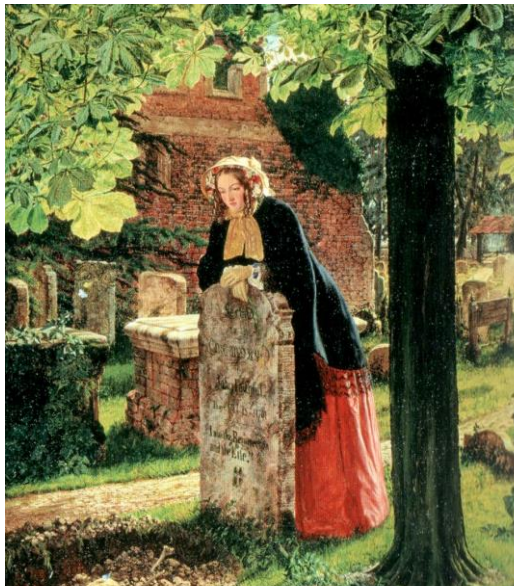


Faith, Doubt, and Literary Canonicity in ENG 427: Victorian Literature

Application for Newell Innovative Teaching Award, Spring 2019

ENG 427: Victorian Literature

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Henry Alexander Bowler's *Doubt*: "Can These Dry Bones Live?" (1855)

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Reason for Redesigning Course:

As a scholar who specializes in women writers, I have spent much of my career thinking about literary canonicity—in other words, Western culture’s tendency to fixate on certain works and ignore others. Unlike the biblical Canon, the literary canon is not an official list but instead refers to those authors and works that scholars are most likely to write about and that students are most likely to be assigned to read. Focusing on a few “great books” has the upside of giving readers of all levels a shared body of knowledge; however, it has the downside of silencing many writers and their viewpoints. Most obviously, the literary canon has typically excluded women, minorities, and the poor. Less obviously, it has also overlooked nonrealistic genres such as fantasy or adventure, and until recently, has been dismissive of works that are overtly political. In addition, the literary canon has often marginalized writers of faith, especially theologically orthodox ones.

Throughout my career, I have worked to include non-canonical writers in courses such as ENG 202: World Literature II. Additionally, I have taught our department’s ENG 309: Women Writers course twice and was instrumental in having it added to our official course catalog. This semester I decided to do something that I had never done before and redesign my ENG 427: Victorian Literature so that the overarching structure of the course would help students experience how our understanding of a period can shift depending on which voices we read and emphasize.

Course Description:

My starting point for redesigning this course was to narrow the topic for ENG 427: Victorian Literature to “Victorian literature of *Faith and Doubt*.” Faith vs. doubt has long been a central subject in both scholarship and teaching related to the Victorian period. This topic lent itself well to Union University’s “Christ-centered” mission and was compatible with both my interests and those of most of our students. Victorian faith and doubt had the added advantage that it is narrow enough that we could approach it from a variety of angles within a single semester. To help students think about the canon and the effects of broadening it, I specifically organized the course into thematic units, each of which looked at Victorian religion from a different perspective. In keeping with my mission of inviting students to think about canonicity, I strategically arranged the units so that the students would first experience an ultra-canonical approach to the topic of Victorian literature of faith and doubt and then revisit the same subject in three progressively less studied ways.

“**Unit I: Famous Victorian Doubters**” focused on the topic related to Victorian religion that has received the most scholarly and the classroom attention: the religious questioning of canonical writers such as Alfred, Lord Tennyson, Matthew Arnold, George Eliot, Charles Darwin, and Robert Browning. These writers were all white, privileged, and male (except for George Eliot, who wrote under a masculine pseudonym), and all were either religious skeptics or theological liberals. As my students went through the ultra-canonical Unit I, they encountered two recurring assumptions that predominated amongst Victorian elites and generations of later scholars: a) that unwavering, orthodox faith is unsophisticated, outdated, even effeminate and b) that the Western world is inevitably marching forward towards greater secularization.

We then moved on to three more units where students encountered other voices, most of which were more orthodox. **“Unit II: Catholicism and Anti-Catholicism”** exposed students to the Roman Catholic and Anglo-Catholic (i.e. ultra-High Church Anglican) movements that flourished during the Victorian period and to the fierce anti-Catholic backlash that these inspired. Specifically, we read Roman Catholics John Henry Newman and Gerard Manley Hopkins and Anglo-Catholic Christina Rossetti. On the anti-Catholic side, we studied Charlotte Brontë and a once prominent but now mostly forgotten Evangelical writer, Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna.

We are currently in the middle of **“Unit III: Christianity and Victorian Social Debates,”** which looks at Victorian women writers and how they used Christian arguments and language to argue for the abolition of slavery, better treatment of factory workers, and greater legal rights and social opportunities for women. As part of this unit, we are reading a diverse array of writers, ranging from the fairly canonical Elizabeth Gaskell and Elizabeth Barrett Browning to less studied figures such as Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna and Mary Prince, the first woman to write and publish a slave narrative.

Finally, we will finish up the course with **“Unit IV: Faith and Fantasy in Victorian Literature,”** which will focus on Christian fantasy writers such as George MacDonald. Though a popular author among Christian readers and scholars (largely because he was a key influence on C.S. Lewis), MacDonald is still neglected outside of church-affiliated schools and communities. Unlike the other units, the course material for Unit IV is not a strength of mine; however, it will give me an opportunity to model how those who would expand the canon must be willing to push beyond their personal comfort zones. It will also allow us to discuss how fantasy literature has been particularly neglected in the literary canon.

Innovative Aspects of Course:

The most innovative feature of this course is its structure. Although it is common to organize literature courses thematically, I am unaware of any class that has arranged units so that they move students farther and farther away from the literary canon. Most literary scholars ultimately have this experience of revisiting a topic in increasingly unconventional ways, but this usually happens late in graduate school or while working as professional scholar. Because of the unique arrangement of its units, this course exposes students to such a multiplicity of perspectives as part of a single undergraduate course.

A second innovative part of this course is how I have personalized debates about the literary canon. Rather than trying to make myself look as authoritative as possible, as academics typically do, I have been open with students about the gaps in my background and how these gaps reflect the biases of my formal literary training, which I received at secular universities. This meant admitting that I have had less experience studying the devotional poet Gerard Manley Hopkins than many of my students, who have studied him extensively through Union's honors program. In a few weeks, it will mean confessing that I read my first George MacDonald novel just a few months ago. This personalizing of debates about the literary canon has also meant encouraging students to reflect on their own, more Christian-focused educations, which have typically neglected women writers—including those of faith. I have also tried to give students the chance to respond to experiencing new writers and perspectives. They have been particularly struck, for example, by Christina Rossetti's distinctly feminine incarnational theology and by discussions of "redundant women," Victorians' term for women who were unable to find husbands. Such discussions remind students of the pressure they feel to "have a ring by spring" of their senior year.

Strengths and Weaknesses of Redesigned Course:

This course is going well so far. Because of its ambitious goals, I was concerned about making this class interesting and do-able for undergraduates. The mid-term grades were a good sign, though: all ten students in the class had at least a C average, and the vast majority had A's or B's. Another positive sign is that two of the students are scheduled to give conference presentations of papers connected to the class, one at the British Women Writers Conference later this month and the other at the Southeast Conference on Christianity and Literature in June.

To improve the course, the first change I would make would be to spend another class period on Tennyson. The selections of his we read included some disturbing comments about women—for example, section 96 from *In Memoriam* where he has a narrow-minded young woman caustically tell the speaker that his “Doubt is Devil-born.” As we were discussing such readings, I realized that to be fair to the most canonical of canonical Victorian poets, I should have also assigned selections where Tennyson presents women in more nuanced and sympathetic terms. To try to fill in this gap, I brought up examples of such works in class; in the future, I would include readings that allow students to experience Tennyson's complexity for themselves.

Another change I will make next time will be to slow the course down. Specifically, I would like to give students more opportunities to present their ideas not just at conferences but to formally share them with the class. I would also like to give students more room to connect the course material even more closely to their individual spiritual lives. To create such space, I will probably need to cut out one of the units, perhaps the unit on “Faith and Fantasy in Victorian Literature.” I will not make this decision, though, until I have finished teaching my originally planned course all the way through.