



Blue Histories: Thinking with Sadness in the Middle Ages

Jes Battis

This essay is about feeling sad in the Middle Ages, both as literary convention and readerly response. It is about what Eileen Joy calls a “blue ecological aesthetic” in this literature, a formative sadness (2013, p. 215). In this discussion, I reflect on the relationship between medieval literature and depression, as well as the ways in which reading and teaching this literature has proven therapeutic to me. My literary examples mostly come from the Early Middle Ages, with special attention to the elegy as well as to the wolf in Old English poetry as a companion for difficult times. I approach this topic as a queer, nonbinary and neurodivergent person whose research combines medieval literature and disability studies, as well as someone who has been medicated at various times for anxiety and depression. I’m a wreck in the sense of already having fallen apart, like the ruins in the eponymous Old English poem. Being a wreck led me to medieval literature, while at the same time, it allowed me to see what ruins can offer.

J. Battis (✉)
University of Regina, Regina, SK, Canada

© The Author(s), under exclusive license to Springer Nature
Switzerland AG 2021

J. Hollenbach and R. A. McDonald (eds.), *Re/Imagining Depression*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-80554-8_5

Old English literature, in particular, has a vein of sadness running through it. Characters wander alone through hostile landscapes. They encounter Roman ruins and cities that have fallen apart, while they are also falling apart, falling out of precarious communities and roaming what was called “Middle-Earth.” In the broadest sense, Original Sin was a cause for sadness: life beyond the Garden of Eden was full of harsh knowledge and toil that couldn’t replace divine acceptance. Looking back on early medieval literature, Christian writers also felt an ache of sadness for ancient lives that existed outside a framework of grace. The *Beowulf* poet, whoever they were, felt a mixture of curiosity and regret for the Geatish culture that suffuses the poem—the same way most adult writers might discuss their melancholy childhood. When I teach the elegies in particular, students are often surprised by their inherent sadness. But there’s also something liberating about feeling blue: the poems offer no “cure” for being incomplete, because the world itself is incomplete. Sadness is a precondition for society.

What is the value in teaching sad, remote literature from a thousand years ago? Part of the goal lies in showing that it isn’t so remote. Students are able to recognize the volatile emotional states presented in poems like “The Wife’s Lament,” or the anxiety of a wizard like Merlin within the Arthurian stories. They sympathize with exiled characters who lack family ties or social supports, because contemporary life can feel that way as well. Self-help culture is obsessed with compulsory happiness, and what Robert McRuer has described as “compulsory able-bodiedness,” but this literature refuses any attempts to cure sadness or anxiety (2002, p. 89). In this way, its moodiness can be valuable to an audience dealing with digital cultures and connections that expose their feelings in profound ways. Something very old can be surprisingly useful for negotiating the *now* of our lives.

My first brush with medieval literature was *King Arthur and His Knights*, the nineteenth-century children’s version written by James Knowles. I felt—even at nine years old—that I was not the child for whom it had been written. I did not want to be a knight, though I did spend hours pondering Louis Rhead’s drawing of Merlin and his crow. The hardcover, with its illustration of an Arthurian twink pulling the sword from the stone, had pride of place next to my *Sword and Sorcery* gaming novels. It was soothing to position their lime green spines in a perfect tower, with the gold dusted special editions at the top. I was just an ordinary kid world-building in their closet while the tabby twined in and out

of the map, defining borders with her tail. Years later, a fantasy author would tell me that queer people were all lone wizards. This would have been a useful thing to know as I stared at Merlin through the eyes of that crow, wondering what came next.

A friend and medievalist colleague once described Old English scholars as “crazy.” The tone was playful, but the ableist subtext was clear: how could anyone in their so-called “right mind” choose *Beowulf* over *The Canterbury Tales*? Who would eschew the glorious Romance tradition in favor of poems about bloody trees and wolf pups dragged through woods? Later medieval literature has more recognizable structures, like chivalry and aristocracy—anyone who’s seen an episode of *Game of Thrones*, or read an Arthurian story, will likely have a sense of how knights and queens may have functioned in the past. But early medieval literature deals with a fragmented “England,” divided into at least seven kingdoms and multiple languages. The “English” that we speak today is mostly based on the West Saxon dialect, though we could have easily ended up speaking Kentish or Midlands English, if these dialects had become more far-reaching. The idea of a unified, “Anglo-Saxon” England has been proven to be a racist fiction, designed to buttress the white supremacy that was on the rise in the nineteenth century, and which still seethes today. In reality, early medieval England was a palimpsest of cultures and languages, and Dorothy Kim has argued that medievalists like J. R. R. Tolkien popularized an “an aesthetic, non-politicized, close reading” of early medieval texts like *Beowulf*—a white-centric view that has discriminated against BIPOC medieval scholars in the field (2019, n.p.).

Our stereotype of early medieval literature is men with swords, dying on a battlefield. But much of Old English and Latin writing was deeply concerned with mentality, emotional states, and the effects of loneliness. One of the Old English words for mind is *mod*, and the *mod* trembles across various meanings: in Leslie Lockett’s words, it “whistl[es]...like a boiling tea kettle” (2011, p. 70). The *mod* endures lessons and struggles, it plays chess, broods in caves, and rests somewhere between the brain and the heart. In his essay on early medieval psychology, M. R. Godden notes that “*mod* seems to convey to many Anglo-Saxon writers ... something more like an inner passion or willfulness” (1985, p. 287). Lockett also points out that early medieval anatomy located “the mind’s activity within the chest cavity,” essentially boiling in emotional broth (2011, p. 54). I get it. I was drawn to Old English literature because of what it kept secret; the dark intimacy and drama of being stuck on opposing islands,

or forgotten in a cave somewhere, having to build your own world out of fragments.

My mother gave me the Middle Ages. Her childhood was both suffocating and non-traditional, a clash between domestic servitude and hours spent reading and painting. She grew up in a farm town in British Columbia, known for its churches and sweet corn. She came of age in the early fifties: her grandparents still had an outhouse, and her mother was already working in the local cannery as a teenager. At six years old, my mother was the keeper of her younger siblings. My grandmother was full of rage and quick to attack, while my grandfather encouraged reading and serious play. An electrician, he built an electrical panel that controlled every light switch in the house. When my mother had read too long past her bedtime, he'd gently flick her lights off and on. She read Viking sagas about kings named "Bluetooth" and "Gorm the Old." I imagine her beneath the covers—like a manicule in a medieval manuscript, that pointing finger, separating her sisters' beds—while Grendel un-bolted the bone chambers of Hrothgar's men. My father is a polymath, but it was clearly my mother who gave me the medieval gene. She passed it down like the celestial hazelnut given to the medieval mystic Julian of Norwich, which God tells her contains "all that is made" (Norwich 1997, p. 227). An entelechy, or seed, for the whole universe.

I've routinely heard Old English literature described as depressing (the technical adjective is "elegiac," but do these not often amount to the same thing?). An elegy is designed to move its audience from one emotional state to another. Anne Klinck describes the Old English elegy as being preoccupied with "exile, loss of loved ones, scenes of desolation, the transience of worldly joys" (1992, p. 11). Even the accentual metre involves disruption; in *The Ode Less Traveled*, for example, Stephen Fry describes the stresses on either side of the hemistich as "bang and bang ... bang and crash," and Ronald Ganze has argued that the speaker in "The Wife's Lament" actually "exhibit[s] the characteristics of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder" and that this is reflected in her narrative form (Fry 2005, p. 99; Ganze 2015, p. 214). Sadness may not always be the focus of early medieval literature, but it often prevails as a mood, like the subjunctive mood in Old English: a grammatical feeling that drifts away from the concrete, into the dark spaces between islands. Sadness may be a bridge for entering into these works.

When teaching medieval literature, instructors (myself included) often apologize for its difficulty. How many times have I assured students that

Chaucer is “*actually hilarious*,” that his bubbling irony is worth the price of learning Middle English? I lure them in with “The Parliament of Fowls”, a poem in which flocks of birds debate the nature of love. A duck *quacks* in rhyme royal—what’s not to like? But the poem also makes some deeply melancholy observations about human existence: “The lyf so short, the craft so long to lerne ... [The] dredful joy alwey that slit so yerne” (97; L1–2). As they translate together, my students are a bit jolted by the charge of sadness within these lines. Just as the poetic narrator is getting on with his dream vision, he is waylaid by the desire to define dreams—an insomniac outsider looking in. His restless thoughts culminate in a blue stanza:

The wery hunter slepinge in his bed
 To wode ageyn his minde goth anoon;
 The juge dremeth how his plees been sped;
 The carter dremeth how his cartes goon. (Lynch 2007, p. 99)

[The weary hunter, sleeping in his bed
 For brighter woods his mind must ever yearn;
 The judge remembers how his pleas were sped
 The carter wonders how his wheels should turn.] (Author’s translation)

It’s the carter that gets me, like a mechanic dreaming of oil changes. How does the dreamscape frame our lives? Are we ill-equipped to abandon the material of our days, or do we return to it, endlessly, with pleasure? These lines flirt with the idea of escape, while never quite attaining the necessary momentum. Ultimately, they leave me unsatisfied.

I wrote my dissertation on medievalist fiction—that is, fantasy-themed texts that were in conversation with medieval histories and concepts. While exploring queer revisions of the knight in Chaz Brenchley’s *Outremer* saga, I fell in love with chivalric manuals: handbooks for transforming a boy into a knight. I was captivated by Geoffroi de Charny’s description of the knighting ceremony, which involved far more nudity than I’d anticipated. He cites all the pleasures that a knight’s body must avoid, including “the sauce of the court ... [and] choice morsels,” suggesting a forbidden chivalric space where knights lounge in feather beds and stall in their transition from soft to hard (1996, p. 111). Giles of Rome was also concerned with the softness of boys, and in his thirteenth century *Regimine principium* (translated by John of Trevisa), he warns that “molles” [soft boys] are “sone ouercome” [soon overcome] (1997,

p. 106). Trevisa uses the Latin word *molles*, from which we derive the term *molly*, an adjective for “softness” that stretches back to the poetry of Martial and Catullus. The task of knighthood is to make the soft hard; to knead dough into steel. In her article on medieval battlefield emotions, Katie Walter identifies this process of making or becoming sad: “The natural heat and softness of a boy’s body needs to be tempered by the cold, or be *saddened* ... [in] order to become a knight” (2014, p. 26). The Middle English verb *saddened* means to harden, which is precisely what sadness can feel like. Trevisa describes a baking process that ends in cooling: “Colde fastneth the lymes and membres and maken hem sad, so that thei ben the more able to do dedes of armes” [cold fastens the limbs and members of the body, making them hard, so that they are more able to do deeds of arms] (1997, p. 238; author’s translation).

School is also a saddening process, by which I mean it is designed to harden us, and that that process of hardening can create despair. As a Master’s student, I failed to write a thesis on *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. It wasn’t a spectacular failure, but rather a daily humiliation that culminated in a desperate message left on my supervisor’s answering machine. “I can’t do this,” I said, while sitting on a couch that was covered in journal articles, some of which had been written in the nineteenth century. At the time, I was living in a bug-infested apartment in Burnaby with three other graduate students who had sensibly decided to study Geography. A colony of spiders had formed in the unsettling gap between the front door and the lintel, and I watched them weaving until I heard the beep of his answering machine. I told him the truth: that the poem was haunting me and yet I had absolutely nothing to say about it. In *The Queer Art of Failure*, J. Halberstam notes that failure can be a sort of style: “Under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking ... [may] in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world” (2011, p. 3). I’ve discussed and criticized this theory of liberatory failure with queer and trans friends, who have experienced the real consequences of failing to conform in a society that would rather we not exist. But Halberstam’s “potential” of failure also holds a kind of living space for experimentation and change. In some ways, valuing failure was what propelled me to teach this poem, and eventually—once I’d been hardened—to write about it.

As an undergraduate, I was drawn to Middle English and Icelandic literature, but something about Old English scared me off; the whole corpus seemed to have caution-tape around it. I’d read *Beowulf* in high

school, where my English Teacher, Miss Morris, taught us the rudiments of Old and Middle English. She had not appreciated my queer reading of John Knowles's *A Separate Peace* (marking it simply as *too speculative*) and this early reader's report seems to have eclipsed my memories of Old English. In grad school, I encountered the poem "Wulf and Eadwacer" and it felt like swimming in the deep end for the first time. It appears in the Exeter Book, which suggests that it might be a riddle, and was first anthologized by Benjamin Thorpe in 1842 who failed to translate it, saying: "Of this I can make no sense" (as quoted in Malone 1962, p. 107). What medieval scholars know is that "Wulf and Eadwacer" is a poem about three, possibly four, people: Wulf, Eadwacer, an unnamed lord, and a wretched pup. The speaker, distant from Wulf, mourns the loss of days when they were together while fearing what their reunion might precipitate, and the traditional reading suggests a love triangle between an unnamed female speaker and two men. W. J. Sedgefield has also suggested that the speaker might be "a female dog of romantic temperament [who] is dreaming, day-dreaming perhaps, of a wolf with whom she has actually had, or dreams she had, a love affair in the course of her rambles through the forest" (1931, p. 74). No consensus exists on whether the poem's actors are human or canine.

The version of "Wulf and Eadwacer" that I studied was glossed by Harvey De Roo on a neatly typed page with a blue cover. Perhaps because of this, I've always associated the poem with a blue sensibility, what Eileen Joy identifies as a stormy affect concerned with "crumbling persons, crumbling worlds" (2013, p. 215). So many Old English poems are about worlds that seem to have already fallen apart: ruins, empty hoards, broken families. The people in elegies are "crumbling," to quote Joy, as they struggle to deal with the blue strains of sadness, dislocation, and regret. In an early medieval world that was only loosely connected by communities and hearths, like small points of life, the scariest thing was to be alone, unrooted, in that map-less blue space. When I was a grad student, I rented a seventies apartment with shag carpeting and a very blue room: it featured a blue velvet *fleur-de-lis* decoration that my ex-boyfriend called "the mural." After we broke up, I remember staring at the mural as if it were somehow responsible. The truth was that we'd both failed quite exceptionally at being good for one another, which made the end feel as natural as a line break. The apartment had seen an endless series of roommates that included an exotic dancer, a man who didn't sleep, and a student whose cat routinely shit on my pillow. My failure to translate

a twelve-hundred year old poem with no clear pronouns seemed fairly benign when considered in this context.

“Wulf and Eadwacer” ends with a moment of dazzling opacity, a failure to convey clear meaning, when the speaker calls out to Eadwacer:

Gehyrest þu, Eadwacer? Ucnarne earne hwelp
 bireð Wulf to wuda.
 þæt mon eaþe tosliteð þætte næfre gesomnad wæs,
 uncer giedd geador. (Muir 1994, p. 286)

[Eadwacer, do you hear? Wulf
 drags our whelp to the woods.
 Men simply shred what was never sound,
 our [] together.] (Author’s translation)

The noun “giedd” means song, lay, riddle, poem, and speech—nothing that can physically be split apart. Does the speaker refer to a sack that Wulf drags behind him, enclosing the body of a poor pup? How could this “Eadwacer” [Dawn-Watcher] hear what Wulf is doing? David Clark links the word “earnne” [wretched] to a state of sexual exile and reads the whelp as queer: “A young man ... [imprisoned] on an island and socially ostracized for engaging in a sexual relationship with another man, Wulf” (2009, p. 30). In this reading, the whelp becomes a queer cub dragged into exile, with “giedd” signifying a forbidden relationship. Victoria Blud takes this sly reading to task for stressing “[the] precariousness of the female character—by writing her out of the poem altogether” (2014, p. 342). As a (hopefully) productive middle ground, I’d like to suggest that both Clark and Blud are right. Erasing women from the poem is certainly not the answer, but neither is assuming that the speaker is female-bodied, or even cisgender. Instead, the speaker’s voice can play with grammatical gender, becoming trans or nonbinary, while offering a refrain that is queer in its citation of radical difference: “ungelic is us” [we are different]. In his contemporary poem about “Wulf and Eadwacer” (using the same title), Miller Oberman describes the indeterminacy of the work as being open in the most inclusive sense:

And when it [“giedd”] disappears
 who is to say then what it meant,
 what form it had, whose mouth
 released it thoughtlessly. (2017, p. 8)

These productive uncertainties within “Wulf and Eadwacer” keep me tethered to it; I can’t seem to break up with this poem. I teach it whenever I can, letting students fill in the blanks however they choose. Like so many experiences that are ultimately untranslatable, it invites what José Esteban Muñoz calls “practiced failure,” which contains “a certain mode of virtuosity” (2009, pp. 183, 173). When you can’t succeed, you can always fail in a fabulous register.

I had wolves on the mind when I fell apart—not for the first time, but perhaps more publicly than ever before. I had just completed my comprehensive exams, which involved reading for hours every day, until migraines dug a garden in my skull. I often went to a Starbucks located in the Pacific Centre Mall, because they allowed me to stay and work uninterrupted for long periods of time. My reading companion most days was a monk with whom I never exchanged a single word. He wore dark Fluevogs, and we were able to be “alone with each other” (Byatt 2011, p. 471). After passing the exams and defending my wobbly thesis prospectus, something in me splintered. I refused to do anything that I was asked. I ate nothing but Glico curry while watching *Six Feet Under*, convinced that I’d entered a dream-vision. A friend told me that I was acting “like a robot.” I didn’t mention that I’d also stopped using the couch, and was treating the floor as a surface appropriate to all occasions. I napped with the cat, dreaming of the giant wolf from *The Neverending Story*. Though he had failed to kill the boy-warrior Atreyu, he succeeded in scaring the shit out of me when I first saw him on a 25-foot movie screen. I told my mother that I was dreaming of wolves, and she tactfully suggested that I might want to come home for a bit. This trip resulted in my introduction to Prozac, a drug that I took for eight years. There was something inescapably medieval about it.

A drug like Prozac tells the brain to release all of its serotonin, like Beowulf liberating the dragon’s hoard. This does not result in a tingling sensation of wellbeing; for the first month that I took it, I existed in a drowned state from which I could barely form sentences. I remember sitting in a Tim Horton’s with my parents, unable to follow a thought to completion. I stared at my coffee like it was a *giedd*, a riddle-object, whose purpose eluded me so completely that it must have been some unearthed fragment. My mother handed me my cup, as if she were handing me the medieval world. I thought of Queen Wealtheow in *Beowulf*, who controls the cup, and therefore the feast in miniature. She decides who drinks first,

who will be honored. That's her role as a "fríþwebba", or "peace-weaver." My mother was trying to weave peace in my mind.

The early medieval poetic record is full of self-help literature, by which I mean guides to life written in the absence of a unified method. The eighth-century monk and scholar, Alcuin, was forever asking for books in his correspondence, guarding them jealously, searching for theories. He describes the act of writing sorrow as "[d]ipping my loving pen in a sea of tears" (Allott 1974, p. 146). Since his beloved Arno (Bishop of Salzburg) wouldn't see his face, he might instead read the textual affect in its place. He worried about his young charges moving alone through the world, calling them dear animals. What would they get up to in the taverns of Italy? Some of the instructional Old English poems, like "Maxims" [1-C], read as apocalyptic road literature. You get the sense of exiles tracking you throughout the poem, keeping pace with you in the shadows just beyond the path. This path is both literal, in the sense of a navigable road, and symbolic, a common knowledge-bond shared by those following in each other's footsteps across Middle Earth. Reconciliation of exile is the preoccupation of "Maxims" and, queerly, the exile's companion in this poem is also a wolf. In "Maxims", the wolves often slink out of formulaic verses meant to describe battlefield carnage. Sometimes they wait greedily for human failure. In *Maxims*, I argue, they take on the role of anti-companion to the exile, the opposite of friendly road-mate:

Wineleas, wonsælig mon genimeð him wulfas to geferan,
 felafæcne deor. Ful oft hine se gefera sliteð;
 gryre sceal for greggum, græf deadum men;
 hungre heofeð, nales þæt heafe bewindeð,
 ne huru wæl wepeð wulf se græga,
 morþorcwealm mægga, ac hit a mare wille. (Muir 1994, p. 257)

[The friendless, ill-fated man / wanders, wolf-companion,
 with sly wildfellows. Too often they bite the fellowship;
 He should fear the graylings, / dig ditches for the dead;
 Wulf sings for hunger, / but that high, binding cry
 is no threnody for slaughter / that grey one,
 mourns not the quelled dead / but howls for more.] (Author's translation)

Here the wolf sings the end of humanity. Wolves den in the ruins of the Anthropocene, yet while civilization persists, they keep their human companions' company. As mourners, they seduce us towards blue places, inspiring what Eileen Joy describes as "a willingness to draw close to

the sadness of others” (2013, p. 226). The unexpected presence of the wolf in this poem can also be a comfort. The exile is never alone: the wolf fares with them along this alien path. There is a witness to all this grave digging. I was once at a conference on medieval ecologies and a participant asked what we might do to help reverse the human-driven extinction event known as the Anthropocene. A presenter responded: “We can die.” Nervous laughter rippled through the audience, but this is the wolf’s maxim as well. Death remains the exile’s choice, fraught as it may be with the sin of despair. Judas and Cain, the original exiles, form a genealogy of *desperatio* [despair] in Old English literature. In his work on medieval suicide, Alexander Murray defines *desperatio* as “a failure to hope for God’s mercy” (2000, p. 377). In Old English vernacular literature, this becomes the failure to admit a sense of worldedness; a turning away from kith and kin. The exile is both “acolmod” [cold-minded] and, conversely, full of burning anxiety. In her work on early medieval psychologies, Leslie Lockett describes the “hydraulic” model of emotions, where feelings begin in the pressure cooker of the chest. They eventually burst out like “a tea kettle full of boiling water, whistling” (2011, p. 70). The exile whistles and the wolf answers.

I use Old English poetry in the classroom as a means of talking about anxiety and depression. We discuss the seafarer, alone on the water, perhaps locked in his own mind and inseparable from the “isigfepera” [frost-locked] feathers of the seabirds (Muir 1994, p. 233). Students are particularly curious about “The Wife’s Lament”, a poem that Ronald Ganze identifies with trauma, explaining that the speaker’s “traumatic experiences have ... [so] affected her ability to encode and retrieve memories that what remains of her experience are a few, scattered details” (2015, p. 224). We discuss the common anxieties felt by wanderers—uncertainty, loss of friends and family support—as well as the highly specific anxieties that only the wanderer can understand. This intimate knowledge is crucial to the poem’s presentation of sadness, as well as the agency of the sad person for whom something always remains untranslatable, and wherein individual sadness resists general diagnosis. We compare “The Wife’s Lament” to Virginia Woolf’s suicide note, in which she expresses painful agency: “I am doing what seems the best thing to do ... I don’t think two people could have been happier than we have been.” The speaker in “The Wife’s Lament” asserts a similar agency:

Ic þis giedd wrece / bi me ful geomorre,
minre sylfre sið. (Muir 1994, p. 331)

[I will weave this self-song / my own mourning,
in my own words.] (Author's translation)

We discuss the self that emerges from sadness, how it resists interpretation as an indeclinable noun. This is a literature that attends to depression, that lingers over instability and a feeling of restlessness. In the *Medieval Disability Studies Sourcebook*, Cameron Hunt McNabb links “medieval” with “disability” as similarly contested terms: “The term ‘disability’ presents complexities similar to ‘the Middle Ages,’ including under its umbrella disabilities marked as physical, emotional, and mental; chronic and acute; visible and invisible” (2020, p. 13). By discussing medieval writing in and through a disability studies framework, students are able to think through the history of emotions, to think with sadness, as these poets may have done.

As Jay Dolmage notes in *Academic Ableism*, the structure of academia—with its relentless focus on production and professional comportment—“powerfully mandates able-bodiedness and able-mindedness, as well as other forms of social and communicative hyperability, and this demand can best be defined as ableism” (2017, p. 7). His description of “communicative hyperability” is particularly resonant with me, since, in spite of my vocabulary and training as an educator, I often struggle to communicate verbally—especially under pressure. But medieval studies can actually help with this, since dealing with issues of translation and historical analysis can open up space for discussing how we read and process difficult texts. Coming out as disabled in the classroom is no single, uniform act. There is no simple disclosure, and Alison Kafer notes that the act of coming out can even be triggering to others: “My talk *itself* might change the space, making it no longer habitable—or habitable only under certain conditions—to some audience members” (2016, p. 3).

When I was in college, a psychology professor informed the class that they were taking anti-depressants. When they did, they did so with a decided change in tone, suggesting that this was not a casual admission, but rather a measured and difficult confession. I remember how surprised I was (and later, how grateful), as if they had pointed out an invisible door. I realize now that they were an adjunct instructor at the time, so their admission was even more dangerous due to lack of job security. In my classes on queer literature and history, I come out right away as both queer and gender-queer: it may seem effortless in the moment, but it

was once a Herculean effort, and still bears the marks of past struggle. But when discussing literatures of disability, I'm far more conflicted about performing this "confession." I ask myself: What communities am I invoking? What diagnoses and potentially traumatic histories am I bringing into the room? Peta Cox describes the act of "passing as sane," which "occurs when a person who is experiencing psychological distress or non-normative emotional states or cognition manages to avoid displaying these states in the presence of others" (2013, p. 100). I would say that this roughly describes my daily experience, both in a classroom and within the more broadly ableist structures of academia. I may look comfortable at the front of the classroom, but a part of me—my wanderer—is silently freaking out. Not because of imposter syndrome or the anxiety of public speaking, but because I am *always freaking out*. This is my style.

None of the poems I have discussed so far seek a cure for sadness. They are content to remain within what "Maxims" describes as "deop deada wæg" [the deep dales/deadways] (Bjork 2014, p. 70). There is no cure because sadness is part of the world rather than a temporary state. This allows for a consideration of ideologies of cure often mobilized against disabled and neurodivergent people, and how one response might be to carve out living space within one's particular failure to be "normal." Like Old English emotional states, our contemporary emotional worlds are resistant to translation. In *Brilliant Imperfection*, Eli Clare notes that "at the center of cure lies eradication and the many kinds of violence that accompany it ... [cure] arrives in many different guises, connected to elimination and erasure in a variety of configurations" (2017, p. 26). An organization like Autism Speaks, for example, wherein no member of the board of directors is autistic, still frames its mandate in terms of "curing" a natural form of neurodiversity. In her 2020 memoir, autistic writer Sarah Kurchak notes that Autism Speaks, "our most prominent charity...assumes that we can't do so for ourselves and therefore appoints itself the savior who can and should assume the responsibility" (2020, n.p.). In order to approach literature within a disability studies framework, we need to privilege the voices of disabled scholars, to explore states of unrest and difference that remain richly uncategorized. Disability in the Middle Ages was not an easily quantifiable experience, and Joshua Eyler notes that while some conflated impairment with sin, "this way of understanding medieval disability has only limited viability. In truth, there were many lenses through which medieval societies viewed disability" (2010, p. 3).

While teaching a class on Medieval women’s literature, I began to discuss “The Wife’s Lament”, a poem about intensities described by an overwhelmed narrator, in relationship to anxiety and environmental sensitivity. The speaker describes a feeling of “uhtceare” [dawn-care], a specific sort of anxiety born in the liminal moment between night and day. At the same time, this is also a particular experience: my own trajectory of depression has always included a troubling relationship with sleep. We know little about this person—even her gender is somewhat fluid, given that we’re basing her cis-womanhood on a few feminized Old English adjectives. She’s been left somewhere in a sort of cave, where she remembers someone who may have been an old lover. The class was particularly drawn to the speaker’s description of stoicism in the face of turmoil—a convention in Old English poetry that seems quite impossible in this situation:

A scyle geong mon wesan geomormod,
heard heortan gēpoht, swylce habban sceal
bliþe gebæro, eac þon breostceare,
sinsorgna gedreag (Muir 1994, p. 332)

[A young person, sorrow-minded,
must be hard-hearted in thought,
always seem happy, while mazed by
a storm of troubles.] (Author’s translation)

The Old English *mon* is gender-neutral, so the “geong” [young] “mon” can be anyone. The poem offers ironic advice for suppressing emotions, while still knowing that this performance is doomed to fail. In class, this leads to a discussion of strategies for dealing with anxiety, the pressures of appearing within a classroom, and the shocks of young adulthood that may be compounded by neurodiversity.

It can be liberating to recite, teach, and puzzle over sad literature—to acknowledge that many different minds often have sadness in common. Medieval literature often leads me to Sara Ahmed’s question: “Do we consent to happiness?” (2010, p. 1). In *The Promise of Happiness*, Ahmed seeks to challenge what she calls “the idea that we have a responsibility to be happy for others” (2010, p. 9). It has taken me a long time to realize that I cannot shoulder this responsibility, nor should I. Enforced happiness is simply another form of McRuer’s “compulsory able-bodiedness ... [the] experience of the able-bodied need for

an agreed-on common ground” (2002, pp. 89, 92). Often, happiness is expected within definitions of “collegiality” and can even become part of an academic’s performance criteria. It is expected of students in the form of “engagement,” while ignoring the fact that students, like faculty, enter classrooms in various states of mental distress. There is also the preposterous notion that instructors will know engagement when we see it, and that criteria designed by neurotypical researchers should apply to neuroatypical students and teachers. In *Mad At School*, Margaret Price argues that “some of the most important common topoi of academe intersect problematically with mental disability,” including concepts such as “rationality ... participation ... [and] collegiality” (2011, p. 5). Price goes on to uncover her own relationship with disability, in an effort of reclamation:

In naming myself a crazy girl, neuroatypical, mentally disabled, psychosocially disabled—in acknowledging that I appear (as a colleague once told me) ‘healthy as a horse’ yet walk with a mind that whispers in many voices—I am trying to reassign meaning ... [naming] myself pragmatically according to what context requires. (p. 20)

As a writer and scholar, I have found teaching medieval literature to be therapeutic and ultimately helpful in this effort to “reassign meaning.” Old English poems, including “Wulf and Eadwacer”, “Maxims”, and “The Wife’s Lament”, have allowed me to present a medieval framework for discussing anxiety and depression. My students have also found these distant perspectives to be surprisingly familiar, and wanderers and wolves have offered them an unexpected language for discussing affect and worldly intensity. Leslie Lockett reminds me that “overwhelm,” a common word associated with stress and grief, comes from the Old English verb “weallan” [to boil] (2011, p. 59). To be overwhelmed is to boil over, to seethe within the gap between despair and hard-heartedness. Sadness can be an argument that challenges conventional academic rhetoric, whistling in the margins. There are particularly medieval ways for thinking about and through sadness which take us to a critical blue space. For me, this space has been transformative, and has allowed for new thinking within medieval disability studies. Poetry that attends to unstable emotional states and inchoate experiences can reclaim creative strategies for living on a spectrum of disability: wandering, wolfing, lamenting our way into new solidarities and queer definitions. Medieval literature often

presents a world in which joy is elusive and sadness is the norm, freeing us from compulsory modes of happiness and giving us permission to feel medieval.

REFERENCES

- Ahmed, Sara. 2010. *The Promise of Happiness*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Allott, Stephen (ed.). 1974. *Alcuin of York: His Life and Letters*. York: William Sessions.
- Bjork, Robert E. 2014. *Old English Shorter Poems, Volume One: Wisdom and Lyric*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Blud, Victoria. 2014. Wolves' Heads and Wolves' Tales: Women and Exile in *Bisclavret* and *Wulf and Eadwacer*. *Exemplaria* 26 (4): 328–346.
- Byatt, A.S. 2011. *Possession*. New York: Vintage.
- Charney, Geoffroi. 1996. *The Book of Chivalry*, ed. Richard Kacuper. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Clare, Eli. 2017. *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Clark, David. 2009. *Between Medieval Men*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cox, Peta. 2013. Passing as Sane, or How to Get People to Sit Next to You on the Bus. In *Disability and Passing: Blurring the Lines of Identity*, ed. Jeffrey Brune, 99–110. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Dolmage, Jay. 2017. *Academic Ableism: Disability and Higher Education*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Eyler, Joshua, ed. 2010. *Disability in the Middle Ages: Reconsiderations and Reverberations*. Surrey: Ashgate.
- Fry, Stephen. 2005. *The Ode Less Traveled*. London: Hutchinson.
- GANZE, RONALD. 2015. The Neurological and Physiological Effects of Emotional Duress on Memory in Two Old English Elegies. In *Anglo-Saxon Emotions*, ed. Alice Jorgensen, 211–226. Surrey: Ashgate.
- Godden, M.R. 1985. Anglo-Saxons On the Mind. In *Learning and Literature in Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. Michael Lapidge, 271–298. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Halberstam, J. 2011. *The Queer Art of Failure*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Joy, Eileen. 2013. Blue. In *Prismatic Ecology: Ecotheory Beyond Green*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, 213–232. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Kafer, Alison. 2016. Un/Safe Disclosures: Scenes of Disability and Trauma. *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies* 10 (6): 1–20.
- Kim, Dorothy. 2019. The Question of Race in *Beowulf*. *JSTOR Daily*. <https://daily.jstor.org/the-question-of-race-in-beowulf/>.
- Klinck, Anne. 1992. *The Old English Elegies: A Critical Edition*. Ottawa: Carleton University Press.

- Kurchak, Sarah. 2020. *I Overcame My Autism and All I Got Was This Lousy Anxiety Disorder*. Douglas & McIntyre [Kindle Edition].
- Lockett, Leslie. 2011. *Anglo-Saxon Psychologies in the Vernacular and Latin Traditions*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Lynch, Kathryn, ed. 2007. *Dream Visions and Other Poems: Geoffrey Chaucer*. London: W. W. Norton.
- Malone, Kemp. 1962. Two English Frauenlieder. *Comparative Literature* 14 (1): 106–117.
- McNabb, Cameron Hunt, ed. 2020. *Medieval Disability Sourcebook*. Santa Barbara, CA: Punctum Books.
- McRuer, Robert. 2002. Compulsory Able-Bodiedness and Queer/Disabled Existence. In *Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities*, ed. Sharon Snyder, et al., 88–99. New York: MLA.
- Muir, Bernard, ed. 1994. *The Exeter Anthology of Old English Poetry*, vol. 1. Exeter: University of Exeter Press.
- Muñoz, José Esteban. 2009. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York: NYU Press.
- Murray, Alexander. 2000. *Suicide in the Middle Ages II: The Curse on Self-Murder*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Norwich, Julian. 1997. Shewings. In *The Writings of Medieval Women*, ed. Marcelle Thiébaux, 221–234. Oxford: Garland.
- Oberman, Miller. 2017. *The Unstill Ones*. Princeton University Press.
- Price, Margaret. 2011. *Mad At School: Rhetorics of Mental Disability and Academic Life*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Sedgefield, W.J. 1931. Old English Notes: *Wulf and Eadwacer*. *Modern Language Review* 26 (1): 74–75.
- Trevisa, John (translator). 1997. *The Governance of Kings and Princes*, ed. David Fowler et al. Oxford: Garland.
- Walter, Katie. 2014. Peril, Flight and the Sad Man: Medieval Theories of the Body in Battle. *Essays and Studies* 67: 21–40.