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Abstract

As the new Dean of Arts and Sciences at Bentley University and the author of *The Lost Book of Elizabeth Barton*, I am a different kind of medievalist from when I started my career in 2003. The story of that journey is not just about me but also about the massive shifts in our profession.

As the new Dean of Arts and Sciences at Bentley University and the author of *The Lost Book of Elizabeth Barton* (Brown 2026), I am a different kind of medievalist from when I started my career in 2003. The story of that trajectory is not just about me but also about the massive shifts in our profession.

I started my career, as many did, seeking out tenure-track positions. First with an eye toward anything I could get, and then, again, when I needed a job in New York. Indeed, I am lucky in that I have had not one but two tenure-track positions, and I earned tenure at both institutions. I got my first position at the University of Hartford right out of graduate school in 2003. Happy as I was there, personal reasons made a second move necessary. I needed to be back in New York for my partner's job, and I also needed to be near aging parents, especially my then very infirm father. I applied for and got a job at Marymount Manhattan College in 2010. I say "lucky" because I know, and I think we all know, that jobs in medieval literature (or the discipline of English more broadly) are more of a lottery than anything else. I had exceedingly talented students in my graduate school cohort at CUNY who did not end up employed in academia in the end. Working as chair of my department also drove home the fact that there are many well-published, excellent teachers with fantastic Ph.D.s on the adjunct circuit.

My faculty job at Marymount Manhattan College (MMC) was typical of many in academia. We were a small tuition-driven liberal arts college that lives or dies by student enrollment and retention. We had little to no endowment. I was able to teach within my specialty, but I also served as a generalist.Teaching seven courses per year, I felt like I taught literally everything: introductory courses, capstones, writing classes, research classes, theory, and anything and everything pre-1800. Despite this teaching-intensive focus, we had decent support for research: we had sabbaticals, and I got grants. As a result, I published regularly. Part of the advantage of working at MMC was being in New York City. I have long participated in a reading and writing group of New York-area medievalists. This group kept me current on scholarship, encouraged me in my research, and gave me a sense of being in a community of medievalists. It was absolutely part of my identity and how I understood and defined myself within academia.

My life as this kind of medievalist started to change, even come to an end, when Northeastern University "merged with" (actually acquired) MMC. In exchange for taking on and absolving the debts of MMC, Northeastern called the shots as we became Northeastern-NYC. This process is still ongoing, but as I write this essay, all MMC faculty are losing their tenure and will be made contract teaching faculty. Our faculty found out about this change in *The New York Times*, not from our President or from any administrator in advance (Barron 2024). Although some MMC faculty were offered three- and five-year teaching contracts, many were given only one-year contracts. In some cases, long-standing Full Professors were demoted to Associate or Assistant Professors to fit with Northeastern's practice,

since that institution ties its rank to the length of contract. Once MMC becomes an outpost of Northeastern, it will no longer service humanities majors; these will be found only at the main campus in Boston. There is apparently very little research support and no sabbatical leave for teaching faculty at Northeastern, and so those possibilities are now closed to former MMC faculty as well.

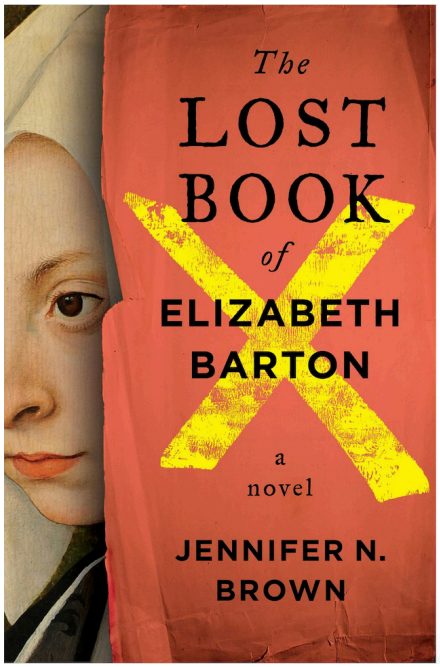
Is one a medievalist if one is no longer teaching anything medieval? What if their institution no longer asks for any research? I don't know the answers to these questions, although I imagine my former colleagues are asking some versions of them regarding their own disciplines and expertise. Will conferences be worth it if there is zero funding for them? To be sure, my main motivation for doing research was not promotion or keeping my job. After all, once I became a Full Professor there was nothing else to apply for. Instead, I was motivated by intellectual curiosity. Even though that motivation was internal, however, I still saw being intellectually curious as part of my job, and I had the limited external support necessary to follow that curiosity. My former colleagues will not even have that.

Unfortunately, I think MMC is one of several canaries in the coal mine. Many institutions are relying more on "teaching faculty" and adjunct faculty rather than tenure-track faculty. The number of institutions that are closing and merging is staggering and disheartening (Rembert and Albright 2025). Everyone feels the pressures of the market, the impending demographic cliff, the decline of the humanities. So, is there a way to be a medievalist here? A whole medievalist?

Yes and no. The end of my college (MMC) was an end to the profession as I knew it. It wasn't, however, an end to my being a medievalist. A random event led me to begin a new chapter, so to speak, in my life as both a medievalist and an academic. In January 2023, I went to London for a conference that was rescheduled due to a rail strike. Because I had bought a bargain basement ticket with British Airways, I had to go the week I had originally planned. No conference. Great, I thought; I'll work at the British Library; but because of the rail strike, the opening hours of the library were severely curtailed. So, I had a week with a lot of time on my hands, a hotel room to myself, no family, no teaching, and no agenda. (I feel like this is also a parable about the mental load of women). At cocktails with a friend, we discussed lost books, books from the past that once existed, that were referred to by contemporaries, but had disappeared. I said that I thought a lot about the book written by Elizabeth Barton — the Tudor era visionary who was executed by Henry VIII because of her prophecies concerning him and Anne Boleyn. All we have remaining are reports from those mostly antagonistic to her. Barton had long been at the periphery of my research and was a figure who had always fascinated me. I told my friend she would make a great subject for a novel. My friend told me to write it.

I laughed. And then I wrote it. I wrote about a third of it during that week in London, after my short hours at the British Library, in a tiny hotel room in St.

Pancras. It turns out, it's kind of easy to write details of historical fiction if you know that history really well, especially if you've dedicated twenty plus years of your life to researching and writing about that history. And then I finished that novel and sent it to an agent. And the agent liked it. And then my agent sold my novel to St. Martin's Press. After years in academia, it is quite a surprise to get paid for your writing! The novel will be coming out in April (2026), three years after I had the idea and started writing it.



I also leaned into my life as an administrator and threw my hat in the ring for some administrative positions. Since I couldn't be a medievalist (or even a valued faculty member) at MMC because of the market forces that had shut down my program and made my position precarious, I expanded my view to the Humanities more broadly. As a Dean, I thought, I could become a champion for the kind of critical thinking and inquiry that are the hallmarks of our discipline — and are often pushed aside by administration, not to mention by political forces. This past July, I left MMC to start my new role as Dean of Arts and Sciences at Bentley University in Waltham, Massachusetts. Imagine my surprise to find such a robust community of Arts and Sciences faculty at a business university, and not only that, but significant institutional support for the subjects that they teach. One of the virtues of my new academic home is that they do not base support for a subject and its faculty on the number of majors; instead, they believe (rightly) that the education and demand for classes by the students in these areas justifies support for departments. The philosophy at Bentley is that our future business leaders should have a thorough grounding in ethics, American government, sustainability and health sciences, modern languages, and literature (among others). Finance is the most popular major here, and the university began as an institution focused on accounting. Students are nevertheless required to take at least six courses in various categories of Arts and Sciences, and they recently have also been given the option of double majoring in them. This is a decision that has boosted the majors considerably on our side. In the Arts and Sciences, the number of full-time faculty has grown steadily over the last decade to around 200. This increase in the number of non-business faculty suggests a real investment in our disciplines and their worth to the students as a whole.

So, in the end, I've landed in two places I never thought I would in the beginning: as a novelist and as a dean bolstering the arts and sciences in a university focused on business. Now the challenge has become how to stay a

"whole medievalist" — keeping a foot in medieval studies while I am mired in administration (and maybe even beginning that second novel). For now, I am trying to block time in my schedule that can still be dedicated to writing/thinking/reading. I am also putting local medieval studies events through Harvard and other Boston area schools on my calendar. I am hopeful that I can continue to keep my head, if not my hand, in the field while I am also working for what I see as a greater story about how the liberal arts and humanities can find their way in the shifting landscape of higher education.

In that shifting terrain, where institutional priorities, demographic pressures, and market forces often threaten the foundations of the humanities, being a "whole medievalist" requires reimagining what scholarly identity looks like. I am no longer solely defined by my teaching load or my research output within a traditional academic setting. Instead, I find myself inhabiting a broader intellectual space — one that includes fiction writing, administrative leadership, and continued engagement with medieval studies through community and curiosity. The academy may change, but the core of what makes us scholars — our questions, our passions, our commitment to understanding the past — remains. To be a whole medievalist today is to carry that identity with us, wherever we go, and to advocate for its relevance in every corner of our professional lives.

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