

Brandon University

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Brandon University is a small undergraduate institution with a liberal arts focus. Can medieval studies flourish within such an environment?

How I teach and how I engage in research in my field cannot be understood unless the conditions under which I do so are grasped. There is one full-time medievalist (in English) at Brandon University, and there is also a specialist in early music. The History department plans on hiring a premodern historian as soon as possible, but until then their one medieval history course is taught either on overload or by a sessional. Beyond the specialised courses which these faculty members teach in their own disciplines, there are also survey courses in Art, English, History, and Women's Studies with some medieval content.

The challenges of working as a medievalist in such an environment are considerable. As the only medievalist in my department, indeed the entire university, I have no one here to talk to about my teaching or research interests. The nearest medievalists are more than two hundred kilometres away at the University of Manitoba and the University of Winnipeg. The result is a powerful sense of isolation, both geographic and academic, which listservs, web sites, and newsletters can only partially mollify. In many ways I feel closer to my American colleagues in the Midwest than I do my Canadian counterparts, because it is usually easier and less expensive for me to go to Kalamazoo and regional conferences in the United States than to try and attend similar conferences in Canada.

Teaching at a small university demands a flexibility, which if one is not careful, can stretch into an unbearable thinness. All senior level courses must be offered in a cycle. I taught a fourteenth-century literature course last year to a class of three students

in their third year. Three years or more will pass before I will teach that course again, and it could then well attract—as it has in the past—fifteen students in their second year of studies. I do not therefore have the luxury of fine-tuning courses on a yearly basis and must adapt my teaching style to the strengths and weaknesses of the class that year.

One's research interests rarely intersect with what one teaches at a small university. My own research concerns manuscript readings of *Piers Plowman*—a text which was squeezed into the last two and a half weeks of that full-year course on fourteenth-century literature. Students, weary and anxious, rarely appreciate the poem as I do. Indeed, with the rare exception of the sabbatical year, research activity is something largely for the spring and summer months. A teaching load of three courses per term and the usual administrivia of academic life leave precious little time for anything else.

Yet medieval studies do flourish here at Brandon University.

The demand for flexibility enables me to escape the boredom of narrow specialisation. The collegiality of my department allows me the freedom to teach any medieval literary subject which interests me, for the choice of what, when, and how to teach, within reasonable limits, is mine and mine alone. No one suggests that I ought to teach Old English literature and *Beowulf* in translation so that students need not deal with the difficulty of the language. No one questions the class time spent on paleography, textual criticism, medieval art and music. All students have the opportunity to participate in the reading of a medieval drama, to demonstrate their knowledge of the form by writing their own medieval romance, to combine the medieval with the modern in the assessment of websites dedicated to the study of medieval literature. Medieval studies do indeed flourish here.