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A Medieval Approach to *Romeo and Juliet* in the High School Classroom (Grades 9-12)

Introduction

Over the years, I have found a major gap in students' knowledge of the medieval period which puts them at a disadvantage when attempting to read Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. Most school districts have junior high school students learn about the bubonic plague and the basics of feudalism, all of which is helpful, but since students haven't studied anything about medieval literature, they have more difficulty understanding the characters' motivations and reasoning behind their actions. Many students also assume that *Romeo and Juliet* is a love story about teenage suicide which greatly diminishes their appreciation and understanding of the play.

Prior to the start of the unit, students take a pre-assessment (which is not for a grade) asking them very basic questions about chivalry, courtly love, knighthood, and the Middle Ages. This way, I can gauge how my PowerPoint will go at the start of the *Romeo and Juliet* unit the following class period. I usually have them answer the pre-assessment as an exit ticket (See Appendix A).

Day 1-2: Introduction and Reading

The first day of the new unit, I present a brief PowerPoint that fills in the knowledge gaps with information about the medieval period and what a medieval romance contains. I go over important aspects of chivalry and the difference between historical reality and the literary ideal. (See Appendix B for the Chivalry and Courtly Love handout.)

We then move on to talk about Andreas Capellanus' "De Amore,"[1] discussing the redeeming qualities of love conveyed in medieval romances that were used as a source of entertainment in the courts of Eleanor of Aquitaine and her daughter Marie, Countess of Champagne. I ask students questions as they read the rules of love aloud such as 1. Which rule do you like and why? 2. Which rule do you think is strange? Why? Students always have very passionate responses to these rules. This also makes it very easy for them when reading *Romeo and Juliet* to see that Romeo is not in fact "emo,"[2] but rather suffers from lovesickness and there can be only one cure!

I hand out a copy of *Cligès* that starts around Vv. 2361. We primarily focus on Cligès's story, not that of his parents. There are several free translations online;[3] however, if possible, I highly suggest a hard copy of William Kibler's translation.[4] What is wonderful about the story of Cligès is that this precursor of *Romeo and Juliet* (while proclaiming itself the anti-Tristan story) is in fact very similar to the *Romeo and Juliet* tale. Both take place in the Middle Ages, have two characters that fall in love at first sight but social circumstances keep them apart, and they have a nurse/friar who concocts a sleeping potion. One major difference that students notice is that *Romeo and Juliet* has such a compressed timeline that it emphasizes the fact it cannot be "true love" since their suffering from the excess of passion leads to their deaths. Meanwhile, Cligès and Fenice spend more time getting to know each other and Fenice has the forethought to make a plan with Cligès so that when she fakes her death, he is aware of it.

On the first read through of *Cligès*, I have students take on roles of the main characters as well as the narrator. We stop at different parts to discuss any points of confusion and to discuss how certain situations reflect the ideas of courtly love and chivalry. The first example of courtly love is when Cligès and Fenice are attracted to each other the very instant they see each other.

Fenice then suffers from lovesickness as she wishes to be with him even though she must marry his uncle. Cligès shows chivalric virtues by fighting bravely to prove his worthiness of Fenice's love. In his confrontation with the Duke of Saxony, he is nearly defeated, but hearing Fenice's voice gives him renewed strength, allowing him to defeat the duke. This makes for a great comparison later while reading *Romeo and Juliet*. Romeo claims that Juliet's "beauty hath made [him] effeminate" which is the exact opposite of what love does to Cligès and many other protagonists of chivalric literature (3.1.116). Rather than love weakening Cligès or causing him to be dishonest, Cligès shows his noble nature by following through with his promise to his dying father. Even though Cligès is torn between his duty to his father and his love for Fenice, as soon as he is made a knight, he goes to King Arthur's court to test his prowess. These are just a few instances of chivalry and courtly love in *Cligès* that prompt class discussions.

Once we finish reading, students get into small groups for a second read through of the text and annotate for literary devices (such as hyperbole, personification, alliteration, apostrophe, simile, metaphor, etc.) as well as elements of chivalry and courtly love. This is easy to modify to suit the needs of various levels of students.

Day 3: Assessment

The following class period, students respond to a short-answer writing prompt which I normally take as a quiz grade. To differentiate, I give them two prompts to choose from. They are allowed to use their copy of the text as well as the Chivalry and Courtly Love handout. (See Appendix C for a grading rubric.)

Cligès **Short Answer Response**

Directions: Choose one of the following prompts to answer in a one-page response.

1. Discuss how the importance of public duty vs. personal desire is displayed in the story. Be sure to include specific examples from the text to support your response. How does the motif enhance the theme?

2. Discuss how aspects of medieval romance (ex. idealized knights, exotic location, sorcery/enchantments, hidden identities) enhance the theme of the story. Pick one to discuss. Be sure to include specific examples from the text to support your response.

I normally allot at least 40 minutes to complete this writing response, but you can adjust the time to fit the needs of your students. Depending on what you would like to do with this writing piece, you can either have them turn it in as is and grade it, or you can have students peer edit a friend's paper then allow students to conference with you before re-writing. I usually grade it first, giving students a few comments on their paper before having them re-write if necessary. There is quite a bit of flexibility with this assignment.

Day 4: The Transformation of Language

The next class period is the introduction to *Romeo and Juliet*. To emphasize that Shakespeare did not in fact write in Old English, I show examples of Old English and Middle English on the overhead and read both of them aloud.[5]

Beowulf in **Old English** (450AD –1100AD)

þa gyt hie him asetton   segen geldenne
heah ofer heafod,   leton holm beran,
geafon on garsecg;   him wæs geomor sefa,
murnende mod.   Men ne cunnon

secgan to soðe,   selerædende,
hæleð under heofenum,   hwa þæm hlæste onfeng.[6]

Gawain and the Green Knight in **Middle English** (1100AD –1500AD)
        Siþen þe sege and þe assaut watz sesed at Troye
        þe bor3 brittened and brent to brondez and askez
        þe tulk þat þe trammes of tresoun þer wro3t
        watz tried for his tricherie þe trewest on erþe
        hit watz ennias þe athel and his highe kynde
        þat siþen depreced prouinces and patrounes bicome
        welne3e of al þe wele in þe west iles…[7]

Finally, I show them the prologue of *Romeo and Juliet* in Early Modern English. Most

students haven't seen anything like it before and they are shocked to see how the English

language has changed over time.

Romeo and Juliet in **Early-Modern English** (1500AD –1650AD)

        Two houſeholds both alike in dignitie,
        (In faire Verona where we lay our Scene)
        From auncient grudge, breake to new mutinie,
        Where ciuill bloud makes ciuill hands vncleane:
        From forth the fatall loynes of theſe two foes,
        A paire of ſtarre-croſt louers, take their life:[8]

They are then given a handout that presents the Early Modern prologue side-by-side with

contemporary spelling ("Two houſeholds both alike in dignitie" vs. "Two households, both alike

in dignity"). We do a choral reading together and afterwards, at the bottom of the sheet, there are

blank lines where students are asked to modernize the text even further, this time in their own

words. This activity can be done with table partners or small groups. I have the students use

classroom dictionaries to look up definitions of any unfamiliar words (such as "misadventure"

and "loins") to assist in the creation of their own translation. Afterwards, the students share their

translations with the class.

Romeo and Juliet: The Text

Early-Modern English (1500–1650)
Two houſeholds both alike in dignitie,
(In faire Verona where we lay our Scene)
From auncient grudge, breake to new mutinie,
Where ciuill bloud makes ciuill hands vncleane:
From forth the fatall loynes of theſe two foes,
A paire of ſtarre-croſt louers, take their life:
whoſe miſaduentur'd pittious ouerthrowes,
Doth with their death burie their Parents ſtrife.
The fearfull paſſage of their death-markt loue,
And the continuance of their Parents rage:
Which but their children end nought could remoue:
Is now the two houres trafficque of our Stage.
The which if you with patient eares attend,
What heare ſhall miſſe, our toyle ſhall ſtriue to mend.

Present Day English (1650-now)
Two households, both alike in dignity,
In fair Verona, where we lay our scene,
From ancient grudge break to new mutiny,
Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean.
From forth the fatal loins of these two foes
A pair of star-cross'd lovers take their life;
Whose misadventured piteous overthrows
Do with their death bury their parents' strife.
The fearful passage of their death-mark'd love,
And the continuance of their parents' rage,
Which, but their children's end, nought could remove,
Is now the two hours' traffic of our stage;
The which if you with patient ears attend,
What here shall miss, our toil shall strive to mend.

Directions: Below, make your own translation of the prologue.

Two households, both alike in dignity, _____
In fair Verona, where we lay our scene, _____
From ancient grudge break to new mutiny, _____
Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean. _____
From forth the fatal loins of these two foes _____   +

End of Unit: After Completion of *Romeo and Juliet*

Once we finishing reading and studying *Romeo and Juliet*, we revisit *Cligès*. The students' final assessment is to write a crossover comparative analysis of the two texts. They have four different prompts to choose from. This assignment can be either an essay or a short answer, depending on whether the instructor wants to take it for a quiz or a test grade and how much class time you have. I allow students to use their copies of *Romeo and Juliet* and *Cligès*. By this time, both texts are thoroughly annotated so students do not need to use the Chivalry and Courtly Love handout.

Romeo and Juliet **and** *Cligès* **Comparative Analysis**

Directions: Respond to <u>one</u> of the following prompts. Be sure to include embedded, cited textual evidence from both texts to back up your assertion.

1. Describe the difference in help that Fenice and Juliet receive from Thessala and Friar Laurence. Who is more helpful? Why? What do we learn from this?

2. Compare and contrast either Cligès and Romeo or Fenice and Juliet. Who shows more agency (i.e. who has more control of situations and actions)? Explain why. How does this impart the theme of the stories?

3. Who more closely adheres to the concepts of chivalry and courtly love, Cligès or Romeo? How? What does this inform us about medieval ideals?

4. In both stories, young lovers are constrained by society. Tell which pair handled the social constraints more effectively and explain why. How does this impart the theme of the stories?

Conclusion

This lesson is primarily aimed at Pre-AP ninth grade students, but can be shortened or modified for other levels. The suggested days are for 90 minute class periods, but can be spread across several days if you have shorter class periods. Depending on the size of your class, you can also modify the small group/partner activities.

Aside from the medieval approach, I have also tried focusing on the possible sources for Shakespeare's play, such as Ovid's "Pyramus and Thisbe" (which we do still read, but not as a focus for the unit). While this approach can lead to good conversations, it doesn't lend to

students' deeper understanding of *Romeo and Juliet*. Their writing responses also end up relying too heavily on plot summary rather than focusing on analysis which shows that this approach is less effective. Instead, I have found it more productive to have students situate themselves solely in the medieval period before reading the play, so that they are reading it from a medieval perspective. In this approach, when Romeo pines over Rosaline in Act 1, students identify that he is suffering from lovesickness. Later, following the Rules of Love, they recognize that "a new love expels an old one" when Romeo meets Juliet at the Capulet party (Capellanus). The sonnet shared by Romeo and Juliet when they first meet mimics Petrarchan love poetry and the exchange between Romeo and Juliet in the infamous balcony scene is filled with courtly dialogue in their protestations of love. Students are also able to understand Tybalt's motivation as he rightfully challenges Romeo to a duel with no intention of engaging with Mercutio. Students also sympathize more with Paris who exhibits qualities of a chivalric gentleman. Paris asks Juliet's father for permission to wed Juliet and the description of Paris provided by Lady Capulet to Juliet all reinforce his noble qualities. In Act 4, Scene 1 at Friar Laurence's cell, his conversation with Juliet is both caring and honest while she deceives him with a face which is "not [her] own" (4.1.36). The confrontation between Paris and Romeo outside of the Capulet monument also serves to enhance Paris's chivalric qualities, where he lawfully attempts to arrest Romeo and Romeo, in his desperation, murders Paris. Having students read a medieval romance prior to reading *Romeo and Juliet* allows student to see what makes this play a tragedy rather than a romance. When students approach the play with an understanding of the medieval world's cultural context, it enhances their comprehension of the play which is displayed in their depth of literary analysis. Beginning the *Romeo and Juliet* unit with *Cligès* by Chretien de Troyes allows for more vibrant parallel comparisons and richer classroom dialogues.

Appendix A

Unit Pre-Assessment

Directions: Match the terms with elements associated with them.

A. Romance   B. Chivalry   C. Quest   D. Hero   E. Courtly Love

1. ___code of behavior a medieval knight was supposed to follow

2. ___began as narratives about the adventures of knights and other heroes, written in Old French

3. ___comes into conflict with evil knights, monsters, and dragons that he must fight or outsmart

4. ___places noble women above men who swear eternal fealty to them

5. ___often has a mysterious connection to the world of nature and is sometimes aided by

animals

6. ___a long, perilous journey in search of something of value

7. ___when knights perform heroic deeds to earn honor for their lady love

8. ___fantasy stories with idealized knights, exotic locations, incredible beasts,

sorcery/enchantments

9. ___may be aided by a faithful companion or by a magic weapon

10. ___states a knight must be brave, honorable, loyal, help the weak and protect women

Appendix B

What Makes Someone a Knight?

Originally, Knights were professional fighters, like boxers in a ring. However, this soon transformed into a social status. A knight was basically anyone who had enough money to have a horse, a sword, and a suit of armor. They could do whatever they want and use violence and fear to get their way.[2]

Without a code of honor to abide by, knights would just be "…running about like a lot of nincompoops and smacking each other with swords."[3]

Chivalry binds knights to a code of honor that restricts the use of violence. Violating this code brings them dishonor.

Important Aspects of Chivalry

- Uphold the virtues of mercy, courage, bravery, fairness, honesty, courtesy

- Protect the weak (women, children, the elderly), the poor

- Remain loyal to the king, country, and God

- Perform great heroic deeds to win land/wealth, women, and honor

Medieval Romances

A **romance** is a story of the adventures of a heroic knight "often one designed principally for entertainment." The term romance is original from Old French *romanz* "verse narrative."[4]

- Fantasy stories with idealized knights (who are the heroes)

- Exotic locations, suspense, mystery

- Incredible beasts & monsters

- Forests operate outside of social norms (i.e. Sherwood Forest)

- Sorcery, enchantments, hidden identities

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[2] Richard W. Kaeuper, *Chivalry and Violence in Medieval Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).
[3] T. H. White. *The Once and Future King* (London: Collins Clear-Type Press, 1972).
[4] The term "romanz" first appeared in written form in 1300AD, http://etymonline.com/

The Art of Courtly Love
(excerpt from Andreas Cappellanus's *De Amore*, 1184AD)[1]

What is Love?

Love is an internal suffering proceeding from the sight and excessive thought upon the beauty of another person. Above all other things, the lover wishes to embrace and fulfill the commandments of love.

"Love (*amor*)" is derived from the word "hook (*amar*)", which signifies "capture" or "be captured." For he who loves is caught in the chains of desire and wishes to catch another with his hook. Love holds two hearts together in a spiritual chain forever.

The Rules of Love
(17 of the 31 rules)

- Every lover turns pale in the presence of his beloved.
- When a lover suddenly has sight of his beloved, his heart beats wildly.
- Girls must be at least 12, boys 14, though for true love men must be at least 18
- Those who are troubled by the thoughts of love eat little and seldom sleep.
- A new love expels an old one.
- No one can be bound by two loves.
- It is not proper to love one whom one would be ashamed to marry.
- The true lover never desires the embraces of any save their lover.
- A lover is always fearful.
- Marriage is no excuse for not loving.
- A lover can never have enough of the embraces of their beloved.
- Every action of a lover ends in the thought of their beloved.
- Those who suffer from an excess of passion are not suited to love.
- Moral integrity (honorable behavior, chivalry) alone makes one worthy of love.
- An easy attainment makes love contemptible; a difficult one makes it dearer.
- The true lover is continuously obsessed with the image of their beloved.
- Love can deny nothing (ever do enough) to love (for their beloved).

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[1] Andreas Capellanus. *De Amore (1184-86) -- A Treatise on Courtly Love (Excerpts)*, Harvard University, http://chaucer.fas.harvard.edu/pages/de-amore-1184-86-treatise-courtly-love-excerpts.

Appendix C

Example Writing Assessment Rubric[9]

Topic Sentence/Assertion: Is it arguable? Is it well-written? 10 points

Evidence: Are the quotes embedded and properly cited? Are they quality quotations or could you have picked better quotes? 20 points

Discussion/Commentary: Is it summarizing what was in the quote? Or is it going deeper and making insightful connections? 50 points

Organization: Does the paragraph flow? Does it make sense? Are the sentence types varied (i.e. complex, compound-complex) 10 points

Grammar/Mechanics: Are there spelling/grammar/punctuation errors? 10 points

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1 I provide students with a handout of excerpts from Harvard's Chaucer site. Students are expected to keep this until the end of the unit. Andreas Capellanus. *De Amore (1184-86) -- A Treatise on Courtly Love (Excerpts)*, Harvard University,

http://chaucer.fas.harvard.edu/pages/de-amore-1184-86-treatise-courtly-love-excerpts.

2 The word "emo" is slang for "overly emotional" and originated with a genre of rock music that is often laden with depressing and/or melodramatic lyrics.

3 The following are two websites that contain the full text of *Cligès* in English:

http://www.sacred-texts.com/neu/cliges/cliges.htm and http://www.gutenberg.org/files/831/831-h/831-h.htm

4 Chrétien and William W. Kibler. *Arthurian Romances: Erec and Enide; Cliges; Lancelot; Yvain; Perceval* (London: Penguin, 2005).

5 There are several different YouTube videos that you can choose from if you don't feel comfortable reading in Old or Middle English. I highly suggest visiting Kevin Kiernan's *Beowulf Project* which contains Old English with translation as well as audio in Old English. http://ebeowulf.uky.edu/ebeo4.0/CD/main.html. The Open University also has a neat video which lets students hear the prologue in Early Modern English pronunciation: The Open

University on YouTube, "Shakespeare: Original pronunciation"

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gPlpphT7n9s

6 Kevin Kiernan ed., "Electronic Beowulf." https://ebeowulf.uky.edu/

7 "Gawain and the Green Knight" *Representative Poetry Online*

https://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/poems/sir-gawain-and-green-knight

8 This is taken from Shakespeare's 1599 folio. It is viewable online:

http://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/Library/

facsimile/book/BL_Q2_Rom/3/?zoom=500

9 This is an example of a rubric I would use for short answers/paragraphs. For essays, I use an

AP Literature essay rubric.

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