



How We See Ourselves

L. Michael McCloud • Johnson County Community College

Recommended citation: L. Michael McCloud, “How We See Ourselves,” *Different Visions: New Perspectives on Medieval Art* 8 (2022): 1-4.

Scholar. A noun defined online by Oxford Languages as “A specialist in a particular branch of study, especially the humanities.”[1]

I am a scholar.

It's amazing how four simple words can engender such pride and simultaneously create such shame. First, I'll have to admit something that I find a bit painful, and that is the source of my shame. I am not a very good scholar. That is not to say that my work isn't of a sound quality or my ideas worth pursuing, but my passions don't drive me in the direction of what ostensibly makes a good scholar. I present sporadically, publish never, and while I touch on some interesting ideas that spark debate and study amongst friends and colleagues from time to time, I don't really burden myself very often with the responsibility of expanding my chosen fields of English or History. By all accounts I haven't made much impact in that way, and thus far I haven't left behind a series of treatises that will mark me out from the average dilettante – unless administrative policies defending academic freedom and emails pressing for reform of transfer pipelines one day become part of the zeitgeist. In all of the ways that the culture of the academy has taught me to judge myself, I am not much to be admired. To be honest, serving in my role as Chief Academic Officer of a college, I am often seen by those I consider my colleagues as “the enemy.” Admitting that has always been difficult for me, as I struggle with the dichotomy between what I have learned to believe I should be and what I authentically am.

For some of us, being a scholar means myriad other things than what we are taught as graduate students is the appropriate way to flex our intellectual muscle. For me the concept of being a scholar is weighty. It is a brimful portmanteau, overflowing with the expectations and imagery that the modern world has ascribed to it. It is doubly weighted by both the fear of knowledge, and the fear of Black men in American society (that holdover of witch hunts and socio-political intrigues from ostensibly bygone eras), and even further loaded down with the hopes, dreams, and expectations of those whose time, energy, and sacrifices paved the way for me to be allowed to carry this title. When I think about it (and I do quite often these days) it is a wonder that I possess the strength to lift the spectral baggage that attends my every conversation, writing, or philosophical position. Yet I continue forward because of the influence of those who believed enough to invest their time and talent in me: my great mentors, five women whom I have come to think of as my foremothers. Their work and commitment gave me hope and helped me to see the way forward when I was ready to walk away from this scholarly life. The first four worked with me in the direct shaping and molding of my life and mindset as a doctoral student: Dr. Virginia Blanton, who is a part of this volume, Dr. Linda Mitchell, Dr. Linda Voigts, and the late Dr. Shona Kelly Wray. The fifth, though we have never had the pleasure of a real-world conversation, has maybe had the greatest impact on me as a person. She set in place a clarity that I had long sought in trying to understand what I was working to become, and her work helped me coalesce my uncomfortable and uncommon role as a scholar: Dr. Rachel Dressler.

I became a doctoral student in the year 2000. That year Dr. Dressler published an article entitled “Cross-Legged Knights and Signification in English Medieval Tomb Sculpture.”[2] The work affected me in a way that was thoroughly unlooked for; however, it was not the substance of the work that touched something in me. Dr. Dressler’s analysis of the armored effigies that began to emerge in burials circa 1240 was apropos of my study of knighthood and the aristocracy as they evolved during the twelfth to fifteenth centuries. But there is also beneath the topic of the essay an examination of the reality of who these individuals truly were, juxtaposed against the gendered identity-politics they used as a tool to mold a public image. That juxtaposition brought home for me the lengths to which our historical forebears went to leave behind a persuasive and well-crafted image. The assertions and connections that were made in the piece clicked together in my head and heart in a way that I didn’t yet understand. Slowly, as I followed that loose thread of thought over the next few years, I read other of Dr. Dressler’s works analyzing the material culture of tombs— and I found something that I hadn’t known I was searching for... a reason for why I had begun pursuing scholarship at all. At the core of her work I

found that what she was weighing about our collective past spoke to our collective present in the early 2000s and to a future that has come to fruition in the modern day: Despite who we truly are, our society is built upon the signification of what we wish others to *believe* we are. This realization triggered for me an understanding that I had never had of myself as an African American, a male, a student, or any of the other roles that I occupy in my daily life: That my study of history and literature was not simply to understand the past, but to understand the present and, more deeply, where I fit in it and who I am as an intersection of every role that I play and every circumstance within which I exist. To wit, I became a scholar to better understand myself against the backdrop of history, propaganda, gender roles, societal expectations, and on and on and on.

I believe that we are each constantly constructing ourselves, just as the knights studied by Dr. Dressler tried to through their tomb effigies. No matter who or what we are, we seek to leave behind a swagger, an air of confidence, strength, good humor, or whatever trait we wish most for people to associate with us.

In the modern day, this lives on with the rise of “influencers” and the self-creation of one’s public image through LinkedIn, Instagram, or Facebook, curated digital mausoleums, honing our public personas with the posting and publishing of each carefully selected picture, opinion or comment. We have evolved the imagery that Dr. Dressler observed so prudently in her work, and we continue an almost unconscious obsession with leaving behind the “right” image of who we are, even if such bears little resemblance to the truth of our lives and actions.

Which brings me back to being a scholar. For years I labored under the assumption that my scholarship needed to conform to an appropriate image that had been placed before me many times by many people. Those expectations were far from being in keeping with who I felt that I was and what gave me joy. I realized that, at my core, I am a seeker; although what I seek is not notoriety or largesse. What drew me to a life of scholarship is that I seek understanding. Understanding of our society, of humans with our variegated languages, cultures, histories, thoughts and opinions. How we became what we are, how we might avoid the mistakes of our past, and how we might build a better world for those who will come after us. But most of all, I became a scholar to better understand myself.

Dr. Dressler’s work was the first that illuminated for me that the motivations behind historical imagery were perhaps more worthy of our attention than merely the imagery itself. I realized that what I was seeking was not simply a diverse education

in the humanities, but an understanding (on at least some level) of humanity itself. What is it that drives us to hide who we truly are while creating such well-manicured facades? Are we ashamed to admit to others (or to ourselves) what matters to us, what gives us meaning, or what we are really dealing with as we try to find music in the cacophony of our lives? Why do we pick the tropes that we do to shield us from our reality and create the veneer that we show to the world? I study knights in literature and their superhuman feats because, naïve though I know it to be, I enjoy the idea of heroism in service to higher ideals. It's for these same reasons that I love modern superhero stories and fantasy literature and spend what little free time I can cobble together comparing and contrasting the trends and tropes in all of these stories with the cultural markers of the time periods in which they were written. Because I learned from Dr. Dressler and my other foremothers that true scholarship is about us learning about ourselves: our motivations, our delusions, and what it takes to see ourselves honestly and accept who and what we are while occasionally presenting a mirror to ourselves and the world to invite introspection. In my case that means working to protect the work of others who are passionate about adding to the field, even though I don't feel particularly called to elevate or draw much attention to myself. Through the self-interrogation that I do daily, that fear that I was somehow unworthy of being a scholar, I find myself capable of living a truly scholarly life, reading, writing, and learning to better myself so that when I have the few moments when I am called upon to speak I have something worth saying.

And so, because of the work of Dr. Dressler, I want to amend the definition that I opened with. **Scholar (n.):** A specialist in a particular branch of study, especially *humanity*.

References

- 1 "Scholar," *Oxford Languages and Google*, languages.oup.com/google-dictionary-en/.
- 2 In *Studies in Iconography* 21 (2000): 91-121 [<https://www.jstor.org/stable/23924216>].