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Student Retellings: Adapting Middle English Literature in Singapore

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Abstract

This article discusses a creative assignment in which students make their own adaptations of Middle English texts. Using three examples of student work, I argue that adaptation encourages students to pay close attention to the medieval text, while also allowing them to build personal and intellectual connections with the material.

I am grateful to all the students whose creative projects have entertained me and made me look at familiar texts with fresh eyes, and in particular to the students whose work I discuss here: Alysia Lim, Fatin Rumaisha Binte Ridzuan, and one who prefers to remain anonymous.

Anyone who introduces Middle English literature to students faces a problem: how to make texts written many centuries ago, in an unfamiliar form of the language, speak to a diverse twenty-first-century audience? And how to balance the desire to help students connect with medieval texts and the desire to help them see those texts as the historically specific products of a very different culture—one that, while sometimes concerned with issues relevant to modern students, might approach those issues in alien ways? As many instructors have recognised, modern reworkings of medieval texts can help to bridge the gap between medieval and modern (see, for example, Forni 2013; Hsy 2014; Essary 2019). As Kathleen Forni has pointed out, adaptations not only make texts “accessible, enjoyable, and significant to a wide array of audiences,” but are also “a potential source of ideological resistance to both the cultural hierarchy represented by the original text... and the social hierarchy that such a text presumably reflects” (2018, 4–5). Adaptation creates space for authors to question and explore canonical texts, and for students to find their way into the text by thinking about what changes have been made and why. The creators of novels, poems, films, and games based on medieval texts necessarily engage critically with their sources. They produce creative outputs that stem from particular readings and interpretations of the original, and that rely on awareness of the difference between contemporary and medieval audiences. These are abilities we aim to instil in our students: identifying their own interpretation of the text, understanding how details of the text contribute to it, and cultivating awareness of how medieval readers’ responses might have differed from their own. For this reason, I ask my students to produce their own adaptations of medieval texts.

The creative assignment I discuss in this paper is one I use with students in my introductory medieval literature course at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. The students of the course, almost all of whom are Singapore citizens, are overwhelmingly from the university’s English program or from a double major program combining English with another Humanities subject. Most are in their second year of the degree, although third- and fourth-year students also enrol. The student body reflects the multiethnic and multi-religious character of Singapore as a whole: as of the most recent census in 2020, Singapore’s population was predominantly ethnically Chinese (74.3%), with large Malay (13.5%) and Indian (9.0%) minorities (Singapore Census 2020, 3). Religious belief was reported as split between Buddhism (31.1%), Christianity (18.9%), Islam (15.6%), Taoism (8.8%), and Hinduism (5.0%) (Singapore Census 2020, 31). Although English is the main language in schools, government, and business, Singapore has four official languages (Malay, Mandarin, Tamil, and English), and many students are multilingual.

The students have generally encountered Middle English literature before only through the department’s required first-year survey of English literature up to 1785, in which all medieval works other than those by Chaucer are read in translation. In that course, students compare extracts from different translations of *Beowulf*—most recently, those by Seamus Heaney, Michael Alexander, and Maria Dahvana Headley—and think about how their contrasting approaches to the poem’s opening

lines frame the poem for their contemporary readers. They also use clips from film adaptations (Yuri Kalakov's 1990 *Animated Epics: Beowulf* and Robert Zemeckis's 2007 *Beowulf*) to prompt discussion of narrative structure and audience expectation. The students entering my second-year Middle English literature course should therefore be familiar with the idea that adaptations can serve as critical interpretations of texts. In that course, their first sustained engagement with Middle English, I ask them to interpret the texts by adapting them themselves. The assignment was initially designed to provoke critical approaches to the medieval texts without the potentially intimidating requirement to write a research paper early in the semester. Although students do not have to retell the medieval narrative, they do have to engage with it in ways that encourage them to find their own individual means of connection with the original text. The students take a wide range of approaches to the text, both in terms of critical assessment and in terms of the aspects of the original that capture their interest.

The assignment I use asks students to build from consideration of the medieval text to their own creative response. They submit the assignment in two halves: a piece of creative work, in any format, and an explanatory paper of around 500 words. Students are given three questions to guide their progress. First, they are asked to identify a significant theme, motif, or structure in any one of the course texts and justify its importance. This is intended to encourage analytical engagement with the original work. Second, they are asked to suggest how a medieval audience might have responded to their chosen element of the text, with reference to at least one secondary source. This requirement pushes students to question their initial assumptions about the medieval period by asking them to read scholarship about medieval social and cultural practices. I remind them that the medieval period was long and varied and that they should consider when their selected text was composed before choosing which scholarly works to read. Finally, students are asked to explain how their creative project gives a modern audience the same experience of their chosen theme as the medieval text might have given its original readers. In this component of the assignment, students often find ways to relate the medieval text to their personal experience or background, although they are not required to do so.

Over the years that I have used this assignment, the students have produced a marvellous bounty of creative projects. While many students have submitted pieces in traditional formats, such as poems and short stories, others have reached further afield: I have received a coffee blend, a fashion show mood board, a D&D campaign, a hand-made dress, several board games, a radio play, a grunge-inspired poster of Thomas Hoccleve, and a burger menu. Students also take a variety of approaches to adapting the text. Some choose to draw parallels with contemporary political and social issues, including policing, marriage equality, and the public perception of mental illness. Others link their adaptations to specific communities, whether geographical, cultural, or virtual.

In what follows, I present three projects that illustrate how the students' adaptations have led them to deep engagement with the text and to imaginative, personal connections with the medieval material. In each case, the students have selected themes and approaches that go beyond what was covered during in-class discussion. To illustrate the students' thought processes, I quote from their work: uncited quotations in the case studies below are taken from the students' submitted papers, whether from the explanatory paper or from the creative piece itself.

Sir Orfeo Visits King Yama

The late thirteenth- or early fourteenth-century *Sir Orfeo* is one of the first texts students encounter in the course, and one of the most popular. They read the online TEAMS edition in the second week of the semester (Laskaya and Salisbury 1995). The Middle English poem adapts the original Orpheus legend to shift the events from ancient Greece to medieval England. Instead of Eurydice dying and Orpheus attempting to save her from the Underworld, Heurodis is abducted by fairies. Orfeo eventually manages to save her from the Fairy Kingdom, and then returns home to reclaim his throne. As this text is itself an adaptation, discussing it early in the semester and in conjunction with the assignment helps students see how texts might be altered for different audiences.

In this project, the student—who prefers to remain anonymous—chose to make a short film focused on the fairy characters. He notes that frightening fairies of the kind seen in *Sir Orfeo* have now been replaced by more positive images of Disney-inspired ‘fairy godmothers,’ meaning that fairies no longer present the same sense of threat to a modern audience. To update the fairies, he first sought to understand how the medieval poem presented the Fairy Kingdom, considering scholarly arguments relating the Fairy Kingdom to the heavenly Jerusalem, the classical underworld, and Celtic fairyland. Ultimately, he concluded that the presence of people who are “thought dede, and nare nought” (line 390) shows that the poem’s Fairy Kingdom functions as a stand-in for the underworld and should be interpreted in that sense.

The next step of the assignment requires students to create an adaptation that will give a modern audience the same experience as they have argued the medieval audience might have had. Accordingly, the student turned to traditional conceptions of hell, arguing that:

Despite living in a highly modernised country, Singaporeans are still highly invested in their cultural traditions. For the Chinese, the personification of death exists in the form of two deities, ‘Ox Head’ and ‘Horse Face.’ They are believed to be the messengers of the Netherworld, responsible for escorting the dead to hell.

In the student’s adaptation, Ox Head and Horse Face take the place of the fairies who escort Heurodis to the Fairy Kingdom. Instead of the Fairy King, Orfeo faces King Yama, the ruler of hell. These interpretations of the characters argue for a particular understanding of the medieval text and the roles its characters play. Other students have taken more positive views of the fairies, seeing the fact that they do not take game during their hunts (l. 287) as evidence of a close relationship with nature, or viewing the Fairy King’s willingness to let Heurodis leave with Orfeo (ll. 469–71) as evidence of fundamental honesty. The project, therefore, helps students to form and defend opinions about aspects of the text. In discussing one another’s projects, students (hopefully) also become open to the idea that two conflicting interpretations of the text can both have merit.



Figure 1: Heurodis makes her way through a paper hell

As well as reinterpreting the characters of *Sir Orfeo*, this student drew on the material cultural practices of Chinese funerary traditions to develop his new vision of the poem’s underworld. As the student explains:

paper effigies are made to imitate the appearance of objects used by the living. The belief is that the burning of paper effigies is a way to send these objects to the souls in hell, ensuring the dead are provided for in the afterlife.

In accordance with this belief, the opening scenes of the student’s film—set in the world of the living—are live-action scenes. Ox Head and Horse Face, who move between the worlds of the living and dead, are played by actors wearing paper masks. The eighteen levels of hell, and all the characters that appear in them, are made entirely of paper and filmed using stop-motion techniques. Dialogue in hell appears as paper speech bubbles, while Orfeo’s songs are paper musical notes that float upwards from his paper cut-out to the top of the screen.

Although the student’s project modernises *Sir Orfeo*, featuring technologies such as cars and elevators, its key intervention is to translate the original poem’s supernatural creatures into a new cultural and religious context which helps to explain their actions. This is a common approach to *Sir Orfeo*. As students puzzle over why the fairies abduct Heurodis, keep her among their “gallery of bodies,” and then allow her to leave with Orfeo, they draw parallels with other beings from folklore and popular culture. Other projects have envisioned the fairies as the Malay and Indonesian spirits

known as *orang bunian*, as aliens taking Heurodis to their own planet, or even as the cosmos itself. In each case, students come to different understandings of how the original text balances the fairies' beauty and power with their potential for violence.

Troilus and Criseyde in the Shadows

Due to the length of Geoffrey Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* and the fact that it only has two weeks' space in the syllabus, students read it in Barry Windeatt's translation for Oxford World's Classics (Chaucer 2009). However, in-class discussion is based on excerpts from the original text and students are encouraged to refer to Chaucer's own language for close reading. As with *Sir Orfeo*, some of the class discussion deals with the text as an adaptation in its own right, in this case of Boccaccio's *Il Filostrato*. Students compare passages of Boccaccio's text, in translation, to the corresponding passages in Chaucer, commenting on aspects of plot, detail, and tone and using them to consider how Chaucer's purpose might vary from that of his source.

In this project, Alysia Lim focuses on ideas of fate and manipulation in Chaucer's text, noting that "the Chaucer-narrator situates the reader in the distant, omniscient position of God who knows the end of the story even before it begins." Her adaptation takes the form of a contemporary shadow puppet performance called *Shadows*, inspired by the Javanese tradition of *wayang kulit* that has since spread throughout South East Asia ("Wayang Kulit" 2018). *Wayang kulit* puppets are made of perforated and painted leather and are controlled by wooden rods. Although Alysia's puppets, cut from paper, are controlled by rods, the film also sometimes depicts them with puppet strings. Both serve as "visual reminders to the audience of the work's artifice" and of "the limits of free will under the unyielding hand of Fate and, in Criseyde's case, under the additional oppression of family and state." Once again, the creative details of Alysia's project demonstrate how the process of adaptation inspired close attention to the structure of the original text.

Alysia notes the parallels between Pandarus's manipulation of the love affair between Troilus and Criseyde and the idea that the overarching narrative is controlled by Fate. To reflect this idea, the puppet character Pandarus—who narrates the film—is also presented as a puppeteer. The bedroom scene, in which Pandarus brings his friend Troilus and his niece Criseyde together, was created as "an imperfect microcosm of Fate's manipulation of the characters." The four-poster bed the couple sleep in was deliberately designed as a miniature puppet theatre, with Pandarus manipulating the characters from above by means of their puppet strings. Meanwhile, Pandarus's own puppet rod is visible, along with the puppeteer's hand, emphasising that "like the other characters he manipulates, Pandarus is a puppet of Fate."



Figure 2: Pandarus, controlled by the puppeteer, in turn, controls Troilus and Criseyde

The puppets' rods and strings also serve to underscore the characters' varying responses to Fate and to manipulation by other characters. Alysia interprets Criseyde's decision to stay at the Greek camp instead of returning to Troilus as a strong and defiant rejection of Pandarus's influence. When Criseyde decides not to return, she cuts her puppet strings, "symbolically severing her ties to her oppressors in Troy." This forms an explicit contrast with Troilus's death. Alysia argues that Troilus is "aware that he is a puppet of Fate," citing his complaints against Fortune from Book IV, after it has been decided that Criseyde will be sent to the Greeks in exchange for Antenor. However, Troilus, "with his characteristic paralysis," does not resist in the same way as Criseyde. He dies with his puppet strings still attached. The parallel between them is emphasised by the visuals and sound effects used in the film: the knife used to kill Troilus is the same knife Criseyde uses to cut her strings, and the same sound accompanies the cut in each case.

Alysia's adaptation of the text adds to Chaucer's plot, providing conclusions for characters other than Troilus himself. The penultimate scene in Alysia's adaptation follows Chaucer's poem in having Troilus ascend to heaven. In the final scene, however, the film unexpectedly turns back to Criseyde and Pandarus. Pandarus, the narrator, states that "as for Criseyde, we know little about what happened to her in the end, but all I can say is she's now free to live. She's perhaps the smartest of all of us." As he considers his own state from the perspective of old age, he acknowledges not only that Criseyde did well to seek freedom, but also that his own attempts to manipulate the other characters were ultimately futile. He concludes, "what use is it to regret my matchmaking—or pimping I'll call it—and wonder if it would have been better to leave the lovers alone? Would they have been happier without falling in love, free from my puppet tricks? Pointless questions, for someone that has one foot in the grave." Although this ending offers the possibility that Pandarus, not Troilus, is the film's tragic figure,

the emphasis on Pandarus's manipulations throughout also leave the viewer wary that Pandarus may be attempting a final emotional manipulation of his audience.

Redeeming *Sir Gowther*

Sir Gowther, the story of a devil's son and his strange redemption, is always popular among the students (Laskaya and Salisbury 1995). Although adaptation is not an in-class focus with this text, we briefly discuss the differences between the text's two manuscript versions, as well as its relationship to the French *Robert le Diable*. Students are often drawn to Gowther's shocking crimes, to the text's suggestion that such crimes can be forgiven, or to the relationship between humans and animals suggested by Gowther's penance, which requires him to eat only food that has been taken from a dog's mouth. Another frequent inspiration for creative projects is the idea that Gowther's redemption takes place through a redirection of the very same behaviour that condemned him: his early violence against Christians is replaced with divinely sanctioned violence against the Emperor's Saracen enemies (Huber 2015).

Fatin Rumaisha Binte Ridzuan's project draws on the tension between the savagery of Gowther's sins and the savagery of his path to salvation. She describes her creative piece, a four-page newspaper, as exploring and critiquing the idea of "legitimate violence" performed under the banner of Christianity, arguing that people's "desire for redemption can result in the belief of the morality of their redemption." Her newspaper aims to provoke its audience to consider the cost of redemption achieved through violence against others. Accordingly, the project presents a terrifying future and offers a way out of it—for a price.

Instead of the religious fear of an afterlife in hell, Fatin Rumaisha's project presents a political fear of information bans and compulsory National Service (NS) for all.¹ The headline of her newspaper, produced in late 2019, reads "COMPULSORY NATIONAL SERVICE TO BE IMPLEMENTED BY 2020." Due to the success of National Service in "instilling values of discipline and responsibility into today's youth," the government of her fictional Singapore has decided to extend it to all residents "regardless of age, gender, or nationality." Even unborn children must be registered. The initiative's hotline, "+65 NS-IS-HELL," underscores the parallel with the medieval Christian framework of the original text. The second page of the newspaper carries another worrying headline: "Further Updates on the 2019 Worldwide Internet Ban: Singapore to be Included in List of Affected Countries." The story describes a total ban on internet use, supported by world leaders including "Queen Gloriana" and "President Dicky Tramp," with the aim of achieving "a safer and less widespread use of information." These stories create conditions that a modern reader would wish to escape.

Only on page three of Fatin Rumaisha's newspaper is there any sign of hope, in the form of an advertisement for "Gowtherism," an organisation that promises to protect its members from the NS Initiative and Internet Ban. There is just one catch—in order to pledge themselves to Gowtherism, people must complete a task: "Murder, Kidnapping, Torturing of other Individuals." Another advertisement for Gowtherism offers "100% PROTECTION GUARANTEED," with testimonials

¹ In Singapore, two years of National Service in the armed forces, police force, or civil defence force is compulsory for all male citizens and second-generation permanent residents.

that should unsettle readers: one, from “Bed Tundy,” a thinly disguised Ted Bundy, states that “Gowtherism changed my life.” Another Gowtherist is excited that he “was able to escape [his] prison sentence thanks to Gowtherism!” Gowtherism therefore offers readers a chance to escape an undesirable future, but only at the cost of harming others—a parallel to Gowther engaging in battle against the Saracens as part of his redemption.

By placing the descriptions of Gowtherism in advertisements, Fatin Rumaisha gives readers “the option to either reject or accept these second chances, depending on their moral beliefs.” Where the previous two projects largely followed the plot of their medieval sources, this one takes a contrasting approach. It abandons the original plot in favour of asking the reader to consider a moral question raised by the medieval text. In highlighting the violence of Gowther’s salvation, Fatin Rumaisha pushes against the intentions of her source by stripping redemptive violence of mainstream religious sanction.

Practical Advice to Instructors

In closing, I offer two practical considerations for instructors who might want to use a similar assignment with their students. These relate to preparing students for the assignment and helping them to avoid common pitfalls.

First, I have found it useful to prepare students by giving some examples of successful past projects and by explaining which approaches tend not to be productive. In particular, I warn them to think carefully about projects using social media. While I have received some excellent, nuanced adaptations using these tools, weaker projects sometimes update the technology—what if *Troilus and Criseyde* used WhatsApp?—without engaging with the themes of the medieval text. In discussing certain approaches that have resulted in successful projects, students necessarily consider different facets of the text and how they might be interpreted. In some years, I return to this conversation when we talk about what makes a good research question for students’ final papers.

Second, I create time for students to provide peer feedback on one another’s projects. This encourages students to evaluate projects in relation to the specifics of the assignment, while also aiming to create a culture of collaboration between students. Three to four weeks before the assignment is due, students are given half an hour of class time to discuss their ideas with their peers. Two weeks before the assignment is due, they give short conference-style presentations on their work in progress, allowing them to draw inspiration from other students and be questioned on their ideas before submitting the final piece. I organise ‘conference panels’ to juxtapose presentations that will describe different approaches to the same texts. This typically prompts discussion about how each student’s understanding of the medieval source contributed to their adaptation. Students regularly tell me that they have been inspired by other students’ work, whether for their own creative projects or for their later research papers. The presentations also create an opportunity for me to suggest primary or secondary sources that students might find useful.

I have found that the different components of the assignment serve different needs for my students. The creative piece itself is flexible, allowing students to find their own points of connection or disagreement with the medieval text. Many students also find it enjoyable, commenting on it both in their feedback on the course and when they take my other courses (where they are disappointed to find that no such assignment exists). The accompanying explanatory paper requires them to set out

their interpretation of their source, supporting it with both primary and secondary evidence. Finally, the preparatory work and presentations create opportunities to discuss work in progress, give and receive peer feedback, and talk about how to contextualise potentially unfamiliar aspects of a text. This project therefore presents an opportunity to practice the key skills of a research paper— independent argument, close reading, contextualisation—while also inviting students to discover and share new ways of relating to the medieval text.

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