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Teaching Chaucer from the Perspective of a Troubadour and Using Music in the Classroom to Further Explain Literature

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Abstract

I am an English instructor, composer, and musical storyteller who uses bardic instruments to teach historical and contemporary texts. In this article, I discuss how teaching literature with music helps to bring that literature, whether ancient, medieval or otherwise, to life for students in both new and very old ways. I explain how I share both original and pre-recorded music, perform songs about the text, and assign creative projects associated with music, such as asking students to make or perform a generative piece along with an analytic defense of their interpretation or having them create a playlist that evokes the text, along with a paper or presentation justifying their choices. These activities help students engage with sources and their contexts.

Though not every high school student enjoys reading, young scholars do tend to like songs, and I have tried to harness this as a teacher by using music to elicit excitement for our texts. I am a composer and educator, and for the most part, I employ original music to teach and show, by example, another way of interpreting literature. Additionally, I use other projects relating to music to work with the books and stories we read, analyze, and discuss.

This piece will center around the use of a song I wrote that retells “The Wife of Bath’s Prologue” and “The Wife of Bath’s Tale” from Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* in the 1960s style reminiscent of that of medieval troubadours. The essay will talk about how and why I wrote it, how I would teach with it, and how its form, content, and the choices I made in crafting it illustrate an act of literary interpretation. The piece will discuss how teaching with it and other music inspires students to take ownership of texts in their own ways and how I use other original songs to teach with our reading matter, and lastly, it will offer other ways to teach literature using music (not necessarily original) and music-related projects in addition to explaining why an instructor may choose to do so.

Brief Personal Background and Application of Original Music to English-Teaching

I have composed and played music my whole life, mostly as a pianist and singer and, in the last few years, as a harper, guitar-, drum- and mandolin-player, and producer. Forever interested in the marriage of words, melody, storytelling, and the bards of old, I have for years written music to the poetry I read in books, eventually adding my own lyrics too. This love for the musicality of language is one of the reasons I became a teacher of English and Journalism after working as a reporter for a few years, and I have been a secondary school educator for more than ten years.

I have written music to texts ranging from the *Song of Songs* to the *Odyssey*, *Beowulf* to *Macbeth*, and from the poetry of Emily Dickinson to that of Sir Alfred, Lord Tennyson, among others. I have also retold stories from literature and mythology, for instance those of Persephone and Ophelia, Josephine March and the Celtic and Norse Mermaids and Selkies (seal-women) as well as ones of my own imagination. A curious listener could find such pieces on my two, recently released companion albums, “Bard” and “Old Wives’ Tales” (linked at the end of the article).

All of these songs are available for listening, of course, but, more to the point, a teacher could make pedagogical use of them in the classroom (discussed more at length below via the focus on the song about the Wife of Bath).

The Wife of Bath’s Song, Why I Made Some of My Creative Choices, and Why That Matters

I originally wrote “The Wife of Bath: Alysoun’s Tale” as a nearly twelve-minute piece in a troubadourial style for the New Chaucer Society’s remote Expo in the summer of 2021 and have not yet had the chance to teach with it but, as mentioned, have taught with my original music to the relevant literary passages for more than a decade (e.g., for the *Odyssey*, *Beowulf*, *Macbeth*, and poems). In writing this song, I weighed the translation-dependent and various spellings of The Wife of Bath’s name (Alyson, Alys, Alisoun, Alison) and chose an amalgamation of these that attempts to combine the spellings and respect the Middle English in “Alysoun.” I composed the piece for voice and guitar to

make it sound both like a troubadourial piece, a nod to the book's hailing from an era somewhat close to that of troubadours, and in appreciation of the medieval-homages common in 1960s and '70s folk music from the United Kingdom and the United States. I explain all of this to students when we study the texts and when I share the song. I would act similarly for any other musical pieces I mentioned, working in conjunction with literature we study. My song comprises two pieces in one — the prologue, which runs at more than four minutes, and the tale, which runs around seven, making the whole thing a robust eleven-minutes and change.

As mentioned, I sang and played the song in this way for several reasons. A source narrative this long and textured should have variation in its sound commensurate with the changing storyline. Folk, country, ballads, Americana, and folk-revivalist tunes of the nineteenth and twentieth century, in particular the 1960s and 1970s, have roots in the medieval style of a minstrel's singing with a stringed instrument – harp, oud, lute or guitar (both the successors of the oud), dulcimer, zither, psalter, or mandolin. Whether through the songs of the now Chanticleer-esque, rooster-formed troubadour Alan-a-Dale, in Disney's 1973 *Robin Hood*, the songs of Simon & Garfunkel, Fairport Convention, Procol Harum, Pentangle, Led Zeppelin, Jethro Tull, or countless others, composers and their listeners displayed an evident fondness for medievalism in the music of the 1960s and '70s.

This song tries to do its own type of justice to Chaucer's prologue and tale, making references to the specific points Alysoun does, while bringing the words and sound to our time. I here use a guitar, an instrument with roots in the late Middle Ages, Renaissance, and Baroque periods (Musicians Institute: College of Contemporary Music, 2018), for this hybrid medieval/mid-century-modern sound and a speak-chant vocal style reminiscent of a country or bluegrass ballad, or tunes like "Rocky Raccoon" and "American Pie." I added harp and lute backgrounds to place the listener in that folk-medieval sound while playfully making fun of the Dark Ages sound in the actual tale, something the Alysoun of Chaucer's writing seems, herself, to do. In her fictional and Chaucer's real time, King Arthur has already long been a legend for centuries, effectively a fairy tale, and I wanted to acknowledge that. I added a sweeping synth string sound like the kind you would hear in 1970s songs and film scores for that homage to the medieval folk rock of that era. My nostalgia for its nostalgia also adds emotional color to my own song and to the sadder elements of *The Wife of Bath's* prologue and tale. All of these choices reflect an interpretation of the source material and careful consideration of how to honor the text. This is something I talk about in class, showing my students another form of textual analysis. Separately, doing this along with playing students recordings of musicians performing actual music from the time period, grounds them in the medieval setting and gets them excited to step into another, often unfamiliar world.

Using the Song to Interpret and Show Interpretation of the Text

This brings me to tone and content. Is the Wife of Bath actually a positively empowered character, a feminist by today's standards? One could argue she embodies a series of negative and misogynistic stereotypes: that she is a greedy, lascivious, heretical, uneducated liar who cannot be trusted in any way. Others could say that while it seems Chaucer has created an enlightened woman in a time when that would have been unusual, to say the least, he does so in the wake of "raptus" accusations and can

either be slyly undermining the image of women (see above) or somehow trying to make amends through his writing (Lumiansky, 2021).

Those are all fair assertions, but I read her – with her background, humor, sauciness, her cry for sovereignty, a push away from double standards, and the valuing of her own experience as a worthy guide not to be underrated in the face of book-learning, something most women, most people, in fact, would not have had access to then – as powerful and admirable (Bovey, 2015). I have always loved Alysoun and see her as someone worth reading about and even learning from in some ways. She takes no nonsense and speaks in favor of liberty in a time and place when talking about it would have been rare if at all present, having it doubly so. I think there is value in hearing from her, just as I think retelling the story, myself, as a woman, further makes it feminist. There is power in having students see that.

For all of her bravado, I think Alysoun does exhibit pathos. Her family and society wed her at twelve. She was of age at the time, and life spans were short, but that is still young. She is a brave lady who travels to Jerusalem and Canterbury in a dangerous world in which she is vulnerable. She loves Jankyn. She has faced spousal abuse. She has to justify her position and her plea against the aforementioned double standards and those who would vilify her (Chaucer, [1386], 1989, 116-125). Is she greedy, or does she have to make her financial way in a structure that endows her with neither means nor property without marriage? In my word choice and orchestration, I want to add that yearning quality to her narrative, just as I think the older witch's description of what women want should have an earnest, plaintive tenor beneath it. What women want and a discussion of a fight for autonomy make sense, and for all the humor inherent to the story, this is not at all the funny part and certainly remains relevant in the world today.

Troubadours and jongleurs, their lower-class counterparts, were men, but very occasionally, women did work as bardic storytellers, trobairitzes and jongleureses / joglaressas, (Bruckner 1992, 865-891; Travers 2018; Poe 2002, 114, 206-215). While there are not many recorded historical instances of such women, this does not mean they did not exist in greater numbers than for which we can account. Even Hildegard von Bingen had paved the way for musical storytelling two centuries before (in the religious space), as had Marie de France (in the secular one, likely setting the standard for romances and tales of courtly love like the kind Chaucer's Alysoun emulates and mocks). Given that many of her — or Chaucer's — ideas do not empower her in a contemporary context, I did not hew exactly to the literal or figurative word of the text (or even always its precise plot), though I did attempt to capture its spirit while following the general framework. I also included commentary that allows my interpretation to make its way in because I do find it frustrating that the knight should have a happy ending, given that he has raped a young woman (and what becomes of that young woman, after all?) or that “young, beautiful, and unfaithful” or “ugly, old, and loyal” should be the only “options” and “combinations” – or that age should face disapproval, and beauty should have only one, “objective” standard. Given that, I inserted some thoughts on those matters while granting the enchantress an aside that promises her another marriage afterward in keeping with The Wife of Bath's own life. Of course, there is room for humor there, and we cannot take everything she and/or Chaucer say at face value, nor should we, but if I am retelling the story for today's listeners, I want to be able to share my take on that, and I think the character would approve. As before, this shows an act of creative literary interpretation.

The song begins with its emphasis on Alysoun’s credibility because she has lived a long time at this point and has had no fewer than five husbands. Though the story implies she works as a seamstress, the song seeks to make the connection between the “women’s” jobs of weaving, spinning, knitting, and sewing with the act of telling a story – as in “weaving a tale,” “spinning a yarn,” “narrative thread,” and the relationship between the words “fabric,” “fabricate,” “fable,” and “fabulous” in addition to “textile,” “textured,” and “text,” especially because of the rarity behind a woman’s telling a story seen as authoritative and believable in this time and many others.

My role here, then, is meta. As the composer and singer, the bard and troubadour, I am telling the story within Alysoun’s story within Chaucer’s story of storytellers. It is a framing device, and I, like Alysoun, here am the weaver of tales, the “seamstress who mend[s] and darn[s]” (narratives, in this case), “stitch[ing] together a story you’ll well remember.” It is not lost on me that “weave a spell” works as an idiom and that those presented as doing so are usually women. The takeaway becomes that women cannot tell credible stories (that the stories they tell are “old wives’ tales” — as in exaggerated nonsense to be taken with many grains of salt), can only do tangible work for the hearth space, and/or they are witches who cannot be trusted to weave words for fear of the evil and magical consequences. From the wrong mouth or pen, the use of “weaving” becomes pejorative and condescending, from the right one, flattering, connected, connective, and empowering. The former makes Alysoun’s role and that of a female singer’s storytelling all the more urgent. If the witch acts as a mouthpiece and both foil and avatar for Alysoun, she winningly acknowledges that others will view her, a powerful woman, as a spell-caster, whether she ensnares men into her web through her wiles or weaves a tale so entertaining as to potentially win the pilgrims’ storytelling contest and gain a free dinner at the others’ expense.

I here wished to emphasize Alysoun’s message of that empowerment for herself and other women, her emphasis on independence and a single standard, the value of experience in the face of a traditional education (the latter to which she would not have had access), and her very relevant set-up of what the old enchantress says to the knight (Bovey, 2015). I frame it in a way it would read today without really changing the central ideas in the prologue and the tale, specifically the old woman’s counsel, because Chaucer’s ideas and words could have arisen in our time. I open with these verses:

They say Experience
Has no value
And it’s no authority

But of husbands
I’ve had five
So you should
Listen to me

Folks may spin yarns
I mend and darn
A seamstress I will stitch
Together a story

You'll well remember...

They tell girls,
Oh, act so pretty
And don't make yourself filthy

Don't enjoy it
Don't have fun
He's not the one

Don't sully yourself
Before your God
But do your duty
By your husband, Todd

And I say
Don't pay them heed...

[In response to the question of what women want, the old woman explains to the knight:]

Give them a choice.

Let them lift their voice!

Let them have free reign
Of life's horse

Let them steer
The course
Of their own Destinies
For them to see

Let them be
Who they must
Needs be

Let them grow
And wander freely
Around this sylvan,
Ancient Land!

In praise of the crone's advice to give women agency and freedom, I sang this as an aside: "And I swear I think/ I like her/ More and more." Though it is the enchantress' prerogative to wish to marry the knight, which is part of the point, I have never understood why she would wish to become romantically involved with and committed to someone who has raped a maiden and is clueless, lazy, ungrateful, and unkind on top of that, especially since she does not seem to marry for station or finance, so I sing these words after describing her demand of marriage as his end of the bargain:

(I don't know why she wanted him
He was cruel
And he was a great fool
But I guess that you cannot
Account for taste!)

The woman offers the knight the choice of youth, beauty, and potential infidelity or age, unattractiveness, and loyalty, and I have forever balked at that stark contrast, now singing, "(Not that those / Should be /The only selections left!)," and, via the witch, I promise the listener that she will not have to stay with this unpleasant character, that there will be other options for her and that she acknowledges that she will be with him "forever and a day...(At least until /I find / My next husband!)." This allows me to further empower and liberate her while sharing with the listener my commentary, inserting the storyteller into the story as listeners and readers do instinctively.

Students' Reactions and a Corresponding Assignment

I am grateful and happy to say that over the years that I played live music for students to help them experience either the text in its original media (e.g., voice and harp), to help them hear the words of the text in another manner (a medium to which, for the most part, they tend to gravitate more in their free time), or when they listened to the same story retold in a new way (again, using a medium to which they are more accustomed) along with (and not instead of) the source material, they reacted positively. They expressed that this teaching method made what had seemed like daunting texts or unrelatable history and language more accessible and "real," that it made it more vivid. They said the characters seemed more like people and less like two dimensional concepts or often complicated words on the page. Again, I want to clarify that this is in no way a replacement for the usual parsing of source text. This is simply another way to introduce or accompany it. Those students most vocally reluctant to read and engage with the literature seemed to take kindly to the reminder that songs with lyrics and film and TV shows use language quite carefully and that someone needed to write and read them. One of the main ideas behind this is to call their attention to the bridge in their midst — between the types of texts many engage with regularly (music, cinema, photography) and the one many of them do not (literature, particularly non-contemporary literature).

While it is true that students with a musical background could respond to music in a more nuanced and specific way, often inspiring them to write, play, or listen to music of their own, those

who do/did not have that background seemed to enjoy live (in person or via Zoom) music and showed excitement for something different than what they expected from English class. It also proved a way to hook them into the reading and its time period and language and to remind them that human nature and many of its central preoccupations have not changed much over the centuries. Similarly, as I said, the teacher does not need to be a musician to teach with music. That person can use recordings of interpretive songs like “The Wife of Bath: Alysoun’s Tale,” use recordings of era-specific work, or employ other projects mentioned further in this piece. That educator could also model creation-as-interpretation and meta-framing through other pursuits and art forms.

Performing such music (or playing recordings of songs by various artists) also encourages high schoolers to see that bards do not just have to be dead men and that they, the students, could take possession of the text, whether as storytellers writing their own music to it, retelling it, rapping to it, remixing my or another’s work, composing poetry or dance, drawing, or something else entirely.

After we talk about the context from which the literature arises and look through primary sources and discuss the “lifestyles” of those existing in these periods, we read and analyze the tale. I would then explain that, in this case, a guitar/voice song is reminiscent of the kind of music Chaucer and his fictional pilgrims would have heard, for example, in the tavern where they would have told their famous tales. I would pass out my lyrics (or we would look at the original text if the song were to accompany the actual language, which depends on the piece), and we would talk through the similarities to the original but also the specific generative choices therein, choices showing the act of secondary creation in a song like this as an interpretive and analytical act akin to the kind teachers ask students to do for papers or related pieces. I would then perform it live, and students could experience something not dissimilar to a concert Alysoun herself would have heard, and this can get them to “feel” Chaucer’s medievalism and how it is actually quite present and contemporary.

I want to make sure the class remains student-centered and Harkness-table/Socratic Seminar-oriented, but if the purpose of sharing the music is, again, to hook students in one more way and to get them to experience something they may not otherwise experience in order for them to see why this literature still has value, relevance, and literal and figurative resonance, then I think it is student-centered, works in hopefully delightful, fresh ways, and is worth it. In this case, it is a long song and one written by the teacher, yes, which requires a certain type of set-up in explaining to students that the purpose is to link this to the text and that they do not need to like or pretend to like the music but just to listen and read along and then consider the message and medium. Because the purpose of sharing original music here lies with directly attempting to further engage them, I think and hope it veers away from performative solipsism and back into the realm of student-centered learning because it is one more way to consider how best to bring students into a learning experience while taking their own learning contexts and time period into account.

What is more, it illustrates by example not only that adults can be complex and continue to have multi-layered lives in which happily doing one job does not necessarily mean leaving behind other passions, something we hope students negotiate in their own lives where relevant, but also that these teachers can creatively converse with the text by making their own art in response to and in dialogue with it.

This invites a combination of creative and analytical assignment for students. After discussing the historical context, aesthetics associated with the period, medium, overall meaning, sentential meaning

and application, analysis, and either the sharing of my original music or playing of others' music (something an educator of any interest and background can do, should they wish to try out these methods), I would assign students to create something of their own based on the text/a passage of the text. Like I said, they could write and play a song, draw or paint a picture, take a photo, make a collage, rap, dance, write a poem, write a letter... There are countless things they could make, and a student does not need to be a musician, artist, or confident "creative" to fulfill this assignment. Those most uncomfortable with this kind of expression can and, following the assignment, will still make something, and as long as it is original and shows investment, it will meet the strictures of that section of the project.

They would then have to either write an essay or present explaining how their creation works in conjunction with an analysis of the text, and in it, they would have to defend their artistic choices in the context of the source material.

When it comes to the types of projects students have made when we have talked about creating for fun or based on the text, those students' creations have run the gamut and are inspiring. One student, on her own time, composed a song and performed it on the ukulele before turning in her paper. Another enjoyed a song I had written to Robert Fagles' translation and later to my own of a crucial passage of Homer's *Odyssey* and, being a budding music producer on his own time, made a remix of the song and played it for the class. The students sang along to the words and learned them, expressing excitement for Homer. Separately from school and for fun, they made pins that said "I am Odysseus, son of Laertes," and it is now possible that they will not forget Odysseus or his background because of these songs.

Another student made stick figure drawings of one page of a graphic novel for a different but analogous assignment, and even though he said he did not have background or "skill" in visual art, did a beautiful job, felt proud of it, and garnered the cheers of his peers. The students need feel no pressure to have certain skills or interests artistic in nature, but they do need to take intellectual risks and be able to justify their choices. I have done assignments like this in grades nine through twelve for different pieces of literature and after sharing different, related songs, and even shy students or those not confident in what they would make expressed enjoyment at the agency this kind of project affords them and their love of different media they did not, perhaps, expect to engage with in their English class. Generally honest, they said that they had fun being creative, saw new connections to the text, and liked seeing what their classmates had done, which aided in fostering a warm, collegial environment.

Other Possible Assignments That Use Music as a Way into the Reading and Teaching of Literature

There are various ways to use songs and other art forms in conjunction with an instruction of literature. Another example that does not use original music lies with a project I assigned in my twelfth-grade creative writing class, that my colleague and I assigned in recent years in a ninth-grade classroom and that relates to the making, listening to, and sharing of playlists.

Whether mix tapes, mix CD's, or playlists across platforms, many, and certainly students, have compiled music together to create a personal grouping of favorite songs around an emotion, idea, or

what-have-you. This is a critical and creative and, for some, emotional act, and many see it as a deeply individual expression. Students often use services like Spotify or Soundcloud to make these playlists, whether for themselves, to exercise to, to play at a party, as a statement, or to share with another as a gesture of affection. TikTok has had a profound impact on the sharing of music, as so many high schoolers currently use the social media platform, and find out about new and old songs in the process. Spotify has a social media component in that users can become “friends” with each other and share their playlists or even make them publicly collaborative. All of this is to say that playlists in their many iterations have been in vogue for decades and, even in new forms, will likely continue to be so.

One way to work with this in a classroom context that involves the study of text is to give students historical background, show them drawings or photos of the clothing of the time period, play them recordings or interpretations of music also from the time period, look through primary sources, and, of course, unpack the language of the literature. Once the teacher feels the students have a more nuanced, textured, visual, and sonic “feel” for the context from which the text arose (taking the historicist approach to reading the literature and assuming that that context does, in fact, matter — an approach I am aware not all share), the teacher can ask them to create a playlist of songs they think connect somehow to the reading and to write a corresponding paper or present to the class how it does so, using the source language and unpacking it in a careful way to illustrate their points.

A teacher could create a similar project that focuses on one song rather than a playlist. The class would go over the historical context and corresponding music, art, clothes etc., get a bird’s eye view of the reading, approach the text in a sentential manner, and then the teacher would ask the students to choose a passage from the literature and a song they feel expresses it. This type of approach could work with any art form that functions as a synecdoche for the text. In other words, doing the same with the reading, a teacher could ask the students to choose a piece of visual art or photograph, etc. The song could express the text because of an intangible “mood” and “feel” (“vibe,” as some students would say in 2022), because of the lyrics, because of chords, because of rhythm, because of its title. This is where the project becomes an interpretive and comparative one that requires the dissecting of language and ideas — both the literal text of the reading and the text of the song, an idea that also introduces students to the concepts of multimedia textuality, intertextuality, and comparative literature. For example, I created a playlist of fifty-or-so songs that somehow evoked the character of *The Wife of Bath* for me, whether in the lyrics’ storyline (e.g., Rod Stewart’s “Maggie May,” Jethro Tull’s “The Witch’s Promise,” Beyonce’s “Run the World,” Janis Joplin’s “Me and Bobby McGee”) or in the songs’ mid-20th century homage to medievalist style (e.g., Fairport Convention’s interpretation of the folk song “Matty Groves,” Simon & Garfunkel’s interpretation of the folk song “Scarborough Fair,” and Brandon Fiechter’s score “Wild Boar Inn”). I would then explain the rationale behind my choices, using passages of the text and excerpts of the songs.

In a paper or presentation, students would have to explain, through their analysis, how and why the song expresses the reading or passage and why they chose it. In the times I have assigned this or something akin to it, across grade levels and using different source material, students have shown themselves interested and invested in this project because so many like the creative parts of making playlists, sharing their taste in music, and defending their creative choices. It has also further hooked them into the reading and the skills associated with this project and its grade level, which, of course, are some of the main points behind this, after all.

Closing Thoughts

In returning to my song about The Wife of Bath, I consider the ending. Finally, Alysoun stops speaking after she finishes her tale, and I have always found that a rather cold and abrupt end to the long, lewd, and interesting journey on which she has taken us. I feel like she should have some last words, and being a fan of chiasmic structure and of bookends, I thought I would remind the listeners of Alysoun's thesis – her experience has granted her legitimacy and authority to speak her piece, in this case, that women should have sovereignty over their own lives. I end the nearly twelve-minute piece with the following stanzas:

So experience has value
And my life's
A testament

To the worth of worlds
Not just of words
I've shared my piece.

Goodnight
And
Farewell!

Since I wished to close with her opening ideas and remind the listeners of Alysoun's worldview and not just words, I planned to use the same musical style as the one with which I opened. I derive pleasure from the multi-layered storytelling going on here – a story about a story and people's telling stories. Add someone's retelling, and that is a strangely postmodern narrative for something related to a fourteenth century text. That is Chaucer – complicated, fascinating, and still relevant. That is Alysoun – complex and worth attending – then and now. A song is another way for students to experience part of and understand Chaucer, or other writers from any time period, while accompanying the reading, and, perhaps, to feel they may have sung these sentiments themselves. It is also a way to further show how contemporary “old” texts can be and often are.

I hope this piece has proven informative and useful in imagining various ways to use music — mine, another teacher's, someone else's, and the students' — in the context of teaching literature and that the new school year invites exciting opportunities to experiment with multimedia approaches to and experiences within the reading, analyzing, writing about, parsing, singing, and teaching of texts.

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Music Featured

- "Bard" album, which includes the above song and emphasizes works of literature and lore, mortality and the oral tradition: <https://distrokid.com/hyperfollow/deborahstokol/bard>
- "Old Wives' Tales" album about women from myth and legend, time and storytelling: <https://distrokid.com/hyperfollow/deborahstokol/old-wives-tales-2>
- "The Wife of Bath: Alysoun's Tale" song: <https://distrokid.com/hyperfollow/deborahstokol/the-wife-of-bath-alysons-tale>