

Preface

Every semester, talented students gather in university classrooms to improve their knowledge of medieval studies and hone their research and composition skills. Many courses culminate in the term paper, a labour-intensive exercise performed for an audience of one. This arrangement gives lecturers a good sense of their students' abilities, but it condemns a good deal of valuable work to oblivion. In a world increasingly played out in social media, the term paper has come to stand out as one of the more private undertakings in a student's life.

There is good reason why coursework remains private by default: medieval studies is a daunting field in which to conduct research. It is characterised above all by uncertainties. Early medieval literature in particular is often anonymous, and our understanding of the circumstances in which it was produced is patchy and highly speculative. The situation is further complicated by the field's other trademark: its interdisciplinarity. Many literary texts are informed by theology, but their origins and social commentary can only be appreciated with a thorough understanding of social history, which in turn relies on archaeology as well as documentary evidence, which combined reveal a complex world requiring years of study to comprehend to any meaningful degree. These aspects cannot be done justice in language and literature departments. Indeed, even the languages themselves tend to receive short shrift, as there is no time in most undergraduate curricula to ensure students have a thorough grasp of Old English as well as Latin, let alone Old Norse and beyond. All of this is supposed to happen alongside the study of a literary tradition that spans centuries, not to mention the overwhelming part of a typical English Language and Literature curriculum that postdates the Middle Ages. Thus a training in medieval studies is bound itself to be as patchy as our collective understanding of the period. How, then, could students be expected to deliver research worthy of publication?

One objection to this reasoning consists in the sobering observation that these limitations do not disappear even after advanced study: the scholar's knowledge of the Middle Ages is just as much characterised by unknowns as is the student's. As she passes through the stages of graduate school and book authorship, the medievalist certainly improves her knowledge of the matters in which she specialises, and indeed she is likely to become the world expert in some small domain, but a scholar with a deep knowledge of all the disciplines involved would be a rare thing indeed. As such, we are all called upon to share the insights we have gained: work that does not break new ground may nevertheless help others advance the state of their knowledge. In the same way, students are well advised to start within well-defined territories, such as the diegetic world of a text, but there is no reason why they could not there do work that is as important as any scholar's, and certainly worth sharing.

This volume demonstrates that student papers are indeed worth reading and sharing. Readers may approach these essays with different objectives, but it is our hope that they will learn something new from each contribution. Sometimes, the knowledge gained will consist in groundbreaking insights, helping the reader reach a set of coordinates on the edge of the universe of current knowledge. In other cases, a reader may find that one or other of these papers provides a particularly useful overview of the material it engages. Regardless of their individual merit, however, all essays here collected are examples of outstanding student scholarship, which makes them especially instructive for ambitious students of medieval literature in search of models whose standard is entirely within their reach.

The contributions to this volume were originally submitted as coursework and undergraduate theses between 2015 and 2017. Whereas the thesis authors (Kai Friedhoff, Julia Josfeld, and Verena Klose [second contribution]) have plotted their own course, the other papers were submitted for courses entitled "The Cosmic Conflict in Old English Literature," "Fate and Fortune in Old English Literature," and "Literary Environments of Middle English Poetry." The combination of these thematic strands has yielded a range of perspectives on the nature of the sublunary world as understood in the Middle Ages and the cosmic forces that were thought to govern it. Taken together, these essays offer considerable insight into medieval models of the world. It is our hope that they will inspire readers to continue the quest for knowledge undertaken by our contributors.

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