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## Reframing the Past: Reflections on Teaching Secondary Students during the Pandemic

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# Reframing the Past: Reflections on Teaching Secondary Students during the Pandemic

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## Abstract

Teaching secondary students amid the COVID-19 pandemic and intensified national concern over racial injustice offered an opportunity for reflection about how we frame the past and approaches to curriculum moving forward.

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I wish I could say I'd been more creative, that I had embraced the opportunity to develop engaging online lessons that maintained the same degree of rigor students experience in my middle school and high school classroom, but I can only claim to have achieved a skilled facility in juggling Zoom, Blackbaud, and G Suite in a multiscreen array on my desk in a small, converted room while my husband taught online from the garage, and our 17-year-old son plugged in to class from a desk near the kitchen. The TV news remained on low volume so we could keep up with the constantly shifting state of affairs anytime we passed. It was a familiar scene in many of my colleagues' homes.

I was the most fortunate of the three of us at home, with small enough classes to be able to see my students' faces and hear their voices as the world quickly found that adolescents thrive on access to information much less than on human connection. Though my teaching assignment this year did not include courses that focus on medieval texts, narratives with plague references came quickly to mind. Amid dark daily news, I resisted confronting my relatively young and overwhelmed students with medieval plague stories, though I can see already that as we gain sufficient distance to reflect, plague stories will resonate much more strongly than they did in years past. Instead, I opted for a more upbeat encounter with medieval texts and selected a couple of fanciful tales from *One Thousand and One Nights*.

Preparing lessons in the throes of pandemic life brought the needs of students and families into focus. Within teaching teams, teachers sometimes differed about how best to approach the balance of rigor and responsiveness, and I considered what would matter most. Not long after the initial lockdown, we were also confronted with additional and more explicit evidence of ongoing racism in our country, and with a lens focused not only on death from biological but cultural disease, I further shifted my perspective about what and how to teach. What was undeniable was the reality of which lives mattered and which had been neglected.

My students and I both benefited from reading voices of those who met the moment with creative insight, and since more time at home meant savoring my paper edition of the Sunday New York Times (carefully sanitized in the earlier months), poetry and essays about matters of race and equality in the US became class texts, supplementary materials for the war and protest poems we had been reading from earlier eras.

My own reading turned toward a deeper exploration of how we confront race when teaching pre-modern literature, especially in secondary school when students are first introduced to these texts and in which entering into this discussion via theory is a bit too advanced. It's been a couple of decades since I introduced Chaucer as the father of English poetry, and my approach is one of critical examination rather than the one of reverence taught by my own teachers, but the discussion has been more focused on issues of misogyny and sexuality, often side-stepping discussion of race or classifying the medieval era as pre-racialized. In the last few years, Medievalists of Color have helped facilitate more frequent inquiry and discussion about how we frame our understanding of medieval texts and the systems of scholarship and pedagogy in which we operate, and I want to ask more practical questions about how we approach these works in secondary curricula. How do we introduce medieval voices, forms, and context? Alongside which texts? How do we ask students to interrogate what they read differently than we may have in the past? How do we expand our lessons to deepen examination

of key images that maintain relevance today? For example, we might discuss how the connotations of blackness constructed in the medieval era served rhetorical purposes that continue to function in modern culture.<sup>1</sup> As we work to re-examine assumptions about racial hierarchy and power in ways that problematize previously accepted paradigms, we have some helpful models from current work inspired by the #MeToo movement, including articles from the Spring issue of this journal.<sup>2</sup> Certainly, there are a host of challenges to teaching medieval texts in high school, but very little changes without updated education for classroom teachers.

There is, perhaps, a bit of truth to the narrative of a struggle between time spent either sharing the literary and cultural richness of time-honored texts, or honoring the perspectives and voices of those who have been neglected, but it's more nuanced than that. If we avoid teaching from a defensive stance, our practices can shine new light on the past to help us see its structures more clearly and include a full(er) range of perspectives of those present. And these same practices may assist us in developing more insightful, purposeful interpretive strategies to apply as we view our contemporary cultural contexts, observing the manner in which storytellers characterize themselves in relation to others, and to consider the broader context that might include those other voices. What narratives do we prioritize now? How do those shape our perspectives, and what might be neglected? As is always the case when I engage in deeper inquiry, I've learned that I have plenty to learn.

At my school, we had the privilege of resources (and weather) to offer in-person instruction and after opening the academic year in distance learning, we shifted to a model in which students were on campus in rotation, many of us bundled up in outdoor classrooms. Though ambient noise, masks, and distance limited discussion, my students' sense of joy at being in one another's presence was palpable. Their personalities came through in their general movement and body language, and it strengthened my ability to know them. Even so, nothing feels ordinary. Though these interactions raised our spirits, and we have begun to move towards normalcy, both students and faculty have changed a bit. Our collective experience of trauma remains present.

My regular teaching practice reflects a heightened sensitivity to how trauma experienced by individuals may impact their learning experiences, but as I prepare to return to the classroom in the fall, I certainly consider how to address the broader experiences we all share. I waver about whether to keep things upbeat or to take this opportunity to dive into material we generally avoid when teaching lower grade levels. In the past, classroom discussions addressed death as an abstract and distant theme; now, we speak of life-or-death situations frequently. When we returned to campus in a hybrid format, several students continued learning from home because their potential exposure at school threatened their parents' or grandparents' lives. This spring, a presentation in our weekly chapel service (on Zoom, even for those on campus) celebrated the lives of family members who were lost during the school year. Now, if not death, all of my students have experienced other significant and abrupt losses, periods of isolation, disappointments, or daunting challenges. Moving forward, I expect that I will have to tread carefully, read the room frequently, and tune my textual choices and approaches accordingly. It's possible that tales of trauma may resonate more soundly.

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<sup>1</sup> On this topic, see Whitaker. For further reading, see Vanessa Jaeger's article on the subject of Crusader ideology in the white nationalist agenda, 39-48 of this issue.

<sup>2</sup> See Torres and McNamara; Powrie.

I find myself fully reconsidering my previous approach to a lesson I've used for years. In the past, the dream-vision poem "Pearl" has proved to be an effective and efficient text for exploring complex allegory and offering instruction on how to use resource materials. The instructional unit highlights the poetic technique of using link-words to connect stanzas as well as deeper studies of individual words, and I've succeeded in interesting high school students in taking a journey beyond their initial understandings of words and images to include contradictions and connections. It's been a reliable approach, but admittedly rather clinical.<sup>3</sup> Even though death and loss are central to the text, I did not spend much time discussing the trauma that underpins the whole poem. Instead, we focused on Pearl's ability to enlighten the confused dreamer. In the wake of our current pandemic, it's difficult for me to imagine neglecting the dreamer's profound sense of mourning. Now, I would begin the discussion with passages that attend to the dreamer's state of grief and loss. I suspect that my students will be able to better understand his initial disbelief and his tentative, fearful acceptance of Pearl's presence. I imagine that we will linger on this vulnerable moment:

Art thou my perle that I haf playned,  
 Regretted by myn one on nyghte?  
 Much longeyng haf I for thee layned  
 Sythen into gresse thou me aglyghte.  
 Pensyf, payred, I am forpayned,  
 And thou in a lyf of lykyng lyghte.

... are you my pearl that I have mourned, grieved for alone at night? I have concealed much longing for you, since you slipped away from me into the grass. Sorrowful, wasted, I am overcome by pain, and you [are] settled in a life of pleasure.<sup>4</sup>

I may ask my students to journal about their own losses and what wisdom they might gain from reflecting on them. I may also take the opportunity to discuss how—as David Coley notes in his recent book—the poem simultaneously represents the trauma of the Black Death and suppresses it; for example, I would expand on the generally apparent associations of the link-word 'spot' with more abstract human flaws or spiritual impurities. Though not explicitly stated, the undoubtedly familiar association of 'spot' for the poet's contemporary audience was the image of the physical buboes of those afflicted with the plague. There were many days this year when I felt that we were both confronting and avoiding the surrounding state of tragedies.

As my students and I carry our experiences forward, perhaps there is room for some grim humor as well. Amid some of the more devastating months of the pandemic, *The New York Times Magazine* commissioned *The Decameron Project: 29 New Stories from the Pandemic* (2020), which asked contemporary authors to capture the moment. Many of them included stories of deep pain, others included issues of race, but leave it to Margaret Atwood to embrace the full, slightly twisted, Boccaccio-style of comedic release and reflection in the face of deepest tragedy by writing about gendered power dynamics. I am preparing a lesson that pairs her darkly hilarious story, "Impatient Griselda," with Boccaccio's *Griselda* and perhaps Chaucer's retelling in *The Clerk's Tale*, giving us the opportunity to

<sup>3</sup> For the full lesson, see *The Once and Future Classroom*. XXI.1.

<sup>4</sup> See Andrew and Waldron, 6.

explore the interconnected nature of comedy and tragedy; and hopefully, like Boccaccio's storytellers, to savor a bit of comedy amid the many tragedies that surround us.

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