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Teaching European Medieval Literature to Asian Students: A Didactic Proposal for the *Divine Comedy*

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ABSTRACT

Normally the teaching of European literature begins with the Middle Ages, the birthplace of various national literature: this, however, leads to a problem for the student, who is compelled to start from the literary texts which are farther from both their linguistic and cultural points of view. These difficulties are emphasized if we consider an Asian student, who in most cases lacks the philosophical, religious, and artistic points of reference necessary to understand the literary texts. In the field of teaching medieval literature, a special role is played by the *Divine Comedy*, a text that probably represents the highest point in the medieval literary production, both in terms of breadth and depth. The *Divine Comedy* continues to be a matter of privileged study not only in the Italian field, but also in culture and medieval society in general. The following paper proposes to follow a different teaching approach in introducing the work to Asian students, starting not only from the classic historical approach based on the previous Dante Alighieri's production, but also by incorporating the work into a comparative genre and theme context, based on both the previous classical texts (such as Virgil's *Aeneid*) and the previous medieval texts (Scholasticism, Provençal poetry, medieval visions of the Afterlife, etc.). The paper seeks to emphasize the advantages of this didactic approach both in the preparatory lessons and during the true reading of the work, by reintroducing Dante's work into a broader cultural and literary context that pushes the student to fully immerse themselves in the culture of the time.

Keywords: Didactic of literature, Asian students, medieval literature, *divine comedy*

Objectives

The objective of this paper is to analyze the needs of Asian students when they are confronted with the reading of European medieval literature, and offer some reflections on the creation of a practical didactic path beginning with the *Divine Comedy*, a text that can be considered exemplary for its presence of Medieval cultural elements and the way in which they were placed inside the work. The main approaches we have decided to use are twofold, by theme and by genre, both of which share the characteristics of providing students with a guideline to the various texts and reading keys that can be reused in independent standalone reading.

Research questions

1. What are the needs of Asian students? What are the peculiarities of their learning habits?
2. What are the benefits of the theme and genre based approaches?

3. How can they be applied to the teaching of the *Divine Comedy* - and how can we structure a course following these principles?

Methodology

The paper is theoretical and entirely literature-based. After analyzing the essential features of medieval literature and the needs of Chinese students, we have started an analysis to see how these two subjects can fit into a theme and genre approach and what benefits this can bring. At this point, with a clear theoretical learning framework, we proceed to the practical aspect by proposing a didactic path of interpretation and analysis of the *Divine Comedy* divided into two main trunks: preparatory lessons and the real reading of some pieces of the work.

Asian Students' Needs

There is a wide body of literature on the characteristics of Asian students, a definition that shall be understood here as residents of the Far East (Southeast Asia, China, Korea, Japan), but this is mainly concerned with its position in relation to the teaching techniques of a Western foreign language. The Asian student would therefore generally not be used to a method of interactive communication teaching - devoted to play, improvisation, direct participation of the single pupil - and often struggles to recognize the didactic value of classroom activities. Asian students, with a common mindset derived largely from the Confucian doctrine, can, despite the different nationalities, present a number of shared elements to a certain degree, depending on the country (Wang, 2006; Littrell 2005; Wong 2004)

- Reticence in speaking
- Poor personal initiative
- Collectivism
- Clear hierarchy within the classroom
- Absolute respect for the professor, who is seen as a bearer of truth that cannot be contradicted or contested
- One-way communication, from professor to student
- Need for clear study tools to use in the classroom and at home (manuals, tasks to be corrected, professors' PowerPoints)
- High importance given to the effort and achievement of goals
- Practical sense of learning

However, against this model of homologation for all Asian students, critical voices have come forward to reshape this generalized vision: Cheng (2000) contests, for example, the so-called reticence of Asian students, arguing that it is an over-generalization and Asian students in the right context have a strong desire to participate in class activities, while Champagne and Walter (2000) state that the generalization of the continent is wrong and we can instead speak only of "habitus".

Faced with these different views of the Asian student with regard to literary teaching, we can use, as a foundation to build on, the scarce knowledge of both Western culture as a whole and the values systems that have governed it throughout various historical ages. For example, in Chinese secondary schools, there is no a part of the curriculum devoted solely to Western history or culture. Our primary goal as teachers of Western Literature, which can be attributed to various courses, should be providing the students with a clear method for a discipline that begins with completely new, and wholly incomprehensible material - Western literature – which is formed from a wider cultural context made of History, Art,

Imaginary, Mentality, Beliefs, Traditions, Expectations, and more. This is even stricter when we decide to deal with Western literature in chronological order, starting from the historically and culturally more distant past. Among the most complex elements for Asian students to study regarding medieval literature is the ubiquitous religious element: Wang (2006) inserts, within the differences of values between Western and Eastern world, elements closely related to the Judeo-Christian mentality, e.g., the existence of a supernatural reality and belief in the afterlife, the value given to faith, a basic dualism, and values that are "real" in everyday life. Therefore, in addition to the knowledge of single biblical episodes and Christianity, the student often struggles to understand Dante's vision of reality and his opinions, emotions, and decisions.

The Features of Medieval Literature

European medieval literature is essentially a European literary production from the fall of the Western Roman Empire (476 AD) until the discovery of America by Christopher Columbus (1492 AD). At first glance, the material to analyze is extremely broad in both chronological and geographic terms: over a thousand years of history on a vast territory with different languages and traditions. Yet, medieval literature, by virtue of some characteristics typical of the culture of that historical period, is much more 'homogeneous' than we can imagine regarding literary genres, themes, and vision of reality. In fact, at least until the fourteenth century, it is usually the expression of certain values (religious and philosophical) that, though changing and evolving over the centuries, still remain the guidelines for much of the written production of the time. Medieval literature is indeed of a type that has a profound relationship with the previous "tradition", or rather "sub-traditions" (Zumthor, 1972), which provide extraordinary stability: tradition is conservation and repetition, especially until the year 1000, and then becomes the basis on which the evolving and creative propulsion is built. Without clearly understanding this background during the reading and analysis of various medieval texts, it is essentially impossible to fully understand this literature: Jauss and Bahti (1979) see in the understanding of the variety of medieval literature the key to understanding its modernity.

Let's examine in more detail some other general features worthy of note:

- The vision of the written language: in all European territories starting from the 7th to the 9th century there are more or less organized testimonies in languages that are now separate from Latin, namely the European national languages. Latin still holds an essential role (in fact, it is referred to as Medieval Latin literature)
- The vision of religiosity: Medieval literature is full of Christian values that have almost always been aimed at educating the reader on a religious level. The theological works therefore form the majority of medieval works, whether they be liturgical (such as hymns or prayers), philosophical (for example the *Scholastica* production) or hagiographic (one in all, *The Golden Legend* by Jacopo da Varazze). Literature is therefore a constant act of faith, and even in the field of "laic" medieval literature, the various productions (gesture songs, courtesy novels, collections of novels or travel novels) are still always attributable to a strong Christian context
- The vision of time and space: medieval religiosity affects the vision of time and space. In both cases, we are facing a pre-scientific vision that uses the Bible as the universal measurement: for the common man, the essential spatial measure is the vertical one with the duality of real world/ divine world, and the conception of time is an eternal present interposed by great biblical events and destined to end with the coming of Final Judgment. The passage of time was marked by nature and liturgical events.

- The Vision of Love: the vision of this sentiment, though evolving over the centuries of the Middle Ages, remains as a totalizing feeling of submission and abandonment to the beloved woman. Love also becomes "another" elevation to a normally elusive and unattainable figure; a symbol of something "superior" (a higher social class, more closeness to God, etc.). At the same time it sometimes seems to be "empty", a mere stylistic exercise, blocked by a series of models and rigid rules to follow. Love also becomes a religious theme; the unconditional love of man towards his creator, and vice versa.
- The vision of society: even society is seen as a realization of a divine providential project. The rulers (e.g., the Pope, Emperor, or various feudal lords) are expressions of the divine will and advocate for a "superior" project. This is accomplished through a pyramidal society strictly based on obedience and sharing of a set of values that are fully realized in chivalric poetry.
- The vision of the written text: For the medieval man seems to exist out of time and space and counts only the direct relationship with the latter, excluding the same author. The text seems to work independently of the circumstances, and therefore there is no problem with the originality or authenticity of a text (Zumthor, 1972, 37).
- The importance of the symbol in all its forms: symbols in medieval culture are very important, saying something by saying something else; anything can be read and interpreted in different ways. For the medieval man, the existence of two worlds, the earthly and the heavenly ones, means that every "real" object is the figuration of something higher, a symbol to be discovered and analyzed which allows the reader to be educated by elevating it to a higher level, and quoting it in a text means referring to this second meaning. This vision, however, finds its ultimate literary expression with the allegory, the rhetorical figure *par excellence* in medieval times. It differs from the symbol - though this is not to say that it opposes it - as it is less static and more difficult to interpret; more arbitrary and linked to the philosophical-metaphysical context. This rhetorical figure is articulated more at the level of the phrase than the name and passes from a metaphorical meaning to the real, while the symbol moves in the opposite direction, and passes from detail to general meaning (Zumthor, 1972, 159).

Even for Zumthor (1972), the history of the economy, institutions and ideas allows us to reconstruct the general reference framework of the work, but this remains subordinated to the alterity that the modern reader feels facing a text coming from a universe that is foreign to him: the center of understanding is the organization of written matter and its function.

The Teaching of the *Divine Comedy* to Foreign Students

The Divine Comedy has always been a cornerstone in the study of medieval literature. In its one hundred *cantos*, it describes an allegorical and didactic journey in the three Afterworld kingdoms and through the encounter with a large number of characters from different epochs and traditions, the poet creates a huge fresco of medieval culture in various fields, from religious to politic, from philosophical to artistic, etc.

It is no surprise, therefore, that Dante's work occupies a special place in the field of the teaching of Medieval Studies and in the field of Italian Studies: in many countries there have existed since time immemorial Dante's Studies courses where the student is forced to face up to this monumental work, which, however, presents various difficulties both from a formal and a content point of view. From the point of view of content the

main problem the work presents is also the element that makes it great: its richness and heterogeneity, its desire to be a great fresco of the poet's thought and a reflection on a part of the society of the time. To do this, Dante assembles Greek-Latin classical culture and the previous medieval Christian culture, creating an enormous structure of quotations and references to real and fictional stories, present and past, then makes it all perfectly functional and puts everything together in the service of his vision of reality and of man. Barolini (2006), for example, sees within an orthodox theological tradition a representation so idiosyncratic as resulting in heterodox by mixing together such heterogeneous elements in order to obtain a personal and multicultural vision.

We can therefore imagine the sense of loss of a student forced to look for a certain order or harmony in this forest of concepts that contribute to form a unique and harmonious work of 100 chapters, each one with its autonomy and dignity, with its very precise style and a special reflection, always different from the previous one, but still attributable to a wider picture of rational thought.

The situation is more complicated for students coming from non-Western geographical areas, for example Asian ones where, besides missing the individual data mentioned above, there is also a certain cultural-religious imagination that is the basis of Dante's work: the Christian dogmas and the concept of faith, the vision of sin and salvation, the belief in the existence of various ultramundane realms, the world's vision of the medieval man, etc. If it is true that Dante's message can be read also in a "universalist" and "de-theologized" light or simply in a "poetic and artistic" one, it is also true that the key for any analysis and interpretation must deal necessarily with the cultural context of the era.

Objectives

1. Improving Asian students' understanding of medieval literature starting from the analysis and understanding of some key elements in order to gain an overview of medieval culture
2. Demonstrating the benefits of didactic approaches by genres and themes within a didactic path based on the above key elements
3. Suggesting reflections for a practical teaching project of the Divine Comedy based on the aforementioned elements
4. Achieving an independent reading of the work by single students

Didactic Approaches in Literature Teaching: Genre and theme based approach

When we speak in general of didactics, there are normally two essential points to consider: what to teach and how. In our case, namely the teaching of a foreign literature to university students, the first question can be easily answered: the so-called classical "canon" of literature inherited, for example, from high school education; a kind of journey between the main authors and/or current from the origins of literature to the mid-twentieth century. More complicated is the "how": how should the material in the classroom be presented to the students, what are the students required to do with the material and what goals should the students achieve?

From this, different approaches to the teaching of this subject are differentiated, depending on where the teacher focuses the center of attention (writer, text, reader, literary genre, theme etc...). Different approaches also naturally involve questioning the role of the professor, which will assume different positions depending on the type of teaching proposed.

Stagi Scarpa, in his essay *The teaching of foreign language literature* (Stagi Scarpa, 2005) proposes the following profit distribution:

Approach	Central role	Teaching
Historical-chronological	Author	Focus on the author and the historical period
Stylistic and linguistic	Text	Focus on text and language: textual analysis
Hermeneutic	Player	Focus on the reader's interpretation
Genre based	Literary genres	Focusing on belonging to a literary genre
Theme	Themes of the anthropological imagination	Focus on a particular cultural theme by linking it to history and genres

The dominant approach in the field of teaching European literature is historicist, or a vision of literature as a "history of literature", therefore more based on the historical-cultural context than on the actual work.

However, the introduction of the work according to this approach presents a series of problems for the foreign students, which we can summarize in the following list:

1. The Divine Comedy is only seen within the European and Italian literary context of the writer's age, but we never fully clarify its relationships with other texts. The student is forced to find the elements passively introduced by the professor in the work.
2. It gives few introductions to the characteristics of the ultramundane journey that the foreign student will have to follow and it is not explained if it corresponds to beliefs normally accepted in the medieval era or is simply Dante's invention.
3. There is no complete confrontation with the culture and the medieval society in its entirety: only individual elements in the text are analyzed, thus contributing to a fragmented and not functional knowledge of an autonomous reading.
4. The student, given the arbitrary nature of the selection of songs to read, struggles to understand the greatness of the work.
5. All the problems previously seen connected with the complexity of the work are not solved: heterogeneity, length, reading difficulty, distant cultural elements, etc.

Often an almost totally opposite approach is proposed, based solely on the reading and stylistic-linguistic commentary of the work, which completely excludes the cultural context. It is an approach based on an analysis of the linguistic and rhetorical figures of the text, and although it may provide a certain order to the Asian student, who prefers a work of "translation", analysis and review at home through a well-defined number of analysis tools (Littrell, 2005), it can't provide valid reasons for the text to be read and turns the reading act into a harsh search for technical elements in a totally decontextualized track (Stagi Scarpa, 2008).

An unexpected aid can instead come from the genre-based approach that presents the following theoretical advantages (Stagi Scarpa, 2008)

1. It establishes a link with other texts and the work is inserted into a line with other texts with which it can be compared → comparatist approach
2. The characteristics and specificities of a precise genre are established
3. It provides students with investigative tools by giving them analysis criteria. This point is essential for foreign students who tend to rely on a rough reading based on intuitions built from their culture
4. We can see the evolution and the changes of a genre in the changing of ages, thus ensuring the contextualization and understanding of the historical, social and cultural elements that influenced it
5. It points out the literary work as the fusion of a series of "internal" elements (the creativity of the individual artist) and "external" (authors and previous currents, characteristics of a given genre, history, society, etc.)

It is possible to combine this approach with the theme-based one; that is, cultural elements closely linked to the evolution of a given genre (or more than one), which presents other kinds of advantages from an educational point of view (Stagi Scarpa, 2005).

1. It is normally considered very stimulating, especially if the topics are chosen with the help of the class
2. It passes the separation between the various disciplines, because the issues may also relate to art and thought in general
3. The theme, contextualized to the historical period or through its evolution, provides an accurate view of certain anthropological and social phenomena
4. The text is placed at the center of teaching as a carrier of certain elements that the student can study and reuse in future readings

The question we can now ask is: can we place Dante's didactic within approaches of this kind? How - and why?

In our view, we can insert the work in an interdisciplinary context and intertextual one, focusing on just the process of reading, analysis and comparison that should be the basis of the teaching of literature. Only through a continuous dialogue - not with the single text, but with different texts and their cultural components - will we appreciate and value each reading. The genre and / or theme will be the *liaison* between the various readings on which students should reflect, seeing common elements, changes, and differences. Clearly there will be a (chrono)logical overview to guide the students, but only by creating a huge web of references, historically and geographically near or far, will they be able to contextualize the work. Only then can we solve the problem mentioned above: the text seen as a stand-alone element.

Preparatory Classes: The Visionary Literature of the Genre Based Approach to the Divine Comedy

In a standard university course of about 15-16 classes based on the reading of the *Divine Comedy*, the variety and diversity will be considered not as a disadvantage but as a strength in touching on the different themes and genres. The use of different styles (comic, sublime, etc.) and the meeting with several characters who speak of different topics allows the creation of an infinite number of didactic paths related to the medieval culture elements that concern us. Those famous "values" and "visions" seen previously in the first chapter are virtually all present inside the text and we can broaden the discussion to other texts and / or readings that can further develop our path.

For preparatory lessons, we can start from a genre based approach that sees, in the reading of Dante's masterpiece, the culmination of a literary tradition. We can think of the *Divine Comedy* as:

- A text that is part of the literature on the afterlife journey; the so called visionary literature
- An allegorical poem
- A didactic poem
- A comedy (in the rhetorical and medieval sense of the term)

Of course it is impossible to cover all these themes in the period of time devoted to preparatory classes; the most convenient one for Asian students is the first, the one most likely able to provide students with the essential religious and social work framework that connects directly to the next two genres, namely the allegorical and didactic poem. This is particularly useful for the Asian students, since, as already mentioned, they do not possess a familiarity with the Christian religious conception of the afterlife and the connected medieval beliefs: with this approach they can get an idea not only of ultramundane geography but also of its evolution over the centuries and which elements have remained stable or which have changed over the centuries. Moreover, the various biblical elements, often repeated in the various works, will find a clearer systematization within the medieval culture and it will be easier to recognize their value.

At this point we can draw on the visionary medieval literature from the beginning (or even from the Second Letter of Paul to the Corinthians), in order to arrive at the *Divine Comedy* as the highest point of this genre.

Reading and Commentary of the Divine Comedy: A Theme Based Approach

When a professor of literature has to select fragments or chapters taken from the *Divine Comedy* they face certain questions: what to choose? In what quantity? Is it better to cover the three parts, or just focus on one? Must you follow the order proposed by Dante or create a new one? How should the various readings be linked? Which path will allow us to understand the work best in its totality?

In addition to all these questions, in the case of the final users being Asian students, we must consider their needs and then offer them a path that considers their shortcomings: these should be "filled" inductively, therefore through the active and direct reading of the text and the comparison between the various tracks. So a theme approach (installed upon a historicist or a genre based general vision) is perfect for creating a path of this kind that is based on an analysis of artistic, anthropological and social elements: as in the previous case of preparatory lessons, we must also pass through the identification of recurring patterns in the work. Given the breadth and diversity of the work, however, in the face of a common framework that the author intends to pursue, an approach of themes allows us to observe the change or evolution of different cultural elements. For the organization of the course, we must instead consider the total number of lesson hours, and the number and length of the fragments we would like to read: in a standard college semester course with one-two academic hours a week, if we consider the introductory classes (the first two or three lessons), we can present 3-4 thematic modules to the students.

For example, in the standard course mentioned earlier we can consider organizing the readings in two-three main thematic categories among those seen previously in medieval cultural categories. For Asian students, for example, the following three themes seem of particular interest: the religious one, time and space and the symbolic-allegorical theme. These three are constitutive elements of the work in which they appear and they bring

evident cultural references to general medieval elements which can be potentially reused in various readings.

For example, we can use the symbol and the allegory – perhaps the most complex theme - and create a learning path as set forth above.

1. We can start from the definition of “allegorical text,” bringing the medieval precedents: the *Tesoretto* of Brunetto Latini, the allegorical anonymous poem *Intelligence* and the *Roman de la Rose* begun by Guillaume de Lorris and concluded by Jean de Meung; all three from the thirteenth century. For each one we will select a clearly allegorical sequence (e.g., for the Latini’s text the loss in the forest and the encounter with Nature, for the *Intelligence* the description of the building, and finally the allegory of the rose for the work of de Lorris).
2. We then ask the students to compare the various parts and to reflect on the meaning of the allegory that emerges from the text, by supplementing it with the definitions of various similar rhetorical figures (metaphor, personification, similitude, symbol, etc.). As we saw earlier, the research should lead to the identification of more or less defined templates.
3. We then move to a more theoretical text, but one that brings us closer to Dante's reading; a letter sent by the Italian poet to Can Grande della Scala (Epistola XIII), in which they discuss the four possible levels of reading of a text: literal, allegorical, moral and anagogical:
4. We can pass now to the concept of “exegesis” and allegorical/figural interpretation, taking as examples the various fragments of the *Divine Comedy*: from hidden allegories in the figure of the Devil, to the figures of Ulysses, Statius, David, and Paul, etc. In this case we must introduce the very general context in order to make the students understand where we are and who the characters presented are. The work is intended as a simple overview to reflect on how, in the work, it is always necessary to not stop at only the basic interpretation of the story.
5. We begin with the real reading activity, digging into the two allegorical *Comedy* chapters *par excellence*, the first one of *Hell* and the 33rd of *Purgatory*. While these are read we introduce the theme of the medieval separation between poet and theologian / prophet, two realities that Dante tried to bring together in his works. This theme is linked to the visionary theme of the work and the possibility that Dante could have really considered himself a sort of visionary can't be excluded, considering the great importance of religious texts in the thirteenth century. In these two chapters, we can see how the allegories are essential to understand the work and how often they have been not fully understood, so that over the centuries there have been various interpretations of the same excerpt. After finding them, the students will be able to compare them with the others previously observed.
6. We analyze the two guides from the two previously read chapters and the characterization made of them by Dante. The analysis of Virgil and Beatrice, usually placed before starting the work, is here instead deepened through the allegorical reading key, and we can thus connect it to the new chapters (*Hell* II, *Purgatory* XXVII, *Heaven* XXX).
7. Finally, we can ask the students to do an autonomous work on a series of specific sub-themes related with the symbolic-allegorical one with a series of fragments they have to read and analyze. The sub-themes can be for example: 1) Dante's journey as an allegory of man's journey, 2) the relationship between allegory and didactics, 3) the inexplicability of what he saw and the need to resort to something "other", and 4) the real world as a representation of the divine (animals).

8. During the whole learning process, a parallel path can also be carried out regarding the allegorical representation in the field of history of art, both in a general sense and connected to the representations of the *Divine Comedy*.

The proposed path is not naturally a homogeneous block, but rather draws strength from its own heterogeneity and modularity: we can then reduce, modify or extend it depending on our needs or how we want to connect the various macro-units. The central point is still concerned with considering the needs of our students and how to help them to face everything as clearly as possible.

Final Results

- The problems of Asian students have been identified as something more than a gap at the level of learning styles: a lack of cultural content necessary to perform work of analysis and understanding
- The two most suitable approaches for the needs of the students while reading the *Divine Comedy* were identified in terms of those able to provide them with a wider structure during the reading activity: the genre and theme based ones
- The identification of macro-themes common to all literature creates educational paths that allow the student to re-use the knowledge acquired in other works of the same historical period
- The creation of two paths, one introductory/preparatory and the other one focused on reading and analysis, makes it possible to gradually introduce the students into the work and get to the real reading with some basic preparation
- The approach by genre allows the student to learn the bases of the Christian culture about the Afterworld inductively through comparisons with previous works
- The reading and analysis of the *Divine Comedy* chapters through the theme based approach allows them to be analyzed through its main components and simplifies the subsequent independent reading by providing reusable interpretations
- Compared to the traditional historicist and stylistic approaches, this mixed path allows a vision of Dante's text that is more internal to the cultural context of the time, detaching it from an excessive connection with the author's previous works that often does not consider a number of external sources
- Finally, it connects the Dante work to the medieval culture through a continuous comparison between these two different fields: it's used as an analysis both from the general to the particular and from the particular to the general. The literature becomes a vast web of cultural references where the comparative, intercultural and multidisciplinary rescues the reading of a passage from the isolation of the individual work.

Limitations

The two approaches described above do not completely eliminate the traditional approach (historicist-stylistic), which is still useful for providing a chronological framework and technical textual tools - but they are grafted onto this. Genre and theme based approaches, if not contextualized, tend to give a too fragmentary image of literature that threatens to flatten the texts into a timeless background (Stagi Scarpa, 2005). If they are deprived of text analysis tools, they cannot make it clear to students that a literary text style is as important as the content, especially in a work so innovative and complex from a linguistic point of view as the *Divine Comedy*.

Regarding the amount of analyzable material, despite all the possible expansions and connections, the overall vision will always be partial due to the impossibility of analyzing

all the medieval cultural elements that form Dante's work, which are extremely extended in all directions. It is impossible to see every "external" element: the teacher will have to make a choice and sacrifice something. There remains the problem of showing the student the dual nature of medieval literature: on the one hand a certain thematic homogeneity, on the other hand the beginning of the separation of bodies of national literature, each one with its own characteristics.

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