“Parzival’s Fear and Werther’s Loathing” – Teaching Emotions in Medieval and Modern Literature to High School Students in Germany: An Experiment

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The Issue

“No, I'm not very interested in the Middle Ages,” I was told by an eighth-grader, aged 14, whose class I had just guest-taught for an extracurricular lesson on German Minnesang of the twelfth century. She quickly clarified, however, that her disinterest for the medieval period had nothing to do with a general dislike of history: “in Antiquity at least, people did some thinking, but in the Middle Ages they just suffered.” During the first years of German high school, the Middle Ages are frequently and sometimes extensively taught in history class, where discussions about the ideal of knighthood and the intricacies of the Crusades lend the period a certain fairy-tale charm or at least show its relevance in the light of today’s religious conflicts. German, English or French literature classes, in contrast, rarely, if ever, focus on medieval texts. If indeed students never get to read any original vernacular text from before Martin Luther or Shakespeare, it is understandable that an eighth-grader would not know of any revolutionary thinkers between Plato and the onset of modernity.

The reason there is very little medieval literature in high school classes in Germany is at least threefold. First, the teaching of texts from, say, 750 to 1550 rarely forms an explicit part of the official subject guidelines prepared by the ministries of education. It is simply not obligatory and can be easily minimized. The recently revised curriculum for eleventh-grade
German in the state of Baden-Württemberg, for example, does not explicitly encourage the use of medieval literature, although it does vaguely suggest “diachronic text comparisons across periods.” Which texts to work with in class is up to the decision of the individual teacher.¹

Second, although prospective teachers of German in Baden-Württemberg at least are required to attend courses on medieval language and literature in the course of pursuing their university degrees (the number of courses depends on their university), their practical teacher training, which takes place in schools and pedagogical institutes, usually focuses exclusively on preparing lessons using modern literature alone. Even if beginning teachers have encountered medieval texts at university, their absence from practical teacher training suggests that they are not suitable material for the high school class, which is then confirmed by their marginal place in the official curricula.

Third, even if teachers wanted to look for lesson plans and tested ideas on teaching medieval literature, there are as yet very few prepared materials to be inspired by – although this is getting better, at least on the German book market. In conclusion, it is not current curricular requirements or inspiration from their peers, but the individual university experiences that aspiring teachers have with the literature of the Middle Ages that determines whether texts like Parzival and the Nibelungenlied will later feature in their high school classrooms.² And this is where medievalists working at university can get involved.

The Idea

In order to inspire students, teachers should encourage discussions and analyses of medieval texts that bring out their challenging ambiguities, their alterities and their subversive potential for our understandings of our own past. As medievalists, we need to be ready to come to the aid of current teachers who would like to teach medieval literature, but
do not know where to start. We need to have a number of teaching ideas and materials at hand to share. And we need to go beyond merely preaching relevance and actually demonstrate that medieval texts and the classrooms of today are a perfect fit.

It was while thinking aloud about how to start doing all this that four medievalists at the University of Heidelberg – Corinna Fette, Ludger Lieb, Laura Velte and myself – initiated a project that brought together the Medieval German Department at Heidelberg, juniors aged 16 to 18 from two local high schools and their German teachers in an experiment running for the entire schoolyear of 2013-14. Our goals for this project were many:

• to bring together high school students, teachers, university students and lecturers in the same spaces to enable personal contacts as well as mutual learning and teaching;
• to try out our ideas on using medieval literature in the high school classroom, and to evaluate these attempts in order to encourage current and future teachers to do the same;
• to use a compare-and-contrast approach with modern literature in order to show that medieval texts are contemporary, eloquent and not all about suffering and the godly, but often celebrate and always negotiate life and its complexities.

to offer high school students an insight into what medieval studies in particular and the humanities in general are about when one pursues them at university (most of the students, we presumed, would know what a biologist does, but what about a medievalist?). In Germany, not going to college but choosing a practical career instead is an attractive option for many students, and even those who do enroll in university are required to select their major upon matriculation and might never get to attend any course in the humanities; our project aimed at getting students interested in the workings of the humanities even before they make their choice to attend university. Once we were clear on these goals, we needed to look for an adequate format for our experiment, which we found in the so-called “seminar
course,” a special type of class that some German high schools offer to juniors. These seminar courses are electives, but students can earn credit towards their diplomas if they enroll. The seminar courses are usually associated with one school subject, but are tailored to a particular thematic focus (“The Ethics of the Internet,” for example) and require students to write a short research paper at the end of the year. Since the entire syllabus can and must be hand-designed by the teachers themselves, the seminar course offered an ideal format in which to introduce medieval literature. However, we did not want to draw up a seminar course that simply proceeded chronologically from the medieval beginnings of German literature to the present. Such a syllabus would not really allow for any side-by-side reading to defamiliarize the modern literature the students already knew well by juxtaposing it with earlier texts whose language and horizons of meaning are different. We needed a concrete topic that allowed us to bring together medieval and modern texts and focus on one particular connective issue: emotions.

This, we thought, would make an interesting topic for our experiment because it would invite students to relate their own experiences to the issues debated by and in the texts and thus gain an easier entry into the unfamiliar medieval territory. As a currently much-debated topic in medieval studies, “emotions” would also allow us to introduce the students to some of the academic discourses that try to abstract and theorize these everyday experiences. By writing their research paper on a question related to the course, the students would then be able to participate in these discourses themselves.

Over the course of the schoolyear, we wanted the seminar to address the following questions:

- What is an emotion?
- Which different theories of emotions have the sciences and the humanities put forward?
• How are emotions historically conditioned?
• Is the medieval German word and concept of “hate”, for example, the same as the modern one?
• Which roles do emotions play in literary texts?
• How are emotions coded in -- and with -- literary language? Which metaphors of love, for instance, feature in medieval texts, which in contemporary literature?
• Which ”frames of feeling” do literary texts provide? Are these dependent on the genre of the texts?
• What do emotions have to do with gender conceptions?
• What happens to emotions on stage?
• Are the Middle Ages and the present day entirely different “communities of feeling”?

The Preparations

With these ideas in mind, we then contacted two teachers of German at two high schools in the Heidelberg area to team up with. During a weekend workshop, the four medievalists and two teachers pooled ideas on which medieval and modern texts to teach, which methods and classroom set-ups to use, and which events we wanted to accompany our course. The resulting syllabus for our project can be consulted in the appendix. 24 students eventually signed up for the seminar course offered at both schools. We also engaged four university colleagues to give special lectures to supplement the course and invited 12 university students to participate as mentors to the high school students, especially to assist them in writing their research papers. Since the high school libraries were not equipped to cater to the needs and curiosity of the participants in our partly research-based course, the teachers bought textbooks and introductory scholarly works on the subject of emotions as well as primary text editions. All of these were shelved permanently in the two high school classrooms. In order to cover the costs for materials, the guest lectures and the transportation
for the students to and from university, we applied for and were granted generous funding by the Robert Bosch Stiftung and their “Denkwerk” initiative that supported projects aimed at introducing school students to the subject matters and methods of the humanities.\(^3\)

**The School Year**

We agreed that our project needed a special kick-off event that would bring everyone together, so we opened a large university classroom for a collective brainstorming on “emotions.” Thus we were able present ourselves and the university setting that would form part of the project as well as pick up on the students' expectations of the year ahead. The following four weeks of the schoolyear were reserved for a very general introduction to key concepts in medieval studies in order to enable the students to approach medieval texts with a bit of confidence. This introduction, for which the medievalists joined the school classrooms as guest lecturers, mainly focused on Middle High German (1050–1350). One of our goals was to teach students the basics of how to arrive at the modern equivalent of a Middle High German word with the help of regular sound changes so that the students might, over the course of the entire year, read the medieval texts more and more fluently. While we were slightly worried they might be bored by this linguistic side of medieval studies, our concerns were unfounded; the students quickly took to the exoticism of a language that resembled modern German but was yet intriguingly different. Exercises in the form of puzzles were particularly well received. We also covered diachronic semantics with the help of dictionaries, and again, historical depth did not deter, but fascinated the students and provoked them to ask questions and be sensitive to single words in the texts. In addition to this introduction to the language, we also offered a first glimpse into the literary landscape of the German Middle Ages (text genres, major authors as well as the genesis and transmission
of “books”), into the sociocultural structure of medieval communities and into medieval concepts of the body relevant to our topic of emotions.

The next five months of the schoolyear were divided into roughly one emotion per month, for which we picked fear, wrath, love, melancholy and felicity. For each of these emotions, we selected both medieval and modern texts suitable for a side-by-side discussion:

- for the month on fear: Heinrich von Veldeke’s *Eneasroman*, Wolfram von Eschenbach’s *Parzival*, Annette Pehnt’s *Lexikon der Angst*, Arthur Schnitzler’s *Leutnant Gustl*, Daniel Kehlmann’s *Rosalie geht sterben*, several short stories by Franz Kafka and Stefan Zweig’s *Fear;* we selected these texts in particular because they allowed us to construct a preliminary ‘typology of fear’ which illustrated just how many affective states and situations can be subsumed under the common label of one emotion.

- for the month on wrath: *Nibelungenlied* (the fight of the two queens), Hartmann von Aue’s *Erec* (the raging dwarf), Gottfried von Straßburg’s *Tristan* (King Marke’s anger at being betrayed), Heinrich von Kleist’s *Michael Kohlhaas*, Janne Teller’s *Nichts* and several contemporary German rap songs; our goal for this month was to introduce the students to the public dimension of emotions in the Middle Ages. The selected texts also helped us to explore the historical difference between our modern notion of wrath (which the students identified as a ‘negative’ emotions) and medieval wrath (as both a vice to be avoided and a necessary part of any impressive performance of authority).

- for the month on love: Goethe’s *Sorrows of Young Werther*, Gottfried von Straßburg’s *Tristan* and Peter Stamm’s *Agnes;* these three texts offered interesting scenes with regard to affective gestures and the communication of
emotions. *Tristan* and *Agnes* in particular invited critical discussions on how the narrator brings the lovers together via a staging of ‘gazes.’

- for the month on melancholy: Goethe’s *Sorrows of Young Werther* continued, Georg Büchner’s *Dantons Death* and several poems by Walther von der Vogelweide. This month’s text selections and discussions were focused on how we assess and evaluate emotions as ”normal,” ”pathological,” “appropriate,” “productive,” or ”destructive.” The topic of melancholy also allowed us to contrast emotions in texts with emotions in visual art.

- for the month on felicity: Wolfgang Herrndorf’s *Tschick*, Peter Stamm’s *Agnes* and a selection of medieval love lyrics; our aim for this month was to introduce the idea of felicity as both a fortunate turn of fate and as the emotional reaction to such an event. The students were particularly intrigued by the medieval allegory of Fortuna and her wheel on which some of the love lyrics drew.

Throughout the year, teaching took place either in the school classrooms (with medievalists as occasional guest teachers) or at university, where we welcomed the students and teachers for library sessions, a writing workshop and a lecture series with four guest speakers from different universities and disciplines who tailored their talks specifically to the students and held discussions with them afterwards. These lectures (on the topics of “Fear in Medieval German Literature,” “The Performance of Wrath in Medieval Politics,” “The Rose and the Nightingale in Medieval and Modern Love Poetry,” and “Melancholy in Romantic and Modern Art”) proved challenging to the students, who were not used to listening to an argument being played out for an uninterrupted hour. However, we found that careful preparation and a thorough follow-up in class helped them enjoy this new form of engagement with texts, and discussions got livelier and livelier with each lecture.
In order not to limit the learning process to school and university classroom discussions, we branched out further: The students met with a local stage director and several actors to discuss emotions in the theatre, for example. They then put their ideas on the performativity of emotions into practice at a special evening event which featured a reading by one of the contemporary authors whose latest collection of short stories on “fear” was read in class, followed by the students' musical and theatrical responses to the author's texts, and a subsequent discussion with the parents and general public in the audience. Some students performed their own instrumental and vocal compositions on “fear,” while others got together in groups to offer staged readings of their own writings. During this evening in particular, set in the most festive hall at the University of Heidelberg, we were impressed how quickly and creatively the students had responded to the texts, ideas and concepts and turned them into something of their own.

The final three months of the schoolyear were reserved for the writing of the research papers. The topics and questions for the papers, about 15 pages in length, were chosen by the students themselves, although it proved helpful to have some exemplary topics at hand by which they might be inspired and encouraged. In order to assist the students with the process of researching and writing, we paired each of them with a university student who, assisted by the teachers, introduced them to research methodology, library and online resources and gave individual feedback on the students' drafts. Of the medieval texts analyzed in the research papers, love lyrics proved to be the most popular, a number of them paired ingeniously with contemporary rap or pop lyrics. After submitting their papers, the students then presented and discussed their arguments and findings with the examiners' committee at their schools, which gave them the opportunity to function as experts for their texts and topics in front of a critical yet curious audience. These colloquia, which counted as part of the students' final grade for the seminar course, also allowed them to reflect on and articulate what they had learned over
the course of the entire schoolyear. Here are a number of examples of topics which the students focused on for their final assessment:

- “Wrath and Revenge – Emotional Women in *Kill Bill* and the *Nibelungenlied*”
- “A Love that Dares Not Speak its Name – Walther von der Vogelweide’s *Lindenlied*”
- “The Fear of Death in Hartmann von Aue’s *Der arme Heinrich* and Annette Pehnt’s *Kooperation*”
- “‘Having the Blues’ – Images of Melancholy in Medieval Lyrics and Modern Pop Songs”
- “Screening Fear – Orson Welles’s Film *The Trial* and Franz Kafka’s Novel”
- “Loving and dreading in Gottfried von Straßburg’s *Tristan* and Peter Stamm’s *Agnes*”

**Results and Evaluation**

Most of the results we took from our experiment at the end of the schoolyear were very encouraging. First of all, the students claimed that the insights from reading medieval literature and discussing it in depth took them completely by surprise. “I have gotten to know an entirely different form of storytelling and text making,” one student concluded. Another added: “I had no idea you could theorize so much about crying or loving. I particularly enjoyed the *Nibelungenlied*, because we don’t have heroic epics in modern literature anymore. It also made me think more about how one specific emotion might be central to an entire genre of texts (like wrath for heroic epics, indignation for tragedies, etc.).” The students also reported that they very much appreciated being welcomed at university, not least in the physical sense of being the guests of honor at specially organized talks at which senior professors lectured to them in particular, of having lecture halls prepared and doors
opened for them, of being allowed into the library to make use of its treasures and see manuscript collections normally kept under lock and key, but now brought out especially for them to study. A number of students claimed that they had never previously considered going to university, much less take up a degree in the humanities, which they had regarded as remote. This fear of contact was then eliminated by their meetings and joint discussions with the medievalists and, particularly, with their student mentors with whom they developed a personal relationship over the course of the last months of the project that helped to demystify the humanities and literary studies at university.

The teachers, too, asserted that seeing medieval literature taught was a very welcome new experience for them. The alterity Arthurian romances and Minnesang had brought into their classrooms helped to unlock new intellectual energies. One of the teachers commented: “Reading medieval literature as a counterpoint to the modern authors whom the students already knew was revealing particularly because the students thought they knew the Middle Ages, too, at least in the guise of contemporary historical fiction and screen productions. Comparative sessions in which we paired an ‘original’ medieval text with a modern one kindled the interest especially of students who thought that as far as literature goes, they had seen it all. Surprisingly, our classroom discussions were fueled by both students with an already extensive background in literature and those who had not yet encountered any texts exciting and ‘different’ enough to get them interested in the written word.”

While we were delighted with the course and outcomes of our experiment, there were some things that could be improved upon: We found it was a bit confusing and unsatisfactory for the students to read and discuss excerpts from a great many completely unfamiliar medieval texts of different genres. Instead of offering snippets from Parzival one week, from Tristan the next, and a number of Minnesang lyrics after that, we would rather recommend to concentrate on two or three major texts to be studied in more detail. We also underestimated
the difficulties the students faced when writing their first major research papers on topics entirely of their own choosing. A more extensive introduction to academic writing would have been helpful. In addition, the high school students should have met the university students earlier in the school year to start the mentorships even before the high school students had decided on their individual topics.

In conclusion, our experimental project was one of beneficial challenges. For us medievalists, it was a demanding venture and a joy to teach an age group with different reading expectations and experiences than the university students we usually discuss with. The teachers, too, enjoyed working slightly out of their comfort zone around the modern texts which they usually teach, but not too far out so that preparation time for the individual lessons was still manageable. In the hope of inspiring other high school teachers with the ideas we tried out in our seminar course, our project team wrote up several individual lesson plans which can work even without the yearlong framework our project provided.\(^4\) If medieval literature exists only at the margin of the school curriculum, then this alone is an excellent reason to persistently include it in course syllabi. The periphery, after all, is where revolutions are born. Projects like ours that allow high school access to university and direct engagement with medieval studies will also contribute to making the discipline a more open and diverse field that attracts students not just in graduate school, but way before then. Our project on emotions in medieval and modern literature invited high school juniors to discover a textual culture whose complexities they were completely unaware of, and challenged all of us to build a critical and historically sensitive vocabulary to analyze the anthropological phenomenon of emotions. Not only, we concluded in our many experimental classroom discussions, did people in the Middle Ages do some thinking. They did some feeling, too.

\(^1\)The curriculum asks students to be able to compare themes and motifs between texts from antiquity to the present day, particularly with regard to topics of anthropological relevance. However, the Middle Ages does not appear among those periods the students are required to
know in contextual detail. This list starts with Baroque literature and includes every period after that; cf. http://www.bildungsplaene-bw.de/Lde/Startseite/de_a/a_gym_D_ik_11-12_01_01 [in German]. With the curriculum comes a chronological list of reading suggestions which offers three entries for medieval literature (a selection of Walther von der Vogelweide’s works, the Nibelungenlied, and Parzival) and over 130 for twentieth-century literature; cf. http://www.bildung-staerkt-menschen.de/unterstuetzung/schularten/Gym/umsetzungsbeispiele/D/@@example.2005-09-07.0019218216 [in German].

2Cf. the interesting study recently published by Ylva Schwinghammer (Das Mittelalter als Faszinosum oder Marginalie? Peter Lang, 2013), who interviewed 250 German teachers in Germany, Switzerland and Austria and concluded that while the overwhelming majority of them were reluctant to work with medieval literature in their classrooms, the few who were not state that it was their university encounters with texts from the Middle Ages that later made them revisit Parzival or the Nibelungenlied for teaching.

3http://www.bosch-stiftung.de/content/language/html/index.asp [in English]. The Robert Bosch Stiftung is one of the largest entrepreneurial foundations in Germany and offers financial assistance especially to projects in the arts, science and educational sector. Unfortunately, their “Denkwerk” initiative (http://www.bosch-stiftung.de/content/language2/html/1500.asp [in English]) has now been discontinued.

4I would be happy to share these lesson plans via email (ricarda.wagner@g.uni-heidelberg.de). A more comprehensive report on the entire project is available at http://www.gs.uni-heidelberg.de/md/neuphil/gs/abteilungen/mediaevistik/lieb/denkwerk_bericht_hd.pdf [in German].