

INTRODUCTION

Back in the fall of 2019, I had the strangest epiphany of my professional career. This lightning bolt moment came one afternoon in the Special Collections reading room at the Newberry Library, where I was looking at an old book with my friend and colleague Federica Caneparo, a brilliant scholar of Italian art and literature in sixteenth-century Italy. We were there so Federica could introduce me to the 1522 edition of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.¹ This was the first Italian translation of Ovid's masterwork to be printed, and the publisher, Niccolò Zuppino, wanted to help it make a big splash by adding a nearly full-page woodcut portrait of the Roman author to adorn the title page (Fig. 1). According to Federica, Zuppino wanted this portrait to make clear that the volume embraced the spirit of the Renaissance by showing Ovid with the full iconography of an ancient poet (and not, she was clear, a medieval doctor) hard at work in his study. However, as soon as I laid eyes on this woodcut, I *immediately* thought: "Oh my gosh, that's medieval studies."

Even *I* was confused by this gut reaction. Why on earth would I think that? I had no idea, and, slightly embarrassed, I didn't say anything about it to Federica at the time. Over the rest of the day, though, I kept trying to figure out why I would think this Renaissance depiction of a first-century Roman poet immediately struck me as the perfect visualization of my field. It could have been the fact that the portrait shows Ovid toiling away on a no-doubt important and interesting intellectual project that required consulting cool old books, which resonated with a lot of things I liked about being a professional medievalist. But no, that wasn't it. After a while, I realized that what struck a chord with me had nothing to do with what Ovid was doing, but with how he seemed to be *feeling*. In that image I saw not a proud ancient laureate, but sad and resigned scholar, with his head resting heavily in his hand while staring out the open window with empty eyes. For me, this title page did not show an influential, successful intellectual, but a

¹ Publius Ovidius Naso, *Tutti gli libri de Ouidio Metamorphoseos* (Venice: Niccolò Zuppino, 1522), Chicago, The Newberry Library, Case Y 672 .09647.

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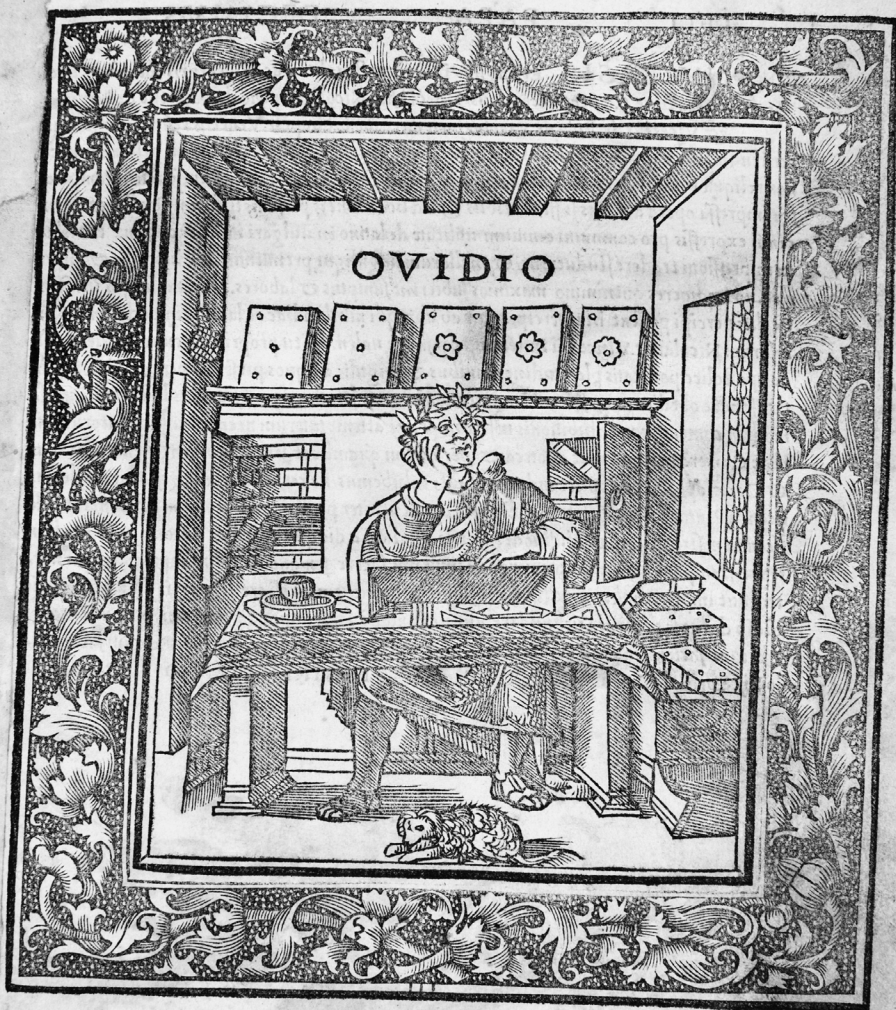


Figure 1. "Sad Ovid" woodcut on the title page of Publius Ovidius Naso, *Tutti gli libri de Ouidio Metamorphoseos* (Venice: Niccolò Zuppino, 1522). Chicago, The Newberry Library, Case Y 672 .O9647. Open Access. Courtesy of the Newberry Library.

melancholy man who, despite his important project and his cool old books, sat sadly pondering why he was sitting in his study all alone.

In that sense, “Sad Ovid” (as I now call him) seemed like the perfect visualization of the current state of the field of medieval studies. If you’re reading this book, I assume that you’re already well aware of the ongoing “crisis of the humanities” and how hard it seems to have hit medieval studies in particular. We don’t need to rehash all the gory details here; I imagine most every medievalist has personally experienced the field’s steadily eroding institutional presence, its growing inability to secure financial support from institutions or granting organizations, its ever-shrinking graduate cohorts, and its increasingly constricting job market.² If all this continues, the field faces a *very* uncertain future, to say the least, and everybody—whether they’re a medievalist or not—knows it.

This whole unfortunate situation has stirred up some pretty intense emotions from medievalists in the early twenty-first century. It was those emotions—loneliness, isolation, and profound anxiety about the future—that I read in Sad Ovid’s face. While there are plenty of things that are exciting, inspiring, and joyous about medieval studies today, when you look at the current institutional landscape and job market results, it’s hard to argue against the idea that our field is a community of very smart people doing interesting and important work...but mostly all by ourselves, with hardly anyone else outside that community paying attention to us. Almost every single medievalist I’ve ever known has reported feeling the same sense of melancholic dread I saw in Sad Ovid...and for good reason.

So, what can we do about it? This is probably the most important question facing the field today, but it’s also (as such questions tend to be) extremely difficult to answer. Part of the reason for that is that there are many external social, economic, and political factors contributing to the crisis in medieval studies and the humanities in general. That includes things like the monetization of higher education, social inequalities, systemic racism, the politically-motivated scepticism and villainization of universities and academic expertise, and the prioritization of STEM fields at the expense of the humanities in primary and secondary education, among others. None of those problems can be solved by medievalists alone, which makes it difficult for any of us to see a way out of our current predicament.

2 Eisenberg with Kurtz, *Executive Summary of Medieval Studies Academic-Positions Update*.

The situation has understandably led to a profound sense of resignation in the field these days, one that has turned a great many medievalists into Sad Ovid, doing great work while staring longingly out the metaphorical window. My most visceral experience of this came at an academic gathering some years back, where I happened to overhear a medievalist professor at a major research university talking about how their program would not be accepting any new graduate students the following year. This was objectively bad news, yet, to my complete shock, this professional medievalist admitted feeling *relieved*, because they doubted they would be able to “find jobs” for all the graduate students already in their program, so it was probably good not to be getting any new ones. I seemed to be the only one struck dumb by that reaction; the other medievalists (most of them professors as well) standing nearby just shrugged or nodded knowingly. I found this incident profoundly depressing; the very people charged with leading the field into the future by training and developing future generations of medievalists seemed to agree that there was nothing to be done about this terrible predicament other than to sigh deeply and grimly press on with our work. Years later, that mentality was what I recognized in Sad Ovid’s face.

The task before us all is clear: if our field is going to survive and thrive as we all hope, we need to leave our Sad Ovid days behind. Granted, the contributing factors to the crisis are systemic and complex, but the enormity of the task absolutely *cannot* be an excuse for us to sit idly and do nothing. Even if we can’t solve every problem threatening our field on our own, we have to do *something*. I know I’m not the only one who feels this way; there are plenty of medievalists of all levels out there ready and willing to change things (and the fact that you’re reading this book means you’re probably one of them), and who are working very hard to solve it. But the challenge is so massive that it’s hard even for these go-getters to feel like they’re making any progress. That said, there are still plenty of other factors contributing to the precarious state of our field that we *can* change, so we should commit ourselves to working on improving as many of those factors as we can. Ideally, we would start by focusing on a particular issue that could, if we fixed it, make it easier to tackle the rest of the field’s problems. And I think I know just where to begin.

In this book, I’m going to focus on a problem in medieval studies that I am convinced will go a long way towards ending our current crisis: public engagement. In my view, this issue is kind of like a through-line connecting all the other structural problems that have brought medieval studies to its precarious state. To put it another way, the main reason the field is los-

ing institutional and material support so quickly is because too many people who aren't medievalists don't understand what the field does or why it's important. Therefore, in order to reverse that trend, the solution is for the field itself (i.e., all the professional medievalists and medievalists-in-training) to convince as many potential stakeholders as possible that expert knowledge about medieval culture is relevant, interesting, and, most importantly, *valuable*.

I wrote this book to help my fellow medievalists do exactly that. To be sure, it sounds simple enough, but practicing more effective public engagement will take a lot of work. As I'll explain in more detail below, our success depends on mastering a skill set that the current academic system isn't designed to teach. So to learn those necessary skills, medievalists will need to look elsewhere, specifically at a different intellectual culture where those skills were both highly valued and diligently taught. Fortunately, medievalists already know just such a system quite well: the intellectual culture of the European Middle Ages. It's here, right in the very subject matter at the core of the field, that we can find useful examples of professional intellectuals employing mindsets, practices, and tools to make their expertise understandable, engaging, and relevant to audiences well beyond their intellectual peers. In short, the key for medieval studies to set itself on course for a more promising future lies in the medieval past, just waiting for us to use it.

My Public Engagement Profile

I think the graduate school version of me would have been quite surprised to learn that public engagement beyond academia is now the main focus of my professional life. That's because my 2015 self could not have known that I would end up working at the Newberry Library in Chicago. I certainly was familiar with the Newberry back then, thanks to its rich collections of medieval manuscripts, printed books, and other objects. But in 2016, I was fortunate enough to be hired there as a Mellon Major Projects Fellow who was charged with coordinating a project entitled "Religious Change, 1450–1700." It was only then that I was really able to appreciate the quality that makes the Newberry truly special: unlike other institutions with similar collections, the Newberry is a *public* research library that has been free and open to anyone and everyone since 1887.³ That public-facing orientation is at the core of the Newberry's institutional identity,

3 Spadafora, ed., *The Newberry 125: Stories from Our Collection*.

and everything that happens there, from public programs and events to research and instruction, is done with a broad range of potential publics (i.e., not just scholars) in mind.

The public character of the Newberry has informed all the work that I've done there, from my days as a postdoc trying to convince non-scholarly audiences to engage with our early modern religious collections to my current role in the Center for Renaissance Studies (CRS), in which my main job is to create programming and outreach initiatives that promote the knowledge and use our medieval and early modern materials. Altogether, I've spent my eight years at the Newberry developing and applying a set of skills, practices, and mindsets that have successfully made very old and esoteric books, art, and other objects understandable, interesting, and meaningful to all sorts of audiences...many of whom are not academics or students. I did all that through a laundry list of projects, initiatives, and activities that I had never even *imagined* doing in graduate school: curating multiple gallery exhibitions, developing digital resources, planning marketing campaigns, talking to the media, organizing public programs, designing pedagogical resources for high school classrooms, leading collection presentations, and much more besides.

In short, my time at the Newberry has given me a thorough and intensive training in how *not* to be Sad Ovid. Thanks to the Newberry's public-facing identity, I haven't had the opportunity to sit alone at my table full of books and sadly wonder why no one else is there. Instead, I've had to (metaphorically speaking) get up, get out, and *find* other audiences so I could convince them to care about the Middle Ages. Alongside all that practical experience, though, the Newberry has also given me a very different perspective on my work as a medievalist than the one I had in graduate school. Coming to the Newberry meant stepping outside of academia proper, which gradually allowed me to look back at medieval studies with new eyes. And as I've spent more and more time and effort engaging audiences beyond academia, those eyes have become much more critically aware of all the practices, mentalities, and assumptions that really only make sense within the academic system, but don't work nearly as well anywhere else. In short, it was through my Newberry eyes, if you will, that I was able to recognize medieval studies' public engagement problem.

The Public Engagement Problem in Medieval Studies

So, how exactly is public engagement a problem for medieval studies? Let's start with the basics. There are some pretty technical definitions of "public engagement" out there,⁴ but for me, it's a pretty simple concept. I define it this way: **making a productive connection with some kind of audience**. I consider a "productive connection" to be one that convinces an audience (or audiences) to take some kind of action that accomplishes something that you want. That "something" could be just about anything: signing a petition, buying a product or service, liking and subscribing on social media, believing a point of doctrine, following rules and regulations, voting for a particular candidate, learning a skill, rectifying an injustice, understanding something about medieval culture, you name it. Whatever your goal, "public engagement" is the set of tools you use to get some kind of audience to think/believe/do what you want. These tools—which, in and of themselves, are neutral—could be just about anything that has ever been represented or expressed in any kind of medium: visual art, public speaking, private conversation, books, poetry, videos, social media, music, and so on. Anyone who is able to master these tools can convince an endless variety of audiences to think and do whatever is necessary to accomplish a particular goal.

This basic definition of public engagement applies to anyone, but I would add a bit more detail for the public engagement medievalists do: **making a productive connection between their expertise about the Middle Ages and some kind of audience(s)**. This, on the surface, should not be anything new to medievalists. After all, they have been building productive connections with certain types of audiences extremely well for a very long time. These include, for example, professional academics (especially other medievalists) through things like scholarly monographs, articles and book chapters, lectures, and the like. Medievalists use these tools to convince other scholars to, among other things, learn new information about the Middle Ages, pursue new questions and avenues of research, and develop new approaches to teaching the Middle Ages. Another important audience medievalists engage extremely well is undergraduate students; from liberal arts colleges to R1 universities, medievalists are constantly developing assignments, active-learning exercises, lectures, PowerPoint presentations, and other pedagogical tools that successfully convince their students to understand, analyze, and get excited about the Middle Ages (for at least an academic term).

4 Frewer, "A Typology of Public Engagement Mechanisms."

The field's public engagement problem doesn't have anything to do with these audiences. Instead, it becomes obvious when we look beyond the university context (in which medievalists do most of their public engagement work) to how medieval studies engages audiences *outside academia*. When it comes to this sort of public engagement—and I'm going to be perfectly frank here—professional medievalists have been pretty ineffective, and that is why the field is in such dire straits. The proof is right there in the bare facts of our institutional crisis. Medievalists have been producing excellent scholarly publications and teaching engaging undergraduate courses for many decades now, yet the field continues to wither away before our eyes. That is because the forms of public engagement that medievalists have always done well are, relatively speaking, extremely limited in their impact. Scholarly publications, as we'll see a bit later, are not very accessible to audiences outside the field, and most undergraduates who enjoy medieval courses typically don't have much reason (or opportunity) to think about the Middle Ages after the grades are in.

Since neither of the traditional forms of public engagement medievalists practice effectively reaches audiences outside academic settings, it should come as no surprise that most people who aren't professional medievalists (or are on their way to becoming one) tend to see medieval studies as something like this: a niche scholarly field in which highly-trained academics with a lot of specialized skills use big words to talk to each other about the strange things people did a very long time ago (depending on where you live, you could also add "in a place very far away" to this, too).

In short, audiences outside academia tend to see medieval studies as *irrelevant*, and this leads to even bigger problems. After all, if what professional medievalists do doesn't really matter to anyone else, why bother making sure they have enough institutional or financial support? It would be far better for administrators and funders to spend their time, effort, and resources on things that make a positive contribution to everyone's lives, right? I'm sure this sounds very familiar to many medievalists out there. After all, this (or something very much like it) is the explanation we often hear from university administrators when they eliminate faculty positions in medieval studies, from grant review committees when they decline to invest money in medieval studies, and from parents who encourage their college-age children to major in something more financially secure.

But here's the thing that gets me the most about this. The common perception of the irrelevance of medieval studies stands in pretty stark contrast to the very real, widespread, and enthusiastic popularity of the Middle Ages themselves. As has been noted many times over, you can find representa-

tions or adaptations of medieval culture showing up everywhere in popular culture: literature, toys, children's books, games, movies and television shows, amusement parks, fan conventions, and more.⁵ All these manifestations are proof that people without PhDs in medieval studies are not only interested in and excited about medieval things, they're also—and I can't emphasize this enough—*willing to spend time and money on them*. How, then, could a field built around understanding something so lucrative and popular be in such trouble?

It's clear to me that the Middle Ages themselves are not the cause of the field's irrelevance problem: we are. Or, to be more precise (and fair), the problem is *how professional medievalists share their expertise with non-medievalists*. If medieval studies appears esoteric and irrelevant to modern society—and the facts are pretty clear that it does—then it follows that medievalists must, at least in part, be presenting it that way, and probably have been for a long time. It's only in the past decade or so that the field as a whole has made it a stated priority to build productive connections with audiences outside of academia, so it shouldn't really be a surprise that those audiences still need a lot of convincing that our work matters. As if that weren't enough, in this time of crisis, far too many medievalists are still taking the Sad Ovid approach, morosely forging along with their scholarship and teaching with the faint hope that someone might suddenly notice that this work is interesting, important, and worth supporting. In my view, this disengaged approach has not only contributed to our institutional decline, it's also caused real harm in the world by making it easier for white supremacist groups to use medieval culture to support their racist, violent agendas without, until very recently, much pushback from those in the field.⁶ In my view, it's hardly an overstatement to say that our public engagement problem could be the root of the entire crisis we're facing.

Therefore, I am convinced that, if we want to find our way out of our current predicament, we need to learn how to do more effective public engagement outside the academy. If we as a field can, unlike Sad Ovid, successfully build productive connections with diverse audiences beyond the university, we'll then be able to convince all kinds of stakeholders that our field is relevant, useful, and, perhaps most importantly, *essential* to modern society. And if we can do that, we will suddenly find it a lot easier to direct peoples'

5 Grollemond and Keene, *The Fantasy of the Middle Ages*.

6 Kim, "Teaching the Middle Ages in a Time of White Supremacy," and Lomuto, "White Nationalism and the Ethics of Medieval Studies."

interest, excitement, and financial support for medieval *things* into medieval *studies*. And once we do *that*, every other systemic problem threatening the field—lack of jobs, lack of students, lack of attention, etc.—becomes much, much easier to solve.

The good news is that this work is already being done. Advocacy and outreach have been major emphases for professional organizations like the Medieval Academy of America for some years now, and plenty of individual medievalists have been doing excellent work sharing their expertise in a lot of innovative and exciting ways. Some of my favourite examples (and this is a very small list) of this work includes books written for popular presses instead of academic ones (such as Christopher de Hamel's *Meetings with Remarkable Manuscripts*), colouring books (like Dayanna Knight's *The Viking Coloring Book*), comics (anything by Kristen Haas Curtis, but especially her adaptation of the *Nun's Priest's Tale*), children's books (my kids' favourite is Katy Beebe and S.D. Schindler's *Brother Hugo and the Bear*), "medieval" covers of popular songs (by YouTube artists like Hildegard von Blingin' or Algal the Bard), humorous videos on TikTok (#medievaltiktok and #medieval), novels (so many to choose from, but I particularly recommend Lucy Pick's *Pilgrimage*), and video and computer games (Ubisoft's *Assassin's Creed* series in particular). On top of all this, more and more senior and junior medievalists are serving as consultants on television shows and movies, making guest appearances on popular podcasts, and sharing content on social media. Better yet, even more medievalists than these are using these more effective public engagement techniques all the time in their teaching, so that they can spark the interest and curiosity of their students, many of whom step into the classroom without any pre-existing interest in the Middle Ages. All in all, it is fair to say that more professional medievalists today are attempting to engage audiences outside academia than ever before.

That's the good news...the bad news is that this terrific work isn't doing enough to end the crisis. No question, all this outreach should give every medievalist hope that it's possible for medieval studies to build productive connections with audiences outside academia, but we need more. In particular, we need *every* medievalist to be willing and able to make a *sustained* commitment to doing some kind of public engagement work beyond research and teaching. What's more, we also need all those medievalists to level up that public engagement from just making the Middle Ages interesting and accessible (which all of the work I mentioned above does) to using their expertise to make some kind of positive, measurable impact on our world today. That is, we as a field need to make it a priority to convince people that medieval studies can help develop solutions to social and eco-

conomic inequalities, address health emergencies, shape legislation and political policies, create profitable business models, and so on.

Right now, the field is willing to do that kind of work, but it doesn't quite know how. And that is so because, at the macro level, public engagement beyond academia is still not a central enough priority for the field. For most medievalists (especially those at R1 universities), it's something *extra*. After all, reaching out to non-scholarly audiences is not the sort of thing that will get you tenure; when it comes to medievalists' professional lives, scholarship and teaching still reign supreme. And, really, that's not surprising at all. This situation is simply the natural product of the academic system in which all medievalists receive their professional development. That system has been designed to produce scholars and teachers, and that's exactly what it does. It has been that way pretty much since the nineteenth century, when medieval studies was transformed into a "scientific" field that could only be populated by experts (most of whom were privileged, white, and male).⁷ Anyone who didn't approach medieval culture as "professionally" as that lot did, was deliberately belittled, criticized, and, crucially for our purposes here, ignored.

Our public engagement problem is the direct result of that fateful shift. The academic system that came out of that period was designed to train people to do their work within that system, either as a researcher or a teacher. As such, every medievalist I've ever known has left their doctoral training with a clear understanding of how to do research and how to teach a class, but not a single one of them has left having learned how to build productive connections with audiences outside the academy. Medievalists who *can* do this work either entered their program already knowing how to do it, or learned to do it completely on their own, in most cases without any support from their department. Left to itself, then, the academic system will, more often than not, keep on producing more professional medievalists who don't know how to convince the rest of the world that their work is valuable.

So, again, what are we going to do about this? To be clear, I don't believe the answer is to make that one great argument, write that one great op-ed article, or give that one great TED talk (all of which are just *slightly* more accessible versions of traditional academic public engagement anyway) that will go viral and convince everyone that the professional study of the Middle Ages matters. If we are going to solve this problem, we are going to need to

7 Gabriele and Whitaker, eds., "The Ghosts of the Nineteenth Century and the Future of Medieval Studies."

change the system. In particular, we need to change it so that it naturally produces medievalists who can engage audiences beyond academia just as well as they can research and teach.

But of course, there's another problem here: systemic change on this scale is hard, tends to take a long time (time the field may not have), and can be very scary, especially when the system has been around for as long as modern academia has. But make no mistake, we need to do something to bring about this change, and we need to start doing it *right now*, ideally by finding a way to make it easier for medievalists to develop and utilize effective public engagement skills alongside teaching and research skills. That alone, I think, would be enough to equip current and future generations of the field to make even more changes that will turn the steady decline of medieval studies around. But how exactly can we do that?

I think the best way to start this critical project is by thinking outside the box, namely, by bringing in some ideas, mindsets, and practices that are not so tied into the old system. And, come to think of it, it sure would help if we had some good models—that is, clear examples of habits, practices, and strategies that other people have used to build productive connections with various non-specialist audiences—to work with. When, where, and how have we seen a different way of doing things? Are there any examples of a professional development system that successfully produced individuals who had expert-level command of public engagement, rigorous academic inquiry, and teaching? As a matter of fact, there are plenty of them. Even better for medievalists, some of the very best of these models have been, as it were, right in front of us this whole time, in the very medieval culture we study.

The Solution: Public Engagement in Medieval Europe

Perhaps you're wondering what medieval Europeans could possibly offer us to help solve the crisis of the humanities. I mean, how could people who could hardly have imagined our advanced communication technology and global culture possibly teach us anything about doing effective public engagement today? As I see it, professional intellectuals in the European Middle Ages—which I define as anyone who made their living off highly-specialized intellectual training in schools or universities (e.g., university professors, preachers, artists, clerics, ecclesiastical and secular administrators)—had a lot in common with professional scholars now. Like us, these individuals made their living by reading, researching, writing, and teaching; spent years studying and training to be considered experts in their fields; and usually worked alongside other elite scholars at major institutions.

However, we don't have to look very hard to see that, when it comes to public engagement with audiences outside the educated elite, we could hardly be more different from our forebears in medieval Europe. And no, this has nothing to do with a lack of technology. Unlike most scholars today, professional intellectuals in the European Middle Ages were *expected* to be really good at building productive connections with diverse audiences... especially those without advanced university degrees. To put it another way, if we wanted to visualize *their* field, we would not see Sad Ovid. Instead, we would see something much more like this book's cover image, in which St. John of Patmos is out and about in the world, preaching confidently to a group of laypeople (that included both men and women, no less) rather than sitting sadly alone in a room. The roots of the more proactive and public-facing intellectual culture of medieval Europe ran deep. Already in the fifth century, Augustine of Hippo had declared that any Christian intellectual "must communicate what is good and eradicate what is bad, and...must win over the antagonistic, rouse the apathetic, and make clear to those who are not conversant with the matter under discussion what they should expect."⁸ Augustine's successors in medieval Europe took this lesson to heart; they understood that being a professional intellectual also meant that they had to be able to make their work understandable to *any* audience that was "not conversant with the matter," so that this new knowledge could convince them to change their lives.

This may seem extreme to professional humanities scholars today, but intellectuals in the Middle Ages could hardly have thought otherwise. In stark contrast to contemporary medievalists, their professional development system was set up to prepare them to build productive connections with audiences outside of the intellectual elite. This was due mostly to two of the most important pillars of medieval higher education: the liberal arts and Christianity. Inherited from classical intellectual culture, the liberal arts were intended to supply students with everything they needed to become responsible, discerning citizens. These same arts became the essential building blocks of medieval intellectuals' expertise, but none were more important than the three arts of the Trivium: grammar, rhetoric, and dialectic. It was from these subjects that medieval intellectuals learned how to use language (grammar), how to speak persuasively (rhetoric), and how to win arguments (dialectic). Rhetoric is probably the most important of these arts for understanding medieval public engagement, since it was this subject

⁸ Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, trans. Green, bk. 4, chap. 4, 103.

that taught one how to express themselves convincingly.⁹ It was mastering rhetoric that allowed intellectuals to make a real difference in the world, because they could use it to convince their contemporaries to think or do certain things they wanted.¹⁰

Christianity, the second pillar of medieval public engagement training, was probably the most powerful cultural force of all in medieval Europe. Most everyone, regardless of their place in society, lived in a world that revolved around Christian ideas, practices, and habits. For intellectuals, the connection was even stronger; most of them were trained and later employed within the structure of the church, so their work was expected to align with the main goals of institutional Christianity. Considering that most intellectuals were expected to not just read but *memorize* the entire Bible, they could hardly have missed that public engagement had been one of those institutional goals since the beginning: “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations,” Christ himself had said, “baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and *teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you*” (Matthew 28: 19–20, my emphasis). In turn, the intellectual system that developed in Europe after the fall of the Roman Empire was designed to carry out that very mission. As such, any medieval intellectual who worked for the church (which was most of them) was expected to use their work to reach and convince any potential audience to do/think/believe something, whether it was full of experts or not.

The upshot of all this is that professional intellectuals in the Middle Ages finished their professional development equipped with two things medievalists today lack: 1) a set of highly-developed public communication skills and 2) a sense of obligation to use those skills to make a difference in the world. Of course, then, as now, some professional intellectuals were better at (or more committed to) public engagement than others. The key difference is that, in medieval Europe, a commitment to public engagement beyond the academy was part of the job of being an intellectual. Unlike the elitist post-Enlightenment medievalists who ruled the roost in the nineteenth century, you’d have to look pretty hard to find a prominent medieval intellectual who *wasn’t* working to engage audiences outside the professional elite in some way. This explains why we see an experimental monastic thinker like Anselm of Bec *also* putting together a set of prayers for a noblewoman,¹¹

⁹ McKeon, “Rhetoric in the Middle Ages.”

¹⁰ Cicero, *De inventione*, ed. Greco, 74.

¹¹ See Anselm, *The Prayers and Meditations of St. Anselm with the Proslogion*.

elite university theologians *also* ministering to groups of spiritual women in cities like Paris;¹² scholastic titans like Albert the Great *also* showing up in popular legends and devotional works (even though they left no vernacular writings);¹³ highly-skilled artisans and designers *also* putting mundane yet popular things like pretzels in expensive stained-glass windows in German churches;¹⁴ and top-notch scholars like Jean Gerson *also* spending a lot of time writing vernacular versions of their more sophisticated Latin works to reach a wider readership.¹⁵

For medievalists keen on learning how to do better public engagement, this is *great* news. Because medieval intellectuals internalized effective public engagement strategies so well, we can find traces of those strategies in everything those intellectuals did. That means that all the texts, images, objects, ideas, and so on that they produced (or helped to produce) are a treasure trove of strategies, habits, tricks, hacks, and cautionary tales for how someone can successfully build productive connections with all kinds of non-expert audiences. In other words, all the helpful public engagement tools we modern medievalists could possibly want to use are right there in the very primary sources that are literally the foundation for our field. All we have to do is find a way to understand what those tools were and how they worked, so that we can pick them up and start using them today for ourselves. And that is what I hope this book will do.

What This Book Is

This book, as you've probably already noticed, is not your typical study of the European Middle Ages. In fact, I wouldn't call it "study" at all. I prefer to think of it as a *manual*, that is, a practical guide for you to learn how to do something. That "something" is this: **how to develop effective public engagement skills by adapting the medieval public engagement tools (i.e., practices, mindsets, and habits) you find in your sources.** In the rest of this book, I will explain how to do that by laying out what are, in my opinion, the very best practices of public engagement in the European Middle Ages. I'll talk about what those practices are, explain how they worked, and

12 See Miller, *The Beguines of Medieval Paris*.

13 See Gottschall, "Albert's Contributions to or Influence on Vernacular Literatures."

14 Cf. *Das Freiburger Münster* and Boivin, *Riemenschneider in Rothenburg*.

15 Hobbins, *Authorship and Publicity Before Print*.

offer suggestions, based on my own experience after I left graduate school, on how you can apply them now.

The advice I've gathered here can help medievalists of any level learn how to do better public engagement, from first-year graduate students to independent scholars to fully tenured professors. For those at an earlier stage in their career, this book will help you understand the importance of practicing good public engagement from the beginning of your professional development. For those who are more advanced, it can help you rethink how you think and talk about your expertise, and learn how to provide the necessary support for younger generations of medievalists to do the same.¹⁶ Importantly, you don't need any particular background knowledge or ready-made skills to do this; this book focuses on the intellectual culture in medieval Europe because that's the aspect of the Middle Ages I know best, so it's where I can see these solutions most clearly. But at the same time, I firmly believe that the medieval public engagement tools I talk about (and plenty more besides) can be found in every subfield and discipline that make up medieval studies, so the model you'll find here will benefit you no matter what you study, whether it's the Islamic world, Mediterranean cultures, the global Middle Ages, or anything else.

More than that, I'm confident this book can be helpful for scholars and students in *other* humanities fields, as well. Though you may not study medieval sources, the strategies and approaches you'll find here should work just as well for other fields and disciplines. After all, the professional medieval intellectuals you'll meet shortly certainly didn't observe the same disciplinary or chronological boundaries that we fret over today, so there is no reason why their example can't work for other areas of study. Whoever you are and whatever you do, this book can prepare you to explain why your work is interesting, important, and valuable to the outside stakeholders (consumers, employers, administrators, institutions, funders, etc.) whose support we need to get us out of this crisis.

How This Book Works

I'm going to do all of this in five chapters. Four of these chapters are fairly brief case studies that tackle what I call "structural roadblocks": four practices or mindsets internalized by medievalists during our professional training that create the field's public engagement problem. Some of these are explicitly taught or encouraged by mentors in graduate school, but more

¹⁶ See also Cassuto, *The Graduate School Mess*.

often, we learn them implicitly by observing how all the medievalists around us do what they do. And, because we internalize these roadblocks in this way, we rarely ever notice them, much less think about them critically. As you'll see throughout the book, I repeatedly slammed face-first in to all four of them throughout graduate school and my brief adjuncting life. It was only when I stepped out of academia by coming to the Newberry that I was able to see them and recognize the damage they were doing. Because these roadblocks are hard to see from within the field, I will be talking about them in a pretty general and polemical way in the following chapters. I'm doing that to make them clearly visible, although I wouldn't blame you if it seemed like I'm building reductive strawmen to knock down. There are, as you'll see, perfectly understandable reasons why those roadblocks have developed, and I certainly do not mean to suggest that you or anyone else is a bad medievalist for practicing them, intentionally or not. But all the same, those roadblocks are, I'm quite certain, harming medieval studies, so I hope this book will help you learn to see them clearly so you can avoid them.

In this book, I take on the four structural roadblocks that I think are most responsible for medieval studies' public engagement woes. Chapter 1 deals with what I call the Life of the Mind Excuse, which refers to medievalists' default tendency to explain the value of their work only in terms of its impact on the field itself. Chapter 2 then takes on Genre Dependency, a term I use to describe the fact that medievalists are conditioned to prioritize sharing their knowledge about the Middle Ages in a scholarly publication. Chapter 3 turns to the General Public Fallacy, my term for an overly simplified understanding of non-academic audiences that short-circuits a lot of outreach initiatives before they start. Finally, chapter 4 sets its sights on Gatekeeping, which I take to mean the field's assumption that the true work of medieval studies—experiencing, interpreting, and talking about medieval culture (that is, the stuff that makes the field cool)—can *only* be done in the academy.

But fear not! Each case study also presents a medieval “solution” to the structural roadblocks and all the problems they cause. Every chapter is centred on a single medieval author or creator whose work shows those solutions in action especially well. Respectively, they are Peter Damian, Hildegard of Bingen, Henry Suso, and the anonymous compiler of a fifteenth-century devotional manuscript. In my view, these creators are the clearest examples of the habits, mindsets, and practices that medievalists should adopt if we want to build the productive connections with other audiences that we so desperately need. I would argue that they were all in force throughout the entire medieval period, but these examples all come from the western part

of the European continent (mostly the German-speaking lands, as it turns out) in the period between approximately 1000 and 1500. I'm positive there are other authors or examples out there that are just as clear and compelling as the ones I've marshalled here; I believe these solutions could be found in any medieval intellectual's work, but these are the particular authors who made these solutions visible for me.

Chapter 1 starts with what I think is really the cornerstone of the whole thing, the Life of Service Conviction, which refers to elite medieval intellectuals' assumption that the whole point of their expertise was to have some kind of impact on the lives of *all* their contemporaries, not just their fellow intellectuals. Chapter 2 then brings in Genre Diversity, or, intellectuals' determination to prioritize multiple creative ways to share their expert knowledge that would make it more accessible to diverse audiences. Next, chapter 3 talks about Audience Development, the lengthy, intensive, yet ultimately effective process elite intellectuals used to cultivate receptive audiences for their work. Finally, chapter 4 focuses on Audience Empowerment, which I think of as the whole endgame of public engagement in medieval Europe: training and inviting non-experts of all kinds, including laypeople (i.e., non-academics), to participate actively in the work of elite intellectual culture.

Following those case studies is a final chapter that I'm calling a "game plan" instead of a traditional conclusion. If chapters 1–4 are about laying the groundwork for a medieval model of effective public engagement, chapter 5 is about how you can implement that model in your own work. As you'll see, I think the key to the whole thing is as simple as thinking intentionally about public engagement, identifying the tools that can help you achieve it, and diligently practicing using those tools as much as possible. So, to help you do that, this final chapter goes over some simple activities that you can practice while you're doing your thing as a medievalist—taking courses, preparing for comprehensive exams, designing and teaching courses, researching in the archives, or writing a monograph or dissertation—that will set you up for public engagement success later. Along the way, you'll also hear quite a bit about me and my experiences in graduate school, adjuncting and, most importantly, my time doing public outreach at the Newberry Library, where I've seen every one of these medieval solutions in action, which gives me confidence that they can work for you, too.

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I wrote this book because I love medieval studies, and I want the field not just to survive the current crisis, but to thrive for generations to come. To

do that, it needs to change. Going forward, medieval studies need to become more open and accessible, more global, more diverse and antiracist, more compassionate and accommodating, and more flexible and creative. We've made some progress in all these areas, but there is a long way to go.¹⁷ Making effective public engagement more central to the field and its training is a way to make all this change happen (and happen more quickly), so I wrote this book to help make that a reality. But I also wanted to do that with a book that *only a medievalist could write*. That's why you'll still find me analyzing primary sources, citing secondary literature, translating texts from their original languages, and discussing the cultural context of the European Middle Ages. I want you to see how a professional medievalist (for that's how I think of myself) can use their expertise today to offer practical solutions to a contemporary problem. Indeed, everything you see me do in this book is ultimately rooted in the knowledge I gained through years of researching why religious thinkers wrote so many letters in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. I'm sure your content expertise, whatever it may be, can accomplish all sorts of useful things that will help address the many other crises and catastrophes out there. After all, the tools provided by our individualistic post-Enlightenment culture don't seem to be able to solve them, so we could use some different solutions, and the Middle Ages could be a great place to find them. I hope that this book will help open your eyes to all the good you can do as a medievalist right now, once you start to look at what you do and what you know from the right perspective. If we can all do that, I think we'll all be able to set medieval studies on course for a more secure future.

17 Otaño Gracia, "Welcome to a New Reality!"

