The Ballad of the Lone Medievalist

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G.Tracy, Kisha and John P.Sexton.
The Ballad of the Lone Medievalist.
This Eremitic Life
LETTER I
November, year 0

Dear ———

We have arrived in Norway. On the trip I began Mary Wollstonecraft’s 1796 *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (Broadwell, excellent edition) and have been inspired to write you real letters on real paper about our big adventure moving abroad and my new (first, real, permanent) job. I am now officially associate (!!!) professor or the much more delicious title “førstamanuensis” of English literature in the Institute for Foreign Languages at the University of Bergen, Norway. The other languages in our department include French, Spanish, German, Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, Russian… both literature and linguistic sides. I have five other colleagues in English literature: total three for British, three for American (picture a buoy right in the middle of the Atlantic, demarcating the fields). No one has mentioned if medieval English literature was ever taught here before. Either it never was — or the institutional memory has been lost — or they want to forget — or they haven’t thought to mention whose shoes I am stepping into. Well, they are mine now.
First advantage is that I can teach basically any medieval course I dream up. Or, any medieval-early modern-onward course, for that matter. Lots of flexibility before 1800 if it’s not a pure Shakespeare course (covered by a colleague). I am excited to teach as an upper-level seminar the Visions and Madness in Medieval Literature course I developed at University of ———. *Pearl*, Hoccleve, *Yvain*, Julian, Margery, *Hamlet*, with some Barthes, Foucault, Gilbert & Gubar, and this great chapter by Littau on affective reading, just recommended to me by someone here.

Tomorrow I begin working hard on the lectures I will give in January for the team-taught Introduction to British Literature and Culture survey course: eight lectures, each 90 minutes long with a 15-minute break, over three weeks. All English program bachelors students and other students as well, about 140 total, take the course. My colleague who works on Shakespeare and things after usually does some of those pre-1800 lectures but he has teaching relief this year, so in future years we will share. Then other faculty and PhD students take care of the remaining 200 years of British literature.

The survey syllabus from last year starts in 1550. Guess where it starts now: Cædmon’s “Hymn.” Then I’ve added Chaucer’s *Miller’s Tale*, a few Middle English lyrics, a bit of Julian of Norwich, and also added Elizabeth I to the so-called “Renaissance poetry” lecture (someday, someday, it will be early modern, so everyone doesn’t get confused with the twelfth-century renaissance). Previously the earliest female author had been Mary Shelley. I’ve also replaced *The Man of Feeling* with Eliza Haywood’s *Fantomina*, which I know from orals, and is so fantastic: masquerade, gender, power, ruinous birth, exile to French monastery. Other lectures I’ve inherited include the “metaphysicals,” eighteenth-century poetry, and a bunch of Swift. So I basically cover 800–1800. No problem.

Our generalist oral exams: I’m not sure it ever occurred to me in graduate school, studying furiously over that long short summer all those years ago, that such broad reading was basically an investment in a very real future where I have to teach anything. At the time it seemed like a distraction from learning
Latin and reading twelfth-century anchoritic guides. I mostly recall thinking that we had to cover other periods in order to be good conversationalists at academic cocktail parties (which has in fact been true). And also obviously because literature. But did anyone ever tell us we had to learn this stuff because we would actually have to lecture for two hours on the rise of the novel to 140 students? *My God, but I'm a medievalist!* Don’t get me wrong, it is invigorating and challenging and stretching me to be a better teacher. But when I was actually given the luxury of time to study outside my field I really don’t think that it occurred to me I would be quite so responsible for teaching so much of that material (and more). Did you think about that? Do you think that now? But you are one of many medievalists…

So far it is as rainy as we were warned — Bergen is the rainiest city in Europe — and we quickly upgraded our raingear to Norwegian brands. So far my distant relatives and our new neighbors are lovely and more welcoming than we could have hoped, just as Wollstonecraft describes her Scandinavian hosts, greeting her with “so much overflowing of heart, and fellow feeling, that only benevolence, and the honest sympathy of nature, diffused smiles over my countenance.” Though perhaps that will not be the case with all our new acquaintances, whose politeness somehow leaves me feeling lonely; “for the politeness of the north seems to partake of the coldness of the climate, and the rigidity of its iron-sinewed rocks” (56).

xoL

**LETTER II**
March, year 1

Dear ———

I have finally reached the top of the mountain we live on, Ulriken. I’ve never really known mountains, much less run up them — never lived among them, much less on one. Our house is at about 170 meters over sea level (moh, *metre over havet*, på
norsk) and the top of Ulriken is 643 moh. I suppose it’s not really that high in terms of all mountains everywhere but when you’re up this far north on the earth, it is high enough that there are no trees above about 550 moh, where the thin soil cannot hold them, and it can be a completely different climate. A month ago: somewhat terrifying Arctic winter. Ice, rocks, wind-scraped snow. Now: still snow in the shadows and lees, most rocks reborn. Lichen, neon green and bright white, grey and brown. “Before I came here, I could scarcely have imagined that a simple object, rocks, could have admitted of so many interesting combinations — always grand, and often sublime” (119). From the top of Ulriken you can see over a huge jagged wilderness surrounding the city, and beyond to snowier higher mountains, and fjords, and the North Sea, and on clear days across the fjords to even higher mountains with white glaciers touching clouds. Even though it is something like under 2 km to the top it takes me 45 minutes hard work and I now have to carry a backpack with food and water. It is a new kind of wonderful exhaustion running up a mountain.

I have begun Norwegian classes: Norskkurs. Having survived seven years of graduate school and Latin etc. and orals and MLA interviews and job talks I really want to wallow in expertise, just roll around and luxuriate in the authority of a real job, but no, I have to be a student again and learn this new language from scratch. Old English will help: Jeg heter Laura. As in: hatan! Wæs se grimma gæst Grendel haten / mære mearcstapa!

Work is going fine. Sometimes I feel a bit intellectually lonely. And not just because everyone works with their office doors closed (though the quiet can be lovely). After so many years in medieval-rich institutions with an embarrassment of lectures and seminars, I have yet to hear of any lectures I want to go to. I think I am not on the right mailing lists. This is literally true as I just became aware of a Medieval Philology research group, mostly Old Norse and Latin faculty, and now that I’m on their list they have some interesting lectures. But many are in Norwegian. I can’t really drop by someone’s office and air a new idea for my chapter because no one on campus has read Ancrene Wisse
or the two ME versions of Aelred’s *Institutione Inclusorum* or *Love’s Mirror* or *Speculum Devotorum* (so great). My colleagues sometimes ask me how my work is going, which is nice, and maybe someday I will actually answer honestly because I will not be afraid of alienating or boring them.

Next month brings Kalamazoo, and then New Chaucer Society even more north in Reykjavik. “My thoughts fly from this wilderness to the polished circles of the world, till recollecting its vices and follies, I bury myself in the woods, but find it necessary to emerge again, that I may not lose sight of the wisdom and virtue which exalts my nature” (108), Mary writes. There are only some woods around me as they soon give way to brush and scrub. But twenty minutes’ run straight up from the end of my street and the hum of the city is gone and I can hear the wind across the rocks, the little mountain birds tittering — I think of clever ways to teach things and clever ways to write things. And soon for a moment I’ll be back in my natural habitat surrounded by people who like to dish about the Wife of Bath and queer theory.

Send news!

xoL

**LETTER III**

**June, year 1**

Dear ———

How is everything? I am immersed in grading at the moment and taking a break to write you. Have you ever noticed that in the US we give out A, B, C, D, F — but no E? Well, I have found it: hiding in the snowy mountains of Norway. We give out E grades like Halloween candy — that is, like the Halloween candy nobody wants. There is almost no grade inflation in Norway: the C really means average, and there will be more D and E grades than A and B grades, and there will be F grades. A lot of them.
Then that makes the A grades much more like the full-size Snicker bars they really should be.

In Norwegian universities undergraduate and graduate classes are almost always assessed by one of three formats: a final “school” exam, between 4 and 6 hours long; a take-home exam of one or two weeks; or a slightly longer term paper with the teacher providing some feedback during the drafting process. Sometimes there is also a follow-up oral exam for the term paper. No other parts of the course contribute to the final grade: no smaller assignments, no participation, etc etc. These final assessments are graded completely anonymously (or in the case of supervised term papers, as much as possible) and now after we have submitted grades we are not even allowed to find out which student got what grade. I think the anonymity is very important for avoiding biases of all kinds, especially gender, yet I do miss the final reveal of names after blind grading in giving some sense of understanding about how students succeeded or didn’t, and being able to apply that knowledge to the improvement of my teaching.

Beyond being graded completely anonymously, every final assessment is also graded twice: by two faculty members who agree on each final grade together. Most of the time there is an internal and an external examiner: the internal examiner is the faculty member in charge of the course (or involved with it, as in team-taught courses) and the external examiner is another faculty member from a different Norwegian university. Each examiner independently considers what grade each exam deserves, and then they chat on the phone or via Skype or occasionally in person, to come to an agreement for each and every grade. The external examiner is paid money. The idea is that this double grading helps to standardize grades across the whole country, to prevent grade inflation, and to give fair and balanced evaluations of students’ work. By and large, the system is effective (though expensive).

But what if no one in the country has read the texts you teach except your students and you? Because I’m realizing now that there are actually no other Middle English literature professors
in Norway. In the whole country. Well, I met one in Oslo, but she has just retired, and technically she was in linguistics though she researches the same literature and culture I do. There are lots of linguists who teach History of the English Language and Old and Middle English, and they are about as comfortable with literary approaches to the material as I am to advanced linguistic approaches, or as any of us would be with deep cave diving: it would make us very very nervous (read: terrified) — so they cannot help. To be sure, I’ve been put in touch with excellent external examiners — other English literature faculty in Norway — who have past experience with Chaucer and a few other medieval texts. But these are specialists from other fields peering back into the Middle Ages. So it looks like I am the lone medievalist for English literature in the country of Norway. Fortunately the population is only about 5 million (i.e. equivalent to the population of Brooklyn and Queens).

So now it’s just me and my 15 upper-level undergraduates who have all read *Pearl*, Hoccleve’s *Complaint*, Chrétien’s *Yvain*, Margery, Julian, and *Hamlet* to top it off — us bound together by this syllabus on madness and visions. I tell them they are each in a unique position of actually having become, in just a semester, a kind of national authority on their paper topic — that they must inhabit the essayist’s “I” with confidence and gusto, to persuade the external reader not only of their argument, but also of the excitement, complexity, and value of these early texts. They are gospellers going forth with the word of pre-modern literature: green converts, but convinced (most of them, anyways).

In this situation the grading experience becomes an even more explicit balancing between what the students are writing about (my evaluative expertise) and *how* they write it (shared evaluative expertise with the external). After the paper there is a *muntlig eksamen* — a short oral exam for each student with me and the external examiner, covering both the paper and the rest of the texts in the course. I am actually looking forward to making those oral exams positive learning experiences for the students, in a small step towards recuperating some of the lame guidance and questions I received for the only oral exam I ever
took… (Will my whole career be in comparison to those graduate school years, sometimes better, sometimes worse, but never again with the same extraordinary time, mentorship, and library resources? Is it normal, some days, to miss my dissertation advisors more than my parents?)

Another peculiarly Norwegian system I feel I have begun to understand is hiking etiquette. While *ut på tur* in the mountains, when is it appropriate to greet those people you pass? The default answer is “never,” since ideally you have the mountain to yourself or you must pretend that is the case. For the few other scenarios I have worked up this handy guide to help you evaluate when it is safe to nod, say *hei*, or even have a short conversation.

- Is it sunny out (or just Sunday) and there are trees around?
- Are there more than five people on the trail?
- Is it raining normally and not unusually early or late in the day?
  → Avoid eye contact at all costs (all altitudes).

- Is the weather really terrible (hail, etc) and you are above the tree line?
- Is it so foggy out (or you’re just up in a cloud) that you suddenly come upon them?
- Is the weather really lovely and you are on a very obscure trail?
- Is it the first human you see after over an hour on the trails?
  → Nod or say *hei*.

- Do you both have small children with you of approximately the same ages, and you are on a less-traveled trail or the weather is very bad?
- Do you both have camping backpacks on, clearly on a *telt tur*, and it is getting late?
- Is it very snowy, nearly a white-out, and you are some distance from the trailhead?
• Is it exceptionally beautiful out, very early in the morning, and you are engaged in the same activity — running, skiing, walking a dog (i.e., not regular hiking)? → Try for a brief chat in Norwegian.

• Is the weather bad, and they are wearing jeans or regular sneakers or a normal coat? → They are tourists. Make sure they know how to get off the mountain so they don’t have to be rescued by the Red Cross later that night.

• Are you both snowshoeing? → This is very unusual, so chat in a friendly manner, and they might even invite you to their mountain hytte at the end of a perilous icy ridge. But beware Hansel and Gretel scenarios.

Above all, don’t take it personally if the Norwegian doesn’t respond. And if you see them approaching while they assiduously avoid eye contact, don’t be an American and say hi — obviously they need the mountain to themselves. Alone is not the same as lonely.

These guidelines generally translate to my department hallways. Maybe someday I will learn the names of all these people I pass several times a day; maybe some julebord when we accidentally sit with people outside our discipline. Of course say hei to colleagues by the copier, or even chat innocuously; but try not to make eye contact with others, and only dare a smile after at least six months.

The days are long here. Only vaguely dark around 12:30 am; quite light by 3:00. During the slow dusk bats flit in front of our living room windows, silhouetted against the darkening valley and the mountain far on the other side. The sunsets astound. “Nothing, in fact, can equal the beauty of the northern summer’s evening and night; if night it may be called that only wants the glare of day, the full light which frequently seems so imper- tinent; for I could write at midnight very well without a candle”
(59). I like staying up late to write too, Mary. Especially with that cool air sliding off the mountain and into the bedroom.

Come and visit soon…

xoL

LETTER IV
November, year 1

Dear ———

We have been here a year now. I am teaching a master’s course (think senior seminar) on Chaucer After Theory. Powered by Dinshaw’s *Chaucer’s Sexual Poetics* as some kind of immortal churning diesel engine, the course pairs tales with feminist/gender critics like Gayle Rubin, Cixous, Irigaray, Butler, Sedgwick, Halberstam. I dreamt up a syllabus that would challenge me too and give the students some theoretical frameworks to move forward with even if they never touch Chaucer again.

I am advising three MA theses: one on Hardy’s *The Return of the Native* and another on Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Cranford* (so I read those two for the first time this summer) and one on *The Great Gatsby* and *The House of Mirth*. Those were covered in orals, but now I wish I had not just the eighteenth-century novel but also the Victorian novel for an orals field. Well, I am sure learning a lot now. I have to say I do know how to ask much better questions of strange texts than I did back then. *Cranford* was a surprise winner—a kind of secret feminist utopia, more complex and moving than you might first assume. (“Have you any red silk umbrellas in London?” The narrator is marvelous.) For these students I just try to help them develop sharp close readings, strong arguments, engaging what critics they find, since I can do less about recommending specific critics and necessary historical angles. But fortunately there is an MA thesis Work-in-Progress weekly seminar where all the faculty and students give feedback on draft material for each student—crucial for getting fresh criticism and theory tips and catching oversights—plus
one of those faculty will be the internal examiner for these theses (I won't be involved in grading at all). I learn a lot from my colleagues’ feedback. They are kind, and sharp, and smart.

My Norsk is getting *ganske bra*. They have two main forms of the language: *bokmål*, most closely related to the Danish language that ruled for recent centuries, and *nynorsk*, a kind of “authentic” Norwegian the way it was before Swedish and Danish influence—basically a reconstructed language by this linguist guy who traveled around the country recording dialects (and whose gruff face graces the bottles of Kinn, a Norwegian craft beer you would love). In addition, at least in spoken form, each micro-region has its own strong dialect and accent, with the high mountains and equally deep fjords isolating people and their languages over millennia. We only learn bokmål in class. Nynorsk kind of looks like everything is spelled wrong, with lots of random words thrown in. So in parallel to the feel of reading Middle English. In fact my working theory is that Norwegian speakers are perfectly set up to read Middle English for two reasons: they have both the modern English cognates ready, as well as a whole set of Norse/Germanic cognates to pull from; and they are experienced in accommodating great variation in spelling and dialect already, from their experience with bokmål and nynorsk and all the huge range of dialects spoken today. They also read ME aloud beautifully by just importing their Norwegian accent. It warms the cockles of my heart to hear these students recite Chaucer for the first time.

I use the historical connections between medieval English and Norwegian to help justify the inclusion of original texts in the entry-level survey and upper-level classes: Look! They can do Middle English because they have great linguistic competency! The cognates jump right out at them! Also, the students in the English program take both literature and linguistics simultaneously, so they get a lot of History of the English language, etc., which makes my job a lot easier in terms of actually teaching Middle English.

In other news I have been doing a lot of mountain running. I ran a crazy race in August, 800 m (2624 ft) straight up a moun-
tain for 3.7 kilometers, one hour of pain and misery and muscle cramps. Really not fun. I was not prepared. How could I have been? Twice as tall as my usual mountain. While it was blue skies and lovely views at the top, I was achingly lonely with no one including me in their celebrations (why would they? they don't know me, no reason to include me, Welcome to Norway) and I chose a long wild lonesome path back down, which ended up being another six miles across a ridge and following a river back into the valley through farms and finally meeting the fjord and my ferry home. Just as in 1796: “Arrived at the ferry, we were still detained; for the people who attend at ferries have a stupid kind of sluggishness in their manner, which is very provoking when you are in haste. At present I did not feel it; for scrambling up the cliffs, my eye followed the river as it rolled between the rocky banks; and to complete the scenery, they were covered with firs and pines, through which the wind rustled, as if it were lulling itself to sleep with the declining sun” (80).

xoL

LETTER V
August, year 2

Dear ———

I got tired of not having any lectures I wanted to go to, or ever meeting any researchers outside my department, so I started the UiB Literature and Religion Research Group. Really a PhD student gave me the idea — she works on Blake and mysticism and she too felt like she fell through the cracks of other research groups, no common minds with which to rave about poetry and exegesis. Through the research group I have met lots of new interesting researchers at UiB, including a professor in a neighboring department — basically comp lit but also Norwegian literature and digital culture — who works on medieval devotional culture and perception and memory and all kinds of interesting
things, and sometimes he stops by my office and he recognizes the books on my shelf and we talk about how great Aquinas is.

So now the research group has a program of lectures and writing workshops for the semester and it is exciting. At the opening event I was part of a panel that gave mini-talks exploring literature and religion, and I was pleased to have some of my English literature colleagues (modernists, Americanists, etc) in the audience so I could give them a taste of some of the best medieval stuff out there. I talked about how the *Pearl*-poet uses the very *form* of poetry, and the semantic flexibility upon which poetry hinges, to probe theological quandaries and try to figure out how grief and love and consolation work. That the poor man can’t really understand why he hurts so much and struggles to wrap his head around what the maiden says — and he fails, like we all do — and how beautiful, detailed, crafted, complex, lace-like poetry is our human way of bringing form and sense and some consolation to an often painful and ugly world. You know now that I actually have a young daughter myself I can’t read certain parts of that poem in front of others, as I found my face covered in tears in a coffee shop the other day… Though I think crying in public over poetry makes you a real professor, *ikke sant*?

From the seeds sown in my seminar on Visions and Madness two years ago I have reaped a master’s student advisee writing on an awesome medieval topic he proposed: how death doesn’t work in *Sir Gawain*, *The Vision of Thnugdale*, and a few *Canterbury Tales*. He is working the uncanny Freudian angle but I still need some leads on zombie theory. Speaking of theory, Jack (aka Judith) Halberstam gave a lecture here in the spring at the *Litteraturhuset*, a kind of public space for cultural and literary events, that also has a bookstore and café and (amazing) restaurant. I encouraged my MA students who read Halberstam on female masculinities to come along, and many of them did. The talk was engaging and thought-provoking though I didn’t agree with all of it. Most of all just being there I felt a real sense of intellectual community and curiosity.
Last week I ran a trail race that went from the Hardanger fjord up to the Folgefonna glacier — from 50 to 1450 meters (4757 ft) — 11 kilometers. Running from one climate to another, from a soft ferny forest covered in moss and occasional sheep, past blueberry bushes and low shrubs, to cold sharp boulders where only lichen lives, across snow that never melts. It was hard and spectacularly fun, especially the last half hour running through fierce winds past clear glacial lakes with blue ice gleaming through and the horizon bringing together the looming depthless white glacier and very low clouds. As we raced higher and higher, “nature resumed an aspect ruder and ruder, or rather seemed the bones of the world waiting to be clothed with every thing necessary to give life and beauty. Still it was sublime” (dear Mary! 76). The mål or finish was at a little kjempe koselig hytte called Fonnabu where they gave us hot fruit soup (it was gross). Fortunately I roped three other modige women into running it with me: smart, kind, tough, adventurous women. Mostly it was a feminist activist move on my part as we almost doubled the number of female finishers from last year. Only 36 people ran in total.

So things are going well. I miss squirrels and swiss chard; friendly strangers; playing in dry leaves in the fall; talking about my research in the hallway; students spontaneously stopping by to chat about Chaucer, etc. (not part of the culture here — can I change that?). I don’t miss guns; being afraid to walk alone at night; getting sunburned (takes some effort); the tenure clock; bigotry and super huge egos (also here, but less obvious). I am not lonely at work. Lovely colleagues, even if they can’t give me easy answers to hard questions that I must wrestle with alone in my office — in front of my sun lamp and dying dead orchids.

Still, still, I agree with Mary: “The country still wore a face of joy — and my soul was alive to its charms” (119) — still we give Norway a chance, and I become more of a missionary medievalist every day.

When will you visit?

xoL