THE ONCE AND FUTURE COURSE: TEACHING THE ARTHURIAN LEGEND

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Clear to California, kissed by crashing waves,
Winner of Wisconsin in the west by his wiles,
Majestic in the majority of great Massachusetts...(etc.)

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Derek Pearsall is the Gurney Professor of English at Harvard University and was
Professor and Co-Director of the Centre for Medieval Studies at the University of
York, 1965–85. His numerous publications include *John Lyndgate* (1970), *Old English
and Middle English Poetry* (1977), *The Canterbury Tales: A Critical Study* (1985), *An
Annotated Critical Bibliography of Langland* (1990), and *The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer*
(1992).

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Teaching the Arthurian legend presents several challenges to the instructor.
Many important works (such as Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* and Tennyson's *Idylls of
the King*) are difficult for non-specialists to read and understand. Students'
preconceptions about the legend, usually derived from the popular tradition, may
hinder fresh responses to the primary texts. With this profusion of Arthur-related
material—medieval and modern, literary and visual, fictional and historical—comes
the challenge of selecting the works that best reflect the legend as it has evolved. As a
Teaching Fellow in Derek Pearsall's undergraduate course, 'The Story of Arthur,' my
aim was to help students interpret the primary texts while identifying the legend's
broader themes and archetypes—archetypes which have provided fertile ground for
re-imaginings (novels, films, and comic strips) since Malory.

'The Story of Arthur' is part of Harvard's 'Core' curriculum, which seeks to
introduce students to the major approaches to knowledge in areas the faculty deems
indispensable to undergraduate education. Core classes are not aimed at majors in
the field and therefore do not require the intellectual background or scholarly skills
expected of students in departmental courses. The majority of my students were
science and social science majors. Their lack of experience with literary analysis, even
with close readings, placed a premium on helping them engage with works they
might otherwise find obscure.

Lectures (given by the professor) emphasized broad themes ('the conflict between
secular and spiritual chivalry,' 'Malorian tragedy') and trends ('the revival of
medievalism,' 'ideological appropriation'). Discussion sections of about 20, taught
by graduate student Teaching Fellows, gave students the opportunity to move beyond
the 'what' to the 'why' and from the general to the specific. Section assignments were
designed to provide students with ample opportunity to practice their critical reading
and writing skills. Rather than attempting to cover the entirety of Malory, the style
and sheer length of which daunted many students, in the limited discussion time
allotted, I assigned three significant sections: Caxton's books 1–4 (Arthur's rise to

power), books 13–17 (the Grail quest), and books 18–21 (the affair of Lancelot and Guinevere and the fall of the Round Table).

Students responded that they found it more instructive (and less tedious!) to approach Malory in this manner.[1] As one student remarked: 'The length and density of the reading was a bit ridiculous but you focused us in on specific passages.' In addition, prior to section meetings I distributed via e-mail discussion questions designed to help students focus on critical issues and passages in each text. One student commented: 'It always helps to know what to look for before you plunge in.' Students also used the questions to prepare for exams and develop paper topics: 'I would save them for when I had an exam or paper and they served as a review.'

Another type of computer technology I used to help students understand the reading and prepare for section was the on-line Internet discussion chamber. I use this technology in every class I teach, from 'Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*' to 'The Postmodern Novel.' Each Teaching Fellow had his or her individual discussion chamber in the course's web page (http://icg.harvard.edu/~arthur), which was accessible to students via personal computer and contained the syllabus, supplementary readings, lecture notes, and other relevant material such as full-color reproductions of works by Sir Edward Burne-Jones. Each week, I 'posted' an important scene or passage from the reading in the chamber, along with some questions about its significance. I then asked every student to post either a response to one of the questions or their own comment about the passage. Over the course of the week, students would read their classmates' responses and comment on them.

The discussion chamber elevated the analysis of more accessible texts such as Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* and T.H. White's *The Once and Future King*, while facilitating the analysis of more challenging texts such as Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, where close reading of passages and line-by-line analyses were essential. One student said that the ongoing exchange 'forced us to do mini-response papers' and gave them necessary practice in close reading. Knowing that comments would be read by their peers encouraged students to think more carefully about their responses. Another student observed: 'I had to respond over e-mail to another class this semester, but just to the Teaching Fellow, and I found that my responses for your section were always more thought-out and analytical than for his.'

The ease and efficiency with which the accumulating commentary was accessed and updated could only be achieved using Internet technology. I posted clarifications or corrected factual errors in students' responses as necessary, but by and large the discussion chamber was a 'virtual classroom' run entirely by students. They could participate in the ongoing discussion at all hours of the day or night ('When I had a free moment I would read the thoughts of my classmates.'), thereby making it easier for them to devote more time to the class ('It's a way of making students think about class more than three hours a week, and that's good.'). The jousting scene between King Pellinore and Sir Grummore in T.H. White's *The Once and Future King* yielded a particularly fruitful discussion. One student analyzed how the passage satirized Malory's more sober and serious portrayal of chivalry. Another student responded that the satire is achieved by emphasizing the performative and choreographed aspect

of combat. A third student said the scene illustrated White's own opinions about war as expressed elsewhere in the novel by Merlyn.

The films included in the course were another way of making the material more accessible to non-specialists. On the first day of class I asked 'What was your first encounter with Arthur?' and the overwhelming response was that it was a film. Still, it is not enough to include a film on the syllabus simply because it is about Arthur. In the words of one student: 'There are a million bad books about Arthur out there, but we didn't read them.' At the same time, it would be wrong to omit films, as they have been an important medium for the re-imagining and circulation of the legend. I found that the most useful films were those which linked well with texts in the course.

A good example is *Excalibur*. Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* is Boorman's primary source, and both works attempt to tell the story from beginning to end. Students also drew parallels between *Excalibur* and Geoffrey of Monmouth. The scene in which Uther seduces Ygerna is a powerful visual dramatization of Geoffrey of Monmouth's account, in which Uther's conquest of woman and territory are presented as expressions of the same martial prowess. In the film, violent and vivid shots of sword-wielding knights are intercut with close-ups of armor-clad Uther thrusting into Ygerna. Also, the many students who recognize Wagnerian themes in Trevor Jones's score are reminded of the way Geoffrey of Monmouth and other early authors emphasize Arthur's status as a national hero. Films like George Lucas's *Star Wars*, which are not explicitly about Arthur but which incorporate aspects of the legend, can also challenge students to trace the mutation of central themes and motifs, such as a leader whose lineage is shrouded in mystery or a magician-teacher.

As I was able to see in their final papers, students seemed eager to investigate the way the story of Arthur evolved to meet the changing tastes of authors and audiences. Some of the strongest papers were those which compared different treatments of the same 'Arthurian episode' (Arthur's birth/death, the Grail quest, the affair between Lancelot and Guinevere). Some students addressed the way a later text exaggerated or suppressed details of an earlier text. Others examined societal pressures shaping authors' interpretations. Although specific topics varied, nearly every final paper addressed different appropriations of the legend and ventured to explain—by analyzing, for example, the evolving portrayal of a central character such as Gawain— why the story has proved so susceptible to continual re-writing.

The option of a creative project in lieu of a final paper enabled students to move beyond how others have interpreted the legend and participate themselves in the process of cultural transformation. Projects included short films and videos, dramatic and musical performances, and stories. Some projects parodied the legend (a video, 'In Search of the Harvard Grail') while others critiqued it (a performance art piece, 'Wench, Witch, and Wallflower: The Changing Role of Women'). The most successful projects were those which, with a mixture of critical insight and creative skill, explored the meaning(s) of the legend in new contexts. One student's short story, 'The Arthurian Knight in the Wild West,' investigated what happens to chivalric quest and courtly love when they are transplanted in time and space. The story illuminated not only

the medieval legend of king and knight, but the modern legend of cowboy and outlaw as well. By exercising their imagination and their critical skills in this way, students tried their hands at shaping the Arthurian legend which, at the dawn of a new millennium, is still re-inventing itself.

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NOTES

1. Student comments are excerpted from an anonymous questionnaire concerning the characteristics of the course and the effectiveness of instructors. This questionnaire was administered by the Committee on Undergraduate Education at Harvard, which compiles and publishes the results as a reference guide for future students considering enrolling in the course.

JOUSTING IN THE CLASSROOM: ON TEACHING MALORY

When I began the semester teaching Arthurian literature I wanted to find some way of incorporating jousting into the classroom, and eventually my students showed me how. It wasn't as exciting as I had hoped, but no one got hurt or had their heads chopped off (at least not permanently), and if the experiment turned out to be somewhat of a failure it was at least failure from which both my students and I learned a great deal. Appropriately, the jousting took place while we were studying Malory. For me, the experience of jousting in the classroom and the experience of trying to teach Malory were equivalent: a failure from which everyone learned.

I had decided in advance that after the first five weeks of the semester I would turn the responsibility of opening discussion over to my students, in order to stir their interest and involvement and hopefully bring more creativity into the classroom. I had students sign up ahead of time for the week in which they were most interested. I then asked students to check in with me in advance a couple days before class with their plans, both so that I could give them some guidance and so that I could prepare myself to pick up wherever they left off. But basically, other than a little guidance and fine-tuning, I left things up to them.

It was in the second of three weeks studying Malory that my students introduced jousting, albeit in a somewhat cerebral version. Most likely, they came up with the idea in desperation, because we were talking that week about the treacherous middle third of Malory—the true 'enchanted forest' of the Malorian narrative through which the first-time reader wanders in a daze from knight to knight and from joust to joust, in a narrative without landmarks and no sense of direction. At least that's how I still feel, even now as a second-time reader of Malory, as I make my way through the middle of Malory from the beginning of Tristram's adventures in Book VIII (Caxton's version) up to the start of the Holy Grail narrative. Reading the course material that week, I felt as if I was getting lost deeper and deeper in the tangled heart of romance, the thicket of thickets, from which I had small hope ever to emerge—and no hope to emerge with the sense of what had happened and when, or any confidence I would