Mediocrity in the Middle Ages:
Finding the Middle Ground

11th Annual Medievalists @ Penn (M@P) Graduate Conference
February 22nd, 2019: University of Pennsylvania
Keynote: Sonja Drimmer (UMass Amherst, Art History)

What makes something “mediocre” in the Middle Ages? We often assume that if a manuscript, literary text, or work of visual or performance art has survived from the medieval period, it is exceptional in some way. Modern scholarship tends to enforce this assumption by either praising a work for its beauty and importance, or arguing for the centrality and exceptionality of something that past scholarship has ignored. But what of things that have survived that are just OK? How can clarifying the boundaries of what modern or medieval critics consider(ed) “good” and “bad” art still leave room for mediocrity? What can this middle ground teach us about form, aesthetics, language, and reception? Resisting the notion that any texts surviving from the Middle Ages are likely exceptional in some way, this conference seeks to examine unexceptional artistic productions in the Middle Ages, to consider what we can learn from medial texts and artifacts, and to critically assess the metrics by which we evaluate quality. We hope that this topic will challenge the spectrum endpoints of what has been labelled “good” or “bad” by searching for the middle ground.

We invite 15-20 minute papers on this subject from any discipline, including History, Art History, Musicology, Manuscript Studies, Literary Studies, Religious Studies, Critical Race Studies, and Gender and Sexuality Studies. Topics may include, but are not limited to:

- Non-deluxe manuscript codices and fragments
- Artists and writers outside conventional canons
- Medieval theories of artistic quality (or lack thereof)
- Microhistories of “ordinary” medieval people
- Average devotional practices; the religious lives of the unsaintly
- Contemporary and historical reception and criticism
- Differences in quality between text and image, or text and music
- Unexceptional examples of common genres, such as romance
- Translation, adaptation, and/or reproduction of medieval objects
- Mediality of the “Middle” Ages

Please submit abstracts of no more than 300 words as attachments to pennmedieval@gmail.com by December 2, 2018. Submissions should include your name, paper title, email, and institutional and departmental affiliation. Papers will be due February 12, 2019 for distribution to faculty respondents.