UC San Diego
New Chaucer Studies: Pedagogy and Profession

Title
Medieval Classrooms: The Genealogy of Teachers

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4s83k05q

Journal
New Chaucer Studies: Pedagogy and Profession, 4(1)

Author
Kane, Jean

Publication Date
2023

DOI
10.5070/NC34160690

Copyright Information
Copyright 2023 by the author(s).This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License, available at https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/

Peer reviewed

eScholarship.org Powered by the California Digital Library
University of California

Volume 04 | Issue 01 Spring 2023

Medieval Classrooms: The Genealogy of Teachers

Jean Kane

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9637-647X
Vassar College, U.S.

Kane. 2023. Medieval Classrooms: The Genealogy of Teachers. *New Chaucer Studies: Pedagogy and Profession* 4.1: 26-28.
https://escholarship.org/uc/ncs_pedagogyandprofession/ | ISSN: 2766-1768.

© 2023 by the author(s). This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial No Derivatives 4.0 license. *New Chaucer Studies: Pedagogy and Profession* is an open access, bi-annual journal sponsored by the New Chaucer Society and published in eScholarship by the California Digital Library. | https://escholarship.org/uc/ncs_pedagogyandprofession | ISSN: 2766-1768.

The editorial staff of *New Chaucer Studies: Pedagogy and Profession* works hard to ensure that contributions are accurate and follow professional ethical guidelines. However, the views and opinions expressed in each contribution belong exclusively to the author(s). The publisher and the editors do not endorse or accept responsibility for them. See https://escholarship.org/uc/ncs_pedagogyandprofession/policies for more information.

Medieval Classrooms: The Genealogy of Teachers

Jean Kane

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9637-647X
Vassar College, U.S.

Abstract

Jean Kane, professor of English at Vassar College, examines the influence of C. Clifford Flanigan, late Professor of Comparative Literature at Indiana University and Kane's former mentor. Reflecting on his unexpected death in 1993, which brought into question her own pedagogy in the face of grief, Kane offers a personal insight into her classroom as she attempts to bridge the gap between instructor and student when dealing with loss.

https://escholarship.org/uc/ncs_pedagogyandprofession/ | ISSN: 2766-1768.

He arrived for class five or six minutes late, dragging behind him a duffel bag so large it seemed to contain the cinderblocks that lined the hallways. It was one of the first classes of my college career.

Peculiar, I thought.

In fact, singular.

Mr. Flanigan, as I will always think of him, was a medievalist, a comparatist, and a teacher of the first order. "He made the work seem alive, in the present tense," my classmate Heather Windsor-Kloer remembers. Clearly, he was in the text and inviting us in too. As I later learned, he tested out his ideas about culture, performance, and theory on us.

"What made his work important and innovative was his insistence on approaching medieval studies in the light of critical studies and in a truly transdisciplinary perspective," said his colleague and friend Claus Clüver, who was also "deeply involved" in "restoring life" to these materials in performance (2014, 27-28).[1] The genealogy and embeddedness of our texts always tugged at what else I thought I needed to know, what I didn't know and wanted to learn.

I took only one strictly medieval literature class with him, which focused on early Christian literature—the noncanonical or "pseudographic" texts excluded from the New Testament but central to the myriad impulses preceding what became the bureaucratic Church. But I took other classes with Mr. Flanigan as well, ones with a broader focus and historical range. Medieval texts were central to the historical sweep of other courses organized by genre or adaptation of older works, many of them in translation. Claire Sponsler gives a dramatic account of Mr. Flanigan's bodily pedagogy:

> Caught up in the passion of an idea he would lurch across the front of the classroom, gesticulating wildly, crossing his eyes, grimacing, sometimes even spitting, a madman, captivated by knowledge and struggling to express it. Witnessing such moments, one received two impressions. The first was of the almost demonic power of ideas that could so forcibly take control of someone, literally possessing him and holding him in its grip. The second was of a formidable intellect straining mightily against the inadequacies of language…. Through a compelling bodily rhetoric of gestures and movements, Cliff's teaching demonstrated what he strongly believed, that ideas were potent but that meaning always exceeded the signifiers available to express it. (28)

C. Clifford Flanigan was born in Baltimore, Maryland, in 1941. He received a Master of Divinity at Concordia Theological Seminary in St. Louis in 1967 but did not pursue ordination. He received a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from Washington University in St. Louis in 1973, the year he began to teach as an assistant professor at Indiana University. Though I did not focus on medieval studies as a graduate student, I felt a profound affinity with these openings to different disciplines and approaches, so different from the New Critical paradigm that still dominated literary studies at the time. His influence popped up much later in my work on modernist and postmodernist novels by James Joyce and Salman Rushdie. I argued that the bodily practice of their early belief formation shaped their literary experiments—the infamous skeptics drew on the knowledge they gained in praxis.

---

[1] See *The Ritual Life* (2014) for Flanigan's unpublished essays and commentary on his teaching and mentoring.

I'd learned of Mr. Flanigan's early and sudden death when I was in graduate school at the University of Virginia. He was an associate professor by then, still at Indiana University, and in his prime at age fifty-two, in 1993. I was a teaching assistant in an English literature survey course. We were reading Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*. In my section, a few of the students were on the women's crew. Their coach had just committed suicide in a particularly gruesome way: he had laid down before an oncoming train.

The students were devastated.

I wanted to help them in the small ways I could. I recalled Mr. Flanigan's remarks about Sir Trevisan fleeing the cave of despair, the worst of the deadly sins, he said, because it registered a loss of Christian faith in God.[2] Without being obnoxiously pedagogical about their raw experience, I tried to draw out from them the representation of what we now describe as a psychological, even a chemical state, through this elaborate allegory. Undoubtedly, it was a clumsy effort.

More remarkable was my realization that I belonged to a genealogy of teachers. This genealogy is not necessarily recorded, in footnotes or acknowledgments, as the genealogy of scholars is. Rather these are the profound effects, and affects, created by the labor of the classroom; they are conversations that are ongoing in memory, acts, perspectives, and connections that reach into students' lives.

I would never claim to be as fine a teacher as Mr. Flanigan was—I cannot throw my thoughts into my body the way a conjurer does—but I do belong to his genealogy, and share in his passion, a consolation in the face of the loss of genius.

Works Cited: Printed

Clüver, Claus. 2014. "*In Memoriam* C. Clifford Flanigan." Pp. 23-26 in *Papers by and for C. Clifford Flanigan: The Ritual Life of Medieval Europe*, edited by Robert L. A. Clark. London, Ontario: First Circle Publishing.

Clark, Robert L. A., editor. 2014. *Papers by and for C. Clifford Flanigan: The Ritual Life of Medieval Europe*. London, Ontario: First Circle Publishing.

Sponser, Claire. 2014. "Cliffnotes: Performance, Pedagogy, and the Medieval Past." Pp 27-32 in *Papers by and for C. Clifford Flanigan: The Ritual Life of Medieval Europe*, edited by Robert L. A. Clark. London, Ontario: First Circle Publishing.

[2] Editors' note: The tale of Ser Trevisan comes from Book I of Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queen*, where the Redcrosse Knight saves Ser Trevisan from committing suicide due to the influence of the spirit Despair. He then leads the knight and his female companion, Una, to the Cave of Despair where the spirit almost convinces the Redcrosse Knight to end his own life due to the sinful nature of the world. Una stops him, citing that the world is also full of Justice and Forgiveness, and the three leave the cave. It is a story often remembered for its themes on hope in the face of despair.

https://escholarship.org/uc/ncs_pedagogyandprofession/ | ISSN: 2766-1768.