Teaching Literary Responses to the Black Death During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract.

In this paper, I provide a case study about the experience of teaching literary responses to the Black Death online during the recent closure of universities in Ireland. I outline the rationale for teaching the module, discussing some of the obstacles and opportunities presented by the sudden switch to online teaching. I provide some practical details and include reflections on the experience of the class.

Keywords: Black Death; COVID-19; Medieval literature; Pandemic; Online Teaching.

This paper presents a case-study describing the experience of teaching a seminar class on literary responses to the fourteenth-century Black Death in the immediate aftermath of the closure of Irish universities due to the COVID-19 outbreak. I describe the module in which the session was taught, outlining how my plans for teaching this session changed, not only due to the need to adapt the material for an online context, but also due to the challenges of teaching about literary responses to perhaps the most famous and deadly pandemic in history at a time when many students were deeply affected by the ongoing public health crisis.

As a lecturer in medieval literature at the School of English, Trinity College Dublin, I teach an advanced optional seminar class for third- and fourth-year students, called Surviving Trauma in the Middle Ages. The module is an option open to Sophister students of English, and normally attracts a cohort of 18-20, including students with varying levels of previous experience of Middle English literature. The module considers the ways in which medieval texts represent the experience of trauma, with a particular focus on the ways such texts emphasise the theme of survival and endurance in the face of such experiences. In developing the module, I have been conscious of the limitations of applying modern trauma theory to the literature of the Middle Ages, but have found it useful as a way of bringing out aspects of medieval literary texts which are relevant to modern audiences, while also enabling students to confront many of the radical differences between medieval and modern attitudes to the problem of suffering. In the module,

we discuss literary representations of a variety of deeply personal experiences, including bereavement, sexual assault and mental illness, and we consider the political, moral and religious ideologies that frame medieval representations of such sufferings. We also pay attention to how literature is shaped by catastrophic experiences such as war, conquest and plague.

For a number of years, I have taught an anonymous poem called Cleanness, a text which has been convincingly interpreted as a response to the Black Death which devastated Europe (and much of the known world) in the middle of the fourteenth century. The poem never explicitly mentions the Black Death: at a literal level, the text is a homiletic poem on the theme of 'cleanness' or purity, which tells a series of terrible exempla about the ways in which God has punished human sinfulness, or 'filth', over the course of human history. Like a medieval sermon, it has a broadly tripartite structure: the first section deals with Noah and the Flood, the second with the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, while the third briefly narrates the conquest of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar, and the subsequent destruction of his successor, Belshazzar. David Coley has demonstrated that the poem's account of mass death is shaped by the memory of the Black Death, and the poet's rhetoric is startlingly close to that of medieval plague sermons. The text can be challenging for students: its graphic accounts of mass death and its stridently moralistic attitudes (in particular towards homosexuality) mean that it is not immediately accessible to a twenty-first century audience. This year, teaching the poem presented particular challenges, as not only did I have to teach it remotely, I also had to remain conscious of how uncomfortable it might be to teach a poem about mass death during the middle of a global pandemic.

I had scheduled to teach the text approximately 10 days after the College closed down; it was a period of uncertainty and distress for many students, who were struggling to deal with the fallout of the college closure, changes to their domestic arrangements, as well as concern about the virus itself and its impact on them and their families. Nonetheless, reading the poem again convinced me that it would be useful to explore the text at that time, and that it was a useful opportunity to bring an understanding of a contemporary issue to bear on a medieval text, while studying the medieval text might also help students to reflect on the ways in which societies seek to find meaning in catastrophes and pandemics. The text contains numerous features that resonated deeply when read in the context of the pandemic. The poem imagines a God who is vengeful and angry, but above all fastidious, even squeamish, in his abhorrence of filth of every kind: the poem stimulates a visceral disgust at uncleanness that conflates physical and spiritual

senses of 'filth' and transforms hygiene into a moral imperative. This abjection of what is impure further translates into hostility towards those perceived as transgressive of social and religious norms; thus, the poem bears witness to the desire to place blame on certain groups which finds uncomfortable echoes in the hostilities we witnessed towards a number of marginalised groups in society in the aftermath of the COVID-19 outbreak. For all these reasons, I felt that the poem would prove remarkably relevant to students.

There remained, however, the practical challenge of teaching the text remotely. Typically, when I have taught the text in the past, I have used small-group exercises, dividing the class into groups of 4-5 and assigning a particular task or topic for each to explore: for example, getting one group of the students to compare sections of the poem with selections from medieval sermons about the Black Death, or asking some to consider how the poem's narrative of Noah's Flood highlights medieval attitudes to the relationship between humanity and the natural world. Had face-to-face teaching continued this year, I would have set specific research tasks for the group, for example asking students to locate and summarise a relevant critical article in the library. In an online setting, it would not be possible to do things in the same way. Given the suddenness of the College closure, the fact that many students would be in different timezones, not to mention the enormous disruption and the anxiety and uncertainty of staff and students, our School decided that it was best to use an asynchronous approach for the remainder of term, and set out a range of approaches for staff to use as they transitioned to online teaching. For my seminar, I opted to keep things simple, focusing on making resources available to students and trying to provide a framework in which they could explore the text in their own time, while also using an online discussion board.

The first task was to update the Blackboard page for the module: in addition to the bibliography that had already been provided, I identified a number of useful essays that were freely available online and added them as PDFs. I would not ordinarily provide quite so much material, as it's important to encourage students to develop research skills and help them understand how to find resources, but given the bewildering and limiting circumstances of the immediate aftermath of the college closure, this seemed a better way to support them. I provided a substantial PowerPoint presentation, annotated with my lecture notes, but modified to include questions aimed at encouraging a reflective response to the material. Given that one of the main objects of the class was to discuss the poem as a response to the Black Death, I provided scanned copies of short extracts from Rosemary Horrox's sourcebook, and also provided a link to an article by Fintan O'Toole on artistic responses to pestilences, which had appeared in that week's

Irish Times. Finally, I set up a Discussion Board; again, I kept this very simple, asking students to provide one substantial response each (300-500 words), and committed to replying to each one individually while also providing a general response to the collective replies. I required all students to read the PowerPoint, the material from Horrox's sourcebook, and an article by David Coley about the poem as a response to trauma, and invited them to read as many of the other sources as they wanted; I also gave a deadline by which the responses had to be added to the Discussion Board.

Considering that the session was put together at short notice, and that none of us were operating in ideal circumstances, the responses on the discussion board indicated that things went quite well. Students responded strongly to the unexpected relevance of the text, and drew useful comparisons and contrasts between medieval and modern responses to pandemics and contagious illness. Many of the students highlighted that they found the poem interesting (one student referred to it as 'riveting' , which is not a word I'd ever heard used by one of my students in relation to this poem before), but also very unsettling to read in the current climate. In particular, a couple of students made fascinating comments about the way the poem made them think about the effects of witnessing traumatic events and living through a pandemic. One concept that emerged forcefully was the idea that literary and artistic responses to trauma often seek to impose meaning on chaos: one student cited a line from the O'Toole article which said that 'art cannot really abide pointlessness'. Many students drew comparisons to other medieval texts they had studied, including works by Chaucer, and medieval dramatic representations of Noah's Flood and other biblical events.

Certainly, the experience of teaching this text online has changed the way I will teach the text in future, even when we return to our classrooms. While I was careful to flag the relevance of the topic to the current public health crisis, I was not quite prepared for how directly this would feed into student responses to the text; it highlighted the need to remain alert to the very real impact the pandemic has had on students and their loved ones. As I write, we still do not know what the coming semester holds for us, but at the moment, I am working on the assumption that the majority of teaching will be online, and thinking about how I might modify my teaching next year. This experience has convinced me that asynchronous teaching has an important role to play in the delivery of a module. In particular, I was delighted to see how well the discussion boards worked: these proved to be a very equitable forum, which allowed all students to engage, and helped a number of quiet students find their voice in the classroom. But of course asynchronous and synchronous teaching methods are not mutually exclusive, and I plan to

incorporate substantially more synchronous teaching, guiding students through the material in real time, but also using features such as breakout rooms on Blackboard, to allow students to engage more directly with their peers and discuss the material in small online groups. One thing that emerged powerfully from our discussions of this text is that witnessing a rapidly transmissible and lethal illness is a forceful reminder that the interconnectedness of human beings is a source of tremendous vulnerability, but also resilience and strength. While the experience of my students was diminished by not being able to gather together to share their ideas and responses to the text, the experience of teaching and learning online during the pandemic nonetheless convinced me that online teaching offers rewarding and often unexpected opportunities for connection and shared learning experiences, which can richly complement the more familiar environment of the classroom.