

THE REWARD OF CRUELTY.



Price 3d

*Behold the Villain's dire disgrace!
Not Death itself can end
He finds no peaceful Burial Place;
His breathless Corpse, no friend.*

*Torn from the Root, that wicked Tongue,
Which daily swore and curs'd!
Those Eyeballs, from their Sockets wrung,
That glow'd with lawless Lust!*

*His Heart, expos'd to prying Eyes,
To Pity has no Claim;
But, dreadful from his Bones shall rise,
His Monument of Shame.*

Designed by W. Hogarth. Published according to Act of Parliament Feb. 1753.

This fall, I will be on sabbatical for the first time in my career. In many ways, I am overwhelmed by the possibilities afforded to me by this privilege of time and space so unique to academia and one that few other professions have built into the process of promotion. Yet I remain deeply aware of how many of my colleagues do not have access to paid research and teaching leave even as I begin to plan what to do with a semester away—the most time I have had “off” in over a decade. As much as my graduate training prepared me to professionalize early and to really think about myself as a scholar-in-training, I am realizing just how much of my early career is about relearning structures of work that are actually realistic for me and commensurate with the conditions of my living. Correction: this feels more like the *unlearning* of work habits in order to learn new ones that are kinder to my bodymind, trained as it has been to work against itself in order to survive an ableist

academic culture of hyperproductivity. It is that much more tragic that this work of self often happens under duress, and much of it ends up being displaced to breaks or in this case leave time.

First and foremost, I plan to rest (as sacrilegious as that may be in this line of work). And alongside much belated work toward the completion of my monograph, I also want to do some reimagining of my current course offerings. Thanks to the guidance of faculty mentors, I devoted my first 3 years to teaching every standing course I will likely teach for the long run. This enabled me to not only revise courses I inherited from my senior colleagues but also to get a feel for what my “standard” rotation would be moving forward. With this semester being the first in which I have taught courses I have already designed and tested, I now have a bank of courses that I can tinker with at both small and large scales as I desire, as well as a foundation for new courses I may adapt from my core ones.

Upon my arrival at Kenyon, I was encouraged to find ways to integrate my work in Health Humanities and Disability Studies into the English Department’s permanent course roster. New courses typically begin as “special topics” courses that then become “permanent” courses afterward. My current 200-level course, “Literature, Medicine, and Culture,” is designed as a survey of Health Humanities and Disability Studies, and it caters to primarily first- and second-year majors in English. As a course that fulfills our major’s “methods” requirement, “Literature, Medicine, and Culture” introduces students to approaches in these fields via theory and primary texts across multiple genres and historical periods. This seems fairly typical in terms of lower-division courses, but, given that I am one of the few people at the College that teaches a course centered on this material and given that I am the only faculty member that teaches it in the department, I wanted a course that would be accessible to non-majors and that could develop student interest in these subject areas. Since majors have expansive choices for courses, such that they will likely take just one course in a particular historical period or topic, I wanted to teach a course that would expose my students to as much material in these fields as possible, so to account for the all too likely event that they never reencounter this material again (as often the sole eighteenth centuryist, this is has been my approach for a very long time).

The course’s function as survey, while useful as a sampling of what these fields have to offer, risks conflating these fields and their unique contributions while also glossing over their tensions. This is in some ways inevitable with undergraduate teaching, but I am thinking toward strategies of preserving these nuances in our discussions. How might I, for example, model scholarly conversations in the field by staging a live discussion between scholars in these fields? How do I balance how much of each field is represented and in what forms? Should this course be a year-long one and does that commitment exclude and dissuade students? The balance between breadth and depth always remains precarious.

Yet, as I reflected in my own pre-tenure review prospectus, this course almost begs to be split into two in a way that does justice to both respective fields and allows for deeper engagement with interdisciplinary scholarship. Separation also creates another opportunity for this material to appear on the roster, which signals to students and to the College the developing presence of these

fields of study. Though separation in this case can potentially mean a dilution of enrollment, especially if this “deeper dive” means the courses becomes offered at the higher 300-level. These distinctions between course levels have been at the center of our departmental conversations about curriculum, and it has raised questions for me about how I make those distinctions in my own pedagogical practice: is it about the number/difficulty of assignments, number of pages to read per week, the amount of secondary source/theory we read? I often remind my students that syllabi and course designs are a series of choices, a semester-long argument made for the inclusion of some things over others that also underscores a set of values about what gets to matter. The case of “Literature, Medicine, and Culture” invites me to think about my own relationship and indebtedness to both of the fields represented in this course, while also the concrete ways I can share that relationship with my students vis-à-vis the work of my peers and interlocutors. This, for me, is how a citational ethics gets practiced in the classroom.

Additionally, narrative medicine (and I would also argue Health Humanities and Disability Studies) courses typically center the personal and the affective, especially as they touch on sensitive topics that many students and faculty often do not discuss in other contexts, let alone in public. To put it in the words of a colleague of mine, “it feels like I need to have a content warning for the whole course and then ones for each unit and reading because this stuff is just so heavy!” My peers can certainly attest to the ways that these courses demand a particular kind of care that attends to the differential experience of students navigating difficult material, especially as disclosure tends to happen frequently in this context. To be clear, this pastoral work often becomes disproportionately displaced onto marginalized faculty who are seen as more capable of doing this work and more “relatable” to students. In Health Humanities and Disability Studies classes, this pastoral work can often exceed our training as faculty, especially when disclosures about conditions or family histories alongside painful encounters with material raise needs for counseling and other forms of mental health support, all of which need to be handled sensitively. The value of the “personal” in the classroom gets lauded for how it creates a sense of purpose and real stakes for students in their learning—but I am always left wondering what can and should happen next after the “personal” is invoked and validated. Perhaps this is a byproduct and extension of my own reservations about the way narrative medicine has been taught in medical school contexts, for example, through journaling and creative reflections, which absolutely help future practitioners practice self-expression and meaning making but also seem unaccountable to the messy challenges raised by the “personal.”

While disclosure is never a requirement for participation in my classes, I have been reflecting a lot on the benefits and drawbacks of my modeling vulnerability as an out queer and disabled professor of color through my own personal disclosures (I recognize many educators do not practice this because of its risks and I do not ever fault anyone for insisting on that boundary). I adore and cherish the fact that students feel safe disclosing in my classroom and in my office hours, but am I also inadvertently creating an expectation to disclose as if it were the ideal way to access the course material? Does disclosure, for students, become a perverse kind of cultural capital that students who are more willing to share gain at the expense of quieter students for whom disclosure remains fraught and even dangerous? Also, what am I doing with the personal

aside from holding space for it? How am I helping students think critically and write about their affective and phenomenological experiences now that I have invited them into the classroom? While there is certainly value in just creating space for experience without necessarily creating meaning for students, what kind of self-reflexivity and self-awareness can I help them practice that will serve them beyond my classroom?

Image source: William Hogarth, *The reward of cruelty* (Plate IV). Wikimedia Commons (donated by the Metropolitan Museum of Art).