The Secret (Book) *History* of Dark Academia

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Abstract

This article describes the author's experience teaching the emerging literary genre and internet subculture called "Dark Academia" in the undergraduate classroom. The pedagogical successes and failures of this class take on new meaning when viewed in the context of the author's research on medieval manuscript culture and the reception and circulation of these books after the Middle Ages.

Dark Academia is an ominous name for what is, in fact, a celebration of humanities learning in a thriving social media subculture.[1] At once aspirational and fanciful, this online aesthetic (typically marked by the tag #DarkAcademia) adapts and remediates romanticized ideas about higher education on platforms like Instagram, Tumblr, and TikTok. Its popularity seems to have been caused by the pandemic: Generation Z's response to distance learning protocols and their general discontent with the instrumentalized experience of education in the twenty-first century (Quiring 2021; Lee 2024; Murray 2023; Stowell and Theriau 2022; Klepper and Glaubitz 2024). To unplug from lives lived increasingly online, creators set their imagined scholastic encounters in idyllic spaces free from modern technology: the dreaming spires of Oxbridge, boarding schools and liberal arts colleges in New England, the colonial campuses of the Ivy League.

Also central to its aesthetic *vibe* is Dark Academia's engagement with the shared tropes and intertextual discourses of ancient, medieval, and gothic literatures. This interest in old books is often realized in an obsession with material culture: the fashions, geographies, and artifacts of Dark Academia's influencers are part and parcel of the subculture's popularity. Social media content tagged as #DarkAcademia regularly features physical copies of the literary classics that have inspired them. What began as a niche online movement has since spawned its own canon of bestsellers ranging from graphic novels to fantasy and speculative fiction for readers of all ages, especially young adults. Building on the momentum of Dark Academia's emergence in mainstream culture, this essay underscores an opportunity for teacher-scholars of premodern subjects, especially those of us preoccupied with material culture and the history of books, to introduce into their General Education classrooms the research questions and specialty knowledge that typically are reserved for more advanced undergraduates. The self-reflexive conversations inspired by Dark Academia ultimately prompt students to consider their own preconceptions about post-secondary education and to think critically about what they hope to achieve in college.

My fascination with what would become known as Dark Academia began with *The Secret History* (Tartt 1992). The consensus ur-text of Dark Academia, Donna Tartt's classic bildungsroman of campus decadence and academic pretentiousness, set in the early 1980s at a rural Vermont SLAC [small liberal arts college], Hampden College, has been devoured by generations of readers simultaneously seduced and disturbed by the novel's idealized setting and romanticized portrayal of the undergraduate experience. The novel is replete with textual artifacts, scholarly spaces, and ostentatious fashions of the kind so pivotal to Dark Academia's conceptions of higher education. Characters in *The Secret History* are students first and foremost, decamping at all hours to the campus library to debate Platonist philosophy, to puzzle over problems of Latin declension, and, eventually, to adopt the ritualized lifestyle of the ancients. This last commitment to academic immersion comes at notable cost to one member of the Classics class, Bunny, whom readers discover in the very first

line of the novel has been murdered by his friends. In its students' encounters with Greek Tragedy and Dantean *terza rima*, *The Secret History* weighs the value of old knowledge and reflects on the power of language and the perils of hubris.

Dark Academia's idealized representations of the pleasures (and dangers) afforded by a life committed to humanities scholarship unsurprisingly appeal to me as a college professor of the English Middle Ages. The principal duties of the medievalist scholar—sifting through archives, transcribing dead languages, piecing together textual and historical gaps—require sustained and deliberate engagement with our objects of study. In its most basic objectives, my research on premodern reading and writing shares with Dark Academia an interest in discovering how encounters with literary texts have been shaped by our collective investment in the materiality of books-as-artifacts. Narrating occluded or forgotten histories of famous books that preserve canonical Middle English works, my research reveals how institutions, past and present, have served to uphold romanticized accounts of the production and survival of medieval literature. I have appreciated in Dark Academia an analogous cognitive dissonance which simultaneously celebrates and critiques idealized beliefs about academic institutions. The multimedia outputs of #DarkAcademia construct through their engagements with materiality a fantasy of the past that reflects contemporary ideas and ideologies.

In the conflicting aspirations of Dark Academia, I can identify a valuable connection between my dual professional commitments to pedagogy and to profession. In my teaching as in my scholarship, I am motivated by the work of destabilizing our monumentalized view of canonical texts. Courses in Medieval Studies, a discipline organized around how textual artifacts are or were preserved and interpreted, rely on the availability of institutionalized texts suitable for undergraduate consumption. For one example from my research, the alliterative Middle English poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, considered along with its three companion poems a touchstone of late-medieval literary culture, was joined in the seventeenth century with two other manuscripts in Latin by antiquarian collector Robert Cotton. More than three centuries later, the British Museum excised *Gawain* and the other English poems from the codex, leaving behind the less desirable material in Latin. Readers of this famous poem, taught regularly in British Literature survey classes everywhere, encounter a version of the text fashioned by the interventions of institutions, now largely invisible to readers. Recognizing as indispensable the material circumstances of *Gawain*'s transmission and reception opens up new, historically-situated ways of understanding the poem and its central place in the canon of early English literature (Hines 2022).

I teach on a small, regional campus of Ohio State [OSU], part of the university's strategy for fulfilling its land-grant mission. Many of my students in Lima, a small industrial city in northwest Ohio, have grown up in rural communities and are the first in their family to attend college. More often than not, they work full-time jobs while earning their degrees. Although our main campus in Columbus boasts a rich and extensive (and growing) special collections library, we do not have in Lima distinctive collections suitable for teaching. Negotiating these circumstances has required some creativity. I have built a small teaching collection for students to handle pieces of parchment, pilgrim badges, and broken bindings. In my Shakespeare class, we stab-stitch early modern quarto editions to understand the history of Elizabethan drama in print. On Manuscript Mondays in my *Canterbury Tales* course, students employ digital facsimiles to practice the basics of paleography. In what is perhaps an unmatched showing of academic generosity, the Head of Thompson Special Collections at OSU,

Professor Eric Johnson, will drive up U.S. Route 33 from Columbus to Lima to deliver a crate of teaching materials for my students to investigate. And yet, these strategies are not feasible every semester or in every course. Bringing discussions of material culture into the classroom is, for me, an ongoing instructional challenge.

Faculty regularly conceive of upper-level undergraduate syllabuses or graduate seminars as occasions to further their own research goals, to read in a specific area or to explore concepts for potential scholarly projects. With narrower pedagogical objectives and specific outcomes expected, however, General Education [GenEd] curricula at many institutions can limit occasions for introducing students to instructors' research specialties. But teaching across a literature curriculum can also mean new opportunities to encourage students to think about material cultures of reading and writing. Tasked several years ago with leading one such humanities course for GenEd students, I turned to Dark Academia's rich corpus of multimedia texts and popular forms of online critique. My thinking, as I designed the syllabus, was to focus on the intersection of popular culture and higher education as a convenient inroad to the hidden curriculum of college learning—how to talk to professors; how to balance obligations at school, work, and home; how to identify and join scholarly conversations. I would choose to teach stories about the experiences of college students and not, like many other campus novel courses, from the perspectives of college professors. Together, we would explore an aesthetic that privileges the pleasures of arcane texts preserved in old books, antique or gothic architecture on ancient campuses, and the allure of vintage fashion, typewriters, and candles. But what I did not expect to discover in teaching "ENG 2367: #Dark Academia" in Spring 2023 was the pedagogical utility of students' nostalgia for an older, conventional, even banal version of the academy. Students projected a surprisingly clear desire for what humanities learning should look like. The lesson I hope to impart to other teachers is that what many students today seem to want from their college educations—*how* students want to learn—couples neatly with intellectual approaches that our training as medievalists has uniquely prepared us to offer.

The syllabus for my course was built around two campus novels, *The Secret History* (Tartt 1992) and *Ninth House* (Bardugo 2019), an adult Dark Fantasy released just before the pandemic. For those readers who have not yet encountered *Ninth House*, imagine a critique of the secret-society and fraternity-bro culture of Yale University… but with magic. Like Tartt's novel, published almost thirty years earlier, *Ninth House* is written from the perspective of a college student who feels unwelcome and alone at an elite institution and whose reluctant and increasingly strained encounters with historical research lead her into trouble. The draw of *Ninth House* for some students could be the magical capabilities possessed by many of the novel's characters, resources and techniques available, of course, only to those with privileged backgrounds that the protagonist does not share. And yet *Ninth House* also offers a social critique of college as an institution, in particular its roles as gatekeeper and as custodian of rare materials. In this way, the novel invites readers to consider the impact of race, class, and gender on students' experience of higher education.

Critiques of Dark Academia—indeed, critiques that also surface *in* #DarkAcademic discourses—underscore concerns about its limited and privileged account of the world, problems that will be familiar to scholars of Medieval Studies. In close reading romanticized portrayals of Yale's campus and libraries in *Ninth House*, we discussed its class prejudices, its focus on the western literary canon, and its capacity for elitism and racism and ableism. To facilitate this discussion, we studied short stories

by Lionel Trilling, M.R. James, and Jorge Luis Borges, excerpts from Evelyn Waugh, Dorothy Sayers, John Milton, and even Peter Abelard. Chapters from A.S. Byatt's *Possession*, Deborah Harkness's *Discovery of Witches*, and, of course, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* describe embodied and unsettling encounters with historical materials, object lessons in how fiction can mythologize scholarly labor and knowledge-making. Films including *The Skulls* and *American Animals* explore the corrupting potential of college life, while *Dead Poet's Society* and scenes from the *Indiana Jones* franchise offered students a distinctly *lighter* perspective on Dark Academia. The subculture's eurocentrism, for many community members its primary attraction, is a predominant concern for some of its practitioners. Novels like R.F. Kuang's *Babel* expose how seemingly objective tools of humanistic inquiry like language and translation, valorized in standard academic discourses as often as in Dark Academic ones, have historically been tools of colonial violence and exploitative systems.

I developed assignments that asked students to think in deep and sustained ways about concepts they encountered in our readings, giving these assessments silly and pretentious names in Latin (*Cogitationes*, *Florilegia*, *Illuminationes*) as a nod toward Dark Academia's special regard for the languages of classical antiquity. For the most part, students chose to study material artifacts, like cigarettes in *The Secret History* or the secret society rule book in *The Skulls*. Digital objects (or digital collections of non-digital objects) like mood boards, marketing campaigns, decorating guides, and "Get Ready With Me" videos became the academic subjects of student essays and classroom discussions. An early writing assignment, the first of four short *Cogitationes*, asked students to analyze an online text—advertisement, meme, TikTok, or post on Facebook or Instagram—that evoked one or more elements of #DarkAcademia. Subsequent essays investigated recurring tropes or motifs in course texts; differentiated between real-life academic labor and glamorized scenes of Research Noir; and meditated on students' own experiences of college life *in fieri*, commenced but not yet completed. These assignments developed college-level composition skills and also encouraged writers to reflect on what subject material and intellectual pursuits they most enjoy.

The *Florilegium*, a commonplace book assignment, asked students to experiment with this premodern writing practice by maintaining a notebook where they would informally collect and organize the textual and visual matter they observed in their daily life. The Latin word *florilegium* unites *flores*, meaning flowers, and *legere*, to gather: a gathering of flowers, a bouquet comprised of items selected for their specific aesthetic interest or appeal. Learning how the practice of reading in the past almost always involved a pen and ink, students completing the *florilegium* experienced firsthand the practice of chronicling their encounters with various kinds of popular and intellectual culture. They produced stunning commonplace books, some elaborately illustrated and others that compiled original poetry, grocery lists, and one-liner jokes from a streaming comedy series. We also made surprising discoveries about our class texts. Students considered literary works and secondary sources in various forms, some excerpted from longer pieces or without additional contexts, and revisited others familiar to them from their high school curricula. *Ninth House*, we learned partway through reading, circulates in multiple forms and formats, including editions with additional paratextual material, offered exclusively by publishers to big box stores like *Target* or chains like *Barnes & Noble*: discussion questions, stained edges, unique cover art, and bonus chapters annotated by the author. Cringing but gleeful, students enthusiastically embraced the performative pretentiousness of these assignments but

also learned to understand writing as a regular and experimental practice rather than something that is only formal and to be evaluated.

Built on unconventional assignments like the florilegium, entertaining course readings, and discussions that centered as often as not on students' everyday experiences on campus, ENG 2367 was ultimately a success according to traditional administrative measurements—student evaluation of instruction, assignment assessment, qualitative feedback, student buy-in. However, a few stories about my pedagogical failures will help reinforce this essay's larger point about students' preferences for what they perceived as an older way (or the right way) of learning. I offered, for the first time in my teaching career, an audiobook option for one of our class texts. Having previously enjoyed reading the *Ninth House* in audiobook form, I thought it might be a productive experiment to encourage students to approach a course text in an unusual way, especially in a medium sometimes considered to be unintellectual or low-brow. This unfamiliar mode of consuming their college reading assignments, I presumed, would also prompt conversations about oral and memorial literary cultures, citation and reference practices, and accommodating different learning styles. To my surprise, not a single student out of seventeen took advantage of this opportunity. I also developed assignments with options suited to my (perhaps naïve) vision of a tech-savvy and extremely online student body. Their final presentation, the *Illuminatio*, was framed as an opportunity to discover something novel, to encounter new knowledge, and to be enlightened. Students' three-to-five-minute lightning talks could take the form of an online text—like a Twitter thread or a story (or its equivalent) on Facebook, Instagram, or TikTok. Not a single student chose this option, selecting instead to present traditional, rehearsed slide-show presentations. Their lack of interest in listening-as-reading and in creative approaches to the final project constituted a missed opportunity for thinking critically about the media they consume and how such media influences their behavior, culture, and beliefs.

I suspect that students' reluctance to take on these experimental approaches was due to a preference for the familiar, and therefore perhaps the easier, option, especially during the busy end-of-semester period. Or, possibly their hesitation to tackle these multimedia projects was related to a self-conscious avoidance of hyper-modern forms of media, especially if they felt strongly about maintaining a separation between their academic lives and social lives. Either way, my surprise at their choices showcases a generational divide in how we think about technology and online culture. As a millennial professor, I assumed that engagements with online and multimodal forms of scholarship would feel as exciting and natural to my students as they did to me, someone who was not encouraged or permitted to engage in these creative forms of thinking in my own education. Their choices revealed, rather, an unselfconscious preference for their received and established knowledge about the forms that assignments take in higher education: PowerPoint presentations are simply how college students (and academics writ large) share information. Even so, students' preferences for more traditional projects still resulted in excellent work. And though they resisted engaging with audiobooks, Twitter threads, and podcast episodes, students were drawn to the materiality of assignments like the commonplace book, which offered familiar forms of engagement reframed as academic projects. What I had originally taken to be failures in assignment-building, I discovered, were actually instructive in how they revealed students' desires to engage with higher education in a purer form. Even if it happened unconsciously, my students favored the traditional formats available to the characters they

encountered in our fictional texts, preferring these to the modern technologies responsible for the conception and viral growth of #DarkAcademia itself.

This is the appeal of Dark Academia, despite its origin and primary home in online media subcultures: to imagine a world without electronic distraction, furnished instead with musty books and labyrinthine libraries. An existence without constant screens could be the detail, in fact, that students loved most about *The Secret History*. Laptops and mobile phones were nowhere to be found in the novel; students at Hampden consulted missed call notifications on Post-it notes and lingered by a dormitory pay phone for incoming calls. Although Donna Tartt could not have foreseen how extraordinarily ancient such behavior would seem to a generation reared seemingly with smart devices in hands, this anecdote encapsulates for me the value my students saw in Dark Academia. They longed for a time when one's focus was not distracted by so many worldly things, when the pleasures and challenges of learning could take center stage without the pressures our current undergraduates must constantly manage: student loans, résumé-building, concurrent jobs, finding the perfect internship. Above all, Dark Academia cultivates a sentimental affection for a time when human connections were built exclusively through in-person interaction, even if those relationships were thorny, toxic, and (as *The Secret History* reminds us) inevitably dissolved into murder.

Ironically, as the extensive scholarship reminds us, nostalgia is a yearning for an impossible time and place that never really existed (see Boym 2001; Nguyen 2022). Students' attraction to Dark Academia, best illustrated by their fascination with outmoded technologies and pretentious Latin names, represents an enthusiasm for a traditional, old-school college education that they feel has become, or has always been, inaccessible to them. Colleagues at other institutions have confirmed my sense that many of our Generation Z matriculants actually dislike online cultures. They are unhappy with how much time they spend on their smartphones and how modern technologies influence their behaviors and relationships. With that perspective, it is unsurprising that students would instead prefer to write a traditional essay or present a PowerPoint slideshow. I find valuable such humbling reminders that students often have different (but no less legitimate) priorities from their teachers. Their resistance to these assignments, though certainly not true of all students or all assignments, complicates the customary logic of new technologies and requires that we as instructors revisit our ideas about what our students really want and what we can offer them through our instructional design and learning objectives.

Dark Academia's core attention to elite institutions is characteristic of a collegiate fantasy of privilege and status that does not align with the experiences of most of my students at Ohio State. Colleagues teaching on small liberal arts campuses, especially those in New England, dryly joke that their students are living in *The Secret History*—murderous Classicists aside, precisely (and ironically) the intimate, interactive environment advertised to prospective undergraduates. The social media feeds of incoming freshmen, at least when I was in school, regularly compared their gothic dormitories and seminar classrooms to magical Hogwarts castle. As my students at Ohio State reckoned with Dark Academia's vision of higher education, media which endeavors to make accessible architectures and fashions otherwise unavailable to them at a land-grant university in the Midwest, they also reflected on the academic cultures of their own campus and institution. Anticipating these conversations, the syllabus culminated in discussions about the #DarkAcademic past of Lima, Ohio. Students discover the central role of their industrial, midwestern city in the dark history of American biblioclasm, the

commercial fragmenting of priceless medieval manuscripts. In the 1930s and 1940s (and beyond), infamous book-breaker and professor of book history Otto Ege based part of his fragment-selling operation at the Lima Public Library, just down the road from our campus. Through digital encounters with Ege leaves dispersed across the Midwest and a class visit to one of the country's largest public library collections of fragments, the class grappled with Ege's proud self-identification as a biblioclast and reflected on the value of heritage collections and Lima's own place in Dark Academic culture (see Johnson 2023 and Davis 2013).

Dark Academia's insistent remediation of historical content appeals to my broader research interests in reception and materiality. But one undertheorized problem with the culture of Dark Academia is that, despite a reliance on the imagery and tropes of its literary-historical sources, rarely do its adherents online or in fiction engage with the complexities of the material they consume and reproduce. Sometimes, they simply get it wrong, which leaves the subject specialist wondering about authorial intentionality and whether accuracy and authenticity should even matter. Strained close readings, triumphant renderings of ungrammatical Latin, and glaring anachronisms elicit teachable moments: were these instances blunders by over-eager characters or missteps by their creators? Dark Academia's surface-level engagement with the historical past constituted a recurring theme in my course, but I came to realize that I regularly facilitate similar conversations when I teach Arthurian Romance, medieval historiography, and Shakespeare's history plays. Students in our GenEd classes are already primed and eager to contend with forms of medievalism ranging from Pre-Raphaelite painting to the Gothic novel, to study the Middle Ages, as I often do, as a fantasy of the past reinvented by each subsequent generation. What distinguishes our encounters with Dark Academia's textual and digital materiality is that its inherent contemporaneity necessitates that we examine it through the lens of what a new generation of students deems iconic, fashionable, and aspirational.

Situated, like my research, at the intersection of materiality and textuality, #DarkAcademia ultimately celebrates the idea of the humanities, rendering personally rewarding and inherently valuable the work that we do and the work that our students do. My solution to the cluster's provocation about the relationship between research and teaching, even in my courses about Britain or the Middle Ages, has been to focus on the *local*, directing students' attention toward their personal experiences on campus and online. Other humanities instructors, building on the particular contexts of their own regional geographies and academic specialties, could engage intentionally and productively with the dark histories that inevitably have marked *their* institutions and communities: material remainders like statues, water fountains, bathrooms, and bullet holes can speak to histories of segregation and discrimination, progress won through organized labor and protest, the heroes and victims of political unrest. These everyday artifacts summon uncomfortable revelations about our white-washed past but also prompt vital conversations about our shared futures. #DarkAcademia, at its heart, revels in the wonder and joy of books and bookish-objects and the experience of encountering them, both in the flesh (literally, in the course of my job as a medievalist) as well as in the digital spaces our students increasingly create and inhabit.

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