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Abstract

This essay explains what happened when I began to pay attention to comics culture in the region where I live. Through conversations with students and with area artists, I learned that a massive printing facility that generated millions of comics and other texts used to occupy the land across the street from my university. In addition to helping me understand my surroundings in a new light, my forays into local history and comics studies have sent me back to medieval studies with a renewed sense of purpose. In response to corporate and institutional pressures to adopt new technologies uncritically, we humanities scholars need to foreground the collaborative processes by which both medieval and contemporary texts are made, distributed, consumed, and revised. We should emphatically and persistently explain why it is important for students — and indeed, for all of us — to communicate fluently, creatively, and independently.

What do you see outside your window right now? Figure 1 shows my office view during my first twelve years at Marist University in Poughkeepsie, New York. The combination of parking lots, big-box stores, passing cars, and occasional pedestrians didn't strike me as anything remarkable.[1] The only time I really took a close look outside was when snow or sleet started falling so that I could gauge the likelihood of an early-dismissal call from my kids' school.

Fig 1: Photo by author

As I'll explain below, eventually I began to pay a lot more attention to the parcel of land visible from my office window. As my teaching and scholarly interests expanded and as I got more involved in my community, I learned about comics history and cartoonists in my area and recently completed a book on this subject, *Drawn by the River: The Hudson River Valley as a Comics Ecosystem* (2025). In working on this project, I swerved away from medieval content. But I regard *Drawn by the River* as a logical, if unexpected, extension of my pedagogy and scholarship as a medievalist. The site-specific production and reception of texts, the interplay between words and images on the page, the collaboration of artists, letterers, and writers—all these issues are as essential to comics as they are to premodern literature. Exploring these topics in a contemporary regional context has sent me back to medieval studies with a renewed sense of purpose.

My interest in local history and culture took many years to emerge. I had my hands full teaching my specialty. At an American institution, many students (and some colleagues) regard medieval texts as culturally foreign, artistically primitive, and generally "weird." In the classroom, I sought to refute some of these stereotypes while acknowledging the grain of truth in others (the weirdness is gloriously real!). Helping students to understand unfamiliar languages, texts, and historical events and responding to their surprise and delight when they connected with premodern literature absorbed almost all my attention for the first decade or so of my teaching career.[2]

Consistently focusing on the Middle Ages also provided me with continuity amid the challenges of two cross-country moves within the space of three years.

[1] In fact, I used to hold the view in such low regard that in 2015 I moved to a new office across the hall with a window that provided a more conventionally scenic vista.

[2] Marist University historian Janine Peterson's engagement of students in "Medieval New York" projects provided me with an early paradigm for integrating medieval studies and regional studies. Peterson's work was, in turn, indebted to Halsall (1996-1998).

No one reading this piece needs to be told that geographic *dis*placement is an ever-more-prominent feature of academic life. In my own case, I landed at Marist University after three years at Western Washington University, a beautiful school that proved to be too painfully far away from my family and friends. Much closer to my home base in New Jersey, the Marist job required me to teach four courses per semester with the typical teaching-college mix of composition, general-education, and upper-level courses in medieval literature and the history of the English language. A few years on, the teaching load was reduced to seven courses (4-3) per year for tenured and tenure-track faculty; several years after that, I added an interdisciplinary first-year seminar (FYS) to my course rotation. Over time, I took on campus roles that made my workday a blend of teaching and administrative tasks. Throughout this period, I was also absorbed in co-raising three intriguing humans.

All these commitments meant that there wasn't much time for staring out of my office window. But my varied teaching responsibilities allowed new interests to sidle into my line of sight. When I added the graphic novel *Watchmen* to the syllabus of my general-education literature course in 2009, students' enthusiastic engagement with the work led me to experiment with comics in other classes as well. With generous support from departmental colleagues and campus librarians, I helped to launch a general-education Graphic Narratives class in our curriculum and began to have conversations about comics with colleagues in English and in other disciplines.[3]

Professional gatherings played an important role in the expansion of my interests, too. Stimulating and welcoming sessions on disability studies at the International Congress on Medieval Studies in Kalamazoo led me to develop an FYS on the subject.[4] Using comics within several iterations of that FYS heightened my appreciation for the medium. I have always loved comics. Teaching them in tandem with disability studies convinced me that the medium is particularly well-suited for representing a wide range of human experiences. Medieval works came to occupy an important place in my syllabi for both the disability-related FYS and in Graphic Narratives courses. The Bayeux Tapestry, for example, provided students with memorable representations of physical aging, trauma, and sexual activity. The vivid and sometimes violent content of medieval saints' lives gave new resonance to the term *graphic*.

The combination of medieval studies with comics studies generated particularly poignant discussions during the pandemic. The square frames of a Zoom room were just the right place to discuss Thomas Hoccleve's account of

[3] I am indebted to, Kristin Bayer, Jeffrey Canino, Angela Laflen (formerly of Marist), Nick Lu, Michael O'Sullivan, Henry Pratt, Donald Schwartz, and Deborah Tomaras for our campus discussions of the medium.

[4] Many thanks to the leaders of the Society for the Study of Disability in the Middle Ages for sponsoring these sessions.

mental illness and tentative recovery in "The Complaint" alongside similar events in Allie Brosh's comic *Hyperbole and a Half*. Whether within the structured stanzas of medieval poems or the panels of twenty-first-century comics, authors' forthright acknowledgement of vulnerability resonated with my students' and my feelings of dislocation. The weirdness of both comics and medieval texts provided us with a space for thinking through our own surreal, and often sorrowful, circumstances. During this period, I also collaborated with Gina Brandolino on *Medieval Meets Modern*, a series of videos within the *Middle Ages for Educators* project that grew to include contributions from scholars who described innovative cross-chronological teaching strategies.[5]

My turn toward local history emerged when I began to engage in comics-related conversations with community members beyond campus. In 2017, I was elected to the board of trustees of my local public library district. One of the district's signature offerings is a "Big Read" in which library patrons come together for events and discussions around a particular book. An extensive roster of programming supported the 2021 selection, Thi Bui's gripping memoir *The Best We Could Do*. That year I participated in two presentations related to the book and graphic narratives in general—one with a historian colleague, and one with two talented undergraduates. After the second presentation, I took a few minutes to explore the library's small but fascinating exhibit of art by area cartoonists. A few months later, I asked one of these artists, Summer Pierre, to speak to my classes. At the suggestion of a student, I invited comics writer (and Marist alumnus) Ron Marz to do the same. It was during these discussions that local comics production finally came onto my radar. I learned that the site across the street from my office was previously occupied by a massive printing facility that, in the middle of the twentieth century, churned out millions of comics and other printed works each month.

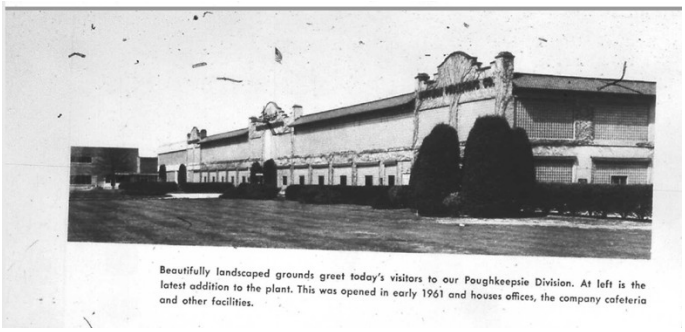
Beautifully landscaped grounds greet today's visitors to our Poughkeepsie Division. At left is the latest addition to the plant. This was opened in early 1961 and houses offices, the company cafeteria and other facilities.

Fig 2: Courtesy of the Wisconsin Historical Society

The plant, which locals usually refer to as "Western Printing," was the eastern outpost of the Wisconsin-based Western Printing & Lithographing Company. From 1934 until its closure in 1983, the facility in Poughkeepsie printed not just comics but also Little Golden Books, paperbacks, calendars, cookbooks, and maps.

[5] I learned a great deal from the ideas shared by Brandolino and by other contributors to the website: Richard Sévère, Rachel Linn Shields, Magda Teter, and Michelle C. Wang. Many thanks to Laura Morreale, Sara McDougall, and Merle Eisenberg for including our work within the *Middle Ages for Educators* project.

Licensing agreements with the Walt Disney Company and Dell Publishing made the plant a hub for printed media aimed at children in the second half of the twentieth century. As shown in Fig. 2, by the early 1960s, the facility was enormous—the size of ten football fields. At its peak, Western Printing employed over 1,500 people in the region, sponsored a wide range of sports leagues and community initiatives, and was toured by hundreds of local and international visitors each year.

Learning about the creative and commercial work that had taken place across the street from Marist whetted my curiosity about other comics connected to the Hudson River Valley. I soon found myself interviewing people who had contributed to the industry in many different capacities. It turned out that a wide range of writers, cartoonists, and editors had lived or continued to live in the region. In addition to exploring Western Printing and the experiences of some of the people who worked there, my research widened to include local cartoonists, writers, and editors. Cartoonist Melvin Tapley drew at least five comic strips while editing the Amsterdam News and serving for years as the president of the NAACP in Peekskill, NY. Wendy and Richard Pini co-created the hugely successful independent comic *ElfQuest* from their home base in Dutchess County. A whole network of Marvel- and DC-affiliated comics creators lived in or near the Catskills and regularly socialized with one another. Cartoonist Irving Tripp, who worked for decades inking the comic strip *Little Lulu* and other Western Printing works, lived for a time in a house just steps from my own front door in the city of Poughkeepsie (Fitzgibbons 2025; Jackson 2016; Cassell and Sultan 2015; Hamilton 1985). My research evolved into *Drawn by the River*. The book explores how the Valley's commercial, natural, and artistic environments fostered the work of comics creators, and how these artists, in turn, contributed to their surrounding communities. My work on the project has made me a much better-informed reader of the neighborhoods where I work and live.

Fig. 3: Undated photo of women colorists at work, and visited by children, at Western Printing. Courtesy of Michael Calenti.

Although undoubtedly different from my scholarship as a medievalist, these local investigations have added new dimensions to my teaching and research in premodern studies. Working on *Drawn by the River* sharpened my attention to the multifaceted collaboration involved in textual production. The more I learned about the writing, drawing, editing, inking, coloring, masking, printing, binding, and shipping of comics that took place at Western Printing, the more I was reminded of the arduous and multifaceted procedures involved in the creation of medieval

manuscripts. Acknowledging this complexity has many benefits. When we explore texts as processes instead of simply analyzing them as finished products, a wider range of creators becomes visible. Like women illuminators, writers, and printers in the Middle Ages, women colorists, editors, and cartoonists played key roles in the comics produced by Western Printing (Figure 4). Many undergraduates are as surprised by the active contributions of women in the first two-thirds of the twentieth century as by their fourteenth- or fifteenth-century counterparts.

Exploring regional comics culture has also intensified my pedagogical emphasis on the cultural infrastructure supporting the creation of medieval texts. While my research has attended carefully to the wide variety of dialects and manuscript contexts through which works such as *The Prick of Conscience* and *Dives and Pauper* have come down to us, I did not always include attention to place in my teaching. Now, however, I spend more time encouraging students to understand medieval texts as the products of specific places and interactions. We read *The Canterbury Tales* through the lens of locations discussed in Marion Turner's *Chaucer: A European Life* (2020) and map the geographic proximity of Margery Kempe to Julian of Norwich. My work on regional comics production has thus given me a more visceral appreciation of spatial and social networks, which has in turn opened up new territory in my medieval studies classrooms.

Encouraging students to consider the circumstances of literary creation carefully is more crucial than ever. The ability of large-language models to generate smoothly plausible prose threatens to detach students altogether from writing as an active process (Gerlich 2025). In my experience, students remain eager to express themselves in authentic and inventive ways and to interact closely with one another as they do so. We should lay bare to them the complex, messy practices that have generated manuscripts, comics, and other forms of communication. This knowledge not only provides students with richer questions to ask about literary texts, but also encourages them to value revision, collaboration, and attention to place in their own creative efforts.

Delving into comics studies and local history has sharpened my perception of medieval studies and of my professional priorities. Medieval studies requires us to ask foundational questions about authorship, audience, and literary production. At every turn, the field provides us with precedents for understanding our own complex textual landscape. It is this back-and-forth among disparate texts and time periods that excites me the most. While it is somewhat nerve-wracking to admit it in this venue, medieval studies functions for me more as a means than as an end in itself. Above all, I am in the literacies business. I want to explore the multiple modes of reading, writing, and storytelling that people have used across chronological and geographic boundaries. I want students to identify and deploy their existing skills as novel-readers, game-players, meme-consumers, poem-writers, and so on. At the same time, I challenge students to try out new modes of

perception and communication, including "reading" the Hudson River Valley and more distant times and places.

With the deep understanding of aural, visual, and textual cultures provided by our professional training, we medievalists are well-equipped to engage in a wide variety of literacy-related discussions in our communities. Strategic alliances with libraries, museums, and local history groups can breathe new life into these organizations and into our own efforts. Comics have been a gateway for my engagement in these kinds of conversations. For you it might be movies, television shows, zines, cosplay, theatrical productions, games, or other media and events.

We medievalists all had to be weird and imaginative readers to choose our field in the first place. Confronted with often-faceless judicial, technological, and cultural regimes, we can engage our students and others in reading practices that are human, humane, and place-specific. Let's venture out into our neighborhoods and make that happen.

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