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Editors' Introduction: On Fragility, Institutions, and Reflecting

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Abstract

This issue includes a cluster of brief essays on editing scholarly journals, three essays on teaching, and two columns: How I Teach and Conversations.

So shall all times find me the same.

—John Donne, “A Valediction: of my Name, in the Window”

On Fragility

Katie Little

On December 30, 2021, in the midst of copyediting some of the pieces in this issue, I took the dog out and noticed clouds of smoke so dense that I couldn't see more than a few houses down the street. After getting online at the local paper to see the breaking news (I still kick myself for not checking Twitter), I learned of a grass fire that had started about seven miles away. (This fire is now known as the Marshall Fire [Wilson 2022]). I thought that the smoke had to be coming from much closer, and, indeed, although I had no way of knowing it then, the fire was at that point about one mile away, burning behind Target, where I had shopped with one of my daughters only two days before. The smoke was so choking and eye-watering, the winds blowing so strong, that we did not wait to be officially evacuated; about an hour after I checked the news, my husband and I threw some stuff, our dog, and our kids in the car and headed to my mom's south of Denver. When we finally got there, the long way, driving on surface streets away from the fire, we watched our town, Louisville, CO, burn on TV, waiting for the fires to engulf our daughter's elementary school and our house. We were lucky; we didn't lose our house (nor did the kids lose their school), but many in our neighborhood did. Not just their houses, but also and heartbreakingly, their pets. We have to walk or drive by the devastation every time we go to school or to work: the charred trees, the twisted remnants of trampolines, patio grills, and Christmas decorations, the collapsed fences, and gaping holes in the ground. If I walk down the path that I used to walk almost every day in the ten years we've lived here, I see the houses abruptly come to an end, and then, the burned spaces where houses used to be.

After such an experience, it is difficult to focus, to feel secure. The sense of loss and terror can strike at any time and at any place. I am, however, still teaching my classes and editing this journal and doing all the things I usually do at work. This return to routine is not exactly the assurance of safety that the trauma counselors advocated for our children in the days after the fire. I don't think I can ever see our house or our town in the same way again. Rather, routine is, for me, a way to rebuild myself within this new reality, this new knowledge of fragility. In this I resemble my daughters who watched the recent Disney movie *Encanto* (Bush and Howard 2021), not coincidentally a movie about a house, every day for a week after the fire and as often as they could after that. I don't think there is any going back to the way things were before. Whatever return there is will have to take into account that something terrible happened, that we are where we are now, after the fire.

On Institutions and Reflecting¹

Katie Little

Eva von Contzen

Candace Barrington

Lisa Lampert-Weissig

The need to reflect on where we are now may not be quite as urgent for us in our professional lives as it is for us as individuals facing the dire consequences of climate change, the fires and the floods, the heat waves and ice storms, the tornadoes and hurricanes. And yet, the one-two punch of the crisis of the humanities and then the COVID-19 pandemic makes it imperative to ask some difficult questions about our profession. At this point, “are there some things we would gladly let go of?” is as important a question as “what is worth saving?”

When we founded this journal, we saw one of our main goals as posing such questions, engaging in the kind of professional self-reflection made necessary by what is often called the crisis of the humanities. It seemed to us that things had gotten quite dire, and to continue on as if our institutions were the same as when we started our careers seemed at best short-sighted and at worst delusional. Although much of our day-to-day activity assumes that our work will continue relatively unchanged—there will be English courses to teach, graduate students to mentor, and jobs to apply for—the reality is that these foundational assumptions have been shaken. And, indeed, for some time. That crisis should now be especially familiar to our American readers in all of its particulars: the adjunctification of the faculty, the shrinking number of open job positions, and, of course, the declining enrollments (Hayot 2018).² These are facts, but there are also, of course, feelings. Even if we still have classes to teach, albeit much smaller ones, there is a widespread feeling that English Literature just does not matter anymore, to our students, to their parents, to American culture as a whole. The study of English, including medieval literature, is, it seems, not relevant or useful, as demonstrated by the titles of books that argue defensively that it is, such as *You Can Do Anything: The Surprising Power of a “Useless” Liberal Arts Education* (Anders 2017).

The foundational assumptions that we have about our jobs, the stability of our institutions, and our day-to-day work lives, have been tested even more during the COVID-19 pandemic. After a harrowing year of disruption, we thought that the summer of 2021, which was the summer of the vaccine in wealthy nations, would be some kind of return to normal, a reassertion of durability. Meeting in-person seemed to be once again possible, and we looked forward to doing so, maybe at the New Chaucer Society Congress, which had been rescheduled for the summer 2022. And yet, by

¹ The editors would like to thank Helene Schöwing for all of her help on preparing this issue for publication.

² The situation is similar in academic institutions elsewhere, including many European countries, where student numbers are declining and whole departments in the humanities are being forced to close down.

early 2022, two years into the pandemic, that confidence in a return to normal has been shaken, and the institutional foundations of our profession are starting to look a lot less solid. Despite the return to in-person teaching in the fall semester of 2021, many colleges and universities in the U.S. had to begin the spring semester of 2022 remotely. At some earlier point, we might have been able to understand such changes—the online conferences and remote teaching—as temporary, as health measures that would only last as long as the pandemic. After a certain amount of time, however, the temporary starts to seem (and may even become) permanent. Some of these changes could be seen as relatively benign or even positive. Future conferences may now routinely include remote and online options, as they have done during the pandemic (Bale 2022). While this new hybrid model poses new challenges and requires additional labor and skills, especially for technical coordination, it also provides access and affordability. There are, unfortunately, also less benign, less positive examples of change. For example, the pandemic is thought to have caused a marked decline in enrollments at colleges and universities in the U.S., and there is no way of knowing if that is a temporary bump or the sign of a cultural shift in the perceived value of higher education (Douglas-Gabriel 2022). Similarly, changes to university finances that were advertised as temporary may persist beyond the end of the pandemic; there may be no return to normal when it comes to replacing faculty who retired or providing research funds (Smith 2022).

There are two reasons to do this kind of self-reflection publicly and formally in a journal, in addition to the ad hoc and very fruitful conversations that happen at conferences and among colleagues and, at times, on social media. The first is to keep track of a profession that is changing in reactive and often ad hoc ways. In this sense, our journal offers a public record of what medievalists are doing, and, one might add, what is being done to them, in the early twenty-first century. This impulse for intentional and accessible record-keeping, along with our keen sense of the new challenges associated with editing this journal, drove us to think almost immediately about journals. Scholarly journals are absolutely central to the way we understand our research lives. At the most basic level, we've been trained to see research ideas as following a familiar trajectory from conference paper to journal publication. Relatedly, many of us were told in graduate school that we needed at least one journal publication to survive, or even thrive, in the job market, and so article writing shaped our research programs as much, and even more than, the books into which our dissertations would eventually evolve. In addition, given the relatively recent shift to digital formats, databases, and online presences, journals seem to reach wider audiences than books. For these reasons, we decided to invite the editors of some prominent medieval journals to reflect on their tenures. Their responses are collected here in the cluster "Reflections on Editing Scholarly Journals." What prompted this cluster had less to do with what these journals mean to or can do for individual members of the profession—the "what do I do to get published" roundtable, so to speak, the lens through which we might have seen our earliest encounters with journals—and more to do with what they mean within the profession, their institutional history. When and why did a journal emerge? Who shaped its purview? Our list of journals ranges from the very old (at least as far as scholarly journals go)—the *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, which, founded in 1897, can surely boast of being one of the oldest scholarly journals in the U.S. (*Publications of the Modern Language Association* was founded in 1884)—to the very new, *postmedieval*, founded in 2010. In between is the journal perhaps most familiar to members of the New Chaucer Society, *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*. Founded in 1979, it belongs to what seems

to have been a boom period for starting scholarly journals in the 1970s. Also in between are those journals that were founded (or re-founded) in response to particular intellectual movements within medieval studies: *Exemplaria*, founded 1989, and the *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, re-titled in 1996 (founded 1971). Finally, we included a journal that is not a medieval journal, *New Literary History*, founded 1969, because it is now edited by a medievalist and therefore can provide a perspective that bridges the specialized field of medieval literature and the wider discipline of English.

Although a journal is a kind of institution, in that it can have employees, a board (or boards), policies, a physical existence, traditions, and so on, it is also, as these essays make clear, a personal enterprise for the editors, even a mission. The essays touch on some of the same topics, such as responsible peer-review and mentoring early scholars, and yet each is entirely idiosyncratic, in the best way possible, yielding insight into the personalities behind the editing. There is no more hopeful aspect for the future of scholarly research, for the continued publication of such journals, than to show that the same questions produce such wildly divergent answers.

Even as these essays, and indeed the emergence of our own journal, offer hope that certain aspects of our profession can and will endure, that people still want to read others' work, that they still care about the medieval texts they read, the essays also underline the growing challenge to our profession: the lack of funding. Concern about funding runs as an undercurrent through all of the pieces—whether an editor can get a course reduction or funds to hire an assistant, whether the journal is accessible to those without library privileges or subscriptions, whether an institution is willing to support the journal financially, who the publisher is and how the publication process works. In times of budget cuts, humanities journals, like humanities faculty, seem particularly vulnerable. Just as enrollments are declining and the number of faculty positions is shrinking, so too is the financial support for scholarly publishing.

This official record can, and certainly should, also be a space for acknowledging the impact of the institutions within which we work or study on us as humans, not just as employees or students. Our personal experiences are, after all, as important to the history of those institutions as the policy decisions or the articles published or the courses taught. For this reason, we invited Siân Echard's "Background Noise," a moving essay written in response to the pandemic cluster included in Vol. 2 issue 2, Autumn 2021. Despite the institutional support that Echard received, support that many at other institutions did not, there was, in some sense, no mitigating the effects of the pandemic on teaching. Pandemic teaching was and remains a painful experience of the best we can do somehow not being good enough.

The second reason to reflect on our profession publicly, in this venue, is to provide a practical reformism, to offer concrete suggestions for the future. Each of the three articles ruminates on a particular challenge faced by teachers of medieval literature. In "Borderlands Chaucer," Elizabeth Schirmer writes of her teaching at New Mexico State University, using border theory to locate Chaucer not as a canonical poet but as a kind of outsider and observer to his time. In this way Chaucer's works become a lens through which the students can see their own experiences, as inhabitants of the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands, and, of course, their own experiences become a lens through which to see Chaucer. What is most strikingly useful about this essay is the way in which it approaches the end of the canon, the anti-racist curricula of the twenty-first century, as an opportunity instead of a loss: what new questions, what new identifications and challenges to identification can students find in this very

old poetry? Seeing medieval texts as resources for thinking through student experience also motivates the teaching that William Revere and Alison Gulley describe in their essays. In “Life with Concepts: Allegory, Recognition, and Adaptation,” Revere takes up the students’ struggle with, even distaste for allegory, and their attachment to complex, and to their minds, relatable characters, that they are not able to find in medieval texts. By using creative assignments that require students to write their own allegories, along the lines of Branden Jacobs-Jenkins’s play *Everybody* (2018), Revere helps students get into an allegorical mindset, inspiring them to think about ideas as ideas. Similarly, in Gulley’s essay, “J. K. Rowling, Chaucer’s Pardoner, and the Ethics of Reading,” student reactions to literary character drive the discussion. In this case, it is the Pardoner who provides an opportunity for students to think about the author who created him. Gulley’s students see the “fallible author,” a helpful term for the Pardoner coined by A. J. Minnis (2008) as a useful tool for negotiating their own conflicting responses to J. K. Rowling, famed author of the Harry Potter series.

Our new section, “How I Teach,” will also provide a space for more concrete suggestions around teaching. This is a column dedicated to exploring the textual aspect of what we do in the classroom, the choice of particular editions or translations. Irina Dumitrescu inaugurates this section with her essay, “Slow Teaching with Gawain,” in which she describes a seminar entirely dedicated to reading and translating one poem, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, in the original Middle English. Under the pandemic circumstances of remote teaching, close attention to the text kept the students together.

As each of these contributions demonstrates, we will not be able to stay the same in all times, let alone in this time of the pandemic, to return to the words of the epigraph. We can, nevertheless, give some thought to how we will change and how we will respond to the changes foisted upon us.

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