



## Guest Editors' Introduction

### Teaching Medieval Literature off the Grid

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In modern usage, living “off the grid” means living totally independently, without the modern conveniences of publicly supplied gas, electricity, and water; it also refers to people who strive to remain unrecorded in governmental, financial, and medical documents. More generally, to live off the grid is to live against the grain of society, ideologically at odds with the mainstream. As we have put the idea to use for this guest-edited issue, “Teaching Medieval Literature off the Grid,” instructors who incorporate noncanonical texts into their classrooms resemble the above definitions in several respects. For one thing, to teach “off the grid” is almost always to teach self-sufficiently—to locate the texts you think are important and figure out for yourself why they are important, to provide or create your own introductory notes, glosses, and other relevant contextualizing material for your students. It is to build a lesson literally from the ground up. You are certainly off the beaten path, without much assistance or advice from textbooks, teachers’ manuals, online resources, or other scholars’ work; there is little, if anything, to vouch for or justify your lesson plan. To put it simply, and most generally, to teach off the grid is to teach outside the comfort zone of the canon, without the built-in validations and pedagogies that literary tradition provides. The challenges of teaching off the grid are many, but this issue of *Pedagogy* argues that the rewards are great. Noncanonical texts can shed light on perspectives different from those represented by the culturally authoritative texts of the canon, often can serve the useful purpose of defamiliarizing traditional readings, and

may even engage students in ways canonical literary texts simply cannot. The essays in this collection not only query the nature and limits of canonicity but also offer models, strategies, and lesson plans that teachers can use to incorporate lesser-known medieval texts into a range of literature courses — from courses focused exclusively on medieval literature, to the early British literature survey, to a wide range of special topics courses.

The goal of this collection is not to set out alternative canons of medieval literature that, as John Guillory (1995) has shown, merely perpetuate the exclusionist practices of canon formation more generally. Nor is it simply to expand the existing canon of medieval literature, although many of the pedagogies presented here arguably — we hope — will lead to these texts being included in more classrooms. Rather, these essays offer strategies for assigning what Wendell V. Harris (1991: 119) calls “selections with purposes” — lesser-known, sometimes nonfictional texts included on course syllabi to raise specific questions with students, to introduce specific skills, and, as Annette Kolodny (1985) has described it, to disrupt, complicate, and make unfamiliar the great literary standards. Without question, the scholarly canon of medieval texts continues to grow, a point Nancy Bradley Warren (2009) has made using the MLA International Bibliography search engine to track increasing attention to less traditional texts. Harris (1991: 113), however, has compellingly argued that the “pedagogical canon” — those texts regularly taught in undergraduate classes — is actually “much shorter than the official canon.”<sup>1</sup> When one considers Warren’s and Harris’s ideas together, it becomes clear that the innovative scholarship Warren charts does not always or easily find its way into classrooms. Students do not often enough encounter “newly” canonical authors like Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich, let alone even less canonical texts like the playfully pedagogical Latin colloquies of the eleventh-century writer Ælfric Bata (discussed in this volume by Harold Zimmerman), or Hildegard of Bingen’s *Physica*, a text on health and healing written by an abbess more famous for her mystical visions (the focus of Andreea Boboc’s piece). These and other essays in this collection make the case that the traditional grid of canonical texts can be invigorated by incorporating such noncanonical material into the literature classroom.

Medieval studies shares with other fields the pedagogical reality that research into lesser-known texts outpaces the inclusion of such texts in the classroom. But whereas courses in African American, Native American, and World literatures have proliferated over the last half century, many of the medieval authors and texts most often taught today are the same that dominated syllabi in the mid-twentieth century. These ultracanon texts are

certainly taught differently now; postcolonial readings of *Beowulf*, Marxist readings of Chaucer, and queer readings of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* have made their way from scholarship to the classroom. But the range of texts taught in medieval literature courses—particularly by nonmedievalists who may be assigned courses like the early British survey—has remained fairly conservative, in part because of the paucity of pedagogical apparatuses for lesser-known texts and the difficulty of locating such texts, let alone preparing them for student use.

Our hope is that these essays can be useful especially for teachers who are not medievalists but are called upon to teach the early British survey or special topics courses, offering ideas and strategies for going off the grid of the standard anthologies. Too often, nonspecialists neglect the rich diversity of material contained in medieval texts. In the survey course, instructors often race through a few medieval classics (*Beowulf*, Chaucer, *Gawain*) in order to reach the more linguistically and culturally familiar ground of early modernity, while in special topics courses, medieval texts are often completely absent. Such disregard for the complexity and cultural significance of the Middle Ages, which after all witnessed the birth of Western vernacular literature itself, results in all sorts of missed pedagogical opportunities. The remedy to this problem of neglect, however, is not simply to assign more Chaucer. Contributor Moira Fitzgibbons, for instance, argues that the weighty penitential text the *Prik of Conscience* offers students a uniquely effective window into their own reading practices in an age of digital and mobile literacies; the polysemous lyrics of Sephardic Jews, explored by Theodore L. Steinberg, enable discussions of cultural and religious diversity in medieval Spain, where Christians, Jews, and Muslims lived together in relative peace; and Matthieu Boyd offers guidelines for teaching a range of Celtic literary texts that allow instructors to make visible for students the rich linguistic and cultural diversity of a truly “British” (rather than merely “English”) literature. Once students get past language differences, the Middle Ages can look surprisingly familiar, and as this collection demonstrates, noncanonical texts—taught both alongside canonical texts and alone—can engage students in ways that the old standards simply cannot.

Such progressive, canon-savvy attitudes as are exhibited in these essays are nothing new for medievalists. The Middle Ages, after all, was responsible for the formation of curricular canons in the first place, and not surprisingly, it was a scholar of the Middle Ages, Ernst Robert Curtius (1953), who in the mid-twentieth century first theorized the continuing processes of canon formation, allowing us to understand that all such systems of catego-

rization, selection, and exclusion posit “classics” and “traditions” to support various institutional and cultural values. Because of their long view of canon change over centuries, medievalists are more apt to see the so-called canon wars as one moment in a long history of such curricular shifts—a mere skirmish that has left untouched the core of canonical medieval authors and texts that has dominated classrooms for the last hundred years. Few medievalists, therefore, could seriously worry over the survival of the dead, white, mostly male denizens of their courses, although some took serious issue with what Jewish studies scholar D. G. Myers characterized as the “angry, damning critique of canon formation from frankly Marxist, feminist, and Third World perspectives” with its origins in the social and political movements of the 1960s and 1970s (1989: 613). If medievalists have long been acquainted with canon stability, however, some were also in the vanguard of canon critique; one of the first textbooks to voice a political critique of the canon was compiled by the prolific medievalist and Marxist scholar Sheila Delany, whose *Counter-tradition: The Literature of Dissent and Alternatives* (1971) offered an alternative to the official canons of Western literature.

Critiques of the established canon have clearly reshaped syllabi and curricula over the last several decades, such that course reading lists very rarely represent only the most traditional and familiar “great works.” The essays in this collection suggest, however, that off-the-grid texts look somewhat different in the medieval literature classroom than they might for later periods. In his essay “Contexts for Canons,” Paul Lauter (2009: 108) addresses the topic of canon expansion, making the argument that, where American literature is concerned, “white women and writers of color do not represent a departure from the canon but aspects of it.” While our contributors certainly embrace these same goals of diversity and inclusivity, that quest can look different in the medieval classroom, in part because of the historical remoteness of the Middle Ages, its tendencies toward low literacy rates for women and laborers, anonymous authorship, and the vagaries of manuscript transmission. Where little to nothing is known about the social status of an author of an anonymous text, for example, an instructor’s desire for diversity of voices can result in a focus on the diversity of the audience hailed by the text rather than identities of authors. In this vein, one of our contributors, Myra J. Seaman, discusses an anonymously compiled manuscript for clues about what the text’s audience would have found appealing and entertaining in it, and coeditor Gina Brandolino defines a tradition of often-anonymous English texts offering religious instruction precisely based on their address to commoners with varying levels of literacy.

Helping to propel these shifts toward inclusivity in the classroom are advances in digital and reproduction technologies that enable instructors to take students of medieval literature off the grid in particularly interesting ways, bringing them into contact with manuscripts previously accessible only in remote libraries. As several of the contributors (including Seaman and David Watt) argue, allowing students to experience reproductions of manuscripts in the classroom — whether in student-friendly facsimile texts or via digital and online images — offers a vivid snapshot of medieval textual production and dissemination, allowing students to consider how the experience of reading manuscripts might differ from later technologies of the printed book. Where such resources are not readily available, several contributors, including Fitzgibbons, offer advice for producing annotated and glossed editions of hard-to-find manuscripts for use in the classroom.

The digital revolution and the wider availability of noncanonical materials have enabled the adventurous pedagogies described in this special issue's first section, "Studying Audiences off the Grid." The essays in this section describe pedagogical approaches focusing on medieval audiences and reception, as well as how noncanonical texts can be used to reach contemporary audiences of twenty-first-century students in literature classrooms. Seaman's "Medieval Prime Time: Entertaining the Family in Fifteenth-Century England — and Educating Students in Twenty-First-Century America," discusses the pedagogical value of exploring the Ashmole 61 manuscript, a Middle English anthology from the very late fifteenth century prepared for a lower gentry family, from the perspective of its contemporary readers. Zimmerman's "Drinking Feasts and Insult Battles: Bringing Anglo-Saxon Pedagogy into the Contemporary Classroom" explores the fate of Anglo-Saxon texts in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and outlines a compelling first-day lesson plan using a playful tenth-century pedagogical text. Fitzgibbons's "Critical Pleasure, Visceral Literacy, and the *Prik of Conscience*" offers strategies for using the Christian poetic moral guide in her title to immerse students in the vividly imaginative sights and poetic sounds of salvation, damnation, and the Last Judgment that made it one of the most anthologized texts in medieval England. Finally, focusing on recovering diverse textual traditions, Brandolino's "Teaching Innocent's Legacy: Middle English Texts for Commoners" locates the precursors of a working-class literature in a series of religious texts directed specifically to nonnoble lay audiences, thus excavating a new textual tradition precisely in an appeal to a diverse audience. As these essays show, introducing such noncanonical (and often quasi-literary) texts in a range of courses can allow instructors to initiate important discus-

sions with students about what makes certain texts “canonical”—and also “literary”—in the first place.

If the quest for diversity in the medieval classroom can look quite different than it does for other periods, it can also draw on the inclusionist values that motivated so many of the canon busters of decades past, and the second half of this collection, “Off-the-Grid Authors and Traditions,” makes a strong case for texts that deserve wider attention. Steinberg’s “Loading Jewry into the Medieval Canon” makes the argument for including medieval Jewish and also Arabic poetry in courses on medieval literature, in part to illustrate moments of intercultural and interfaith exchange in the Middle Ages that can serve as models for forging cultural connections today. Boyd’s “The Languages of British Literature and the Stakes of Anthologies” asks us to reconsider the “peripheral” status of a range of multilinguistic Celtic texts that are often neglected because they are written in languages and cultural traditions unfamiliar to us. In “Teaching off the Grid with Hildegard of Bingen’s *Physica*,” Boboc looks at a lesser-known text of a medieval woman known for her mystical writings, exploring some of the ways her twelfth-century medical texts speak to students’ interest in holistic and alternative medicine. Lastly, Watt’s “Thomas Hoccleve’s Particular Appeal” asks what it is that “appeals” to students about early literatures and offers an elegant lesson combining close reading and theorization of an obscure lyric text that helps students reconstruct the material circumstances of writing in fifteenth-century England.

R. F. Yeager’s response piece, “Off the Grid for Forty Years: Bringing John Gower into the Classroom,” offers an insightful reminiscence about his devotion to a once-neglected medieval author. His experience with Gower testifies both to the challenges facing scholars who wish to work with and teach noncanonical authors and texts and to the sorts of resources—including concordances, scholarly communities, online and digital materials, and student-friendly texts—needed to make lesser-known works more teachable. Rounding out this issue is a collection of reviews of recent books that offer instruction on off-the-grid authors and texts, each written with an eye to pedagogical usefulness.

“Teaching Medieval Literature off the Grid” thus offers practical ways to open up the study of literature in the classroom, to look beyond the usual literary, ideological, and canonical bounds in ways that we hope will be an inspiration to teachers across periods and fields. Allied with the inclusionist values that motivated so many of the canon busters of decades past, the contributors embrace what Lee Patterson, in his often-cited “On the

Margin: Postmodernism, Ironic History, and Medieval Studies,” has called “the proliferation of academic courses and programs designed to include the previously neglected” (1992: 88). At the same time, these essays suggest that medievalists can offer a rich and unique vantage point from which to view the effects of the canon changes of previous decades. The essays that follow offer a wealth of strategies for specialists of all periods to venture “off the grid” of the traditional anthologies — and demonstrate a host of compelling reasons for doing so.

### Note

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1. Harris’s idea of a “pedagogical canon” is, of course, indebted to Alastair Fowler’s (1979) notion of the six types of canons, in particular, Fowler’s description of “selective” canons, which are defined by readings for individual courses.

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