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Introduction Special Cluster: Retellings of Medieval Literature in the Classroom

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Introduction Special Cluster: Retellings of Medieval Literature in the Classroom

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Abstract

This special cluster focuses on the role of contemporary retellings of medieval literature in classroom contexts, thereby providing a platform for a largely neglected topic of research. It features articles on a diverse range of retellings—including, for example, fanfiction and an interactive novel—and displays the various re-reading adventures students embark upon as they engage with contemporary adaptations or pen their own personal version of a medieval tale. Retellings consequently prove useful and democratic educational tools that allow for a more expansive student engagement with medieval material.

There is no doubt that medieval literature has exercised influence far beyond its time, but some periods have been more prone to seeking out medieval material for inspiration than others. In recent years, we have once more seen an upsurge of texts that draw heavily on works produced in the Middle Ages. Prominent examples include Patience Agbabi's poetry collection *Telling Tales* (2014), a modern rendering of Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, Maria Dahvana Headley's *The Mere Wife* (2018), which rewrites *Beowulf*, the Arthurian short story collection *Sword Stone Table* (2021), edited by Swapna Krishna and Jenn Northington, and Zadie Smith's dramatic reimagining of Chaucer's Wife of Bath, *The Wife of Willesden* (2021). They illustrate that the appeal of medieval literature is neither limited to a particular genre nor to a specific source. Reworkings also span various media and comprise cultural products as varied as the Arthurian-inspired 2020 graphic novel-turned-television series *Cursed*, the critically acclaimed film *The Green Knight* (2021), and the video game *King Arthur: Knight's Tale* (2022).

Medieval scholarship, and especially medievalism studies, has started to pick up on the trend, with Marion Turner tracing the modern reception of the Wife of Bath in *The Wife of Bath: A Biography* (2023) and various edited collections dedicating chapters to contemporary retellings, such as *Medieval Afterlives in Contemporary Culture* (2015), edited by Gail Ashton, and *Postmodern Poetry and Queer Medievalisms: Time Mechanics* (2022), edited by David Hadbawnik, and soon, an entire volume on a contemporary author's reception of the Middle Ages, *Caroline Bergvall's Medievalist Poetics: Migratory Texts and Transhistorical Methods* (forthcoming 2023), edited by Joshua Davies and Caroline Bergvall.

However, there is another, often overlooked realm where contemporary retellings of medieval material make their influence felt and are the topic of debate: the classroom. The essays assembled in this cluster demonstrate the extent to which retellings can function as motivating and versatile pedagogical tools: they ease the way into engaging with the source material; they open up a dialogue between past and present contexts; they allow students to become creative themselves and experiment with the practice of retelling, also beyond conventional parameters of literary production; they can be playful and interactive, especially in contexts of games; and they heighten students' awareness for differences as well as continuities and convergences between the past and the present.

Scholarship on using retellings in classroom settings, however, is slim, and even slimmer when it comes to retellings of medieval material in particular.¹ While there are useful publications from an Adaptation Studies perspective—and retellings overlap with adaptations to a certain extent—there is a predominant focus on screen adaptations rather than written adaptations.² From a pedagogical perspective, doing screen adaptations in an English class may not be the best choice given that the goal is to focus on narrative and language. Marina Lambrou's edited volume on *Narrative Retellings: Stylistic Approaches* (2021), which covers a broad range of genres, both fictional and factual ones, contains a useful section on "Pedagogical applications of retellings" (181–234); yet the volume does not include any material from medieval contexts.

An innovative new approach from a medievalist perspective is Christine Schott's concept of "canon fanfiction," a term she has coined in order to speak to her target audience—undergraduate students (2023, 3). "Canon fanfiction" is fanfiction of premodern canonical Western works, which

¹ There are of course exceptions; see e.g. Forni 2016.

² See Cartmell and Whelehan 2014.

Schott distinguishes, among other terms, from retellings (relatively close revisiting of a source text) and adaptations (often implying a change of medium, very loose term). Her book offers an insightful introduction to the pedagogical benefits of including retellings and “canon fanfiction” in the classroom, and she offers hands-on methods and starting points for teaching contexts, discussing, for instance, Kim Zarin’s *Sometimes We Tell the Truth* (2016) and Maria Dahvana Headley’s *The Mere Wife*. Also, and importantly, she stresses an aspect that also emerges from the essays in our cluster: retellings as a pedagogical tool enable inclusion and access. In a diverse classroom, “students whose voices, perspectives, and sometimes even existence have been denied or erased by canon literature [can] write themselves back into the tradition” (Schott 2023, 10).

Taken together, the contributions to this special cluster on “Retellings of Medieval Literature in the Classroom” showcase the potential of contemporary retellings as entryways to medieval literature and to opening up the canon to new audiences. The articles foreground, in particular, the student engagement and participation generated by introducing retellings into the curriculum and outline, among other aspects, assignments that facilitate active learning in the classroom. On the one hand, contemporary retellings, such as Agbabi’s *Telling Tales*, elicit a re-consideration of the medieval material at hand, especially in view of its relevance for our historical moment, and thus show the vital role medieval literature can play today. On the other hand, modern adaptations highlight the playful way in which one—anyone, even the students themselves—can engage with the Middle Ages: namely by rewriting the medieval tale. Indeed, what struck us as we reviewed the cluster articles were the numerous ways in which retelling—both in the form of a published text and a learning activity in class—can be utilized in order to get students actively involved in the discussion of medieval literature. Our contributors demonstrate, often by reflecting on their own experience of teaching retellings at university level, the kind of re-reading adventures students embark upon in seminars as they debate others’ as well as their own take on medieval texts. Retellings ultimately prove useful educational tools that allow for extensive student engagement with medieval material.

Our cluster also underscores that retelling, both inside and outside the classroom, is an astonishingly democratic literary practice. Not only can it be employed in different genres—among our contributions you will find, for instance, discussions of a play as well as an interactive novel—but it can also be utilized by anyone willing to try their hand at creative writing. From professional authors to amateurs and students, retelling is easily accessible to all groups of writers, and while it can involve a very complex writing process, it has the advantage that it provides one with a plot and characters that can then be tinkered with. If anything, retelling as a practice is worth taking seriously, and worth trying.

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