

MASTERCLASS
On teaching in truth

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December 1, 2017



Covet ye, therefore, my words, and love them, and you shall have instruction.
— *Wisdom of Solomon 6:12*

WHY DO I TEACH medieval European history? I can tell you in three words: *because story matters*. More particularly: *because the stories with which we fill our imaginations shape our souls as well as our actions in the world*.¹

All of the courses that I teach begin from this premise: that the study of history is valuable not just for the skills that it imparts, but also for its content because it is the content of its stories that gives shape to our understanding of ourselves and our world. The humanities as a whole have become heavily invested in the intersection of identity and practice over the past thirty or so years, but history has always been about identity—about our particular identities as individuals and about our shared identity as human beings. It is the practice of telling ourselves, as human beings, who we are.



METHODOLOGICALLY, in all my courses, I focus on helping students become aware of the way in which stories frame the way they think about the past, while at the same time encouraging them to read the sources I assign for the questions that they were originally

¹ For another version of this argument, see “Why Study the Humanities?,” March 2, 2016, <<http://fencingbearatprayer.blogspot.com/2016/03/why-study-humanities.html>>.

intended to answer; that is, to look for the frames within which they were originally written.

In my two-quarter section of our core sequence “History of European Civilization,” this exercise takes the form of particular questions that I have the students ask about each text that we read: What does the author tell us (explicitly or implicitly) about why he or she was writing? Why was the author’s subject so important that he or she considered it worth writing about? What does the author’s interest in the subject tell us about the historical circumstances in which he or she was writing?

In my undergraduate and graduate courses in medieval history and the history of Christianity, my methodology is the same, if less explicit: to think ourselves inside the frame(s) from within which our sources were written so as to attempt to understand why their authors made the arguments that they did in the way that they did and thereby become aware of the limitations of our own frames. (Hans-Georg Gadamer would say, of our horizon of expectations.)

Such an exercise is necessarily always contingent and provisional, subject to revision as we read further into the sources, become aware of new elements in the story, and encounter assumptions for which we have no interpretive frame. My Doktormutter Caroline Walker Bynum coined the phrase “history in the comic mode” to describe this process. As Bruce Holsinger and I explained in the Afterword to the festschrift that we co-edited in her honor,

History in the comic mode challenges us as scholars (and storytellers) to recognize not only our endings, that is, our answers—carefully articulated on the basis of a proper weighting of the evidence in context, balanced against all the slippages and silences of the sources themselves—as constructions, but also our beginnings; the punch line is only funny, the answer is only satisfying, if we accept the premise of the joke....

As with all comedy, such an openness [to our own contingency] involves risks—we cannot be sure of our audience’s response any more than we can of our answers—and yet, we would insist, to refuse to take these risks out of otherwise commendable concerns for objectivity or methodological applicability, never

mind contemporary political urgency, is less a mark of serious scholarly rigor than it is a tragic refusal to join in the fun.²

I want my students to join in the fun, even as it challenges them to take risks, even as it threatens to overturn everything they have previously learned about the past—or about themselves.



LAST YEAR our Dean of Students John Ellison told our incoming freshman at Chicago not to expect “intellectual safe spaces” on our campus or “trigger warnings” in their syllabi. Rather, he told them: “You will find that we expect members of our community to be engaged in rigorous debate, discussion, and even disagreement. At times this may challenge you and even cause discomfort.” Many of my Chicago colleagues took issue with Dean Ellison’s assertion, insisting that “to start a conversation by declaring that such requests are not worth making is an affront to the basic principles of liberal education and participatory democracy.” Rather, they insisted, the classroom should be a place of mutual respect committed to learning from “a wealth of histories and experiences—to *more discussion, not less; to openness, not closure.*”³

At odds, as I see it, are two radically different conceptualizations of what it means to make a classroom “safe.” Should the university classroom be a place in which students are free of discomfort? Or should it be a place in which students are encouraged to take risks? Should it be a home—or a school? The answer depends on which frame we use.

If the classroom is a home, then our students are children and we, their teachers, are in the position of parents. It is our job to protect them from each other (siblings that they are) and from the threats that may come at them from the outside world, including the materials that we assign them to study.

² “Afterword,” in *History in the Comic Mode: Medieval Communities and the Matter of Person*, ed. Rachel Fulton and Bruce Holsinger (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 282-83.

³ I talk more about Dean Ellison’s letter and my colleagues’ response in “Safe Spaces vs. Sacred Spaces,” September 29, 2016, <<http://fencingbearatprayer.blogspot.com/2016/09/safe-spaces-vs-sacred-spaces.html>>.

But if the classroom is a school, our responsibilities to our students are somewhat different. Here the model is less that of a family, and more that of a training ground, an artificial space in which one is tested in order to develop certain skills. Insofar as this ground is removed from the consequences that actions have in what for lack of a better phrase we in academia call the “real” world, it is safe. We do not, as teachers, *want* our students to fail. And yet, if we do not give them the opportunity to fail, how will they learn?

This is the way in which I conceptualize the classroom: not so much as a “safe” space, as a sacred one—as a space, that is, for training the soul. The idea comes from the Rule of St. Benedict, where the monastery is described as a school (*scola*) for training souls in the service of the Lord. It is bounded—monasteries were typically walled—and, therefore, safe (relatively speaking) from exterior attack; but within the monastery, the monks confront all sorts of demons, most particularly, their own weaknesses and sins.

Likewise, the university classroom is bounded—having admitted our students to our program, we want them to succeed—but inside filled with risks, above all, the risk of saying something that others in the room find ignorant, objectionable, or absurd. Here another metaphor comes into play, that of the joust, where highly trained athletes pit themselves against each other in combat. It is a testing ground on which the combatants have agreed not to seek each other’s death, but rather only to exercise their skills.

Both metaphors—that of the monastery as a place for training in virtue and that of the tournament ground as a place of friendly competition—helped shape the institution of the university as it developed in medieval Europe, with additional input from the idea of the guild as an association of masters and apprentices to be trained in a particular craft. Are we as scholars monks or knights? Craftspeople or clergy? All—or none of the above?

My Chicago colleagues who objected to Dean Ellison’s letter seem to be suggesting that we are above all citizens, our primary purpose being to train our students to engage in our “participatory democracy.” As in my research, I tend to take a more experiential perspective, seeing our role as academics as closer to that of artists than of statesmen, of storytellers than of entrepreneurs, even as we participate the political and economic life of our society. This stance reflects, of course, my role as an historian, but it also affects the way in which I teach.



BY FAR my most popular course is my undergraduate-only “Tolkien: Medieval and Modern.” I first taught this course in Spring 2005 with Lucy Pick (Divinity School) and have taught it in Spring 2008, 2011, 2014, and 2017 by myself. The course is cross-listed in Fundamentals and in Religious Studies as well as in History; I typically get between fifty and a hundred students each session.

The students are required to have read *The Lord of the Rings* before the course starts, and I give them a quiz on the first day to make sure that they have. But the purpose of the course is not to quiz them on the details of Tolkien’s imaginative construction. Rather, it is intended to introduce the students to the frames within which Tolkien wrote—his use of language, history, philology, geography, music, and dreams; his idea of the Elf-friend as a mediator between Legend and History—and to invite them to enter into those frames and participate in the work of sub-creation to which, in Tolkien’s own words, we as human beings are called.

Tolkien was a devout Catholic. His purpose, as we learn from his letter to his prospective editor Milton Waldman, was to create a mythology (“a body of more or less connected legend”) for England.⁴ A pre-Christian mythology, to be sure: the mythology that the Anglo-Saxon pagans might have had. And yet, as he explained in a letter to the Jesuit Robert Murray, “*The Lord of the Rings* is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision.”⁵ Why is *The Lord of the Rings* so wonderfully re-readable, even as *The Silmarillion* is not? Because, or so I argue in the course, they are not just stories, they are scripture. They work on their readers in much the same way as scripture, encouraging the practice of *lectio divina*, requiring us to read not as modern readers might approach a novel, but as medieval readers approached their sacred texts.

Meaning: actively, expecting to be transformed by what we read, perhaps even inspired to act. One of the themes of our discussion in the course is the problem of choice

⁴ J.R.R. Tolkien, *Letters*, ed. Humphrey Carpenter (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), no. 131.

⁵ *Letters*, ed. Carpenter, no. 142.

and free will: Was Frodo able to choose to claim the Ring? But just as important is the way in which Tolkien shows his characters' choices as caught up in the activity of making—and of their relationship to the things that they have made. We contrast Aulë's willingness to destroy his sub-creations, the dwarves, with Fëanor's attachment to his, the Silmarils. And then, as the culmination of our study of Tolkien, we risk making something ourselves.

The students have two major assignments, in addition to reading and participating in our discussions in class. The first is a blog, where they are asked to post a number of reflections over the course of the quarter on the discussions we have been having in class.⁶ I have used blogs like this for two other courses and found them to be very successful at encouraging the students to write well, partly, I think, because with a blog they have a clear audience.⁷ But also because a blog, being public, gives them a sense of being real writers, not just completing an assignment. In this sense, they are participating in the public, scholarly conversation as sub-creators, as commentators on the texts, and indeed the blog for Tolkien has been acknowledged by colleagues in the field as a significant contribution to our study of Tolkien.

The second assignment is a little more complicated. The students have a choice of options: either to write a scholarly paper modeled on Tolkien's own scholarly work (e.g. "On Fairy Stories," "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics"), or to create something themselves. Tolkien himself issued the invitation in his letter to Milton Waldman, hoping to convince Waldman to publish his *legendarium* in full (Waldman declined):

Do not laugh! But once upon a time (my crest has long since fallen) I had a mind to make a body of more or less connected legend...which I could dedicate simply to England; to my country.... I would draw some of the great tales in fullness, and leave many only placed in the scheme, and sketched. The cycles should be linked

⁶ "Tolkien: Medieval and Modern," Spring 2011, Spring 2014, and Spring 2017, <<http://tolkienmedievalandmodern.blogspot.com>>.

⁷ "Mary and Mariology," Spring 2012, Autumn 2015, <<http://maryandmariology.blogspot.com>>; "Animals in the Middle Ages," Autumn 2010, Spring 2015, <<http://animalsinthemiddleages.blogspot.com>>.

to a majestic whole, and yet leave scope for other minds and hands, wielding paint and music and drama. Absurd.⁸

I invite the students to consider everything: stories, poems, songs, maps, comic strips, pictures, clothing, food. Some of the most ambitious projects that I have received over the years have included a hobbit morality play, complete with hobbit cast portraying the story of the Lamps; a Númenórean rock opera performed on the eve of their sailing West; and a series of hobbit poems about monsters complete with plush toys. The students are required to write an essay explaining how their works participate in the “depth” of Tolkien’s own sub-creation; the essays themselves are typically as rich (if not richer) than the works for the insight that they reveal about their makers’ own creative process.

In the end, as I hope the students realize, this is not just a course on reading Tolkien or imagining our way into his world, but an exercise in converting ourselves to a new way of seeing our own world. There is, I argue in our discussions, something fundamentally sacramental in the way in which Tolkien understands the relationship between material and Art. I want the students to see themselves not just as artists or authors but as participants in the sacrament of making, to recognize themselves, as Sam does on the stairs of Cirith Ungol, as being in the same story in which the light of the Trees has been captured in the Lady’s glass. This is what I think the title of the course means: finding ourselves still in the same story, neither medieval nor modern, but part of the whole, the glory of creation revealed through the sacrament of sub-creation. In Tolkien’s own words: “We make still by the law in which we are made.”⁹



OVER THE YEARS since 1994 that I have been teaching at Chicago, I have designed some twenty-nine different courses, in addition to teaching in the core sequences for “History of Western Civilization” (1994-2002) and “History of European Civilization” (2002-

⁸ *Letters*, ed. Carpenter, no. 131.

⁹ Tolkien, “Mythopoeia” (1931), stanza 5, in *Tree and Leaf*, ed. Christopher Tolkien, 2nd edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1988).

present). During this time, I have advised forty B.A. essays for students in History, Medieval Studies, Religious Studies, and Theater and Performance Studies. I have advised twenty-six M.A. essays for students in History, MAPSS, and MAPH. And I have served on twenty-seven Ph.D. dissertation committees for students in History, History of Christianity (Divinity School), Music, Romance Languages and Literatures, Anthropology, Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, and Jewish Studies. I have also served on Ph.D. dissertation committees for students at New York University and the University of Notre Dame. I regularly work with graduate students as interns for my two-quarter section of “History of European Civilization” and as Teaching Assistants in my larger undergraduate courses (“Tolkien,” “War,” “Mary,” and “Knights and Samurai”). I have been a regular participant in the Medieval Studies Workshop for over twenty years.

I have posted syllabi for all my courses as well as lists of the students whom I have advised at Chicago on my homepage, where I have also given links to the PDFs of my articles archived at Academia.edu and a list of all my book reviews.¹⁰ I consider these postings an important part of my public role as a professor, and colleagues have thanked me regularly for making my syllabi available online. Since being awarded tenure in 2002, I have been recognized for my teaching at Chicago with the Provost’s Teaching Award (2006) and the Llewellyn John and Harriet Manchester Quantrell Award for Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching (2007). I have continued to design new courses, with one or two every year.

In my undergraduate courses, my primary goal is to introduce students to the sources that we have for studying the past, including images as well as texts, material culture as well as physical practices. I have taught survey courses on “Europe in the Early Middle Ages” and “Europe in the High Middle Ages,” but the majority of my courses are more thematic, focusing on particular aspects of medieval European culture from animals to education to monasticism to war. I have co-taught a comparative course on “Knights and Samurai” with my departmental colleague Susan Burns, and I have developed a junior colloquium for our majors in History on “Writing Historical Fiction.” My graduate courses tend to focus more on issues in the history of Christianity, more particularly exegesis, devotion, theology, and liturgy. I design these courses to introduce students

¹⁰ Rachel Fulton Brown <<http://home.uchicago.edu/~rfulton>>.

both to the sources and to the scholarship as well as to give them practice in developing research topics.

All my courses, whether undergraduate or graduate, contain significant writing assignments, whether research papers proper or more imaginative exercises such as creating an exercise in grammar (“The Arts of Language in the Middle Ages: The Trivium”) or constructing an imaginative—but properly researched and documented—account of the adventures of a medieval warrior or knight (“War in the Middle Ages”). My upper-level courses typically have weekly assignments designed to take students through the various steps in discovering a research question, building a bibliography, critiquing the historiography, and finding an argument, so as to bring them to the point of being able to write imaginatively as well as critically about the past. This Autumn, for example, the exercises in my colloquium on “Cities and Towns in the Middle Ages” included choosing a town on which to concentrate, finding maps of the town, compiling a bibliography on the history of the town, describing the government of the town, describing a day in the life of an inhabitant of the town, making a list of the primary guilds and crafts in the town, describing a procession through the streets of the town, writing a sermon that a preacher might give in the town, and writing a description of the town as seen by a medieval traveler, all with the aim of writing a substantive research paper at the end.

Such exercises have a number of benefits, not the least of which is teaching students how to break down the process of writing a paper into manageable chunks—and thus hopefully avoid writer’s block.¹¹ Perhaps the most significant, however, at least to my mind, is the way in which they encourage the students to “put on” the mask of the thoughts and practices we are seeking to understand, whether the effects of training the intellect through the liberal arts of grammar, dialectic, and rhetoric, or the experience of praying to the Virgin through her Hours. Just as in the Middle Ages Christians trained themselves in virtue by imitating the Virgin and Christ, so I have found in my teaching as well as in my academic writing, there is no better way to “rethink the thoughts” of our historical subjects than imitation or paraphrase of their behaviors and texts. This is the

¹¹ See “Tips for Dealing with Writer’s Block: For Teachers and Students”
<<http://home.uchicago.edu/~rfulton/Tips.htm>>.

spirit in which I first took up fencing—so as to train myself in an analogue of the kind of combat on which medieval monks and nuns modeled their own spiritual exercises—and this is the spirit—of experiment, danger, and fun—which I encourage my students to adopt in confronting both their writing and their engagement with the past.



“I WONDER what sort of a tale we’ve fallen into?” [said Sam].

“I wonder,” said Frodo. “But I don’t know. And that’s the way of a real tale. Take any one that you’re fond of. You may know, or guess, what kind of tale it is, happy-ending or sad-ending, but the people in it don’t know. And you don’t want them to.”¹²

I have been thinking a lot this past year about the way stories work, the way we take on roles in the events around us, assume the masks that we do. I know what kind of tale I would like to be in.¹³ A romance. Or a detective story. Ideally, a detective story with a romance: love, and finding things out. The excitement of discovery—with someone else. Justice for the wronged, and a feeling of connection with my partner in puzzle-solving. I particularly love stories in which there are layers and layers of symbolism. Like the stories in the Bible, properly understood, the way medieval Christian exegetes read them. As clues to a mystery, never fully resolved. “Now I see! It all makes so much sense!” I love when it seems like stories *mean* something. But what is meaning?

As Tolkien (and before him Augustine of Hippo) would have it: finding ourselves in the story, like Frodo and Sam. “Why, to think of it,” Sam realizes, recounting the history of the Silmarils from Beren to Eärendil, the light of which living gemstone Frodo is carrying in the star-glass given to him by the Lady Galadriel, “we’re in the same tale still!” For Tolkien, as for myself, there is only one story in which we would most like to

¹² Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1994), 696-97.

¹³ In what follows I am drawing from “Self-Authored Meta-Tale,” June 16, 2017, <<http://fencingbearatprayer.blogspot.com/2017/06/self-authoring-meta-tale.html>>.

find ourselves, the story of the eucatastrophe according to which the Artist entered into his own creation; the story in which “Art has been verified.... Legend and History have met and fused.”¹⁴ How do we recognize what is most sacred to us? Arguably, by realizing the story we would most like to be true.

Stories, as Tolkien’s fellow mythographer Terry Pratchett liked to say, don’t care who tells them; they just want to be told: “All that matters is that the story gets told, that the story repeats. Or, if you prefer to think of it like this: stories are a parasitical life form, warping lives in the service only of the story itself.”¹⁵ Psychologist Jordan Peterson has a more sanguine take:

We use stories to regulate our emotions and govern our behavior. They provide the present we inhabit with a determinate point of reference—the desired future. The optimal “desired future” is not a state however, but a process: the (intrinsically compelling) process of mediating between order and chaos; the process of the incarnation of the *Logos*—the Word—which is the world-creating principle.¹⁶

For my own part, Peterson’s definition of stories as maps of meaning comes as close as any definition I have read to the way in which I understand the importance of faith—and, therefore, of history. Human beings define ourselves by the stories that we inhabit, the heroes we see ourselves through, and the meaning that we experience in living according to their model. It matters enormously which models we choose, not only for the way in which we judge ourselves, whether we are living up to their pattern, but also for the way in which we act in the world. Within the Christian tradition, as Peterson has shown, the hero is above all the one who is willing to speak the truth and to accept what comes. He—or she—is willing to suffer the consequences of speaking out for the sake of the truth because it is only through speaking—and living—in truth that we can achieve justice—or wisdom.

¹⁴ Tolkien, “On Fairy Stories” (1947), in *The Tolkien Reader* (New York: Del Rey), 89.

¹⁵ Terry Pratchett, *Witches Abroad* (London: Corgi, 1992), 9.

¹⁶ Jordan Peterson, *Maps of Meaning: The Architecture of Belief* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 185-86.

This past year, I have spoken my truth: that I believe what we call for lack of a better term the Western tradition is the source of some of the most important ideas by which we in the West strive to live, including chivalry—the idea that it is better for men to respect women as equals than to rape them; marriage defined as instituted not through sexual intercourse but by mutual consent; and feminism, including the full participation of women in the public spheres of education, business, and politics. This is not the first time that I have been caught up in this kind of debate. Fifteen years ago, just after I received tenure, I had a similar experience, albeit at that time it was assumed that I had taken the opposite side of the debate, against Western civilization, rather than for it.¹⁷ Which only goes to show that the stakes in these kinds of debates are emotionally very high, so much so that it often becomes impossible for either party in the debate to listen to the other, never mind hear what is actually being said.

What it also shows is that—contrary to the way in which we in the humanities have tended to argue in support of our disciplines—it is not just the skills that we teach that matter. It is ultimately the content of the stories we tell. It matters that we teach students not just how to write grammatically or argue logically or speak persuasively; it matters that we give them culture, not just intellectual tools. For my own part, I believe that the content that I teach—about the history of Christianity in the Middle Ages, about the place of animals and education and monasticism and travel and warfare and towns in the development of European civilization, about what it meant to see the world as participating in a story beginning with creation and ending in joy—matters, as much if it is alien to the students’ own stories as if they embrace it as their own. Ideally, I prefer to leave the students guessing what my personal position on the more contentious of these issues is (for example, whether there are such things as hobbits—or dragons), although if I do speak from personal conviction I am always careful to mark it for them. What I do not want them to doubt, however, is the value of speaking the truth and of modeling themselves as agents and artists on this virtuous ideal.



¹⁷ I tell this story more fully in “Blogging with Tenure,” January 22, 2016, <<http://fencingbearatprayer.blogspot.com/2016/01/blogging-with-tenure.html>>.