

John Wyatt Greenlee / teaching observation report

I attended JWG's FWS class, "Where the World Ends: Foundations of Medieval Geography," on 30 October 2015 (10:10-11:00). Of 17 students registered, 16 (9 male, 7 female) were present to begin with; the last student (female) came in about twenty minutes late. The class focused on examining the presence of monsters and monstrous races at the edges of medieval maps (and occasionally not only at their edges). The students had been assigned a reading from *The Ashgate Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous*, ed. Asa Mittman and Peter Dendle (Burlington: Ashgate, 2013), Chet van Duzer's chapter "Hic sunt dracones: The Geography and Cartography of Monsters," pp. 387-435. They had also been asked to post responses to the readings on the course BlackBoard site, and some of the more thoughtful or intriguing of these responses played a key role in the class discussion.

JWG started the class off with a few administrative announcements and with an open-ended question about the reading. This article was the first assigned reading from modern secondary scholarship, and the students' initial responses highlighted their relief at encountering prose that they found much more easily comprehensible than that of the medieval primary sources (in translation) that they had been reading up to this point. JWG noted in passing that some of the texts the class had read earlier in the semester (Bede's commentary *On Genesis*, for example) could be considered both secondary and primary, depending on whether one emphasized their response to a prior text or their function as witnesses to the period in which they were written; I found this a useful, thought-provoking comment on the ontology of texts, though I'm not sure it was framed in a way that allowed the students to notice its significance. JWG later explained to me that part of his rationale in assigning a secondary literature item at this point in the course was to prepare the students for their upcoming essay, in which they would be asked to analyze and respond to a peer's previous essay; van Duzer's article thus served, in part, as training ground to accustom them to identifying and picking apart an argument.

And indeed, the students did an admirable job of analyzing van Duzer's argument, picking up on important underlying ideas, from Tacitus to Edward Said, embedded in the discussion. They discussed what made the edges of the Earth good to think the monstrous with; what made the unknown scarier than any known monstrosity; and how literate people's monsters differ from those of illiterate ones. JWG nudged them towards a more nuanced understanding of some points; I especially appreciated how he modelled reading van Duzer in a simultaneously appreciative and critical mode, acknowledging the fecundity of van Duzer's idea while taking him to task for not having developed the point sufficiently ("I agree, that was a really interesting comment, and I wish he'd thought it through a little more...").

During the latter part of the session, the weight of the conversation shifted to considering resonances between medieval and modern conceptions of the monstrous. JWG recommended *The Natural History of the Unicorn* and the *Weekly News of the World*, proposing aliens as present-day manifestations of monsters relegated beyond the edges of the known universe. The discussion occasionally became touchy, as when one student generalized van Duzer's literate-illiterate distinction into a smug statement of privileged advantage; JWG and other students pushed back, a little feebly I thought (but then, how does one affectively counter such a sentiment in a pedagogically sound manner?). I was also unclear on the purpose of some directions in which JWG took the discussion, asking students for further examples of modern-day monsters (Yeti, Nessi, Bigfoot, etc.) or for modern ascriptions of cannibalism (to South American tribes, WWII Japanese, etc.). More successful, in my view, were JWG's prods to explicate medieval concepts and historical

junctures. Through a combination of explanations he offered in his own voice and comments solicited from students, he introduced and elaborated on the notions of the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel, Gog & Magog, and Prester John, and contextualized the flourishing of legends about all of these by reference to the debacles of crusading in the 12thC and to the ambivalent European perception of the Mongols in the 13thC.

The class wrapped up with a delightful discussion (accompanied by images JWG had prepared) of medieval perceptions of the elephant; one of the students had commented in her posting on how strange she found it that elephants should be regarded as belonging to the same class of creatures as blemyae or dragons, and JWG skillfully talked the students through consideration of their own context (having grown up on Babar, seen pachyderms in zoos, etc.) in contrast to that of medieval zoologists (for whom these creatures were, at best, distant and learned rumours).

The class I observed was not particularly innovative in terms of format or content, but it demonstrated JWG's success at engaging students (many of whom evidently come from a background in the hard sciences, engineering, etc.) with the humanistic thought process involved in investigation of the past. His skill at fruitfully juxtaposing medieval and modern variations on the same themes stood out especially, as did his easy rapport with the students. I also could not help but notice that the majority of contributions to the discussion came from female students, in my view another index of JWG's success at drawing his students in and cultivating their confidence (since co-ed classrooms usually tend to be dominated by males).

Oren Falk
Associate Professor, History & Medieval Studies

340 McGraw Hall
Department of History
Cornell University
Ithaca, NY 14853
USA
tel. [\(607\) 255 3311](tel:6072553311)