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INTRODUCTION

Who Was That Masked Monk?

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Hi. Are you a Lone Medievalist?

This volume is a sequel, of sorts, to an ongoing series of round tables at the International Congress on Medieval Studies held at Western Michigan University, beginning in 2015. The impetus for those sessions, and for this book, is the sense of isolation many medieval scholars feel in their professional lives. Often the only scholar of the period in their departments, their universities, or their surrounding area, medievalists can find it challenging to advocate for their work and field. The problem is only more pronounced for the medievalist in an adjunct teaching position or without an institutional position at all. When we work alone among colleagues, teach mostly (or entirely) outside our specializations, and compete with “more easily” understood or well-funded research, it is easy to feel disconnected from the larger discipline of medieval studies. Our scholarly production slows or ceases. Our language skills atrophy. Our knowledge ossifies. Soon, even attending a conference of fellow medievalists can feel isolating. Surrounded by scholars with greater institutional support, lower teaching loads, or more robust research agendas, we may feel alienated from the field we love—the work to which we’ve dedicated our careers.

The Lone Medievalist exists as a partial antidote to the problem of professional isolation. The nature of medieval studies has always been collaborative—paleographers, editors, translators, archeologists, preservationists, librarians, scholars, and students may all play a part in the creation of a single so-called “monograph.” Yet our physical distance from one another (and the preferences of a professional system that privileges the individual scholar) tends to de-emphasize the work of the medieval collective. Our other duties, especially teaching and institutional service, have traditionally been even less connected to that collaborative spirit. Fortunately, the advent of the internet age, and with it, social media, digital reproductions, remote-conferencing, and long-distance collaboration have all improved the lot of the solitary scholar. Knowing and working with our fellows has never been easier, and with the right encouragement can result in remarkable new directions for the field of medieval studies as a whole.

Our organization builds on those new connective conduits. The goal of the Lone Medievalist sessions was and is to encourage far-flung and isolated medievalists of all stripes to share their knowledge, experiences, and strategies for successfully pursuing and sharing their work. We hope to build a platform for medievalists to provide support to one another. The Lone Medievalist isn't focused exclusively on scholarship, on teaching, on institutional life, or on the pursuit of new learning—it's focused on all of them. We privilege all aspects of the professional and intellectual life of medievalists.

Our experience in this new era is, we hope, surprisingly akin to the monastic vocation itself. The medieval monks, whose simple anonymity inspired the look of our organizational mascot and whose cloistered lives were a combination of eremitic and collective experience, knew that a supporting institution and like-minded colleagues provided the energy that made many things possible that would be exhausting, lonely, or even impossible for a single individual. Though our profession often requires that we work in disciplinary isolation, we are more connected than our predecessors could have imagined. In our work, and in our intel-

lectual lives, we have the chance to build a new kind of cloister for ourselves — one that encompasses the entire world.

A Lone Medievalist need no longer be an isolated medievalist.

The idea for this volume grew out of our very first International Congress round table. It was clear then that Lone Medievalists had much to say and much to offer each other. We all have our own stories and our own strategies for managing our “lone” status. We thought that a collection of these stories would be useful and unique — if not also cathartic for the contributors and the readers — and thus this volume was born. We were pleased and surprised by the response to the original call for submissions. It seemed that the topic was of great interest to many, and both those who volunteered to contribute as well as others have expressed the desire to read about such experiences.

We were also pleased by the range of responses we received, the varying types of emphases that contributors identified in their contributions. In the end, these responses have naturally organized themselves into four sections.

The Lone Medievalist as Teacher: Breaking Free of the Cloistered Classroom

In this section, Lone Medievalists discuss how to approach the classroom, from turning students into colleagues to bringing the medieval into non-medieval courses. Medievalists are traditionally innovative teachers, and Lone Medievalists, perhaps by necessity, even more so.

The Lone Medievalist as Scholar: Opus Clamantis in Deserto

A challenge often faced by Lone Medievalists is how to find the time and the resources to maintain scholarship. While scholarship may not always follow the traditional paths that we became used to in graduate school, we can be creative in using our time and resources wisely — and maybe even forge new paths in the meantime.

The Lone Medievalist at Work: Or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Job

The professional reality is that many of us are without colleagues who share our areas of expertise and interest. In most cases, a department will hire only a single medieval specialist — and may be hard-pressed to convince administrations or hiring committees to approve even that one. These essays provide suggestions and ideas for professional engagement, curriculum planning, and reappointment and tenure cases as the Lone Medievalist in a department or institution.

This Eremitic Life

Think being the only medievalist in your department is difficult? What about being the only one in a whole country? In this section, we get glimpses into the lives of Lone Medievalists on a global scale.

When we started organizing this collection, we were adamant that it would not be a forum simply for bemoaning the state of medieval studies in small institutions. While we all recognize and acknowledge the challenges in being Lone Medievalists, these essays are deliberately crafted to offer strategies, camaraderie, advice, and alternatives. We hope readers find it forward-thinking and revitalizing as well as helpful to those of us in these positions.