

THE BEAUTY OF LITERATURE TEACHING IS IN THE FEEDBACK:

S T U D E N T S ' R E W R I T E S O F O L D E N G L I S H E L E G I E S

This is the story of one of my very first experiences as a teaching assistant in English literature.¹ It was the academic year 1999/2000 and I taught the course in English literature, from its beginnings up to 1625, for the first year undergraduates. The educational authorities in my country had decided that that generation was not obliged to take the entrance exam to university because they had been unable to complete the final year of their secondary education. The final year of their secondary education began in September 1998 and ended in June 1999. During that period the school year was interrupted several times by teachers going on strike and by the NATO air campaign.

As a result of the authorities' decision, the English, and other departments in my country, enrolled all candidates who had applied for undergraduate studies. The English department in Belgrade alone admitted almost five hundred students. What I got was what Rob Nolasco and Lois Arthur would call large classes.² I had nearly eighty students per tutorial group. We had classes in the biggest classroom on the Faculty's fifth floor, and the room could hardly hold them all.

My first-year syllabus was lengthy too, since it comprised literary texts from the middle of the 7th up to the first quarter of the 17th century. Apart from the large classes and the lengthy syllabus, I had a third major concern – how to teach the English literary period which is hardest to understand – Old English literature? The first texts we read were prose extracts from Aldhelm and Bede. By the look in their eyes, I realized that some of my students were confused, others bored to death.

Then we moved on to *Beowulf*. I talked to them about remote, misty times when heroes and monsters trod the earth and when life was spent either on battlefields or in mead-halls. They found it hard to understand, let alone to like the poem. Some of them said it was naïve, while others claimed it resembled folk tales whose outcome could be predicted the moment we started reading the opening lines. However, they fervently discussed the principal characters, major themes and symbols of the poem. We heard a lot about Beowulf's physical strength and reputation, Grendel's envy and resentment toward mankind, Grendel's mother's

monstrous, yet humanly understandable revenge for her defeated son, Hrothgar's wisdom and generosity, Wealtheow's kindness and hospitality and Wiglaf's loyalty. The students also compared Hrothgar's great mead-hall Heorot to the cave where Grendel and his mother lived. They saw the former as the place of light, warmth and joy, and the symbol of the Scyldings' greatest achievement. The latter was interpreted as the symbolic home of resentful outcasts, a hellish, dark, dank place in the middle of a fen (Baldwin 2000: 63-70). Together we read famous extracts such as Beowulf's fight with Grendel, Grendel's mother's attack, Beowulf and the dragon and Beowulf's funeral.

In our next class we were supposed to do three Old English elegies: "The Seafarer", "The Wanderer" and "The Wife's Lament". I entered the classroom as usual. It was a Tuesday in late November and my class time was from 18.00 to 19.30. It was dark and cold outside and it had started to snow. A fierce wind was blowing in such a way that classroom windows were shaking. Then, all of a sudden, the classroom door opened without human agency. My students looked at me and said: "Oh my God, this is Grendel coming!"

Everybody laughed. It was the draught, of course, because the classroom had a front door and a back door, none of which was properly fixed, and it also had those shaking windows. But I liked their remark very much. I saw it as the turning point in their attitude to the syllabus. They had started thinking in terms of Old English literature. They associated a detail from Old English literature with their particular situation. It was for fun, of course, but it was significant. The remark came out of the blue, but my personal opinion is that their change of mind took time to occur and that the remark was the outcome of a process.

I suddenly realized I could teach Old English elegies in order to achieve two things: first, to maintain their interest in the matter and second, to prompt them to make further associations between the input and their own experiences.

Since the students had read the three elegies for homework, I first asked them to give me the adjectives describing their general impressions. The words they produced were "sad", "hopeless", "absorbed" and "lonely". When I asked them what the three protagonists of the elegies had in common, they said that all the three were exiles, but pointed out that the Seafarer's exile was voluntary whereas the Wanderer and the Wife were forced to leave the warmth and safety of home. They also noticed that the messages of "The Wanderer" and "The Seafarer" were God-centred while "The Wife's Lament" offered no consolation in eternal terms (Godden & Lapidge 1991: 186).

Then we read the three elegies together. I drew their attention to poetic formulas and kennings and then elicited from them an awareness of expressions such as "bereft of joy", "to travel the paths of exile", "the path of the whale", "the gold-friend", "the gift-stool", "the hall-men" and "ubi sunt". We agreed that the predominant atmosphere was one of loss, banishment and exile, of loneliness and the failure of human relationships. They noticed that the images representing such an atmosphere were frozen waves, sea-birds, winter storms and gloomy cliffs. Earthly pleasures being insecure and transient, the narrators of the Old English

elegies adopted wisdom and patience waiting for either a heavenly resolution of their troubles or simply for death which ends all sorrow (Sanders 1996: 23-4).

When we finished that, I asked my students to imagine what the Wanderer, the Seafarer and the Wife looked like. The Wanderer turned out to be in his late thirties, a desperate and miserable man aimlessly roaming vast spaces and longing to join his fellow-clansmen in the Otherworld. The Seafarer was an old, grey-bearded man in worn-out clothes, willingly turning his back on transient earthly luxuries in search of heaven. The Wife used to be beautiful before the exile, but her face had become weather-beaten and her eyes lifeless. Her abode in a cave under an oak-tree was a dark and scary place. Her hair was reddish and she was dressed in grey linen.

After the lead-in, I divided them into groups and gave them the task. Within a set time limit (15 minutes), each group was supposed to write its own version of an Old English elegy, up to twenty verses long, and comprising two elements: the motif of exile and that of remembrance of past happiness. When they heard what they were supposed to do, they did not seem very enthusiastic, but as time began ticking away, they got down to work and this is what they came up with:

1. My Love

I had a dream
A dream of the life
That is now gone.
I had her love,
Now I've lost it.
Even now I wander
Around the world searching for it,
Hundreds of times I asked myself:
"Where are you?"
There is no moon, there is no sun
With my life I'm done.

2. no title

Oh dear God, how much I suffer!
How painful my wounds are!
All alone in this severe darkness of life,
Without my soul mates to comfort me!
My beloved ones have left me on the bloody
Battlefield.
They have found comfort in the Heaven above,
And I'm drowning in this harsh and bitter
Loneliness.
Wishing I were with them now
To share all the joy we had.

I have searched all over the world,
 But not a sparkle of happiness have I found.
 How strange it is to be alive
 And at the same time to be dead inside!

3. The Lament of the Lost Ones

Banished and exiled on the fifth floor
 We sit here in anguish while the wind blows.
 Outside where once was warm sun-time
 Now hails rage.
 Now we remember under the sky of grey
 The thanes we have lost on the watery-way,
 Some on the second floor, some on the first,
 Some in the desert dying of thirst.
 Alas, where are they? Where have they gone?
 The brave-hearted retainers
 Of the days of old? We sit in our tower,
 Our sorrow we bemoan,
 While the happy sparrow
 Sweeps through the mead-hall.
 Hwaet! White-winged angels, come to carry us away
 Into the kingdom of bliss where forever we'll stay.

The experiment was a success. The outcome – marvellous. The reporters who read what their group had produced were attentively listened to. And not just that. Students suggested we choose the best poem. As expected, “The Lament of the Lost Ones” had no peer. They had had fun but they had accomplished a serious thing as well. By writing their own pieces of poetry they expressed creativity and showed profound understanding of the main ideas of the source material.

In my opinion, the Old English elegies are of great importance within the literary canon. Not just because they deal with concerns and troubles common to us all and regardless of the century we live in. The fact that troubles are universal is not always a comforting knowledge. On the contrary, it can leave us with a sense of the futility of all strivings. But the Old English elegies did not have that effect on my students. They did not just show them how sad and hard life can be – although they did that, of course – but they also threw them into a whirl of activity in which they discovered how resourceful they could be.

Because they stand at the beginning of the English literary heritage, Old English elegies are students' first encounter with English literature. If the elegies are capable of producing such an effect upon students' imagination, we, teachers of English literature, should do our best to encourage and facilitate that first encounter, because it can have an impact on students' attitudes to the whole of English

literature. It can either discourage them or make English literature classes a pleasant and rewarding experience.

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¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 16th Oxford Conference on Teaching Literature: "Firing the Canon", at Corpus Christi College, Oxford, in April 2001. The conference dealt with new ways to approach the English literary syllabus. Consequently, it addressed questions such as whether we can change or modify the conventional syllabus to suit contemporary needs and interests, and whether there are new and more dynamic ways of approaching poetry, fiction and drama.

² See Nolasco & Arthur (1998).

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REZIME

LEPOTA PREDAVANJA KNJIŽEVNOSTI JE U UZVRAĆANJU: STUDENTSKE VERZIJE STAROENGLLESKIH ELEGIJA

U ovome radu opisan je čas na kojem su obrađene tri staroengleske elegije – "Potukač", "Moreplovac" i "Ženina tugovanka". Posle uvoda koji se sastojao od njihovih objašnjenja i razgovora o opštoj atmosferi i likovima u elegijama, studenti su dobili zadatak. U grupama i u zadatom vremenskom intervalu trebalo je da napišu svoju verziju staroengleske elegije, u kojoj će biti zastupljen motiv izgnanstva i motiv sećanja na prošlu sreću. U ovome radu prikazana su tri primera studentskih ozbiljnih i parodiranih, neosporno lucidnih elegija i prokomentarisani su mesto i značaj staroengleskih elegija u književnom kanonu.