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Teaching the Crusades in a World Literature Survey Course Using Interactive Media: An Overview

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## **“Teaching the Crusades in a World Literature Survey Course Using Interactive Media: An Overview”**

**by Kisha Tracy**

I often teach a course entitled “World Literature I.” This course, as anyone knows who teaches one similar, poses several problems. For starters, the breadth of the material is daunting as it covers ancient and classical literature through the sixteenth century. The geographical expectations are also an issue as we are expected to engage with the Judeo-Christian and Greco-Roman foundations of Western literature and New World writings as well as with Hindu, Buddhist, and Islamic texts, among others. The chronological and physical space covered in the semester is, to say the least, vast, and the class time available for each reading is necessarily limited.

My approach to this course entails breaking the material into units corresponding to aspects of human or societal experience, such as “creation,” “wise men,” “love,” “women,” “death,” “the other,” etc. Each unit includes texts from a range of time periods and societies, encouraging comparison and analysis of over-arching concepts. The unit in which I include the Crusades texts is on “war.” It follows the unit on “epics” and flows naturally from discussion about *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, *The Odyssey*, *Beowulf*, and *The Song of Roland*.

The textbook I choose to use for the course, which I have found to be quite satisfactory, is Volume 1 (Compact Edition) of *The Bedford Anthology of World Literature: The Ancient, Medieval and Early Modern World, Beginnings-1650*. This volume includes a section entitled “The Crusades: War and Faith in the Middle Ages,” situated as an “In the World” context to the preceding *The Song of Roland*. In this section, there are, following a background introduction, Robert the Monk’s version of Pope Urban II’s “Call to the First Crusade” from 1095 and excerpts from the early twelfth-century *History of the First Crusade* and Third Crusade sections of Ibn al-Athir’s twelfth/thirteenth-century *The Collection of Histories*. In this article, I will outline my approach to teaching these texts.

### **Before Class: Twitter and Readlists**

A question that haunts all of us as instructors is how to prompt students to read actively and with a critical eye. This question is especially significant in courses of this nature, in which the material incorporates so much – history, societal values, culture, literary constructions – that will be or might be unfamiliar and, at times, both difficult and uncomfortable. With the Crusades texts, there are a few specific, occasionally competing, stumbling blocks. “The Crusades,” as a phrase, is one with which students are familiar – or at least believe they are familiar. It is often thrown about in the media with seemingly little understanding of its context or its history. Yet, students feel that

they understand it, and this perceived familiarity can foster indolent reading. In the same vein, they believe they are well versed in understanding the “Muslim vs. Christian” tensions and, thus, read the texts through preconceived notions rather than engaging with what is on the page. Further, the particular excerpts in the Bedford textbook, particularly the ones from the Christian perspective, emphasize the religious contexts of the conflict. On one side, students tend to overlook the significance of this rhetoric, sometimes perceiving it as repetitive; on the other, they can find some of the inflammatory language and images difficult to process. Both are moments when their reading can become less critical.

In an attempt to address these issues, I created an assignment called “@Crusades.”<sup>[1]</sup> “@Crusades” is a Twitter-based activity students are required to participate in while they are reading for class. As I did not want to require students to create a Twitter account or to use their personal accounts for coursework, I set up five user names: WoLiPopeUrbanII, WoLiSaladin, WoLiRichardI, WoLiSaracens (generic Muslim soldier/s), and WoLiCrusaders (generic Christian Crusader/s). I post the user names and the passwords associated with each. Students then log in as each of these characters in order to speak from the individual points of view. As a side note, students claim credit for their posts by ending them with their initials.<sup>[2]</sup>

While reading the Crusades texts, students are instructed to Tweet their thoughts and observations, switching between user names as appropriate. Those unused to

Twitter and its conventions are sometimes initially nervous about the types of posts to make. We discuss how their posts can be: factual, informative, witty, interactive among characters, taken directly from a text, thoughts inspired by a text, etc. They may use their imagination or adhere closely to the readings. As hashtags are a convention of Twitter, these are encouraged and often lead to witty and thought-provoking commentary. Students also will take advantage of the ability to attach images to their Tweets. Mark Sample, in his article in *The Chronicle*, "Practical Advice for Teaching with Twitter," comments that we can "encourage students to think of Twitter as low-stakes writing, as a place to pose adventurous claims or half-baked ideas." The concept of "adventurous claims" is at the heart of the "@Crusades" idea.

The results of this assignment have been invaluable. By requiring active participation beyond the standard reading, students read with more purpose and with considerably more depth and enthusiasm, not only finding more to question and discuss but also remembering more of what they have read. It becomes, in a way, an experience, rather than a routine, encouraging them to analyze their preconceived thoughts before they post them for the class (and the world) to read. The Twitter format, with its 140-character limit, allows a great deal of latitude for creativity, discussion, and also the identification of key, manageable sections of the texts. With the inclusion of the different user names, students consider how the various characters are related to and interact with each other. Not the least of its benefits, the activity builds

communication among students as they respond and build on to each other's Tweets, role-playing their characters.<sup>[3]</sup>

As an addendum, I also provide students with a collection of online resources, through *Readlists*, to support their readings and their participation in "@Crusades."

<http://readlists.com/b9434052/embed>

As you can see above, this collection of resources includes the Prezi presentation we will view in class as well as an individualized Google map, with relevant locations marked and annotated. The geography of the Crusades texts can be confusing, and I find that students relate more when they have a map in front of them in order to situate themselves physically into their readings. Additional resources include background material, other primary texts, links to the Bible and the Qur'an as well as links to modern contexts, which I will discuss further in a moment.

### **In-Class Activities: Twitter and Wordle**

When the class period devoted to these texts arrives, students have already been reading and Tweeting for several days. At the beginning of class, students are given two brief instructions. The first is that they are required to post at least one Tweet during class, particularly relating to any new thoughts or discussions that arise. The

second is that they should keep a list of all key terms, making note of the number of times each term is repeated.

The former instruction is designed to provide continuity with the pre-reading activity. Requiring the Tweet in class encourages focus and also helps them to think about how to participate in the face-to-face discussion. The latter instruction is an additional activity. At the end of class, they take their list of terms, repeated appropriately, and enter them into [Wordle](#). Wordle is a free, online tool to generate and design “word clouds.” The size of words in these images changes depending on its frequency within the supplied text. In the context of our discussion of the Crusades readings, it provides students with a permanent visual – multiple visuals as I collect the embed codes for all of the Wordles and post them side-by-side on our course wiki site – of the important points of our discussion. As an example, we work to understand various definitions of the term “jihad,” so this word may appear frequently on their lists and, thus, as a larger image on their Wordles.



there is reflection on the Pope's representation of the Christian Franks as a "race beloved and chosen by God . . . set apart from all other nations by . . . Catholic faith" ("The Crusades" 1379)<sup>[4]</sup> and the Muslims as "an accursed race, a race wholly alienated from God" (1379) who have "subjected [Jerusalem] . . . to the worship of the heathen" (1380). This dialogue sets the stage as we transition to the *History of the First Crusade* and *The Collection of Histories*, stimulating thought on how each group represents the other, the language employed and its implications.

These two activities together, Twitter and Wordle, support the reading completed before class, provide goals for engagement and encourage careful attentiveness during class, and create relics of our discussions for future reference after class.

### **Textual Connections**

In the previous section, I outlined the types of discussions that are created as a result of the assigned activities. Another thread of discussion I encourage in the Prezi projected during class is that of emphasizing textual connections between the Crusades texts and previous ones we encounter earlier in the semester as well as others we will read later. In particular, in setting up the background and thinking about the introductory material provided by the textbook, we return to a reading from the unit on "wise men": the eighth-century *The Life of Muhammad* by Muhammad Ibn Ishaq. In this

text, in a section entitled “The Apostle Receives the Order to Fight,” the text reads:

“[God] gave permission to His apostle [Muhammad] to fight and to protect himself against those who wronged them and treated them badly” (1092). It continues: “Then God sent down to [Muhammad]: ‘Fight them so that...the religion is God’s,’ i.e.[,] Until God alone is worshipped” (1092). We then parallel this permission given to Muhammad to fight for God with statements from the Qur’an, a text we revisit in a later unit:

Fight for the sake of God those that fight against you, but do not attack them first. God does not love aggressors. Slay them wherever you find them. Drive them out of the places from which they drove you.... Fight against them until idolatry is no more and God’s religion remains supreme. But if they desist, fight none except the evil-doers (Sura 2 1065-66).

Clearly, reading these together generates thought on the motivation of the character of Muhammad and then, further, the textual basis for motivations illustrated within the Crusades readings.

Once we delve into the readings and think about the rhetoric, we also return to our previous, and recent, unit on “epics,” and *The Song of Roland*. Students find statements such as Roland’s pronouncement, “Pagans are wrong, the Christian cause is right./A bad example I’ll be in no man’s sight” (1351), compares to such lines in the *History of the First Crusade* as, “Be unanimous in every way in the faith of Christ and the victory of the holy cross” (“The Crusades” 1383). Archbishop Turpin’s promise to the

Franks in *The Song of Roland* – “Confess your sins, ask God to pardon you; / I’ll grant you absolution to save your souls./If you should die, that will be martyrdom, / And you’ll have places in highest Paradise” (1353) – is an echo of Urban II’s promise to the Crusaders – “Accordingly, undertake this journey eagerly for the remission of your sins, with the assurance of the reward of imperishable glory in the kingdom of heaven” (“The Crusades” 1380). Students spend time in class discovering and analyzing these parallels and connections.

### **Visual Representations: *The Kingdom of Heaven***

While *The Kingdom of Heaven* (2005) contains many inaccuracies, it includes several scenes which are quite effective as visual representations when paired with Crusades texts. For a discussion of the film in general and potential teaching applications, see Scott Alan Metzger’s “The Kingdom of Heaven: Teaching the Crusades”; though directed to the high school classroom, it is a useful resource in considering using this film to teach the Crusades. For my purposes, I highlight three short scenes in particular.

First, there is a clip in which Crusaders are debating whether to go into battle against Saladin. Their arguments are encapsulated by the cry, “God wills it!” Though attributed to a different Crusade, this outcry is taken directly from the account of Pope

Urban II's speech in which he pauses to the sound of his audience, moved by his words, shouting in unison, "It is the will of God! It is the will of God!" ("The Crusades" 1381).

[https://www.youtube-nocookie.com/v/Ez6wfJWVCeI?hl=en\\_US&version=3](https://www.youtube-nocookie.com/v/Ez6wfJWVCeI?hl=en_US&version=3)

The most direct and useful correlations between the film and the readings are those found in Ibn al-Athir's *The Collection of Histories*. The excerpt in the textbook focuses on the Third Crusade and, in particular, the exploits of the Muslim sultan Saladin. At the gates of Jerusalem, Saladin agrees to terms proposed by Baliān ibn Barzān, leader of the beleaguered Christians. The text states, "The Sultan agreed to give the Franks assurances of safety . . . Saladin made no difficulties, and when he was advised to sequester the whole lot for Islām, replied that he would not go back on his word" ("The Crusades" 1392). This scene in the film is quite poignant.

<http://www.youtube.com/embed/We3f3YKIHDs>

Watching this scene highlights the contrast found between the Muslim history of the Third Crusade, with its overall merciful attitude, and the *History of the First Crusade*, written from the Christian point of view, in which the carnage at the taking of Jerusalem is emphasized and seemingly approved (1385). In this scene in the film, the

character of Baliān mentions the Christian violence, asking why Saladin would not do the same out of revenge. The sultan's reply considered in light of the contrasting tones of the texts provides opportunity for serious reflection.

After the surrender of Jerusalem, Saladin and his soldiers reenter the city as the Christians leave. The *Histories* reads, "At the top of the cupola of the Dome of the Rock there was a great gilded cross. When the Muslims entered the city on the Friday, some of them climbed to the top of the cupola to take down the cross" (1392). It continues to describe the restoration of shrines and other reconstruction projects. Saladin at one point orders several Qur'ans returned to the mosques (1393). Though briefly represented in the film, this transfer of Jerusalem to the Muslims is depicted in a visually-stunning montage, which emphasizes the descriptions in the text and the significance of the recapturing of the city.

<http://www.youtube.com/embed/1PMjG3xF2ts>

All of these clips are relatively brief. They illustrate and enhance specific sections of the texts without overshadowing them.

## Modern Contexts: Pope John Paul II

The final activity related to the Crusades texts involves bringing our discussion into a modern context, specifically referencing documents by and about Pope John Paul II. Many students are unaware of John Paul's startling and significant pronouncement in a homily on the Day of Pardon, Sunday, March 12, 2000. The homily, while it does not directly make reference to the Crusades, is generally considered to be an apology from the Vatican for the violent measures taken by Christians in the conflict. The most significant passage reads:

While we praise God who, in his merciful love, has produced in the Church a wonderful harvest of holiness, missionary zeal, total dedication to Christ and neighbour, we cannot fail to recognize the infidelities to the Gospel committed by some of our brethren, especially during the second millennium. Let us ask pardon for the divisions which have occurred among Christians, for the violence some have used in the service of the truth and for the distrustful and hostile attitudes sometimes taken towards the followers of other religions. (Section 4)

This homily was given as a part of the year of Jubilee, 2000, and was not undertaken without serious thought on the part of the Pope and other members of the Catholic Church. John Paul II began outlining the Vatican's position for the year of Jubilee in 1994, with the Apostolic Letter *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*. His statements were carefully examined by the International Theological Commission, which produced the report entitled "Memory and Reconciliation: The Church and the Faults of the Past" in 1999.

By reading these documents together, along with a transcript of a CNN Sunday Morning News Report from the day the homily was given, in the context of the primary Crusades texts, students discover how important the Pope's statement was, consider the Church's concerns with the statement, and debate if it was indeed an apology and whether or not it went far enough.

The Crusades are such a rich source of literary and historical documents that it can be difficult to decide how to focus an abbreviated lesson in an undergraduate survey course. In the approach I have outlined above, I attempt to engage students with pre-reading exercises, in-class activities, textual connections, visual representations, and modern contextualization in order to maximize quality of discussion and to provide a variety of interactions with the material. Though I continue to hone the assignments and alter certain aspects, I have been pleased with the overall success.

## **Endnotes**

[1] In the past, I have simply organized this activity in class, simulating Twitter on the white board in a low-tech environment. However, as I reorganized my thinking and realized its value as a pre-class exercise, I moved it to actual Twitter. It was, though it accomplished different goals, an effective in-class activity in its previous incarnation.

[2] There are two aspects of this assignment I plan to alter in the future. The first is turning student initials into hashtags to make finding individual contributions easier. The second is encouraging more inclusion of outside links, particularly those from the background materials and additional primary texts I provide.

[3] An example of a topic that often reappears is the fascination with and repulsion by the descriptions in the *History of the First Crusade* of the Crusaders cannibalizing the dead ("The Crusades" 1385).

[4] Another textual connection emphasized here is to Psalms 77:7-17, which Pope Urban II references: "That they may put their hope in God and may not forget the works of God: and may seek his commandments. That they may not become like their fathers, a perverse and exasperating generation. A generation that set not their heart aright: and whose spirit was not faithful to God. The sons of Ephraim who bend and shoot with the bow: they have turned back in the day of battle. They kept not the covenant of God: and in his law they would not walk. And they forgot his benefits, and his wonders that he had shewn them. Wonderful things did he do in the sight of their fathers, in the land of Egypt, in the field of Tanis. He divided the sea and brought them through: and he made the waters to stand as in a vessel. And he conducted them with a cloud by day: and all the night with a light of fire. He struck the rock in the wilderness: and gave them to drink, as out of the great deep. He brought forth water out of the rock: and made streams run down as rivers. And they added yet more sin against him: they provoked the most High to wrath in the place without water."

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