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How to Teach *The Canterbury Tales* in (My Own) Translation

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Abstract

This essay describes the author's work as a translator of Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* and how she uses this translation in the classroom.

How do we teach Chaucer to high school and early college students, and what advantage is gained by doing so using my translation? Why do we (want to) teach Chaucer anyway? Why does Chaucer matter—regardless of who is reading him or how, whether in Middle English or in translation for the very first time? Why Chaucer matters is wound up in the main reasons I did my translation in the first place: to make Chaucer accessible to as wide an audience as possible and to give those of us teaching him in translation a text that registers the complexities of his writings in Middle English, so we can forget we are teaching him "in translation" and can just grapple with teaching the text. To be able to access through a translation the authenticity and immediacy of the complex worlds Chaucer creates in his fictions: this is why I did my translation and why, through it, we can persuade our students that Chaucer matters.

It might not be enough to tell our students that *The Canterbury Tales* is the best-known work of late medieval English literature because of its inventiveness, range of stories, and vividly characterized storytellers. In the United States, Chaucer still seems overlooked in a way that other great premodern authors aren't. Unlike Shakespeare or Homer, he isn't taught much in American high schools, even in Advanced Placement courses. In my experience, even many English majors, although they've signed up for my advanced Chaucer course, have little to no prior acquaintance with Chaucer. They don't know what to expect.

I began to wonder whether Chaucer might become more readable and more accessible if there were a translation that tried to sound as much like Chaucer as possible, and that would, in the process, try to do his poetry justice. No matter which translation I used in my introductory courses, I hadn't found one that let us engage with the artistic complexity of Chaucer's poetry as we could when we studied him in Middle English in my advanced courses. Translations of *The Tales* fall into two general categories: prose translations that focus on meaning and poetic translations that try to turn Chaucer into accessible modern English verse. The prose versions obviously lose a lot in translation but so do the poetic ones. Many choose blank verse. Others rhyme only sporadically. If they choose rhyme consistently, they don't attempt iambic pentameter, or, when they do, they can become too regularized and smooth. Sometimes they overly modernize the language and diction. I wanted a translation that would give students a sense that they were reading "the real thing," Chaucer's text. So I got to work.

What were my greatest challenges, issues, and problems in doing the translation? When did I succeed, or not?

My fundamental principle was to let Chaucer be Chaucer, to let Chaucer speak for himself. A colleague of mine has said that the end result isn't so much a "translation" as a "recreation" of Chaucer's poetry in modern English because my translation doesn't precisely sound like modern English, and of course, it doesn't sound like Middle English either. That was a deliberate choice. I've placed my translation somewhere in that in-between space, without, I hope, sounding totally strange to the ear. (I have translated, of course, with my American ear, with full awareness that American English is just one limited way English sounds or rhymes.) What's more, sound is particularly important to understanding *The Tales*. Medieval poetry was meant to be read aloud, and not only in public; when people in the Middle Ages read privately to themselves, they read out loud. And, of course, the motivating fiction of *The Tales* presents them as stories told and heard out loud as the

pilgrims travel to Canterbury. My translation is based not so much on any principles of translation or on any specific translation theories as on granular, focused local work with the text and on many, many small choices – thousands of microdecisions.

To see what I mean, let's go directly to the famous opening eighteen lines of *The General Prologue*. The first two lines, which were the first two lines I translated way back when (got to start at the beginning after all) almost did me in. "What that Aprill with his shoures sote / The droghte of Marche hath perced to the rote" (GP 1-2).[1] Right off the bat, I saw that it's not always possible to get the rhyme right. "Sweet" and "root" just don't rhyme in modern English. Ever. I finally settled on the rhyme of "sweet" and "complete": "When April comes and with its showers sweet / Has, to the root, pierced March's drought complete." I'm not happy with it. It doesn't sound like Chaucer. It's not even grammatical. Not a great way to begin. But there you are. All those micro choices. I got to keep the idea of "piercing to the root," which is central to the fertility images of the opening lines, but I had to forgo the rhyme on "sote" and "rote." That opening taught me valuable lessons.

Not surprisingly, the sounds linked with end rhymes turned out to be some of the biggest challenges of doing a faithful poetic translation. It's often possible, of course, to rhyme on the same words as Chaucer did, since his English is essentially ours, and especially since the sounds of our short vowels haven't changed much since the 14th century. And so, with "The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne / Hath in the Ram his halfe cours y-ronne" (GP 7-8), it's easy. "Sonne" and "y-ronne" rhyme as do "sun and "run." But that's not always the case. For instance: "And smale fowles maken melodye, / That slepen al the night with open ye" (GP 9-10). "Melodye" and "ye" rhyme in Middle English but not in modern English ("melody" and "eye"). So, in these instances, I tried to keep at least one of Chaucer's rhyme words: "And when small birds begin to harmonize / That sleep throughout the night with open eyes." I wanted to preserve the wonderful idea/image of the little birds sleeping with their eyes open, which, of course, is no sleeping at all. It's also important to emphasize this image with its prominent placement at the end of the line because it appears again, not long after, in the Squire's portrait (GP 97-98).

The opening lines of *The General Prologue* also illustrate the choices involved with attending to word order. In my translation, I follow Chaucer's word order as much as possible – as in "Of which vertu engendred is the flour" (GP 4), which I translated as "That, by its strength engendered is the flower." I went with Chaucer's word order rather than the more familiar modern English arrangement, "the flower is engendered." Doing so maintains rhyme, is perfectly comprehensible to us modern readers, and sounds like Chaucer, because, well, this is Chaucer's word order. There is no need to modernize. But if maintaining word order seems unnecessarily strained, I switched to modern English word order as rhyme and scansion permit. Thus, "The holy blissful martir for to seke, / That hem hath holpen, what that they were seke" (GP 17-18) becomes "The holy, blessed martyr they all seek, / Who has helped them when they were sick and weak." Rather than keeping the objective pronoun before the verb in line 18, as Chaucer does, I move it after the verb to follow the modern English word order and to create better scansion. But I was sorry to lose Chaucer's evocative repeating rhyme

[1] All Middle English quotations are taken from the Middle English in the facing-page version of my translation, published by W.W. Norton (2011). For the teaching edition geared toward high school and introductory college courses, see the new Norton Library edition of my translation (W.W. Norton, 2021). In order to facilitate reading, in the in-text citations I used shortened titles and line numbers, rather than dates and page numbers.

of "seke" and "seke" – "seek" and "sick" – a rhyme that seems to articulate the very motivation for pilgrimage, a seeking because of sickness. So I settled for a rhyme on "weak" and the use of "sick" in the non-rhyming position.

Because sound is so important in *The Tales,* I tried to underline its importance when and how Chaucer does. I maintain alliteration (which is relatively easy to do) as often as I can, and, if a particular line gains some of its impact from sibilance or percussiveness or onomatopoeia, I try to make sure the translation does the same. Here's one example from the Monk's portrait in *The General Prologue*, where sound works to underscore characterization. "A MONK ther was, a fair for the maistrye, / An outrydere that loved venerye: / A many man, to been an abbot able" (GP 165-167). The last line here in Middle English sounds like nonsense, gibberish, babble. And I tried to catch that in my translation: "A MONK there was, the handsomest to see, / An outrider, who most loved venery, / A manly man, to be an abbot able." Say that last line a few times fast, and see how it underscores the ridiculousness of manliness being a qualification for abbothood.

Another example comes from the portrait of the Miller: "he was short-sholdred, brood, a thikke knarre" (GP 549). Look at the phrase "thikke knarre," with its insistent knocking of the hard "k" sounds that accentuate the Miller's menacingness. He likes breaking down doors with his head, after all. He wears a lot of knives. So, in my translation: "He was short necked and broad, a thick-thewed thug." I had to give up the alliteration of "short-sholdred," because it wouldn't yield a modern English equivalent. But I wanted to try to recreate something of the sonic impact of this line as it registers the Miller's physicality (which is his identity) and especially the punch of the phrase "thikke knarre." So I went with "thick-thewed thug," almost as hard to say, I hope, as "thikke knarre."

Two more quick examples of attentiveness to the importance of sound in my translation. When the old crone transforms herself into a beautiful young woman in *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, Chaucer writes of her (now finally!) grateful husband: "His herte bathed in a bath of blisse" (WBT 1253), which I translate as "His heart was all bathed in a bath of bliss" – the repeated "b's" in Chaucer and in my translation giving a sense of bliss just bubbling all over the place for this allegedly rehabilitated young rapist now that the old woman has become the girl of his dreams. Or, in *The Franklin's Tale*, when Dorigen is bemoaning her husband Arveragus's departure, Chaucer writes in a pile-up of active verbs: "She moorneth, waketh, wayleth, fasteth, pleyneth" (FrT 819), which I translate as "She mourns, she sobs, she fasts, she wakes, she wails" in order to keep the repetitiousness of obsessive emotions and their verbs in the series, and especially the alliteration of the "w's" that emphasize her desperate pain.

Like Shakespeare in his sonnets, Chaucer was a master at making couplets join end rhymes to reinforce or problematize meaning. In my translation, I've tried to keep those sonic links where they're especially important, as in the end of the Squire's portrait. Although the Squire seems frivolous and superficial, we learn at the end of his portrait that "Curteys he was, lowly, and servisable, / And carf biforn his fader at the table" (GP 99-100). Because this is a new twist in his characterization, I wanted to try to preserve the couplet as nearly as I could: "Courteous and meek, to serve, quite able, / He carved before his father at the table." Will he become his father, or remain just a dutiful son?

Another telling example of hard-working couplets comes at the end of Chaucer's long portrait of Alison, the young wife married to old John in the fabliau of *The Miller's Tale*. She is fit "For any lord to leggen in his bedde, / And yet for any good yeman to wedde" (MilT 161-162) – "For any lord to lay down in his bed, / And yet for any good yeoman to wed." Given the class antagonism the Miller

shows by wanting to tell his tale right after the Knight's, it's crucial to keep rhymes like this intact. The rhyme on "bed" and "wed" tells the tale. In its stark simplicity (and it was very easy to translate), this rhyme claims that, no matter what fictional knights do in courtly romances, real lords are bedding working class girls and then leaving them for men of their own class to marry.

Sometimes, though, I decided to settle for an eye rhyme in order to keep significant thematic linkages that Chaucer forms through true rhyme in his Middle English. This was particularly important with the Wife of Bath. She (more accurately, Chaucer, through her) repeatedly and insistently rhymes "mariage" and "age," beginning right at the start of her long autobiographical prologue:

> Experience, though noon auctoritee
> Were in this world, is right ynough for me
> To speke of wo that is in mariage:
> For, lordinges, sith I twelf yeer was of age. (WBP 1-4)

"Marriage" and "age" don't rhyme in modern English as they do in Middle English, so much the pity! But I wanted to keep this repeated rhyme, even if I could only do so as an eye/sight rhyme, to underscore the connection Chaucer keeps making in her prologue between marriage and the Wife of Bath's "age" – not only the time she lives in but also her preoccupation with her own aging.

Even as I decided not to modernize the diction and tone, I also avoided archaisms that would sound quaint and antique. For example, though Middle English uses "thou," "thine," and "thee" for the second-person singular, I've stuck with "you," as we do in modern English usage, unless a character is represented as pretentious, as is the Prioress. In her prolgue's encomium to the Virgin Mary, second-person singular pronouns abound: "Lady, thy bountee, thy magnificence, / Thy vertu, and thy greet humilitee / Ther may no tonge expresses in no science" (PrP 474-476). "Lady, thy bounty, thy magnificence, / Thy strength and all thy greet humility / No learned tongue may tell with eloquence." Chaucer has the Prioress deliver her prologue and tale in the ornate rhyme royal stanza with its intricate a-b-a-b-b-c-c rhyme, a stanzaic form that he himself introduced into English (which I replicate in my translation wherever Chaucer uses it). He uses this stanza sparingly in *The Tales*, and always for effect: generally to show high style aspirations or pretensions. In order to catch the tone – the affected Prioress's striving for effect – I maintain the "thou" form in my translation of her rhyme royal stanzas.

Making such microdecisions to try to make the pilgrims' voices and those of their tales' characters heard was the chief challenge and the real and revelatory joy of doing this translation.

And so, to conclude, and in the interest of what Chaucer would call "tyme and space" (GP 35), I offer a very cursory and partial list of where I tried to express those variegated voices in ways that I hope will be helpful to you as you teach Chaucer in translation:

There's the monumentality of *The Knight's Tale*, with its emphasis on ceremony, as we see the moment it starts (KT 859-874).

There's the fast-paced raunchiness of *The Miller's Tale*'s chaotic climax (MilT 3798-3819).

There is the whole range of tones we get in the one massively complex character that is the Wife of Bath. Her voice can be bawdy, straightforward, direct, and pragmatic (WBP 409-418). And yet she can be almost lyrically sentimental in her remembrance of things past (WBP 469-479). For all her

resilience and bravado, she articulates the pain of listening, night after night, to her beloved Jankin read misogynist lore from his "Book of Wicked Wives": "Who could imagine, or who would suppose / The woe that in my heart was, and the pain?" (786-787).

There is the cynically cold voice of the corrupt Pardoner explaining his M.O. to the pilgrims (PardP 137-148).

And there is the sternly moral voice of the Parson, right outside of the gates of Canterbury, when he eschews telling a tale in poetry in favor of a prose sermon, thus ending both storytelling and poetry in *The Tales* (ParsP 31-51).

Since my goal was for this translation to sound like Chaucer, some of it isn't regular or smooth or polished because sometimes Chaucer isn't either. Chaucer may well deserve to be called "The Father of English Poetry" specifically because he was working with a language whose poetic expressiveness was in its first youth. As a result, there are lines, groups of lines, whole passages of some of *The Tales* that might not strike us or our students as the world's most scintillating poetry. Some passages aren't meant to do much more than the basic narrative work of getting us from point A to point B in the plot. Sometimes, even if the lines have thematic purposes (like the long catalogue of trees in the description of Arcite's funeral pyre in *The Knight's Tale*), they may not be particularly appealing to our tastes. Sometimes Chaucer's syntax can seem strangely tortured (KT 1858-1873).

If I have tried to capture as best I can the pervasive beauty, wit, humor, lyricism, satire, and vividness that make Chaucer's poetry masterful, moving, and memorable, I have also tried to be faithful to his poetry when it's not any of those wonderful things. There are rough spots. I have left them there. This is, after all, an unfinished work, left to us by a poet who died before he could complete it.

Still, no matter how we read it, in the original or in translation, Chaucer's *Tales* shows his complex grasp of the contradictions in human nature and of the gestures we use to fill voids and ease pain. Chaucer's characters embrace the storytelling competition because they know, as do we, that stories matter.

In creating his characters' voices and complex psychologies through their tales, Chaucer shows his own awareness of the power and limits of language. Language is all we have to tell our stories and the stories of ourselves. So we keep reading and wrangling with Chaucer, century after century. Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* explores how we make and share stories in our efforts to make meaning and thus to try our best to understand our world. This human need goes as far back as the beginning of storytelling and as far forward into the future as our stewardship of the planet will allow. And this, in the end, is why Chaucer matters.

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