PEDAGOGY & PROFESSION
NEW CHAUCER STUDIES

Volume 03 | Issue 02 Fall 2022

Cluster on Medieval Studies and Secondary Education: Introduction

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Crawford and Lampert-Weissig. 2022. Cluster on Medieval Studies and Secondary Education: Introduction. *New Chaucer Studies: Pedagogy and Profession* 3.2: 38-40.
https://escholarship.org/uc/ncs_pedagogyandprofession/ | ISSN: 2766-1768.

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Abstract

Introduction to the special issue on incorporating medieval studies into secondary education curricula, including a discussion of partnership between secondary, post-secondary and community institutions, and their importance.

Editing this special cluster has brought home to us how limiting it is to think about medieval studies only as a university discipline. As the essays in this cluster show, medieval studies can actually be at its most vibrant in the secondary school classroom, where a teacher innovates with song, as we see in Deborah Stokol's contribution, or shifts a teenager's worldview by centering African history, as explored in John Terry's piece. As the essay on 'Chaucer's World' Study Days in Oxford demonstrates, the seeds of a lifelong sense of wonder about the medieval past can be planted through an experiential collaboration among museum, university and school. The essay on the new *Middle Ages for Educators* site also reminds us that this type of collaboration can inspire even when we can only gather virtually.

As teachers, we hope to inspire wonder and collaborative learning for their own sake but also for the sake of the field. A colleague of Kara's recently returned from a summer institute for U.S. secondary school educators who are preparing to teach Advanced Placement Literature and Composition, a gathering where teachers share ideas and align practices to meet national grading standards for a course that grants college credits to students who pass the exam. At many high schools, these courses are taught by veteran teachers whose AP programs often develop a set of traditions in the school culture. All experienced educators themselves, the group discussed how to address the curriculum that one might inherit from the previous instructor. Seeking commiseration, one participant interjected, "The guy before me actually taught *The Canterbury Tales*!" which garnered general groaning and an indication of agreement that such a practice was outdated. While anecdotal, this account provides a glimpse into an educational landscape very different from a decade or even five years ago.

Our experience as educators is U.S.-based. As Kara has noted, in her thirty years as an English teacher, secondary school curricula have seen dramatic and enriching growth, celebrating a broader range of voices and perspectives, considering global contexts and rethinking earlier interpretations of texts that many of us read as students ourselves. But while college courses *can* seek to expand the discourse and engage in more insightful and informed readings of medieval texts, these works have largely disappeared from secondary school syllabi. Earlier in Kara's career, selections from *The Canterbury Tales* and *Beowulf* were considered foundational to a rigorous high school literature course, and many also included *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* or cantos from Dante's *Inferno*. Now, among Kara's personal network of teachers at both public and private institutions, very few work in departments that have maintained curricula that include medieval texts.

The shift away from including medieval works is less about concerns of overcrowding the curriculum and more a reflection of broader forces that impact the curricular choices in secondary classrooms. Though English courses are still required at all levels of secondary education, a host of curricular mandates and guidelines from the state or district level, coupled with national testing objectives of the College Board, shape the decisions made by individual departments and teachers who work to craft a developmentally and culturally appropriate curricular experience for their students. An emphasis on skills often rises above concerns over content, and many teachers are limited by the books on hand and general availability of resources. But while digitized resources to access and support medieval texts have grown in number, the demand has diminished. The AP Literature exam now explicitly emphasizes 20th-century and contemporary texts, primarily short fiction and poetry, and

less than 20% of tested material is drawn from longer works of fiction or drama. Teachers the world over have lamented the limitations of teaching to a test, but for many this is reason enough to let go of these texts entirely.

We are still learning about what students are missing as a result of these deletions, but the proliferation of medieval tropes in popular culture indicates that students remain curious. Encouragingly, plenty of teachers continue to update and expand their strategies for teaching medieval texts, and their creative and insightful forays into this material inspire their students. Though high school success stories regularly spotlight individual teachers who spark passion in their classroom, secondary teachers frequently work collectively to construct and hone both content and pedagogical practices to create a coherent experience for students. In confronting the challenges to include pre-modern texts, we are grateful to the teachers who join us in conversations about how to offer an experience in humanities education that reflects the broad reach and depth that will serve to entice continued exploration in college.

And, of course, even as medievalists teaching at the university level have attempted to expand and deepen the global context for medieval studies, many universities, including large public research universities like Lisa's home institution, can no longer support extended offerings in medieval studies due to enrollment and funding concerns. It is hard not to see these two declines as interrelated. Susanna Fein and David Raybin's discussion of the now-defunded NEH overseas Chaucer training that they led for many years both explores this decline in institutional support and provides a stirring call to resist it, which is very much in keeping with the goals of this special cluster.