

## **“Speche of thynges smale”:**

### **Micro-College Medievalism**

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The phrase “medieval studies” is virtually meaningless at a small school such as Algoma University College. One faculty member out of the entire faculty complement of just over 30 is a specialist in a medieval discipline, Medieval English Literature (especially Chaucer), and though AUC does have a handful of courses on medieval topics on its books (e.g. History of Medieval Europe, Medieval Philosophy), the only ones offered regularly are the upper-year Chaucer courses. Courses in medieval drama and romance are on the books, but only the drama course has been offered, and only as a Directed Studies course. Library holdings are so sparse that even many major texts (literary and critical) are available only through inter-library loan, and most major (and all minor) journals focusing on medieval studies are not in our holdings (we receive exactly three medieval-focused journals here, and *Florilegium* is not, I regret, among them). Research on medieval topics is therefore and of necessity difficult, requiring long delays as inter-library loan materials trickle in, as well as extensive travel to other sites. Furthermore, few students take courses focusing on medieval topics, and even fewer of them acquire an abiding love for the subject that carries them forward to careers as medievalists. Indeed, in my years at AUC, not a single student (to my knowledge) has pursued graduate studies in any medieval discipline. The preservation, let alone the nurturing and growth, of medieval studies, is extremely difficult under such circumstances. One might imagine that a rewarding, or even an interesting, career as a medievalist would be impossible under such circumstances.

Nevertheless, there is little reason for despair. Medieval studies is perhaps of necessity something of an insular discipline, but the micro-college medievalist has little opportunity for such insularity. While the lack of colleagues or even advanced students

with whom one can discuss (for instance) the nuances of one's latest insights into Chaucer is unquestionably a problem in both teaching and research, the micro-college medievalist is forced out of insularity because he (or she) has no choice. Because I teach at a small college, for instance, I am required to teach an array of subjects other than medieval literature. I regularly teach Drama to 1642, Spenser to Milton, Shakespeare, Children's Literature, Science Fiction and Fantasy, and various other things, including a general introductory literature course (I was in my eighth year here before I had a year in which all the courses I taught were repeats of earlier courses). Because I cannot devote most of my time to medieval-specific teaching (or research), I interpellate the other subjects I teach with the medieval. I am unlikely to send many students to graduate programs in medieval studies, but I know I expose a significant number of students to more of the medieval literary world by virtue of incorporating that world into the array of courses I teach than I would be able to influence at a larger university, where I could pursue my medieval interests with greater depth and devotion.

Furthermore, while ongoing and intensive research into medieval subjects is rendered difficult for the micro-college medievalist, other perhaps complementary research possibilities present themselves. For instance, I genuinely regret that I have been unable to research Chaucer as extensively and as intensively as I would have been able to do at a larger school with more resources and where I would have a much less onerous course rotation. However, that onerous course rotation has required me to broaden my research for teaching purposes and therefore to broaden my own academic research. Instead of working exclusively or primarily on medieval literature, I work as well on Renaissance literature, Restoration literature, Canadian literature, genre literature, and even cultural studies. I believe this breadth rounds me as a scholar in ways different from but not of necessity inferior to the ways I would be rounded out by a more exclusively medieval diet. It also allows me to make connections between my medieval interests and subsequent periods, connections too infrequently made in a world in which even President Jed Bartlett on *The West Wing* thinks *Beowulf* is a Middle English text and most students see the Renaissance, let alone earlier periods, as an alien world.

I do not believe that the micro-college medievalist is in an ideal position to function as a medievalist, nor would I like to see the academy develop much further in a direction that requires medievalists also to do several other things. There must remain room for dedicated and focused, intensive work in medieval studies. Large

schools must continue to provide support to programs and courses in medieval studies to ensure the continued health of this vital and (in my opinion) generally undervalued and under-explored discipline. We need more research into the medieval world and more teaching of medieval subjects, not less; the atrophying and elimination of courses in medieval literature, history, philosophy, and so on bodes ill for medieval studies. However, I believe that the micro-college can provide a fruitful environment for the medievalist. The micro-college medievalist may be able to make only modest contributions to the development of the discipline. However, the micro-college medievalist can take the medieval world to students when they least expect it, in courses with no obvious connection to the medieval world. Students get some exposure to medievalism without having consciously to seek it out at the micro-college at which a medievalist is a faculty member. Such exposure will serve them in good stead as budding academics—and it might help them better appreciate the merits and limitations of pop-culture medievalism represented by such works as the film *A Knight's Tale*. I hope students will not get their only exposure to Geoffrey Chaucer in that film; as a micro-college medievalist, I can ensure they will not.

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