

# *MEDIEVAL STUDIES AT THE BEGINNING OF THE NEW MILLENNIUM*

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Despite numerous predictions to the contrary, medieval studies have flourished over the past two decades, at least in North America. As we enter the new millennium, a surprising number of students are not only taking courses focusing on medieval topics, but also choosing careers as medievalists. To use the Medieval Academy as an example of this interest, our membership of 4,100 medievalists – including almost 800 graduate students and about 750 international members – is the highest in our seventy-seven year history, having grown over the past two decades by almost twenty percent. Our journal, *Speculum*, is received by most major academic institutions worldwide (about 1,650 institutional subscribers), and our conference that meets each spring in locations throughout North America is highly successful, offering sessions underscoring the interdisciplinary nature of our profession. Thousands of medievalists, furthermore, gather each May and July to attend two international congresses sponsored by the Medieval Institute at Western Michigan University and the International Medieval Institute at the University of Leeds, and smaller, more focused conferences held throughout the world provide further opportunities for medievalists to present their scholarship, compare pedagogical strategies, and build professional relationships. The latest issue of *Medieval Academy News*, for example, lists over sixty meetings scheduled from February through December 2002 alone. In addition there are many vigorous specialised organisations of scholars studying medieval literature, such as the International Society of Anglo-Saxonists, the New Chaucer Society, and the Society for Medieval Feminist Scholarship. Publishing in medieval studies is also healthy. In 1997 Oxford launched an important annual, *New Medieval Literatures*, and major publishers, such as Cambridge University Press and the University of Pennsylvania Press, have well-established series focusing on medieval studies, while new book series, such as the New Middle Ages published by St. Martin's Press, have joined other, long-standing editorial projects supported by the Anglo-Norman Text Society and the Early English Text Society.

The discipline is doing so well in attracting students and expanding scholarship that one must wonder why it seemed to suffer a lack of self-confidence only a few years ago. Were we in the grip of Augustinian pessimism regarding the future? More likely the anxiety regarding the viability of our discipline arose in alarmist reaction to the 'high theory' that engulfed English departments during the seventies and eighties. Witnessing the privileging of theory over literary history and criticism, those of us specialising in Old and Middle English worried that medieval studies were becoming irrelevant to literary studies. Some medievalists, prophesying the end of civilisation as they understood it, washed their hands of their departments and withdrew into their scholarship and specialised courses, while others argued with their colleagues about the relevance of literary history and fretted that students wouldn't take Chaucer if their departments dropped a pre-1800 requirement. Medievalists were on the defensive, and it became a regular feature of conference talks to mourn the decline of medieval studies and its increasing isolation. In 1987 these concerns were voiced by Lee Patterson. He noted that 'Medieval Studies appears to many to be more ghetto than enclave, more prison than prelapsarian garden', and worried that medieval literature had been marginalised 'as a force within literary studies as a whole.' Underscoring the irony of this situation, Patterson questioned the discipline's future:

Its irrelevance is especially striking because it was, after all, in the name of the Middle Ages that the stranglehold of classical studies over nineteenth-century education was first broken, allowing vernacular literature to become an academic subject. As the work of Auerbach, Spitzer, and Curtius testifies, medieval literature was once at the center of the old humanist program. Now that that program is breaking up, will medieval literature disappear into an enclave of bureaucratized positivism, protected only by an increasingly desiccated erudition?<sup>1</sup>

Other scholars expressed similar concerns, intended sometimes to rally fellow medievalists, sometimes to needle colleagues working in later periods. For example, David Aers, a medievalist influenced by Marxist thought, expressed consternation about the ways in which the Middle Ages are figured as the 'other' by scholars seeking to find the 'new' in later periods. Complaining of scholarly amnesia among radical literary critics, he noted that 'Although now in Foucauldian costume, the basic picture [of the Middle Ages] is still of a static homogeneous collective in which there simply could not be any self-conscious concern with individual identity or subjectivity because these could simply not exist in that society.'<sup>2</sup> Aers suggests several reasons for this continuing

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<sup>1</sup> Lee Patterson, *Negotiating the Past: The Historical Understanding of Medieval Literature* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), p. 38.

<sup>2</sup> 'A Whisper in the Ear of Early Modernists; or, Reflections on Literary Critics Writing the "History of the Subject,"' *Culture and History 1350-1600: Essays on English Communities, Identities and Writing*, ed. David Aers (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1992).

misrepresentation of the complexity of medieval culture, society, and thought, including the possibility that our colleagues in later periods ‘are the victims of an institutionally fostered ignorance.’<sup>3</sup> Such may be inherent in departmental structures and the ways in which the entire discipline narrowly defines its specialties, hires its teachers, and offers its courses. Whatever the reason, scholars working in later periods of literary studies have often misunderstood the Middle Ages, caricaturing it as the ‘Age of Faith’, uniformly Christian and dominated by a hegemonic institution, reproducing in these stereotypes the very logocentric master narrative they seek to undermine in studies of their own, later, periods. Although medievalists may be responsible for this ignorance for not engaging our colleagues or showing how our scholarship is relevant to their work, it is frustrating to see how long the tired stereotypes have continued. It is sad that an important collection of essays published by the Modern Language Association as late as 1992 adhered to commonplace and largely outdated periodisation schemes, despite the volume’s title, *Redrawing the Boundaries*. There Leah S. Marcus, for example, explains the ‘terminological shift’ from ‘Renaissance’ to ‘early modern studies’ by implicitly setting the Middle Ages against this later period, whether it is defined ‘as a time of re-naissance, cultural rebirth’ or ‘in terms of elements repeated thereafter’, that is, those elements – such as self-conscious authorship – supposedly not found in the Middle Ages that seem to be ‘precursors’ of the modern.<sup>4</sup>

From my perspective, the problem of periodisation plaguing literary studies in general is specifically evident in scholarship on early modern theatre. It often ignores most ‘pre-Shakespearean’ (their term) drama as unworthy of study or irrelevant, and, if noting the robust early theatre that stretched into the reign of Elizabeth, it repeats commonplaces while focusing on the ‘new’ drama.<sup>5</sup> It is therefore refreshing to see medievalists answering this challenge by tracing the continuity of early English drama into the sixteenth century.<sup>6</sup> This move exemplifies a significant development in medieval studies at large, in which scholars interrogate the conventional dating of the ‘period’, whether its conclusion is associated with the coming of Henry Tudor, Caxton’s establishment of the printing press, or the Reformation. Whether or not a friend of mine is right in

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 196.

<sup>4</sup> Leah S. Marcus, ‘Renaissance/Early Modern Studies’, *Redrawing the Boundaries: The Transformation of English and American Literary Studies*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt and Giles Gunn (New York: Modern Language Association, 1992), p. 41.

<sup>5</sup> I’ve written on this problem in ‘Eliding the “Medieval”: Renaissance “New Historicism” and Sixteenth-Century Drama’, *The Performance of Middle English Culture*, ed. James J. Paxson, Lawrence M. Clopper, Sylvia Tomasch (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1998), pp. 25–41.

<sup>6</sup> See Lawrence M. Clopper, *Drama, Play, and Game: English Festive Culture in the Medieval and Early Modern Period* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001). A similar healthy eliding of arbitrary period divisions in the study of early drama characterises the special issue of the *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 29 (1999) edited by Sarah Beckwith.

exclaiming, 'The Renaissance is just the Middle Ages in drag', it is certainly good to show the continuity of literary traditions as well as their changes over time. Important works crossing artificial period boundaries include historical reinterpretations (for example, Eamon Duffy's *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400-1580*), standard histories (e.g., *The Cambridge History of Medieval Literature*, which stretches from 1066 to 1550, and the third volume of *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain*, which covers the period 1400 to 1557), and new teaching texts (such as, Derek Pearsall, ed., *Chaucer to Spenser: An Anthology*).<sup>7</sup>

Past worries about the marginalisation of medieval studies have faded, furthermore, as medievalists engage newer methodologies informed by contemporary theory, and this trend is likely to characterise the next decade of medieval literary studies. Not surprisingly, some 'readings' have been relatively superficial and tedious, in the vein of 'let's apply this or that theory to this or that medieval text', but much of it has been more sophisticated and has sought to show how contemporary theoretical insights are related to genuinely medieval forms of thought.<sup>8</sup> The theory is worn lightly, used to pose questions and open up new approaches, rather than smothering the medieval text. In general medievalists have traversed the brave new world of literary theory aware of the pitfalls of appropriating approaches designed originally to examine later cultures, and for those who are not aware of such dangers, theoretically savvy scholars such as Gabrielle Spiegel have brought them to the fore. Speaking of a form of cultural studies that has been particularly attractive to medievalists, Spiegel warns that 'to apply postcolonial theory to medieval society without theorizing the analogy in an explicit manner is to decontextualize postcolonial theory and medieval history alike'.<sup>9</sup> The concern is to make sure we understand the assumptions underlying literary critical appropriations of various theoretical approaches. As Lee Patterson recently wrote in a wide-ranging critique of Freudian interpretations of medieval literature: 'Theory, properly understood, demands that we test our assumptions against different views and against the evidence, that we explore the presuppositions and implications of the positions we adopt'.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400-1580* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1992); David Wallace, ed., *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Lotte Hellinga and J. B. Trapp, eds., *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain*, vol. 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); and Derek Pearsall, ed., *Chaucer to Spenser: An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999).

<sup>8</sup> I seek to do this by linking modern semiotic theory to medieval sign theory in 'The Morality Character as Sign: A Semiotic Approach to *The Castle of Perseverance*', *Medievalia* 18 (1995 for 1992), 191-220.

<sup>9</sup> Gabrielle Spiegel, 'Épater les Médiévistes' (review of Kathleen Biddick's *The Shock of Medievalism*), in *History and Theory* 39 (2000), 246.

<sup>10</sup> 'Chaucer's Pardoner on the Couch: Psyche and Clio in Medieval Literary Studies', *Speculum*, 76 (2001), 679.

Luckily, recent theoretically informed scholarship has done exactly that. Impressive essay collections and monographs have been published over the past few years drawing on the critical insights provided by newer methodologies to understand medieval texts. This work often critiques the naïve ways in which poststructuralist studies have fashioned the Middle Ages while showing how medievalists can contribute to a better-informed theoretical discourse. Such is accomplished, for example, by the essays in *The Postcolonial Middle Ages*, which rigorously attend to the thought of Homi Bhabha and Edward Said while analysing texts ranging from Dante to Lydgate's mummings.<sup>11</sup> Similar sophisticated handling of the theoretical is evident in the work of Carolyn Dinshaw, who draws on queer theory to examine Michel Foucault in a book studying Margery Kempe's *Book*, the Lollards, and Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction*. And the goal of opening dialogue between medieval and poststructuralist thought is shared with medievalists working in other disciplines, too.<sup>12</sup>

Perhaps the theoretical positions having the greatest continuing influence on medieval studies are various forms of Feminism. Such approaches have led to a tremendous growth in our awareness, editing, and analysis of texts authored by medieval women – the writings of Hildegard of Bingen being only the most prominent – and has provided new insights into the writings of well-established male authors, particularly Chaucer.<sup>13</sup> It has also brought to scholarly attention related issues, such as the role of women as literary patrons and as targeted audiences for particular texts.<sup>14</sup> Attention to literacy, furthermore, has expanded beyond issues of gender into a more general study of the reception of medieval texts – including oral and aural reception<sup>15</sup> – and has paralleled interest by critics influenced by New Historicism in the social and political status of authorship and reception. For example, in one of the most important recent studies of Middle English texts, *Writing and Rebellion: England in 1381*, Steven Justice insightfully

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<sup>11</sup> Ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000.

<sup>12</sup> Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999); for a philosophical example, see Philipp W. Rosemann, *Understanding Scholastic Thought with Foucault* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999).

<sup>13</sup> Particularly influential are Barbara Newman's *Mother of Wisdom: St. Hildegard's Theology of the Feminine* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), and Elaine Hansen's *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

<sup>14</sup> Anne Clark Bartlett's *Male Authors, Female Readers: Representation and Subjectivity in Middle English Devotional Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995) is an excellent example. See also June Hall McCash, ed., *The Cultural Patronage of Medieval Women* (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 1996).

<sup>15</sup> Important studies include Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe, *Visible Song: Transitional Literacy in Old English Verse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), and Joyce Coleman, *Public Reading and the Reading Public in Late Medieval England and France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

analyses *Piers Plowman* and the early reception of Wyclif while tracing an ‘insurgent literacy’ linked to the Rising of 1381.<sup>16</sup>

Accompanying these uses of contemporary theory is a new awareness of medieval ‘literary theory’, thanks to the impressive work of Alastair J. Minnis. His *Medieval Theory of Authorship*, along with the valuable anthology that accompanies it,<sup>17</sup> has made an entire generation of scholars aware that methodological self-consciousness was not limited to Dante. Widely cited, Minnis has sparked interest in related medieval theory, a tradition that has a long history, as evident in Rita Copeland’s helpful overview.<sup>18</sup> The wealth of material recently gathered in *The Idea of the Vernacular: An Anthology of Middle English Literary Theory, 1280-1520*, furthermore, may come as a surprise to those who think theory is essentially a modern invention or limited to medieval rehashes of Augustine and Aristotle.<sup>19</sup> Such studies and anthologies provide the methodological framework for a more informed literary criticism. Equally important, they have been complemented by groundbreaking scholarship that exemplifies the hallmark of medieval literary studies – its wide-ranging interdisciplinary research. It seems to me that the best books published by scholars in medieval English literature over the past decade or so have traced broad comparative themes, explored deeply rooted critical practices, and analysed significant textual features rather than studying specific authors or texts. As a result, they have provided a much richer intellectual context for our understanding of medieval literature.<sup>20</sup>

That the current J. R. R. Tolkien Professor of English Language and Literature at Oxford University has recently published a fundamental statement regarding the role of

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<sup>16</sup> Steven Justice, *Writing and Rebellion: England in 1381* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

<sup>17</sup> A. J. Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988); and *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism c. 1100-1375: The Commentary Tradition*, ed. A. J. Minnis and A. B. Scott (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988).

<sup>18</sup> ‘Medieval Theory and Criticism’, *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism*, ed. Michael Groden and Martin Kreiswith (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 500-508.

<sup>19</sup> Ed. Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, Nicholas Watson, Andrew Taylor, and Ruth Evans (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999).

<sup>20</sup> Among these highly influential books I would include Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Rita Copeland, *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation in the Middle Ages: Academic Traditions and Vernacular Texts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Siegfried Wenzel, *Macaronic Sermons: Bilingualism and Preaching in Late-Medieval England* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994); and Richard Firth Green, *A Crisis of Truth: Literature and Law in Ricardian England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999).

theory in the study of 'premodern' texts<sup>21</sup> suggests how far scholars in Old and Middle English have moved beyond the philology that provided the rationale for the profession and the subjects of much of its research through mid century, when New Criticism and exegetical historicism began to challenge the status quo. Recently, though, the original impulses motivating our discipline have been reinvigorated, now rechristened the New Philology in a special issue of *Speculum* that highlighted this approach. According to Stephen G. Nichols, the goals are 'to return to the medieval origins of philology, to its roots in a *manuscript* culture...' and to rethink philology, seeking 'to minimize the isolation between medieval studies and other contemporary movements in cognitive methodologies...'.<sup>22</sup> New Philology has supported a renewed interest in the study of the manuscript contexts of medieval literature, an interest fostered by the manuscript conferences held regularly at the University of York and linked to scholarship in art history and codicology. How medieval texts were received in manuscripts is an extremely important topic of study, involving the comparative analysis of the textual contents of a manuscript – including variants, emendations, glossing, and marginalia – as well as its structure, layout, decoration, and illustration.<sup>23</sup> It has also directed attention to less studied fifteenth-century texts as well as the major Ricardian poets who dominated attention in earlier New Critical and exegetical readings.

The New Philology and the focus on medieval manuscripts exemplify the importance of the basic building blocks of medieval studies. From my perspective as Editor of *Speculum*, I am pleased by the continuing vitality of literary scholarship informed by contemporary theoretical approaches and insights drawn from interdisciplinary research, but from my perspective as the Executive Director of the discipline's major professional organisation, I am also concerned that we not take for granted the erudition and skills on which these accomplishments depend. We must ensure the continuity of medieval studies through our training of the next generation of medievalists, not simply as critics and theorists but also as informed and skilled scholars. To do this, we should emphasise the importance of training in medieval languages. The Medieval Academy was begun in 1925 in part because the Modern Language Association – perhaps understandably –

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<sup>21</sup> Paul Strohm, *Theory and the Premodern Text* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000). Strohm has been a leader in what can be loosely called New Historicist approaches to medieval texts, as evident in *Hochon's Arrow: The Social Imagination of Fourteenth-Century Texts* (Princeton: Princeton University press, 1992) and *England's Empty Throne: Usurpation and the Language of Legitimation, 1399-1422* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

<sup>22</sup> Stephen G. Nichols, 'Introduction: Philology in a Manuscript Culture', *Speculum* 65 (1990), 1.

<sup>23</sup> An important essay stimulating this approach is Malcolm B. Parkes, 'The Influence of the Concepts of *Ordinatio* and *Compilatio* on the Development of the Book', in *Medieval Learning and Literature: Essays Presented to R. W. Hunt*, ed. Jonathan J. G. Alexander and M. T. Gibson (London: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 115-41. An important contributor to manuscript studies is Ralph Hanna, whose influential studies have been collected in *Pursuing History: Middle English Manuscripts and Their Texts* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1996). My own recent work has been in this area; for example, Richard Emmerson, 'Reading Gower in a Manuscript Culture: Latin and English in Illustrated Manuscripts of the *Confessio Amantis*', *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 21 (1999), 143-86.

was ignoring medieval Latin. The need to know Latin as well as the medieval vernaculars has always distinguished medievalists and is one reason why it is chosen by a select group of students and why doctorates in medieval studies are often so drawn out. But other skills are also required, such as the ability to read medieval handwriting, decipher and edit difficult texts, and track down evidence in remote and uncatalogued archives. Unfortunately, these skills are not always taught to graduate students. To help obviate this situation, the Medieval Academy provides, through its Committee on Centers and Regional Organizations (CARA), awards to help student members attend summer institutes on palaeography and medieval Latin at Notre Dame University and the University of Toronto. In the summer of 2002 our support will extend to students in the institute on Spanish palaeography and archival sciences at the Newberry Library as well. I would like to see support expanded in the future to encourage the offering of institutes in medieval Arabic and Greek as well as other vernacular languages.

To encourage the editing of medieval texts, and because university presses – straining under the demands of the bottom line – seem increasingly reluctant to publish editions, the Medieval Academy has focused its book series on scholarly editions. We have recently published an edition of King Alfred's Old English translation of the Psalms and have editions of Johannes Witte de Hese's *Itinerarius* and *The Mirroure of the Worlde* in production.<sup>24</sup> Medievalists have also been on the forefront of experimenting with new electronic tools that are vastly advancing the study of medieval texts. These include the very impressive Electronic *Beowulf*, edited by Kevin Kiernan (<http://www.uky.edu/~kiernan/eBeowulf>), which includes very clear digital images of the *Beowulf* manuscript, and the ambitious *Piers Plowman* Electronic Archive (<http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu/piers/archive>) under the direction of Hoyt Duggan, which will provide a multi-level, hyper-textually linked electronic archive of the textual tradition of all three versions of what may be the most difficult poem in the English language. Other electronic projects include the Middle English Compendium (<http://ets.umdl.umich.edu/m/mec>), which includes an electronic Middle English Dictionary and the Corpus of Middle English Prose and Verse. These and numerous other electronic resources are easily accessible through Labyrinth (<http://www.georgetown.edu/labyrinth>), a central site maintained by Georgetown University.

A major project in English medieval studies that has successfully secured impressive funding (about \$420,000 to date) from the National Endowment for the Humanities is the Middle English Texts series published by the Consortium for Teaching the Middle Ages (TEAMS). Designed to make available teaching editions of texts not sufficiently

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<sup>24</sup> Patrick P. O'Neill, ed., *King Alfred's Old English Prose Translation of the First Fifty Psalms* (Cambridge, Mass.: Medieval Academy of America, 2001); Scott D. Westrem, *Broader Horizons: A Study of Johannes Witte de Hese's "Itinerarius" and Medieval Travel Narratives* (forthcoming 2002); and Robert R. Raymo and Elaine E. Whitaker, *The Mirroure of the Worlde: A Middle English Translation of the Mirroir du Monde* (forthcoming 2002).

in demand to be published by commercial and university presses, the series as of 2001 has published thirty-seven editions, all at very reasonable prices and available on-line (<http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/teams>). Under the skilled direction of Russell A. Peck, this project exemplifies how scholarship can be directly related to teaching, which is where the discipline of medieval studies needs to invest more energy if we are to continue to flourish in the future. TEAMS has made teaching a major goal, and it is a priority the Academy will pursue more vigorously in the future as well. For some time we have sought to support centres and institutes teaching medieval studies through CARA (<http://www.asu.edu/clas/acmrs/cara.html>), providing information for students and faculty alike about centres, programmes, committees, libraries, and regional associations in North America. We must also invest directly in students. In the past year we have begun to do so more actively by establishing a Graduate Student Committee and by funding dissertation grants for students completing doctorates in medieval studies. These and other programs offered by the Medieval Academy are described on our Website (<http://www.MedievalAcademy.org>).

I have been greatly impressed by the devotion to teaching exhibited by the younger generation of faculty who began their careers during a time of few jobs and much pessimism about our discipline. Junior faculty members seem to have grasped sooner than their more established seniors the importance of compelling teaching. If medieval courses will no longer be required, then the only way medieval literature will be taught is to make courses so interesting students will seek them out. Thus pedagogy, like scholarship, needs to be valued and supported by institutions and professional organizations. Teacher-scholars regularly gather in conference sessions sponsored by TEAMS and CARA to discuss teaching strategies such as how to integrate contemporary theory or recent research into the classroom, or how to teach medieval literature in translation or to students in a Bible college in the American South. The future lies with such teachers, and the nature of that future is largely dependent upon their innovative and negotiated solutions to serious curricular challenges and institutional constraints.

Particularly encouraging is their recognition that 'we are not alone'. Faculty need to understand that problems faced by medievalists are shared with other colleagues in English and the humanities at large, that medievalists are not the only ones worried about the future of literary studies, that it isn't a 'them-against-us' problem – not medievalists against modernists, historicists against critics, traditionalists against theorists. Specialists in Victorian literature and twentieth-century American literatures increasingly complain that students lack basic knowledge of literary history, and when we approach them as concerned colleagues, they recognise the crucial importance of medieval literature and its contributions to the greatly expanded canon now taught in English departments. When I chaired the Department of English at Western Washington University, I forged alliances with colleagues working in later periods, sharing, for example, my scholarship on medieval drama with a postmodernist theorist who specialised in avant-garde drama. We began by recognising how much the two theatrical

forms had in common (for example, from performance traditions to the apocalyptic themes of *Angels in America*). But then talk turned to pedagogy and disciplinary issues, and we gradually came to realise that our concerns about the challenges we faced and our teaching goals were remarkably similar.

For medieval studies to flourish in the future, medievalists need not only reach out to their colleagues in English and other humanities programs but also to the general public. In an interesting personal essay, Ronald Herzman recounts his experience bringing the Middle Ages to the broader public, ranging from producing videotapes on medieval topics for the highly successful Teaching Company to teaching the *Commedia* at Attica Correctional Facility. He notes that 'there is an audience out there in all kinds of places that badly wants (and I am inclined to say badly needs) to hear what we have to say because what we have to say is really good'.<sup>25</sup> The summer seminars for high school teachers sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities is one way to make sure that the next generation of students becomes interested in medieval studies. But our 'medieval outreach' need not be limited to the classroom. There is, indeed, a great popular interest right now in things medieval, as evident in the tremendous success of internationally acclaimed music groups such as Sequentia and the success of medieval drama productions. The University of Toronto has led the way here, showing how scholars and teachers can link the kind of research that results in the thick volumes of documents published by the Records of Early English Drama project to public performance. The summer productions of the Corpus Christi cycle in York have been similarly successful, involving local amateur as well as academic troupes. The critical triumph of *The Mysteries* at the National Theatre is further indication of serious popular interest in medieval culture.

I must admit, however, that other forms of popular medievalism are more a source of anxiety than of optimism about the future of medieval studies. Computer games linking 'medieval' dragons and monsters to incessant violence and scantily clad women in distress only underscore the worst stereotypes about the Middle Ages. Such seem to motivate the extremely popular medieval fairs promoted throughout the United States each summer, in which men wearing horned helmets and women wearing bustiers walk about drinking goblets of 'mead' and purchasing huge swords and twisted daggers. But other forms of popular medievalism, including a remarkable number of well-made films set in the Middle Ages or developing medieval romance and epic themes as well as television shows such as the 'Brother Cadfael' series and novels by medievalists such as Sharan Newman and Candace Robb,<sup>26</sup> can be a means to interest the general public

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<sup>25</sup> Ronald Herzman, 'Medieval Outreach', *Medieval Academy News*, no. 141 (September 2001), 12.

<sup>26</sup> The fictions of both these novelists, members of the Medieval Academy, are informed by much serious historical research and a commitment to representing the Middle Ages in a positive and realistic manner. See Sharan E. Newman, 'Reaching Way Out: Presenting the Middle Ages to Modern America', *Medieval Academy News*, no. 137 (September 2000), 3; and Candace Robb, 'Language Made Strange', *Medieval Academy News*, no. 140 (September 2001), 14.

in the Middle Ages. Of course, one must guard against a kind of Disneyland representation or worse. Michael Drout has noted a concern among Tolkien scholars that the promotion of the movies based on his trilogy through Burger King might lead to ““Lord of the Onion Rings” or something like that’.<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, I think medievalists should become involved in such popular representations of things ‘medieval’ and make use of them to direct the interest of students and the general public towards a more complex and sophisticated understanding of the Middle Ages. It is better to participate in the conversation, providing advice and informing the process, than simply to sit back, criticise or bemoan how the Middle Ages is represented, but basically ignore it as if it has no effect on our students and the discipline at large. I take this critical engagement with popular medievalism to be the largest challenge facing scholars of medieval literature and the Medieval Academy as we enter the new millennium.

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<sup>27</sup> Anand Vaishnav, ‘Getting “Rings” into Academic Circles’, interview with Michael Drout, *Boston Sunday Globe* (13 Jan. 2002), B10.