The Ballad of the Lone Medievalist
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And Gladly Wolde He Teche: The Medievalist and the History of the English Language Course

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When I was hired on the tenure track by University of Maine at Augusta, a small branch of Maine’s public university system, there were no courses in medieval or Renaissance literature at all other than the ubiquitous Shakespeare course that was taught by the British literature specialist. The job advertisement for my position simply stated that the English program sought a candidate to teach “composition and literature,” with no particular specialization attached to the position. On being hired, I was thus in the enviable position of proposing and creating the courses in my field that I then taught; in essence, I filled a position that I subsequently designed to my own specifications. I am extremely grateful that my colleagues were enthusiastic about having the curriculum augmented with courses in early English literature.

Because I teach in a small program, this meant that I was the “lone medievalist” at my school, not to mention the lone Renaissance scholar—a state of affairs that I expect is common for those of us teaching in smaller schools. (Though the other specialist in British literature very happily and enthusiastically
teaches Shakespeare, her specialization is actually nineteenth-century literature.) This casting of a very wide net is reflected in job advertisements for positions at smaller schools, which often call for a candidate to teach “pre-eighteenth-century literature,” assuming her or his ability to teach all of it: Old English, Middle English, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century literature. This expectation goes against the grain of the kind of narrow specialization under which graduate schools organize their curricula.

Because my dissertation actually covered literature from the fourteenth through the seventeenth century — a fairly wide range, given the kind of period specialization that doctoral programs often demand — I was in a solid position to develop and teach a wide range of classes for my school, and I suspect many of us are. I am grateful for the opportunity to teach in the fields of both medieval and Renaissance literature, though I also must acknowledge that the state of Maine can be a lonely place for anybody on a faculty in a small school where nobody else really teaches in these fields. This is not true only for me, but for my many colleagues, all of whom go regularly to conferences, maintain professional relationships with other scholars, and seek out those who, as it were, speak the same academic “language.”

That said, one course that has definitely helped my program and my own scholarly interests is one that I did not anticipate when I began at UMA: our history of the English language course. When the English faculty revised its curriculum six years ago — which consisted of dropping courses that had not been taught for years, adding others that had been developed and were now taught regularly, and revising the program requirements to align with the new curriculum that resulted — we considered dropping an introduction to linguistics course. It had been taught by a long-retired colleague, and for some reason the course itself had never been dropped from the catalog listings, even though it had not been taught for about fifteen years. In graduate school, I took a linguistics course similar to it, but as an undergraduate I had taken a history of the English language course. This seemed to me to be a more appropriate course at the undergraduate level in that it more closely aligned
with literature and the texts that students read in their undergraduate program. So I proposed that, instead of dropping the course, I retool it into a history of the English language course and teach it once to see how it would run. If it proved popular, then we would consider making it a permanent course.

A medievalist is a logical choice to teach such a course, even if she or he isn’t trained specifically in linguistics (as I wasn’t), because obviously work in medieval literature demands the study of the historical periods of the English language. I have not formally studied Old English since graduate school, so that my reading skills are very rusty, though I have taught *Beowulf* and shorter related Old English texts in translation regularly in our English literature survey courses. But those graduate seminars in Old English gave me enough grounding in the grammar and vocabulary of the language that I can reasonably discuss how Old English works and its place in the development of English. My Middle English is quite strong, as I expect it is for most medievalists, if only because it is likely that we took a Chaucer seminar at some point in our careers — and, of course, Middle English is considerably easier than Old English. In addition, working in Renaissance literature has given me a strong grounding in much of the later course content of the history of the language course.

It hasn’t provided context for all of the course content, though, and this is where I have found that I am extremely grateful for the opportunity to teach this course. For my textbook, I have used the classic *History of the English Language* by Baugh and Cable (Prentice-Hall, now in its fifth edition)\(^1\) on the recommendation of a former colleague who is a linguist and who primarily teaches linguistics. Baugh and Cable’s text has several advantages: its coverage is comprehensive, they write in an academic but accessible style, and most important, they cover American English well. Many history of the language textbooks are written for the British market, and they naturally cover Brit-

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ish English more thoroughly, in particular the many dialects spoken in Britain today. Baugh and Cable’s American orientation is a plus for American students. I augment this textbook with R.L. Trask’s *Language: The Basics* (Routledge, in its second edition)\(^2\) in order to give students an introduction to the basics of linguistics, now that we no longer have a linguistics course, and the materials about how language works—grammatically, culturally, and socially—give students a wider view of a skill that they have mastered and take for granted.

Teaching from these texts has grounded me in the developments of the language in the eighteenth century and beyond, which has informed my teaching of the entire two-course survey of English literature, which I now teach regularly. It has also grounded me far better in the developments of American English and world “Englishes,” and the field of linguistics has become a secondary field of academic interest for me because of this course.

Teaching such a course in a small department has further advantages. The course naturally and logically gives me the opportunity to promote my own courses in early English literature. I have found that students are fascinated by Old and Middle English, as we were when we were undergraduates. Thus they are interested in taking courses in which they get to actually read the material that looks so odd on the page, even if they read it in translation. This is especially true if one discusses the culture of Anglo-Saxon, medieval, and Renaissance England, which of course one does in order to demonstrate how language both shapes and is shaped by its culture. Promoting my own courses is frankly opportunistic, and I admit this freely. My experience is that a course titled “medieval literature” does not necessarily sell as well as courses on media and film, popular culture, gender studies—courses that are, to put to use the phrasing of some of my colleagues, sexier on paper than my courses. Students actually love medieval literature, once they’re in the medieval literature class. The challenge is to get them there in the first place.

I have also found that the course is a good place to promote our university's language courses as well, which endears me to my colleague who teaches French, our only traditional foreign language offering. (Our other offering is American Sign Language.) Our school has a minimal foreign language requirement for English majors of one year, or two courses, but the history of the language course underscores why language study matters in all sorts of ways. When students enter into the French courses and the history of the language course — often simultaneously — they find it worthwhile to go on to take the second- and third-year advanced language courses because they realize that language study is actually interesting and useful and that it connects them better to their own first language. As both my French professor colleague and I say, “If you want to really understand your native language, learn another one.” In a small, modestly endowed school such as ours, filling both lower- and upper-level courses really matters. Often they do not run if we cannot fill them with a minimum number of students because there is no money to underwrite them. Promoting other courses in any course one teaches is a smart move in itself, as it helps students understand how courses in the program and among other programs are interrelated.

I was concerned initially about the popularity of this course, but filling it has not been an issue. In fact, much to everybody’s surprise, it has never been an issue. I am sure that at least initially it was not the course itself that attracted students. (After all, until I created the course, we had never had a course with this subject matter.) It’s more likely that, the first time we offered the course, it was offered at a good time that worked with our students’ work schedules. Our student body is largely non-traditional and all of them commute to campus, so scheduling seriously matters. The course was scheduled for the late afternoon, a time frame that I advocate for many of my upper-level courses because it allows working adults to attend. Since that first offering, I have also made the course available online and will teach it in the upcoming fall semester on compressed video — essentially a live class with students in different locations, using video
conference technology to connect us all. This allows the course to reach the widest audience possible; since my school was the campus originally charged in the University of Maine System with distance education, this kind of flexibility in course delivery is key.

Because our English program is relatively small, I knew that the language course would have a sizeable number of non-majors in the class. That didn’t surprise me. What did surprise me was how popular the course was. I got strong student evaluations that first time, and the course has been filled or nearly so every time I have offered it. And now, since the course has been around for six years, the word on the academic street is that it’s well worth taking. I would like to say that this is all the result of my teaching, but I don’t think that this is the case, though of course I do hope it’s a factor. I do think that a much greater factor is the nature of the subject matter. As I point out the in first class meeting every time I teach this course, everybody in the course is already an expert linguist. That is, every student has mastered her or his mother tongue, so that the linguistic expertise with which one comes into the course is already in place. Furthermore, many students have already studied a language, often in high school, so that they have some knowledge of how languages work already. And in Maine, with its strong French Québécois heritage, many students come from bilingual families, even if French is no longer normally spoken (which tends to be the case). Few courses can build on a student knowledge base that can be best described as “expert,” but history of the English language is one of them that can. Much of the course, in fact, teaches students things that they already instinctively knew but had no idea that they knew; for example, when we read Trask’s chapter about language acquisition in infants and how the human mind seems to be hard-wired for language acquisition, my students who are parents with toddlers are happily stunned to realize that their two-year-olds are daily picking up the vocabulary and grammar of their mother tongue to the point that they too will be experts by the time they are five or six. Likewise, students are delighted to discover that irregular verbs
have plagued English speakers and writers for centuries, and that all of the rules of grammar that they learned in high school are actually opinions about how the language ought to function and not necessarily how it does function. This course gives students the ability and opportunity to explore and analyze their own language to a highly sophisticated level.

The course material is fascinating in itself, though students don’t necessarily sign up for the course thinking that this will be the case. As an undergraduate I remember Baugh and Cable’s text as being somewhat dry; for example, their discussion of strong and weak verb forms in Old English is technical and somewhat difficult for students to grasp entirely. But the course lends itself to endless discussions about how language is intensely political. Given that it is so inextricably tied to personal identity and, by extension, cultural and national identities, it can’t help but be. Students, however, are often unaware of this or have not fully acknowledged language’s ties to identity politics. But this issue comes to the fore as the course continues, as we discuss the British Empire, the American century and its rise as a world power, and the rise of English itself as the leading world language in its many permutations. The advantage of playing up the political nature of English, or indeed any language, in this course is that it connects the course to other fields and courses that students are taking. Students often comment on the issues that they are studying in other courses, from world history, when we discuss the geopolitics of world Englishes, to computer science, when we discuss programming languages and how the computer industry borrows familiar words and coins new ones for its own use. Making the disciplines of English, language, and literature relevant is not a challenge for those of us who have dedicated our professional lives to them, but it is not always immediately apparent to students why language is relevant. This course makes it very clear why it is.

Since we started offering the course, its popularity and its relevance to the English program and other programs in the university have led the English faculty to make it a requirement for English majors. While this gives the course a certain legiti-
macy and a built-in student audience, we nevertheless have a small English program, so that the course even now must draw students from all disciplines. Even so, offering this course has tacitly given more legitimacy to the fields of medieval and Renaissance studies at my institution and has helped strengthen interest in the courses that I offer in those fields. I have no illusions that medieval and Renaissance literature are absolutely central to the English program at my school. But my school has given me the opportunity to explore a closely-related field that draws on my expertise in early English literature and culture that has proven itself central enough to the program to be a requirement. In a time in higher education when English programs are often expected to justify themselves — and medievalists are further expected to justify themselves within the English program — a course with proven relevance that serves a wide audience and is popular is not a bad thing to offer.