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"Teaching 'The Battle of Maldon': Lust, Lore, and Legos"

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"Teaching 'The Battle of Maldon': Lust, Lore, and Legos"

by Dr. Audrey DeLong, Suffolk County Community College

I had been teaching the "Battle of Maldon" to my students on Fort Bragg, when one student asked if I could please write out Byrhtwold's speech in Anglo-Saxon. At the moment, overprepared as all new teachers are, and with my Bright's Grammar with me, I gleefully took the opportunity to expand the moment into a lesson on Anglo-Saxon poetics, and thought no more of it.

Seven months later, I ran into that student in the base PX. He grabbed my hand and led me to a less trafficked aisle, with nothing more than a "You're going to like this," as he turned around and began unbuttoning his BDU uniform jacket. As I'm reaching in my purse to grab my phone--just in case--he turns back around, peeling up his brown t-shirt to reveal...those same words, in a gothicized script, tattooed over his left pectoral.

I can't think of a more blatant illustration of the fact that literature speaks, and its words frequently resonate in ways we cannot always predict--to this student, that speech in the face of certain destruction must have struck some chord with his current status as a Special Forces operator. And there's a great deal to unpack about the image

of a modern warrior turning his own flesh into, essentially, a copy of a page of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, writing a history of his own in those old words on his skin.

But of course, not all students are soldiers, and to them a poem like "Maldon" may seem more like a chimera--part history, part mythology, and fragmentary. It seems to many of them simply not worth the trouble to engage with, a Gordian knot they'd rather not try to untangle.

The following is a lesson I have used to introduce this poem, as a way to make it more engaging, approachable, and, well, 'fun', without doing, I hope, a disservice to my former student-soldiers and their love for the warrior ethos.

Objectives

This lesson can be used to discuss any of the following, individually or in combination:

1. oral culture
2. issues of translation (Old English to modern, poem to film)
3. martial masculinity
4. historiography
5. Danish/Viking incursions
6. the 'entertainment' value of violence

Preparation:

There are three tracks I've used for this poem: history/historiography, orality, and gender, depending on the interests and theme of the class. Feel free to mix and

match, or devise your own. As well, I've offered a few options and suggestions to shape the class based on student engagement.

The class before, a brief lecture on the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, its genesis and usefulness to scholars. A brief overview of the Viking incursions, including the rise of the Danelaw, might also be useful.

Have the students read the main battle site and related linked pages at: <http://www.battlefieldstrust.com/resource-centre/viking/battleview.asp?BattleFieldId=23>

This will prime them to consider the historical elements of the poem. Or, of course, substitute your own historical information, perhaps a chapter in a textbook or coursepack. For accountability, you might ask them to produce a short, low stakes answer to a prompt such as:

1. Who are the Vikings in this story (for fans of the TV series, how do they match?)
2. What's so important about this land?
3. What's the difference between a *here* and a *fyrd*? (This will be useful if you cover 1066 as a date of significance later on).
4. Draw a map as you understand the battle's end.
5. Why is this recorded in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*? Why commemorate a loss?

I know this may go against every pedagogical reasoning, but do not have them read the poem before class. Medieval literacy ensured that most people, even most audiences of poetry, were not literate, so they would encounter poetry as an oral form. The video found below will allow them to experience it in a way that imitates the

immediacy and orality of the poem. Since many scholars argue that our culture is turning more visual than literal, the video will allow them to experience it in their own preferred modality.

Before you show the video, tell the students that they will be watching the text in order to weigh in on Byrhtnoth as a hero. This will give them a focal question to return to, and an accountability item (their short paragraph response).

Show the youtube video:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=3&v=Zuxv5I0dH6w

This 14 minute long video shows the Anglo-Saxon text superimposed on the screen, while also allowing students to follow the action with a modern English voiceover--in other words, the text glosses itself for them.

You can let the video play, start to finish, or you can pause it at intervals to call attention to some visual feature (ex: "Why does the leader of the Vikings look like that? Why does Byrhtnoth look like this?"), depending on the class.

When the film concludes, ask them to write a quick response in answer to the question of whether or not Byrhtnoth is to be admired as a hero or not. If they need extra prompting, ask them to create their own definition of hero. (This can also be done as a small-group activity).

Topics/prompts for further discussion:

- The poem itself is a bit violent, and the Lego film engages with the violence in ways that verge on comedy--though gruesome in the poem, the Lego bead blood and facial expressions often make the students laugh. It allows the violence to register--they remember it--but not in a way that will be triggering or disturbing for viewers. How do we feel about the level of violence in the story? How does it stack up to, say, the violence in modern action/war/horror films?
- What are we to make of the act of 'ofermod'? Is this akin to Greek notions of 'hubris' or is it something else? Does the poem overall seem to judge Byrhtnoth negatively for having granted passage across the land bridge?
- What stylistic choices did the directors make? You might discuss the different endings of the poem versus the film, as well as the visual aspect.
- How does it feel to hear/see a poem like this, instead of reading? We've come to understand reading as a solitary activity, while in the Middle Ages, even in the monasteries, it was very much a public activity, with the audience engaged in commenting and questioning the action (if you decided to pause the video at intervals and discuss, you might mention that this may mirror the way literature was often experienced in the era).

- The video also omits a short passage, lines 146-8:

"Se eorl wæs þe bliþra,

hloh þa, modi man, sæde metode þanc,

ðæs dægweordes þe him Drihten forgeaf."

How does this passage complicate our notions of the Christian god and how he's supposed to feel about war and violence?

- Close read the attached excerpts from the poem, the speeches of Byrhtnoth's men after he dies:

Translation activity--gather two translations, the initial Anglo-Saxon. of Byrhtnoth's speech. Get the timestamp for B's speech in the movie. Translation AS-Modern English, modern English to film.

The text of Byrhtwold's speech from Bright's Old English Grammar:

1. Byrhtwold mæfelode, bord hafenode--
2. se wæs eald geneat--, æsc acwehte;
3. He ful baldlice beornas lærde:
4. 'Hige sceal þe heardra, heorte þe centre,
5. mod sceal þe mare þe ure mægen lytlað.
6. Her lið ure ealdor eall forheawan,
7. god on greate. A mæg gnornian
8. se ðe nu fram þis wigplegan wendan þenceð.
9. Ic eom frod feores; fram ic ne wille,
10. ac ic me be healfe minum hlaforde,
11. be swa leofan men licgan þence.'

Translation 1: Douglas Killings,

available <http://www.english.ox.ac.uk/oecoursepack/>

maldon_resources/Translations/Killingsfull.htm

Byrhtwold spoke, shield raised aloft --
he was an old loyal retainer -- and brandished his spear;
he very boldly commanded the warriors:
"Our hearts must grow resolute, our courage more valiant,
our spirits must be greater, though our strength grows less.
Here lies our Lord all hewn down,
goodly he lies in the dust. A kinsman mourns
that who now from this battle-play thinks to turn away.
I am advanced in years. I do not desire to be taken away,
but I by my liege Lord,
by that favorite of men I intend to lie."

Translation 2: Wilfrid Berridge

available <http://www.battleofmaldon.org.uk/index.htm>

Brythwold spoke, grasped his buckler,
He was an old comrade, urged the men,
He full boldly cheered his soldiers,
"Thought must be the harder, heart the keener
Spirit shall be more - as our might lessens.
There lies our chief all cut down,
Good man on the ground; for ever may he grieve
Who now from this war-play thinketh to go.
I am old in years - hence I will not,
But by the side of mine own lord,
By my chief so loved, I think to lie."

What differences do you spot between the two translations? Which do you prefer?

The speeches of Byhrtnoth's retainers:

Leofsunu*

Leofsunu gemælde and his linde ahof,
bord to gebeorge; he þam borne oncwæð
"Ic þæt gehate, þæt ic heanon nelle
fleon fotes trym, ac wille furðor gan,
wrecan on gewinne minne winedrihten.
Ne þurfon me embe Sturmere stedefæste hælæð
wordum ætwitan, nu min wine gecranc,
þæt ic hlafordleas ham siðie,
wende fram wige, ac me sceal wæpen niman,
ord and iren." He ful yrre wod,
feahfæstlice, fleam he forhogode.

Dunnere*

Dunnere þa cwæð, daroð acwehte,
unorne ceorl, ofer eall clypode,
bæd þæt beorna gehwylc Byrhtnoð wræce:
'Ne mæg na wandian se þe wrecan þenceð
frean on folce, ne for feore murnan."
Þa hi forð eodon, feores hi ne rohto;
ongunnon þa hiredmen heardlice feohtan,
grame garberend, and God bædon
þæt hi moston gewrecan hyra winedrihten
and on hyra feondum fyl gewyrcan.

*omitted from video

What can we learn about the code of martial masculinity from these speeches? What did they value? The video omitted them--what justification can you think why they'd cut these speeches and keep Birhtwold's?

Concluding Activity

Have students, in groups or individually, write an 'exit ticket', a short paragraph summarizing what they got out of the class. This might be to revisit an earlier discussion topic, or, you may ask them to think of an action movie hero they know, and compare the masculinity he enacts with that of Byrthnoth and his thegns. I have had students compare Byrhtnoth to characters as diverse as John McClane from the *Die Hard* films, to Rick Grimes from *The Walking Dead*. This activity allows students to connect the text to the present day, so they can see that the seeds planted in these early 'epic' texts still echo in our own action literature.

This class leads well into *Beowulf*, having already covered the sociopolitical ground and martial masculinity. This allows students to 'bring something' already to *Beowulf*, as well as leave space for new material about that poem's complexities.