The Life and Writings
of
Geoffrey Chaucer

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Scope:

This lecture series examines the life and work of the English poet Geoffrey Chaucer (c.1340–1400) in order to understand the richness and depth of his poetry, its ways of representing medieval life and culture, and its impact on later writers and on English literary history as a whole. Chaucer is a great poet of human expression and social relationships, and the theme of this course is how Chaucer understands the social function of poetry: that is, how poetry brings people together into communities of readers and listeners. Chaucer wrote in virtually all the forms of literature available to him: classical epic, domestic farce, ribald comedy, saint's life, beast fable, romance adventure, personal lyric, devotional prayer, and philosophical and religious prose. He also wrote in Middle English, the language of England spoken and written from about the middle of the eleventh century to the end of the fifteenth. Chaucer not only appropriated the resources of his language, he changed them. His impact on the history of the English language, therefore, is also significant, and this course will spend some time on just how Chaucer affected the literary forms of English.

After an introductory set of lectures on Chaucer's life, the range of his work, and the language in which he wrote (Lectures One through Three), the course examines his major themes by looking closely at a set of exemplary poems. First, we look at two short lyrics to establish Chaucer's basic intellectual and literary vocabulary (Lecture Four). Then, two lectures introduce the student to his *Troilus and Criseyde*, a great long poem of classical subject matter and deep philosophical themes. In this poem, Chaucer speculates on the nature of language change, the passage of history, and the role of the writer in society, as well as telling a compelling story of love and honor, betrayal and desire, friendship and political connivance (Lectures Five and Six).

The following five lectures (Seven through Eleven) engage us with the *Canterbury Tales*, an encyclopedic poem of social relationships and personal drama. We look at the order and form of the General Prologue that introduces the poem (Lecture Seven), the First Fragment or set of tales that defines the work's structure (Lecture Eight), and two remarkable literary creations that challenge both the medieval and the modern reader: the Wife of Bath and the Pardoner (Lectures Nine and Ten). The penultimate lecture of the course (Lecture Eleven) reviews the enormous range of the *Canterbury Tales* as an invitation to the student to read widely and personally in Chaucer, and the final lecture (Lecture Twelve) outlines Chaucer's impact over the six hundred years of literary history since his death.

This course of lectures is both an introduction and an invitation: an introduction to the writings of a poet long known as the "father" of English poetry, and an invitation to the modern reader to find ways of enjoying, valuing, and responding to a poetry as vivid now as it was six centuries ago.

Lecture One
Introduction to Chaucer's Life and World

Scope: This introductory lecture places Chaucer's work and life in the contexts of medieval English literature and social history. It also calls attention to some key problems that attend to our reading of Chaucer's poetry: for example, the nature of scribal culture, the features of his language, the structures of his narratives, and the patterns of literary and historical allusion that we need to recover. Finally, this lecture looks forward to the overall approach of the course, focusing largely on Chaucer's major long poem, *The Canterbury Tales*, and to the poet's later impact on English literature and literary history. From the time of his earliest readers on, Chaucer has been thought of as the "father of English poetry" and, in the words of the sixteenth-century poet Edmund Spenser, "the well of English undefiled." John Dryden announced: "here is God's plenty." This course of lectures seeks to understand, ultimately, how and why we think of Chaucer in these ways and why we still continue to read and value his poetry today.

Outline

I. The nature and purpose of this course.
   A. Our goal is to appreciate Chaucer's poetry in its range and power.
      1. We need to understand the ways in which Chaucer uses inherited medieval literary forms, but also how he transforms them into personal expressions.
      2. And we need to understand how Chaucer views the nature of authorship—in particular, the problems of being an author in the vernacular language (English) at a time in history when the ideals of authorship and the codes of literary value were still largely defined in terms of Latin reading, writing, and study.
   B. We also need to understand how Chaucer is a social poet—that is, Chaucer is a poet that does not simply describe society or social groups as he sees them, but encodes in his work a controlling idea of the social community.
   C. Chaucer's poetry is about many things, but it is always concerned with the uses and abuses of literature in maintaining social relationships.

II. Chaucer's life: a brief overview.
   A. Chaucer was probably born in about the year 1340; he died in 1400.
   B. During his life, Chaucer was first and foremost a public servant.
      1. He held a variety of positions in the English royal court.
      2. At various times in his life, he was an ambassador on foreign missions, a Member of Parliament, and Clerk of the King's Works, among other things.
      3. There are many records of payments to Chaucer in medieval English documents for his royal service.
      4. But there are absolutely no records of Chaucer as a poet: that is, we have no external historical evidence for Chaucer's work as a poet.
      5. What we do have are a collection of manuscripts (but not signatures), all of which were appearing c. 1415–1420, after Chaucer's death, which identify him as the author of a body of literary works.
      6. There are about eighty surviving manuscripts of *The Canterbury Tales*, which is a mark of the importance of Chaucer's poetry, since making a manuscript copy was a laborious process.
   C. Thus, more than simply seeing Chaucer's life as marginal to his work, or more than simply understanding Chaucer as a public servant who wrote poetry in his spare time, we need to understand an important theme for his work:
      1. The relationship between public service and the private imagination is not just a problem for Chaucer's own life, but a theme of his writings.
      2. Throughout Chaucer's poetry, the tensions between the public and the private, the political and the literary, the experiential and the imaginary, are the key problems for the characters who tell his tales and the characters who act within them.
   D. In charting Chaucer's life, too, we need to see him as a European, as well as an English poet.

1. Chaucer made many trips to Europe: he served in the army in France in 1359–60; he traveled to Spain in 1366; he traveled to France in the 1360s; and he stayed for 100 days Italy in 1372–73.
2. On these journeys, all of which were for political service, Chaucer may have encountered European writers and European literary cultures. He was multi-lingual, in fact, a translator.
3. For example: on a trip to France, he may very well have met the French historian and poet Jean Froissart; and on his trips to Italy, he may have met the aged poet Francis Petrarch (cf. "The Clerk's Tale").
4. He was familiar with the works of Dante, Boccaccio, Jean de Meun and Guillaume de Lorris (*Romance of the Rose*) and others.

E. Chaucer's poetry draws heavily on literary models from European writers: the *fabliau* (or sex farce), the saint's life, classical tales, dream vision and frame-tale narrative. His travels to Europe, and his contacts with European political and intellectual figures, help us understand his sense of himself as a European, as well as an English, literary figure.

F. Finally, there are many moments in Chaucer's poetry when he is clearly writing for royal or public patronage.
1. His first major poem, *The Book of the Duchess* (c.1369) is an elegy on the death of the wife of John of Gaunt.
2. His *Legend of Good Women* (c.1380s) was clearly revised to account for changes in the political and patronage landscape.
3. His many short poems or ballads are often addressed to friends who were courtiers, as well as, on occasion, the Kings of England themselves (e.g., Richard II and, after 1399, Henry IV). These poems explore problems of public service and even occasionally request patronage or payment for services rendered.

III. Thus, Chaucer's life often informs his work, and three major relationships in his writings emerge.

A. Relationships between men and women:
1. Chaucer explores the ways in which we construct gender roles in society.
2. He dramatizes the tensions between the nature of a person's sexual identity and the social position that person is expected to play, including within the religious life.
3. He explores and often critiques some of the institutions in which male and female roles are shaped: marriage, courtly love, sexual activity.

B. Relationships between people and God, in which Chaucer asks some basic questions about belief:
1. What is the relationship between spiritual aspiration and base desire?
2. How can we, as creatures of the world of experience, apprehend a vision of divinity?
3. What is the place of theological and philosophical speculation in everyday life (cf. "The Miller's Tale")?
4. Is poetry and artistic creation a function of divine inspiration or of demonic possession?

C. Relationships between "us" and "them," that is, relationships among groups of people and excluded or non-normative groups:
1. Throughout his works, especially in the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer shows us people different from the run of everyday experience.
2. His Pardoner is a eunuch or a homosexual.
3. His Prioress tells a story about Jews (who had been banished from England in 1290, not to be officially readmitted until the middle of the sixteenth century).
4. His Squire sets his tale in the court of Ghengis Khan.
5. His Nun's Priest tells a tale about talking birds.
6. In short, these and other poems ask: just who are we, and how does literary experience inform or perhaps mar our understanding of those outside our social, moral, or national purview?

Essential Reading:

Donald Howard, *Life of Geoffrey Chaucer*.

"Chaucer's Life," in Benson, ed., *Riverside Chaucer*.

Supplementary Reading:

R. S. Loomis, *A Mirror of Chaucer's World*.

M. Crow and C. Olson, *Chaucer Life Records*.

Questions to Consider:

1. From what you have heard so far, how do you think Chaucer's work will speak to you?

2. What concerns or intrigues you about approaching an author and his work now 600 years old?

3. How can you compare Chaucer's public career and literary life to that of other, more familiar writers who have similarly negotiated the worlds of work and writing (for example, T. S. Eliot or Wallace Stevens)?

Lecture Two
The Scope of Chaucer's Work

Scope: This lecture surveys the range of Chaucer's literary production. It identifies and describes the five kinds of modes in which Chaucer wrote, and summarizes the content of his major poems other than the *Canterbury Tales*.

Outline

I. Chaucer explores the major issues of his poetry in a range of texts written throughout his life. Broadly speaking, he writes five kinds of things:

  A. Dream poetry. These are poems in which the narrator falls asleep and has a vision. Chaucer's four major dream poems are:
    1. *The Book of the Duchess*.
    2. *The Parliament of Fowles*.
    3. *The House of Fame (a long unfinished work)*.
    4. *The Legend of Good Women*.

  B. Classically inspired poetry of a courtly nature.
    1. Chaucer's major long poem of this kind is *Troilus and Criseyde*, an erotic epic tale set during the Trojan War.
    2. "The Knight's Tale" of the *Canterbury Tales* also fits into this category.
    3. There are also some shorter, fragmentary poems which are apparently forays into this area as well.

  C. Frame-tale narratives, in which a collection of individual stories is yoked together under a controlling larger story about the group performance or journey.
    1. The major collection of this kind is the *Canterbury Tales* (cf., Boccaccio's *Decameron*).
    2. *The Legend of Good Women* is also an attempt at this form, but it is apparently unfinished.

  D. Short lyrics, ballads, and personal poems, often addressed to individuals in Chaucer's social or political circle. There are about fifteen of these kinds of poems (Chaucer's authorship of some of them is doubtful, though).
    1. The short poem known as "Truth" is one of these, and was one of the most popular of Chaucer's poems after his death.
    2. The single stanza addressed to his scribe Adam is also important for understanding Chaucer's sense of literary and personal self.

  E. Translations of intellectual texts from Latin and French.
    1. Chaucer translated Boethius's (d. 524 AD) *De Consolatione Philosophiae (On the Consolations of Philosophy)*, a Latin philosophical work of the sixth century AD, into English. It was an important project for him and was a work he returned to often for intellectual themes.
    2. He also translated part of the Old French poem, *The Romance of the Rose*, a long erotic dream vision, from which he also drew many characters, themes, and motifs elsewhere in his poetry.
    3. But many of Chaucer's works are, in some sense, translations, as they are based on literary texts drawn from other languages.

II. Chaucer tells us what he wrote in his "Retractions," a text that comes at the end of the *Canterbury Tales* in which he asks for forgiveness for the sinful works he has written and praise for the spiritual ones.

  A. This document stands in a long tradition of literary retractions stretching back to St. Augustine in the fifth century AD.

  B. It lists just about everything that we know Chaucer to have written, including a couple of items which apparently do not survive.

  C. It may be straightforward or ironic—but in either case, it is a testimony to the enormous range of Chaucer's work.

III. Thus, in exploring Chaucer we need to see him as a writer of many forms and genres.

  A. He is a writer of spirit and flesh. His allegorical and religious poetry is rich with allusions to the Bible and the Church Fathers (for example, the "Parson's Tale," the "Tale of Melibee," and the prayer poem known as the "ABC").

  B. He is a writer of intellect and desire. He knows the major philosophical debates of his time and often comments on the relationships of scholarly pursuit and love (for example, in the "Clerk's Tale," "The Wife of Bath's Tale," and throughout *Troilus and Criseyde*).

  C. He is a writer of elevation and obscenity. Chaucer can be one of the most obscene writers who ever wrote. Works such as the "Miller's Tale," "Friar's Tale," "Summoner's Tale," and the close of the "Pardoner's Tale" demonstrate the way Chaucer can humor and shock his readers.

  D. But most broadly, in his own words, he is a writer of "earnest" and of "game" or play. The question is always: what is serious, what is humorous; what is straight, what is ironic; what is the heart of the argument and what is simple entertainment?

Essential Reading:

The scope of Chaucer's complete works can be seen in Benson, ed., *Riverside Chaucer*.

Supplementary Reading:

A. C. Spearing, *Medieval Dream Poetry*.

Derek Brewer, *Chaucer in His Time*.

Questions to Consider:

1. What is a dream poem and why do you think Chaucer enjoyed using the form?

2. How do different literary genres work for you, and how do you respond to the relationships among narrative form, thematic content, and verbal style?

Lecture Three
Chaucer's Language

Scope: This lecture introduces the student to Chaucer's Middle English. It identifies the key features of Chaucer's language: both in its historical contexts in the development of the English language itself, and in its local contexts in the particulars of Chaucer's regional dialect, level of education, and blend of literary and intellectual discourses. The lecture concludes with a close reading of the first sentence (the first 18 lines) of the General Prologue of the *Canterbury Tales* to illustrate Chaucer's language at work and to show how Chaucer's literary themes and techniques are intimately bound up with his own sense of linguistic change.

Outline

I. By "Chaucer's English" we mean both the language of an educated, literate, late fourteenth century Englishman and the language of Chaucer's poetry (its choice of words, syntax and grammar, and its sound).

   A. Chaucer's poetry works at the level of linguistic choices.

   B. His age, and his writings, mark a watershed in the history of the language.

II. What is Middle English (ME)?

   A. There are three periods of English linguistic history.
      1. Old English (OE): the language of the Anglo-Saxons in England, was spoken and written from about the seventh century to the mid-eleventh century; OE is a set of dialects, really, of the older Germanic languages.
      2. Middle English: the language developed out of OE in contact with the Norman conquerors of the eleventh century (speakers of Norman French); ME was spoken and written, in various regional dialects, until the mid-fifteenth century.
      3. Modern English: the form that developed in the Renaissance and differed from ME in pronunciation of vowel and consonant sounds, its simplified grammar, and an enhanced vocabulary (words borrowed from other languages).

   B. Old English is an inflected language.
      1. Nouns have case endings and have grammatical gender.
      2. Verbs are grouped in classes of conjugations.

   C. Middle English tends to lose these older inflections.
      1. Word order rather than case endings becomes the determiner of meaning in a sentence.
      2. ME also has more loan words, especially from French and Latin, than OE does.

   D. Studying ME involves looking at four features of the language:
      1. Lexis, or vocabulary: words used by speakers and writers.
      2. Morphology: the ways in which grammatical categories are indicated in words and groups of words (e.g., case endings and gender).
      3. Phonology: the sounds of the language.
      4. Syntax: the ways in which words are arranged to form grammatical units (e.g., clauses, sentences).

III. Lexis.

   A. ME has a growing vocabulary from French (the "prestige" language of the time) and Latin, including:
      1. Terms of religion, society, politics, and high culture.
      2. Words entering after the Norman Conquest, and also from intellectual life (e.g., the church, scholarship, theology).
      3. Words coming in from court life, from administration, from architecture, cuisine, the plastic and visual arts.

   B. But ME does preserve many OE words and forms.
      1. Words for key concepts, parts of the body, and central features of the landscape or cosmos remain OE words.
      2. Grammar words, or particles, remain OE words.

C. OE words tend to be monosyllabic; French and Latin words tend to be polysyllabic.

IV. Morphology.

    A. ME lost most of the OE system of grammatical gender.

        1. In OE, as in many modern languages, nouns were masculine, feminine, or neuter.

        2. This virtually drops out in ME by the fourteenth century.

    B. What does survive from OE is the regularized genitive ending in -s, and several other older ways of indicating the plurals: both with -s, and occasionally with -en (e.g., child, children), and also by changing or mutating the root vowel of the word (e.g., foot, feet; man, men; etc.).

        1. What also survives is a double system of verbs: strong and weak.

        2. Strong verbs signal change of tense by a meaningful change in the root vowel: drink, drank, drunk; run, ran; think, thought.

        3. Weak verbs signal the past tense by the addition of a suffix in -d or -ed: walk, walked; love, loved.

        4. All new verbs that enter English enter as weak verbs.

        5. Many old strong verbs from OE have become weak verbs; the point is that Chaucer's language preserves many of these older forms.

    C. The complex system of pronouns in ME maintains an OE distinction between singular and plural in second person.

        1. Thou, thee, thy, thine—these are the singular.

        2. You, ye, your, yours—these are the plural.

        3. This is an important grammatical distinction that is lost in Modern English, and we need to notice this in Chaucer's verse, because the forms used can be an important indicator of the social status of the characters.

V. Phonology.

    A. How was Chaucer's language pronounced?

        1. Rule 1: pronounce everything. No silent letters, so pronounce consonant clusters completely (e.g., "knight").

        2. Final -e is usually pronounced, as are all syllables in a word. Thus, "marriage" is a four-syllable word in ME, not a two-syllable one.

    B. Vowels are the hardest thing. They retain their OE values, to a large degree.

        1. The sounds of the vowels are really more like the sounds of modern European languages: a, e, i, o, u.

        2. Chaucer's own dialect of London lent certain distinctive pronunciations, too.

VI. Syntax

    A. Chaucer's word order is often influenced by the order of words in the poetic line.

        1. But word order patterns in Chaucer's language were moving to look like modern ones.

        2. Word order could, however, still be used in distinctive ways that we no longer use.

    B. Interrogation: asking a question was done not with the word "do" or its forms, but by inverting the order of the subject and verb.

    C. Giving commands was similarly done by reversing subject verb order.

    D. Negation and comparison are cumulative. Chaucer uses double (and even triple and quadruple negatives) for enhancing effect, not to cancel things out.

VII. A close reading of the "General Prologue," first 18 lines, serves to illustrate some of the above points.

    A. Vocabulary: The passage opposes words of OE and French and Latin for special effects.

        1. "Vertu"—from the Latin *virtus*; power, divine being.

        2. "Inspired"—from the Latin, to breathe life into, infuse with divine power.

        3. "Corages"—French, heart, seat of spirit.

        4. "Adventure"—Latin, that which is about to happen; but also a literary genre, a romance quest.

B. Pronunciation: pronounce French words as French: e.g., "flour" and "shoure" are monosyllabic; words like "engender" are French words. Chaucer also exploits dialect variation to use two different looking words for the same thing: "soote" and "swete" both mean "sweet," and are used for rhyming.

C. OE elements in Chaucer's lines:
   1. OE verb infinitives ending in -en.
   2. OE strong verb, "holpen" (helped).
   3. OE pronouns: "hem" = them, "hir" = their.

D. The final couplet of the sentence juxtaposes the old and the new for sonic, thematic, and dramatic purposes:

"The hooly blissful martyr for to seeke,
That hem hath holpen, wham that they were seke."

   1. Here, Chaucer juxtaposes French and English words and forms to synthesize his linguistic inheritances.
   2. But he also apposes them to create tensions between the English and the imported.
   3. Note, too, the alliteration in the final line and its return to an earlier, OE alliterative prosody.
   4. This final couplet ends the sentence, and its sounds and senses summarize the Chaucerian linguistic and literary project.

Essential Reading:

A. C. Baugh and T. Cable, *A History of English*.

"Language and Versification," in Benson, ed., *Riverside Chaucer*.

Supplementary Reading:

S. Lerer, *The History of the English Language*, Part I (Teaching Company tape series, 1998).

N. Davis, *A Chaucer Glossary*.

Questions to Consider:

1. How does Chaucer juxtapose French and English words in his poetry? As you read his verse, look for obvious loan words and see how they function.

2. The opening lines of the *Canterbury Tales* are some of the most familiar poetry in English; how does it become new to you as you notice its linguistic tensions and innovations?

Lecture Four
Chaucerian Themes and Terms

Scope: In this lecture, we explore some of the key concepts, vocabulary terms, and narrative stances Chaucer uses by examining closely two short poems: "Truth" and the poem to his scribe Adam, known as "Adam Scriveyn." These poems distill many of the issues that Chaucer had explored elsewhere in to brief, aphoristic form. They serve as a good introduction to Chaucer's language and his artistry. But they are also worth reading because later readers took them as the most representative of Chaucer's work. "Truth" was the most popular of his short poems in the centuries after his death, and "Adam Scriveyn" has long been taken to exemplify the problems of the author in an age before print, in a manuscript culture. Finally, these poems help us understand the conditions of that manuscript culture: that is, what it meant to be an author in a time of hand-made manuscripts, when language and texts were more variable than they are now.

Outline

I. Chaucer's "Truth" was the most popular of the poet's short poems in the centuries after his death. Twenty-three manuscript copies of the poem survive (an unusually large number), and it summarizes many of the key themes and idioms of Chaucer's poetry and narrative stances.

    A. The poem is written in rhyme-royal, a seven-line stanza that Chaucer reserved for his most courtly, philosophical, or advisory poetry. He used it four times in *Canterbury Tales* and in *Troilus and Criseyde* throughout.

    B. The poem addresses several key themes for Chaucer's work:
        1. The relationship between social and moral stability on the one hand (*sothfastnesse*) and the insecurities of Fortune and desire (*tikelnesse*) on the other.
        2. The need to control the self, even in adversity.
        3. The need to accept one's lot in life, be it social station, political condition, wealth, personal experience, etc.

    C. The poem draws on some of the most important philosophical sources for Chaucer's work, especially Boethius's *On the Consolations of Philosophy*.
        1. It uses the imagery of the pilgrimage of life, classical allusions and the high way of philosophy.
        2. This image resonates with the pilgrimage structure of the *Canterbury Tales* and helps us frame that longer poem's philosophical context.

    D. The poem is addressed to one of Chaucer's friends, Sir Philip de la Vache.
        1. This final address (present in only one manuscript) places the poem in Chaucer's social and political circle.
        2. It illustrates the way in which Chaucer develops his stance as a social poet of good advice.
        3. It is similar to other short poems addressed to known historical figures.

II. Chaucer's "Adam Scriveyn" survives in only one manuscript copy from the mid-fifteenth century. But it remains the one brief text that many modern readers see as Chaucer speaking directly: in his own non-fictional voice.

    A. Here, Chaucer addresses his scribe Adam and complains that he has done his job poorly.
        1. This kind of address is familiar from other poems of the manuscript tradition, ranging from that of the classical poet Martial, to the twelfth-century poet Baudri of Bourgeuil, to Petrarch in the fourteenth century.
        2. The poem illustrates the pitfalls of working in a manuscript culture.

    B. The poem calls attention to the *Boece* and *Troilus and Criseyde*—two works that are linked thematically, but also compositionally.
        1. The poem may be dated to the 1380s, when Chaucer was probably at work on these two texts.
        2. The mention of these texts illustrates what Chaucer probably thought were his two most important literary projects.

    C. The poem calls attention to Chaucer's anxieties about the transmission and reception of his work.

1. It resonates with passages throughout *Troilus and Criseyde* about the scribal mangling of his poetry.
2. It calls attention to the importance of the concept of "correction" (moral, scriptal and linguistic) in Chaucer's work.

D. The poem raises some important and perhaps disturbing challenges to modern readers in his final line about Adam's "negligence and rape."
   1. The word "rape" has suggested to modern critics that Chaucer considers Adam's work a form of violence against his text.
   2. The word "rape" also resonates with many other Chaucerian texts, especially the "Wife of Bath's Tale," that explore the problems of violence against women.
   3. For some critics, the word also resonates with Chaucer's own legal problems, when in 1380 he was released of the charge of *raptus* by Cecily de Champagne—a legal document which some modern critics have argued paints a picture of Chaucer himself as a rapist.

E. "Adam Scriveyn" may also help us understand Chaucer's uses of allegory and his narrative stances.
   1. There is no evidence that Chaucer ever had a scribe named Adam.
   2. The form of the poem is a traditional one.
   3. Chaucer presents himself as a condemning literary God, cursing his failed Adam.
   4. Even in this little poem, the tensions between the literal and the allegorical are present, and a study of its nuances helps us understand the larger problems of Chaucerian self-presentation and literary style that we will encounter throughout his work.

Essential Reading:

"Truth" and "Adam Scriveyn," in Benson, ed., *Riverside Chaucer*.

Supplementary Reading:

Carolyn Dinshaw*, Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*, chapter 1.

Paul Strohm, *Social Chaucer*.

Questions to Consider:

1. How does Chaucer's moral scope fit into the short space of these lyrics?
2. Do you find "Adam Scriveyn" funny, ironic, brutal, or what?
3. Keep in mind the voice of these apparently straightforward, autobiographical poems; where will you hear it again in Chaucer's narratives?

Lecture Five
Troilus and Criseyde: Love and Philosophy

Scope: This is the first of two lectures on Chaucer's long, classically inspired, yet deeply humanist poem *Troilus and Criseyde*. This lecture addresses the poem's central themes, characters, and structure. It shows how Chaucer explores the problem of love from a philosophical perspective. It also illustrates how Chaucer appropriates material from classical mythology and from his near-contemporary Italian poets, Boccaccio, Petrarch, and Dante, to create a rich synthesis, in English, of the inheritance of European literature.

Outline

I. *Troilus and Criseyde* is a poem in five "books," or sections, written in stanzas, that concerns the love of two figures from the Trojan War.
  A. It is based on the poem *Il Filostrato*, written by Giovanni Boccaccio.
    1. Chaucer presents it as a translation from a source—but he does not name Boccaccio, instead referring to a fictional source, "Lollius."
    2. Yet, Chaucer clearly has manipulated his source, changed it radically, in particular by enhancing the status of the narrator, by adding a major philosophical set of themes to the work, and by developing the character of Pandarus.
    3. Chaucer's poem is only in some sense a translation; as with all his works, he radically reworks his source material, and in the process shows us how medieval habits of reading are invariably habits of rewriting.
  B. Plot: The young Trojan prince Troilus falls in love with Criseyde, the niece of   Pandarus, an older, avuncular friend and adviser to Troilus (Book I).
    1. Troilus sees Criseyde and is smitten.
    2. He seeks advice from Pandarus on how to win her.
    3. Criseyde is presented as a young widow.
    4. Pandarus counsels an elaborate scheme. Is he a voyeuristic manipulator?
  C. Under the tutelage of Pandarus, Troilus writes letters to Criseyde (Book II).
    1. The two lovers develop an exchange of letters.
    2. They fall in love.
  D. Pandarus sets up a complex ruse to get Troilus and Criseyde into bed together (Book III).
    1. Pandarus manipulates Troilus.
    2. Troilus and Criseyde consummate their relationship.
    3. The poem's narrator reflects on their relationship.
  E. Criseyde becomes a pawn in the diplomatic deliberations between the
     Trojans and the Greeks (Book IV).
    1. She is offered as an exchange for Trojan prisoners.
    2. Diomedes, a Greek, will take her away.
  F. Criseyde is exchanged; Troilus feels betrayed; the poem ends on a philosophical note (Book V).
    1. Criseyde seems to fall for Diomedes.
    2. Troilus feels betrayed.
    3. Troilus and Criseyde exchange one final round of love letters.
    4. Troilus dies, Criseyde's reputation is destroyed, and the poem's narrator reflects on this "tragedy."

II. The poem's major characters.
  A. Troilus is a classic, smitten lover.
    1. He speaks in the language of love poetry drawn from Petrarch.
    2. He experiences love sickness.
    3. He follows the precepts of the manuals of love to the letter.
    4. He is overwhelmed by political events and comes to represent the male lover betrayed by women and by the sweep of history.

B. Criseyde is presented as a savvy, knowing woman.
1. She appears at first as someone without need of male companionship.
2. Yet, she permits herself to fall for Troilus.
3. She represents many of the features of medieval literary and cultural conceptions of women.
4. She comes eventually to stand for the figure of the betraying woman in later literature.

C. Pandarus is perhaps the most challenging and disturbing of Chaucer's literary creations.
1. His name is the very source of our word "pander."
2. He is a voyeur, a teacher, a transgressor.
3. In many ways he is the flip-side, or anti-type, of the Chaucerian author figure—someone who manipulates characters, creates fictions, and offers interpretations of the world of books and experience.

D. The narrator is the fullest addition of Chaucer to Boccaccio's source text.
1. He is clearly in love with his own literary creation, Criseyde.
2. He continually voices issues in philosophy drawn from Boethius's *On the Consolations of Philosophy*.
3. He often reflects on the unstable nature of human language, human behavior, and literary texts.
4. He is, perhaps, the first truly "unreliable" narrator in English literature.

III. Philosophical themes.

A. Chaucer draws heavily on Boethius's *On the Consolation of Philosophy* to express the themes of limited human free will and desire in the poem.
1. His narrator frequently reflects on the paradox of free will in human life.
2. His narrator and Troilus reflect on the pitfalls of being reliant on Fortune for personal pleasure or gain.
3. The poem takes as one of its central philosophical themes the inability of people to find reward in earthly achievement—a central theme for Boethius.

B. Chaucer is also interested in the nature of language and linguistic representation.
1. The poem reflects on how human communication often goes wrong.
2. Words are unstable, their meanings arbitrary and conventional, and literary texts are often subject to misinterpretation.
3. The poem thus encodes a philosophy of language, as well as a moral philosophy.

C. Chaucer dedicates the poem to friends at its end.
1. Moral Gower: John Gower, his friend and lawyer, a poet of moral and social criticism.
2. Philosophical Strode: probably Ralph Strode, an Oxford University logician who specialized in theories of language and communication.
3. He also addressed it to Christ.
4. Morality and philosophy, ethics and language, are the two poles for the poem's meaning.

D. We have to consider carefully whether Chaucer is being sincere or ironic in these dedications.

E. The placement of the final statement, or colophon, is significant, but in keeping with medieval tradition.

Essential Reading:
Troilus and Criseyde in Benson, ed., *Riverside Chaucer*.
Neville Coghill, trans., *Troilus and Criseyde*.

Supplementary Reading:
I. Gordon, *The Double Sorrow of Troilus*.
P. Boitani, ed., *The European Tragedy of Troilus*.
J. V. Fleming, *Classical Imitation and Interpretation in Chaucer's "Troilus."*

Questions to Consider:
1. Chaucer's narrator clearly adores Criseyde. Do you? How does the poem's narrative manipulate you into feeling for its characters?
2. Is Troilus a fool, a sincere lover, or a man betrayed?
3. Can anything be said in Pandarus's defense?

Lecture Six

Troilus and Criseyde: History and Fiction

Scope: This lecture looks more closely at *Troilus and Criseyde* to understand Chaucer's controlling interests in the way that history works. In particular, it attends to Chaucer's narrative reflections in the poem on how the passage of time changes language and social habits. It also explores the ways in which Chaucer speculates on just what he thinks his work is about: that is, what the nature of literary fiction is, and how it differs from history. In the course of this lecture, Chaucer's poem will be framed by some discussions from medieval intellectual texts, which inform his discussions and which help us locate Chaucer's project in his time.

Outline

I. Chaucer's sense of history.

   A. Chaucer recognizes that cultures and languages change over time.
   1. The reading of any earlier work of literature is thus necessarily an act of translation.
   2. Chaucer presents himself as a translator of past texts in Book I of the poem, right before Troilus's first lyric outburst.
   3. Chaucer begins Book II of the poem with a sustained reflection on language change and cultural difference.

   B. These reflections may make Chaucer seem less a "medieval" than a Renaissance or even a "modern" writer.
   1. Medieval thinkers tended to see history as figural rather than periodic, more spiritual than temporal, more linear than cyclical.
   2. That is, they believed that history was measured according to certain key moments in spiritual chronology (e.g., creation, fall, incarnation, last judgment), rather than according to changes in cultural periods (e.g., classical antiquity, Dark Ages).
   3. Writers of the fourteenth-century Italian Renaissance, such as Petrarch, began to recognize that languages and cultures do change over time, and Chaucer was clearly influenced by their attitudes.
   4. The Renaissance "invented" history as we know it.

   C. Chaucer sets his poem in the time of the Trojan War; yet, the details of his story are clearly contemporary, late fourteenth-century English ones.
   1. His characters speak and act like contemporary English people.
   2. There are continuous, "anachronistic" references to recent events, writers, and places of interest.
   3. His characters, even though they are supposedly pagan, invoke Christian concepts and even a God.
   4. These kinds of gaps place Chaucer firmly in the "medieval" tradition: they evidence his sense of historical difference as less fully articulated than other Renaissance or modern writers had it.
   5. In fact, we can learn much about the attitudes, reading habits, and social life of Chaucer's contemporaries from reading his poem.

II. Chaucer develops a theory of poetry in *Troilus and Criseyde*. He explores the nature of just what literature is, and is for; what languages it can and should be written in; and what its social purpose may be.

   A. Chaucer develops a vocabulary for describing literary production.
   1. A "poet" is a dead, invariably male, writer who wrote in Latin (e.g., Virgil , Ovid), or in the case of Petrarch, Dante, and Boccaccio, one who wrote in Latin as well as Italian.
   2. A "maker" is a living writer who writes in the vernacular.
   3. Chaucer presents himself as a maker trying to become a poet. This is a central theme for the narrator of *Troilus and Criseyde*.
   4. His concluding remarks in the poem present the problems of being a maker faced with the examples of the poets.
   5. He calls attention to the mutability of the vernacular, both over time (through linguistic change) and over space (through variation in regional dialect).

B. Chaucer calls his poem a "tragedy."
1. This word does not mean a species of dramatic literature, as it does today.
2. Rather, it refers to a specific kind of moral narrative, derived from Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, that describes the fall from grace of a famous or ambitious man.
3. Chaucer associates his poem with this literary heritage, and contrasts it explicitly with the "comedy" of Dante.
4. Thus he aspires to be like the classic poets and also like the greatest vernacular poets (e.g., Dante).

C. Chaucer's figure of Pandarus represents the anti-type of the poetic writer, or maker.
1. Pandarus uses images derived from rhetorical and literary manuals, thus associating his schemes with the techniques of making literary fiction.
2. Pandarus teaches Troilus the art of letter writing, and thus functions as a literary instructor.
3. Pandarus often reads, and mis-reads, works of literature represented in the poem. He thus becomes a kind of bad translator, or bad critic.
4. Pandarus is an *interpres*: an interpreter, but more literally (as the Latin word connoted) a go-between. This concept of the go-between in all its senses extends beyond Pandarus to embrace Chaucer as well.
5. Behind the figure of Pandarus is both a powerful representation and   an equally powerful critique of the literary reader and writer in Chaucer's age (the "write-by-manual" and the poet or "maker").

Essential Reading:

Troilus and Criseyde in Benson, ed., *Riverside Chaucer*.

Neville Coghill, trans., *Troilus and Criseyde*.

Supplementary Reading:

Lee Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History*, chapter 2.

Winthrop Wetherbee, *Chaucer and the Poets*.

Questions to Consider:

1. How does Chaucer's sense of history differ from our own?
2. How do your apprehensions of the medieval world help, or hinder, your understanding and appreciation of this poem?

Lecture Seven
The Canterbury Tales: The General Prologue

Scope: This lecture introduces the student to Chaucer's major and most lasting literary work, *The Canterbury Tales*. It begins at the beginning: with the General Prologue introduction and the portraits of the 29 pilgrims who will make up the tale-telling structure of the pilgrimage. Central to this poem, and to its opening, is a sense of order: what is the proper social relationship among classes and individuals; what is the proper place of humankind in the scheme of creation; what is the poet's relationship to his material; how does one aptly describe a person? These are the questions Chaucer asks and answers in the General Prologue—both by addressing them directly in his narration, and by exemplifying them in the individual portraits of the pilgrims (we will look at three representative portraits).

Outline

I.   The first 18 lines of the General Prologue serve several purposes.
   A.   This famous opening sentence sets the stage for the *Canterbury Tales*.
      1.   It announces the occasion of the poem's story.
      2.   It shows a point of view or focus of attention that leads the reader from the general and cosmic to the local and the English.
      3.   It utilizes all the resources of Chaucer's changing language to present an English event in terms of Latin philosophy and literature and French intellectual culture.
   B.   The sentence, too, is thus an invocation: the "inspiration" of the opening   is both literal and figurative, concerned with both the coming of spring and the coming of literary inspiration to the poet.

II. The General Prologue describes the figures of the pilgrimage.
   A.   The order of the pilgrim portraits reflects the concepts of the social order of late medieval English culture:

   The Nobility
   Knight
   Squire
   Yeoman

   The Clergy
   Prioress
   Nun + 3 Priests
   Monk
   Friar

   The Professions of City and Town
   Merchant
   Clerk
   Franklin
   Haberdasher, Carpenter, Weaver, Dyer, Rug Weaver
   Cook
   Shipman
   Doctor

   The Widow
   Wife of Bath

   Spiritual Brothers
   Parson
   Plowman

   "Agriculturalists"
   Miller
   Manciple
   Reeve

"Grotesques" (carnal "brothers")
Summoner
Pardoner

The Controllers
Narrator
Host

Dramatis personae: 29 Pilgrims + The Host + The Narrator

    B. The portraits are rhetorically structured descriptions of both individuals and social and moral types.
        1. They are organized according to the techniques of medieval literary description.
        2. The portraits tend to be of two kinds: descriptions of internal qualities, or descriptions of external attributes.
        3. Both kinds of descriptions, however, reflect upon each other.

    C. Often, the portraits are satiric, and are designed to raise questions about certain kinds of pursuits (e.g., knighthood and chivalry), certain kinds of institutional practices (e.g., putting women in convents, selling relics and pardons), and certain kinds of human qualities (e.g., love between men and women, the desire for monetary gain).

    D. The portraits can be seen as lenses through which we can read the tales of the tellers.
        1. But we need to ask, first, just who is describing these characters?
        2. How do the portraits say as much about the narrator as about the characters?

III. To answer that question, we look in detail at three portraits:

    A. The Prioress is the head of a convent
        1. Yet, she is described in a highly eroticized manner.
        2. Her eating habits are described in the same terms as those of the teacher of courtesans in the thirteenth century French erotic poem, the *Romance of the Rose*.
        3. Her physical form is of great interest to the narrator. For example, her eyes are described like those of Guinevere in the Arthurian legends.
        4. The Prioress herself is a social creature of aspiration and desire—hardly the individual one might see as head of a convent.

    B. The Monk is a "manly man" and the head of an abbey.
        1. For all his supposed spiritual goals, he is an individual of great appetites.
        2. He is constantly described in terms of food.
        3. The narrator creates, in effect, a portrait in indirect discourse here, a ventriloquizing of the Monk's own words about himself.

    C. The Pardoner is a seller of false relics who claims to be able to give his purchaser time off from Purgatory.
        1. He is the last pilgrim described.
        2. He appears as a grotesque figure; physically disturbing, oddly dressed and decked out.
        3. The narrator says: "I trow he were a gelding or a mare." I believe, he states, he was a eunuch or a homosexual.
        4. The Pardoner's portrait is disturbing for us because it may appear to caricature non-normative sexual identity and because the narrator or Chaucer himself seems so baffled, or perhaps even threatened by this individual, since he has a power with words.
        5. Yet, the Pardoner remains one of the most fascinating of Chaucer's literary creations, and like Pandarus, he comes to represent the anti-type to Chaucer's own sense of what do to with language and how to work with (and work on) an audience.

Essential Reading:

"General Prologue" in Benson, ed., *Riverside Chaucer*.

Supplementary Reading:

Jill Mann, *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire*.

Questions to Consider:

1. What do you think of Chaucer's pilgrims and his narrator? How can you draw the line between sincerity and irony in the portraits of the pilgrims?

2. Does Chaucer provide us with a good or useful way of describing people today? How "realistic" are his portraits to you?

Lecture Eight
The Canterbury Tales: First Fragment

Scope: This lecture describes the major features of the first section of *The Canterbury Tales*: the Tales of the Knight, Miller, Reeve, and Cook. It illustrates how Chaucer's poem proceeds through the process of "quitting," the telling of tales in response to other tales, and how that process in itself constitutes an act of literary and personal criticism. The theme of this so-called First Fragment is language and control: that is, how language comes to degenerate in the course of the sequence of tales, and how all hope of controlling human social and linguistic behavior ultimately fails in the face of individual desire, aggression, anger, and wit. Finally, this lecture explores some of the ways in which Chaucer (or his pilgrim narrators) is funny: where humor goes right and where it goes wrong.

Outline

I.   The First Fragment consists of the Tales of the Knight, Miller, Reeve, and the unfinished Cook's Tale. It forms both a structural unit within the tales, and a manuscript unit in the texts of Chaucer's work (i.e., it circulates in manuscripts of the Tales as a fixed unit).

   A. It embodies the principle of "quitting," of tale-telling as a response to earlier tales and, thus, as a form of literary and social criticism.

      1. The Knight tells a classically inspired story about two heroes in love with the same woman, and with a sense of the classical gods as meting out judgment.

      2. The Miller interrupts the Host's plan for the Monk to tell a tale, and offers a ribald story of two Oxford men in love with a carpenter's young wife, with a sense of poetic justice and domestic detail controlling the judgments on the characters.

      3. The Reeve tells a mean-spirited story about two Cambridge students from the North of England in love with a Miller's daughter, rich with regional dialect jokes and with a spiteful edge to it.

      4. The Cook begins a story about London prostitutes (but his tale is never finished).

   B. These tales illustrate a progression and an overarching sense of the plan of the *Canterbury Tales*.

      1. The Knight offers an initial statement of social orthodoxy.

      2. The Host tries to sustain that orthodoxy by requesting the Monk to tell the tale.

      3. The Miller challenges that orthodoxy.

      4. The Reeve attempts to constrain or contain that challenge, but fails.

      5. The Reeve's Tale and the Cook's fragment illustrate how the argument dissipates into squabbling and vulgarity.

   C. These are stories about language and reality.

      1. Their theme is how language may be said to humanize or dehumanize individuals.

      2. There are political and social dimensions to Chaucer's opening group of tales, which reflect on the upheavals of Chaucer's own day (especially the memory of the Peasant's Revolt of 1381).

      3. The dialect humor of the Reeve's Tale, in particular, illustrates how people's language can be a mark of social, regional, and moral quality.

      4. And, finally, all of the tales rely on proverbs to cinch arguments or distill moral advice. Are these proverbs really applicable to the stories told, or are they illustrations of how Chaucer's tellers in effect misunderstand the tales he has them tell?

II. Humor in the *Canterbury Tales*.

   A. What is funny about the Miller's Tale?

      1. The Miller's Tale is funny in the way in which it inverts hierarchies and subverts expectations.

      2. The tale works through a series of oppositions that undermine social and moral expectations.

      3. Bodies themselves are inverted, as the characters in the tale wind up kissing the wrong parts.

      4. Speech is subverted, as the request for a word of love is greeted only with a fart, and as the whole story descends into laughter.

      5. This is a story, in short, about scatology and eschatology: about the funniness of human dirtiness and the spiritual presence of redemption.

B. What is funny about the Reeve's Tale?
1. The Reeve's Tale tries to be funny, but in the end is only mean spirited.
2. It illustrates perfectly the character of the Reeve himself, a "slender choleric man," in the words of his General Prologue portrait.
3. It is a tale about sex, lies, and money.
4. People are hurt deeply in the Reeve's Tale, whereas in the Miller's Tale they are only hurt superficially (i.e., rear ends get scalded and bones get broken).

C. These initial stories illustrate how Chaucer can be a poet of what he calls both "sentence" (moral or intellectual content) and "solaas" (entertainment or pleasure).

Essential Reading:

The tales of the Knight, Miller, Reeve, and Cook in Benson, ed., *Riverside Chaucer*.

Supplementary Reading:

Donald R. Howard, *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales*.

Winthrop Wetherbee, *Chaucer: The Canterbury Tales*.

Questions to Consider:

1. Do you find the "The Miller's Tale" and "The Reeve's Tale" funny? What is different about their senses of humor?
2. Try reading "The Knight's Tale." How does its great length become important to the narrative itself? Is it stately or just boring?

Lecture Nine
The Wife of Bath

Scope: This lecture presents Chaucer's Wife of Bath as a central character in the Canterbury Tales. Her General Prologue portrait, her own long Prologue to her tale, and her tale itself, come together to describe a lusty, willful woman. But they also contribute to an understanding of what Chaucer sees as some central problems of relationships among men and women. The Wife exercises the power of her body over both the world of experience and the books she reads. In her constant references to her own physical form (and her own private parts, in fact), she makes all the intellectual activities of reading, interpreting, and arguing into physically responsive actions of her own body. She has been taken by some modern critics as a proto-feminist; by others as Chaucer in drag. Whatever she is, she is one of the most memorable characters in all of literature.

Outline

I. The General Prologue portrait shows the Wife of Bath as a character whose physical attributes carry a thematic importance.
   A. She is deaf: not only hard of hearing, but, as we will see in her Prologue and Tale, deaf to other people's opinions, to the meanings of literary texts, and to any form of criticism.
   B. She is a cloth maker: a weaver, not just of textiles but of tales. She represents what for the Middle Ages was one of the great controlling plays on words for literature: textile (something woven from thread) and text (something woven of words). Both words come from Latin *texere*, to weave.
   C. She is a large, powerful physical presence; everything is just a bit too big.
   D. She knows the "remedies of love," a reference to Ovid's *Remedia Amoris*, a work of classical Latin erotic instruction.
   E. She knows the "olde daunce," a reference to a central medieval metaphor for love-making.

II. The long autobiographical prologue to the Wife's Tale reveals much about her character.
   A. This is a story of someone who revels in experience.
      1. The experience of everyday life is central to the Wife.
      2. She constantly recounts her woes of marriage.
      3. In particular, she recalls the relationship with her fifth husband, a clerk named Jankyn.
   B. But it is also a story of someone who revels in citing authorities.
      1. The Prologue is full of references to texts.
      2. The Wife retells stories drawn from Ovid, for example, the story of King Midas and his donkey's ears.
      3. She makes the centerpiece of her account of Jankyn the description of his book of wicked wives.
      4. The Wife describes how she tore pages from that book, and how Jankyn beat her.
   C. But, this is also a story about what she calls "maistrie" (mastery) in marriage.
      1. Her argument is that the woman should be the master of a relationship.
      2. But also that she should cede that mastery to the man, to create in him the false impression that he is the one really in control.
   D. The Prologue is very long (over 850 lines).
      1. Its length is due largely to the Wife's constant retelling of stories she has read, and to her cataloguing of the contents of books.
      2. But it is very long because this length—this dilation—is a major theme for the Wife.
      3. This theme is part of who the Wife is: someone who defers the pleasure of the ending, someone who in her old age and physical deformity can only give pleasure (to herself and others) in words rather than actions.
      4. We can also think of the Wife of Bath as probably being barren of children, and therefore one who gives birth to stories.

III. By comparison, her brief tale itself (only about 400 lines long) is about quick action and sexual tension.

   A. Its plot concerns a knight of King Arthur's court who rapes a young woman.
      1. He is sentenced to come up with the answer to the question: what do women want in marriage?
      2. He is given a year to come up with the answer.
      3. If he doesn't get it, he will be killed.

   B. The knight meets a horrible old woman who promises to tell him the answer, but only on the condition that he marry her.
      1. He agrees, gets the answer (i.e., just what the Wife had said earlier, mastery in marriage), and is saved.
      2. But when he marries the old woman, she turns into a beautiful young lady on their wedding night.

   C. This tale is a fantasy—perhaps a fantasy of what the Wife of Bath herself would like to be (i.e., an old woman magically transformed into a beautiful young one).
      1. But it is also Chaucer's fantasy, for it tells a story of how story-telling itself can save someone's life, how fiction can make the horrible seem beautiful.
      2. The entire performance of the Wife of Bath should be seen, perhaps, not as a true, "woman's" voice (either for the Middle Ages or the modern age) but as what Chaucer the man and poet thinks women want: i.e., to be the real poets of our world.

Essential Reading:

Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale in Benson, ed., *Riverside Chaucer*.

Supplementary Reading:

Carolyn Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*.

E. T. Hansen, *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender*.

Questions to Consider:

1. Does the Wife of Bath seem like a "real" woman to you? How, or how not?
2. Try going back to some of her sources: e.g., Ovid's story of Midas from the *Metamorphoses*. How does the Wife twist her source material around to suit her (or Chaucer's) purposes?

Lecture Ten
The Pardoner

Scope: In this lecture, we meet the Pardoner in full—along with the Wife of Bath, perhaps Chaucer's most memorable, infamous, challenging, and perhaps disturbing creation. The Pardoner, like the Wife, prefaces his tale with a long rambling autobiographical Prologue, rich with allusions to literary and biblical sources. Like the Wife, too, he is a creature of the body, one whose physical presence constantly gets in the way of what his audience will hear and see. But, unlike the Wife, the status of that body is always in doubt. Is he, as the narrator of the General Prologue asks, a "gelding" or a "mare" (a eunuch or a homosexual)? Is he a drunkard, too, and is his story of the revelers at the tavern also a story about the link between inebriation and inspiration? And just why does his final address to the Host bring forth such a wild, angry, and obscene response? In asking and attempting to answer these questions, we will confront the very essence of Chaucer's literary art itself, and its power to move, anger, and productively disturb us.

Outline

I. The Pardoner presents himself as a great preacher who uses his eloquent skills only for the purpose of deluding his audience and gaining wealth.
   A. He is a seller of false relics, as we saw in the General Prologue.
      1. He comes last in the General Prologue descriptions.
      2. He is presented as a physical grotesque.
      3. His status as a "gelding" or a "mare" may have less to do with precisely identifying his sexual status or his gender identity than it may have to do with the Chaucerian narrator's attempt to describe him as the most alien kind of person he can imagine. Such a line, in the end, may say as much about the narrator as about the Pardoner: or more precisely, may say as much about what the narrator interprets the Pardoner to be as about what he actually is.
   B. Thus, the Pardoner is a creature of indeterminacy.
      1. He is, in fact, modeled on the figure of "False Semblance" from the thirteenth-century French poem, *The Romance of the Rose*.
      2. And the Pardoner himself stresses his skills at deception in his Prologue.

II. The Pardoner tells a tale that is similarly about deception.
   A. It is an old story of three revelers who hear about "Death" coming into town.
      1. Fools that they are, they think "Death" is a real person, rather than an idea or a concept (or in the historical terms of the late fourteenth century, the Black Plague, often referred to simply as "The Death").
      2. They set out to kill Death.
      3. They encounter an old man, who tells them they can find Death under a tree.
      4. What the revelers in fact find is a stash of gold coins.
      5. In the end, they all wind up killing each other over the money, and ironically, really do find death itself (this plot, by the way, later formed the basis for John Huston's move, *Treasure of the Sierra Madre*).
   B. But central to this story is not just its moral but the way the Pardoner uses it.
      1. He is right: he is a great tale-teller and can tell a great moral tale.
      2. But he uses the story to illustrate to the pilgrims on the way to Canterbury just how he deceives his audience.
      3. He then turns to the Host, and asks him to purchase one of his relics.
      4. But the Host declines angrily, threatening to cut off the Pardoner's testicles and enshrine them "in an hogges turd."

III. The Host's anger and his violent obscenity are immensely disturbing.
   A. If the Pardoner is, in fact, a "gelding," then the Host's threat, "I wolde I hadde thy coillons in myn hond" (line 952), is cruelly insulting.
      1. The Host, too, had remarked in anger:

> Thou woldest make me kisse thyn olde breech,
> And swere it were a relyk of a seint,
> Though it were with thy fundament depeint! (lines 948–50).

    2. Here, what is at stake is the way in which the Pardoner is a profound threat to the amity of the Canterbury pilgrimage, and even to the order of the *Canterbury Tales* itself.

B. The Pardoner represents, I suggest, a negative version of Chaucer's poem, and his prologue and tale recapitulate much of the overall pattern of the *Canterbury Tales*, except from this malevolent perspective.

    1. First, the Pardoner reviews his calling, reminding us of the General Prologue portrait.

    2. Then, he reflects on the nature of literary intention and the need for moral correction—two concepts central to the *Canterbury Tales* and, in fact, to Chaucer's project as a whole.

    3. His miniature sermon against drunkenness, in his Prologue, recalls the drunken interruption of the Miller and the world "full tikel" of the earlier tale.

    4. In the Pardoner's Tale itself, the revelers have to decide who will go into town after they find the gold. They draw straws, "cut," which explicitly recalls the way in which the Pilgrimage tale-tellers were selected at the end of the General Prologue.

    5. Finally, when the Pardoner turns to the Host, he says, "Unbokele anon thy purs" (945), unbuckle right away your purse; a direct recollection of what the Host himself had said right after the Knight's Tale and before the Miller had broken in: "unbokeleed is the male," the purse has been opened up—i.e., the game has begun.

C. In these echoes, the Pardoner comes to represent a kind of anti-Chaucer, a figure of marginal, grotesque otherness that Chaucer can use as a foil for his own self-presentation and his own authorial identity.

    1. At the very end of the tale, the Knight must intercede and get the Pardoner and the Host, quite literally, to kiss and make up.

    2. Here, Chaucer has his first tale-teller and his highest representative of the social hierarchy to get the game going again and restore order to a literary interchange that Chaucer has seemingly permitted to go wildly out of control.

IV. In the end, the Pardoner is important because, much like the Wife of Bath, he challenges our modern notions of sexual identity and literary and social propriety.

A. He enables, like the Wife, Chaucer to do things (to say things, to take stances, to present materials) that he could not do in his own voice, or even in the voice of a more traditional or respectable character.

B. In short, he enables Chaucer to look at the dark side of human nature, to plumb the depths of cruelty and avarice, and just before the end, to pull back—in the words of the Knight, to "lat us laughe and pleye."

Essential Reading:

Pardoner's Prologue and Tale in Benson, ed., *Riverside Chaucer*.

Supplementary Reading:

Donald R. Howard, *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales*.

Questions to Consider:

1. Does the Pardoner's homosexuality matter—to the tale, to his prologue, to you?

2. What would you do if you were in the Host's position at the end of the Pardoner's Tale?

Lecture Eleven

"God's Plenty": The Variety of *The Canterbury Tales*

Scope: To this point, we have looked closely at only a few selections of Chaucer's great work. This lecture surveys the range of the *Canterbury Tales*, its tales of "sentence" and of "solaas," to illustrate the richness and variety of Chaucer's literary imagination. It also points the student toward some particular problems and perspectives in Chaucer's work, in order to provoke him or her to read more in Chaucer and appreciate the power of his verse and the compelling quality of the worlds he has created.

Outline

I. Looking back over the *Canterbury Tales*, we can see that Chaucer left the work in fragments when he died in 1400.

  A. The order of the tales is largely based on the order of a couple of early manuscripts from the first quarter of the fifteenth century.
    1. Modern scholars like this order, because it gives a dramatic scope to the tales.
    2. It begins with the "First Fragment" of Knight, Miller, Reeve, and Cook.
    3. It then progresses through the Man of Law, Wife of Bath, Friar and   Summoner; the Clerk and Merchant; the Squire and Franklin; the Physician and Pardoner; and then through a string of tales associated in the early manuscripts together.
    4. The tales of the Shipman, Prioress, of Chaucer himself (the "Tale of Sir Thopas" and the "Melibee"), the "Monk's Tale" and the "Nun's Priest's Tale" work as a literary unit (known by scholars as Fragment VII), each presented in a different genre.
    5. The tales of the Second Nun and the Canon's Yeoman usually follow.
    6. Finally, there is the "Manciple's Tale" and the Parson's prose sermon, followed by Chaucer's Retraction.

  B. This order creates some dynamic relationships among the tales, and gives to the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole a movement to spiritual resolution, as the pilgrims approach Canterbury and the Parson gives his moral sermon. For example, many of the later groups of tales move by "quitting."
    1. The Summoner responds directly to the Friar, just as the Reeve responded directly to the Miller.
    2. The Franklin responds directly to the Squire, even to the point of interrupting his long and rambling story.
    3. Chaucer the narrator is asked to tell a story, and tells the bad Tale of Sir Thopas (really a parody of romance adventure). It is so bad, that the Host interrupts, claiming that the story "is nat woorth a toord," and begging Chaucer to tell something else. Chaucer responds with the long prose allegory, The Tale of Melibee.
    4. Then the Monk tells a long collection of tragic stories, only to be interrupted by the Knight, and the Nun's Priest is then invited to tell a tale, capping off Fragment VII.

II. Chaucer incorporates virtually all the subjects and all the genres of his time in the *Canterbury Tales*.

  A. There are tales of comic ribaldry.
    1. "The Shipman's Tale," like the Miller's and the Reeve's, is in the genre of the *fabliau*, a narrative form borrowed from the French which concerns middle or lower class people engaging in farcical sexual relationships and episodes of mistaken identity.
    2. The Tales of the Friar and Summoner are satiric portraits of the excesses of churchmen and the ways in which they take advantage of people sexually and commercially. They are known as "anti-fraternal" satires.
    3. "The Tale of Sir Thopas" is a parody of what is called "tail-rhyme romance," an adventure story told in stanzas.

  B. There are tales of noble or idealized women. All four of these tales are told in "rhyme royal," the seven-line stanza that Chaucer used for his most elevated courtly poetry (*Troilus and Criseyde* is in rhyme royal, as was "Truth").
    1. The Man of Law tells the story of Constance, who endures great hardship to become a Christian saint.

2. The Clerk tells the tale of Griselda, who patiently endures the testing of her husband.
3. The Prioress tells a story of the miraculous power of the Virgin Mary.
4. The Second Nun recounts the life of St. Cecilia.

C. There are beast fables,
1. The great Nun's Priest's Tale about Chauntecleer and Pertelote is a story in which little happens, except that the birds argue about the nature of love and the meaning of dreams and they both escape the wiles of the barnyard fox.
2. By contrast, the "Manciple's Tale" is a sour lesson about a talking crow and the dangers of improper speech.

D. And there are moral lectures.
1. "The Melibee" is a prose allegory about the need for prudence in social and ethical life.
2. "The Physician's Tale" is a terrifying object lesson in parental obedience.
3. The "Canon's Yeoman's Tale" is a story about the dangers of avarice and, in particular, the sham of alchemy.
4. "The Parson's Tale" is really a long prose sermon on the seven deadly sins. It may represent the ultimate "quitting" tale, responding to the entirety of the *Canterbury Tales.*

III. The point about the *Canterbury Tales*, as Chaucer himself had said in the Prologue to the Miller's Tale, is that there is something for everyone. Chaucer's injunction here "to turn the leaf" bears repeating, as it is both an explanation of his task and an invitation to read his poetry as we see fit.

Essential Reading:

As much of the *Canterbury Tales* as you like, in Benson, ed., *Riverside Chaucer*.

Supplementary Reading:

Donald Howard, *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales*.

Winthrop Wetherbee, *Chaucer, The Canterbury Tales*.

Questions to Consider:

1. Turn the leaf: find the Canterbury Tale that you think best. Will it win Harry Bailly's prize? Why?
2. Find the worst tale; what makes it bad (or what makes it fail) for you?

Lecture Twelve
Chaucer's Living Influence

Scope: Ever since his poetry started circulating after his death, Chaucer had an impact on his readers and, more generally, on English literary history. The injunction at the close of the Prologue to "The Miller's Tale" was taken often as an injunction by later readers to select and edit the stories. Chaucer's importance in the fifteenth century was so great that, by the close of that century and the introduction of printing into England, he was one of the very first writers printed—by William Caxton, England's first printer. Caxton praised Chaucer in his edition of the *Canterbury Tales* (1484) as both a refiner of the English language and as a master of literary description. Chaucer came to be understood as the "father" of English poetry. At the close of the sixteenth century, Edmund Spenser and William Shakespeare both turned to Chaucer's poetry for inspiration and for literary source material. In the seventeenth century, John Dryden modernized several of Chaucer's poems, calling attention to the richness and variety of their subject matter. In the eighteenth century, William Wordsworth also wrote modernized versions of several of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales. Nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholars, critics, and teachers have made Chaucer the figure who begins English literature. But Chaucer himself provided the terms for that later reception and literary history, and this course of lectures closes with both an invitation and an injunction for the student to return to Chaucer as the founder of English vernacular literary culture itself.

Outline

I. Chaucer is, first and foremost, considered the "purifier" of the English language.

    A. Chaucer's early readers recognized the large number of French and Latin loan words in his language.
- 1. These words were considered "ornate" and "embellishments."
- 2. Yet they were also seen as an attempt to transform English into a language as "noble" or as "pure" as Latin.

    B. Chaucer's early readers also noticed how Chaucer used the techniques of medieval rhetoric to create what was called "ornate eloquence."
- 1. His imitators and followers in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries followed what they saw as Chaucer's examples by creating a style of poetry full of polysyllabic words of Latin or French origin, and also full of long elaborate sentences and addresses.
- 2. This style was called "aureate diction," or golden speech.
- 3. Its proponents were poets such as John Lydgate and Stephen Hawes, who considered themselves followers of their "master" Chaucer.
- 4. This highly elaborate diction stands behind many of the most important experiments in English verse in the Renaissance: for example, Gavin Douglas's translation of the *Aeneid* into Chaucerian verse (1513), and later the conscious archaic language of Edmund Spenser in his *Shepherd's Calendar* (1579).

    C. Later readers and poets considered Chaucer the "well of English undefiled."
- 1. Spenser writes in the *Faerie Queene* of "Dan Chaucer, well of Englishe vndefyled," and later calls him "Dan Geffrey (in whose gentle spright/The pure well head of Poesie did dwell)."
- 2. John Dryden considered Chaucer to have regularized English verse and rhyme patterns, making it possible to write fluent poetry in the vernacular for the first time.
- 3. Samuel Johnson in the *Dictionary* of 1755 calls Chaucer "illustrious," and notes that he "may perhaps, with great justice, be stiled the first of our versifers who wrote poetically."

    D. In fact, to Chaucer we owe the introduction of many words of Latin and Romance origin into English literature, and lexicographers recognize that Chaucer did augment the English vocabulary greatly (as Shakespeare would two centuries later).

II. Chaucer was also considered a great teacher of morality and social behavior.

    A. Manuals of courtesy and proper public behavior (which proliferated in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries) often drew on Chaucer's examples and on his work for the details of their instruction.

1. The *Book of Curtesye* (published by Caxton in 1479) advises young readers to read his works, which are "clere in sentence"; that is, full of high sententiousness or moral weight.
2. Chaucer's poetry was recopied and later printed, marketed, and sold for its proverbial wisdom and moral content.
3. Thomas Speght, in his edition of Chaucer's works of 1602, explicitly marks the "Proverbes and Sentences" in his edition.

B. Chaucer's poem "Truth" was highly valued as a source of moral instruction.
1. Not only was it the most widely copied poem in manuscripts, as we have seen, but it was one of the first short poems to be printed.
2. The poem is continually reprinted throughout the Renaissance.
3. Sir Thomas Wyatt was deeply indebted to this poem in many of his moral verses (especially his well-known, great poetic letter of counsel to his friend, "Myne own John Poins").

C. *Troilus and Criseyde*, too, was read throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries as a manual of courtly behavior.
1. Henry VIII, in particular, enjoyed the poem, and commissioned a play (now lost) based upon it. It was titled *Troilus and Pandar*.
2. The figure of Pandarus became a model—both positive and negative—for courtiers throughout the Renaissance in England.
3. There is much evidence, too, that men and women in England imitated the love letters of Troilus and Criseyde when they wrote to each other, and thus modeled their own real love affairs on the language of Chaucer's fictional characters.

D. Many of Chaucer's most morally sententious of the *Canterbury Tales*, moreover, were excerpted and copied and read separately from the work. In fact, the most popular of his tales in the two centuries after his death were the "Clerk's Tale," the "Tale of Melibee," and the "Prioress's Tale."

III. Chaucer was considered the "father" of English poetry.
A. His fifteenth-century followers considered him to have originated English poetry itself.
1. They made him both the father and the imaginary "poet laureate" for English literature.
2. They wrote about themselves as children before his paternal authority.

B. Later Renaissance and modern readers also considered Chaucer to have essentially invented the major forms and language of English poetry.

C. Many later writers also called him the English Virgil, and associated his works with the founding writers of Western literature.

IV. Chaucer's works stimulated the writing of much later literature.
A. Edmund Spenser drew on the "Squire's Tale" for the plot of Book IV of his *Faerie Queene*.
B. Shakespeare often drew on Chaucer's works.
1. *Troilus and Cressida* reworks much of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde.*
2. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* draws on the story of Theseus and Hyppolita from Chaucer's "Knight's Tale," while the play performed by the rustics draws on the story of Pyramus and Thisbe as Chaucer had presented it in his *Legend of Good Women*.

C. Dryden recast *Troilus and Criseyde*, by way of Shakespeare, and modernized several of the *Canterbury Tales*.

D. Even Milton—author of tracts on marriage and divorce and portraitist of the first marriage among people in his *Paradise Lost*—was a reader of Chaucer.
1. Milton noted in his commonplace book: "The discommoditie of marriage. See Chaucer, marchants tale and wife of Baths prologue."
2. Milton also read through much of Chaucer and alludes to his writings throughout his own work.

E. The eighteenth century valued Chaucer's descriptions of everyday life.
1. Thomas Morell wrote in 1737, "So lively are Chaucer's Descriptions, that only to read them is to carry Life back again, as it were, 300 years."
2. Much of eighteenth-century English poetry returns to Chaucer for its descriptive flavor.

V. Chaucer's work did stimulate a new conception of English literature and literary history.
   A. The structure of "quitting" in the *Canterbury Tales* is really the structure of literary history itself.
      1. Writers often respond to other author's works.
      2. They seek to "quit," in effect, their predecessors, and literary history works over time much like the pattern of the tale-telling in the *Canterbury Tales*.
   B. Chaucer praises other writers, notably Petrarch, for their eloquence, their learning, and their technique. These terms of praise became the models for all later forms of literary criticism.

VI. Chaucer is central to the modern school curriculum; but more than that, he should be central to our notion of literature itself.
   A. Reading Chaucer today takes us back to a carefully described world of 600 years ago.
      1. His portraits remain vivid.
      2. His political resonances, when we can recover them, are as pointed as any social satire written since.
   B. But Chaucer also provokes us today to ask the same questions he asks in his poetry:
      1. What is the place of poetry in society?
      2. How does literature bring people together into a community, whether it be harmonious or discordant?
      3. How do we cope with individuals whom society excludes or marginalizes? Indeed, what is normative behavior in society?
      4. How can the magic of the literary imagination transform base experience into compelling fantasy?
   C. These are the questions asked by all great literature, and these lectures invite the student to return to Chaucer anew: to read him, as it were, again for the very first time.

Essential Reading:

Seth Lerer, *Chaucer and His Readers*.

Derek Brewer, *Chaucer, the Critical Heritage*.

Supplementary Reading:

Alice Miskimin, *The Renaissance Chaucer*.

E. T. Donaldson, *The Swan and the Well*.

Questions to Consider (in addition to the questions raised at the close of the lecture):

1. What impact has Chaucer had on modern literature as you experience it?

2. How, for example, do certain works begin in April (e.g., T. S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*, or George Orwell's *1984*), and how are these references to Chaucer's opening of the *Canterbury Tales*—and in turn to the place of these works in literary history?

Timeline

c. 480–524 .... Boethius, Italian philosopher, wrote *On the Consolations of Philosophy* (524), which Chaucer translated and used widely in his poetry.

mid-thirteenth century .... *Roman de la Rose* composed by Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun; this Old French poem was translated in part by Chaucer and influenced his poetry.

1265–1325 .... Dante, Italian poet, author of the *Divine Comedy*, which Chaucer knew and which influenced his poetry.

1340 .... Geoffrey Chaucer probably born.

1348 .... Black Plague hits England.

1357 .... First recorded mention of Geoffrey Chaucer in the household of the Countess of Ulster, wife of Prince Lionel.

1359 .... Chaucer attends wedding of John of Gaunt and Blanche of Lancaster; John of Gaunt becomes Duke of Lancaster; Chaucer serves in French war under Prince Lionel.

1360 .... Chaucer captured in France and ransomed by King Edward III.

1366 .... Chaucer travels to Spain; first mention of Phillipa Chaucer (his wife and the sister of John of Gaunt's mistress).

1367 .... Chaucer enters the service of Edward III.

1368 .... Death of Blanche of Lancaster; Chaucer writes *Book of the Duchess* to commemorate her (probably soon after her death).

1370 .... Chaucer on mission to France with John of Gaunt.

1372 .... Phillipa's sister, Katherine Swynford, bears a son to John of Gaunt. Chaucer leaves for Italy.

1373 .... Chaucer returns to England; likely date of birth for Thomas Chaucer, Chaucer's first son.

1370s .... Chaucer is probably composing the *Parliament of Foules* and short ballads and lyric poems during this decade.

1377 .... Chaucer again in France; death of Edward III and ascension of Richard II (then 10 years old) to throne.

1378 .... Chaucer in France and again to Italy.

1380 .... May 1, Chaucer released from charge of *raptus* by Cecily of Champain.

1381 .... Peasant's Revolt (late May–early June), uprising of agricultural workers and some small craftsmen against royal authority, especially in regards to taxation; the defining political upheaval of Chaucer's time; mentioned explicitly in Chaucer's "Nun's Priests Tale," and probably informs the drama of his "Miller's Tale."

1385 .... Chaucer appointed justice of the peace for Kent.

1386 .... Chaucer re-appointed justice of the peace; Chaucer elected Member of Parliament from Kent.

1389 .... Richard II reaches majority and assumes full power as King; Chaucer named clerk of the King's works.

1380s	Chaucer probably begins writing *Canterbury Tales*; probably writes *Troilus and Criseyde* and translates Boethius's *On the Consolations of Philosophy*; writes short poems to friends.
1390	Chaucer receives commissions as clerk of the works, among others to build scaffolding for a tournament at Smithfield.
1391	Chaucer no longer clerk of works. Throughout the 1390s, he will receive a series of annuities (i.e., annual payments) for various services rendered to the king.
1396	John of Gaunt marries Kathryn Swynford, Chaucer's sister-in-law.
1399	Richard II deposed by Henry Bolingbroke, who becomes Henry IV. Henry doubles Chaucer's annuity; Chaucer signs 53-year lease on a tenement near Westminster Abbey.
1390s	Chaucer writes the rest of the surviving *Canterbury Tales*; writes shorter poems to his friends; writes a short poem to Henry IV in 1399.
1400	Chaucer dies; October 25 is cited as date of his death on his tombstone in Westminster Abbey (NB: the stone is erected in 1556).
1410s–20s	Earliest surviving manuscripts of the *Canterbury Tales* are produced. Throughout the fifteenth century, manuscripts of Chaucer's poetry are copied and circulated.
1479	First publication of Chaucer's poetry in print by William Caxton, England's first printer.
1484	Republication by Caxton of improved text of *Canterbury Tales*.
1532	First edition of the *Complete Works* of Chaucer, edited by William Thynne.

Glossary

Here are some important Middle English words that Chaucer uses, together with some central concepts for studying his poetry.

alliteration: the repetition of the initial consonant or vowel sounds of words in sequence, often for literary effect. Old English poetry uses alliteration, however, as its principle of organization.

aureate diction: the term used to describe the language of fifteenth-century poetry written after Chaucer. It connotes a vocabulary of polysyllabic words derived from Latin and French, often very learned and esoteric.

dream poetry: a genre of poetry, popular in the Middle Ages, in which the narrator   falls asleep and has a dream (often a conversation among people or inanimate objects or animals), the content and record of which constitute the poem itself.

earnest: a Middle English word (paired with *game*) that connotes seriousness of style or subject matter.

frame-tale narrative: a form of story telling in which individual tales or stories are framed by a larger, narrative premise. *The Canterbury Tales* is a frame-tale narrative.

game: a Middle English word (paired with *earnest*) that connotes entertaining style or subject matter. It can also refer to the dalliances of love, witty exchange, or play in general.

gelding: a Middle English word meaning a castrated stallion; used in the Pardoner's General Prologue portrait to describe him as, perhaps, a eunuch.

iambic pentameter: a line of verse with five stresses and ten syllables, where the stress patterns are made up of paired unstressed and stressed syllables. Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* is written in iambic pentameter.

lexis: the vocabulary of a given language.

mare: a Middle English word meaning a female horse; used in the Pardoner's General Prologue portrait to describe him as a homosexual.

Middle English: the form of the vernacular spoken and written in England from about the middle of the eleventh century until the end of the fifteenth.

morphology: the forms of words which indicate grammatical relationships in a given language (for example, case endings, or endings that signal the plural).

Old English: the form of the vernacular spoken and written in England from about the middle of the seventh century until the middle of the eleventh century. A branch of the older Germanic languages, it is highly inflected and grammatically complex.

phonology: the system of sounds in a given language.

quitting: the Middle English word for requiting, paying back, answering, or recasting. Chaucer's characters in the *Canterbury Tales* use the term to describe how they answer one tale with another.

sentence: a Middle English word (paired with *solaas*) that connotes philosophically deep or morally rich narrative; also connotes the style of moral or philosophical discourse.

solaas: a Middle English word (paired with *sentence*) that connotes pleasant entertainment or mirthful literary narrative.

syntax: the ways in which words are ordered in sentences in a given language to create meaningful utterances.

sothfastnesse: a Middle English word that means stability, assuredness, and moral as well as cosmic order.

tikelness: a Middle English word that means instability, often in a moral or social sense.

Biographical Notes

Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–75). Italian author, writer of many works that influenced Chaucer, including *Il Filostrato* (which became the basis of *Troilus and Criseyde).*

Boethius (c.480–524). Italian philosopher; wrote *On the Consolations of Philosophy* which Chaucer translated and used throughout his poetry.

William Caxton (d.1491). England's first printer, printed Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and several other works in 1479 and again in 1484.

Geoffrey Chaucer (c.1340–1400). English poet, author of the *Canterbury Tales*, *Troilus and Criseyde*, and other major works of Middle English literature. Royal and public servant.

Dante Alighieri (1265–1325). Italian poet, author of the *Divine Comedy*, which Chaucer knew and which influenced his poetry.

Edward III (1312 – 1377) King of England, reigned 1327–77; patron of Chaucer.

John of Gaunt (1340–99). Younger son of Edward III, Duke of Lancaster, one of the richest men in late-medieval England. Had as his mistress, and later wife, the sister of Chaucer's wife, Phillipa. Major patron of Chaucer, who wrote *The Book of the Duchess* in memory of his first wife, Blanche.

John Gower (c.1325–1408). Poet, lawyer, and friend of Chaucer. Wrote poems in English, French and Latin. Chaucer dedicated *Troilus and Criseyde* to him and to Ralph Strode.

Stephen Hawes (d.c.1523). Early sixteenth-century poet and imitator of Chaucer.

Henry IV (1367–1413). King of England, son of John of Gaunt, usurped throne from Richard II in 1399; provides Chaucer with sizable annuity.

John Lydgate (c.1370–1451). Fifteenth-century poet and imitator of Chaucer.

Francis Petrarch (1304–74). Italian author, writer of many works that influenced Chaucer, including his translation (into Latin) of Boccaccio's Italian version of the Tale of Griselda (which became the basis of Chaucer's Clerk's Tale), and of love sonnets, one of which is incorporated in translation into *Troilus and Criseyde*. Chaucer may have met Petrarch on one of his journeys to Italy.

Richard II (1367 – 1400) King of England, reigned 1377–99; patron of Chaucer, who served as his clerk of works.

John Shirley (c.1366–1456). Fifteenth-century scribe and book collector; was responsible for producing manuscripts of many of Chaucer's works.

Ralph Strode   Late fourteenth-century Oxford logician and philosopher; most likely the "philosophical Strode" to whom Chaucer dedicates *Troilus and Criseyde*.

Wat Tyler (d.1381). One of the leaders of the Peasant's Revolt of 1381.

Sir Philip de Vache   Late fourteenth-century English courtier and friend of Chaucer; conjectured dedicatee of the short poem known as "Truth."

Bibliography

There are many editions and modern translations of Chaucer's poetry. The standard current edition of his works, in Middle English, is Larry D. Benson, ed., *The Riverside Chaucer* (Boston, 1987). For those daunted by Chaucer's Middle English, *The Canterbury Tales* is available in a readable modern English version by Neville Coghill in a Penguin paperback (Baltimore, 1952); *Troilus and Criseyde* is also available in a modern version by Coghill, also in a Penguin paperback (Baltimore, 1971).

There are two good, readable biographies of Chaucer currently available:

Donald R. Howard, *Chaucer* (New York, 1987).

Derek Pearsall, *The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer* (Oxford, 1992).

The raw materials for studying Chaucer's life are collected in:

Martin M. Crow and Clair C. Olson, *Chaucer Life-Records* (Chicago, 1966).

The best guides to Chaucer's times are:

Derek Brewer, *Chaucer in His Time* (London, 1973).

Roger S. Loomis, *A Mirror of Chaucer's World* (Princeton, 1965).

Chaucer's language can be best studied through the following works on the history of English:

A. C. Baugh and Thomas Cable, *A History of English* (4th edition, New York, 1994).

Norman Davis, *A Chaucer Glossary* (Oxford, 1979).

Seth Lerer, *The History of the English Language* (Teaching Company, 1998).

Literary criticism of Chaucer is complex and often directed at college undergraduates, graduate students, and professors of literature. Among the most interesting and readable of recent critical books, however, are the following:

J. A. Burrow, *Ricardian Poetry* (New Haven, 1974), a study of the poetry of England at the end of the fourteenth century.

Piero Boitani, ed., *The European Tragedy of Troilus* (Oxford, 1989), a collection of essays on the many versions in European literature of the Troilus and Criseyde story.

Carolyn Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* (Wisconsin, 1989), an approach to Chaucer's poetry stressing feminist interpretations.

E. Talbot Donaldson, *The Swan at the Well: Shakespeare Reading Chaucer* (New Haven, 1985), a brief, well-written study of Shakespeare's use of Chaucer's works in his plays.

John V. Fleming, *Classical Imitation and Interpretation in Chaucer's Troilus* (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1990), a scholarly study of Chaucer's classical sources and, more generally, of how Christian medieval readers read classical literature.

Ida Gordon, *The Double Sorrow of Troilus* (Oxford, 1970), a general introduction to Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*.

Elaine T. Hansen, *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender* (California, 1992), an approach to Chaucer's poetry stressing feminist interpretations.

Donald R. Howard, *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales* (California, 1976), a general interpretation of Chaucer's major poem in its place in medieval intellectual life and its author's own frame of mind.

Steven V. Justice, *Writing and Rebellion, England in 1381* (California, 1994), a scholarly study of the Peasant's Revolt of 1381 and its impact on literature and society in the English Middle Ages (with special reference to Chaucer's poetry).

Seth Lerer, *Chaucer and His Readers* (Princeton, 1993), a study of how Chaucer's later readers shaped his reputation as the "father" of English poetry and, more generally, how Chaucer had an impact on the making of English literature itself.

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