

Some Practices for Publishing the Precariat

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In 2005 the late Christy Desmet and I co-founded *Borrowers and Lenders: The Journal of Shakespeare and Appropriation*, the first scholarly periodical to concentrate entirely on Shakespeare's afterlives and the first born-digital humanities journal to incorporate rich multimedia, dynamic pdf generation, and mouseover references. What we didn't anticipate, however, was that the very topic of Shakespearean adaptation would draw in hitherto-underrepresented groups in Shakespeare Studies – contingent faculty, independent scholars, and scholars of color. We were both committed to mentoring and publishing these kinds of scholars as well as Early Career Researchers and from very early on developed several practices to accommodate the faculty whom Sharon O'Dair and Tim Francisco's recent collection dubs “the 99%”: those who lack the research funds, sabbaticals, small classes, well-funded libraries, and the ability to teach within their fields of expertise.

Moreover, we were also committed to the precariat, those who conduct by some estimates “75 percent of instruction in U.S. universities” (Kelty 2014), the contingent faculty, temporary instructors, part-time instructors, graduate students, and untenured instructors whose hard-won expertise remains unrewarded on three levels and whose labor and skills usually remain unrecognized by their institutions, by the profession for which they trained so tenaciously, and by the structures of late capitalism in the West. As Anne Allison and Charlie Piot summarize, “precarious laborers [are] often without the time (or means) to produce the type of article that will be accepted by [a scholarly] journal” (Kelty et al.) This paper will offer a case-history of the

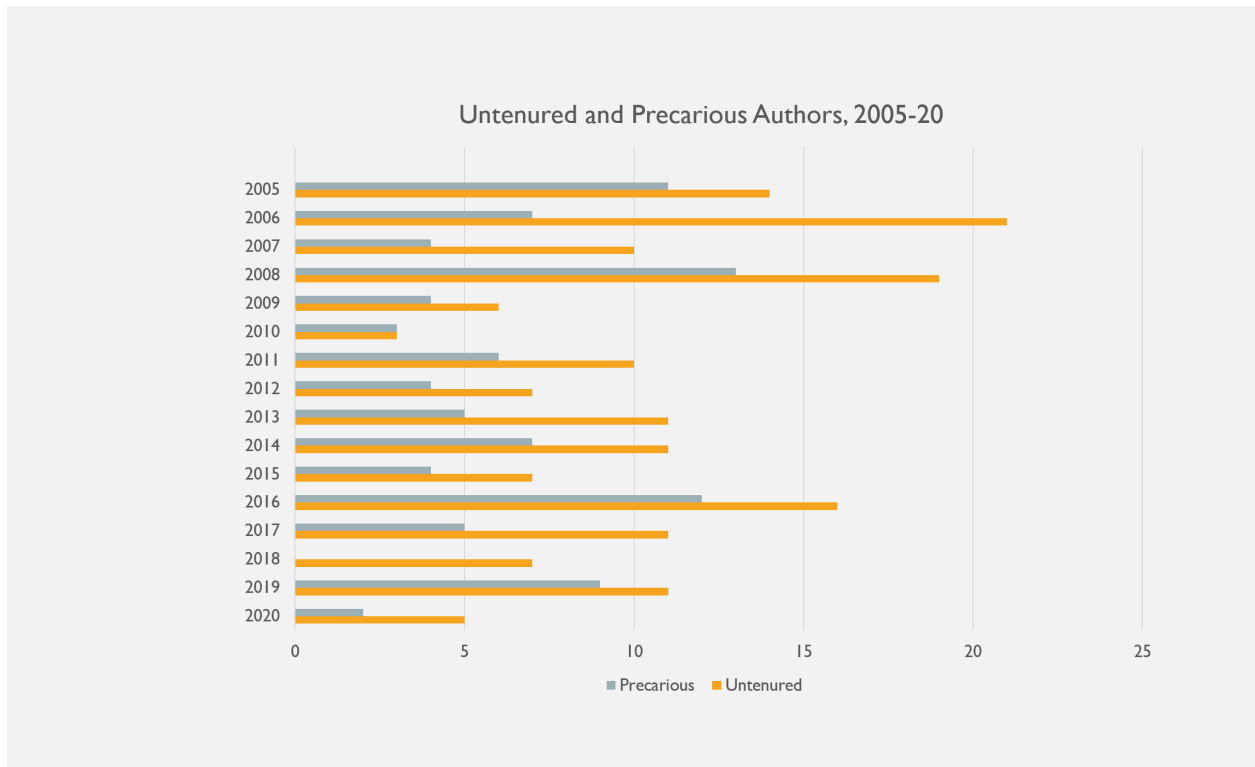
journal and what we learnt by trial and error about encouraging and nurturing early career, contingent, minoritized, and precarious scholars – and when and how we reached the limits of what we could do under the constraints of late capitalism.

The Journal and Background

Borrowers and Lenders publishes original scholarship engaging with the works of Shakespeare in light of theories of adaptation, appropriation, and transformation. It publishes both traditional scholarly articles and multimedia essays, interviews and thesis-driven reviews, and will shortly publish its first peer-reviewed game on the platform Twitch. We are open-access and open-source; until this year we published on a bespoke symphony php platform but have just moved to the UGA Libraries as part of an Open Journals Systems installation. We are in the process of moving to a Creative Commons model (CC didn't exist when we launched).

Our very first issue, “Shakespeare in the South,” grew out of a Shakespeare Association of America seminar with senior scholars, including the late *eminence grise* Terry Hawkes, whose imprimatur gave us instant gravitas and sound political credentials. At the same time, we included alongside essays by seven early career scholars, two of whom had contingent status. Our topics and our approach quickly drew authors from all over the world, including those from former Eastern European nations and developing nations who lacked the scholarly infrastructure (well-stocked libraries, computer access, electronic databases, digital bibliographies) of the US or Western Europe.

Here's a table showing the numbers of untenured authors we have published over the past fifteen years, subdivided to exclude Assistant Professors and those on permanent tracks. My intention is not to create an Olympics of oppression here by separating Assistant Profs, since I still remember that feeling of precarity during those probationary years. At the same time, however, I want to acknowledge that the precarity of an ASTP (until their final year) differs measurably from that of graduate students and contingent faculty and independent scholars, not least because of the financial security of a tenure-track position.



Precarious Time

Few studies exist to quantify the unpaid labor that goes into producing a standard, peer-reviewed scholarly article. As Lauren Bridges writes about freelance editors,

It has become normalised within the publishing industry, and among editors, to pursue a meaningful career at almost any cost. Unpaid work has become the backbone of the industry where almost everyone starts out as an intern. Furthermore, it appears that the 'push' out of full-time work towards flexible arrangements is almost inevitable at some point during one's career where women, in particular, have come to accept a certain level of precarity in their work. And the creative industries have come to depend on these flexible workers. (Bridges 136)

A comparative study from 2011 (Bentley) found that humanities academics in the US spent about 15 hours a week on research when classes were in session, and 24 hours a week on research when classes were not (and I'll add that many of us in the US are considered "off contract" when classes are not in session, and budgeted as 9- or 10-month employees, so that 24 hours a week is all unpaid labor even for those with permanent faculty positions). A recent mathematical model (2020) suggests that university faculty work 142% of a standard US work-week, especially when teaching multiple new or unique courses, or when we have an excessive teaching responsibility (as is usually the case with contingent faculty, our so-called "Freeway Flyers").

How can a freeway flyer teaching five courses a semester at three different institutions carve out time to produce a research article? I'm a tenured full professor and Griffith and Altinay's model, which I quote above, estimates that I have only 69 hours a year to devote to paid research (if my institution let me teach multiple sections of the same course, my research time would go up, they predict). The study recommends that institutions

should...view [a contract] as an agreement with the faculty by the institution to acquire a maximum number of working hours per contract year. An employment contract should not be viewed or treated as an all-access pass to control every hour of each faculty member's time year-round.

This recommendation is of course even truer for the precariat. My hypothetical freeway flyer would have, of course, zero hours to spend on her research. And yet without those all-important

peer-reviewed journal articles, precarious faculty are even less likely to secure permanent positions, and to be even more bereft of scholarly community.

Practices from Pedagogy

We can't fix this problem ourselves, and, as I'll go on to discuss, the journal has itself been precarious. But foregrounding teaching responsibilities ourselves – including our responsibilities to our graduate students – has helped us form more progressive publishing practices. From writing pedagogy, we took the importance of writing as a process and the importance of peer-review as a collaborative practice, rather than a final, evaluative, authoritative assessment from an all-knowing or all-perfect master. We therefore began by requiring detailed readers' reports that offered suggestions for revision, rather than dismissive or curt rejections, offering generous resubmission policies that took account of the fact that most faculty have limited research and writing time; and working with authors both to revise their essays in light of peer-reviewers' anonymized comments and to secure hard-to-find sources or even to pay image permissions where authors' institutions lacked resources to do so. These processes mean that we sometimes "fire" reviewers for harshness or impatience; we have found ourselves soliciting reviewers who, perhaps lacking PhD students of their own, are actually eager to respond to the work of other scholars rather than burnt out. I'll add that regularly refreshing the pool of reviewers in this way has also allowed us to keep up with current thinking about inclusivity, the topic of another CELJ panel at MLA this year.

It's easier to write short things than long things. So we also included sections of the journal where we published short, thesis-driven articles, just 2000-4000 words, most recently

instituting a “Notes” section where we hope researchers can investigate a topic in a couple of thousand words, and then if they wish revisit the topic at greater length in a book manuscript or in a longer article for another journal. We have also just revised our word length for regular articles down to 5000 words, both to accommodate changing reading practices and to make it easier for faculty to convert conference papers or teaching materials.

It’s easier to write with a buddy. And it’s easier to write on what you have to teach (as Griffith and Altenay’s study suggests). So we encourage faculty to submit pedagogical essays, and rather than cordoning these off in a “practice” or “teaching” section, we include this work alongside traditional archival and critical scholarship. We also encourage collaborative and co-authored work, with peers or with students, and we work with co-authors to encourage ethical practices.

The Limits of Late Capitalism

Ongoing and regular feedback, sometimes leading to three or even four drafts of an article, is time-consuming, however, and none of us receives any release time to manage the journal. The journal is itself precarious. We have no endowment. Until last year, we were granted server space in the English Department and payment for membership in CrossRef; that award has expired, and the person who maintained that server has retired, but we are now at the UGA Libraries, with server space and tech support, I hope, as long as we need it (but no CrossRef membership). We get a \$3000 renewable stipend from our Humanities Center which goes to a graduate student managing editor. That person cannot do everything that a Managing Editor

needs to do, and certainly not on that money, so we also rely on graduate student and, right now, uncompensated precariat volunteers.

When I have asked for more support, a Dean suggested we should start charging authors a review fee to publish with us; this would obviously hamper early career and untenured researchers, and I don't believe we could strong-arm senior scholars to paying to publish with us in order to subsidize untenured scholars. We did add, however, a Wikipedia-style "Donate" button. So our greatest weakness is that we are no quicker than – and at points of personal crisis for the editors (notably miscarriage, childbirth, cancer, heart attacks, family illness) we have been slower than – other scholarly print journals, which also imposes a hardship on untenured or early career scholars in particular.

I can't help but see the journal's fate as emblematic of the profession as a whole and of precarity. There is work, no end of work, and there are qualified persons to do it, and there IS money, and moreover, there is a need for qualified and experienced editors nationwide to curate and fact-check the information in which we currently drown. But what there isn't – as yet – is the political will to divert that money away from tax breaks for corporate behemoths (including academic publishing conglomerates) in ways that would make life livable again for both those who are, like me, chronically overworked and those who are also overworked, but precariously under-employed.

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