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Introduction: Cluster on the Social Value of Medieval Studies

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Introduction: Cluster on the Social Value of Medieval Studies

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Abstract

The Introduction sets up the professional context, the extremely difficult job market for new medievalists, that motivated the creation of this cluster of articles. It then reflects on the typical position allocation process and underscores the importance of adding qualitative arguments, especially those highlighting the social value of Medieval Studies, to the quantitative data usually required in official position requests. The cluster, then, seeks to help individual faculty members, chairpersons, and deans to articulate those qualitative arguments. It includes six essays offering six different approaches to defining or illustrating the social value of Medieval Studies. The Introduction concludes with a summary of the contributors' major insights.

History [is] the witness of the ages, the illuminator of reality, the life force of memory, the teacher of our daily lives, and the messenger of times gone by.

— Marcus Tullius Cicero

Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted.

— William Bruce Cameron

What is the collective memory of a civilization, or civilizations, worth, and who is best positioned to preserve, protect, and expand our understanding of this cultural heritage? Given the generally robust interest in the Middle Ages, it appears that contemporary society as a whole highly values this cultural heritage. For example, on the positive side, medieval fairs flourish both in the U.S. and Europe, and medievaesque fantasy in popular literature and film has been embraced by large segments of the population. On the negative side, however, medieval symbols and motifs have been enthusiastically (mis)appropriated by various right-wing activists. It is ironic, therefore, that the American job market for academic professionals in the field of Medieval Studies has collapsed, descending into what has been called a “lottery” (Eisenberg 2021). Indeed, there are many reasons for the short- and long-term declines of tenure-track positions in Medieval Studies, including the devastating impact of the Covid epidemic, the appropriation by universities of business models that rely largely on quantitative data for allocating faculty lines, and the general long-term trend of the reduction of permanent, tenure-track positions in favor of non-tenured and/or part-time faculty.¹

However, increased public support for programs tied to specific job-related disciplines has rendered the position of American humanities departments in general and Medieval Studies programs in particular even more precarious in the competition for permanent faculty positions.² While tenure-track positions at PhD-granting institutions in such fields as health sciences, engineering, the physical sciences, and business experienced robust growth in the period 2011–2021, open positions in the humanities have declined by 16.8% over the same period (Lange and Olejniczak 2023). In recent years, for example, the annual number of new tenure-track positions in English (again, in the U.S.) has fallen far below the number of new PhD graduates, and much the same could be said for positions in history (Newfield 2022; Bessner 2023; Lauck 2022). While data on the total number of medievalist PhDs produced each year is not available, we do have a good sense of how many new medievalist positions are being offered annually in the U.S. American colleges and universities are averaging only 11–13 new

¹ On this final point, it has been reported that currently 70% of the faculty (part-time or full-time) in American institutions of higher education are not tenured or on the tenure track. However, 52% of all post-secondary faculty positions are part-time (Kezar 2019, chapter 2).

² See, for example, the proposal of Florida’s Blue Ribbon Task Force on State Higher Education Reform to charge higher tuition for students majoring in subjects not directly related to specific jobs and the response by history professors at the University of Florida (Flaherty 2012).

jobs per year in medieval history and only about 20–21 new jobs per year in medieval English (Eisenberg 2021).³

Of course, since academic positions are supported financially either by public funds or, increasingly, by the private tuition dollars of students, it makes sense that university administrators, public officials as well as the public in general need to be convinced of the value of those areas of study that they fund. But, overwhelmingly, monetary values and especially ‘return on investment’ play an outsized role in their assessments. For example, the Biden administration is currently considering publishing a list of ‘low-performing’ programs, i.e., programs with low financial return. Commenting on this project, Martin Van Der Werf of the Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce is quoted as saying that “what it’s going to boil down to more than anything is probably really looking at debt-to-income ratios” (Knott 2023). Understanding “value” strictly as “the material or monetary worth of something; the amount at which something may be estimated in terms of a medium of exchange, as money or goods” (*Oxford English Dictionary*) is a legitimate but limited understanding of the term. A broader and more useful understanding of “value” is “the relative worth, usefulness, or importance of a thing ... the estimation in which a thing is held according to its real or supposed desirability or utility” (*Oxford English Dictionary*). By exploring the ‘social value’ of Medieval Studies, then, these essays seek to make the case for the worth, usefulness, and importance of Medieval Studies for society as a whole, demonstrating, thereby, that Medieval Studies are a public good and worth society’s investment. In essence, these essays seek, in the words of Amanda Adams, to “improve the ways we argue now” when we make the case to fund new medievalist positions or for students to study medieval literature and culture.⁴ The focus will be solidly *qualitative* rather than *quantitative*.⁵

Given the current management models used in higher education, models that privilege data-driven decision making, however, will our efforts to articulate the social value of Medieval Studies qualitatively actually make a difference?⁶ I think it well might. In my fourteen years as a dean of a college of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences at Cleveland State University (CSU), I have had long experience with the process of position allocations. Although there are many different budgetary models in higher education, I believe that most colleges and universities use similar considerations to allocate faculty lines.⁷

³ My focus in this section is on the job market in the U.S. For the British context, see Collini 2012.

⁴ Quoted in Small 2013, 2.

⁵ Humanities scholars, however, have not been silent on this point. Notable recent contributions are books by Frederick Aldama (2008), Jonathan Bale (2011), Stefan Collini (2012), Willem Dress (2021), Martha Nussbaum (2010), and Helen Small (2013). There have also been investigations with a narrower focus, a focus on the social value of literary studies. Among these are publications by Albrecht Classen (2022), Ronan McDonald (2015), Kathleen McLuskie (2015), and Francis O’Gorman (2011). Finally, Kisha Tracy’s recent book, *Why Study the Middle Ages?* (2022), and my own contribution to the *Chaucer Blog* (2022) narrow the focus even further.

⁶ Robert Birnbaum (2000, 18–27) reviews the introduction of “scientific management” principles into American higher education. These principles emphasize efficiency and productivity and led to data-driven decision making. In short, advocates of “scientific management” propose to run universities more like businesses.

⁷ Jeffrey Buller’s chapter entitled “Setting Budget Priorities,” for example, provides a good overview of the various criteria to be considered in making budgetary requests. Although he emphasizes arguments primarily based on data, he also suggests that budget requests should be made with a solid understanding of the bases on which we set our priorities and that budget requests should allow upper administrators to “see the big picture” (Buller 2015). His chapter entitled

First of all, at CSU there were no longer any protected ‘heritage’ lines, lines that were automatically reassigned to specific colleges or departments. Hence, an English Department with a retiring medievalist, for example, was no longer guaranteed to be able to replace that medievalist with another. Indeed, as the profession evolved and new specialties and interests arose, departments themselves sometimes preferred to request a position in a different sub-specialty. English Departments could, for instance, decide to prioritize a new position in, say, Critical Theory, Gender Studies, Postcolonial Literature, or even an additional position in another traditional field.⁸ Because shifting departmental priorities play a crucial role in determining whether or not a retiring medievalist would be replaced, arguments about the importance of Medieval Studies might indeed be needed first on the department level.

But the arguments for funding a medievalist position will need to be made on higher levels as well. Once the CSU higher administration decided to allocate a certain dollar amount to new faculty lines, those dollars were assigned on the basis of ‘merit’ and other strategic considerations across the university’s colleges. This means that department chairpersons and deans had the obligation to justify each specific request that they forwarded in the hope that their proposals would prove more convincing (to the provost and president) than those of other chairs and deans. The competition for positions, then, took place on the levels of the department, the college (which must prioritize the requests received from its many departments), and, finally, the university.

Data considerations, of course, played an important role. As an administrator of a large college, I respected the important perspectives that those numbers provided. Accordingly, my comments on departmental requests often highlighted such data as the number of student credit hours (SCH) produced by a given department, the number of majors in each program, graduation rates for the program, the cost of each student credit hour produced (a number that almost always reflected favorably on humanities programs), and research and grant productivity numbers for the department’s faculty.

However, our hiring proposals also included qualitative as well as quantitative arguments. Robert Birnbaum points out that, after new management information systems were introduced into university administrative practices,

[r]esponsible advocates of quantitative approaches acknowledged that ‘many higher education outcomes are simply not susceptible to description in quantitative terms.’ They cautioned against giving precedence to quantitative over qualitative data, or considering quantitative data more valid because it appeared to be more objective. These advocates also noted that there were no data to confirm that the quantitative approach led to better decisions or more effective management. (2000, 25)

“Position Requests and Descriptions” is also helpful. Finally, in a section entitled “Aligning Objectives,” he suggests that, for deans of colleges of liberal arts, discussing various qualitative considerations in discussions of position requests with provosts can be helpful.

⁸ Gender Studies was one of the few specialties in the humanities for which the number of assistant professor positions actually increased between 2011–2021 (Lange and Olejniczak 2023).

Or, as William Bruce Cameron noted more succinctly, “not everything that counts is countable” (1963, 13). This is a valuable perspective that is often lost by university administrators and the public. In position requests at CSU, we were fortunate to have been able to make qualitative arguments. CSU departments and deans could, for example, highlight the intrinsic importance (and social value) of each particular area of study represented in our hiring requests. The importance of liberal education for the personal development of our students as informed citizens of a democratic society could also be included, as could references to the ‘transferable skills’ imparted by study in various humanities fields. Finally, to prove that a hire was ‘strategic,’ deans could describe how the request aligned strongly with the mission and strategic goals of the university, which sometimes make reference to these qualitative goals.⁹ While no dean can claim a 100% success rate for all his or her hiring proposals, I do believe that these qualitative arguments played an important role in the decision-making process. In short, qualitative arguments for faculty positions can and should still play a critical role in improving the chances that medievalist positions will be funded.

Beyond the audience of university administrators, however, arguments supporting the social value of Medieval Studies will need to serve additional purposes. After all, provosts need to justify their choices to university presidents, presidents need to defend hiring decisions to the university’s Board of Trustees, and Trustees are accountable to elected state politicians. Moreover, given the importance of enrollments and numbers of majors, advocates need to convince the larger audience of potential students (as well as their parents) that the study of the Middle Ages is of immense value precisely because, as “the illuminator of reality, the life force of memory [and] the teacher of our daily lives” (Cicero 2001, 133), it retains its intrinsic public worth and critical utility.¹⁰ Thus, this cluster will help medievalists who wish to engage in public advocacy, another key task for improving the medievalist job market.

One way to argue for the social value of Medieval Studies is to demonstrate its continuing *relevance*, that is its appropriateness for the current time or situation, and especially as it relates to teaching. The Middle Ages continue to be relevant, argues Albrecht Classen, a professor of medieval German literature at the University of Arizona, because many aspects of the modern world are rooted in medieval precedents and because medievalism is alive and well worldwide. But is the study of medieval literature relevant to our most important audience, our students? As a test case, Classen queried Egyptian students for whom he taught a course in medieval German literature while on a Fulbright appointment during the fall of 2022. He wished to test whether the study of medieval German literature could be relevant to students in a non-Western culture. He reports that the student responses were indeed uniformly positive, recognizing the importance and attraction of medieval literature. Classen also explores how structuring courses thematically can further highlight the relevance of medieval literature and attract larger student audiences. He demonstrates how the theme of ‘toleration/tolerance,’ which is so timely today, can be seen slowly developing in some of the most important literatures of the Middle Ages.

⁹ On the introduction of “strategic planning” into university management, see Birnbaum 2000, 64–75.

¹⁰ For a description and analysis of the significant recent declines in humanities majors, see Heller 2023.

In their article, David Raybin and Susanna Fein, editors of *The Chaucer Review*, note that “[w]e learn about human possibilities through both similarity and difference.” While Classen stresses the familiar in medieval literature and, thus, its relevance for contemporary students, Marion Turner, J. R. R. Tolkien professor of English literature at Oxford University, focuses on the value of encountering “the different and the seemingly incomprehensible” in medieval texts. She explores how varied human subjectivity can be across time and *the value of accessing “radically alien subjectivities.”* She does this by exploring three different examples of medieval attitudes—towards genius, technology, and love. Reading medieval literature, she notes, can help us “step out of our societies and think about contingency and inevitability.” It gives us a frame of reference outside of our current cultural bubble and helps us review our beliefs and assumptions more objectively, seeing both their merits and also their shortcomings.

Pointing to the historical mission of the recent NASA Webb telescope project, David Raybin and Susanna Fein remind us that modern societies still desire to explore the past and sometimes make very large investments to do so. This is true not only with respect to the history of the universe but also with respect to the history behind contemporary societies and cultures. The late Middle Ages, which “were the crucible in which the framework for the modern transatlantic world was forged,” remain a critical field of study. However, current medieval research, illustrated in this article by four new and critical publications, seeks to place medieval Western culture in a more cross-cultural and global context, expanding its former focus both in space and time. Such new initiatives help readers to recognize the historical and multicultural roots of contemporary thought, and Raybin and Fein argue that, to create our “willed future,” a profound, sophisticated, and capacious understanding of the medieval world is critical. *Thus, beyond the essential task of forging a more accurate understanding of our cultural roots and, thus, dispelling false beliefs about our common past, historians give us critical tools for charting the future.*

Albrecht Classen has argued that the Amazon rainforest provides a good metaphor for the “vast expanse of pre-modern literature” (2022, 111–39). Just as the rainforest, which contains an astonishingly rich biodiversity of animal and plant life, potentially holding elements that will be essential to aiding humanity in meeting new health challenges, so, too, the corpus of pre-modern literature, a “Human Amazon,” preserves vast human resources that will continue to serve human society in unexpected but critical ways. The essay by Andrew Lynch, Emeritus Professor and Senior Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Western Australia, examines a compelling illustrative example of this concept. The essay focuses on one of the most vexing problems facing contemporary Western societies: significant numbers of refugees arriving in developed countries, like Australia, seeking asylum but sometimes being subjected to racist oppression.

Lynch’s essay explores how medieval literature, including Chaucer’s works, can be read as a resource to promote racial justice. He explains, for example, how the tribulations of Custaunce in Chaucer’s *Man of Law’s Tale* resemble those of modern refugees. He also analyzes the work of David Herd, an activist for the rights of refugees in Britain, who, in seeking an effective way to bring the plight of refugees to the public’s attention, was inspired by Chaucer’s writings. Taking *The Canterbury Tales* as a model, Herd organized “A Walk of Solidarity with Refugees, Asylum Seekers, and Detainees.” The journey took nine days, and at each stop two “tales” would be told publicly, one by

a refugee, the other by a professional who worked with refugees. After the journey had ended, Herd collected these narratives and published them in 2016 with the title *Refugee Tales*, which have continued to be published annually since then. Thus, just as a rare species of Amazonian plant might provide a critical ingredient for a new kind of medicine, so *medieval literary forms and concepts have the potential to be fundamentally useful for addressing various contemporary social problems.*

In her article, Julia Costa Lopez, an International Relations professor at the University of Groningen, explores *the central role of Medieval Studies in the production of knowledge in the social sciences as well as in “contemporary political debates about community and identity formation.”* The prominence of medieval imagery and ideas in contemporary political contexts makes the critical study of the Middle Ages particularly relevant. Medieval scholars, then, have an important role to play in correcting what has been called an “overtly blatant disregard for historical veracity.” The role of academic historians offers an additional social value in the current technological moment, when, due to the power of social media, the writing of history has become ‘democratized.’ In other words, historical interpretation has entered the realm of the public domain, and the writing of history has been appropriated by those who have been excluded from it in the past. As a result, the participation by writers not well-trained in historical methodologies has altered the traditional flow of information and identity categories. In the case of ideas about the Middle Ages, the effect has been, in the words of Andrew Elliott, the creation of a “modern tapas style history [in which] facts from the past can be selected at will and loosely corralled into almost anything we wish them to be” (2017, 9). In such a context, it is more important than ever that academically trained medievalists become socially embedded in these discussions to, in Costa Lopez’s words, “make their knowledge and knowledge production procedures part of the public debate.”

How can history be written without the existence and preservation of the necessary historical documents? Claude Fagnen, graduate of the École Nationale des Chartes and a former archivist for the Department of Finistère in France, explores the social value of those, like archivists and rare book librarians, *who are trained to find, preserve, and present critical historical documents from the Middle Ages.* The earliest medieval documents in France date back to at least the Merovingian period (486–761), and these documents, a rich source of information for medieval historians, are found in archives and libraries across his country. Their continued existence in good condition, however, is neither guaranteed nor easily accomplished. In his article, Fagnen reviews basic procedures for the preservation of manuscripts and recounts examples of how he was able to identify and/or uncover documents that were previously hidden. He also explains his work in aiding both academic scholars and other members of the public who needed assistance in finding relevant medieval documents as well as interpreting them.¹¹ In sum, Fagnen argues that *the knowledge that archivists and rare book librarians help preserve and disseminate offers democratic societies important guidance for the future.*

¹¹ An important recent example in Chaucer Studies of collaboration between an academic literary scholar and an archivist, specifically Sebastian Sobiecki and Euan Roger, was the uncovering of critical documents in the British National Archives related to Chaucer and Cecily Chaumpaigne. *The Chaucer Review* 57, no. 4 (2022) dedicates an entire issue to the results of this ground-breaking collaboration.

Together, these essays suggest that the study of the literature and culture of the Middle Ages retains its critical utility and is, thus, well worth funding. It follows, then, that the collapse of the academic job market for new PhDs specializing in Medieval Studies produces not only tragic personal situations for all those new graduates but also a serious loss of a public good. It is a loss of a public good precisely because the teaching and research of professors of Medieval Studies as well as the activities of archivists and rare book librarians—i.e., those who are best positioned to protect, defend, and enlarge our understanding of this period—add significant value, not only to the lives of individual students but also to society at large. This is so because:

- the study of medieval literature and history continues to be engaging and relevant,
- it introduces an alien subjectivity, providing a detached perspective on the strengths and weaknesses of our current culture and its practices,
- it helps us understand our cultural and intellectual roots,
- it shields us from misappropriated and distorted ideas about our past,
- it offers valuable themes and forms that can be reused to address contemporary problems,
- it is foundational to the training of archivists, who are the guardians of documents that are portals to our cultural memory,
- it can help us chart our common future.

By articulating this added value clearly and often, both on campuses and in the larger public arena, scholars, administrators, and sympathetic public figures can begin to contest narrow and/or misguided assessments of academic value as well as various ideological agendas effectively.

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