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Introduction: Who Needs A Whole Medievalist?

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Abstract

This introduction describes the editors' and contributors' various efforts to de-compartmentalize our lives as medievalists: both to explore different ways of being a “whole medievalist” in the rapidly-changing landscape of higher ed and to consider what we as academic medievalists might have to offer beyond the confines of our fields.

This special issue of *NCS: Pedagogy & Profession* is an attempt to de-compartmentalize our lives as medievalists, to explore links between different facets of our professional and personal identities—as scholars and teachers, workers and administrators, members of our families and communities. It began with my own curiosity as to why so many of us end up in academic administration. At my institution there are two (2) medievalists total, and both of us are currently serving as Department Heads, of English and of Art; our counterpart in History works in the Italian Renaissance (a distinction without a difference, one might say) and our relatively new President, whose Ph.D is, delightfully, in Comp Lit, specializes in twentieth-century Italian fascism but was tapped at some point to teach Dante and soon started publishing on the trecento, too (Ferme 2002, Ferme 2015). Anecdotal evidence suggests this tendency is widespread; a quick survey of my social media contacts pulled up two department chairs, two associate deans, two deans, and one associate provost—all medievalists—in addition to the two former chairs (Fitzgibbons and Vulić) and one current Dean (Brown) represented in this cluster. Is there something about our training or temperament as medievalists that inclines us to this kind of work—and, if so, what else might we have to contribute, both within our academic institutions and beyond?

An evening of gin and speculation with my colleague from Art yielded several insights. Medieval studies is a demanding, high-expertise field, more so (we flattered ourselves) than many in the humanities; as a result, we are comfortable with steep learning curves and juggling different kinds of work, both vital to surviving as administrators in the ever-more-corporate university. As medievalists, we are also used to advocating for our field in spaces where it is easily dismissed as “weird” or “useless” — charges levelled more generally at the humanities in too many spaces these days. What I myself have found most useful, as Head of a complex unit with several competing subfields and programs, is the perspective I bring as a medievalist to modern disciplinary structures. Because my own work doesn’t fit neatly into the subfield of “Literature,” as distinguished from “Rhetoric,” I have been able to bridge those two often-warring faculties in my department. More broadly, by virtue of my training I experience academic fields as historically contingent formations, ways of shaping knowledge that emerge from, and serve, particular cultural norms and systems of power. I like to think this perspective could help us think both critically and creatively about the shape of the humanities in the twenty-first century.

In fairness I should add that when I pose this question to other people, say to students or to colleagues in other fields, they are largely unsurprised that someone drawn to the Middle Ages would want to be a boss — to play mini-king or mini-pope of their own academic demesne. This less flattering association reminds us of the authoritarian uses to which the Middle Ages have been, and continue to be, put (see, e.g., Whitaker 2020). Nor is academic administration always benign.

Katie Little, my co-editor for this special issue, was rightly cynical about the growth (and high salaries) of administration in higher ed. But Katie shared my interest in what it means to be a medievalist and in how the declining value of medieval studies was playing out in the lives of individual scholars and teachers in the field. So, we began developing a call for a roundtable on the “Whole Medievalist,” and the topic opened up in new and exciting ways. We became interested in how we as medievalists might push back against the compartmentalization of academic life. How might we rethink the categories of research, teaching, and service that structure academic labor and reinforce a differential system of value for intellectual work? How can we open new pathways between and amongst our professional, personal, family, and community lives so that these aspects can engage and inform each other? What could it mean to be a “whole medievalist,” especially when the foundations of the profession we trained in have shifted in so many ways?

We were thrilled and humbled by the contributions of our roundtable participants and the conversation they generated at the Sewanee Medieval Colloquium in February 2025. (And we are grateful to Stephanie Batkie for making an exception and allowing the roundtable format.) Especially powerful were accounts of the personal and family histories that brought speakers to medieval studies, and how they have drawn on those histories to reshape the field in turn. Michael Calabrese argued for bringing “the full ethnic and socio-historical history of our families” into the classroom and inviting our students to do the same. His students at Cal State LA have brought their own translations of Chaucer and Langland, infused with the cultures and languages of East Los Angeles, to the International *Piers Plowman* Society (online, July 2025) and the New Chaucer Society (Pasadena, July 2024). Misho Ishikawa recounted how the Silk Road offered a precedent or history for her own multiracial family growing up, and how it inspired her to de-center medieval Europe and explore contact literatures of the Mongol Empire. In Ishikawa’s work, the Global Middle Ages becomes a site for theorizing multi-raciality both then and now. Neither of these talks, for various reasons, generated an essay for this issue, but both shaped the project as a whole, not least in what they have taught us as its editors.

The conversations that have emerged from our Sewanee roundtable model new forms of integration: of past and present, teaching and research, academic and personal or public spheres. We might say they are fueled by the desire to be more than one thing, without having to rank or choose. In her essay, “Going Local,” Moira Fitzgibbons recounts how a variety of factors in her life — an increased generalist teaching load, new administrative duties, the demands of parenting, a desire to invest in her community — gradually led her to comic books, first in her teaching and then in her research. Her most recent book, *Drawn by the River: The Hudson River Valley as a Comics Ecosystem* (Fitzgibbons 2025), tells the story of the massive Western Printing plant that used to operate in Poughkeepsie, NY. But

as her work moved increasingly into the twentieth century, the Middle Ages were never far from view; the parallels between the production of medieval texts and modern comics underlined for Fitzgibbons that she was first and foremost “in the literacies business”— an insight that might resonate with those who, like me, work closely with people in rhetoric and writing studies, or who regularly teach first-year composition.

A focus on the local and social contexts of literary production, medieval and modern, can help students embrace their own unique, messy, authentic ways of writing, and engage with writing itself as a collaborative process—a powerful counterweight, as Fitzgibbons points out, to generative AI. Where Fitzgibbons argues compellingly for “cross-chronological teaching strategies,” more traditional disciplinary approaches to teaching the Middle Ages can have a similar effect, as Katie Vulić shows.¹ As a new Assistant Professor at Western Washington University, determined to share the excitement and perspective she herself had found in the archives as a graduate student, Vulić set out to provide her students with access to medieval manuscript materials. Drawing on a wide range of connections, relationships, and skill sets, many of them developed as Department Chair, Vulić was gradually able to build a small but significant collection of manuscript fragments and incunabula — which her students can now learn to identify, describe, and catalog, contributing to the metadata published on the university library website. This kind of “experiential learning” with medieval manuscript materials has produced a few professional archivists over the years; more broadly, it has connected Vulić’s students with the materiality of textual production and made them savvier readers of modern as well as medieval media.

One thing I have learned from this project is that medievalists, while we can be fierce defenders of our field and its value, are also astute and savvy boundary-busters, able to see through and work around the “silos” that shape academic knowledge and the “ivory tower” that can isolate us from other spaces. One hope I have for this project (to risk a digression) is that it might nudge us beyond these well-worn metaphors. Raised in the Midwest, I think of silos as what keeps the birds out of your grain and the split peas out of your oatmeal. Rather than dump everything on the ground, we might turn to more controlled and creative agricultural metaphors, such as grafting with its pleasingly queer resonances in Shakespeare and beyond (cf. Kunin 2009). The image of the ivory tower, in turn, has always felt vaguely medieval to me, evoking the maiden in need of rescue from a monster — or from a husband. While neither the *OED* nor *Wikipedia* provides corroboration for that image, the phrase seems to come originally from the Song

¹ Vulić and Sidhu joined the project after Sewanee; we are grateful for both of their contributions.

of Songs 7.4, where it describes the neck of the beloved; connoting rareness and purity, it was associated in the Middle Ages and beyond with the Virgin Mary (see, e.g., Shapin 2012). So there is, I think, some patriarchal scaffolding to expose and challenge here.

The classroom, as the main point of contact between academia and the world outside, provides many rich opportunities for cross-border experimentation (cf. Calabrese and Schirmer 2024). Jessica Hines’s essay, “Medieval Sex Ed: Hermeneutical Injustice and Forms of Resistance in and beyond the Medieval Classroom,” is a case in point. Students often take Hines’s class looking for cross-temporal “companionship” in their own disappointing experiences of sex ed, especially growing up (as Hines herself did) in the American South. But medieval texts, they soon find, can also surprise us with relatively playful or fluid approaches to gender, sex, and the body. It is just this jostling of the familiar and the strange, Hines argues, that exposes hermeneutical injustice, the “silences and elisions” that limit our cultural understandings, and invites us to imagine other possibilities.

Being a whole medievalist, for our contributors, often means learning from the past in unexpected ways and spaces. In Hines’s essay, the medieval literature classroom offers a space for “playful exploration” towards “other ways of knowing” about embodiment, gender, and sexuality. For Kate Crassons, medieval texts have been integral to her thinking about disability studies and the neurodiversity paradigm. In her essay, “Premodern Perspectives, Disability Studies, and Public Writing,” Crassons rejects the “artificial gulf” between academic and public writing, finding deep connections between her own scholarly work on medieval poverty and her recent book, *Right from the Start: A Practical Guide for Helping Young Children with Autism* (Donahue and Crassons 2019). In Crassons’s essay, medieval guides for enclosed religious resonate with neurodivergent approaches to self-regulation, and the *Book of Margery Kempe* offers models for embracing non-normative ways of being. Without knowing it, readers of Crassons’s *Right from the Start* benefit from premodern insights about the formation of the self.

Crassons’s essay is an exemplary instance of boundary-busting, exposing and rejecting the myth of the university as ivory tower. Crassons’s body of work shows what is possible when the medieval and modern, the academic and the public, are able to converse on an equal footing. But for all the unexpected synergies that emerge in these essays, there remains a fundamental rigidity to academic labor, as Nicole Sidhu reminds us. In Sidhu’s essay, “‘Personal Circumstances’: Why I Left Academia,” the story of her own decision to leave opens up into a powerful critique of tenure as a gatekeeping structure. Creating intense competition for low salaries and encouraging adjunctification, limiting geographical flexibility and offering no opportunities for part-time work, the tenure system disproportionately excludes women, people of color, and other minoritized scholars, making it all but impossible for someone like Sidhu to be a “whole medievalist” within academia. In this way,

a system nominally designed to protect academic freedom ends up impoverishing the university, policing the boundaries of the ivory tower. In addition to personal freedom to parent where and how she wanted, Sidhu discovered a more vibrant intellectual life outside the academy than she had ever found within it. We are grateful to Sidhu for her willingness to return to this space and share her view from outside.

Sidhu's essay highlights the precarity and inherent inequalities of academic work in the twenty-first century, even for those of us fortunate enough to have tenure. Where Sidhu exposes the exclusionary mechanisms of tenure as a system of labor, Jen Brown reminds us that even the promises made to those of us on the "inside" can prove illusory. Brown's tenured position dissolved when her employer, Manhattan Marymount College (MMC), merged with the behemoth Northeastern University; humanities degree programs on her campus were closed and tenure-stream faculty were reclassified as teaching faculty with term contracts. Brown's essay asks what it means to be a "whole medievalist" when the ground shifts, and the versions we know are no longer available to us. Brown narrates her own evolution from one kind of medievalist to another: from a tenured Full Professor with a heavy teaching load but some institutional support for research, to a novelist and full-time administrator no longer working officially in the classroom or the archives. Interestingly, when Brown spoke at Sewanee she was suspended between the two identities: the merger was underway, and her novel had been accepted for publication, but she had not yet been offered her current job as Dean of Arts and Sciences at Bentley University. At Bentley, she has found, the humanities are valued not for student credit hours or major headcount but rather as essential education for "future business leaders." There is, perhaps, hope that we can find our way forward by leaning into our own values, rather than scrambling to meet the market-based metrics of a shrinking neoliberal academy (cf. Butler 2022, Payne 2022).

Brown's essay reframes the question that sparked this project, for me at least; whereas I began by wondering why so many medievalists end up in academic administration, Brown ends by drawing on the core of her scholarly identity as a medievalist to advance the humanities in new spaces. The pressures we are facing are certainly real. Even the most secure academics are overworked and underpaid, stretched thin across the growing demands of research competition, pedagogical innovation, and institutional compliance — especially with the rise of ed tech and generative AI. Humanists, and our colleagues in the arts and social sciences, are also facing an accelerating wave of program cuts and institutional closures; Brown describes what happened to MMC as a "canary in the coal mine," and indeed nearly everyone in the room at Sewanee had heard of or experienced parallels. In my own department, beneath every faculty debate I sense an undercurrent of fear that in adapting to survive we will sell ourselves out. As one colleague put it, "I'm all for

parachutes, but I think [a proposed curricular change] will cut the cords of mine and I'll just go splat." What is essential about what we do, and how can we preserve and nurture it? While it can be exhausting to have such questions always on the table, I do think the kinds of conversations that we are having here, at our Sewanee panel and in this collection of essays, can offer some hope. None of them, to be clear, presents a "scalable solution" (another of my least-favorite phrases) to the problems faced by medieval studies, much less by higher ed at larger. But they do tell stories of medievalists challenging boundaries and forging new paths. I am inclined to lean into such opportunistic, creative, and local building projects both within and beyond the "university in ruins" (Readings 1996, Resina 2025). We as medievalists have some excellent skills and perspectives to bring to that work.

As I am often mocked for saying, "Everybody needs a medievalist."

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