

## "NARWE IN CAGE": TEACHING MEDIEVAL WOMEN IN THE FIRST HALF OF THE BRITISH LITERATURE SURVEY

What is at stake when we do not teach medieval women writers in the British survey sequence?

In my first 300-level medieval survey at the University of Alaska -Anchorage (UAA), I designed a course around "writing by and about medieval women," drawing from my experience at the 1997 NEH Summer Institute, "The Literary Traditions of Medieval Women."<sup>1</sup> I was pleased when 17 students signed up with "the new professor in the department," but was equally puzzled when several dropped after the first day. One student took time to E-mail me about the course:

I am a student who was enrolled in your Medieval Literature class. I say "was" because I have dropped it from my schedule. I dropped it because I was not interested in the material. However, this is not the reason why I am writing to you. I am writing to tell you that I think your choice of material for English 315 was inappropriate. Engl. 315 is a survey course, one intended to cover "representative authors and genres." I do not think that your material—"Writing by (and about) Medieval Women"—was chosen with this intention in mind. I, therefore, think that your class was misrepresented in the catalog.<sup>2</sup>

He continued that such material is better placed in a women's studies or advanced elective course.

Somewhat surprised by his candor, I responded that the selections "we're looking at this semester are representative texts that cover a broad range of genres, authors, styles, and time periods from across Europe to the Near East."<sup>3</sup> As you might suspect, I went on to propose that the questions of "canonicity" and "representation" are themselves highly vexed: Which texts and genres are representative of what specific values and/or populations, as judged by whom? In fact, I offered that the whole notion of "Literature" is undergoing a re-examination and that a medieval survey class presented a good opportunity to consider those very questions. The student wrote in reply:

In the last analysis, though, my attitude boils down to that of unfulfilled expectation: I came expecting Dante, Langland, *Beowulf*, Chrétien, *The Romance of the Rose*, an Icelandic saga perhaps, and, indeed, I would have been let down if this list did not include Marie de France. In fact, what I expected was a survey course, not a Medieval Literature with subtitle course. . . . I am saying that Engl. 315 should be "representative" of the Middle Ages. For myself, I would have found it equally unconscionable if you had made the class a study of the medieval epic and heroic poem—though I most assuredly would not have dropped.<sup>4</sup>

This student's frankly-stated belief is in itself "representative" of many in our classes and is also a symptom of the kind of tough curricular choices we face as we design our courses. In my view, however, it would be unproductive simply to criticize the view that a medieval survey course should be composed of traditional canonical—and therefore largely male—writers or merely to censure its unstated premise that women's writing is somehow generally of less literary value and is therefore not representative of medieval literary traditions. More instructive from a pedagogical perspective is (1) to assess how those expectations are formed and (2) to decide how we develop courses that go beyond the facile dichotomies (male/female, active/passive, canonical/noncanonical, literate/illiterate, devotional writing/courtly literature) that have marginalized the literary traditions of medieval women.<sup>5</sup>

Pedagogically speaking, most students' introduction to English literature of the Middle Ages, and many other students' only taste of this literature, comes in the first half of the English survey course.<sup>6</sup> Practically speaking, for many of us, to teach the British survey is to teach the *Norton Anthology of English Literature* (NAEL).<sup>7</sup> Because of its near monopoly in the sophomore survey market, the NAEL has assumed the status of canon-maker, both defining the range of what counts as "literature" and shaping many students' (and colleagues') understanding of things medieval.<sup>8</sup>

What I'd like to do in the balance of this essay is to map out one possible trajectory through the Old and Middle English sections of the NAEL, with suggestions for supplementary texts, and then to remark briefly how the issues of women, gender, and society raised in these OE and ME sections might lead to further discussion in subsequent sections of the NAEL. My hope is that this essay will provoke continued conversation about other successful approaches to the English survey course and about making service courses like this an important part of the medievalist's teaching and research agenda.

The NAEL's Old English section is notable for its inattention to texts that foreground gender issues. The Anglo-Saxon selections, which have remained virtually unchanged since the first edition, clearly need to be revamped with material dealing more directly with gender issues. I have used both "The Wife's Lament" and "Wulf and Eadwacer" to good advantage, and the next time I teach the survey I will include Cynewulf's *Judith*.<sup>9</sup> These three pieces continue to inspire spirited discussion about the place and role—that is, the social and discursive construction—of women in "heroic" society, as well as provoke incisive analysis into the lives of women in the Anglo-Saxon period. If I had my way, the NAEL would also include either *Juliana* or *Judith* as a counterpoint to *Beowulf*, and these additions would broaden both the generic and cultural scope of the sophomore survey.

There are, of course, a number of ways to arrange the OE material, and I'm sure we have all experimented with many, but I have had good success with the following reading schedule, based on three meetings per week:

### Week One

- Class 1 Syllabus and Introduction to the Course // Bede and "Caedmon's Hymn" (NAEL 16-19)
- Class 2 "The Wanderer" (68-70) and "The Wife's Lament" (handout)
- Class 3 "The Seafarer" (handout) and "Wulf and Eadwacer" (handout)

### Week Two

- Class 1 "The Dream of the Rood" (19-21) and "The Battle of Maldon" (71-75)
- Class 2 *Beowulf*: (Introduction 21-26) "Prologue" to the "Fight with Grendel" (27-37)
- Class 3 *Beowulf*: "The Celebration at Heorot" to "Beowulf Returns Home" (37-55)

### Week Three

- Class 1 *Beowulf*: ""Beowulf and the Dragon" to Beowulf's death and burial (56-68)
- Class 2 *Judith* (handout)
- Class 3 *Judith* (handout)

In conjunction with the readings, one or two students prepare "close readings" of specific passages of their choice as discussion starters each class period, and I ask them to write a highly-focused 3-4 page "response paper" near the end of each historical subdivision, which invites them to think synthetically across the entire section and trace a single idea across several texts. One prompt that usually elicits a number of responses goes something like: "Define the 'heroic ideal' in *Beowulf* or 'The Battle of Maldon' and trace its critique and transformation in 'The Wife's Lament,' 'Wulf and Eadwacer,' or *Judith*." These response papers often help a student's thinking coalesce around a certain set of issues, which they can then pursue throughout the rest of the term.

Although largely missing from the OE subdivision, writing by and about women is represented somewhat more fully in the Middle English segment of the NAEL. I have often offered some variation on the following schedule of readings:

#### Week Four

- Class 1 *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (NAEL, Parts 1–2)
- Class 2 *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Parts 3–4)
- Class 3 *The General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales* (81–100)

#### Week Five

- Class 1 *The Miller's Tale* (101–17)
- Class 2 *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* (117–35)
- Class 3 *The Wife of Bath's Tale* (135–44)

#### Week Six

- Class 1 Margery Kempe, from *The Book of Margery Kempe* (298–308); The Chester Play of Noah's Flood (308–18)
- Class 2 Julian of Norwich, from *A Book of Showings* (292–98)
- Class 3 Julian of Norwich, Revelation 14 (handout)

#### Week Seven

- Class 1 *The Second Shepherd's Play* (318–44)
- Class 2 *Everyman* (363–84)
- Class 3 Midterm Exam: Old and Middle English Literature

Beginning the ME section with *Gawain* as a critique of the Arthurian tradition provides an important contrast to the heroic ideal in *Beowulf*, for the consummate knight finds himself at the very limit of his courtly resources as he is pursued by Bertilak's wife. What's more, the question of Morgan le Fay's overall influence on the action of *Gawain* further problematizes the issues of gender, power, and discourse in the poem.

Next, it is difficult to cover the *General Prologue* in a single class period, but by assigning a pilgrim portrait to each class member, one can easily raise questions of class and social standing, multiple points of view, and the status of representation—among many others—so crucial to an appreciation of the *Canterbury Tales* and other literature that follows. I then generally teach the Miller and the Wife—the *Miller's Tale* for its high-spirited artistry and complicated depiction of gender and power relations, and the Wife for the important critique of misogyny in the *Prologue* and subversion of masculine courtly culture in the *Tale*. One could just as easily include the *Franklin's Tale* or the selections from Malory to add a different dimension to any discussion of heterosexual love relations and the gendered notions of honor and fidelity.

Personally, I grew up with the 4th edition of the *NAEL* (1979), which still included *Pearl* and *Sir Orfeo*, and I now teach the 6th (1993), with its notable inclusion of Margery Kempe, Julian of Norwich, and the Chester Play of Noah's Flood. Although Margery explicitly occupies only a single class period (or sometimes two) in my version of the ME unit, she is in fact the core of the ME section, and I have toyed with the idea of assigning her *Book* as parallel reading during the first half of the course. Margery has been a miller, and the quarrelsome ale-wives of the Chester Noah provide an interesting counterpoint to Margery's own experience as a brewer. The *Wife*, of course, also then leads naturally to Margery and the intellectual labor and social struggles of her *Book*, particularly Margery's appearance before the Archbishop of York, for if the *Wife*, as a fictional character, seems to be hard to take seriously for some students, Margery, as the first autobiographer in English, often makes the *Wife*'s claims seem conservative.

As I'm sure you have also found, one of the most powerful moments of the semester comes in that marvelous colloquy—"the holy dalliance" (*NAEL* 303)—during which two real, historic persons meet and affirm one another. Margery, the very public pilgrim, seeks the anchorite Julian at her cell in Norwich, and we hear the voice of the hermit in the faithful testimony of the sojourner: "The Holy Ghost moveth never a thing again charity" (303). Although both women operated within the tradition of what we might call "affective piety," a characteristic over-stressed in the *NAEL* selections in my view, both Margery and Julian ultimately move far beyond the rather stereotypically "feminine" characteristics of strong emotional attachment to the wounded and human Christ: Margery in her social and interpretive deftness before the Archbishop of York and Julian in the rigorous and systematic development of her theology.<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, we read the whole of Julian's 14th Revelation concerning the parable of the lord and servant and mother/child.<sup>11</sup> Although the *NAEL* is to be lauded for its inclusion of these two important writers, I think we must heed Anne Clark Bartlett's warning, as voiced at this past summer's NEH Institute, that we should not too quickly establish a counter canon centered on Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich, as worthy and important as they are, for such a move just as easily forecloses many other important women writers.<sup>12</sup>

As a Middle English specialist, I personally find that my OE selections lead naturally into the ME selections, and together the medieval segment of my survey course forms a coherent basis from which to pursue the rest of the semester's readings. The *NAEL*'s selections in the 16th and Early 17th Century offer more selections and a wider range of genres and issues than in the earlier literature, though in less depth. Depending upon how one might structure the transition from the ME period to the Renaissance, one could move easily from the stereotypes of the Mystery and Morality plays (*Secunda Pastorum* and

*Everyman*) to the seemingly more complicated gender dynamics of, say, *King Lear*. In some of my recent classes, students have responded critically to pairing such canonical staples as *King Lear* or *Henry IV, Part I* with the selections from Queen Elizabeth (NAEL 997–100) and *The Faerie Queen*; the sonnet sequences of Sidney, Spenser, and Shakespeare with Lady Mary Wroth’s *Pamphilia and Amphilanthus* (NAEL 1689–92); and *Paradise Lost* with Aemilia Lanyer’s “Eve’s Apology in Defense of Women” (NAEL 1059–62). I’m sure many of us have discovered other stimulating combinations of texts.

All faculty face the unhappy trade-off between breadth of coverage and depth of selection, but as a medievalist I take it as both my prerogative and responsibility to take fully half a term in the OE and ME literature—even more, if I could get away with it! I think the point of working primarily within the NAEL selections—but pairing them creatively and surprisingly with other texts—is to raise exactly the question of canon formation and more specifically the gendered notions of power and society underlying the development of the canon. One of the best questions to which we can lead our students goes something like this, “Well, why is that selection in this book anyway?”

As I write this essay, I am acutely aware that these suggestions present only one possibility among many for approaching the sophomore survey class; I am equally sure that many others have even better ideas. Though teaching the first semester of Survey of English Literature may often be a “service” and therefore less-desired course for many faculty members, it warrants our careful thought, best preparation, and finest faculty. The course often fulfills a General Education Requirement, making it an important draw for non-English majors, and it often functions as a gateway or required course for (prospective) English majors. Its strategic placement within the college or university and in many English programs makes it an ideal vehicle both to create an even greater space for the examination of women’s writing and gender issues in 300- and 400-level courses and to negate the expectation that such discussions should be the sole province of specialized elective or women’s studies courses. Until we make writing by and about medieval women an essential part of what we teach—especially at the 100- and 200-levels—these important writers and the issues they raise will remain at the margins of our students’ awareness and interest.

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<sup>1</sup> The syllabi mentioned in the essay are available online at <<http://www.engl.uaa.alaska.edu/kline/index.htm>>, and I welcome your comments.

<sup>2</sup> Craig Jackson, <[aschj@uaa.alaska.edu](mailto:aschj@uaa.alaska.edu)> "Medieval Literature," 4 September 1997, personal E-mail (1 February 1998).

<sup>3</sup> Dan Kline, <[afdtk@uaa.alaksa.edu](mailto:afdtk@uaa.alaksa.edu)>, "Re: Medieval Literature," 4 September 1997, personal E-mail (17 February 1998).

<sup>4</sup> Craig Jackson, <[aschj@uaa.alaska.edu](mailto:aschj@uaa.alaska.edu)> "Re: Medieval Literature," 10 October 1997, personal E-mail (1 February 1998).

<sup>5</sup> See Gillian R. Overing, Helen T. Bennett, and Clare A. Lees, "Gender and Power: Feminism in Old English Studies," *Medieval Feminist Newsletter* 10 (1990): 15-20 for a critique of this kind of dualistic reading of Anglo-Saxon literature and culture.

<sup>6</sup> Apart, that is, from popular treatments of medieval literature and culture, ranging from Xena, *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, and Roger Corman's *Knight Riders* to Brother Cadfael, *Braveheart*, and John Boorman's *Excalibur*. These pop culture versions of medieval life, often more gender determined than their medieval proto-texts, present a different, though not unrelated, series of pedagogical challenges and opportunities.

<sup>7</sup> M. H. Abrams, gen. ed. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature, Volume 1*. 6th ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993): 2586 pages.

<sup>8</sup> One might take as a parallel case the reception of *The Norton Anthology of African-American Literature*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997) as an indication of the cultural influence of the Norton Anthologies. Kevin Meehan writes, "I'm not trying to suggest that the world would be a better place without the Norton, nor do I want to dismiss the monumental efforts expended by the editors. But all monuments cast shadows, and the bigger the monument the bigger the shadow. This makes it imperative to remember, recover and circulate those voices that are not included, and that run the risk of being lost through the Darwinian logic of canon formation" ("Spiking Canons," *The Nation*, 12 May 1997: n.p.; EBSCOhost, <<http://www.epnet.com/>> Item Number 9705081830 [31 January 1998]).

<sup>9</sup> For translations of these shorter OE texts, see Kevin Crossley-Holland and Bruce Mitchell, *The Battle of Maldon and Other Old English Poems* (New York: St. Martin's, 1966) and C. W. Kennedy, *An Anthology of Old English Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966). Burton Raffel has translated *Judith* in *Poems from the Old English* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1964) and is coming out with a new *Poems and Prose from the Old English* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), co-edited with Alexandra Hennessey Olsen. Recent important articles include Helen T. Bennett, "Exile and the Semiosis of Gender in Old English Elegies," in *Class and Gender in Early English Literature: Intersections*, ed. Britton J. Harwood and Gillian R. Overing (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994): 43-48, and in the same volume, Karma Lochrie, "Gender, Sexual Violence, and the Politics of War in the Old English *Judith*," 1-20. See also Shari Horner, "Spiritual Truth and Sexual Violence: The Old English *Juliana*, Anglo-Saxon Nuns, and the Discourse of Female Monastic Enclosure," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 19 (1994): 658-675.

<sup>10</sup> Much more than just another example of "devotional" literature or conventional affective piety, the analytical rigor and technical innovation of Julian's *Showings* is becoming more widely recognized. For example, Joan N. Nuth writes, "It is my argument that Julian's *Showings* deserve a place alongside the *Cur Deus Homo* as an important soteriological study" ("Two Medieval Soteriologies: Anselm of Canterbury and Julian of Norwich," *Theological Studies* (1992), n.p.; EBSCOhost, <<http://www.epnet.com/>> Item Number 9608146898 [31 January 1998]).

<sup>11</sup> I use Edmund Colledge and James Walsh's translation in *Julian of Norwich: Showings*, from the Classics of Western Spirituality Series (New York: Paulist, 1978), 248-305.

<sup>12</sup> Roundtable Discussion, NEH Summer Institute at Rice University, "The Literary Traditions of Medieval Women," 18 July 1997.