

## **Women in Fiction / Women in Fact: Power and Worth Exposed by Pandemics**

Curriculum Unit 20.01.10

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### **Introduction**

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Queen Boudicca. Westminster Bridge, London.

Women have always had power and worth, even behind masks of weakness forced upon them by society. Indeed, in primitive hunter-gatherer societies, women and men had equal roles. Historically, war and pandemics have precipitated more power for women in societies where their rights were limited.

While women's voices may have been silenced in politics, in history, and as artists, their social, artistic, and economic power was always felt behind the scenes, and portrayed vividly, not in historical documents, but in fictional voices. Ultimately, women in fiction are based on women in life, in real stories, and in families. This unit will touch on plays from ancient Greece, and examine the power of women in medieval fiction, where their voices were amplified after plagues, and encourage students to reflect on the value and importance of "women's work" – and the essential work of all marginalized people – that was exposed by the COVID-19 quarantine, which started just as the seminar for this unit began.

When COVID-19 struck, research emerged on the positive effect plagues have on the agency of women in society. Mostly due to their greater survival rate, plagues led to changes that were beneficial to women, which was the case for the Black Plague<sup>1</sup>, the 1918 Influenza<sup>2</sup>, plagues in ancient Athens, in early Anglo-Saxon England, and perhaps COVID-19<sup>3</sup>. Very current research is examining the potential for the 2020 pandemic to be a similar catalyst for societal changes that will benefit women and society<sup>4</sup>.

On May 11, 2020, my aunt Delphine died of COVID-19. I mention her because her life was similar in many ways to the immigrant lives of my students: She was the seventh of eight children born to my Italian immigrant grandparents, who lived in poverty in the South Bronx. She was born in 1925, lived through the Depression, her father's early death, WWII, the Age of Aquarius, the Moon landing, and beyond the dawn of the Internet. She grew up in a beehive of a family of sisters, and she was tough. She got into fights on the streets. When she was a teenager, she dropped out of high school to work in a factory during the war. All of her older sisters worked, too, as the war created unprecedented opportunities for women. She married, went to work for Royal Typewriters, and worked until her retirement. She never had children.

I mention her because I don't know what she would have made of the feminist movement of the 1960's, since her life proved that women had power and deserved recognition. I mention her because she was a very ordinary, outrageous person, the loud one taking over the dance floor at all the weddings. She was the storyteller, the keeper of the embellished family history, and a story unto herself. She always told me I would be the first woman on the Moon. I might yet be.

I mention her because I realized that she is exactly the kind of person I would like my students to recognize in the voices of women in the works presented in this unit, and in the women in their own families: a woman whose power and agency was restricted by society, poverty, politics, place, and time – but, it would seem, no one told her. She found her agency as an essential worker during the horrors of WWII. Now, my students have the potential realize their power as essential workers during this pandemic, and can use this spotlight, as women did in the past, to fight for equality.

## Rationale

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Back in the 1970's, I would not have believed that women in 2020 would still face sexual violence, harassment at work, and that economic and political equality is still a dream. There is still a shameful lag in women's political representation in our country, a shameful wage divide, a shameful continuation of violence against women, and a continuing struggle for societal equality for females. COVID-19 exposed the shocking level of unpaid labor performed by women in our society<sup>5</sup>. It is estimated that in 2020, American women performed 1.5 *trillion* dollars of necessary work such as childcare, elder care, shopping, cleaning, and cooking that no one counts as part of the economy. Globally, this balloons to 10.9 trillion dollars<sup>6</sup>. During COVID-19, research began to highlight the bold fact that women do more housework while working full-time, than the men they live with<sup>7</sup>.

I teach in an urban school in New Haven, Connecticut. Most of my students are from marginalized families living below the poverty line. Many families are refugees or immigrants. Our school is open and welcoming to students who identify as LGBTQ, and it educates severely disabled students. Due to our location close to Yale University, we also have a small population of affluent student from academically enriched backgrounds. This unique environment often reveals a generous human capacity for empathy, although the greater world is not so inclusive. Many of my marginalized students were themselves essential workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many got sick, or had family members who were sick.

Is there room, or value, in teaching literature from the past at all? During a time where literature majors at university are rapidly declining, and universities are beginning to eliminate this degree altogether, it is important for high school teachers to draw students back in to what once was called "the canon" of literature, and not only because these works are artistically excellent. Art embodies the human soul, it conveys human wisdom and truth, and it is a powerful catalyst that can effectively change attitudes, and inspire social justice. It is also important because these works are reflected in our modern culture – in art, law, music, history – and public school students should not always fall behind private school students in this knowledge.

Ancient and medieval literature portrays women characters who are intelligent, shrewd, and capable of gaining power through realpolitik maneuvers, while holding few legal or economic cards. The power cards they do hold, and wield, are moral and sexual, social and practical, physical and reproductive, and they have strength in resilience. A person's power is not something anyone can take away, and these stories are inspirational reminders for every marginalized person.

When women are oppressed, society throws away half of its human capital and loses valuable resources of innovation, creativity, and potential to advance civilization. This happens with all forms of discrimination. I have been framing issues about racial and gender equity as issues of *human* justice for as long as I've taught. Teenagers as a whole understand social constraints more often than adults. It is a perfect time to nurture insight into a lifetime of fighting for human rights. Tapping into literature that portrays women as strong, wise, empowered, courageous, crafty, and resilient in the face of oppression is an inspiration for all.

This unit will strive to create lessons that will help students see that women, as marginalized people, retained powerful roles in society that often sought to silence them, and that pandemics such as the one we are experiencing as I write this, have been moments of empowerment. To continue this struggle, it is important that young women – and men – realize that all people have power and worth; we should not need a war or a



plague to see this, but perhaps we can all find enlightenment from the one that is upon us.

## Unit Overview and Objectives

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This unit will be geared toward my Advanced Placement Literature and Composition class, but could certainly be taught in any survey course of English literature, or a course that examines women's literature.

One objective, part of the AP Literature curriculum, is to teach historical context. This is always important so that students realize that art is a response to real life, and characters' lives represent real lives shaped by real events. I also want my students to see connections to their own lives, and that the struggles for equity are not futile, but ongoing and necessary. I would like students also to see that a society that suppresses a group of people, is weaker, not stronger, and oppression is something for all of us to fight. And, I would like to open up some dusty-shelf texts to high school teachers who might not consider teaching them.

This unit will ask students to examine the historical boundaries in law, society, and economics for women in medieval literature, and consider how females depicted in stories from these eras might reveal power and agency that is not revealed in laws or politics. The unit will include the ancient Greek play *Lysistrata*, poetry from Anglo-Saxon England, *Beowulf*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and stories from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.

With this historical pandemic upon us, it seemed vital to give students a writing assignment that could help them process and record what they witnessed: I will ask students to create their own narratives that reflect the power and worth of women revealed as the quarantine took effect. And, I also want to point out to students that what we call "women's work" is honestly *everyone's* work. I want to inspire students to tell a story from their pandemic experiences that might help them argue for better wages, for more political representation for women, for flexible working hours – and see that these things will benefit not just women, but society as a whole.

## When Women Were Goddesses

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Human males did not always dominate human societies. In a fascinating book, *Women after All*, anthropologist Melvin Konner points out that for most of the history of homosapiens, males and females lived in groups that offered women *more* equality than modern societies. Aside from the obvious reproductive power of women, in early hunter-gatherer societies, women gathered *most* of the food, sometimes as much as 70 percent of the calories, compared to male hunters. Mothers and extended members of the group were responsible not only for child care, but for *raising* a child in the community, for medical care, cooking, making clothes, utensils – and doing everything else a community needs. It indeed does take a village to raise a child, not a mom isolated at home alone in a nuclear-family setting<sup>8</sup>. Changes in larger human civilizations came when human cultures settled, and then fought to protect the property they claimed. Preindustrial cultures required male brawn for managing large animals and plowing vast fields.

As civilizations grew, male aggression and brawn were now requirements for warfare, and as males begin to dominate the world outside the home, they moved to dominate women inside it. Social stratification bred inequality among people, subjugation of slaves, of women, and brutal violence between tribes and nations. Females became possessions for lust, for controlled breeding to assure male lineage, to forge political alliances, and as war prizes<sup>9</sup>. But half of any population cannot be rendered powerless, especially the half who are solely responsible for the regeneration of the species.

Literature is mostly composed in male-dominated societies, but we still find powerful female figures, goddess and mortal. Female archetypes such as Artemis, Demeter, Aphrodite, and Athena play powerful roles in works from classical Greece, which feeds into Western culture. In the Celtic society that dominated England before the arrival of the Romans, women did hold power both in religion and society. And figures from the bible, including Eve and Mary, would work their way into literature in the melting pot that was England after the Roman Empire. These are not powerless women – they are goddesses.

## The Golden Age of Athenian Drama

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Although we commonly think of the Greek culture of Athens as “the first democracy”, women had no rights, and were the property of their fathers or husbands. While male slaves had the opportunity to buy their freedom, there was no freedom for women<sup>10</sup>. Yet, many of the works of the famous playwrights of Greek theater focus on women’s power and women’s issues, particularly *Antigone*, by Sophocles, and many plays of Euripides, including *Iphigenia at Aulis*, *The Trojan Women*, *Medea*, *Electra*, *Helen* and *Hecuba*.

Before the Golden Age of theater, Athens suffered a terrible plague through the years 430-427 BCE, in the midst of the second Peloponnesian War. According to the historian Thucydides, the plague was a catalyst for Sparta’s victory. The death of 25 percent of the population in Athens resulted in social collapse, lawlessness, and corruption<sup>11</sup>. In many plays there are common themes revealing that the damage done by masculine aggression, hubris, lack of compromise, and violence – particularly against women and family – led to the destruction of Greek dynasties, and eventually, empire. These events might be failure to propitiation female goddesses, such as the theft of the Palladium, or Agamemnon’s soldiers killing an animal sacred to Artemis. But they are also depicted as male acts of violence against *human* fictional women: Clytemnestra, Iphigenia, Hecuba, Leda, Cassandra, Andromache, Polyxena, and Medea. Did the breakdown of society and lawlessness that resulted from war and the plague place new value on “feminine” traits of family, unity, compromise, and peace, fibers necessary to weave together a strong human society?

A noteworthy play from this era is Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata*, where women in Athens unite with the women of Sparta to organize a sex strike to end the Peloponnesian War. In the play, the women’s strike makes it clear that without a balance of power between adversaries – Athens and Sparta, men and women – civilization will end. People will either not be born, or die as a result of conflict. *Lysistrata*, whose name means “dissolver of armies”, points out that the war is already causing losses for women whose husbands are fighting, losses for civilization in goods and trade, and losses in the lives of partners and sons. The women, despite their differences, find strength in unity. While giving up sex proves a serious challenge for them, they agree that given the choice between making love and making war, between having sex or getting slaughtered – men will choose sex. An easy choice, no?

Symbolically, this option is choosing family unity rather than political strife, and in effect, choosing political cooperation, rather than political conflict. In the center of the play, *Lysistrata* uses an elaborate metaphor comparing carding wool and weaving cloth to good governance. She illustrates that building cooperation is something women excel at. In the end, the sex strike works, and in this fiction, the destruction of the Greek civilization stops as the men slaver in compromise over a representational character called “Peace” – a woman with the map of Greece on her naked body. Then everyone goes off happily to copulate.

In 2015, Spike Lee released the film *Chi-Raq*, a modern version of *Lysistrata* depicting women in Chicago going on a sex strike to end gang violence. *Lysistrata* is a sexual farce, with all the warts, and possibly not a play that can be taught in all high schools. But in many other works, women embody reproduction, peace, civilization, home, family, community, cooperation, and any other plays listed might be equally suitable.

### **Student Activities: Discussion and Essay**

After reading and thematic discussion, students will focus their analytical essays by looking at the works not through a feminist lens, but a *humanist* one: Which actions lead to civilization building? Which lead to destruction?

One wonders what kind of civilization might have developed had peaceable values ruled, rather than warrior ones. It is interesting to note that the founding Celtic culture of England was a place where women and men were equals.

## **Pre-Roman England**

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When Julius Caesar first arrived in Britain in 55 BCE, he was shocked that Celtic women had more power, legal rights, and independence than women in Rome, or in tribes in Europe. Caesar noted that Celtic women could choose their husbands and lovers, and children fathered by different men were cared for equally. Women were educated, could own and inherit property, and could divorce<sup>12</sup>.

Celtic people believed a mother river goddess, Danu, was the source of all creation, and had a warrior goddess among their large pantheon of gods. But unlike the Greco-Roman world, reverence for women was not limited to their roles as goddesses. In the physical world, Celtic women waged war, were no one’s possession, ruled over tribes, and served as Druids, an elite class of priests. There are many examples of notable female Celtic tribal leaders, including Queen Boudicca, of the Iceni, who led a coalition of local tribes against the Roman army in Britain. Under her leadership, united Celtic tribes annihilated an elite force of Roman soldiers, and burnt many Roman towns to the ground before finally being defeated<sup>13</sup>. According to a Roman historian of the time, “A whole troop of foreigners would not be able to withstand a single Celt if he called his wife to his assistance”<sup>14</sup>.

Although Romans ruled for some 400 years, the culture of the Celtic people, and importantly, Celtic women, was woven into the fabric of the emerging nation. The Celtic language was not widely written, and there is no single source for religious worship, but Celtic women influenced a “whole range of powerful historical female leaders, priestesses and Christian saints. Their role did not stop with the coming of Christianity, but continued into medieval times”<sup>15</sup>.

## Student Engagement

After introducing historical background, students will research a female archetype to share with the class. It is important for AP students to have a grasp on female archetypes from the bible, and from Greco-Roman and Norse mythology, since these figures often emerge as allusions in literature. There are many students who are not familiar with the bible or mythological figures, and it is culturally still important to know these characters as they appear in law, history, art, and music. Students can also research real female warriors in Celtic history, as this culture, which formed the backdrop our own, had powerful human females who, along with goddesses, echo through the years.

## Anglo-Saxon England

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The years from the 400's – 800's CE is often called "The Dark Ages". After the Romans depart, England is settled in the east by Anglos, Saxons, and Jutes, roughly from what today is northern Germany, the Netherlands, and Denmark. Melvin Konner points to the chiefdoms in England and Ireland, and the invading Vikings during this time, as "the worst examples of males out of control"<sup>16</sup>. You might reference *Game of Thrones*. Women were wombs to be controlled, bartered as political chess pieces, raped, and captured as war prizes, with no rights, and little power.

Then, Anglo-Saxon England was struck by a ravaging pandemic of the bubonic plague in the mid-500's, which women tend to survive in greater numbers than men<sup>17</sup>. Could women have gained legal ground with this plague?

As England rose up from this plague, the laws follow: women could not be forced to marry. They owned land, material possessions, and businesses. They could testify in court. A noble woman could rule jointly with her husband, and solely after his death. Although Christianity was late to come to England, Christian nuns during this time were educated and had a great deal of autonomy. One third of all surviving wills of this time were from women<sup>18</sup>. Women supported themselves as artisans and in trades, particularly as weavers. The "morning gift" paid upon marriage was a woman's to keep and control. Women could divorce and keep their children, and were not condemned if they did not have children. They were literally worth the same as men, as the Germanic "wergild" tradition that attached monetary value to lives was in place. A pregnant woman was worth her own wergild, plus half of her child's<sup>19</sup>.

As Anglo-Saxon England emerges as a thriving, intellectual place under Alfred the Great, the great poems of the language were written down. A fraction survive, but some are extraordinarily notable, including two that are testaments to the resilience of women even in a society that is "the worst examples of males out of control".

### Early Anglo-Saxon Poems

Two of these anonymous poems are *Wulf and Eadwacher* and *A Woman's Message*<sup>20</sup>. In both, the women who voice the poems are exiles: In the first, the speaker has been plundered from her beloved Wulf and raped by Eadwacher. In *A Woman's Message*, the speaker eloped, but was then abandoned by her lover when his family rejected her. While these scenarios are certainly dire, the voices of the poems are not.

The first poem's speaker imagines infanticide of the "wretched suckling" that she bore her abductor. She ends the poem, "It's easy to smash what never existed, / You and I together". Her body might no longer be her own, but her fighting spirit is still hers. And while her womb might have been stolen, maternal care for an unwanted child of rape cannot be.

The woman in *A Woman's Message* has been abandoned in what seems to be a Celtic convent, "In an earthen cavern under an oak", but it begins with an affirmation of power, attesting, "This song of journeys into sorrow / Is mine. I sing it. I alone / Can ravel out its misery", almost like a post-modern self-help guide to surviving a toxic relationship. She tells us her lover's family forced the split, and in her heartache, she curses him with a most-satisfying fate: "May that man be always bent with misery, / With callused thoughts; may he have to cling / To laughter and smiles when sorrow is clamouring / Wild for his blood". This independent spirit might fare better in the pre-Christian, Celtic world she alludes to where oak trees, and women, were sacred.

### ***Beowulf***

Of course, the most famous Anglo-Saxon poem is the epic, *Beowulf*, a work that on the surface reinforces a vision of a world of out-of-control males. The women of the text are largely there to pour mead, give out golden torques, and serve as "peace weavers" that is, forced political brides. The men drink a lot, do gory battle, boast, and participate in reckless swimming contests. Hrothgar's thanes do nothing but party, drink, and make so much noise that it drives the indigenous denizen, Grendel, crazy. Grendel goes on a killing spree to get rid of this frat-house of a castle. What does this have to do with women's power? First, this Viking kingdom is in deep trouble because the drunk frat-boys are powerless against Grendel. Using women as "peace weavers" is an utter failure as a political tactic, and backfires for the tribes. And then, there is Grendel's mother.

Beowulf defeats Grendel in hand-to-hand combat, ripping off his arm. Grendel crawls back to his home under the swamp to die. But then – and initially everyone is surprised – the castle is attacked again by Grendel's mother, who comes to retrieve her son's arm, killing one guard, while the rest of the castle sleep off their partying. Beowulf follows her, and in her own watery world is almost defeated, since his weapons are useless against her. To kill her, he grabs one of her own weapons, a beautifully-crafted sword. The civilization of Grendel, apparently, is not a primitive one, but one with powerful female warriors, who were also fiercely protective mothers. Might they represent the former Celtic society, now being overtaken by a male-dominated culture?

The epic is often interpreted as an allegorical representation of a transition from a pagan tribal world to a Christian one. There are references that allude to the bible, and a shift in culture. The monsters in the first part of the epic, Grendel and his mother, are notably descendants from the biblical Cain, who are exiled from God's chosen people. They are fully human, but "others" – indigenous beings on whose land Hrothgar's castle sits.

Beowulf is different from this warrior culture. He embodies virtues that are often described as Christian: He exhibits justice, compassion, humility, and courage. He is praised because of his ability as a peacemaker, not by violence, not by forced marriages, but by political savvy. He is rewarded and respected by the queens in the epic. He never marries. In the second part of the epic, Beowulf defeats a dragon, another familiar symbol of paganism, but he dies from the dragon's poison. Without his peacemaking qualities, the old code of warrior revenge will return, and his kingdom is predicted to fall.

But perhaps Beowulf's qualities are more "feminine" than Christian, since Christianity doesn't arrive full-force



in England until the Norman Invasion in 1066. Perhaps Anglo-Saxon England unites partly because women survived the plague. Their greater numbers would have made needed contributions to the labor force and economy, reducing the need to fight for resources, or indeed, for wombs. Their legal protections and increase in power might be the unifying force at work, more Mother Goddess than Christian.

### **Student Engagement**

The Anglo-Saxon poems voiced by women can serve as discussion for modern context. When women suffer in abusive relationships, why is it difficult to leave? How does violence affect the spirit? How does it ultimately affect society?

*Beowulf* is really fun for guided reading, as students are asked to note the qualities that make a good civilization and a good leader. If you consider the freedoms that women have in later Anglo-Saxon England, compared to the bride-barter, mead-serving roles of women in the failing Viking cultures of the text, students can see that a culture that rules by values that have traditionally been pegged as “feminine” might have a better chance at success. And it is important to note that these are not particularly “female” qualities, but just good politics. And, to protect the home? Females can fight.

## **The Norman Invasion**

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The Norman Invasion in 1066 brings a feudal culture that will almost completely erode the rights of women. Normans consider military service the exclusive roles of males, and to support their militarized chevalier culture, women were not allowed to own land, which would have given them leadership roles in rallying knights. Forced marriage became the solution for women who were landed, primogeniture becomes law, and women are stripped of independent legal rights. They no longer leave behind wills, for they can own no property. Women become objects to be sold in marriage, as marriage fees go to male relatives. The virgin womb becomes monetized, and forced child marriages proliferate. Women are once again bartered for political gains, and become the property, along with their children, of the feudal lord upon the death of a husband<sup>21</sup>. Will it take another plague to free them?

The Norman Invasion will expand and change the English language and bring new styles of literature: the romance, troubadour songs, and *lais* – mystical stories of knights and ladies. These meld with the myths of Britain, lingering Celtic stories, and largely faux histories. What emerges are stories of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. The stories in part serve as an allegorical telling of a cultural shift from pagan to Christian, with the knights on the side of Christianity and the magicians, sorceresses, dragons, and other mystical beings on the side of a meld of religious “pagan” traditions.

The ladies are presented as damsels in distress, but in a culture that entirely suppresses women’s rights, there are surprising examples of agency and power. The study of Arthurian romances and the women of this time, especially Eleanor of Aquitaine, deserves a unit on its own. However, in tracking the Mother Goddess as she wends her way in culture and literature, it is important to mention the Grail legend.

While the male-dominated institution of the Catholic Church spread through Europe, replacing pagan holidays with Christian ones, and pagan deities with patron saints, there was also a shift from worshiping God or Jesus,

to a veneration of the Virgin Mary. Mary emerges as a force of redemption and renewal. She is not quite the same figure as the Celtic creator goddess Danu, but a powerful proxy. Perhaps the best place to find an example of this subversive female power in fiction is in the Grail stories.

The Holy Grail, the chalice that Jesus held at the Last Supper, has now disappeared due to male lust. The country falls into a wasteland, and it is up to Arthur's knights to find the Grail to restore the country. The knights are guided by female acolytes, and the one who finally discovers it is a male virgin, Galahad. Jessie Weston, in *From Ritual to Romance*, connects the symbols of the Grail text – a cup, a lance, a dish, a sword – to four magical items of Celtic legend known as the four treasures of the children of Danu, the *Tuatha de Danaan*, interpreting these as fertility symbols<sup>22</sup>. The Grail represents the womb, implying that the entire success of a nation lies there, and with female guidance, a fallen nation might again be healed.

### Student Engagement

For enrichment, students can research the really fascinating life of Eleanor of Aquitaine, and discuss the courtly love texts of *The Romance of the Rose*, which Chaucer translated, and *Treatise on Love*, commissioned by Eleanor. Both put women in control of wooing.

Marie de France, who likely had Eleanor as a patron, is famous for her twelve *lais*. These are stories in which women use wit, the blessings of mystical powers, and the very force of their spirited devotion to pursue a chosen love. While beautiful fantasies, they depict rebellion against the male-dominated world. Students might enjoy creating visual projects of these fairy-tale like stories, perhaps creating modern takes on the magic – and discuss the power of imagination as a source of solace and freedom.

The best version of the Grail legend is the Launcelot-Grail, called, *The Quest of the Holy Grail*. Literary connections abound: Monty Python, Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, and T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*. Students might read T.S. White's *The Once and Future King*, or Thomas Mallory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*.

## Medieval Light: Influence of the Black Plague

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According to Norman Cantor in his book *In the Wake of the Plague*, the Black Plague that hit Europe in the middle of the 14<sup>th</sup> century (1348-1349) was the “greatest biomedical disaster in European history”<sup>23</sup>, killing 30 to 50 percent of the population in England. Waves of plague would follow to the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. The sociological impact of the plague is impressive: So many deaths led to de facto land reform. Peasants, newly empowered, gained access to land, and with it, capital. In religion, there was an awakening, attacking the corruption and secular power of the church, and with it, questioning the aristocracy and class society. Led by John Wycliffe, the Lollards called for the publication of bibles in vernacular languages, and allowed women as preachers and in leadership roles. Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* excoriates the corruption of the Church, portraying commoners and women with wit, power, and intelligent voices.

Women, who seem to miraculously survive the plague, were persecuted as witches, beginning centuries of abuse for any woman who speaks truth to power. But women will survive in greater numbers<sup>24</sup>. With the plague killing so many men, land and property fell into the possession of the sole woman left to inherit, who became legal heir to the estate and gained legal protection for this property. Among the working class,

women took more prominent roles in commerce, with some guilds such as brewing and textiles becoming women-dominated. Cantor notes that “the Black Death was a boon to women of the gentry. Their superior survival rate brought enhanced wealth, independence, and position local society”<sup>25</sup>. Their voices also become more powerful in literature.

## ***Sir Gawain and the Green Knight***

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One of the most delightful mid-14<sup>th</sup> century works is a mock romance called *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. In it, Sir Gawain steps in to support King Arthur when a strange Green Knight disrupts Christmas at the Round Table and challenges the knights to a head-chopping contest. When Arthur hesitates, Gawain gathers his noble courage, steps up, and chops first. Although now headless, the Green Knight is unharmed. He picks up his head, gives Gawain a year and a day to come find him at his castle so he can chop Gawain’s neck, and rides off on his green horse.

When the year rolls around, noble Gawain gathers his noble knightly valor, his favorite horse, and some pretty fancy armor, including a shield with a pentangle on the outside and an image of the Virgin Mary facing him. The points of the pentangle represent knightly virtues and are associated with five joys in the life of the Virgin Mary. The pentangle is also a womb symbol. Off he goes to honor his promise. It’s cold. He weeps, he suffers, and he prays, and eventually he comes to a castle, whose robust and sanguine lord offers him succor before Gawain must go to have his head chopped off in a game. During his three days there, the lord hunts, while his lady hunts Gawain.

The events of the hunt are intercut to parallel the lady’s attempts to seduce Gawain. But Gawain is stalwart, and craftily walks the line between refusal and insult, as he parries her advances. He resists temptation. Or so he thinks. On the third day, she offers him her green girdle, saying it will protect him from any injury. He hesitates, but takes it, and lies to the lord of the castle when asked if he took any gifts from his wife. In a reveal that surprises no one but Gawain, this lord turns out to be the Green Knight.

He takes two practice swipes with the ax, and on the third swipe, nicks him for his small sin. Instead of being really happy about this, Gawain cannot get over himself and his shame. When he gets home, the other knights tease him. Was this all a set-up?

### **Student Engagement**

This is another text that is wonderful for guided reading. If you examine this superb tongue-in-cheek story, told from the perspective of innocent Gawain, with an impressively muted satirical tone, you find that Gawain’s “sin” seems to be a peculiarly male one consisting of a seriously misplaced sense of honor and hubris. Did the Virgin Mary and the lady of the castle save him? By offering him a way out with symbols pointing to the womb, they remind him that no life should be sacrificed to a vanity contest. In fact, the preservation of human life is a main teaching of Christianity, Islam and Judaism. Of course Gawain doesn’t get it, even in the end. Which is why, perhaps, women should rule.

As a writing assignment to analyze author’s intent and tone, students can critically examine scenes where Gawain’s over-developed sense of male honor, lust, and loyalty get in the way of his brains. How does the text

seem to mock warrior culture?

## Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*

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Chaucer (1343-1400) is often considered the father of English verse, yet I wonder how many English majors today read *The Canterbury Tales*. This is unfortunate for a number of reasons. This text is a brilliant challenge for my AP students to practice analysis of characterization, to analyze story form, to decipher layers of narrative voice, and in understanding satire. For history teachers, it offers a unique snapshot into late-medieval life. It easily can be excerpted, so that students might be responsible for reading just one or two tales, or parts of the General Prologue.

Chaucer, born the son of a prominent wine merchant, became a courtier in war-mongering King Edward III's reign. He traveled to Italy as a diplomat, and was ransomed for the price of a good horse in the 100 Years' War. He served under Edward III's son, John of Gaunt. Gaunt's son overthrew Richard II, the heir to Edward III, beginning the internecine War of the Roses. The post-plague world was changing fast.

Chaucer was arguably a genius, a well-schooled intellectual who knew many languages, philosophy, theology, history, and science. He wrote a treatise on the use of the astrolabe, a navigational instrument invented in the Middle East. He was a courtier who wrote poetry on the side and was witness to some of the most egregious excesses of the aristocracy and Church. *The Canterbury Tales*, largely, is a social satire and commentary, opening a door to Renaissance humanism by questioning the rights of the aristocracy and the authority of the Church. By focusing mostly on common folk, it also reveals a world where this social class was on the rise. This brilliant work proposes moral arguments that prove engaging and important for students. And, it portrays women who hold their own power, even in a society that, while expanded, largely denies women equality.

### The General Prologue: Narrative Layers

The premise of *The Canterbury Tales* is simple: A motley crew of pilgrims, mostly commoners, gather at a pub in London to begin their pilgrimage to pay homage to St. Thomas à Beckett at Canterbury Cathedral. The pub owner, the Host, challenges them to a story-telling contest, and the best tale will win a meal paid for by the losers.

The pilgrims include a character called Chaucer, who declares he will serve as the scribe and write all the tales down exactly as he hears them, being too simple to make any changes. And of course, since he is just writing down what he observes, and what he hears, he should not be held accountable for anything offensive. This transparent satirical ploy of the no-nothing narrator is deployed in literature (Voltaire's *Candide*), science (Galileo's *Dialogue*), and countless examples of journalism, politics, and life.

The General Prologue of *The Canterbury Tales* is famous in itself. Chaucer's alter-ego closely observes the pilgrims and gives a detailed description of each. Just as a good photojournalist can argue that the picture tells the story, the descriptions on the surface are seemingly impartial. But as every good journalist will confess, the devil is in those details. In the General Prologue, the devil is not far from literal, especially in the snapshots of ecclesiasts, especially the Prioress, the Monk, the Friar, and the Summoner.

In examining the tales themselves, it is important to examine the description of the teller: How does this



picture of the storyteller shade the message of the tale? Note, that now there are two levels of narrative voice: First, Chaucer's alter-ego as scribe, and then, the pilgrims who tell the stories. But in addition, within the stories themselves, are characters who tell *their* stories. That presents *three* levels of narration, with Chaucer the author holding the strings. All of these perspectives are on the table for discussion of thematic elements and character choice.

The tales are also divided by "links" in which the Host comments on the previous tale and introduces the next. The tellers often provide prologues of their own to the tale. The links are also important places to look for characterization of the pilgrims, and some reflection on the tales themselves.

### **Women in *The Canterbury Tales*: An Overview**

Of the storytelling pilgrims, three are women: the Wife of Bath, the Prioress, and the Second Nun. Two tales are hagiographies of powerful female saints: Saint Cecilia and Saint Cunstance. There are tales that effectively condemn the powerlessness of women: The Shipman's Tale is a martyr's story where a father kills his daughter rather than have her forcibly wed to a pagan. The Manciple's Tale is about a jealous husband who locks up his wife and then kills her for her adultery.

In the Miller's Tale, the Reeve's Tale, the Merchant's Tale, and the Cook's Tale, women effectively rely on their sexuality to gain power and manipulate their elderly husbands, or father. In the Knight's Tale, two knights fight over poor Emily. It is the same story as Shakespeare's *Two Noble Kinsmen*, although in Chaucer, when Emily prays to Diana, it is to preserve her *from* marriage, rather than to marry whoever loves her best, as she does in Shakespeare's version.

In the Nun's Priest's tale, the barnyard hen, Pertelote advises her rooster, Chauncicleer, not to be afraid of silly dreams, but to watch out for his own hot-headedness. Chauncicleer had dreamed a fox got him, but when a real fox tempts his ego and asks him to crow, Chauncicleer cannot abide either his dream or his hen. In a stupid display of vanity, he crows and gets caught. He should have listened to his sensible hen.

### **The Prioress' Tale**

On the surface, the Prioress' Tale is an anti-Semitic rant, a blood-libel story of vicious Jews who violently slice the throat of an innocent Christian child who is singing a hymn to the Virgin Mary, and dump his body into a sewer. This makes the tale problematic similar to Shakespeare's *Othello* and *Merchant of Venice*, in that it exposes religious and racial injustices without offering apparent apology. This is a difficult one to teach, but with students who can think beyond the narrative itself, it is worth the effort.

Before examining this story, students should know that by Chaucer's time, Jews had been expelled from England for almost a century, and that a papal letter issued in 1272 by Pope Gregory X, ordered that Jews be treated with clemency and respect. This ruling was largely disregarded, especially during the plague. Rampant anti-Semitism and massacres of Jews took place throughout Europe during Chaucer's life, a fact he surely would have known.

The story would have been familiar since it is the retelling of the tale of Saint Hugh of Lincoln. After his throat is cut, the dead boy keeps singing the hymn, *O Alma Redemptoris*, until he reveals a seed on his tongue placed there by the Virgin, who promises that he will go to heaven. When the seed is removed, he dies peacefully.

If you pick apart the tale itself, there are hints at a message beneath the surface: the level of violence in a story told by a nun, an exaggeration of pathos in the depiction of the innocent child, the callousness of the Jews who attack him, and in his weeping mother. When questioned, even though none of the Jews seem to know what happened, all are locked up, and a few are summarily hanged. The hymn is a plea for redemption, and one might wonder who needs redeeming in this story, and where that seed needs to be planted. Most of *The Canterbury Tales* is written in rhyming couplets, which give a lighthearted tone. This one is composed in rime royal, with an ababbcc pattern. The variation in rhyme lends a serious and heavy tone. It is meant to be frightening.

The Prioress' Tale provides an excellent exercise in examining the meaning of a story by examination of the narrator. The devil in the details comes through in Chaucer's simple scribe's description of her in the General Prologue. A prioress would have been in charge of nuns in a convent, and would have had some power, but not much within the Church. Also, during this time, many women were placed in convents against their will as children. In the General Prologue, she is described as a coy, affable character who puts on airs and speaks school-girl French. She eats meat prodigiously, careful not to let any morsel fall on her breast, careful not to dip her fingers in the sauce too deeply, and careful to wipe the grease from her mouth. She is "by no means undergrown". She counterfeits courtly grace, to "seem" dignified. She is indeed "seemingly" in most of this description, displaying excessive tenderness, and weeping for mice caught in traps. She feeds her little dog meat, milk, and fine white bread. She is dainty, "all sentiment and a tender heart" with glass-grey eyes. She wears a fine cloak, a coral trinket on her arm, has expensive stones in her rosary, and a gold brooch engraved with *Amor vincit omnia* – Love conquers all.

What kind of person is she? Does she seem to be someone particularly suited for a life of chastity, prayer, and service to the sick and poor? What might happen to a woman forced into a convent where her sexuality is stolen? Oppression and injustice do not always make people strong and noble. Often, injustice fosters violence, a desire for revenge, and turning on others to secure power and status. While often turning violence on themselves, could oppressed women also aim violence at others, especially in manipulative ways?

Any society that allows injustice plants the seeds of violence within itself. Chaucer does not tell us what to think of his characters. A mark of excellent literature is that it allows students to observe, as they would in life, and make judgments for themselves. While difficult to teach, the *Prioress' Tale* offers this kind of challenge.

## **The Clerk's Tale**

The Oxford Cleric who tells this story is a sallow, starving, student of theology who, in the General Prologue, spends all his money on books. Even his horse is starving. He found no placement in the church, and perhaps like a lot of elitists, is described as too unworldly for any secular job. He certainly proves to have a very unworldly view of women.

The Clerk's Tale is about Griselda, a beautiful peasant girl, and Walter, a party-boy marquis who doesn't want to get married. When Walter is pressured to produce an heir, he relents, with the caveat that he gets to choose his own bride. He chooses Griselda, who has no say in the matter. She is now committed to honor and obey him. Her status as a peasant and his as a nobleman ensure that she has no power at all, and Walter is free to do as he pleases. However, her humility and kindness endear her to Walter's vassals, and Walter grows jealous of their admiration for her. She bears him a daughter, and in an act of unspeakable cruelty, he has a servant take the child from her breast, telling Griselda that the baby will be killed to test her loyalty. Powerless, she relents, and in an achingly moving passage, she prays to God to "take back your little maiden".

After she gives birth to a son, Walter tests her again with the same cruel ploy. The children have actually been removed to another place to be raised. The people love her more for her suffering.

Walter then devises another “test”: He tells Griselda he is going to annul their marriage to marry a younger woman, and that she must be a servant for this wedding. He sends her walking almost naked back to her father. Powerless, she meekly complies. Now, finally convinced of her devotion, he brings back the children and restores Griselda to royalty as his wife. Griselda’s virtuous suffering redeems Walter, and they live happily ever after.

### **Not so fast.**

Chaucer’s alter-ego character objects, vociferously. In an envoy to this tale, he warns men against treating their wives badly. Walter here, is a step away from facing down a peasant rebellion. Chaucer urges women to speak out against this kind of lesson in women’s obedience, and to fight any man who tries to subjugate them: “Arch-wives, stand up, defend your board and bed! / Stronger than camels as you are, prevail!”

The tale employs the same rime royal as the Prioress’ Tale, and similarly, both tales depict misguided, dangerous religious perspectives. But Griselda’s fictional life is not simply an exemplum of wifely devotion and the transformative power of a woman’s virtuous suffering: She represents real women, both in Chaucer’s time, through history, through the time of slavery in our country’s past, and in our own time. When societies allow violence against women, which is often done in the name of religious beliefs, they will degrade into violence, corruption, and ultimate failure. In class, students can discuss sex trafficking, violence perpetrated against women by extremist groups, and by domestic partners. This continues to be an issue that demands redress, and as revealed in the Clerk’s Tale, it will take loud, outraged voices and action to demand change.

### **The Franklin’s Tale**

The Franklin, a landowner who was not a member of the nobility, represents a new social class resulting from the Black Plague. The Franklin in the General Prologue is a sanguine man, an epicurean whose house and generous table is open to all. His tale shows the benefits of generous equality for women.

In the story, Dorigen and Arveragus have a marriage based on parity. As an aristocrat, Dorigen was allowed to marry a knight she loved, and there is a balance of power. When Arveragus is called away in service as a knight, Dorigen pines for him excessively. She obsesses that his boat will be dashed upon the rocks of Brittany when he returns. At a dance, Aurelius, a handsome nobleman, falls for her. Dorigen is loyal, yet she flirtatiously promises to sleep with Aurelius if he does the impossible: removes the rocks of Brittany. After almost dying of love, Aurelius pulls himself together and finds a scholar-magician who figures out how to do this – for a steep price.

When Arveragus returns, all three are faced with a moral dilemma. Because their marriage is based on trust, Arveragus is sympathetic to his wife’s grief, and encouraging her to “do what is right”, releases her of her marriage troth. Dorigen doesn’t want to sleep with Aurelius, but feeling obligated, she goes to him. When she arrives, he feels shame and pity, and releases her from his immoral pact. When the scholar finds out that Aurelius acted honorably, he releases him from the fee. Thus three promises are broken, but honor is kept. It should be noted that an immoral promise, similar to an unjust law, is no true promise. No one is obligated to follow through on a promised wrong.

The honorable behavior of the characters and lack of violence in the story hinge on the autonomy Dorigen

enjoys, and an acceptance for her sexual choices on the parts of Arveragus and Aurelius. Because of her freedom, kindness rather than violence erupts. The Franklin poses a *demand d'amour* at the end: Which of the men is the most generous? It is a question students love to discuss. It would be an excellent story to teach along with #MeToo examples of non-disclosure agreements for sexual harassment.

### **The Wife of Bath's Tale**

The Wife of Bath is a fantastic tour de force. She speaks for women from Chaucer's time onward. She is a *character*: gap-toothed, big-hipped, wearing scarlet red stockings and a big hat. In the General Prologue, she is described as a wealthy cloth-maker, someone who had five husbands at church, in addition to others that no one needs to talk about. She has traveled extensively on the pilgrim circuit – Rome, Boulogne, Compostella, Cologne, and three times to Jerusalem. She is bold and handsome, twice called “worthy”, and described as someone who likes to laugh and chat. Another note is that she is “somewhat deaf, which was a pity” and that she knows “the remedies for love's mischances”. It would have been very unusual for an unaccompanied woman to travel, even on a pilgrimage. The nuns in the group are accompanied by priests. Yet, the Wife of Bath is by herself.

The prologue for her tale is twice as long as the tale itself. It is her unrepentant life story and confrontational views on sex and marriage. She immediately tells us that her first marriage was to an old, rich man when she was twelve. After four more, she has the experience and authority to judge that marriage is nothing but “a misery and a woe”. But she states that while St. Paul argued for virginity, that isn't the life for her. She is intelligent, well-versed in the bible, and in forming arguments: She names biblical men who had multiple wives, and asks why shouldn't she have multiple husbands? She declares that God made genitals for pleasure, propagation and urination, and she's just doing His will. When the Pardoner interjects to say she's convincing him that he ought to marry, she tells him not to interrupt her.

Three of her marriages were tolerable, to men who were rich and old. With these, she honed her skills in cunning manipulation of their vanity, and sexual bartering for clothes, money, and personal freedom. Her next two marriages, for love, were marred by jealousy and physical abuse. As she forms each of her arguments against marriage, as if told to one of her husbands, she repeats, “You say that” with his example of why women need to be controlled. She counters with calling out their false assumptions. It is an amazing example of corrected “mansplaining”, by the Wife of Bath in the 14<sup>th</sup> century!

Her last husband was twenty years younger, handsome, and a scholar, who attempted to financially control her, and physically abused her. In a particularly bad fight, he read a book to her containing multiple examples of women causing the demise of men. The stories, she notes, would be different if they hadn't all been written by *men*. Done with this, she ripped the book and punched him. He hit her back, causing her deafness. The violent fight continued – until he gave in. She made him burn the damned book, she won control of her finances, rule of the house, and they were happy until he died. Now, she's on a pilgrimage looking for husband number six.

This is no one's idea of a good relationship, but remember, she was forcibly married at twelve. Is it any wonder she had control issues? Her prologue is an excellent story in and of itself. This is the powerful, autonomous voice of a 14<sup>th</sup> century woman, but it is easy to move her to the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, and certainly, the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. For discussion, students should note that she only gains power in her life to choose to marry for “love” when she owns capital and a business. This wealth is also something Dorigen possesses, but something Griselda and the Prioress don't have. Wealth parity is necessary



for women to gain autonomy and political power.

In her tale, we go back to King Arthur's time, when the Elf Queen and fairies danced in the forest. The Wife of Bath claims that the Friars chased all the fairies away, and women can walk safely, for only the Friars are about: "There is no other incubus but he, / So there is really no one else to hurt you / And he will do no more than take your virtue". Some things never seem to change!

In her story, a knight (It's Gawain!) rapes a woman in the forest. He is immediately arrested, and the king condemns him to die. In a parenthetical worthy for its ironic tone, the Wife of Bath notes, "(It seems that then the statutes took that view)". However, the queen intervenes. Instead of death, she offers this reprieve: If the knight can find out what women most desire, he will be set free. He has a year and a day, or it's off with his head. He asks women everywhere, but no one agrees: Clothes? Sex? Flattery? Freedom? To be frequently widowed? To be respected for their wisdom? Not overly criticized? To speak, even if they embarrass men?

Just when it looks like he's cooked, he meets an old hag. She has the answer to his question, but he must promise to do whatever she wants in return. What does he have to lose? When the Queen asks him what do women want, he gives the old woman's answer: They want power over men. He's freed.

Now, the old woman claims her fee. She demands that he marry her. He hesitates, and begs her at least not to claim his body. Not happening. The wedding is bad, sad, and he morosely goes off with her to bed. She asks what his problem is. Surely, he knows that although she is poor, true gentility is meritorious. Poverty is something Christ blessed above wealth. Being old, she has wisdom. Being foul, he won't have to worry about her cheating. He is still not happy. It is her own history, starting when she was twelve, of a poor young woman forced to wed and bed some foul old man, but in reverse. At least in her tale, the old person *saved* the young man's life instead of ruining it. Shouldn't he be gracious at least?

Finally, she asks him to choose. Would he rather have a wife who is old, ugly, wise and true, or a young, pretty wife who is lusty and loose? Something must have sunk in, or perhaps he's just beaten when he says, "You choose!" Bingo. She transforms into a young, pretty, lusty woman, who is also wise and true – And who has control in the relationship. It's not only what women want, but perhaps what society needs.

## **Student Activities**

*The Canterbury Tales* is a great equalizer. Wilbur Cross has students from affluent families of New Haven educated alongside students in poverty, and students from all over the world. While many enriched households might include stories from Shakespeare, very few students arrive knowing Chaucer. My urban students will take this to college.

For this segment, students will work in teams to interpret one of the *Canterbury Tales* in a reenactment, with a narrator. Their presentation must include a thorough description of the character from the General Prologue, the links before and after the tales, and individual prologues to the tales. Then, students take turns analyzing their claims about what the story says about human nature, providing evidence from the text: How do the voices of women in these stories reflect power and worth in a society whose laws and social norms limited women's rights? How do the stories reflect emotional and physical resilience of women, particularly evident in dire times? How do the stories reveal advantages for women with property, for the women themselves, and for society as a whole? How might these stories shed light on the continuing need to step forward in forming a society that lives up to American promises of equality?

My students read *The Canterbury Tales* in Modern English, but as part of their presentations, the group divides a 14-line section to read in Middle English<sup>26</sup>. This is particularly empowering for my urban students and bilingual students, who often excel at pronouncing Middle English, which uses European-sounding vowels, and is phonetic.

## ***The Decameron Project*<sup>27</sup> for Students**

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While Chaucer wasn't specifically responding to the Black Plague, Giovanni Boccaccio was. Chaucer took his inspiration for *The Canterbury Tales* – and some of the tales themselves – from Boccaccio's *Decameron*, where ten young Florentines escape the plague to quarantine in a villa outside the city. To pass the time, the three men and seven women tell stories. While the stories aren't *about* the plague, they do reveal a changing society, and changing roles for women. (The *Decameron*, however, does begin with a notoriously gruesome depiction of the suffering caused by Black Plague in Florence.)

To complete this unit, students will write personal stories from the 2020 pandemic that illustrate societal inequalities made visible when we all quarantined. Who were essential workers? Who did most of the shopping, cleaning, child care, and child tutoring? In what ways did the pandemic expose not only inequalities for women, but income inequalities, and racial inequalities – especially in light of the historic protests against the deaths of Elijah McClain, Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, and the endemic racism that has sickened our country for over 400 years?

Melvin Konner points to research that shows that as women participate in politics, governments become more democratic and less authoritarian<sup>28</sup>. COVID-19 has also exposed lethal flaws in hyper-masculine leaders in America, Brazil, England, and Nicaragua, where their refusal to wear masks and model a righteous response to the virus resulted in skyrocketing cases and deaths, especially compared to actions of female leaders<sup>29</sup>.

As in the past, often progressive changes to our society come when wars and pandemics force us to confront societal corruption<sup>30</sup>. We can make changes to advance equality and justice in our world. My hope is that students will consider the power they hold to be the instrument of change that might come from this tragic moment in our history.

## **Conclusion**

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"I can't breathe." These were the last words of Eric Gardner, George Floyd, and at least 68 other Black men who died at the hands of police. Floyd's death unleashed the largest social protest in United States history<sup>31</sup>. COVID-19 also takes away your breath. It has exposed racial injustices as well as gender injustices. Blacks and Latinos are dying in greater numbers than whites. Students in poverty-stricken neighborhoods, including my own, did not have computers, and our school did not have enough to provide when we suddenly closed in March. Students had nowhere in their crowded apartments to learn remotely. Many had no Internet. My students and their parents were essential workers who did not benefit from federal unemployment packages,

who had to leave their children at home in the care of others, had little health insurance coverage, and who got sick with COVID-19.

Will the combination of a viral and racial pandemic finally open our collective airways and let us breathe justice for all marginalized people? I hope that this unit, drawing on women's voices from the past, will inspire students to take that deep and courageous breath to tell their stories, and relate what they experienced and learned about injustice in America during COVID-19. I want students see that a society that allows injustice for some, harms everyone. I want them to see clearly their power and value, and to fight against violence from police, society or partners. To fight for health care, child care, family leave, flexible working hours, higher wages, and balanced representation in government. These are *everyone's* issues that will yield a better, more just society. We should not need a war or deadly pandemic – viral or racial – to make changes, but given that one is upon us, it is truly time to seize the day.

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## Appendix on Implementing District Standards

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The New Haven English Language Arts Curriculum follows the Connecticut Common Core Standards for instruction in grades 11-12. This unit will give students practice in using text to guide and support analysis, to examine narrative point of view, and to improve comprehension by analysis of complex texts. In addition, the unit will allow students to make meaningful connections to their own lives and think critically about inequity for women, and for marginalized people, especially in the wake of COVID-19.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Curtis, "The Sex-Selective Impact of the Black Death."

<sup>2</sup> Christine C. Blackburn, "How the 1918 Flu Pandemic Helped Advance Women's Rights."

<sup>3</sup> Sharon Moalem, "Why Are So Many More Men Dying from Coronavirus?"

<sup>4</sup> Titan Alon, "The Impact of COVID-19 on Gender Equality."

<sup>5</sup> Diane Coyle, "Why Did It Take a Pandemic?"

<sup>6</sup> Gus Wezerek, "Women's Unpaid Labor."

<sup>7</sup> Alon.

<sup>8</sup> Melvin Konner, *Women after All: Sex, Evolution, and the End of Male Supremacy*. 119-145.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.* 174-1755

<sup>10</sup> James C. Thompson, "Women in Ancient Greece."

<sup>11</sup> Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 151-156.

<sup>12</sup> Peter B Ellis, *A Brief History of the Celts*. 91-92.

<sup>13</sup>*ibid.* 81-95.

<sup>14</sup>*ibid.* 82.

<sup>15</sup>*ibid.* 94-95

<sup>16</sup> Konner. 195.

<sup>17</sup> Sharon Dewitt, "Sex Differentials in Frailty in Medieval England."

<sup>18</sup> Alison Hudson, "Women in Anglo-Saxon England.

<sup>19</sup> Christine Clark, "Women's Rights in Early England."

<sup>20</sup> Burton Raffel, *Poems from the Old English*. 36-37, 64.

<sup>21</sup> Clark.

<sup>22</sup> Jessie L. Weston, *From Ritual to Romance*. "The Symbols".

<sup>23</sup> Cantor, 6.

<sup>24</sup> Cantor, 125.

<sup>25</sup> Cantor, 130.

<sup>26</sup> The Geoffrey Chaucer Website Homepage.

<sup>27</sup> "The Decameron Project: New Fiction."

<sup>28</sup> Konner, 280-281.

<sup>29</sup> Peter Glick, "Masks and Emasculation."

<sup>30</sup> Lawrence Wright, "How Pandemics Wreak Havoc-and Open Minds."

<sup>31</sup> Mike Baker, "Three Words. 70 Cases."

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