

Chapter I

PETER DAMIAN AND THE LIFE OF SERVICE CONVICTION

The Problem: The Life of the Mind Excuse

“A degree in medieval studies? What are you going to do with that?” If you’re reading this book, I’m going to assume that you’ve heard a version of this question at some point in your life...probably lots of times, and from lots of people. That’s certainly been the case for me and pretty much everyone I know in the field, and I think it’s safe to say that dealing with sceptical questions like these is just part of what being a medievalist means these days. Indeed, I wasn’t a graduate student for very long before I noticed that swapping tales of family members, friends, or complete strangers asking us what we could possibly do with a degree in medieval studies was something of a team-building activity for graduate students huddled together at conference receptions.

I’ve taken part in many of those impromptu support sessions myself, and always found them comforting, because we all assured each other that following our hearts into this field that didn’t seem to make sense to anyone else was the right decision. Looking back now, though, I can’t help but notice something that my fellow graduate students and I usually *weren’t* doing during all that team-building: actually answering those sceptical questions. The support was great, but it would have been better if we were also putting our heads together to come up with things we actually *could* do with our medieval expertise that would make a difference in peoples’ lives. I don’t blame myself or my fellow graduate students for not doing this; after all, why would we? Everyone present there already knew that medieval studies were important, so explaining its relevance today didn’t seem necessary. What none of us realized—what none of us *could* have realized at the time—was that we had run smack into the first structural roadblock I want to talk about, the Life of the Mind Excuse.

I consider this roadblock to be the root of medieval studies’ public engagement problem, because it heavily influences how medievalists tend to think about why their work is important. In this chapter, I’ll explain how the default approach is designed to be received by other academics (and therefore, doesn’t work well with anyone else), how that approach is the

exact opposite of the way in which medieval intellectuals thought (and talked) about their expertise, and how I didn't realize that difference until I was quite unexpectedly using my own knowledge of medieval culture to do my day-to-day work at the Newberry.

To be clear, the life of the mind is not a bad thing. Seeking knowledge for knowledge's sake or loving learning are both great, and I know that they have led plenty of folks into medieval studies. What I'm talking about here is strictly a public engagement issue, and in that area, the "life of the mind" is, at least in my view, not all that helpful. If you need a good example of that, look no further than our good friend Sad Ovid. As Federica Caneparo explained to me, the viewers of this portrait were supposed to notice that the great poet wasn't *doing* anything with the books, tools, or anything else in his study; as she put it, "Everything that matters is in his head."

The Life of the Mind Excuse works the same way. That makes it problematic, to say the least, when people use "the life of the mind" to explain why something is important or worth supporting. Unfortunately, medievalists do this *all the time*. Think about it for a second, how have you answered the question "why are you doing medieval studies" in the past? Based on the conversations I've had with fellow medievalists over the years, I'm going to hazard a guess that you said something like "I think it's interesting," or "I really love it," or maybe "I want to understand it." In other words, what you do with medieval studies is all about some sort of personal or academic interest. Or, to put it another way, everything about the field that matters is in your own head.

If you've found yourself saying those things, you're in good company. In fact, all three of those quotes above are exactly how I explained why medieval studies mattered as a graduate student. And why wouldn't I? Everything in my training taught me that's how medievalists were *supposed* to talk about the importance of the particular knowledge they'd developed about the Middle Ages through their research and writing. If you want proof, go ahead and grab the nearest book or journal article from medieval studies and find the thesis statement. When you do, chances are you'll find a sentence that sounds a lot like this: "[this study] sheds light on the broader implications the widespread popularity letter-writing had for our understanding of the practice of religious thought and the formation and character of intellectual culture in the eleventh and twelfth centuries."¹ If you didn't stop to check the note, this is the thesis of my dissertation, that is, the sentence in which

1 Fletcher, "Understand, Delight, and Obey," 1.

I tell the world why all the reading, thinking, transcribing, translating, and writing I had done in my six-ish years in graduate school *mattered*. And my answer was that it would help a relatively small group of experts know a little bit more about one aspect of a particular period of the medieval past than they did before. This is what the Life of the Mind Excuse looks like, and it is certainly not the kind of thing that would get someone outside of academia excited, interested, and invested in my work.

That's why I see this roadblock as the root of the weed currently choking effective public engagement in medieval studies. Thanks to the Life of the Mind Excuse, professional medievalists have been trained to explain the value of their expertise in terms of what it can do *for other professional medievalists*, which does not often translate well to other audiences. This is not to say, of course, that every professional medievalist shies away from explaining the value of their work to a non-specialist audience; many can do it quite well, but they tend to be pretty well established professionally by the time that they can. As mentioned earlier, very few graduate students are encouraged to explain the value of their work outside of an academic context; instead, most of them are told to focus on their dissertations, the value of which they tend to express in jargony thesis statements like mine. Later on, when graduate students are finally urged to start explaining why their work matters, the "elevator pitches" they come up with are aimed at search committees for academic jobs. With the system set up in this way, it's no wonder that, even though many medievalists are eventually able to talk about their work in a more engaging and open way, many more never do.

So, before we can talk about any other tactic for improving medievalists' public engagement efforts, we need to uproot the Life of the Mind Excuse. This doesn't mean that we should stop learning for the sake of learning or participating in scholarly conversations, but it *does* mean we should make articulating how our field impacts the world outside academia more central to what medieval studies is all about. If we do that, then we need no longer fear questions about "what we're going to do" with our work, because everyone in the field will have been trained to have a compelling answer at hand. Right now, of course, that's not how the field is set up, so we'll have to look elsewhere for help figuring out how to do this. Conveniently enough, the intellectual culture of medieval Europe is a great place to start.

The Medieval Solution: The Life of Service Conviction

You probably already got an idea from the Introduction that professional medieval intellectuals did not sweat the Life of the Mind Excuse. For most of them, the idea that their expertise was only supposed to benefit their peers was as foreign to them as it is familiar to us. Pick pretty much any aspect of intellectual culture in the European Middle Ages, and you'll find someone talking about how it could make some impact far beyond the medieval university or monastic cloister. To name just a few, monks and nuns developed highly-structured and complex regimens of prayer and devotion inside the cloister so they could benefit the souls of people outside it; bishops, priors, and other social elites used their own conduct and lifestyles as ways for training effective secular and ecclesiastical administrators; university doctors of theology compiled dense doctrinal treatises so the church could effectively combat heresy in cities and villages throughout Latin Christendom; patrons, artists, artisans, and labourers collaborated (often anonymously) to create stunningly decorated spaces that instructed the unlearned at the same time as they displayed wealth and status. You get the idea. Simply put, medieval intellectuals took for granted that their work was supposed to make some kind of visible (and, in their minds, positive) impact in the lives of everyone else in Latin Christendom, because that's exactly what their training prepared them to do.

This didn't mean, of course, that professional scholars didn't find their work interesting, or that they didn't love learning, or that they believed everyone in their society could engage with their work on the same level as their peers could. Furthermore, I think it's probably true that not every intellectual was all that interested in making an impact in the world outside their cloister or classroom. But, thanks to their training and the general orientation of the culture in which they participated, most all of them would have had a clear sense of how their work could benefit everyone around them and, unlike too many medievalists today, would have been ready to explain how if they were asked (or, as was often the case, even if they weren't). In other words, instead of excuses, they had *conviction*. We need the latter if we want to get past the Life of the Mind Excuse, and medieval intellectuals can show us the way to develop it. In this chapter, we'll do this by looking at a particularly elite religious thinker who was the living embodiment of an intellectual career based on public service.

The Model: Peter Damian

Our first medieval model is Peter Damian (ca. 1007–1072), an influential reformer, administrator, and theologian. As far as intellectuals went in the eleventh century, he was as elite as they came: he was renowned throughout Europe for his prodigious learning, his mastery of a wide array of sources, his unparalleled rhetorical and pedagogical skills, and his prolific, acclaimed writings.² At least on paper, he had the kind of career that any academic today might give their eyeteeth to have. But interestingly, Damian himself was pretty clear that he wasn't interested in any of that stuff. Born to a large family of modest means in Ravenna, he didn't grow up intending to be a learned saint, and even started his career as a secular teacher. But, shortly before he turned thirty, a spiritual crisis convinced him to join the religious life. Finding Benedictine monasticism a bit too easy-going for his tastes, he joined the hermitage of Fonte Avellana on the eastern coast of Italy, eventually becoming prior in 1043. For the rest of his life, Damian insisted that all he wanted to do was spend every day in his cell, blissfully praying the Psalter and contemplating the mysteries of the divine. Public engagement of any kind seemed quite far from his mind.

Damian's actions, though, told a different story. As much as he loved his hermitage, he didn't end up spending much time there. Rather, his contemporaries were more likely to find him out on the move, putting his extensive learning to work in a variety of public-facing projects and initiatives. Indeed, it had been that way from the beginning. He had hardly set foot in Fonte Avellana when two consecutive archbishops and "many citizens of Ravenna" summoned him back home "to stay in the hopes of winning back the souls living there." Although some early setbacks prevented him from remaining there long, Damian did not simply go back to his cell. On the contrary, "driven by a zeal [to serve] my neighbours," he "wandered throughout many regions in Italy with clear purpose of mind to acquire as bountiful a harvest of souls as I could...while also going around to call others back onto the right path" (Ep. 8, 1:118–20).³

He wasn't alone. The mid-eleventh century was a time that saw a series of spiritual reform movements sweep through the Latin Church that were, generally speaking, committed to restoring the fallen world to the divine exem-

2 Blum, *St. Peter Damian*.

3 This chapter relies mainly on Kurt Reindel's four-volume MGH edition of Peter Damian's *Epistolae*. I will cite it using the letter number, volume of Reindel's edition, and page number (e.g., Ep. 1, 1:65).

plar by changing the thoughts and behaviours of everyone in Latin Christendom.⁴ Damian, though, seems to have stood out from the other reformers in the Italian lands, and he was drafted into the intellectual circle surrounding Pope Leo IX to help instil reform throughout the institutional church. He did that so well that he was eventually (despite repeated protests) elevated to the cardinal bishop of Ostia in 1057. From then on, he worked tirelessly as a religious thinker, administrator, legislator, diplomat, and general fixer for the papacy. Along the way, he practiced just about every form of public engagement he could: preaching sermons, giving orations at councils and synods, arguing legal cases, debating opponents in person and in writing, and having personal conversations with anyone who would listen, whether they wanted to or not. In the end, his efforts made profound contributions to some of the most important intellectual and social developments of his time.⁵

In other words, Damian was an elite intellectual whose work made a clear impact on his world, and I think he has a lot to teach us about how we can do the same. The important thing for us here are Damian's means, not his goals, so should start with a close look at *how* he shared his expertise, which turns out to be pretty easy to do. Although Damian surely produced all manner of writings during his career, the vast majority of his work survives in just one format: an extensive collection of letters, the largest one by a single author since the Patristic era.⁶ This was 100 per cent intentional; Damian worked carefully with a couple editors to make sure that the letters, like all such collections, left a comprehensive overview of interests, his style, his erudition, and his service to the church.⁷ In other words, the letters were something like a visible record of how Damian had conducted his intellectual career, or, if you like, the "receipts" for how he used his expertise to make a difference in the world.

Thanks to all that careful curation, Damian's letters are ideal sources for understanding the role the Life of Service Conviction played in his intellectual life. In them, just as Damian intended, we see him bringing his expertise to all manner of Christians (from high-ranking prelates and secular rulers to novice monks and middling nobility) in a variety of ways. More importantly for us, we also see him—constantly and without any prompting—explaining why his expertise was valuable to all his various correspondents.

4 Constable, *The Reformation of the Twelfth Century*.

5 Cf. Blum, *St. Peter*, 13–36; and Ranft, *The Theology of Peter Damian*, 108–84.

6 Blum, *St. Peter*, 40.

7 Reindel, "Studien zur Überlieferung der Werke des Petrus Damiani."

What's more, he knew perfectly well how challenging this could be. Perhaps the best example of this came from Ep. 17, which was written to a nobleman identified in the letters only as T.⁸ Whoever T. was, he was clearly not a highly-trained intellectual or a devout monk or hermit, so it made perfect sense for Damian to assume that T. was as sceptical of the value of Damian's expertise as most non-medievalists today are of medieval studies: "What, I ask you..., " Damian imagined him saying, "can something that is useless for me to know possibly teach me?" (1:164). Faced with this challenge, however, Damian did not talk about transferable skills or scholarly conversations; he talked about how what he knew could change lives. Damian's letters give us the perfect model for seeing the Life of Service Conviction in action. In the next sections, we'll talk about how that mindset shaped the ways in which he understood and shared what he knew with others. If we can get a solid sense of *why* he wrote his letters at all, *what* he thought they really were, and *how* he structured them accordingly, we'll have a better understanding of what we need to do to get some conviction in our own work.

Why Damian Wrote

To hear him tell it, Peter Damian's decades-long letter-writing campaign was not something he actually wanted to do. He often claimed he was "forced" to write many of his letters, so much so that later scholars would describe him as a "compulsive" letter-writer who instinctively turned to the genre whenever he felt compelled to say or do something.⁹ Even that term is underselling it a bit. Although many of Damian's letters were written in response to particular requests, plenty more were written when no one had asked for them, and Ep. 104 (an account of a prominent noblewoman's confession) probably never should have been written at all.¹⁰ For our purposes in this book, though, this is great; Damian's inability to resist writing letters is what makes him such a great model for the Life of Service Conviction. Letters, you see, were far and away the most *active* written genre around in the eleventh century; they were widely understood to be much more persuasive than commentaries and treatises, so authors (especially reformers) liked to use them when they wanted to make someone else do or think something to further their goals.¹¹

8 On T's possible identity, see Reindel, *Die Briefe des Petrus Damiani*, 1:155n1.

9 Cf. Blum, *Letters of Peter Damian*, 1:12, and Leclercq, *Saint Pierre Damien*, 151–52.

10 Blum, *Letters of Peter Damian*, 4:155n55.

11 Fletcher, "Rhetoric, Reform, and Christian Eloquence."

Damian obviously was a part of this trend, but in his case, there was something else driving his dependence on letter-writing: fear. This emotion was the engine that drove Damian's entire intellectual and spiritual career; everything from his pursuit of a strict form of asceticism to his zealous defence of the church from any impurity (as he understood it) was rooted in how terrified he was of being found wanting at the Last Judgment. In fact, it was this, as he called it, "beneficial fear" (*salubrem formidinem*) that compelled him to enter the religious life in the first place, since he could live an "upright life" much more easily in a hermit's cell than in the middle of the world's temptations (Ep. 21, 1:210). But, as we've already seen, that wasn't quite good enough. Even in the supposed safety of his hermitage, Damian was afraid. What about all those people who, for one reason or another, couldn't or wouldn't take religious vows? Who would help *them* get into heaven? What would God do if Damian never used his deep learning and rhetorical brilliance to teach the non-specialists what they needed to believe or do in order to be saved? He was afraid of the answer. "For if I should live unproductively," he reasoned in Ep. 8, written at an early crossroads in his career, "I am terrified that the Gospel axe will be set at the roots of my tree, about which the Truth frighteningly thunders, saying 'Cut it down, why should it stay in the ground?'" (1:120).

Damian's "beneficial fear" would not allow him to be content with just the Life of the Mind. Instead, it convinced him that he had a responsibility to use his prodigious intellectual gifts to help as many people as possible find salvation, and he made sure everybody knew it.¹² He often told his correspondents that he wrote his letters "not because they would be helpful for me, but so that you might benefit from my counsel" (Ep. 12, 1:130). At the same time, he expected his letters to make their recipients (or, indeed, anyone who read or heard them) productive, too. He once proudly referred to them as "nails and goads" (*clavis et stimulus*), instruments of persuasion that both clarified divine truths for others and inspired them to live a virtuous life that would guarantee salvation (Ep. 21, 1:203). Those extremely high stakes are right there in Ep. 1, which was addressed to his friend, Honestus of Pomposa, a layperson. Honestus, it seems, had asked the recently converted hermit to write him something to refute Jews who wanted to debate the validity of Christianity. Although Damian was not entirely convinced that the effort was necessary, he wrote the letter anyway "because this knowledge certainly pertains completely to the faith, and faith is without question

12 Fletcher, "Understand, Delight, and Obey," 145–63.

the foundation of all virtues, and whenever the foundation is shaken, the destruction of the entire structure is seriously threatened" (1:65–66).

If it seems a bit extreme to you that not answering a friend's unnecessary request could lead to the downfall of Christianity, you're not alone. But this was the kind of power beneficial fear had in Damian's intellectual life. He clearly wanted his readers to feel it, too, considering the many times he told his correspondents they were doing something that would lead themselves or someone else to damnation. For example, he told monks who were too interested in secular affairs that their actions would cause any laypeople who saw them to lose hope in the possibility of their own salvation (Ep. 165, 4:186). Likewise, when Duke Godfrey of Tuscany focused too much on pursuing a life of monastic virtue instead of enforcing justice in his lands, Damian reminded him that he was "without doubt the devil's accomplice" for exposing so many innocents to unchecked violence and abuse (Ep. 67, 2:283). He even went so far as to "terrify" and "restrain" a nobleman and his wife from cutting his mother out of decision-making in his household, citing a litany of stories in which God dispensed divine wrath on those who disrespected their parents (Ep. 86, 2:458–59).

Damian himself recognized that this approach was a little much. He knew just how hyperbolic he could be while sharing his expertise, but he was convinced that it was worth it, no matter what anyone else thought. As he once explained to a friend in Ep. 19, "Someone may say that I have gone overboard with my words, but the salvation of my neighbour is so important to me that I do not think it silly to light an enormous fire in order to kill a tiny poisonous lizard if that were necessary to keep the people safe" (1:198). This sentence, perhaps better than any other, sums up why Damian wrote: he was afraid of what would happen—to himself and others—if he didn't.

What Damian Wrote

What, according to Damian, were his letters? The answer is a bit complicated; Damian, like many other letter-writers of his day, used a variety of names for these texts (*epistola*, *littera*, *brevis*, *opusculum*, and so on).¹³ No one at the time would have been surprised by this; the medieval epistolary genre was, to put it mildly, infinitely flexible, and authors freely used it to create all kinds of texts that did all kinds of different things.¹⁴ Damian took

13 Fletcher, "Understand, Delight, and Obey," 24.

14 Van Engen, "Letters, Schools, and Written Culture," 106.

full advantage of that flexibility; Ep. 1 alone includes four different genres (scriptural commentary, dialogue, peroration, argument from reason), and the rest of the collection features almost every kind of prose genre imaginable in the eleventh century: exegetical commentaries, theological explications, hagiographies, anecdotes, chronicles, panegyrics, bestiaries, mock trials, and more.

But even with all that versatility, Damian was consistent about what he thought all his letters, whatever form they took, were supposed to do. For starters, he was adamant that each and every one was “useful” or “beneficial” to whomever read or heard it (Cf. Epp. 12, 80, 93, 105, and 133). He was so confident in this because, at the end of the day, all his letters were really about the same thing: “my grammar is Christ...and only whatever can be consulted for the edification (*aedificationi*) of my brothers in Christ is recognized to emit from my letter” (Ep. 21, 1:203). Accordingly, Damian never sent (or, at least, never preserved) a letter that did not have some kind of spiritual lesson, admonition, or explication in it. When it came to securing the “edification” of his fellow Christians, Damian used everything in his intellectual toolbox. That included all the content we would expect from a highly educated cleric in medieval Europe: citations from nearly every book of the Bible, commentaries, theological works, chronicles and histories, canon law, synodal and conciliar proceedings, letters, monastic rules, and so on. At the same time, he also used material that was more accessible to non-elite audiences, such as saints’ lives, liturgical prayers, and even stories he’d heard in casual conversations with clerics and laypeople. All of this—that is, everything that Damian knew—provided the raw material for the “nails and goads” that put his reform agenda into practice.

That said, Damian did not necessarily *want* his recipients to think of his letters as something that changed how they thought or acted. This was a pretty big ask even in the eleventh century, so he preferred that his readers think of them as opportunities or, perhaps better, *invitations* for their own spiritual and intellectual development. He made this clear near the end of Ep. 21, when he addressed the copious biblical quotes he had included in the letter, reminding his correspondent that “I *lay out before you* not my own words, but examples from holy Scripture” (1:210, my emphasis). The verb Damian chose here is really important; unlike other words he could have used (like “cite” or “quote”), *proponere* invites some action from the reader, specifically, to pick up what had been laid before them in order, we assume, to then do something with it. Sometimes Damian felt compelled to spell that out, in case his correspondents missed the point, as he did to Honestus in Ep. 1: “Therefore you have everything necessary for a conflict of this sort

set before your eyes. Use the material I have prepared for you however you think is best" (1:102).

Ep. 1 is not an isolated example. Whenever he included Scripture in a letter (which was basically all the time), Damian encouraged his recipients to actively engage with it. His citations often include commands—like “weigh carefully,” “consider,” “pay close attention,” or “take note”—that functioned like directions showing his readers how to work through whatever he had cited. This was another reason why Damian liked to write letters; unlike a sermon or an in-person conversation, his readers could, theoretically, read his letters again later if they wanted or needed to.¹⁵ Even more remarkably, Damian encouraged his readers—including laypeople—to use the Scripture he provided as a starting point for reading more of it *on their own*. For instance, when he offered some Bible quotes in Ep. 179 to console a distraught nobleman, he also encouraged him to seek out “other witnesses in holy Scripture” (*aliisque scripturae divinae testimoniis*) that would aid in his recovery (4:291).

Damian treated all the other elite intellectual material in his letters in exactly the same way, placing it before his readers and instructing them how to use it. For that reason, we should think of his letters as *resources* for edification; that is, well-sourced and carefully constructed collections of “useful” content that would clearly define what the “upright life” was, how to follow it, and why it was important to do so. Damian himself explicitly talked about his letters being used this way. For example, he recommended “the letter that I wrote to Countess Blanche” (Ep. 66) to two recipients asking about the Last Judgment, since he had dealt with the subject pretty comprehensively there (Epp. 92–93). When he wrote to Adelaide of Turin (Ep. 114) to enlist her help in ending clerical marriage in her territories, he assumed that she had also seen and read Ep. 112, which had been addressed to Cunibert, the bishop of Turin (3:296). He even expected the citizens of Florence, who were embroiled in a controversy over the validity of sacraments performed by unreformed clergy at the time, to have read Ep. 40, also known as the *Liber gratissimus*, one of Damian’s longest and most theologically dense letters on any subject (Ep. 146, 3:533). In short, it’s clear that he wanted his letters to not just poke and prod people into doing, thinking, or believing something, but to give them the information they needed to understand *why* they needed to do, think, or believe it.

15 Reindel, “Petrus Damiani und seine Korrespondenten,” 217.

How Damian Wrote

Of course, saying your work is useful to anyone and actually *making* it useful to anyone are two very different things. This was true even in the eleventh century, so we should take a minute to appreciate how difficult this was to do, especially considering the astonishing range of audiences for whom Damian wrote. Far from just writing to other elite intellectuals, Damian's letters show him sharing his expertise with all levels of the spiritual and secular hierarchies: popes and emperors, prelates and prominent nobility, monks and secular city officials, and everything in between. That range only increases if we factor in the many in-person conversations Damian mentions in his letters, which show him debating and teaching secular scholars, large groups of citizens, and even devout peasants.

Quite a few modern scholars have argued that Damian couldn't possibly have been serious about effectively teaching such a diverse group of audiences, so he must have written mainly for his ecclesiastical colleagues, who, at the very least, could read Latin.¹⁶ That argument makes sense on the surface. After all, it's striking how consistent the overall tone, source material, and basic rhetorical approaches are throughout every letter, whether it was addressed to an elite intellectual like Desiderius of Monte Cassino or an unknown layperson going through a difficult time.¹⁷ He also made surprisingly little distinction in terms of content, freely recommending to laypeople the sorts of texts we might assume were more appropriate for highly-trained intellectuals. For instance, Damian confidently directed his sister to read Augustine's *City of God*, Jerome's *Explanation of the Prophet Daniel*, and the book of the Apocalypse along with its commentaries in order to understand the Last Judgment, the exact same reading list he recommended to a monk interested in the same subject (Ep. 93, 3:28).

However, while I won't deny that he probably considered other professional intellectuals his *primary* audience, I don't think that means he considered them his *only* audience. I rather doubt Damian would have been confident that "But they didn't know Latin!" would be a satisfactory excuse for not edifying the laity as much as he could on Judgement Day. Not only that, there is pretty substantial evidence to suggest that even Damian's lay correspondents would have been able to access the letters, either because they knew Latin themselves or had someone who could translate for them at

¹⁶ Cf. Blum, *St. Peter*, 72, and Leclercq, *Saint Pierre*, 67.

¹⁷ Ranft, *Theology*, 196.

court.¹⁸ In any case, I think the more-or-less unified tone and approach we see across the letters is evidence for the opposite of what most scholars have assumed about Damian's audience; rather than seeing it as proof that he always wrote for his fellow elites, it helps us to think about how Damian tried to express his elite expertise in ways that would work for *non-expert* audiences as well. That might be the reason why, for example, he shared more accessible material like anecdotes, *exempla*, and other popular stories with his more erudite colleagues. The point of this unified style, in other words, was to make his letters into something that could engage anyone who read or heard its contents.

He learned how to do that not in the cell, but from his time as a secular liberal arts instructor in Ravenna, an experience that clearly influenced how he handled the rest of his career.¹⁹ I think we can see the letters' style as part of an attempt to recreate the classroom setting; that is, the rhetorical approaches in the letters were meant to bring his audiences—wherever and whoever they might be—into a space where they could learn how to change their lives directly from Damian. Incidentally, this makes his example particularly useful for medievalists, who are also expected to make their expertise engaging and useful for uninitiated audiences (i.e., undergraduates) in the courses they teach. What Damian shows us, however, is how to keep that pedagogical magic going in places beyond the physical classroom.

One way he established his epistolary classroom was by recreating the in-person interaction between instructor and student, adopting a style that resembled living speech more than an inert text. This fit very well with the medieval epistolary genre; since all letters (even the boring ones) were customarily read aloud to their recipients by messengers, an element of oral performance was in the genre's DNA.²⁰ His correspondents certainly seemed to think that was the case; a young monk named Ambrose asked him to explain the basic tenets of Christianity in a letter because, Damian recalled, he "would be more effectively instructed, and this teaching would stick more tenaciously in [his] mind, if I *in my own voice* explained what is found in the writings of the ancient fathers" (Ep. 81, 2:417, my emphasis). Throughout the collection, Damian made sure to preserve as many traces of face-to-face engagement with his readers as he could. Sometimes this meant modulat-

18 Cf. Fletcher, "'Understand, Delight, and Obey,'" 151–55; Thompson, *Literacy of the Laity*; and Petrucci, *Writers and Readers*.

19 Little, "The Personal Development of Peter Damian," 327.

20 Hoffman, "Zur mittelalterlichen Brieftechnik."

ing the volume and tenor of his “voice,” like when he tried to convince the former empress Agnes to return to her religious life in Rome in Ep. 149 by speaking “more quietly” instead of “with shouts” (3:551). At other times, Damian sharply admonished his reader by demanding “Are you listening to what I am saying?” as if their mind had wandered off while he gave his lesson (Ep. 104, 3:550). And when he had a *really* important point to make, Damian liked to ratchet up the emotional energy behind his words, emphasizing the intense anger, joy, terror, or fear behind whatever argument he was making. Putting it mildly, Damian could get very *dramatic* in his letters, like the time he “collapsed...pouring out tears” at the feet of Widger, bishop of Ravenna, in Ep. 7, asking for tax relief for an impoverished monastery (1:117).

Another way Damian maintained his epistolary classroom was by walking his “students” through whatever content he had to share, as if he were standing in the room with them. He knew perfectly well that his arguments often depended on interpreting dense theological material, so he always made sure his students had the scaffolding and sign-posting they needed to get through it. Like any good teacher, he did not throw them into the deep end, but encouraged them to “look first at simple things, and from these small things consider what is beyond comprehension.” Take, for example, how he explained the tricky concept of Christ’s virgin birth to the new monk Ambrose:

To wit, a sunbeam comes through a glass window, passing completely through the obstacle through some imperceptible kind of elusiveness. Yet this does not affect the solidity of the glass in any way, which afterwards looks the same from the inside and outside. Moreover, the glass is not broken when the sunbeam first enters it nor when it passes through, but maintains its integrity through the beam’s coming and going. Therefore, if a sunbeam does not shatter a piece of glass, cannot the divine nature of the redeemer also remain intact after being born from a virgin? (Ep. 81, 2:423–24).

This is clearly the approach of someone used to working with novices. In fact, the example he uses to bring Ambrose into this divine mystery is so simple that it would have resonated with anyone who had ever seen a window before...perhaps even with people who weren’t monks, clerics, or scholars.

He did the same thing with the abundance of Scripture quotations in his letters, which could be the most difficult source his lay readers (who were definitely *not* experienced exegetes) encountered. Mindful of that, he always offered his own interpretation to get them started, sometimes encouraging his readers to actually see themselves in it. That’s what Adelaide of Turin found in Damian’s explanation of Judges 4:5, in which he compares her to the Israelite judge Deborah:

And just in the same way, you also rule your territory without the help of a man, and people with lawsuits and legal cases come to you from all over, seeking your judgment. But take note, that just like her you also rest under a palm tree between Ramah and Bethel. Ramah, indeed, is taken to mean “the highest,” while Bethel means “the house of the Lord.” Therefore, always sit under this same palm tree contemplating the victory of the cross of Christ standing above you (Ep. 114, 3:297).

Additionally, Damian was always aware of his students’ limitations, and he avoided giving them more than they could handle. This might seem a bit odd to modern eyes, considering how densely packed the letters are with Scriptural, theological, and rhetorical content, but he insisted that they included only the bare minimum that was necessary for his readers to understand his point. Even in his longest letters, Damian always liked to remind everyone that he could have included even *more* content. In a letter to one of his fellow cardinal bishops, for instance, Damian was prepared to unleash his full learning on explicating the Biblical example of the prophet Gideon, but in the end, he decided to “explain the meaning of these complex stories more concisely, saying no more than is required for the type of discussion I began.” (Ep. 69, 2:307).

In part, Damian had to keep things short precisely because he was writing letters, which required their authors to observe brevity as much as possible.²¹ One way he accommodated that was by giving his readers shorter quotations and concise summaries instead of long block quotes or intricate theorizing, which is what you might find in a treatise or commentary. Near the conclusion of his first letter to Honestus, for instance, he remarked how he had refrained from “encumber[ing] you with complex and prolix arguments because I also know that you cannot carefully read through a great deal given your involvement in secular matters” (Ep. 1, 1:101–2). Interestingly, he took the same approach for clerics and monks who *did* have the time to read more extensively, even in matters that seemed to be most important for him. Take, for example, Ep. 112, his most comprehensive attempt to condemn the practice of clerical marriage. Then as now, readers would be forgiven for blanching at the almost overwhelming amount of theological, legal, and anecdotal evidence marshalled in this letter, but Damian steadfastly maintained that the letter gave only a small taste of what was possible. The Church Fathers were, he insisted, unanimous in their support of clerical celibacy. “But since no one will believe the words I say,” he continued, “it is

21 Fletcher, “Rhetoric, Reform, and Christian Eloquence,” 73–74.

necessary for me to put out a few of their words here, so that the little that comes off the top of my head might remind everyone how much more the Fathers say in agreement with this in their writings” (3:263).

Finally—and, I would argue, most importantly—Damian assured his students that they did not need to have the same amount of expertise as he did in order to understand what he was teaching them. This was especially the case with younger monks or laypeople, who lacked the experience or the time to master material in the way that seasoned hermits or monks could. Rather than ignoring these potential students, Damian adjusted his usually high standards for living the upright life to better suit their capabilities. A particularly clear example of this is Ep. 17, which was written to teach the nobleman T. (and, thus, any layperson) how to pray the monastic hours. Though he felt that it would be best for T. to pray exactly the same way that the monks did, he also knew they couldn’t. So, while he provided a comprehensive explication of the canonical hours, he also offered T. some more realistic alternatives that would also make for a healthy prayer life. Instead of praying at all six canonical hours, for example, laypeople like T. could simply repeat the Lord’s Prayer as they went about their day. Similarly, if they couldn’t chant the entire Psalter every day (piece of cake, right?), they could make do with any Psalms they had access to, even if it was just one, repeated it as many times as needed (1:164).

In a nutshell, Damian’s letters show us that he consciously chose to *not* write like the highly-trained intellectual that he was. Although the depth of his learning was obvious to anyone who knows how to look for it, he tried to restrain, or even hide it from audiences who might have found that intimidating. In other words, even though the letters are in an elite academic language, and even though they contain a lot of dense material that would be hard for a non-expert to get through, Damian did everything he could to make sure his audiences, whoever they were, found these letters accessible, understandable, and, most importantly of all, meaningful.

Embracing the Life of Service Conviction

What would it look like if medievalists today grounded their work in the Life of Service Conviction instead of the Life of the Mind Excuse? (I promise no one has to become a hermit and develop a near-debilitating fear of eternal damnation to do this.) Can you even imagine a public-facing, problem-solving, life-changing medieval studies? I don’t think I could have done that in graduate school, but I learned to do it very quickly when I began my fellowship at the Newberry Library in 2016. Quite suddenly, I found myself

responsible for spearheading an exhibition, developing digital resources, designing public programs, constructing a marketing campaign, and planning exhibition tours. I didn't know how to do *any* of those things, and my imposter syndrome really kicked on my first day, making me worry if being a medievalist had set me up for failure. But I had a job to do, so I just got started, and I quickly found that doing all these things I didn't know how to do was much easier than I expected. There were several factors for my success (especially my terrific and talented Newberry colleagues), but the most surprising one, the one it took me a while to notice, was my expertise in medieval culture.

Without any other formal training to guide me, I had to rely on what I already knew to get any of my work done, and what I knew best was how religious thinkers (including Peter Damian) wrote letters in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. So, when I needed to write exhibition labels describing the historical significance of a Newberry object in seventy-five words or less, I modelled it on how my letter-writers condensed complex theological explanations. Or, when I needed to imagine different types of digital resources, I thought about all the different genres you could find in any given eleventh- or twelfth-century letter collection. Also, when I was asked to present exhibition items to Newberry visitors in a collection presentation, I based my approach on the conversational signposting that I had seen time and time again in letters to laypeople or monastic novices. In other words, my medieval content expertise set me up for *success*, not failure. This experience was the first time that I had ever felt confident that what I knew as a medievalist was relevant outside the field. The same material that I was once embarrassed to talk about publicly was a huge reason why I was able to accomplish all sorts of things I had never done before, things that could make a difference at the Newberry and, importantly, for all the audiences it served.

That is what the Life of Service Conviction can do for you. The model Peter Damian left us in his letter collection can be, in my view, extremely helpful for you to figure out how to work it into every part of your medievalist career—how you understand your work, how you talk about it, and how you shape it. But at the beginning, I think the most important part of his model to highlight here is his belief that he could *do something* with the expert knowledge he had. Everything else that he did (or tried to do) as a professional intellectual rested on this single foundation, which set him up to impact his world in the way that he did. So, if you're having trouble imagining what medieval studies would look like under the Life of Service Conviction, just take a look at him. If you do, you won't see anything like Sad

Ovid; instead you'll see someone relentlessly charging out of his study and into the world to make whatever audiences he could find understand how his expert knowledge would change their lives.

I'm happy to say that there are already plenty of medievalists who are thinking of their expertise in the same way as Damian did. For example, more medievalists these days are willing to put their knowledge to work to unmask and discredit the dangerous myths about the Middle Ages weaponized by white supremacist groups.²² Others are looking to identify and dismantle the harmful legacies of the field's nineteenth-century past that are still, as we've seen, holding us back from engaging the public as well as we could.²³ But for me, the group of medievalists that show the Life of Service Conviction the most these days are those working on the incredibly vital sub-field of critical studies of race in the Middle Ages.²⁴ These are medievalists who consider themselves "an activist scholarly organization" whose work can show "the power of difference" in a field that sorely needs it.²⁵ Among professional medievalists, scholars of colour are much more willing to think about how their expert-level knowledge of the Middle Ages can help explain and even address the injustices and harms done by systemic racism today.²⁶

Based on this, I'm convinced that a medieval studies that works according to the Life of Service Conviction is actually possible, which gives me hope that someday, I won't have to picture Sad Ovid whenever I think about the field. That's because, armed with this more active mindset, medievalists will, like Peter Damian, constantly be out in the world trying to make a difference. And the more we can do that, the more administrators, donors, students, and other stakeholders will realize that studying the Middle Ages is extremely relevant to the world today. And for me at least, the first signal that we're on the right track to that future won't be larger departments, more funding, or bigger grad student cohorts. All I'll need to see is a huddle of young graduate students at a conference wine hour, sharing stories about how they told some sceptical interrogators *exactly* what they were going to do with their PhD in medieval studies.

22 Lomuto, "Public Medievalism."

23 Cf. Gabriele and Perry, *The Bright Ages*, and Albin et al., eds., *Whose Middle Ages?*

24 For an overview, cf. Heng, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages*; Whitaker, Otaño Gracia, and Fauvelle, eds., "Race, Race-Thinking, and Identity in the Global Middle Ages"; and Hsy and Orlemanski, *Race and Medieval Studies*.

25 Medievalists of Color, "Constitution," Article 1.2.

26 Cf. Whitaker, *Black Metaphors*, and Hsy, *Antiracist Medievalisms*.