Using Medieval Literature to Teach Introductory Composition in the Community College Setting

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Using medieval literature to teach introductory composition in the community college setting

by

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INTRODUCTION

Before delivering her tale, Chaucer’s Wife of Bath from *The Canterbury Tales* builds her credibility by talking about the importance of experience to expertise: “Experience, though noon auctoritee / Were in this world, is right ynough for me / to speke” (WBT III.1-3). Though the Wife of Bath is referring to her ample familiarity with marriage, the same could be said of experience with teaching, especially at the community college level. For me, several education classes filled with textbooks and research had helped me predict what types of challenges I could face in a two-year setting. However, my single semester of adjunct work for Des Moines Area Community College (DMACC) as an introductory composition instructor has taught me more through experience than six years of theorizing ever could. Because I earned a B.A. in English Education from my undergraduate college and continue to pursue both English and Education studies in graduate school, working at DMACC has allowed me to pursue a lifelong dream of teaching which has been both demanding and rewarding.

Part of my experience has been to acclimate myself to the community college environment and determine how to meet student expectations in this setting. I have found that educators at community colleges face the complex task of preparing students for a variety of educational outcomes. Many students attend two-year institutions to compete and succeed in a complex modern workplace. Other students use the experience as a springboard to attending four-year universities; in 2007, 29 percent of students in Iowa had moved from some two-year institution on to a four-year college (Iowa Dept. of Education 185). While instructors need to serve these students by fostering practical skills in writing and communication, we also must offer opportunities for self-development in general. By helping students improve critical
thinking, meta-cognition, self-reflection, and even social consciousness, we more broadly prepare students for improved personal, professional, and civic lives.

As educators attempt to satisfy diverse target requirements in the classroom, diversity among the students themselves makes individualizing the curriculum for each learner even more of a challenge. Aptitude among students varies widely. In 2007, the success rate for students (measured by how many enrollees either graduate or move on to a four-year institution within three years) in Iowa community colleges was 53 percent (Iowa Dept. of Education 185). Additionally, in 2010, minorities comprised 14.5 percent of the student population throughout Iowa, many of whom were English Language Learners (ELL) with differing levels of comfort using English (Iowa Dept. of Education 9). These demographic statistics indicate that community college teachers must foster a variety of skills for a variety of learners. Some of these students will excel at a university and beyond, while others need extra support to succeed.

As I considered how to approach these challenges, I turned my attention to another long-time area of interest: medieval literature. I have enjoyed reading and learning from older literature because it has introduced me to a wide scope of academic areas beyond literature, such as history, art, linguistics, and archaeology. On comparing the interdisciplinary natures of both composition and medieval literature, I began to picture how the two could be combined in a single classroom. Would the idea prove impractical or too difficult? Would older works seem too alien for these students, many of whom have specifically career-oriented goals for their education? I wondered whether interest in the literature would make it useful in a non-literary classroom.

As I reflected on my own experience with medieval literature, I began to notice various parallels between what I had learned and what my students were practicing in composition
classes. My students learn to write for a professional context, and thus require proficiency in creating clearly organized essays. They must be able to predict the expectations and values of their potential readers. In order to fulfill the unique requirements of any given context, students need to possess flexibility of style and genre. To support their thoughts adequately and to understand topics more deeply, beginning writers need to conduct research and critically evaluate the sources they find. In addition to skills related to writing, success in the modern workplace demands high-level critical thinking as well as interpersonal and intercultural communication skills.

Medieval literature supplies an attractive possibility for meeting these outcomes. The idiosyncrasies of medieval literature offer a unique connection with the complex challenges of today’s composition classrooms. Students wrestling with a modern world of language which constantly evolves can benefit from analyzing a parallel instability in medieval literature. The clear organization of many medieval texts such as The Canterbury Tales and Dante’s Inferno lends beginning writers timeless examples of how to create a powerful text which nonetheless unfolds smoothly and clearly. Observing the world portrayed by medieval stories, seeming so distantly removed by time, students can dissect the political and cultural issues of their own time through a medieval cultural proxy filled with social themes still important today. Community college students can improve their understanding of source integration by examining the less formal standards of source integration used in the Middle Ages. Many young writers may find meaning in reading a talented medieval author who, by rigorous modern academic standards, sometimes falters in using sources, just as students today sometimes find themselves faltering.

The potential of medieval literature to illuminate other subjects for students will not surprise those who have made a career of studying it. Experienced community college
educators, however, may wonder how to successfully integrate this challenging literature into a sometimes equally challenging environment. As Cathalin B. Folks wisely observes, “Community college students, like Chaucer’s pilgrims, represent a varied cross-section of society, but certainly not the elite” (474). However, medieval literature possesses a number of traits which can make it exciting, engaging, and meaningful for undergraduates. Medievalists celebrate their field for more than its staying power; their literature inspires, it instructs, it moves one to laughter or to tears. The availability of entertaining contemporary corollaries to medieval literature, from video games and graphic novels drawing on Dante to comic books and movies based on the legends of King Arthur, may help students remain motivated. Countless creative adaptations have been made over hundreds of years, with traditions like those of Arthur and Robin Hood as important today as ever. Contemporary relevance could be the overt theme of a course or a unit in which the past provides a unique lens for understanding the present. The junction of these both medieval literature and composition has the potential to enliven the study of both in unexpected ways.

When evaluating how students can benefit from this approach, one must examine what the introductory composition course at a two-year college should accomplish. The national standards issued by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) provide an adequate starting point for identifying which skills community college students must possess (NCTE sec. “The Standards”)

1. The first three standards require students to read a variety of texts using numerous interpretive strategies. Combining medieval literature and composition would certainly require diverse readings. Another important theme among the standards is that the curriculum should emphasize both audience analysis and flexibility of form and purpose. Competence in using technology is addressed in Standard 8, but can be difficult to succeed with

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1 See Appendix A for a list of the NCTE/IRA standards for Language Arts proficiency.
if the teaching setting does not provide sufficient access. Along with technological proficiency, the standards recommend that students be able to conduct meaningful and accurate research using that technology. Finally, teachers also must foster understanding and appreciation of linguistic differences among various ethnic and cultural communities. This suggestion may take a high priority in the diverse classrooms often found in two-year institutions.

A final consideration regarding the aims of the composition classroom in community colleges, is the relevance of two-year colleges to workforce development. Remembering that many students acquire an Associate’s degree to increase their value to potential employers is important when handling a humanities subject such as medieval literature. Though enjoyment and appreciation of the arts may be central to the instructor and a hopeful outcome of the coursework, for many learners these aesthetic concerns may serve a secondary purpose. The American Association of Community Colleges, in preparation for the 2010 White House Summit on Community Colleges, prepared a briefing which addressed, in part, the importance of two-year institutions in the economy: “Major philanthropists, business leaders, the Obama administration and workforce specialists increasingly agree that community colleges offer the most cost-effective way to meet the nation’s need for a better educated citizenry to ensure U.S. global competitiveness” (“Community Colleges” 6). Understanding that students attend college to achieve greater success in their careers, and that community colleges are placing an increased emphasis on practical job skills in their courses, instructors must devise activities which encourage learning that can be applied across a spectrum of contexts. Advanced communication skills, critical thinking, and civic-mindedness are some of the tools which can support both learners and their communities.
With these essential goals in mind, in this essay I approach from a theoretical standpoint the integration of medieval literature in the composition classroom. The first portion of the essay examines how specific writing traits can be taught or modeled using medieval examples. Some of the composition skills I include are structure, audience analysis, using sources and building credibility. This analysis concentrates less on a day-to-day curriculum a teacher might implement than on the multitude of possibilities that an instructor could develop to suit the traits of a given classroom. Though these recommendations remain hypothetical, I occasionally describe a potential class activity for purposes of illustration. Further, the structure of the argument by no means suggests an order in which texts or skills should be taught in a given course. Instead, the essay provides a list of possibilities from which a teacher might draw and adapt to his or her unique curricular needs.

In addition to covering fundamental writing capabilities such as topical organization and audience analysis, I discuss ways in which medieval literature can maximize student motivation. Many students experience anxiety about their writing; one cannot disappear behind a wrong answer on a test or an empty seat in the class. A lack of success in writing can build a self-perpetuating attitude of incompetence with the subject (Daly and Wilson 327). These and other factors create considerable trepidation among some students entering a composition course. Fortunately, the exciting action and cultural relevance of medieval literature might build student interest and make the class much more enjoyable for students. For this reason, I offer ideas about how medieval literature might connect with students in positive and invigorating ways. Some of these methods include incorporating popular adaptations of traditional literature, through films, comics, or videogames. Extensive video gaming is not needed for fruitful literary
analysis; rather, the introduction of enjoyable and low-stress modern adaptations can give the literature an added attraction for students.

In this analysis I draw upon specific medieval works and traditions that could be used in implementing a curriculum. Though I refer to several works, my most frequent suggestions involve four of the most well-known and popular selections from the medieval canon. *Beowulf*, an epic poem probably handed down orally and existing in a single manuscript recorded in Old English between the 8th and 11th centuries, tells the story of the titular hero’s battles with three separate beasts. *Inferno*, the first part of *The Divine Comedy*, was written by Dante Alighieri in Florence around 1300, and is generally regarded as one of the most important landmarks not just of Italian literature, but of all Western literature. Drawing on a sociopolitical conflict regarding the power of the Church in Italian government, as well as on his personal spiritual introspection, Dante recounts a fictional journey into hell where he discovers the torture that awaits those destined to arrive there. I also refer to multiple works of Arthurian legend, from Geoffrey of Monmouth’s early historical treatment of Arthur in the first half of the 12th century to Thomas Malory’s romanticized tales of courtly romance and the chivalric Round Table in the late 15th century. These tales span several centuries and numerous languages, such as Latin, Anglo-Norman, Old French, and Middle and Modern English. Finally, Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*, penned in the late 14th century, features pilgrims who travel to the shrine of St. Thomas á Becket and enjoy a storytelling contest to pass the time along the way. Chaucer’s collection of tales marks a significant moment for the advancement of vernacular English; Chaucer is sometimes referred to as the “father of the English language.” I use these medieval works in part because students seem most likely to have had some exposure to them. These are also four major medieval traditions which are alluded to in modern literature and pop culture,
making these selections ideal for student interest and attention. Because of their popularity, these texts also have a much larger body of pedagogical literature to support teachers who wish to use the works in their classrooms.

In the second section, I describe connections between medieval literature and students’ lives which could help boost learners’ perceived importance and enjoyment of the readings. Students often respond favorably to literature, of any period or genre, when they see a parallel significance to their own experiences. Students may require this connection to a greater degree when reading in a literary tradition far removed by time and culture from the comfortable present. For this reason, I explore the position of composition students among their readings in terms of linguistic parallels (such as literacy and language conventions) between the past and present, medieval literature in today’s pop culture, and universal themes such as those of justice and heroism. Unlike other courses on antiquity which often emphasize history and origins, the audience of my imagined classroom would more likely value currency and practicality.

Finally, in actually designing and implementing a composition course which uses medieval literature, instructors must decide how much of each medieval text to read and which translations to use. Time constraints will inform a number of choices here. Because the purpose of the course is teaching composition rather than literature, assigning lengthy readings is impractical. Thus, most of the literary texts should be handled as excerpts. When selecting an edition or translation for each reading, it is important to select one which enhances students’ appreciation of the stories and yet meets learners at a difficulty level where they can confidently perform. I do not endorse specific translations here; however, I think certain principles should govern the choices made by educators. First, the activity in question affects the choice immensely. Translations which retain the original rhyme and meter are typically unnecessary
when the teaching purpose centers on cultural analysis, modern parallels, and even audience analysis in many cases. If, however, a class were exploring the parallels between medieval oral culture and modern hip hop music, then the verse form would naturally matter much more.

Second, student aptitude and engagement play major roles in deciding on a translation. Students may find it interesting to see the original verse form of *Inferno*, but some learners may possess a predetermined distaste for poetry. That said, a poetic translation can also enliven the content for a number of students. Whatever emphasis a teacher places on a given unit or exercise, the most important principle should be that a translation fit the reading ability of the students who must use it. If poetic form is essential to a lesson, but student comprehension tends to be limited, verse forms using simpler diction may suffice. Learners are more likely to choose to read medieval literature if they can read confidently and understand what they have read. Thus, careful choice of texts will have the greatest benefit to the classroom experience.
TEACHING SUCCESSFUL WRITING THROUGH MEDIEVAL LITERATURE

*Using Clear Structure*

The ability to use a clear and well-organized structure throughout a document as a whole and within individual paragraphs can help students write with focus and confidence. Sometimes my students have shown a tendency to move through paragraphs in a stream-of-consciousness manner which may indicate a lack of preparation and understanding of how ideas develop. Instructors may also recognize a habit among young writers in which a central thesis is more or less developed, but each paragraph only reiterates this main point in varying language without separating sections into paragraphs of distinct but related ideas. Whether writing an essay for a course or a briefing for a workplace meeting, to succeed professionally students must know how to structure an informative piece of writing.

Because it is a prevalent format of informative writing and simple to use, many instructors require topical organization for written assignments; a simple thesis in the introduction is supported by clear paragraphs which support that claim. Within the community college classroom, students may approach topics such as “three reasons I chose to attend this college” with a fairly straightforward thesis which divides clearly into three paragraphs with an introduction and conclusion. When instructors remove the crutch of a topic with easily distinguishable main points, however, students may falter. Separating ideas into distinct groups may not appear necessary or beneficial to students. Reading scholarly articles can provide practice with this skill, but they may be difficult to use for simple purposes like observing organization. More accessible genres, such as news or magazine articles, infrequently unfold in a topical way. By using medieval literature as a model, students can find exciting examples of
topical organization which show how a piece can use a high degree of structure and have a bold, creative effect.

The overall organization of Dante’s *Inferno* illustrates how topical organization supports each distinct section. In the first canto, the poet clearly sets the scene, introduces himself and Virgil (the Roman poet who guides him on his journey) as main characters, and describes his purpose. More important to the composition classroom, in this medieval text the reader sees many of the steps of writing effective introductions. Dante grabs the reader’s attention with vivid imagery and a dramatic opening encounter with several hungry beasts. He bolsters his credibility by admitting his sinfulness and ultimately revealing that he travelled to hell to discover what his fate might be. Similarly, his reading audience is central to the introduction as Dante calls on them to consider the message of the forthcoming story. Using the character of Virgil as a device for feeding the character Dante (and the reader) a steady stream of background information, the story eventually previews what will essentially be its “main points”: that hell divides into nine concentric circles swirling toward the center of the earth. *Inferno*’s opening section exemplifies the successful execution of a proper introduction which sets the stage, establishes the tone, and leaves the reader wanting more.

Each circle of hell provides a new main point which supports the overall thesis of presenting hell’s frightening contents. Examples of this organizational pattern need little discussion. The first circle, “limbo,” is summed up in a tidy way by Virgil in what composition students might recognize as a topic sentence: “they did not sin; and yet, though they have merits, / that’s not enough, because they lacked baptism, the portal of the faith that you embrace” (iv.34-6). The second circle focuses on the lustful who committed sins of the flesh, and so on (v.38-9). How Dante then unpacks each circle of hell for the reader demonstrates a lesson for composition
students. Where student essays use “support sentences” to elaborate on a paragraph’s topic, Dante uses the real-life personalities he has fictionally cast into hell to develop his ideas about each particular circle. For instance, when Dante observes Alexander the Great submerged in a river of boiling blood for the violence committed in his lifetime, the author uses him as an example of the violent in the seventh circle, and Dante makes clear what types of violence he refers to through this specific example. Students can examine the different strategies used to support ideas through the poem, as Dante frequently uses examples, explanation, and research (insofar as he explains what Virgil says or what other thinkers have offered on a subject) to express and establish his thoughts. Although Dante may wander “off-topic” to discuss contemporary politics and philosophy, his overall organization is still tightly controlled. Community college students may appreciate that Inferno allows for flexibility within the precise larger structure.

Using Inferno as a way to think about essays raises the problem of conclusions. Dante did not end The Divine Comedy with Inferno, but continued through two other phases of the afterlife. Nonetheless, in Inferno the author builds to a climax that his readers anticipate throughout the story. The closing encounter with the devil reemphasizes one of Dante’s main purposes; to excite readers while imploring them to avoid damnation. Finally, Dante looks to the future at the end of his journey, a step often taken in academic writing to reiterate what must be done about an issue or what further research is required. The extreme attention Dante pays to structure and organization makes Inferno a worthwhile example for community college students who would benefit from an overt demonstration of a clear structural arrangement.

To create a contemporary twist for students, instructors in composition classes can have students put Inferno in a modern perspective by assigning modern figures from entertainment or
the news to circles of hell based on Dante’s criteria. Such an assignment can whet student interest, and in terms of composition skills it can be adapted into an ideal outlining assignment. Rather than make their choices and write about them, students could be asked to complete an outline of their choices. Each main point, then, might list a different circle of hell, and the sub points could include the people they have selected for that fate. Alternatively, the main points could feature the different people chosen and the sub points would detail the supporting reasons for that choice. By using modern celebrities as the hypothetical victims in such a lesson plan, the activity can be an engaging way to interact with the poem while illustrating through practice how related ideas are grouped together in a successful paper outline.

Other authors also used thematic organization in the Middle Ages. The anonymous author of Beowulf successfully demonstrates how a text can be broken up topically, here by different events. Students should quickly observe that the poem features three major battles: with Grendel, with Grendel’s mother, and with the dragon. Similarly, Beowulf can also be read as dividing into three sections centered on funerals. Because Beowulf divides chronologically by event rather than spatially, as Inferno does, students are presented with a different approach to topical writing. The poem prefaces each battle with an introduction to a new enemy, whose description may be understood by analogy as a topic sentence. Each battle brings new challenges and each monster seems increasingly taxing on the protagonist, resulting in a practical progression of main points which students may easily recognize as a logical manner by which to organize a piece. If one analyzes the funerals throughout the story, the separate topics become the respective deceased, connected through the similar traditions which govern each funeral.²

² The digressions in Beowulf both enrich and complicate the poem greatly. Here, I concentrate on its most basic plot elements.
Such a cyclical organization affords readers a degree of predictability. In a professional setting which requires efficient and accurate communication, a clear and predictable road map like that laid bare in the poems works effectively. The brain more easily processes and stores knowledge when it has a system by which to organize it (Sylwester 103). In my experience, many students in a community college classroom find reading comprehension challenging, and will appreciate the topical format for the ease with which it can be understood and how quickly the main points can be synthesized.

*The Canterbury Tales* also possesses an organizing frame which makes it useful for studying in a composition course. This lengthy work is clearly separated into different tales recounted by different speakers. The host of the travelling party, Harry Bailey, even models transitions; students may not learn to write an effective transition phrase through his example, but the role of this organizational tool can be illuminated through comparison. The “General Prologue,” in its memorable way, accomplishes many steps common to successful introductions, such as previewing the main points of the work. In the “General Prologue,” Chaucer introduces the characters who will later tell their tales. Through this preview, Chaucer reveals something else about the structure of his object, as well. By leading the reader through a description of the pilgrims themselves rather than their tales, the author emphasizes the travelers’ significance to the overall organization and meaning of the tales. In other words, the stories are organized by which character tells them rather than by any inherent quality of the tales themselves. Thus, the introduction of the Knight as the first storyteller prepares the reader for a logical progression of tales based on class. However, the Miller’s interjection of his own bawdy tale immediately following the Knight’s disrupts this pattern. Instructors will not likely hear any objections, however, as the break with this predictable organization serves a useful artistic purpose which
leaves many students laughing. Of course, students would not have to read the entire “Knight’s Tale” to understand the disruption which follows it. “The Miller’s Prologue” should suffice to show the interruption, and a conversation about whether this disruption surprised students could help clarify the point that audiences develop expectations about a piece from the introduction and how it suggests that the work will be organized.

*Analyzing the Audience*

Having outlined several examples of strong organization, I turn my attention to other elements of composition such as the connection with audience. Composition students face an ever-expanding set of genres in which they must write personally and professionally. Though instructors can work with students on the most common genres they may need in the future, young writers must learn to adapt their writing styles to whatever a situation requires. One central ability behind such adaptivity is the capacity for analyzing one’s audience. Students should develop the ability to address the beliefs, expectations, reservations, and needs of their readers. Audience analysis as a subject may emerge as a stand-alone topic in a lecture or textbook reading, but students may also benefit from engaging in audience analysis throughout the curriculum, treating it as an undercurrent of many major writing decisions.

Because the intended audience of medieval authors differs tremendously from today’s classroom audiences, medieval literature offers a unique perspective on the value of audience analysis. One important difference, of course, comes from the medium through which the stories are communicated. Much medieval literature was meant to be delivered aloud; stories such as *Beowulf* may have existed for centuries in oral form before being written down, while other written works were likely performed aloud. Beyond the effects of oral and written communication, the culture of modern readers differs greatly from that of the audience for which
medieval texts were intended. Religion, central to many medieval texts, would have been an understood theme for the texts’ original audience. Knowledge of allusions to past events would have incited grief or celebration, and certainly camaraderie. Beginning readers today may miss these crucial elements, and also bring their own expectations in terms of story and character development, cultural allusions, and social norms. Class discussions and assignments can confront this cultural difference directly, helping students embrace the importance of audience analysis for communicating effectively.

Comparing modern adaptations, especially film, to medieval works is one way to practice audience analysis. Many medieval stories have been filmed; Beowulf furnishes an especially strong example of how audience analysis can change a work. There is a great cultural divide between the audience of the Anglo-Saxon poem and that of its most recent remake, the 2007 film directed by Robert Zemeckis. When reading portions of Beowulf along with viewing this film, students enjoy the advantage of observing a story communicated to two dramatically different audiences through very different media. What is possible through moviemaking breathes a different (if not always better) life into a subject. Because movie-going audiences have high expectations for faster, bolder visual sequences, makers of the 2007 Beowulf took great liberty with plot, characters, and language to create a product they felt confident would captivate the contemporary audience.

Initial discussions could allow students to analyze the audiences for both iterations of the story. Students could also predict how they expect the poem and film to differ as a means of elevating their audience analysis from reflection to application (Angelo and Cross 116). As students progress through the poem and film, discussions and activities could require that they evaluate the differences in the two versions’ plots and how these may be explained as products of
audience analysis. Dissimilarities between the plots of the medieval story and the film are not difficult to spot. The Beowulf of the Anglo-Saxon poem is motivated by desire for personal glory as well as a duty to protect, and the Beowulf of the film often acts out of lust and greed. Wealhtheow evolves from the peacemaking queen to a woman suffering an unhappy marriage who quickly falls in love with Beowulf. In a major departure from the poem, Grendel’s Mother in the film version appears not as a monster but as a beautiful, though wrathful, woman; unsurprisingly, she becomes the object of male sexual craving and ultimately she is the Achilles heel of the film’s archetypal hero. Diverging audiences and their tastes may inform these differences to a great extent. Instructors could focus discussion on what makes the audience of the poem and the film different, developing as exhaustive a list as possible. With this audience analysis completed, instructors could then ask students to decide how each audience is reflected in the two versions.

If we search for other possibilities for audience analysis, the form of The Canterbury Tales involves a repeated display of interaction between authors and listeners as each pilgrim attempts to win the host’s reward. The expectations of Harry Bailey, who serves as the judge of the contest, are made clear through the rules of the contest: the winning tale must excel at both entertaining and instructing the listeners. Other pilgrims in the story also function as an audience. The “General Prologue” and the links between the tales reveal details about the individual characters so that this fictitious audience and its likely preferences in stories can be anticipated by student readers. Some of The Canterbury Tales’ most entertaining moments occur when different characters interact between tales, sometimes fighting with one another and then giving stories in response to other pilgrims (for example, the Miller and Reeve trade stories about an inept carpenter and miller, respectively). One can analyze how each traveler does, or does
not, tailor a story to fit the expectations of the fictional audience. Students may also learn from observing pilgrims who tell a tale in which the audience is not successfully considered. “The Miller’s Tale,” for instance, misses the fictional audience’s expectation that the tale have a positive moral, and the Miller offends the Reeve by featuring a doltish carpenter as a main character. Writing with no more than one’s personal intention can be a pitfall for many student writers; grafting specific exercises in audience consideration with some literary models may help reduce this problem.

*Writing for Diverse Purposes in Diverse Ways*

Connected to the concept of composing for a specific audience is the capacity to write for a specific purpose. Chaucer provides a unique example of a model writer who can conform to many styles and purposes, to the extent that each fictional storyteller presents Chaucer with a new purpose. In *The Canterbury Tales*, the numerous stories use different patterns of rhyme and meter, some are written in prose, each is constructed differently, and the tone and word choice of each tale fits its teller. While students will not write creative fiction or poetry in the typical work environment, *The Canterbury Tales* can aid more formal discussion of genre alongside actual practice.

Arthurian legend, also, appears in a variety of genres. With so many different stories combining plots and characters in different ways, students may find it challenging to understand the tradition at first. The literary Arthur transcended national boundaries and languages, with each new story developed in a new style and form. Even today’s reclamations of the Arthurian legacy mirror the freedom of adaptations made in the Middle Ages. Among all these additions to the root details, no single, authoritative legend exists. New characters emerge in each story. Major events are twisted, invented, or omitted, with Arthur a legendary hero at one moment and
a careless and ineffectual king at another. Finally, each author molds the general tradition into a work which serves his present purpose and current audience. Any instructor who wishes to include Arthurian legend in the curriculum must adapt the unit in a way that suits the particular goals of the classroom, just as many Arthurian authors have adapted the tradition for their purposes. Encountering various Arthurian texts with conflicting details and form can show the effect style and genre can have on a piece of writing.

Two Arthurian writers with extremely different styles and purposes are Geoffrey of Monmouth and Chrétien de Troyes. Geoffrey’s *Historia Regum Brittaniae*, as indicated by its title, falls under the category of history. The larger intention of the work is to elaborate on the history of Britain, and a large portion of the book posits King Arthur as a real and significant part of that history. Because he was writing history, Geoffrey mentions the names of previous historians and sources to build credibility for himself and his text. The choice of genre also affected how readers approached the book. Since Geoffrey maintained that the work was factual, and there were few sources with which to corroborate his claims, the ideas the book expressed were understood to be true.

Chrétien de Troyes, on the other hand, developed romances for his treatment of Arthur. Though Chrétien, too, used his own sources (which likely included Geoffrey), his choice of focus shifted from major battles and national events to more specific stories of an individual knight or episode. Courtly love is introduced as a major theme, and the first reference to the adulterous relationship between Lancelot and Guinevere comes from Chrétien. The details included in these Arthurian romances become much more personal and introspective. Finally, because of the genre in which he wrote, Chrétien was less obligated to defend his sources and the
accuracy of his ideas. These are, of course, only two pieces of Arthurian literature; further analysis of genre can be conducted if instructors include other Arthurian texts in their courses.

*Using Sources and Establishing Credibility*

An analysis of *Historia Regum Brittaniae* works for students of community college composition on multiple levels. In addition to observing how genre selection influences the details of the work, students can use Geoffrey for a deeper analysis of source usage. The American Association of Community Colleges develops the expectations for research usage by advising that learners be able to “evaluate information and its sources critically,” “use information effectively to accomplish a specific purpose,” and “access and use information ethically” (“AACC Position Statement”). By modern standards, Geoffrey’s support for *Historia Regum Brittaniae* might inspire some protests from students evaluating research along these lines.

Geoffrey professes that his information has been obtained from “a certain very ancient book written in the British language” (51). Lewis Thorpe has observed that Geoffrey also tends to refer to various historians (Bede, Gildas, and others) by name in order to demonstrate to his readers the scope of his research which supports the overall narrative (22-3). Thorpe also addresses Geoffrey’s use of historical events with which *Historia*’s readers would be familiar: in contextualizing an event by adding “in the time of…” Geoffrey borrows from the authority of the contextual event to gain credibility (22). Such source citations and persuasion strategies would not hold water at a modern academic conference. However, students in community colleges may not see through such rhetorical strategies. *Historia Regum Brittaniae* opens a world of discussion which meets many students at their present level of understanding. An activity may ask students to compare Geoffrey’s citations with those of a recent scholarly article and discuss
whether and why one appears more credible than the other, thus easing students into this topic. Geoffrey’s integration of sources is an example of a timeless scholarly concern which is analogous to research completed every day by modern students.

As already mentioned, one benefit to studying Arthurian legend comes from the proliferation of Arthuriana in pop culture. However, since many movie adaptations, children’s stories, and written versions are dissimilar to the medieval texts, students may need reorienting when reading from the medieval tradition. If educators are already using literature to discuss source usage, then the tradition might provide opportunities for actual practice using sources, as well. In order to acclimate students to what is actually known about Arthur, what was invented by medieval authors, and how the details evolved and continue to evolve, instructors can assign students to research these subjects. Upon doing some introductory research, students will find that if Arthur really existed in the 6th century, his clothing, language, and customs would appear very different from Malory’s 15th-century recreation of him. Research will also suggest that the concepts of courtly love, jousting, and armor-plated horses are not linked to the time in which Arthur would have lived in. Of course, in the spirit of opening literature up to reappropriation, there can be no “right” or “wrong” depiction of Arthur or his court; they are part of a much larger tradition which continues to change to this day. The artistic conversation between past and present presents opportunities for simple and effective research and to enhance other composition-specific abilities including structure, audience relation, and the distinct uses and effects of different genres.
STUDENT MOTIVATION AND SEEING MODERNITY REFLECTED THROUGH

ANTIQUITY

Thus far, this essay has examined the student relationship to medieval literature as one of apprenticeship in practical writing; individual strands of composition behaviors have been pulled from example texts. If this relationship is clearly explained to learners early in a course, then they can adjust their focus away from matters such as meter and rhyme, since they are not writing poetry, and focus on the material which is relevant to their current goals. As veteran two-year college instructors may recognize and research corroborates, students seldom perform their best unless they fully believe that a subject matters to them (Sass 87). No course is immune to criticism about its usefulness, even a course which stresses a skill as fundamental to professional success as writing. Therefore, instructors must clarify for students how they will be expected to approach readings throughout the term.

Making the connection to students’ lives transparent can make the study of medieval literature enjoyable for students and may be part of a successful approach to the subject. Thus, in addition to using medieval literature to examine writing traits, an instructor could expand the focus to encourage interdisciplinary skills such as critical thinking and analysis while allowing students to enjoy the literature. Further, students can pursue both academic goals and personal interests by examining analogies between medieval culture and literature and the world of today. Basic human concerns surrounding morality, politics, art, and culture are largely similar both in past and present times. In comparing past and present, students gain a deeper knowledge of their own time through awareness of the past, and can appreciate in new ways the complexity of both. Students may enjoy and connect with literature in a more meaningful way when they can sympathize with the characters and events of the readings. With this connection as a continuing
underpinning, the following section explores parallels such as literacy and written conventions between medieval writing and contemporary writing. I describe features of medieval literature which may boost students’ interest and motivation in the subject. Finally, I move to various themes present in medieval literature which may help learners make meaning of the texts and find significance in what these have to offer.

**Literacy, Linguistic Conventions, and ELL Students**

The theme of literacy provides one way the study of the Middle Ages reveals topics of social importance today. Instructors in community colleges often ask students to compose literacy narratives, histories of their experiences with reading, early in the semester or for a first major writing assignment. This activity lets students tackle straightforward, first-person ideas, focusing on organization and paragraph development. It also sparks introspection among students concerning the importance of their education, both past and present. Many students in today’s community colleges attend because they truly understand and appreciate the significance of education to their personal and professional lives. Learning about the scarcity of books in the Middle Ages and the power of literacy then and now, students may bring insights to the literary narrative assignment because of the life experiences which have brought them to seek higher education.

Also, the phenomenon of language change resulting from technological expansion over the past fifteen years connects strongly to students’ daily lives. Most pupils in a given college classroom have used texting. The limited characters per message, the inconvenience of composing messages via handset, and the expense of text messaging have resulted in a new English language consisting of abbreviations and omitted punctuation. Interestingly, medieval manuscripts also display abbreviations and other characteristics similar to those of today’s
writers. Punctuation is inconsistent in medieval manuscripts; it was not standardized until after the advent of print culture. Spelling, too, relied more on phonetic estimates than fast rules, and often a word appears with different spellings throughout a single text. For example, throughout Sir Thomas Malory’s work, the verb meaning “to know” is variously spelled *wyte*, *wyghte*, *wytte*, *wete*, *weete*, and *weyte*. Of course students must use modern rules of grammar, spelling, and punctuation in their own essays, but a glance at a manuscript page in facsimile can prompt students to understand why such regulations are necessary. If learners recognize how language can be improved rather than restricted by normalization, they can connect the medieval world to their own and appreciate the benefits offered by clear standards for expression.

Comparing literacy and language between the ages can be fascinating for all students, but language matters in a different way for international and ELL students. Students learning English will face several struggles while working with medieval literature. Even though I have suggested here that instructors use modern adaptations, even these may include complex artistic language. However, since the proposed curriculum emphasizes modernized texts and the dialogue that exists between the new and the old, language becomes less of a problem for most learners. In many cases, antiquated language might appear as foreign to native English speakers as to international students. A greater difficulty lies with the potential lack of cultural exposure to European literary traditions. One of the major strengths of a medieval curriculum comes from the shared background many American students enjoy, which allows them to engage quickly with familiar names, places, storylines, and themes such as courtly love. Students without this background, who may not recognize the characters and plots, may fail to find significance in the medieval stories.
However, limited exposure to the medieval texts may not necessarily be a disadvantage. Unless students read the text in the original, everyone reads in translation to some extent. The events, too, are affected by a translator, and thus all learners must approach the literature as though it were new and unexplored territory. Because some ELL students may have no previous exposure to the literature, they provide an important counterbalance to those possessing a prior understanding of these traditions. The assumptions which English-speaking Americans may hold about their literary subject do not always correspond with fact (for example, many learners imagine a 15th-century version of Arthur which is historically inaccurate). Non-traditional students can help a class explore the difference between literary fact and fiction through their first interaction with the stories and subsequent participation in daily activities and written work. In this way, ELL students may improve the educational experience for the native speakers. Instructors may find it helpful to be transparent with their classes about the advantages ELL students offer, as such a discussion can encourage all students, native speakers and English learners.

Of course, integrating ELL students poses significant challenges. For instance, international and ELL students commonly struggle with group discussion and participation (Ferris and Tagg 300). Many of the activities I have suggested can include group interaction. The value of interpersonal communication lies in its relevance to professional competence and workforce development, and thus group work can be a significant part of community college courses. However, my experience has been that ELL students tend to shy away from contributing to discussions, especially when the discussion moves toward heated argumentation and debate. Because reading early literature requires analysis and application as well as reading
and retention, ELL students may also struggle to make meaning in an environment of rapid discourse on unfamiliar topics.

A high degree of visual and tactile elements is one way to connect ELL students with medieval literature more effectively. For example, because many of the readings I have described are told in a storytelling fashion, instructors might use role-playing and acting to help the tales take on a kinesthetic aspect while reaffirming the plot lines for all learners. Some activities, such as the outlining activity using Dante’s circles of hell and the prominent film components of Beowulf and Arthurian legends, also take into account the importance of diverse learning styles and abilities.

_Diversity in Culture, Classroom, and Medieval Literature_

As stated previously, students who improve their interpersonal and intercultural communication skills will successfully interact in diverse classrooms and function well in their careers. Instructors could creatively use Beowulf to help students analyze the opposing cultural mores of Anglo-Saxon England and the modern United States. By using the world of Beowulf as a proxy culture, one which students will not encounter except within their classroom, class discussion and activities can question the value of differences while allowing students to speak freely and offend no one. Such conversations may enable students to evaluate cultural worth and the arbitrary nature of social norms within distinct communities.

Teachers can encourage interpersonal and multicultural growth using Beowulf in a number of ways. For instance, an instructor may ask students to assume that the character of Beowulf were a permanent member of that class. The students could respond to a number of hypothetical questions about how he would behave, how he would react to given situations (such as receiving an F on a paper), and how they would interact with him on various tasks. Such an
assignment requires students to fully understand and examine the character of Beowulf, apply their knowledge to an assignment which also develops their awareness of multicultural interactions, and practice an important preparation strategy used in composition: freewriting. Because no Geats would be present, students could speak openly about how these interactions could take place and how to handle the tension that inherently comes with clashes of social norms.

Because diversity is such a key part of the community college atmosphere, evaluating diversity as a theme in medieval literature should be meaningful for learners. However, not everything about medieval literature can be characterized as diverse; especially in earlier examples, main characters tend to be wealthy, or to have embraced self-sacrifice because of their religious beliefs. Medieval authors are even more homogenous. *The Canterbury Tales*, however, offers a refreshing contrast to this tendency. One high school educator, Tom Liam Lynch, considers variety among characters to be as an important trait of the poem, one deserving attention in the classroom. The collection of stories echoes the diversity one finds within the community college classroom: “to my surprise, Chaucer’s writing was many things, but it was not stuffy or boring. *Canterbury* is rife with human characters that are naughty, crass, and even pious…Each occupies a social, economic, or political position, and each speaks at least partly in allegorical code” (44). Cathalin B. Folks’ article goes further, considering *The Canterbury Tales* as a metaphor for the community college classroom. Pilgrims come from a variety of places and situations, meet in one location, and then embark on a journey of self improvement (474). One might even notice that, like the pilgrims, students often define themselves through their vocations. Students may find that certain characters in Chaucer’s world resemble them closely and that not so wide a gulf separates the pilgrims from those who are reading about them.
Thinking about the diversity of the characters in a way relevant to students and their writing is a vital task for instructors. To understand *Canterbury Tales’* diversity through modern analogies, educators might assign students to discuss or write about contemporary vocations that would parallel the pilgrims’ in terms of class and labor. It may benefit students to examine how people, then and now, often define themselves in terms of their occupation. The personality traits of each character also invite analysis. A sample lesson plan posted through the Alabama Learning Exchange suggests that students replace Chaucer’s travelers with modern personalities who exhibit similar personalities to their respective pilgrim (sec. “Overview/Annotation”). Bernard Lewis has also assigned his students to write a continuation of a character’s tale or build upon that character’s back story to demonstrate their understanding and evaluation of their chosen pilgrim’s persona (“Re. Thesis”). These exercises might be combined in an activity similar to the outlining activity discussed in the organization of *Inferno*. Students could replace a pilgrim with a celebrity of similar temperament, and write about the changes such a switch would cause in their tale, the reception within the story, and interaction with other pilgrims. With writing at the center, diversity among characters would become clear, and the past would serve as an exciting way to understand the present.

For all that can be said about diversity within the classroom and diversity within the texts, a criticism of much medieval literature is that it lacks focus on the female or on a female point of view. Women occupy little space on the page, and where they appear they typically fulfill inactive though not insignificant roles. For example, Wealththeow, the queen of the Danes in *Beowulf*, serves a necessary role as peacemaker and cup-bearer, but her role is largely to aid in navigating a smooth relationship among the men, whose diplomatic encounters push her activities to a subordinate status. Guinevere, probably the most recognizable woman of medieval
literature for community college students, often is active only so far as she participates in extramarital affairs. Otherwise, both characters and authors tend to treat her as an object of affection, a person over whom the male characters fight in the spaces where the real action takes place.

However, exceptions to this rule make for memorable reading and discussion. For example, Chaucer develops the description of the Wife of Bath in much greater detail than many of the other pilgrims; simply to command as much attention by the author as she does places her far beyond many of her medieval counterparts. In her prologue, she recapitulates her romantic history, which includes a total of five marriages. The Wife of Bath celebrates her control and power over each of her husbands, another characteristic which distances her from the passive archetype typified in tales of courtly love. The story the wife tells fits well with her nontraditional personality: a knight in Arthur’s court rapes a woman and to spare his execution, the queen instructs him to search for the one thing that women truly want, giving him a year to discover the answer. After a year of fruitless seeking, he meets an old woman who promises the answer in exchange for a future request. When he accepts, he is able to report to the queen that what women want above all is sovereignty and mastery over their husbands. His life spared, but he must marry the old woman, who becomes both beautiful and faithful when assured of her control over him.

The feminist tone of the tale stems from a misogynistic tradition. The “loathly lady” motif, in which a man is forced to marry a homely woman, appears in the Arthurian tradition and elsewhere in the medieval canon. The Wife of Bath, however, emphasizes the old woman rather than the male figure and invites us to consider what such a tale means coming from this proud, abrasive female. The Wife of Bath is not a “loathly lady”; she is powerful and self-assured, if
imperfect. In both the Middle Ages and the 21st century, power, marriage, and sexuality are important themes, so “The Wife of Bath’s Tale” promotes the continuity between old and new even as it offers opportunities for cultural and social analysis.

_The Canterbury Tales_ supplies ample opportunities to analyze the social status of women in the medieval period. For example, “The Knight’s Tale” and “The Miller’s Tale” feature major female characters from different backgrounds playing very different roles. Emilye of “The Knight’s Tale” is a typical maiden of the royal court over whom two nobles will fight to the death, while Alysoun of “The Miller’s Tale” belongs to the common class but is adulterous, bold, and comical. William F. Woods has used this comparison in freshman composition classes at a four-year university to discuss social history. He instructs his students to start with their physical characteristics and let them lead you into a discussion of each woman’s class, social role, personality (insofar as this is possible), and function in her respective story. In other words, how do they fit into the world of the story? In what way is each one a motivation for the action of the story? (55)

Another writing task could ask learners to reflect on what modern counterparts might occupy these roles if the tales had been written today. Students could analyze which of the two possesses more power: Emilye with her high station or Alysoun as a more lively and active character. Instructors could also ask students what type of pilgrim would be telling their tales and what those tales might be about. Male and female students alike can examine how romantic relationships have changed over the last 600 years. Such questions could result in a reflective or analytic writing assignment. Determining the roles that men and women play and, more important, how modern readers can position themselves in relation to the characters they meet, students may develop ideas for discussion as well as engaging topics for papers.
Medieval Literature and Pop Culture

Some medieval traditions hold significant status in both contemporary pop culture and even modern philosophy. For example, lingering perceptions of Dante’s hell pervade today’s culture and inform the fire and brimstone imagery found in many Western representations of the underworld. Indeed, *Inferno* is as relevant to culture now as it has ever been. In 2010 the wildly popular *Dante’s Inferno* video game was introduced. It allows users to pilot Dante (armed with the Reaper’s scythe) through each circle of hell, slaying sinners and creatures resembling those from Dante’s imagination. Writers and illustrators have produced graphic novel and comic adaptations of the story; the increasing popularity of these formats suggests that many young adults engage with the story Dante set forth, and not just as a cultural handing-down. A YouTube search of “Dante’s Inferno” produces over 5,500 video results. Many of these originate from the video game, but these results also include a number of homemade video adaptations, comedic spinoffs, and even sections of the poem read aloud in translation (one such reading has had over 200,000 views). Some of these variations may prove useful in the classroom; some would certainly not. The objective is not to have students rush out to buy videogames, but to make the story attractive to learners. Not every community college student will have had experience encountering Dante’s text, but the work certainly possesses modern cultural currency.

To turn this popularity into motivational dividends, instructors can review those facets of *Inferno* which hold the greatest cultural significance for students. One example is Dante’s treatment of the devil. In the case of the devil, students may be asked to read the passage from Canto XXXIV which describes his physical appearance and to compare this account with modern perceptions of him from the Bible, literature, or popular culture. Students can analyze
the importance of the three figures consigned to the beast’s mouths, evaluate and perhaps contest Dante’s selections. Students should also be able to infer something about the author’s moral hierarchy by the sins committed by those in the deepest part of hell, and could challenge those decisions, as well. As discussions arise from this topic, instructors may provide a multimedia lesson showing visual artwork throughout history which depicts the devil in various ways; such a demonstration could prove the historical significance of the literary moment while keeping students of various learning styles engaged with the content.

Another culturally popular text, as we have already discussed, is Beowulf. In addition to the film version discussed above, Beowulf also entered the video game world in the last five years. The film version of Lord of the Rings, whose author J. R. R. Tolkien owed much of his literary invention to Beowulf, became one of the highest-grossing film series of all time. Finally, as with Inferno, modern writers have adapted Beowulf into contemporary formats such as graphic novels and comics, as well as prose editions which are typically either simplified versions or modernized reimaginings of the original. With the dramatic increase in Beowulf exposure over the last ten years, many community college students may well have some understanding of the story into which they can integrate further study.

There are many methods for creating a memorable and exciting experience using Beowulf. One connection between medieval oral culture and modern entertainment comes through music, particularly hip hop. Rap music, in many ways, mirrors the content of medieval literature and the role of the medieval oral poet. Both Beowulf and much of modern rap use braggadocio to build credibility and seize audience attention. In the epic poem, Beowulf himself is boastful of his skill and wealth gained through prowess; with a more risqué tone, this same attitude permeates modern pop music, especially hip hop. Each tends to celebrate a shared
culture and history: *Beowulf* recounts past trials and battles by the community, while modern rap artists perform songs about their origins, local pride, and personal obstacles overcome. Both Anglo-Saxon poetry and rap place a greater importance on alliteration and rhythm than does modern poetry or traditional music. With *Beowulf*, students’ understanding of these similarities puts this classic in the oral tradition in perspective. Instructors may extend this mode of understanding by asking students to elaborate on the comparisons or to submit musical playlists which represent their own background and write an accompanying analysis of their choices. Further, students could write an essay that compares a single song with *Beowulf* in the manner described above. For many community college learners, building a strong foundation in comparisons of this type is appropriately challenging.

In addition to hip hop, modern comic books and graphic novels connect with antiquity, here through the convention of illumination, an element of early literature. Of course, medieval manuscripts tend to be more complex than comic books. However, Allison Adair Alberts discusses one way she makes the comparison meaningful to her students. She challenges her composition classes to advocate for a course dedicated to the study of graphic novels, using their similarity with medieval manuscripts as an argument for their legitimacy (“Medieval”). In an introductory writing course, students may enjoy observing medieval illuminations and considering how this art enhances the poetry. Such observations may help students understand the past and also validate the pop culture young men and women celebrate today.

No literary legacy of the Middle Ages survives so strongly, and continues to enjoy such popularity, as the tales surrounding King Arthur. In the lifetimes of most community college learners, Arthur has been transformed through various iterations of children’s books, video games, comic books, and blockbuster movies. Because of the quantity of film adaptations about
Arthur, using film to discuss the written legend and captivate students holds great potential. As previously discussed in regard to *Beowulf*, comparison of a film version and a printed narrative invites inquiries into audience, authorial purpose, and other aspects of a work. Adam Woelders has taken film activity a step further by comparing multiple film versions as a way to teach middle school students about history (369). His pupils learn about the subjectivity of history by viewing several films which communicate different understandings of the text. They also watch the evolution of a (perhaps) true historical figure over time by viewing the films spanning the last 75 years. Showing movies during class hours may occupy too much time for a course primarily devoted to composition practice. However, if technology allows, it may be possible to distribute copies among students to view at home, then have them come ready to discuss the film in class. Additionally, rather than comparing only films, community college learners could compare their observations from the films to their readings. Whatever specific choices instructors make, film integration can be a way to capitalize on the excitement of medieval literature.

Chaucer’s influence on modern culture has been significantly more subtle than those discussed previously. There is no pilgrimage video game, no *Troilus and Criseyde* YouTube phenomenon, although Chaucer is surprisingly characterized in the Heath Ledger vehicle *A Knight’s Tale*. His influence, instead, has registered in the continued and still-growing significance of the English language, for few writers have had such influence on English as a language of learning and literature. As examples have already demonstrated, his works have much to offer students in the study of composition, so sparking student interest need not be difficult. As with *Beowulf*, the poetry of *The Canterbury Tales* can also be used to compare the medieval practice of reading poetry orally to modern music. In fact, the lengthy collection of tales has been used in one classroom to compare Chaucer to modern rap artists like Eminem who
use poetry to talk about social issues (Lynch 43). Students then wrote rhymed couplets about problems facing them and the world around them and performed them as rap songs (43). The instructor, Tom Liam Lynch, argues that The Canterbury Tales was the sociopolitical rap of its day. For community college students, writing their own hip hop tunes may foster appreciation of Chaucer’s work. Or, if students do not compose their own raps, they might examine someone who has made a living turning The Canterbury Tales into rap. Baba Brinkman earned critical acclaim for his 2004 release of The Rap Canterbury Tales, an album dedicated to the subject of the artist’s undergraduate thesis. Brinkman tells a number of Chaucer’s tales, using his own language but remaining surprisingly close to the original stories. In classes using The Canterbury Tales for an extended period, instructors may wish to play Brinkman’s interpretation of the tale or tales to be discussed each day.

One other way to engage students with Chaucer is to ask students to perform passages from different tales or otherwise act out interactions among the characters in a dramatic fashion. Because The Canterbury Tales supplies so many characters with distinct personalities and often memorable interplay with other travelers, this poem is ideal for acting. Cathalin B. Folks has tested this approach in her community colleges classes and generally found that performance helps clarify Chaucer’s diction and language (475). One potential setback she has encountered is a reluctance and occasionally even an outright refusal to perform (476). Simply reading aloud may offer many of the same benefits as acting in such a case. Bernard Lewis, too, has used acting to teach Chaucer, insisting that students come prepared to participate (“Thesis”). He also stresses oral performance and music integration as part of a multimodal learning environment.
**Shared Themes Across the Ages**

Not only were medieval people similar to us, so were the things they cared about. Many themes which appear in contemporary art were also explored by authors of the Middle Ages. For instance, the concept of justice is heavily represented throughout the medieval canon. Many works, from entries in Boccaccio’s *Decameron* to the French war poem *The Song of Roland*, present questions of justice. In *Beowulf*, for instance, the Germanic notion of wergild, a blood payment for losses suffered, prompts a chain of retaliatory attacks which comprise much of the poem. Instructors who connect the motif to universal questions of right and wrong may spark lively student discussions. Even if such medieval values alienate students, the dramatic differences between old and new show that students do not need to sympathize with a culture to compare it with their own. In some respects, the poem undermines the value of wergild; one sometimes finds it difficult to determine which side is responsible for the original infraction which begins the cycle of vengeance. Grendel lands the first attack on the inhabitants of Heorot, but he has been cruelly rejected from society. The string of assaults beginning with Grendel, then leading to his death, followed by Grendel’s mother’s revenge, and Beowulf’s vengeance against her, illustrates the endless destruction wrought by this system of exacting payment for personal wrongs.

*Beowulf* is scarcely the only poem to weigh in on the topic of justice. The stories which comprise the Arthurian canon include a number of difficult questions about justice. For example, in *The Death of King Arthur*, the prose story in French from the early 13th-century Lancelot-Grail cycle, Guinevere is wrongly accused of killing Gaheris when she gives him an apple poisoned by another knight. Gaheris’ brother Mador proposes that Guinevere be burned at the stake, unless a knight fights Mador on Guinevere’s behalf. The true justice of deciding life
or death matters through battle, and the unclear connection between winning in hand-to-hand combat and proving one’s actual innocence, should not be lost on curious students.

Later, after his knights catch Lancelot and Guinevere in an adulterous relationship, King Arthur decides that his queen will be burned at the stake without trial. This event offers several points for discussion. One problem for community college students to discuss is the fairness of condemning someone as guilty without a proper trial, especially when execution is the result. Instructors can push further to establish a correlation with modern American government and its system of checks and balances which prevents any branch from taking control. These offsetting powers prevent any one person or group from acting rashly or out of personal emotion. If King Arthur’s court had had a similar system, Guinevere’s fate may not have been decided by the one person with the greatest interest in her punishment. Complicating the matter further, the king softens his stance only when the Pope threatens to excommunicate him if he executes Guinevere without a trial. The friction between royal and religious power should be familiar for learners with any awareness of contemporary politics. Students may recognize that justice does not take place, since Arthur changes his mind only because he is motivated by threats to his own salvation. Through these various texts, justice can be approached in terms of both abstract fairness and legal application.

Dante’s *Inferno* also features both justice and politics, and does so in a way that captivates its audience. If students see the continuity between problems of the past and the present, Dante’s motivations for writing become clearer and more significant. The political problems facing Dante included arguments over the role religion should play in government, which of two major political powers should control Florence, and treachery within the country. Transitioning from 14th-century Florentine politics to discussions of contemporary American
debates, students may gain a greater appreciation for historical conflicts while deepening their understanding of subjects they hear about on the news. Classroom activities such as mock debates may help learners tackle such matters in a way that requires supporting reasoning and critical thinking while building interpersonal communication skills vital to the workplace.

The prominence of binary themes such as life and death or good and evil may also relate to community college readers. Returning to *Beowulf* for examples, the case of Grendel is provocative because although he commits inexcusable acts of violence, his true nature is not fully explained. Students often characterize Grendel as a monster, though this claim is not strictly accurate. The text defines him as one of the race of Cain, suggesting that though he is hideous and enormous, he is still human. Grendel seems to act as he does because he has been shunned from society; this does not forgive the murders he carries out, but complicates the reader’s sense of absolute right and wrong. J. Beth Haase Menzies connects Grendel’s characterization with an exploration of binary themes in an activity in which students use found objects to create sculptures of Grendel. These sculptures then prompt discussions of the underlying assumptions and shortcomings of student definitions of “good” and “evil” and what their artworks reveal about these assumptions (71). The ultimate moral – to treat others fairly – may seem simple, but the process by which students reach this realization promotes a deeper look at the subtle ways that intercultural understanding can go awry. Practicing this activity at the college level may require adjustments; removing the focus from the act of creating the sculpture, and replacing it with an activity that makes it more useful for discussion and writing practice, can save time spent on artistic creation. Using magazine clippings to create collages of Grendel, for instance, may provide the same opportunity for analysis more quickly and can be then used as a prompt for writing.
Heroism, one of the most widespread themes in medieval literature, should also resonate with community college writers. Courtly romances portray a man or men performing amazing feats (sometimes combating true danger, other times just boasting of their prowess) to win the hand of a beautiful woman. Epic poems tell of warriors with almost superhuman strength who save entire kingdoms by their heroic deeds. As is the case in *The Song of Roland*, sometimes a character sacrifices his life in service of God, king, and country. All these were venerable qualities during the Middle Ages. Even Christ was frequently described in heroic terms; Rick McDonald asks his students to consider “What would Jesus do, if he were the warrior Christ from *Dream of the Rood*” (33). Students can discuss and write about how heroism has changed over time, what it means to be a hero in the 21st century, how real-life heroes compare to fictional ones, and the relationship between characters such as Beowulf and modern comic book superheroes.
Instructors at every level who use literature to teach writing share a challenge which can never be completely overcome. The question of how to reach every student’s learning style, values, preferences, and goals demands a careful selection of literature and innovative planning. Teaching to each student’s needs is especially challenging in the community college setting, an environment of tremendous diversity. Yet these diverse students all need to address the complex task of writing, even as evolving technological capabilities and redefined job descriptions have changed the face of it. Visual and electronic elements of communication become more essential every day. The attention spans of readers have diminished while their schedules have grown tighter. Successful writing in the 21st century demands concise, attention-grabbing, and eye-popping content delivered with energetic execution. In short, students must create more complex, challenging writing in an environment in which it is harder than ever to perform. For students at community colleges, the craft must be mastered in only two years. With such a tall order to fill, teachers of composition at community colleges strive to develop innovative curricula to help students become competitive in the modern job market. Today’s courses must reach beyond the traditional boundaries of writing to foster flexibility of form and purpose. Writing forms the central core of the curriculum, but critical reading and critical thinking should also emerge through the act of writing.

My hope is that ultimately, by using the ideas expressed through this essay, educators can make medieval literature accessible to students and can help them become better writers. This essay supports the idea that medieval literature is useful for the specific goals and outcomes of the community college composition curriculum. Several examples, such as *Inferno* and *Beowulf*, model clear topical organization while remaining creative and engaging. The ever-evolving
The legend of Arthur can show how authors use various styles to accomplish specific purposes, as well as how important source usage is to successful academic writing. These factors are central to successful writing, and medieval literature could be a novel way to teach them.

The essay also discussed parallels between medieval literature and the world of today’s students which could enhance interest and appreciation of the subject matter. A characteristic shared by medieval literature and the community college classroom is diversity of people and culture. The appearance of medieval stories throughout modern pop culture could make the literature attractive and foster thinking and writing about elements such as the oral tradition. Finally, timeless themes such as justice and heroism place medieval literature and culture in a meaningful perspective for the readers. Through these themes, instructors can find numerous opportunities for students to practice writing, whether reflecting on their lives or researching aspects of medieval culture. Invoking this fascinating era of literature can enrich the experience of writing and help learners understand writing tools in a new way.

My brief experience leading a community college composition class has had a profound impact on the way I teach and the way I approach learning. Before I began to work in a community college, I did not know what to expect. As I have discovered, most students are involved, curious, and earnest in their desire to better themselves and the world. They have been more likely to participate every day, ask useful questions, and provide helpful feedback to their peers than any students I have taught. Knowing community college students to be hard-working and open-minded, I relish the chance one day to share with them many of the ideas outlined here. I hope my future students will find the experience of discovering medieval literature as instructive and enjoyable as I have.
APPENDIX

National Council of Teachers of English and International Reading Association: “The Standards for the English Language Arts.”

1. Students read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works.

2. Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.

3. Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).

4. Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.

5. Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.

6. Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and non-print texts.

7. Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. They gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a variety of sources (e.g., print and non-print texts, artifacts, people) to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience.

8. Students use a variety of technological and information resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge.

9. Students develop an understanding of and respect for diversity in language use, patterns, and dialects across cultures, ethnic groups, geographic regions, and social roles.

10. Students whose first language is not English make use of their first language to develop competency in the English language arts and to develop understanding of content across the curriculum.

11. Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities.

12. Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).
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