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Daniel Sawyer
St. Hilda's College, Oxford, U.K.

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Daniel Sawyer
St. Hilda's College, Oxford, U.K.

Abstract

Practical challenges deter scholars from writing single-author teaching books, but such books offer chances to think about pedagogy. This article describes some of the choices made in the writing of a teaching book, *How to Read Middle English Poetry*. It is presented not as a set of final rulings on best practice, but as an account of decisions made, to lift the lid on the work and support the creation of more teaching tools in future.

Several factors discourage the writing of teaching books. Such work holds uncertain worth in the job market, with its perceived weight varying in academic career structures. In England, where I live, teaching books do not necessarily fit either the Research Excellence Framework or the Teaching Excellence Framework. Academics labour under burdens of administrative activity and must spend time on the work—often pleasurable, but still work—of actual teaching. Time is more easily spared for a short chapter in an edited student-companion collection than for 90,000 words.

Yet book-length, single-author guides have their own strengths: they permit a unified vision of a topic and can enter into that topic in both breadth and depth. Teaching books can also have a long shelf life. Like a good edition, a helpful guide for students can find readers for longer than a research monograph. I've just written a book about Middle English poetry for undergraduates. Anything that might ease the way for future teaching books in our field seems good, and so I lay out here parts of my experience. I briefly sketch the book's nature and describe some of my choices. I don't claim to have solved many teaching problems, or to have reached some final state of pedagogical wisdom, or indeed to be the only person writing such material: Jessica Brantley, for instance, has recently published a fine book modelling literary approaches to manuscripts containing Old and Middle English (2022). I offer these reflections only as notes from one practitioner to others.

At a few points, I refer to suggestions from the anonymous reviewers for the press; both reviewers wrote helpful responses, seeing the project's worth but also righting errors, offering generous suggestions about positioning, and pointing out a few corners of coverage I had missed. We do not normally discuss peer review in public, but I have chosen to do so in moments here for three reasons: first, doing so sheds light on some of my decisions; second, everything I say reflects positively on my reviewers, to whom I am very grateful; and, third, it might encourage other younger scholars to remember that academic books usually contain, at minimum, some gentle course-correction from readers.

The book, *How to Read Middle English Poetry*, sets out to guide readers through poetry between roughly 1100 and 1500, for study or pleasure, with a particular focus on understanding craft and reading closely. Its chapters cover wording, word order, alternating metres, alliterative verse, rhyme, stanzas, and larger forms; contextual chapters discuss manuscripts and textual criticism, multilingualism, and the reading of verse aloud. An indexed glossary explains technical terms. *How to Read* doesn't provide a full reconstructed poetics, but it should equip undergraduates to study Middle English verse with more confidence; it might also serve as a useful reference and refreshment tool for new graduate students.

Several factors made the book seem necessary, indeed made it felt as a hole on my teaching shelves (between Terasawa 2011 and Lennard 2005). Though reading and understanding Middle English poetry sits close to the heart of day-to-day study, we lacked a student-facing handbook. Companions to literature from the period usually give more space to historical and cultural context, while guides to poetry often say little about centuries before the sixteenth. Existing cross-period student guides to poetry or to close reading say very little about verse before c. 1550. Sometimes they say things which do not hold true for earlier poetry, as when they assign lineation to the poet (Greenham 2019, 57; Hodgson 2021, 61): for Middle English, scribes had more of a say. Within Middle

English studies, meanwhile, formal matters tend to take up one chapter in a companion, handbook, or collaborative history volume. These chapters often marry utility and rigour (e.g. Minkova 2007; Putter 2023; Weiskott 2023) but their concision means that they cannot convey either the full range of excitement offered by the material, or the full toolset useful to undergraduates. Understandably, the exposition of literary content and context is the order of the day in the other chapters of such books. The more interdisciplinary, cultural-historical flourishing of scholarship on Middle English works in recent decades had many virtues; my own work has benefitted from it. But, in the midst of this flourishing, pedagogical aids have perhaps at times risked losing sight of Middle English poetry as poetry, as a distinct category of language use springing from particular craft techniques and inviting particular engagements from readers.

Certainly, Middle English scholarship has seen a flourishing of new studies attentive to verse form and style (e.g. Galloway and Grady eds. 2013; Prendergast and Rosenfeld eds. 2018; Weiskott 2021; Strakhov 2022). The field has also seen more technical studies that advance our knowledge of how form worked (e.g. Putter, Jefferson and Stokes 2007; Jefferson, Minkova and Putter 2014; Weiskott 2016; Cornelius 2017; Duffell 2018; Evans 2018; Nuttall 2018; Nuttall 2020). Thus, for instance, and despite remaining disagreements, we now have a more precise working consensus on the nature of the b-verse in the later Middle English alliterative line than we did in 1990, and we have a clearer understanding of the uses and history of rhyme-breaking in Middle English poetry. However, works aimed at undergraduates have only fitfully folded in these technical advances and the broader growth of work on form—knowledge that should feed through to student practice.

Meanwhile, undergraduates increasingly come to the lecture, class, or seminar with less experience reading poetry or reading dense works closely. I don't think that undergraduates have grown less competent in general: they often show more skill in information synthesis and search-based resource use than I and my peers had, for instance. I suggest, though, that their competencies have shifted, and that some past tools assume bases of knowledge that they often now lack. Discussing the question with colleagues drew out similar views—never, I'm glad to say, offered in jeremiad—as did enquiries with secondary education teachers. Many factors must be at play here. We have seen shifts in the nature of reading and in the distribution of attention in recent decades. On a longer timescale, as Jonathan Culler has recently remarked (2023), practices of reading aloud and memorisation have dwindled away.

My sense of the local context in England drew especially on my experience across six rounds of university admissions, which at my employer require direct granular work from academics. (I discuss England, in particular, because educational systems vary within the UK.) Each year, I have talked with a range of applicants, and have read sample schoolwork, normally supplied with teachers' marking, so that one can see something of the immediate assessment context as well as the nature of the work itself. Cumulatively, I have now read some hundreds of pieces of previously marked pre-university schoolwork.

The standard pathway to the study of English at university in England is a two-year qualification studied by students aged 16–18, A level English literature; before that, the typical student will have taken a General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) in English literature. Different exam boards fill these qualifications with different materials, but the undergirding assessment scheme is set out by a central authority, the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual). Ofqual

demands attention to literary form in both A level and GCSE English literature qualifications, but these demands are double-edged swords: students are often taught pragmatically towards the assessment, with limited time and resources, and the attention to form need not join organically with other aspects of criticism. As a result, close reading in secondary education can become a business of fulfilling Ofqual's explicit criterion through the dry collection of facts and the recognition of patterns—two tasks at which computers might beat human readers—rather than surviving as a living enmeshment with a work, with oneself, with other readers, and with other topics. Students can win credit for spotting (say) the increasingly tricksy play with rhyme in the second half of William Blake's 'Holy Thursday', for relating 'Holy Thursday' to philanthropy and established religion in 1790s England, and for thinking through how other critics have read 'Holy Thursday', but not for joining these three kinds of thought up. (Might rhyme and other features of 'Holy Thursday' prompt us to think on beautified institutional philanthropy and the aestheticisation of poverty, then or more recently?) Some of this mechanical division of critical functions might emerge unavoidably from teaching beginners, and I see even the more culpable narrowness as a problem of resource limits and assessment structures, not as the fault of teachers. The process does, however, encourage a dry and isolated understanding of formalism. The regrettable dwindling of modern language study in secondary education also serves up undergraduates less likely to have groundings in language study in general—useful for Middle English—or in French in particular—incredibly useful for Middle English. Scholarly contexts vary, and different academics in different places will have different chances to consider the past paths of teaching that bring students to us. But thought on how secondary education shapes and equips students as readers ought to benefit any teaching book for undergraduates.

I aimed for a guide to Middle English poetry that shows the topic's inherent interest, as crafted verse, but also supports students who have passions for cultural history, theory, and the other broader commitments of English studies, helping them better understand the works in which their arguments are rooted. The kernel of the idea for the book came to me late in 2019; the arrival in the UK of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 drove me to begin writing. The epidemic stymied my planned research. Suddenly, universities' interest in the Research Excellence Framework seemed small, and other things, including teaching, seemed more pressing. Teaching under these conditions prodded me to make my writing at least somewhat student-led. Parts of the book circulated in early forms among my own students at the time; others were tried out aloud, in classes. I reviewed my experience of teaching students at Oxford, and visiting students from Japan, Canada, and the USA. I conferred with friends who teach Middle English in continental Europe and in North America. I looked back at my own undergraduate experience at Queen Mary, University of London, though guardedly: the undergraduate who becomes a scholar is unrepresentative.

Thinking harder about students and their studies shifted my view of undergraduate readerships. Perhaps scholarly minds sometimes imagine the ideal student, one who can study full time, and has managed to arrive at university with a wide grounding in relevant cultural and linguistic traditions. By and large, this student doesn't exist. The real student is often working while studying. In England, Wales, and Northern Ireland, undergraduates often pick one subject to study from their degree's start. However, as my careful phrasing there begins to show, this system doesn't hold true even across the whole of the UK, and in many systems of higher education some or all in the classroom are not majoring or concentrating on English literature. Such disciplinary variety can grant boons: one of my

most enjoyable and rewarding experiences teaching visiting students from the USA had me teach Chaucer to a student majoring in engineering. But disciplinary variety also means challenges: unstable bodies of background knowledge and foundational skills. Real students are busy, and a great deal of teaching involves students who come neither trained in Middle English, nor thinking of themselves as primarily working in literary studies, or even in the humanities (Kline 2020).

The first waves of COVID-19 spurred other thoughts about students and their experience too. The withdrawal of things highlights those things. We no longer took for granted aspects of teaching that had been assumed: synchronicity, presence, gesture; one of the things I most missed, though also hardest to describe concisely, was interstitial time, those short but important slivers at starts and ends of lectures, classes, and tutorials when one can address off-piste student interests, or fit in a quiet pastoral enquiry. The book became asynchronous communication to students, in general, future students, all students, written at points as one might write a letter, in a time when—since I lived through the pandemic alone—all human contact felt like writing letters. I have ironed out some of this initial urgency now that the pandemic has entered a different phase. From this experience, I draw the thought that to write a teaching book is in fact to teach, in a highly diffuse and asynchronous way.

In a teaching book, just as in teaching, much rests on the choice of editions. Isolation taught me lessons about accessibility and usefulness here too. At the time, I lived five minutes' walk from the Bodleian Library's special collections, but I could no longer pursue key tasks such as collation—the heart of codicology (Beadle 2017)—and work with specialist editions beyond those on my bookshelf. The Bodleian might as well have been on the Moon. One noticed in the first waves of the pandemic, also, who retained access to books and who did not, who had space in which to work and who did not. As David Lavinsky has remarked, the pandemic abstracted students' pedagogical and institutional links while leaving their finances concrete (2021, 73). What kind of primary works might help students most, especially students without access to large libraries? I had long been using the Middle English Texts Series produced by the Teaching Association for Medieval Studies (TEAMS METS) as one part of the teaching toolbox; these editions don't aim for the last word in textual criticism, but they have student-friendly glossing, more affordable prices, and a consistent pairing of physical volumes with free online publication. I realised that a teaching book would make itself accessible if it drew often, though by no means only, on TEAMS METS editions, and I set out to do this. Many of the works discussed at length in *How to Read* can be found online for free through TEAMS if physical copies are unavailable. The finished book therefore serves students without access to large libraries or book-buying budgets, and for that matter general readers with no university library to hand.

Using TEAMS editions brought two additional benefits. First, the series helped with breadth of coverage, because its editions have often printed works beyond the centre of the pedagogical Middle English canon. Second, the series helped me draw on potentially-free texts without spooking my publisher. Academic publishers feel understandably queasy about books that draw primarily on electronic texts. Every TEAMS edition has a print analogue, and this fact was helpful: it was comforting to my publisher that my use of Middle English texts available online still pointed to traceable print editions, rather than resting trust in web-only material. Hybrid print-and-digital publishing helped me thread that needle, and *How to Read* would have a much narrower range of coverage without the achievements of the TEAMS series.

The choice of a referencing system involved trade-offs between information and accessibility. I feel most at home with on-page footnotes, providing all the evidence at once, but these might create a page-image unfriendly to new student readers. Some older books for undergraduates (e.g. Lewis 1964) use highly abbreviated footnotes keyed to a bibliography, but such notes ask two movements from the reader: from main text to base of page, then from base of page to the bibliography. Endnotes have their uses in writing for a truly general audience, when few might chase the sources, but some student readers might care to follow the references in a student-focused book. Therefore, somewhat to my own surprise, I found myself reaching for parenthetical author-date references. Parenthetical references wouldn't suit even every teaching book: in a codicological book for students, for instance, or a Companion volume on a more specific topic, footnotes would have a stronger case. Parenthetical references still send readers elsewhere. At least, though, they send readers to one consistent place, in a single movement. Moreover, parenthetical author-date references serve better in a book that tends to focus on primary works, as *How to Read* does, than in a book picking its way through lots of past published scholarship, as technical monographs often do.

I considered my prose too. Swallowing my pride, I returned to handbooks of style, among which Joe Moran's *First You Write a Sentence* stood out to me as unusually clear, direct and humane, despite a subtitle that smacks of self-help (2019; I have since started suggesting it to students). When redrafting, I racked my brains for pithier, more meaningful verbs with which to replace the copula. I also swapped as many *-ation* nouns and *-ise* verbs as I could for simpler choices. I strove for sentences with short subject phrases. I also tried to clarify basic cultural context where I could. *How to Read* might or might not achieve any beauty, but I hope it will make itself understood.

Several judgments about the book's coverage and disciplinary drive pressed themselves upon me. I wondered about the possible unintended methodological force of a book about close reading now. Linguistic turn notwithstanding, detailed work with text remains something that literary critics do better than historians, not because of greater virtue, but because critics take this work as more of an end than a means. Teaching about reading poetry probably needs guardrails against a New Critical heritage—perceived heritage, at least—of context-free aestheticism. Fortunately, most Middle English poetry has characteristics that dissuade audiences from approaching it as some kind of well-wrought urn. Perhaps most critics would agree with the longstanding idea that many Middle English poets wrote for the ear, and worked at the level of the passage, not the lone well-wrought line (Spearing 1964, 18). In the book, I suggest that the problems presented by manuscripts and editing, addressed in a dedicated chapter, also shield thought from atomizing aestheticism—indeed, learning about these topics in relation to Middle English examples can train students to look out for the same issues in other periods. Close attention to Middle English poetry in fact seems a good antidote to thinking of literature as a self-contained art object that somehow escapes history, politics, and ethics.

Speaking of politics, I wondered whether or not to include Scots poetry. The Scots language and Scottishness itself echo differently and call on different sensitivities in different teaching contexts. Perhaps some North American standpoints can speak of Scots within a discursive category of 'British' literature in ways that would seem thornier in the UK (Klein 2017, 21). The placement of early Scots writings is a present-day political question for people in Scotland. Unfortunately, saying this doesn't let a book dodge choosing. My decision drew on the book's formal concerns and on a practical view of the future. Despite the somewhat different communities and transnational links of England and

Scotland in these centuries, Scots and English verse worked within the same formal ambit, observably much closer to each other than to other verse traditions. Moreover—and although on this point I would love to find myself proven wrong—the odds of a similarly extensive book dedicated to older Scots poetry emerging soon seemed slim. Scots poetry stayed in.

I found myself making coverage choices of a different sort about Chaucer, a poet famous enough to draw forth single-author teaching books (e.g. Scala 2020). While Chaucer's work appears often, *How to Read* makes a sustained effort to point to and discuss poets beyond Chaucer. Both readers for the press understood this approach, and one reader felt enthusiastic about the pedagogical pay-off, but the other reader helpfully cautioned that in a few places my explicit discussion of this avoidance of Chaucer grew too strident. Undergraduates feeling their way into early literature via Chaucer are not ideologues spoiling for a contest; they are sincerely and bravely exploring an area that clings on within the humanities at the falling number of institutions where it is taught at all. (Dwindlings in early English studies formed one bleaker strain in the background as I worked; see Jagot 2021.) Thanks to my readers' advice, the book retains its position on Chaucer, but has more tempered rhetoric, gently stating the reasons underpinning its choices but avoiding the risk of scolding student readers. Pedagogical writing can and probably should engage with issues in the field, but that engagement must balance with clarity and restraint.

I also faced a terminological question involving *medieval*, a word my recent scholarly writing has eschewed. I don't think using it is somehow wrong, but I find it counterproductive when writing about my usual topics, poetry and manuscripts. The term has far more chronological breadth than *late antique* or *early modern*, and its use—even qualified with *early*, *late*, or *high*—risks giving the impression of one jellied, uniform cultural mass across roughly a millennium and many different places. I chose not to deploy *medieval* in *How to Read*, therefore, though I continue to use the word in some contexts, and happily reach for it when I have to make a quick case to a general audience. Again, on this point one of the readers helpfully guided me toward toning down explicit discussion of the problem: the finished typescript quietly notes that I don't find the word *medieval* necessary in talking about poetry but doesn't labour the point.

I noticed one other disciplinary concern developing in me as I wrote: justifying the field itself. The normal boundaries of scholarly books rarely offer chances to make the case baldly, openly, and loudly for Middle English studies. We argue our worth daily, but tacitly, in and through our teaching. Though some of us also publish in public-facing venues, research monographs remain the coin of the realm for employment, and these address an audience who already know and care for the stakes. A teaching book therefore offered an unusual chance, and I felt it would be a shame to pass that chance up. Since the book will have student readers, it includes a first chapter laying out, briefly, some reasons why I think early poetry deserves our time. Middle English poetry has its own beauties and yields new discoveries. As poetry from centuries in which English had little prestige and displayed great synchronic variation, it offers a unique standpoint from which to look at more recent histories of English and its literature, a standpoint outside dominance and default status. Plus, Middle English poetry has influenced, and continues to influence, modern and contemporary poets. Some of this influence runs through inheritance: the paths of Middle English verse explain why so many poets have written with or against a five-beat line, for instance, and, as Eric Weiskott has observed (2021), such metrical lineages trample across periodisation. Modern poets show another kind of influence in their

knowing borrowings. I chose to weave references to modern poets into the rest of the book. Some poets appear as analogues: writers who do in modern English things also done before. Others appear because they draw on Middle English or Older Scots poetry as a well of inspiration and formal models. The book's notes on inheritances tacitly claim that poetry is all one thing; if poetry is worthwhile, then Middle English poetry is worthwhile, as modern and contemporary poets themselves have seen.

I talked to potential editors relatively early in the writing process. These conversations helped me keep certain things in mind, such as the worries that presses might have about using purely electronic texts. For administrative reasons, it made sense to use a UK publisher. Several factors made me pitch the project to Oxford University Press. I felt confident that the relevant editors would find good peer reviewers, who would see the project's value but also improve it. I also knew that OUP had previously published works in a similar vein for other tongues, and for English verse of other times, making the institution more likely to find the book's concept legible; when pitching a book, one can—up to a point—use the past sales of similar works as a proxy for coming sales of one's own work.

How should a teaching book proposal make its case? In my experience, and understandably given some of the pressures they face, scholarly presses of all kinds, university-based and freestanding, must make fairly hard-nosed choices. My view, therefore, and that is all it is, is that a proposal must take what the author sees as a pedagogical need, and frame that as potential sales, in identifiable readerships. The proposal for *How to Read* laid out different segments by career-age: a small group of ambitious pre-university students exploring the discipline while in secondary education; a larger group of undergraduates grappling for the first time with Middle English; and a smaller group of new graduate students consolidating their knowledge. The sum total of people in the world concerned with Middle English at any one time has its limits, but these three groups refresh every year. The proposal also surveyed analogous books to show the lack of equivalent works. The pitch framed the book's methodological thrust in terms of other books that take on similar tasks for other periods. Pitching books is a topic unto itself, and I have only limited experience—perhaps someone else should write about this for *New Chaucer Studies: Pedagogy and Profession*—but it seems to me that much of the trick lies in finding ways to make the case readable in the publisher's own terms.

Where else might our teaching benefit from single-author teaching books? Here I speculate rather than prescribe; if readers take issue with my ideas, even that might still be fruitful. Perhaps Middle English studies could do with an up-to-date handbook for students approaching the period's prose. Anyone attempting such a guide would confront the mass of under-studied material, and prose's much looser tradition: one sometimes senses that writers in this period were inventing English prose from near-zero again and again. Slim, up-to-date introductions to authors other than Chaucer seem to me highly desirable, and perhaps books of a similar sort might usher students into corpora defined by mode or genre rather than author, too: some enjoyable Middle English writing goes with its virtues unsung, failed by our authorial and thematic paradigms. Of course, when given a teaching anthology organized around a theme, students will sometimes treat that theme as a concrete, determining historical reality. I think, though, that such thematic reification is sometimes the price of growing knowledge—we need stepping-stone concepts that we can complicate later—and, besides, Middle English studies treats several author-functions as concrete historical realities despite small bases of real evidence.

Thinking of that somewhat chimerical broader thing, 'medieval studies', some other needs appear. I sometimes wonder whether a short, quasi-anthropological guide to religion in Latin Europe c. 1215–1530 might not help students taking courses on a wide variety of topics touching on these centuries. Different countries have different undergraduate bases, of course, and that thought springs from teaching in the UK's predominantly secular society; the hazy grasp of pre-modern (or any) Christianity among many of my students presents a teaching challenge, but also a chance to get out from under confessional assumptions that would have held the field a few decades ago. That topic stays in Europe, indeed within just one part of Europe, of course, and we could think more broadly. Perhaps, as several disciplines strive to adopt transnational and/or global viewpoints, a book that walked students through this emerging area of study would find appreciative readers—if it could safely navigate ongoing boundary debates. Such a book might model responsible comparative work, and explain what research can and cannot do when working in translation. Finally, I should note that all teaching makes its stand on another kind of book, one that career structures could value more highly: the edition.

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Writing *How to Read* was sometimes frustrating, and perhaps professionally unwise: I was living from fixed-term contract to fixed-term contract at the time, and I still am. It was also hard. Like syllabus design, a teaching book involves painful zero-sum choices about what will fit, and what will not. No doubt it contains errors for reviews to find. But I finished writing it having newly convinced myself of the significance of Middle English. Writing the book meant grappling with areas of form and language that had previously intimidated me. The work also granted a bird's-eye-view of a swathe of literary history, a perspective only available from book-length efforts. The process forced a new appreciation for generalism and generalists, and for the remarkable qualities of so much poetry from these centuries. I'm now writing a research book for a narrower audience, following up the implications of things learned while writing *How to Read*. Research drives teaching, but teaching also takes us back to research.

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