

Elizabeth Hebbard

Medievalist “Undercover”:

Broken Books, Hidden Libraries, and Fragmentology

Friday, Nov. 3
3:00 pm
GA 3134

About the Talk: Through the practice of book-breaking, which began in the Middle Ages, medieval manuscripts lead long and fascinating afterlives as they are dismantled and their constituent parts dispersed. As a “fragmentologist,” I study the material conditions of these manuscript remnants for evidence of how and why they were created, as well as how they were repurposed and, sometimes, by whom. Over 25,000 individual fragments have entered library and private collections in the United States, and most still await study. But around the world, thousands more fragments are yet to be discovered between the covers of early print books, where they were used as binding reinforcements. These hidden libraries-within-libraries hold the keys to an enormous material-cultural history of the parchment trade, book binding practices, and medieval library collections. They also provide clues to better understanding dispersed fragments in the US, and point to the possibility of reuniting fragments from the same original codex. Perhaps most importantly, these fragments sometimes contain previously unknown texts, and their survival testifies to the existence of hundreds of long-forgotten books that could shift our modern image not only of manuscript production, but also of the literary landscape of the Middle Ages.

This talk is based on research conducted this past summer as a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

About the Speaker: Elizabeth Hebbard (PhD Yale, 2017) is a Visiting Assistant Professor in the Department of French and Italian. She served as Lecturer in French for two years at the University of New Hampshire before joining the IU faculty this fall.



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