

University of Prince Edward Island

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Teaching and researching medieval literature at UPEI is both a challenge and a delight. It is a challenge, because I am the only medievalist on the campus (indeed, on the Island). My students do not have complementary courses in other disciplines (such as history or philosophy) to introduce them to the contexts in which the literature I teach emerged. And I often miss the intellectual stimulation and support of having other medievalists nearby. Finally, as might be expected for a small university where only one member of the faculty teaches a vast area of literature and history, our library resources are inadequate.

Yet, these challenges are not overwhelming—interlibrary loan is expensive, but our library staff are invariably cheerful and helpful, finding even the most obscure material for me. I have strong support from other members of my department and faculty, particularly those who teach early literature. In fact, once a year, Mount Allison university hosts a one-day colloquium for teachers and researchers of literature to 1800, where we can share our research and make connections with others whose interests coincide with our own. (This colloquium is organised by Karen Bamford of the English department, and has been a wonderful way of overcoming the isolation that can plague those of us who work at small universities).

Teaching here is also a delight. As the sole medievalist, I have a great deal of freedom in how I organise my courses. At the same time, those of us who teach early literature at UPEI have made a concentrated effort to collaborate in our teaching; for example, we have spent a great deal of time and energy working on how we teach the first half of our historical survey (literature to 1800) so that it feeds into upper-level courses in Medieval, Renaissance, Restoration and Eighteenth-Century literature. Many of the concerns are the same: the “strangeness” of the literature, the distance of

the historical periods (and students' total unfamiliarity with the history of the times), the difficulty of the language, to name only a few.

But the chief joy (and challenge) in my teaching here is my students. They often enter my courses with some trepidation, and I have the usual mix of those who take the courses because they are interested, and those who are there because they have to be—a medieval course is required both for majors and honours. Once there, however, they generally throw themselves into the course with enthusiasm and energy, and by the end of the course they are comfortable with the literature (and some are even converts!).

As a small department, we have the usual heavy commitment to service courses (each student at UPEI is required to take two English courses). We all teach first-year courses, survey courses and general interest courses on a regular basis. We also pitch in to cover courses outside our areas as needed. But our department has also made a commitment to offer at least one course each semester in every area required for the major and honours degrees, so I teach one medieval course each semester, in addition to honours supervision. I teach 4 medieval courses on a regular rotation, so that all 4 courses are taught once in a two-year cycle. In the fall semester, I alternate third-year courses on Chaucer and Arthurian literature, and in the winter I alternate upper-level courses on Medieval Genre and Major Authors. In medieval courses, my class size is generally small—I have had up to 35 in the Chaucer and Arthur course, but the upper-level courses tend to hover at about 20, an ideal size for a seminar style course.

I try to include at least one creative or interactive project per semester; for example, in my Chaucer class last fall, my students each took a hand at being a medieval scribe, copying a poem from an exemplar in medieval script. At the end of the term, we looked for variant readings and traced a stemma codicum for the text. Last winter, my class put Margery Kempe on trial, calling witnesses from the people whom she describes in her text. Julian of Norwich refused to leave her cell, but sent a written deposition on Margery's behalf! One course was designed to teach students web-page design, and their research projects took the form of creating web-pages about an author or text. When I taught a course on early women's writing, my students imagined themselves as women living in the time period of our authors, and wrote a character profile and two journal entries describing their lives and situating themselves in their historical period.

In short, despite the paucity of research material, which limits the material I can assign (especially for honours students), I thoroughly enjoy teaching medieval literature at UPEI. I have excellent students, enough courses to keep both me and my students interested, and class sizes which enable students to generate lively and thoughtful debate. I work in a close-knit department, in a university that is supportive of both faculty and students. This is a delightful place to live and work, and I am very happy to be a part of our “great small university.”