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Abstract

Responding to the last *New Chaucer Society: Pedagogy and Profession* issue on the Pandemic, Siân Echard reflects on her experiences as an educator and member of the academy in times of the pandemic.

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As I write this essay, in response to "Cluster: Pandemic Experiences" (2021), I can hear the radio in the background, delivering the latest Omicron statistics. The news is confusing, moving from reporting on rising case numbers and pressured hospitals, to musing about whether we are shifting from a pandemic to an endemic phase of the disease, a shift that might mean a relaxing of COVID-19-related restrictions. I am alert to the news because I am procrastinating (always a necessary stage in my writing process, alas), but also because I am vitally interested in what every new development might mean for my teaching. Listening to the radio, I run the "what if" scenarios in my head, trying to map the intersections of the current wave with my teaching plans. My term is set to start on January 10, and we have already been told to plan the first two weeks online, after which we are supposed to switch to face to face. But as the radio makes clear, matters are developing quickly, and I know that all plans must be tentative. Two years into the pandemic, we are still living with profound uncertainty, both pragmatic—where and how will I be teaching? and existential—will things ever be "normal" again?

Even when the radio is not on, I have begun to think of the pandemic as a constant background noise, humming through daily life, sometimes rising to a level loud enough to drown everything else out, and sometimes receding, but never disappearing entirely. It is the soundtrack to the weary risk calculus we have all been engaged in for so long. It is the irritating ear worm that intrudes whenever we dare to imagine something on the other side of all this. Like most medievalists, I suspect, I have often found myself thinking about Boccaccio (indeed, two of the essays in this collection, Kara Crawford's and Katrin Rupp's, are explicit about the link). I am not thinking, as they so movingly are, about the therapeutic deployment of comedy amid tragedy, or about the manifest pleasures of companionship and storytelling that animate both the medieval author and the modern teachers. Instead, I am simply wondering how Boccaccio managed to write at all, with the background noise of the plague in his own world. I am in awe of the productivity Jonathan Fruoco reports during his plague year, particularly given the many roadblocks he encountered. For a time, I was able to escape into my research too, but my pandemic has been mostly pedagogical, as my students and I continue to learn how to navigate our new, technologically-mediated interactions with texts, and with each other.

and oft boþe blysse and blunder[1]

Many of the essays in this collection make sobering reading, recording as they do chaotic institutional responses to the pandemic, alongside unreasonable and unsustainable demands on teachers. For me, by contrast, the pandemic started out well enough, in institutional terms anyway. My university pivoted to online learning first in mid-March of 2020. I was on administrative leave at the time, and so the effect on me initially was on my research, rather than on my teaching. I had been scheduled to travel to the UK for a conference, and had intended to build some manuscript research around that trip. In early April of 2020 I learned that I had been awarded a research grant by our federal social sciences and humanities funding body, which meant I could make more elaborate travel plans. And then of

[1] The subheadings are taken from the following: Andrew and Waldron 1996, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, line 18; Echard 2022, line 1; and Chaucer 1987, 1.22.

course travel shut down, and my grant, intended to fund archival research, sat (and continues to sit) largely unused.

I was in a position to make lemonade out of lemons, at least at first, because my leave project had been to finish a long-delayed book. The sudden requirement to figure out if there were enough digital facsimiles of the manuscripts I'd meant to consult to keep my new project alive, fed directly into that book, which is concerned with the material and immaterial forms in which we encounter medieval texts. David Lavinsky notes the ways that various immaterialities—of research, of teaching—can be generative for someone working in book history, and his insight certainly describes my early pandemic experience. So, I was barreling along quite well, all things considered, and even finding comfort in losing myself in writing. And then, thanks to my university's admirable advance planning and communication, all that came to a screeching halt, because in July of 2020 we learned we would be online in the fall, and by later in the summer it was clear we would be online for the entire academic year.

The leave that had spared me the frantic pivot my colleagues experienced in March of 2020, meant that I had nothing to draw on in the face of this new challenge. What was more, one of the courses I was scheduled to teach was my book history course, which I have always taught with a significant hands-on component in our Rare Books and Special Collections library. Like Sandy Feinstein and Bryan Shawn Wang, I found that reimagining my courses for this new mode of delivery was not straightforward (and like them, I am still engaged in that process of reimagination, as we navigate the latest uncertainties brought about by the arrival of a new wave of the pandemic). But knowing, as early as July, that I was going online in the fall was a blessing. It meant I had time to learn and to plan, unlike many colleagues whose universities refused to recognize the inevitable until much closer to the start of fall term. Still, the task of actually making the transition seemed so gargantuan that I put aside my book, and spent those last precious weeks of summer getting ready to teach online.

Sandy and Bryan's piece is in the form of a dialogue, and dialogue was crucial to my shift to online as well. Matt Clancy notes that the Venn diagram of an already broken job market, his skills as acquired through graduate study, and the new pedagogical needs of the pandemic, offered an unexpected opportunity supporting the transition to digital teaching and learning, and for my part, I certainly leaned heavily on the many resources our on-campus teaching and learning center had developed. I was also in constant contact with colleagues whom I could not meet in person, but who were more than happy to talk via Zoom as we all tried to figure out how to approach a fully online academic year. If this situation wasn't exactly "bliss," as my header for this section suggests, it was at least collegial and encouraging. I was grateful to have so much support for the transition. I worked obsessively throughout those final summer months, and met my first online students in the fall of 2020.

This is where the "blunder" part comes in, because I promptly learned that I had done pretty much everything wrong, at least for my style of teaching, and my particular students. In the lead-up to our online year, I had read advice suggesting instructors should mix synchronous and asynchronous modes in order to avoid Zoom fatigue. We were encouraged to set up frequent low-stakes tasks, in order to promote engagement in this new format. These looked like good ideas in the summer, but come fall, they did not always yield the desired results. For example, it seemed as though everyone at my university had followed the advice to create low-stakes "engagement" assignments, and as a result the students were drowning in them, and having trouble sorting out what was more or less important.

My colleagues and I had assiduously constructed asynchronous modules, only to find students fell quickly behind on the material delivered in that mode, perhaps because it was easy to tell themselves they'd watch that capsule lecture or work through that module activity later, and perhaps simply because they were just traumatized by everything that was happening. David points out that our new online educational world had the unintended effect of making the whole idea of the university abstract, and that feels right to me. I find myself thinking about our atomization into so many rectangles on a Zoom screen. At first that screen felt like a new but viable way to be together, but in the end I think it was part of that process of abstraction, of making the whole experience seem strangely unreal.

Wrætlic is þes wealstan, wyrde gebræcon

My colleagues and I were certainly trying to make this new mode work, but it quickly became apparent that not all students were satisfied. Early in the fall of 2020, stories began running in student newspapers and in local media about the perceived inferiority of the online product. Students should not be paying full price for such hobbled instruction, the argument went. Even here in Canada, where tuition is not as eye-wateringly high as it is in some other places, there is a very considerable expense associated with going to university. And university is not just about the classroom; it is also about all the on-campus interactions, educational and social alike. But while I agreed with the students that what we were able to do online was not in any way offering the totality of the university experience, I also knew that it was taking all of our time, and more. I knew that the university was spending a lot of money, too, not just on the salaries of instructional faculty, but also to pay for all the extra IT requirements and teaching support.

And so I wrote to the local CBC radio station, and then found myself being interviewed on the morning show, explaining that even if the digital delivery was not what students signed up for, it was not cheaper or easier to produce than in-person learning. I recounted some of the challenges of trying to engage and energize students when all I could see of them were their Zoom rectangles, often populated by a name or a random image rather than a face, because so many students kept their cameras off during class. I tried to make it clear that we cared, desperately, and were doing all we could to deliver inspiring instruction in very difficult circumstances. I heard from many colleagues after that interview, people who, like me, were doing their best to keep things going, even as our usual pedagogical world lay in ruins about us.

And this brings me to the heading for this part of my musings. Like Kathleen Cawsey, I had programmed some Old English elegies for one of my courses, and *The Ruin* became something of a touchstone. "Wondrous is this wall-stead, wasted by fate," it starts, and throughout the year, I kept thinking about those walls broken by events. It felt as though the whole pedagogical edifice I had painfully constructed over the summer had crumbled in the face of our fateful pandemic reality. Kathy and her students found solace in Old English elegies, and when I returned to face-to-face teaching this past September, I once again programmed *The Ruin*, *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer* for one of my classes. Suzanne Edwards's collaboration with an artist and a composer to render Old English body and soul dialogues for modern audience offers, she says, a way to work through our situation collectively. I hoped that the Old English elegies would offer me and my students a way to do precisely that. What happened was, again, not quite what I expected.

To Caunterbury with ful devout corage

September of 2021 seemed like a new beginning. We were back to face-to-face teaching, and while we were all masked, we nevertheless began the term giddy with the delight of physical presence. Some of my students were repeats from the online year, and I spent the first couple of weeks noticing that they were taller or shorter than I had imagined. I found myself comparing their voices to the voices I'd heard in my head when reading online comments in the Zoom chat box. I was rebuilding my sense of them in the real world, and it was funny and heartwarming to do so. The students who were new to me were also terrific. I had more trouble than usual learning their names, because of the masks, but they talked so much in those early weeks that soon I knew a lot about them. At first, too, my reading choices were working really well. The students loved *The Ruin*, and talked animatedly about it in one of the first classes of term. I relaxed: channeling Julian, I said to myself "all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well" (Julian 1998, 79).

Not quite, as it turned out. Gradually things got quieter in class, and attendance began to fall off. It was later in the term, when as any teacher knows you can begin to lose some students to the pressure of the school year, but I think more was going on. At that point we were not dealing with students being absent because they had COVID-19: we were in a lull between waves. Instead, our students were struggling with an accumulation of sadness and stress, weirdly all the more crushing now that we were back in person again. I had noticed that *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*, later in the term, did not elicit the same response as *The Ruin* had done in the first weeks. One wise colleague suggested that perhaps my students were already sad enough, and instead of helping them to process their grief, these gorgeous poems simply crystallized it for them. I suspect that at the beginning of term, we thought we were heading back to "normal." By the end, we were instead realizing that the pandemic remained present, not past; we could not process it while still enduring it.

And what now? What will this year's mixed modes and mixed (un)certainties bring? One of my courses for the upcoming term is a seminar for senior undergraduates, focusing on works by Gower and Chaucer in their manuscript contexts. I have taught this course before. It starts with palaeography boot camp, which introduces students to some basics about dealing with manuscripts. We then move on to read selections from the *Confessio Amantis* and the *Canterbury Tales*, alongside the manuscripts in which they are found. The course has always had to rely on digital facsimiles, so even if for this iteration we remain online for longer than the university is currently imagining, we can still move through the course as planned—but only sort of. The first time I taught this course, I planned on transcription practice for the early weeks, intending to move away from that activity as the course progressed. To my surprise, transcribing was my students' absolutely favourite part of every class, and so we ended up doing at least some transcription every week. Students worked in pairs while I circulated, and the seminar room inevitably filled with cursing, loud counting of minims, arguments, and shrieks of delight when a line became clear. Transcription, in other words, was a communal activity, a journey we were all on, with comprehension rather than Canterbury as the desired destination. Kristine Larsen's contribution to this collection draws a pointed distinction between entertainment and education, between watching and doing. Transcription in my class is explicitly intended to emphasize learning through doing, and I think it would be possible to do it in the online

mode. After all, many people learn palaeography online through the admirable tools provided by places like the Hill Museum and Manuscript Library. But the uproarious human activity that accompanied transcription the last time I taught the course remains crucial, I think. Medieval pilgrims could and did head off on their own, but Chaucer shows us that there is both fun and profundity in making the journey with others. My students and I will set out together, and I hope we will get a chance to meet each other in person. If we do not, then I hope at least that I have learned enough these past months to make the journey sustaining and perhaps even healing for them. If I have done so, then I suspect it will be at least in part the result of reading the wonderful essays in this collection. To all the contributors, I offer my most profound thanks.

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