

*The Value of the History of the
English Language Course for the
Twenty-First Century*

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The "Report to the Teagle Foundation on the Undergraduate Major in Language and Literature" concludes by advocating that "all students who major in our departments should know English and at least one other language" (MLA 297). The primary intent of this proposal is to support foreign language requirements, but the first point also raises a serious issue. What does it mean to know English as a language, and how can we address that outcome through our curricula? I suggest that a course on the history of the English language (HEL) offers an effective solution. Although no one course can address the shortcomings or encapsulate the strengths of a curriculum in a diverse discipline, HEL offers promise as not merely a component but a cornerstone of the twenty-first-century literature curriculum that the Teagle report envisions.

HEL has been around almost as long as the modern discipline of English; in fact, it may seem like a relic left over from the earliest, philological phase of the discipline.¹ In the 1893 *PMLA*, Francis A. March argued for the value of the history of the language in the curriculum:

Anglo-Saxon study, delightful and important in itself to specialists, seems also to be necessary for a solid and learned support to the study of Modern English in college. The early professors had no recondite learning applicable to English, and did not know what to do with classes in it. They can now make English as hard as Greek. (27)

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Philology allowed the discipline to claim a new kind of academic rigor, and a specialized knowledge of the nature and history of English was the foundation for that claim. Literature, instead of being the focus, served to illustrate usage, and a technical knowledge of the language, in turn, provided the key for interpreting any text. H. C. G. Brandt advocated this approach in the mid-1880s, exhorting, "Let 'English' mean as it should and as it is bound to mean more and more, the historical scientific study of the language. Beowulf and Chaucer" (61). As philological approaches gave way to literary studies, HEL persisted, but the material that had been the heart of the discipline in its earlier incarnation became condensed into a single course.

While HEL has endured in one form or another for over a century, its position in the discipline and its connection to the core purposes and values of the discipline have become progressively more tenuous. English studies continues to transform, and changes such as the rise of cultural and historicist approaches and the decline of linguistics threaten to push HEL from artifact to memory. Once widely required, HEL is now taught less frequently; once representative of the discipline as a whole, it now fails to correspond exactly to any specialty in the discipline; once fundamental to the curriculum, it is now marginal or absent in many departments.² The claims for rigor and objectivity have become a reputation for dryness and difficulty. As Jo Tyler explains, "Courses on the history of the English language are commonly acronymed *HEL*, and for many students 'hell' could well describe the netherworld experience they might expect upon entering the course" (464).

But HEL has not remained unchanged while the discipline evolved around it; both the subject itself and the approaches to and resources for teaching it have continued to expand and develop in innovative directions.³ I took advantage of those developments recently when reviving the HEL course after it had gone untaught for fifteen years at Oregon State University. On the basis of my experience teaching it and the feedback of the students who took it, I contend that HEL is becoming more rather than less relevant to the discipline of English as we imagine it now, that HEL offers benefits that no other course does or can, and that we can leverage new resources—traditional as well as multimedia—and pedagogical techniques to reimagine HEL in a way that maximizes those benefits and recognizes the valuable contributions it can make to the curriculum and discipline. I present my argument in these deliberately provocative terms to counter the checkered past and precarious present position of HEL.

THE VALUE OF HEL

In the current disciplinary context, HEL offers three valuable benefits that would otherwise be absent from the curriculum or, at best, supplied in a piecemeal fashion by other courses. First, it provides a sense of the historical span of literature in English and a forum for exploring the intricate relation between history and literature. Second, it makes students aware not only that the language has changed over time but also that it continues to do so. Finally, HEL enables students to build historically informed interpretations of texts from any period. While I focus below on how these benefits contribute to a literature curriculum, HEL also suggests how we might bridge gaps that often exist among the subdisciplines of English (literature, rhetoric, and creative writing) and between how we practice literary studies as a scholarly discipline and how we teach literature classes.

The foundational benefit that HEL offers is a fuller understanding of history and culture and their complex connections to literature in English; in other words, it helps students develop the "historical and comparative perspectives" that the Teagle report identified as indispensable to a college education (288). Most HEL courses are arranged chronologically, but those that are not nonetheless cover a historical duration greater than any other course and do so more consciously and in more depth. In addition, HEL foregrounds the relation between history and literature as an object of study to a degree that few, if any, other literature courses have the time or potential to replicate. Individual courses may elaborate on the context of a particular text, period, or genre, or on the connections between history and literature within such limits, but it is difficult for students to piece together that information and gain an understanding that covers the Anglo-Saxon scop to the American postmodernists, with every stage in between. Even introductory theory courses cannot examine the relation between literature and history in as much detail as HEL and with such a range of examples. And even literature survey courses cannot offer the same experience of the historical arc that HEL does. While it focuses on the English-language literary tradition above others, HEL more than any other literature course gives students an expansive and detailed framework in which to position a given text.

Traditionally, literature has been subdivided by period and nationality, but many English departments now emphasize its transnational character or rely on a more fluid view of periodization. The ability to connect and evaluate texts not only in but also across historical periods is a growing desideratum in literary studies; it aids students who will draw on a

