In our new rubric "Conversations", we continue discussions from previous issues: in her essay on the Humanities Lab, Patricia Ingham picks up on Carolyn Dinshaw's call for experimentation, and Emma Margaret Solberg responds to our issue 2.1 on "#MeToo, Medieval Literature, and Trauma-Informed Pedagogy."

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Editing a journal is full of surprises: one never quite knows what to expect. This issue of *New Chaucer Studies: Pedagogy and Profession*, our second to be released in 2021, turned out to be a tremendous learning experience for the editorial team. It features a number of 'firsts': our first thematic cluster, which is on pandemic experiences, and a new forum called 'Conversations,' which contains response essays to our two previous issues. While the current issue does not attempt to provide one coherent line of argument, there is an implicit concern that runs through all of the contributions: how can we ensure the relevance of teaching and engaging with medieval literature in view of ongoing political, economic, ecological, and health threats and uncertainties? Put differently: why does medieval literature matter, at this very moment in time? And how can we best communicate its relevance in the classroom and in our research?

Pandemic Experiences: The Consolation of Literature

The past 18 or 19 months have been fundamentally shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic. The effects on instructors and students have been decisive even as we remain unsure about the extent to which these are long-term changes for teaching, conducting research, and engaging with the academic community. In a special call we issued last year, we invited educators in the field of medieval literature to share their experiences. Our call was inspired by other projects that have assembled responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, such as *The Decameron Project*, the short reflective pieces collected by Richard Utz for *Medievally Speaking*, and the two-part collection called "Journal of a Plague Year" that features contributions by scholars of English and American literature, many of them early modernists (Hartley et al.; Andreev et al.). *New Chaucer Studies: Pedagogy and Profession* also ran a series of short essays in our Substack newsletter on teaching during the pandemic.[1] How have we reacted and responded to the pandemic as teachers and scholars? How will we in the community of medievalists remember the impact of this global crisis? We have assembled nine essays that consider the writers' pandemic experiences in the educational and scholarly contexts where they work, learn and create. Our contributors live and work in Canada, France, Switzerland, the U.K. and the U.S. They are PhD students, early career researchers, established professors, and secondary school teachers. They have all experienced hard times during various lockdowns and governmental as well as institutional restrictions. Yet they also highlight that the pandemic unleashed a surprising amount of support, understanding, and sense of community among colleagues and between instructors and their students. Often, a shared interest in medieval literature provides the common ground, not least because the engagement with medieval texts can open up new pathways for reflecting on the pandemic situation, but also for new approaches to teaching collaboratively.

The order of the nine pandemic reflections is not alphabetical but thematic: around the disruptions to regular work, consolation, collaboration, and thoughts for the future. The first essay, "A Tale of Two Competing Pandemic Experiences" by Jonathan Fruoco, describes the effects of the pandemic on a scholar in a precarious professional position. Despite the stereotype of the ivory tower,

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[1] See https://ncspedagogyandprofession.substack.com/p/post2019.

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scholars do not actually thrive when forced to work in isolation from their colleagues and students. The difficulty of teaching hands-on classes online is shown by Kristine Larsen in "Virtual Astrolabes and Virtual Pizza." Larsen, a professor of Physics and Astronomy, sees too many losses when it comes to teaching the functions of an astrolabe virtually: "virtual astrolabes are like virtual pizza—pretty to look at, but not particularly satisfying" (71). David Lavinsky's contribution "Screen Time – Or, Awaiting the Worst, Remotely" likewise problematizes the new—remote—work contexts in which a lack of physical experience, for instance in handling manuscripts, changes the realities of teaching and learning. He makes a case for "trying to strike the proper balance between page and screen" (74). Katrin Rupp, in her essay "The Consolation of Literature: Reading Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* during the COVID-19 Pandemic"—from which we have borrowed the subtitle of this section—provides an example of how teaching remotely can become a success: she recounts how class on the *Decameron* brought to light the striking similarities between medieval responses to the Plague and those to COVID-19. Engaging with these medieval experiences made Rupp's students aware of the power of literature: they came to see that "the idea that reading can serve as a cure for dis-ease is not just a literary convention, it is also grounded in lived experience" (79). The consoling dimension of medieval literature in particular is also central to Kara Crawford. In her essay "Reframing the Past: Reflections on Teaching Secondary Students during the Pandemic", she also argues for teaching the *Decameron* as well as the Middle English poem *Pearl*. These texts not only allow to bring the medieval past and the present together, they are also well-suited for trauma-informed teaching.[2]

The comforting function of medieval literature takes centre stage also in Kathy Cawsey's piece called "Lament during the Pandemic." Weaving passages from the Old English Elegies and *Beowulf* into her text, she demonstrates how on the affective level the early English experiences of isolation and devastation can still be a source of consolation. This consolation of (medieval) literature is also central to Suzanne Edwards. In her essay "Graveside Singing: Medieval Debate Poetry and the COVID-19 Pandemic," she discusses her collaboration with composer Mark Volker, performance ensemble Chatterbird, and visual artist Christine Rogers to write and perform a chamber music based on two medieval body-soul debate poems, "Als I lay in a winteris nyt" and "In a thestri stude I stod." The creative collaboration had already been planned before the pandemic, but the COVID-19 crisis intensified the work as it allowed for shedding new light on the poems and their relevance for coping with traumatic experiences today. The essay by Sandy Feinstein and Bryan Wang, "Mixing Medievalism and Molecular Biology in the Age of COVID-19", is also the result of an unusual collaboration that took on a new turn during the pandemic: Feinstein, a medievalist, and Wang, a molecular biologist, developed and taught a general education course called "From Beast Books to Resurrecting Dinosaurs", a class that integrates the approaches of both disciplines. In the form of a dialogue, the two authors explain the idea for the class. The full schedule and reading list of the course round off the contribution.

The final essay returns to some of the precariousness of the first, but with strategies for thinking into the future. In "Being a Medievalist in the Age of the Pandemic," Matt Clancy, who completed his PhD in spring 2020 in the U.K., takes a critical perspective on what it means to be on the job market

[2] On trauma-informed pedagogy, see Barrington et al. in the introduction to *New Chaucer Studies: Pedagogy and Profession* 2, no.1 (2021).

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amid a global pandemic. He focuses on the skills we have as medievalists, especially those that are well suited for online teaching, but that may also be useful beyond positions in academia. He closes his essay by urging us to rethink our profession as medievalists in view of the new working environments and makes a case for an inclusive understanding of what it means to be a medievalist.

Learning from Mistakes: Making the Medieval Relevant

Becoming and being medievalists in these times certainly require us to be attuned to the changes and challenges of the ways we work and live, and to engage critically with them. Each of the essays we share demonstrates the ways in which pedagogy can help the community of medievalists to learn and grow. The first essay in our 'Articles' section, "Approaches to Teaching the 'Multicultural Middle Ages'" by Marcel Elias and Ardis Butterfield, introduces a class the two authors taught together at Yale, that decentered the focus on the European Middle Ages and opened up the oftentimes very narrow geographical boundaries. The course content is highly ambitious in that it systematically and rigorously sets more 'traditional,' European-centered texts and perspectives next to non-Western ones, such as those from the Arab world and North Africa. Student responses demonstrate that such a class can be extremely eye-opening and rewarding—and hopefully, in the long term, normalize a more inclusive understanding of 'the' Middle Ages.

Further articles, by John Lance Griffith, Vanessa Jaeger, and Stacie Vos, consider pedagogical contexts for making medieval literature relevant. John Lance Griffith teaches at a technological university in Taiwan, which is a challenging environment in which to teach medieval European literature. In his contribution "Medieval Studies and Medievalism: Choosing Good Texts for ESL and General Education Students in Taiwan", he describes how he uses medievalism, by means of the example of Brian Helgeland's movie *A Knight's Tale* (2001), as a useful tool to familiarize his students with European medieval material, including Chaucer's *The Book of the Duchess*. Vanessa Jaeger's essay on "Eating Up the Enemy: Teaching *Richard Coer de Lyon* and the Misrepresentation of Crusader Ideology in White Nationalist Agendas" picks up on right-wing extremists' misuse of medieval or medieval-inspired symbols and narratives. She outlines a teaching context for historicising and problematizing these issues, which centres on the popular medieval romance *Richard Coer de Lyon* and its use of the 'pork-eating Crusader' image. Stacie Vos, in "Divided by Flesh and Pens: Teaching Medieval Manuscripts Through Virginia Woolf," offers a course outline for a class that takes as its inspiration a little known short story by Virginia Woolf, "The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn." The story thematizes textual absence and presence and the arbitrariness of the archive, in particular with respect to female writers and critics. The course is situated at the intersection of Middle English Literature and Book History and invites students to think about textual transmission and the limits and challenges of the archive.

Productive Discomfort: Pedagogy as Experimentation

Vanessa Jaeger closes her essay with a "call to action to my fellow educators" (46). She urges medievalists to work together with their colleagues in other departments to ensure that students are introduced to an inclusive and differentiated image of the Middle Ages. Similarly, Stacie Vos argues that "the survival of medieval studies requires that we, together with our students, keep writing the field" (60). The focus on collaborative work and the advantages to be gained from working together

are also recurrent features in the essays about the COVID-19 experiences. The essay by Patricia Ingham carries the idea of collaboration one step further, to the structural level of the university, when she considers "The Shock of Tradition: The Case of the Humanities Lab." Instead of seeing the lab model as a problematic imposition from the natural science to the humanities, Ingham argues for embracing it. Indeed, as the collaborative work of the Chaucer Laboratory at the University of Chicago illustrates, the lab model has long been integral to medieval studies. Yet traditional interdisciplinary work tends to be dismissed as old-fashioned and therefore fails to excite university administrators. From the perspective of the dynamic interplay of tradition and innovation, the hype about the lab concept could be seen as an asset for medievalists. Ingham asks, "might we consider the Humanities Lab as, precisely, an explicit reclamation of our collaborative impulses, and thus the most recent example of the pursuit of innovation by way of a transformative engagement with tradition?" (128).

Ingham's contribution is one of two pieces that inaugurate our journal's new section called "Conversations." The rubric assembles essays that engage with previously published articles or whole issues of *New Chaucer Studies: Pedagogy and Profession*. There are no fixed rules as to the kind of engagement or the nature of the response: we invite and encourage authors to submit their ideas as they see fit. That way, we hope to continue the discussion about pressing issues in our field, and to approach topics from multiple perspectives.

Ingham's article is indebted to Carolyn Dinshaw's essay in the first issue of *New Chaucer Studies: Pedagogy and Profession*, in which Dinshaw makes a powerful call for experimentation, especially in structural terms, in order to change the nature of the university at a crucial and difficult point in time. Experimentation involves risking something, and being prepared to fail. Risking something, this time in the classroom, is also at the heart of our second contribution in the "Conversations" section. Emma Margaret Solberg's "Response to '#MeToo, Medieval Literature, and Trauma-Informed Pedagogy'" is a passionate and thought-provoking engagement with *Pedagogy and Profession*'s spring issue, which was devoted to #MeToo and teaching medieval literature. Solberg argues that past and present cases not only raise consciousness—for similarities, differences, discordances—but also invite identification and inspire activism. Taking up Torres and McNamara's reference to students as "critical co-investigators" (35), Solberg talks about "the classroom as a collaborative laboratory" in which she asks her students: "What can you see in the text that I can't? What can we do together that I can't do alone?" (137). Once again, it is the collaborative nature of interpretation and meaning construction that becomes crucial in engaging with difficult and challenging texts, whether the material is medieval (rape narratives in Chaucer, borrowed from ancient mythology; Chaucer's accusation of rape; *The Lais of Marie de France*; pastourelles) or contemporary (the crimes and trials of people such as Woody Allen, Louis C.K., Bill Cosby, and others).

Due to the nature of the material Solberg discusses, we decided to include a content warning on the title page of her article. The editors are very much indebted to Renata Flotow and Mareike Huber, the two student interns who supported the publication of this issue, because they brought up the idea of a trigger or content warning. In an engaged debate, we came to see that the generational, geographical, and cultural differences, both between the editors and between the editors and the interns, led to a very different appraisal of the case. In Germany, trigger warnings have not yet entered academia on a large scale, though there is certainly a heightened awareness of what trigger warnings

aim to do. While trigger warnings have become established in U.S. classrooms, opinions differ on their usefulness, which range from regarding them as a courtesy to an imposition (Knox, ix):

> Do they allow students valuably to prepare themselves to deal with disturbing material that could otherwise inflict misogynist, transphobic, racist, classist, and colonialist violent fantasies upon them? Or do they coddle students, preventing them from learning how to confront those histories, fantasies, and violences? (Joyrich, 189)[3]

Gen-Z students in particular are very much attuned to potentially triggering material and advocate for their use.[4] It has been argued that this new awareness among an activist-minded generation of students is symptomatic of "neoliberal individualization and depoliticization endemic to contemporary capitalism" (Lothian, 743). Such critique, however, may reveal more about the critics than about the case. Lothian, to be fair, summarises other scholars' opinion at this point in her article. In fact, she continues by turning the argument around: "What if the praxis of warning, broadly conceived, can be a method not to avoid such spaces and experiences, but to facilitate them?" (745). She sees trigger warnings as a chance to rethink and reshape the world.

The advantages of such a productive approach to content warnings notwithstanding, it is important to mention the problematic oversimplification of such warnings, as well as the stigmatization of marginalized groups. Lynne Joyrich draws attention to the lack of differentiation when it comes to the formal arrangements of the represented content that is warned against:

> questions of textuality, with its slippages, differences, and deferrals, are typically omitted from demands for trigger warnings (as if, say, representations of rape are all the same, with the same likelihood of producing a traumatic effect, regardless of the mode of portrayal, aesthetic treatment, narrative and genre conventions, and so on). (193)

Also, trigger warning demands are prone to be made in relation to that which tends to be unfamiliar to audiences, whether temporally, culturally, or aesthetically (Joyrich, 193). In particular, there seems to be a worrisome correlation between trigger warnings and materials of marginalized groups:

> The lives of members of marginalized communities tend to be traumatic. I wonder what it would mean if we lived in a world where trigger warnings were primarily attached to the works of women, racial minorities, LGBTQ people, and other marginalized groups? In the end, trigger warnings are essentially about relationship: What is my relationship as instructor to my students? How do I embody this relationship in my teaching? What are my moral obligations to my students and to the ethics of my field? (Knox, xvi)

We do not have an answer to these questions, but we recognize the urgency of dealing with potentially triggering material. At first, the idea of adding a content warning to a scholarly article felt new and unusual to us. But why should it? Given that trigger and content warnings originated on the Internet,

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[3] For the wider debate on trigger warnings, see e.g. Halberstam 2014a, 2014b, 2017; Maxfield; Smith; and Serano (in response to Halberstam 2014a). On a critical evaluation of the rhetoric of the debate about trigger warnings and the effects of trauma, see Robillard. She also draws attention to the possibility that faculty may be triggered as well, a context that remains not much discussed. A further useful resource is "Digital Archive: Trigger Warnings." A recent study by Bridgland et al. calls to question the efficacy of trigger warnings.

[4] On the generational divide in the debate, see Halberstam 2017; Maxfield; and Serano.

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in the context of fan fiction written from female and queer perspectives, an online journal such as ours aligns itself well with practices of reading and engaging audiences outside of traditional formats of publishing.[5]

At this point, we come full circle to our previous discussion of factoring in mistakes in our teaching. Kathryn Oleson speaks usefully of "productive discomfort" when teaching difficult and challenging material. Perhaps we should embrace the idea of a productive discomfort in our teaching contexts. As instructors, most of us will have made mistakes, such as misjudging students' levels of background knowledge or making assumptions about their reactions, affective and otherwise. If anything, the debate about trigger warnings has demonstrated the heightened awareness for potentially damaging material. If such material is the content of one's classroom, the effects can be particularly (re)traumatizing. By including content or trigger warnings, we do not prohibit talking about certain topics but prevent those who are vulnerable from being harmed, or at least helping them prepare for what to expect. Very much in the spirit of "productive discomfort," Joyrich closes her article with a call for courageous openness: "rather than avoiding triggers, we might, like the most adventurous fans, seek out the open exchanges, transformations, and recreations that encounters with charged material, whether in media or academic forums, can yield" (194). The present issue teases out some contexts and intersections of such exchanges and transformations. We remain committed, with all our contributors, to experimentation, to collaboration, and to critical reflection in our classrooms.

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[5] For the history of trigger warnings, see Knox, especially the chapter by Colbert. On the origins in fan fiction, see Joyrich in particular.

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