

Crafting Medievalism in an Introductory Integrative Arts Course

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This chapter provides an overview of a multidisciplinary honors course on medievalism, one bringing together the creative arts and close reading with writing on aesthetic concepts and productions. While reading and listening assignments provided a foundation for integrative artistic creation, students achieved the course goals by creating hand-crafted and digital projects accompanied by artist statements. Combined, these assignments, requiring different modes of crafting, provided a means for thinking about and working through—for students and teacher—the relationship between artistic production and written expression, and how engaging them together develops and enriches both.

This chapter provides an overview of a multidisciplinary honors course on medievalism, one bringing together the creative arts and close reading with writing on aesthetic concepts and productions. More specifically, the course concerned how the arts are integrated in medieval works and how later medievalist works appropriate tropes of the period. Medieval works exemplify arts integration; later works influenced by them adapt this compositional feature by combining multiple arts, including words, visual images, music, and performance. This characteristic of medievalism served the objectives of my honors integrative arts course: namely, to increase student awareness of the interplay among the arts over time; to examine how art and media reinvent the past; and to experience through creative production how materials and methods inform artistic ideas and constructions. While reading and listening assignments provided a foundation for integrative artistic creation, students achieved the course goals by creating hand-crafted and digital projects accompanied by artist statements. For Anicca Cox (2015), the artist statement itself acts as a central text in relation to art-making practices.

The course design emphasized creative production and written expression partly for students to learn how writing can serve art relationally to develop a compelling mutual dependency, as Cox argues it does. I developed this course as a response to having had success with assignments requiring creative projects and writing in humanities courses such as *The Quest* and the Arthurian Legend, the motifs and characters of which students know from medievalist fantasy novels, films, and games. Students would even brave humanities courses beginning with medieval texts and the earliest Arthurian literature because they were fans of the *Game of*

Thrones novels and HBO's adaptation of them or the BBC's *Merlin* or Tolkien's novels and the films based on them, or they fondly recalled childhood works such as the *How to Train Your Dragon* series of books and films. Many, too, were avid game players, would-be game constructors, and aspiring fantasy fiction writers.

The course was also to meet the goals of the Integrative Arts Program at Penn State University: to prepare "undergraduate students to work successfully as innovative and dynamic artists, designers, and performers in an increasingly interdisciplinary world" (Penn State University Integrative Arts Program). The program's stated educational objectives endeavor for students to be able to "synthesize and evaluate creative output, contribute to critical discourse, and learn how to incorporate feedback and critique as part of the creative process"; and to "understand, apply, and analyze art historical and aesthetic concepts related to the creation and/or design of creative works that combine multiple forms of art, design, or performance" (Penn State University Integrative Arts Program). The medievalism course assignments in reading, seeing, listening, performing, and writing were intended to facilitate these goals and expand the directions for students' creativity.

Integrating student performance in English courses is longstanding when it comes to dramatic literature. Scholarship focusing on performance in the teaching of Shakespeare in English courses (as opposed to theater courses), for example, has elaborated on the pedagogy of performance and its benefits over the course of 35 years (Cohen, 1990; Gilbert, 1983; Riggio, 1999). Students have staged small scenes in and out of the classroom, mounted full theatrical productions for on campus productions, attended field trips to school, community, and professional productions, and watched cinematic interpretations of works. In addition, scholars in English have described and argued the case for performing *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, a narrative poem (Vitz, 1999; Vitz & Zaerr, 2007). The integrative arts course on medievalism described here extended learning through performances of these genres to enactments of lyric poetry and visual art. It also ventured into the field to discover integrative medievalist sites, not only in an art museum but in the aspirational architecture of an energy efficient building whose walls were adorned with medieval symbols of alchemy. The course final reinforced this kind of engagement with off-site medievalism in Washington, DC, where students identified and discussed what they would categorize as medievalist in the city; their responses included the Smithsonian Castle, the National Cathedral, and a performance of Shakespeare's *Henry IV, Part 1*, among others. Such field trips expand the concept of what constitutes art, both what it is and what it can do. Students see for themselves how communities shape the arts and how the arts shape communities, and what they learn begins to inform their own creative ideas.

Students were enthusiastic about the creative assignments and the class time devoted to them. Even those who professed no artistic ability seemed to look

forward to trying to make something. One period was set aside for a workshop led by the Berks College resident artist who introduced the class to contemporary hand tools that could be used to recreate medieval crafts. Our guest teacher provided resources for hand crafting—gold leaf, paints, brushes, inks, stencil books of lettering, among other materials. Students experimented with drawing marginalia on a manuscript page, designing and inking historiated letters, and recopying text as medieval scribes did with less readily available resources. Though a few claimed to be self-conscious about what they produced, they also expressed how much they enjoyed the opportunity to be creative. While self-conscious about their writing as well, none enthused about the act of doing it.

Preparing students for doing creative projects and writing about them began with reading assignments and journal exercises. The first assigned readings focused on early literature and, like all the works on the syllabus, integrated at least two different arts: for example, poetry and music, drama and performance, and/or poetry and visual image. Marcabru's medieval lyric "L'Autrier Jost'una Sebissa" ("The Other Day Beside a Hedge"), for example, is accompanied by music that can be "heard" online; "The Agincourt Carol" is a later English song; and the Robin Hood plays have stage directions identifying where to add fight scenes and dance. These and numerous other pre-modern works are freely and legally available online, as are visual images of manuscript illuminations and marginalia related to these texts, if not originally part of them. The first journal assignment accompanying the readings asked students to:

Create or find music to accompany the play. Discuss how the music complements the action, words, characters, etc. OR
create, draw, or find costumes to outfit the knight. Then discuss how the costumes complement the characters, dialogue, action.

Knights appear in all three assignments. Additionally, in *Robin Hood*, stage directions identify breaks for music to be performed, though there are no extant copies of the play that include musical settings.

This first assignment, a journal entry requiring students to write music or create costumes, offered them a choice between exercising their talents in the visual or musical arts. Costuming, while typically associated with drama, is also important in paintings, as students later see for themselves, for example, in "The Blessed Damsel," a painting and poem by the Victorian Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Since not all students want to write music or feel comfortable sewing or drawing, the alternative was for them to "find" music or costumes to represent their ideas about character or theme, a responsibility of music supervisors for film and television and dramaturges in theater. Therefore, justified by these professional models, I included "selection" as creative production, for anything chosen to represent these medieval works would be original and, thus, provide new interpretations and approaches to them.

Score

Two Knights Laid Waste

An Electronic Project

Christian Brendel
Sean Geguera

Piano

Tenor

Low Irish Whistle

Bass Drum

Pno.

T

B. Dr.

Two knights laid waste one qui - et spring morn

Their eyes a - blaze and all vows foe - sworn

© Honors Program

Figure 12.1. Brendel and Geguera's song¹ (courtesy of Christian Brendel and Sean Geguera).

1 This is the computer project, not the journal response, of Christian Brendel and Sean Geguera. Sean submitted both written music and designed costumes for the journal assignment.

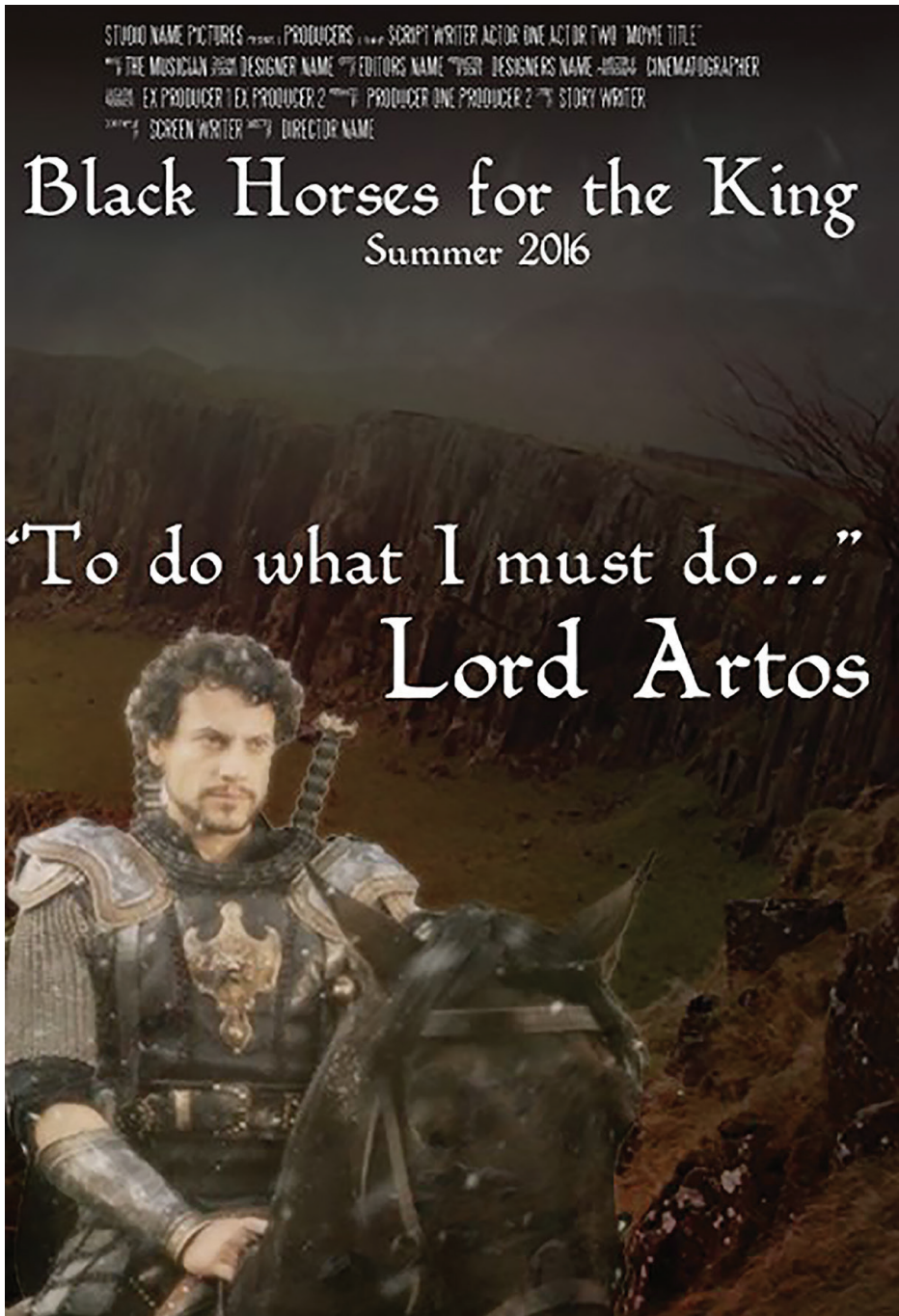


Figure 12.2. Rachel's poster, "Black Horses for the King" (courtesy of Rachel Jensen).

Writing was to complement whatever students chose to “make” or “do.” It was to emphasize an identifiable purpose and the specific ways their choice of music or costume design provided insights into a character or action of a work. The challenge of this first assignment, as it would be for the subsequent paper, was the written discussion rather than creative production. Typical of my comments were the following: “You could have been more specific in your references with regard to these particular Robin Hood texts”; “But you address the play relatively generally . . .”; “Explanation would help here”; and “More considered discussion of the play”² As for the creative works elicited by the prompt, they went in a variety of directions: crayon sketches, raps, collages, among others. One student costumed characters *and* wrote music for one of the Robin Hood plays, demonstrating multiple talents and, also, a compelling interest in how two very different forms could be used to tell an old story in a new way.

This initial assignment had asked students to create something and then write about how what they created reinterpreted or re-envisioned a medieval text. The next journal exercise was a variation on the first, but started with writing based on the reading and then proceeded to creating art. In this unit, students began by reading “The Nature of Gothic” by John Ruskin and a much shorter piece by William Morris, “Address on Pre-Raphaelite Paintings.” Then they were exposed to selections of Victorian medievalist poetry and paintings by nineteenth-century artists such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti and William Morris, as well as paintings by medieval artists coupled with later poetry about them, for example, Robert Browning’s poem “Fra Lippo Lippi” paired with the eponymous subject’s medieval paintings. Following exposure to these primary sources, students were introduced to contemporary medievalist theory in one article by Elizabeth Emery and another by M. J. Toswell. With varied forms of medieval and Victorian constructions in mind, together with contemporary theorizing about them, students were asked to:

Do #1 and then two of any of the following:

1. [Make] A key word list of “the Gothic” as defined by Ruskin;
2. Write an epigraph or epitaph informed in some way by medievalism;
3. Write a short description of a “medieval” (human) character;
4. Write a short description of a creature suitable for a medieval bestiary;
5. Write a short prayer using biblical verse or an encomium using biblical and/or classical allusions;
6. If you can write music, write one simple line of notes and represent one key word from #1 as part of the music or a lyrical line.

2 I have omitted more specific comments to maintain student confidentiality; but, in this regard, the comments were much the same and, therefore, not likely to reveal the identity of any particular student.

The students found Ruskin difficult but useful. They enjoyed the two scholarly articles by Toswell and Emery, perhaps because the use of familiar contemporary examples made the theories of medievalist taxonomy comparatively accessible.

This journal assignment resulted in “aha” moments for most of the students. Indeed, their descriptions of medieval beasts or human types, whether of their own invention or traditional ones such as dragons, would become the basis for their first creative projects. The problems in the responses primarily concerned synthesizing Ruskin and understanding his terms in relation to their would-be creations as gothic or medievalist. Distinguishing his key characteristics, such as “savageness” from “grotesque” or “rudeness” from “rigidity” or “naturalism,” proved particularly challenging. Though students would not be required to use Ruskin’s terminology in their artist statements, they would anyway, having found it useful for thinking about design.

The students were ready to create their first project, hand crafting an object or “artifact” evoking the Middle Ages. As with each of the preparatory journal assignments, invention and construction would come more easily than writing about what they had created. The comments I appended to each project primarily focused on the accompanying artist statement, not the creation itself. Typically, I noted a lack of specificity, clarity, focus, definition, and use of terms. Students had clearly expended their time and energy on the creative productions that deserved the effusive praise lavished on them when presented to the class. The writing seemed almost an afterthought, the suddenly remembered homework. The students knew, too, that the written portion could be revised, that I was more interested in their learning how to write about their artistic products than with what grade their first drafts deserved.

Whether or not students chose to revise their artist statements for their first project—and not all did—they would have a second chance to practice the form when they wrote new ones to accompany the second project. This project would take them into the digital age by requiring a “computer crafted” object. The project parameters read as follows:

“Computer craft” an object (it can be the same subject as project one or entirely new) in the medievalist tradition. Then write a short paper identifying what you created, how you created it, and what you think was gained through use of this medium, followed by what you think was lost through use of this medium.

Though students were not required to cite Toswell or Emery, most did, replicating their use of Ruskin as a constructive critical authority in the first paper. They had learned something about creating a context for their work and invoking an authority to support their approach. Working with different tools also prompted reflection on the choices they had made as artists. Thus, their conclusions about what is gained and what lost through different modalities—here hand-crafts and digital-crafts—were shaped by their creative experience engaging both methods.



Figure 12.3. Lewis' Wyvelope³ (courtesy of Erik Lewis).

The second artist statement required students to address the same principles as the first one. The results, therefore, were reassuring, as my response to one suggests: “Doing the same thing twice offers all sorts of insights into process and production—and you seem to have considered most of them . . . good specificity and details!” These papers avoided the vagueness that characterized the artist statements accompanying the first project. In this second essay, students were careful to explain precisely what they had tried to do, detailing and discussing their decisions in terms of an intended purpose or effect. They also demonstrated a greater facility in using the critical and scholarly sources, as noted in this appended comment: “the use of Emery and Toswell is impressive for being thoughtful and sophisticated.”

Students had learned something from writing their artist statements. But the final writing project, an Artist's Manifesto, was less successful. Few were ready to formulate a personal approach or ideology of art at this stage of their creative life. Assigning examples of the form (e.g., the Futurist Manifesto) may only have made the task seem more daunting; artist statements had not been provided as models for the first two papers, and the omission may have been enabling, freeing them to find their own voice and style to represent their creative ideas rather than leaving them intimidated by those of others. In future iterations of the course, I will replace

3 This is the computer project of Erik Lewis based on his craft project of a Wyvelope. The sculpture, carved, painted, and made of several pieces, unfortunately shared the vulnerability of medieval crafts and has since partly broken apart.

this assignment with a critical review or a small grant proposal, either of which would increase student awareness of how intended audience may impact creative production.

The course asked students to embody in their writing what they created with their hands and mini-pads. Everything produced was both performance and text, something recommended strenuously by Henry and Baker (2015). By making art and writing about it, students explored relationships between the theoretical and applied, culture and forms of media, technology and handcrafting, written expression and artistic production, artistic vision and process, and how creativity informs craft *and* composition in all its varied forms.

The writing produced in this integrative arts course was unique to my experience. I reminded myself—and sometimes the class—that I was not teaching a literature course, despite readings including poetry, fiction, drama, and historical criticism. Nor did art history papers substitute for English papers. I was interested in creative performances in multiple forms—crafts, composition, computers. The assigned writing was intended to help students generate ideas, describe their artistic vision and process, and critically assess the success of their creative projects in fulfilling their own goals and intentions. Combined, these assignments involving different modes of crafting provided a means for thinking about and working through—for students and teacher—the relationship between artistic production and written expression, and how engaging them together develops and enriches both.

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