

### **Editor's Introduction (Spring 2018)**

In our effort at *The Once and Future Classroom* to introduce new pedagogical ideas and innovations for the high school and college classroom, this issue presents eight essays, four for the high school classroom and four for the college classroom. Among the eight, four arose out of one sessions at the 2018 International Congress of Medieval Studies conference of May 2018. The three-essay set are the result of a collaborative discussion among scholars who teach the N-Town plays as investigations into “modes of cultural performance.”

The first essay, Jamie Fumo's “Exchange of Winnings or Mutual Beheading?: The Place of the Modern in Teaching the Medieval,” is an engaging and shrewd foray into “the deals we strike, the exchange-games we play—for better or worse—with today's undergraduates as we ask them to engage a historically distant culture.” She explores the idea of adaptation and asks whether professors should encourage discussion of modern works that resonate with medieval and pseudo-medieval motifs, such as the Harry Potter series, *Star Wars*, or the *Merlin* TV show. Asking how, as a class, students should assess such works against the serious demands of reading medieval texts, Fumo offers a collaborative class project that encourages students to juxtapose today's creative adaptation of medieval concepts to primary medieval texts. Setting her students to consider what a cultural artifact actually is, she guides them toward achieving a critical distance from what they assumed were “givens.” Fumo notes the distorting potential of the modern adaptation, but acknowledges that medieval texts themselves “are virtually always adaptations in their own right from prior texts and traditions.” Her assignments lead her class to an awareness of “the potential of modern appropriations to expose interpretive areas in the earlier text that reward deep scrutiny, demand remediation.”

The seven other essays in this issue are collected into two sets, each one demonstrating ways that a specific METS edition can be taught in the classroom. The first four essays, organized by Susanna Fein under the rubric, "Teaching MS Harley 2253 in the High School Classroom: Four Lesson Plans," were presented at the 2018 International Congress on Medieval Studies. Susanna Fein, editor with David Raybin and Jan Ziolkowski, of the METS edition of *The Harley Lyrics* submitted these four essays with her Introduction as a set. As a group, these fine essays provide thoughtful and carefully detailed plans for how a high school teacher might introduce and make accessible a number of wonderful but challenging Harley lyrics. Although written with the high school teacher in mind, college teachers will also benefit from the detailed goals and variety of engaging lessons these teachers have designed.

In "What do YOU Stand For? Elements of Protest in MS Harley 2253 and in Modern Culture," Heather Matoszka presents a series of activities in which students are asked to compare "causes and common elements of protest" from the past with today. Her aim is to introduce students "to the struggle others have experienced throughout history and to understand the potential power of thoughtful protest, while also providing rigorous instruction that culminates with meaningful student work." Reading each of the assigned Harley lyrics along with a variety of specific supplementary materials of recent protests, students are exposed to modes of protest that reach back to the Middle Ages. Matoszka has developed a concrete, coherent series of steps that lead students from basic to more complex tasks, drawing on four protest lyrics from Harley 2253 and culminating in a final multi-genre research paper.

Charmae Cottom's contribution comes in two parts, an essay, "Teaching the Harley 2253 *King Horn* with a Reader's-Theatre Script," and the "Reader's Theatre Script" itself that she adapted from the translation by Susanna Fein. Cottom describes the process of introducing the

work to her class and then guiding students into a dramatic performance. She uses this performance method as a means of making the Middle English romance and some of its major themes accessible to high school students. Cottom connects *King Horn* to “today’s growing orphan mentality,” a mentality, she explains, resulting from a “staggering epidemic of orphans in our schools, a situation fostered, unfortunately, by the absence of parents through opiate abuse and drug-related imprisonments.” Cottom encourages her students to reflect and comment upon the relevance of the story of King Horn to today’s current events.

In "Using the Harley Lyrics in the Inner-City Classroom," Stephanie Andrews argues that certain lyrics in MS Harley 2253 can serve to broaden students’ understanding of medieval culture from the superficial and distorted view they may have derived from modern culture and from short excerpts in Malory and Chaucer. She leads her class to a more sophisticated understanding of medieval culture by focusing on three areas of medieval life: culture, politics, and gender. Andrews finds these focal points to be “a universal and timeless key to understanding one’s self.” For each of the selected lyrics, Andrews provides a list of various companion readings and opportunities for research. Her comprehensive and unified design allows students to tackle definitions of culture, politics, and gender in individualized and self-directed ways. Andrews’ essay outlines the steps necessary to prepare students for writing a culminating final essay that embraces the series of shorter essays and research topics that created during the course of the unit.

Annie Brust sees the Harley piece, “Gilote and Johane,” as a way to “Finding a Medieval Woman’s Voice and Teaching Women’s History.” Brust uses this “eye-opening text” to introduce students “to the literature, geography, and gender-bias of the Middle Ages.” Her students study this work as an “example of a real woman created through literary device.” The

work itself, a comic piece originally in Anglo-Norman, presents a lively debate between two women recorded by a male eavesdropping scribe. The women discuss the optimum ways to handle their private and public lives. Although some of their talk includes familiar medieval female stereotypes, Brust uses this debate as a way for students to interrogate and research medieval ideas about women. For Brust, the “intimate conversation (or debate) between Gilote and Johane, enlarges students’ understanding of women’s history, as well as the work itself.

The final set of three essays, "Teaching and Performing The N-Town Plays as Bricolage," by Douglas Sugano, Leah Haught, and Jamie Friedman, is directed toward college-level teaching of the METS edition of the *N-Town Plays*, edited by Douglas Sugano. In his Introduction and essay, Sugano answers the question, “Why should anyone read the N-Town Plays?” The resulting collaboration among these authors resulted from a series of thoughtful teaching discussions on “medieval and postmodern intertextuality, modes of cultural performance, and what happens when ... the “pre-modern meets postmodern.” The N-Town plays can teach students to consider aspects that reflect both medieval and modern times: “about performative authority, about gender construction, and about the power of truth telling in medieval times and now.” In Sugano’s view, the “irregular fissures” of the N-Town Plays’ “patchwork anthology” present an alien realm that through performance and analysis, also feels like our own world. The three essays here amply answer the question Sugano poses as to the value of reading and teaching the N-Town plays.

Sugano details how his advanced Chaucer/Middle English Literature class was guided to perform parts of three N-Town Plays. Sugano quotes his students’ comments about performing – and therefore “translating” -- the drama (and the Middle English) for a student audience and for the class. For Sugano, whose edition of the plays have made them available to medievalists, the

plays feel postmodern: they are “more self-conscious and varied than the other English plays.” The comments by his students that Sugano includes are most interesting, as they describe the experience of acting in this performance and in the process discovering the N-Town Plays in a dynamic and sophisticated way:

Instead of receiving scriptural interpretation from the male clergy within the space of the church, [the character of] Mary interacts and experiences the text firsthand, directly. This direct experience with scripture is then embodied when she carries the Word in her womb. She is able to have an unmediated experience with texts, ultimately positioning textual (and therefore scriptural) interpretation as domestic, personal, individualized, and vernacular. Given that Mary is the divine mediatrix, her individual interpretation is praised as miraculous, rather than subversive.

Sugano’s students, who are quoted throughout his essay, have developed remarkable analytical skills and an impressive ability to express erudite and insightful observations that are a pleasure to read.

In “Fragments, Framing Devices, and Female Literacy: Teaching the N-Town Marian Material,” Leah Haught focuses her teaching on the “models of female piety and literacy” that appear in the N-Town Marian plays and *The Canterbury Tales*. She demonstrates how “exposing students to a variety of Marian materials quickly challenges their ability to dismiss the Middle Ages as a ‘dark’ era in which people accepted a single, universally ‘endorsed’ church doctrine without question....” By studying the N-Town plays, which have more emphasis on Mary than other English mystery cycles, and Chaucerian characterizations of Mary (in the

“General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*” as well as in the Prioress and Second Nun’s tales), students can discuss the many possible responses to “complex theological topics like the interplay between divinity and humanity, but also the social construction of identities and institutions commonly promoted as inherently stable, such as gender roles and marriage.” Encouraging debates among her students, Haught demonstrates that juxtaposing a canonical work with a less well-known theatrical effort leads to an enriching and lively learning experience.

For Jamie Friedman, in “(Post)Modern N-Town and the Urgencies of the Now,” is interested in bringing postmodern ideas to bear on the N-Town Plays. She sees plays’ forms and competing ideologies as having resonance for today’s cultural and political moment:

The current crisis of the American political landscape around the proliferation of ‘alternative facts,’ ‘fake news,’ and the longstanding joke about ‘truthiness’ (where truth is removed from objective, verifiable fact and emanates instead from one’s *feeling* about what is true) has led many to call current moment ‘post-factual.’

In fact, she finds that her students often consider postmodernism as “post-truth” or no truth at all when postmodernism actually aims to “dismantle power.” She has her students consider moments in the N-Town plays that offer contradictory narratives about “what happened” or “what is true,” calling attention to the fact that, unlike a postmodernism text, the N-Town plays demonstrate “the plasticity of truth in the service of the powerful,” wherein “those espousing ‘alternative facts’ reinforce it,” instead of dismantling power.

Helping students explore such seemingly contemporary issues of authority, interpretation, and representations of truth in the medieval era, “N-Town provides prescient and relevant

permission, or caution, for students to remember that truth claims are always negotiated from within their own relation to power structures that readers, and citizens, have a hermeneutic – and potentially urgent – obligation to query.”

Taken as a group, the essays in this issue of *The Once and Future Classroom* provide a range of topics and variety of innovative tools and methods for guiding our students to recognize the relevance despite the alterity of medieval literature, as they become exposed to the “real thing” rather than the misconceptions that float through our culture.

-- Gale Sigal, Managing Editor

