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Reflections on Editing *Exemplaria*, Part II: An Interview

Noah D. Guynn

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5788-3065>

University of California, Davis, U.S.

Elizabeth Scala

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3824-3599>

University of Texas, Austin, U.S.

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Reflections on Editing *Exemplaria*, Part II: An Interview

Noah D. Guynn

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5788-3065>

University of California, Davis, U.S.

Elizabeth Scala

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3824-3599>

University of Texas, Austin, U.S.

Abstract

In an interview with Katie Little, Noah Guynn and Elizabeth Scala reflect on editing *Exemplaria* during the years 2008–2018.

Exemplaria was founded as a journal of theory in medieval and early modern studies.¹ This dual mission signaled an important shift in the discipline: a recognition that theory should be in conversation with early historical periods and was not some alien interloper in literary and cultural studies. By 2008, when one of the co-founders, Al Shoaf, invited Liz Scala to take over the journal as part of a new editorial team, along with James Paxson, Tison Pugh, and Patricia Clare Ingham, the journal had firmly established itself around that dual mission. In imagining a second generation for *Exemplaria*, Shoaf wished to broaden the editorial team, to diversify its main stakeholders beyond the University of Florida, and to expand the journal to a quarterly. Becoming part of the establishment meant greater financial security: shortly before the new team took over, Shoaf sold the journal to Maney, an independent academic publisher based in the UK. This acquisition ensured an annual editorial budget and provided a nest egg that could be used to support the journal in hiring graduate student workers, funding travel to conferences, or hosting symposia.

The second editorial team marked an intellectual second wave. The place of theory as such no longer needed to be defended, and the team could attend more closely to refining and strengthening the journal's place in the field. What exactly did a theoretical approach to medieval and early modern studies involve? It involved an active and critical engagement in the field as changes were happening. One of the first changes the new team made was to add a fifth member, the book review editor, to help imagine and solicit book review essays on disciplinary-shaping and field-redefining publications. Mark Miller of the University of Chicago was invited to take up this role. (Mark would eventually be succeeded in this role first by Peggy McCracken, and then by Robert Mills, and finally by Hall Bjørnstad, who holds the position now.) After the untimely death of James Paxson in 2010, the editorial team invited Noah Guynn, a specialist in Old French, to join them, further shoring up the journal's disciplinary reach. The editorial team collaborated on a new mission statement in which the aims of the journal were more clearly defined. Crucial to discussions of the mission statement (and to the review of submitted essays generally) was the issue of how to define theory in relation to other avenues of inquiry, many of which (for instance, historicism and philology) were too often pitched as untouched by theory. The editors also debated how best to understand the genealogies of theory, broadly construed. Should theory be traced through the linguistic turn of the early twentieth century, starting with the structuralism of Ferdinand de Saussure? Or should it begin instead with the Frankfurt School and German Marxist critique? To what extent do historicist and philological approaches belong to these genealogies of theory, and how should the editorial team distinguish between scholarship that poses theoretical questions and scholarship that merely cites theoretically-informed criticism?

There was seldom agreement among the editors about how to respond to these questions, though the team remained committed to encouraging—and modeling—healthy, vigorous debate. Polemic was understood to be generative, and theory was always seen as an evolving mode of intellectual and disciplinary inquiry; indeed, the very circumstances of the journal's initial founding make that generative, evolutionary aspect of theoretical scholarship clear. In order to foster debate, the team sponsored two symposia during their time as editors, one in 2012 on “Surface, Symptom, and the State of Critique” (Cohen 2012) and another in 2017 on “The Way We Do Theory Now” (University

¹ Elizabeth Scala served as co-editor of *Exemplaria* from 2008–18; Noah Guynn from 2010–2018.

of Texas n.d.). Both were held at The University of Texas with strong financial support from a host of additional institutions, including Indiana University and Mary Washington University. The first was focused around the questions raised by the post-critique movement, notably the work of Bruno Latour (2004) and that of Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus (2009), whose special issue on “surface reading” appeared in *Representations*. The symposium marked a moment of convergence, although not necessarily agreement, around a set of theoretical questions. The second was more diffuse in focus, and, in hindsight, reflected a transitional moment, when the polemics about theory within the academy were about to be transformed by polemics outside the academy, and by debates about the politics of medieval studies (on which more below).

In terms of editorial practice, the journal’s evolving and polemical conceptions of theory required the editors to place considerable emphasis on curating essays and book review essays and on working closely with authors, most of whom were relatively new to publishing. As a result, the editors saw the submission and review process as a mentoring experience, even a pedagogical one: not so much sitting in judgment but supporting authors in finding an audience for their work, refining their writing, and sharpening the critical edge of their scholarship. As both Liz and Noah noted, *Exemplaria* has always received the vast majority of its submissions from graduate students and early career scholars. Helping that population succeed is a vital, if often implicit and unremarked, mission. Indeed, Liz was invited to be an editor because her very first article was published in *Exemplaria*, and she had worked closely with Al and especially Judy Shoaf on it. Judy was a silent partner in the founding of *Exemplaria* but did all the copyediting for the journal. Liz has written on Judy’s work particularly in “The Handmaid’s Tale: Editing Women Out of Medieval Studies,” a conference paper available on Academia.com (Scala 2010).

During their time together, the editors developed a deeply collaborative process for evaluating submissions, recognized for its quick turnaround. Initial discussions of an essay might lead to what is known as a desk rejection, a decision that the essay did not properly fit the remit of the journal. Typically, this category included essays that did not bring together theory and pre-modern texts. Aware that such rejections can be painful to receive, the editors were careful to explain why a particular essay did not belong in *Exemplaria* and to offer concrete suggestions for other publishing venues. Those essays that were deemed a good fit were sent to two reviewers, who were always chosen for their particular expertise. Instead of relying (as many journals do) on automated e-mails generated by editorial software, the *Exemplaria* editors personalized their communications, explaining to potential reviewers why they had been chosen and making sure to acknowledge—and value—the labor involved in peer review. In each of these stages, the editors were careful to keep the needs of the authors in mind. As Liz put it, “never let readers’ reports be a fortune cookie.” One of the four editors would be lead editor for a particular issue, but that editor relied on feedback from the others.

The journal’s interest in mentoring was also built into its operations. *Exemplaria* has long relied on graduate student workers to perform citation checks, meaning every bibliographical entry or quoted passage in the journal is verified for accuracy. This position was often highly coveted by graduate students, as it enabled them to gain firsthand experience with journal publishing. Some of those graduate students went on to publish in the pages of *Exemplaria*. The ability to hire graduate students for editorial work was also a benefit to the editors themselves. Liz was able to use the journal to recruit graduate students to the Ph.D. program at UT Austin and to make the case to her colleagues for

admitting students interested in pursuing medieval studies. The University of Texas generously provided an editorial stipend that relieved the students working on *Exemplaria* each year from teaching duties for one semester.

Both Liz and Noah reflect proudly on their time as editors: they are delighted with their successes in finding audiences for new and exciting work, in shaping new authors' voices, in redesigning the journal (for which they won a Phoenix Award for Significant Editorial or Design Achievement from the Council of Editors of Learned Journals in 2012), in establishing the journal as a lively and widely-read venue, and by extension, in helping support and shape the field of medieval and early modern studies. That pride can be seen in their establishment of their own essay prize, the Al and Judy Shoaf Award, and in nominating their authors' essays for other distinguished prizes.

At the same time, Liz and Noah register considerable frustration about the fact that editorial work is not typically recognized as intellectual labor. They also express nostalgia for an earlier, more financially stable time. Scholarly journals are more precariously positioned within academic institutions than they were when Liz and Noah took over and certainly more than at the founding of *Exemplaria* in 1989 (which was already a moment of precarity, as Al Shoaf acknowledges in his essay in this cluster). There is less and less money available from public universities, even large research institutions like the ones where Noah and Liz work. Although Liz was eventually able to secure a course release every other year and Noah was able to find funding for graduate student workers, much of their editorial work was, in the end, voluntary and unremunerated, added to instead of subtracted from their required teaching, research, and service. Both feel that this work slowed down their own research and delayed academic promotion. Noah contrasted the ad hoc institutional support he received with the far more substantial and reliable financial backing for *Yale French Studies* (YFS), where he worked as a graduate student. Housed in and funded by an Ivy League institution, YFS is able to maintain a professional editor on staff and to hire part-time editorial assistants.

In addition, and relatedly, the independent publishers of scholarly journals have also changed greatly through consolidation and standardization. The publisher, Maney, sold *Exemplaria* to the giant conglomerate Taylor and Francis in 2015. At that point, Liz lost the journal's close contact with the press and its upper-level operations, with whom she could have face-to-face discussions and work out any difficulties. Even more distressingly, the new publisher pressured the journal to change its stylesheet, imposing Chicago author-date, a standardization that made *Exemplaria* look like a journal in the social sciences. The editorial support offered by Taylor and Francis was also deeply inadequate, often introducing errors to scrupulously prepared content. The journal's editors were routinely obliged to demand multiple rounds of page proofs in order to ensure adherence to the citation practices of the field. This dramatically increased an already substantial workload.

These distressing external forces may or may not be aligned with, but they are certainly made more harmful by, what seem to be increasingly aggressive claims for the irrelevance of the medieval. Shortly before Liz and Noah were interviewed for this piece in February 2021, the University of Leicester (UK) made headlines by announcing that it would drop medieval literature in order to "decolonise the curriculum" (Regan 2021). If *Exemplaria* was founded out of a need to justify theory in the field of literary studies, including to medievalists, it now seems that medieval needs to be justified to the field of literary studies and that medievalists need to forge new discourses of intellectual and political solidarity. At this point in the interview, and so as not to end on a hopeless note, Noah

inserted an optimistic point from the perspective of French and Francophone studies departments. These departments are certainly beleaguered and understaffed, as support for the study of foreign languages and cultures has rapidly decreased in American higher education; however, this crisis seems to have motivated scholars to emphasize the need for theoretical discourses that can bridge disciplinary, and especially historical, divides. For Noah, new theories and theorists—such as Cedric Robinson, whose groundbreaking work on racial capitalism and the anthropology of Marxism is deeply engaged with the Middle Ages—can fuel new polemics, offering medievalists opportunities to make the legacy of the past relevant to the present (Thomas 2005). It is the hope of all the past editors of *Exemplaria*'s second wave that the newest generation of editors will find a way forward.

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