

## **Fear is an Excellent Motivator: A Final Character Assassination of Gwendolyn Morgan**

Brady Jensen, University of Oregon

When I was asked if I would like to write a few words in honor of Gwen Morgan for this special edition of *Year's Work in Medievalism*, I thought, without a moment's hesitation, "Yes, a chance for one final 'character assassination.'" Character assassination is how Gwen indicated Teacher/Course Evaluation on her syllabi. In order to best explain the time that I spent with Gwen, I have decided to explore the time leading up to the first character assassination that I wrote for her and follow the progression—what I learned during my time in her classroom and what I have come to realize since.

The first time I walked into Gwen's office for advising, I was a scared freshman who had just switched to English from the sciences. I told Gwen that this was the case, and, I am almost positive, she suspected that I was another slacker who had switched to English because I thought it would be an easier major. She promptly told me that my AP credits wouldn't be sufficient to cover any of the pre-requisites for the department (regardless of what the secretaries in the English Department said) and that I just needed to follow the sheet that outlined all of the English requirements. The meeting probably last only a couple of minutes, but I walked out of her office swearing to myself that I would never take a single course from that terrible woman.

Cut to the following term. I had enrolled in a writing course which, at the time, had no instructor listed, but, when it came time to buy textbooks, the name was posted in the bookstore: MORGAN. "It can't be," I thought to myself as I rushed to the nearest computer to check. Of course, it was Gwen, but I was determined to see how it all played out—I had resolved not to take a class from her, but I was not a quitter (and, this close to the beginning of the term, it was impossible to find another open class that fit with my schedule). On the first day of class, I saw the same woman from my advising appointment with the same attitude. She came in, assuring us that a large portion of the class would fail and few (if any) would receive an A—I would later come to recognize this as characteristic of Gwen's first-day-of-class speeches. As the term progressed, she continually came in annoyed with what we had written (often addressed in her notorious "Ten Reasons Why I Hate You All" list, which listed our ten most troublesome issues during our most recent essay), decided to abandon the readings a quarter of the way through the semester because we couldn't handle the focus, threw chalk, and, at least once throughout the term, was so frustrated that she had to excuse herself for a couple minutes for a smoke break (now, having taught composition myself, I entirely sympathize with this response).

Despite all of these things, this was the course where I *really* learned to write, and I have not forgotten many of the lessons from that term and frequently use them in my own classroom. It was one of the first times in my writing education where I received honest feedback, where an instructor wasn't afraid of telling me, directly, just how badly I was doing. This honest feedback allowed me to really assess my own work and be able to make the *real* changes that were necessary instead of simply

trying to just salvage what I had written before. Gwen never had a problem being honest; if she didn't like the topic, she would say so; if she thought a paragraph was too wordy or out of place or off-topic, she wasn't afraid to give the entire thing a big, red "X."

At the end of the term, then, when character assassinations came around, I sat in the room with the piece of paper in front of me, and I thought about the term that I had just experienced, and I wrote the only thing that came to my mind: "Fear is an excellent motivator."

Walking out of that classroom for the last time, I did not have the same resolve as I had when I left her office for the first time. I was still terrified of her, but I was not (as) determined to avoid her class, and, by the time I had graduated, I had taken a handful of classes from her. With each class, I proved myself a little bit more, and came to recognize the patterns between her classes. I learned not only the material, but the amount of work that was necessary to really be successful. For each class, however, my character assassination remained the same, "Fear is an excellent motivator." While my response never changed, what did change was the meaning behind it, though I am certain that I was not cognizant of that at the time.

When I first wrote those words, I was really motivated by fear, superficial fear: fear of having to dodge a piece of chalk, fear of having entire paragraphs (or pages) crossed out in red pen, fear of having a mistake pointed out in front of the class, fear of being told I was wrong (something Gwen is never afraid of doing). But, as the years passed, I realized that those things, while potentially scary, were not what I was really afraid of—or, at the very least, not what I ended up being afraid of.

My fear started to change in the first literature course I took with Gwen, one of my first few that I had taken from the department, when, after admitting that we didn't really know anything about how Romans viewed medicine, Gwen announced to the class that "to study literature aright is to study everything." These words are still ringing in my ears, and I could take you to the classroom where she said them and point out the seat where I was sitting. It wasn't until that very moment that I quite understood why I had made the switch from the sciences to English in the first place. That was the first time that I realized that a field of study could become the focus of one's life; not just my life or Gwen's life, but anyone's life. Never before had I seen such passion expressed over an intellectual pursuit, and, it was at this moment that I realized how much this all—the study of letters—meant to her. Studying English and literature was a privilege for Gwen, and she did not have the patience for anyone who was not going to give it the time and attention that she believed it deserved.

The more that I realized these things, the more that my fear changed from centered on me to centered on her. I found myself, more than anything, afraid to disappoint her, afraid of being considered someone who was in the classroom for the wrong reasons, someone who did not deserve to be there to hear what she had to say about the subject at hand. For Gwen, what we did

every day was a privilege, one that she would gladly share with anyone who respected it as much as she did and was willing to put in the work, but one which she would just as quickly guard (dressed in chainmail and brandishing a sword) against anyone who was there looking for an easy A or an easy degree.

I am certain that this is what Gwen suspected of me on my first visit to her office and why I had to prove myself, why I had to prove that I could work hard enough, that I cared enough to fight through the fear, or rather, to embrace it. I have spent enough time in English departments to know exactly how many people are there for the wrong reasons. When I first walked into her office and into her class, I did not understand, but, as time passed, it became clear to me, and I became able to pick out the students who didn't share Gwen's passion for what we were lucky enough to do every day. I suspect that it is no coincidence that those are the same students who avoided Gwen's classes at all costs, who never warmed up to her approach to the material, or were never lucky enough to stumble into her class by mere chance.

Gwen was notorious in the English department. By many students, her classes were feared and avoided, but, for a select few, her classes offered the opportunity to engage in the material in a way that is, in my experience, rarely available. Her enthusiasm and passion is so intense that it is literally scary, but this is the passion that we need. This is the passion that is going to keep English departments alive and will keep students from jumping into what they perceive as an easy route to a diploma. Gwen's passion for what she did, what we do, should make anyone proud of a field that is undergoing so much scrutiny and seems to be constantly under attack from the outside. Fear is an excellent motivator; fear is what pushed me (and, I suspect, other students) to learn and excel and to take charge of our educations. I know that I happened to find my way into Gwen's classes by chance; had that not been the case, it is likely that I might not have ended up where I am today. I hope that, someday, I will be able to scare people with my passion, that they will meet me and will know "Ah, *that* is what he lives for." Fear is an excellent motivator, and it was a privilege to be scared.