Volume 05 |2024

Chaucer, Intertextuality, and Academic Integrity: What Medieval Studies Can Teach Composition and Rhetoric[1]

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[1] Warning: Contains a brief mention of suicide.

Alberghini. 2024. Chaucer, Intertextuality, and Academic Integrity: What Medieval Studies Can Teach Composition and Rhetoric. *New Chaucer Studies: Pedagogy and Profession* 5: 158–69. https://escholarship.org/uc/ncs_pedagogyandprofession/ | ISSN: 2766-1768.

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Chaucer, Intertextuality, and Academic Integrity: What Medieval Studies Can Teach Composition and Rhetoric

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Abstract

The fields of medieval literary studies and composition/rhetoric do not overlap much. While knowledge of composition theory is necessary for many medievalists to thrive in English departments, if only with respect to pedagogy, the reverse is not often the case. Yet medieval studies has a lot to teach scholars of composition and rhetoric. In this essay, I will describe a lesson on Chaucer's *House of Fame* for a first-year composition course. Using the poem's retelling of the story of Dido and Aeneas as an example of source use, I argue that medieval poetry can teach students how to combine sources with original material to create a new contribution to a critical conversation and teach us as instructors about our students' anxieties about writing.

New Chaucer Studies: Pedagogy and Profession 5: 158–69.
https://escholarship.org/uc/ncs_pedagogyandprofession/ | ISSN: 2766-1768.

With the advent of artificial intelligence, such as ChatGPT and similar programs, colleges and universities appear to be having a watershed moment regarding academic dishonesty. A Google search for "artificial intelligence cheating" comes up with such alarmist headlines as "Experts are worried students use AI to write papers. And millions are, new data shows" (Bratton 2024) and "Is AI a gateway to cheating" (*Good Morning America* 2024), to name a few. The technology may be new, but the sense that there is a problem with cheating is not. Twelve years ago, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* declared that "Dozens of Plagiarism Incidents Are Reported in Coursera's Free Online Courses" (Young 2012), and ten years earlier, *Newsweek* (2002) published an article, "It's A Bird, It's A Plane, It's Plagiarism Buster," about how the Internet made it easier for students to find or to purchase papers. It seems, whatever the reason, whichever technology is being used, this sense of urgency and panic remains the same: students are cheating, and it is the professor's responsibility to catch them and impose penalties, from a failing grade to a suspension, as is my current institution's policy, and possibly worse (Baruch College n. d.).

Academic dishonesty (a characterization which is itself problematic, see Valentine 2006) is not as black-and-white as many might think, descending as it does from a long and complicated history of ideas about authorship. Scholars of composition and rhetoric argue that existing policies on plagiarism in the Western education system are often a form of gatekeeping that excludes, especially, students who are already disadvantaged by such factors as race and socioeconomic background (See Watson 2017, Eckstein 2013 and Zwagerman 2008). For these scholars, plagiarism and policies around it are "[c]ulturally constructed" and "hegemonic" (Watson 2017, 84). The contemporary emphasis on grades, a root cause of plagiarism, demonstrates the high value placed on originality. According to Sean Zwagerman (2008), "the mark itself is inserted with just such intrinsic value and validity, by way of romantic beliefs about genius, originality, and authorship" (688). Furthermore, Missy Watson (2017) notes that "Our understandings of what constitutes authorship are thus motivated by profit-driven enterprises, which we can readily connect to the advent of the printing press and later to conceptualizations of intellectual property, and the forging of copyright law" (86). Mention of the printing press should cause medievalists to reflect on how our knowledge, about authorship in the past, might lend some insight into the present: the perceived phenomenon of academic dishonesty—be it plagiarism, AI, or something else—and the emphasis on punishment rather than education. As an instructor of composition, as well as of pre-modern literature, I have found that explaining the policies on punishment takes valuable time. Of course, punishment becomes another source of stress for both myself and my students, one that compounds the stress the latter might already feel as writers—a stress that is not unique to them but, interestingly, is held by many classic authors. Rather than focusing on frightening students with threats of the aforementioned penalties, I propose using a Chaucer-based lesson that approaches plagiarism by considering student psychology, viewing plagiarism and/or improper citation as a potential symptom of a larger struggle with comprehension and thus as an opportunity for intervention.

Background

Before presenting this lesson, I want to consider the psychology behind why students might be plagiarizing. Conversations with students in a first-year writing course often reveal that they are filled

with anxiety, whether because they are writing at the college level for the first time or because they have writing-related baggage from high school, such as poor letter grades or negative comments on their writing. Research on academic integrity confirms this anxiety: Zwagerman (2008) explains the pressure, starting in high school, to get good grades (83–84). Designers of policy also point to students' fear. The Council of Writing Program Administrators (2003) puts fear first in their list of the causes of plagiarism: "Students may fear failure or fear taking risks in their own work." Unfortunately, this single sentence, with no further explanation, is the shortest of the reasons on their list. Yet, we can find elaboration of this fear, perhaps ironically, expressed by already established authors. In the popular essay "Shitty First Drafts," Anne Lamott (2020) draws on her own experience as a professional writer. Describing her process, she says,

> Even after I'd been doing this for years, panic would set in. I'd try to write a lead, but instead I'd write a couple of dreadful sentences, xx them out, try again, xx everything out, and then feel despair and worry settle on my chest like an x-ray apron. It's over, I'd think calmly. I'm not going to be able to get the magic to work this time. I'm ruined. I'm through. I'm toast (Lamott 2020, 854).

Lamott's anxiety may not be far from what our students actually feel, but, unlike them, her experience has taught her to press on with the draft that gives her essay its name, knowing that it does not have to be perfect right out of the gate. This "writing as a process" is something first-year writing classes usually intend to teach (Wardle and Downs 2020, 15). If a student believes, however, that a perfect piece of writing can be produced right away, then it is no surprise if they think that copying and pasting an essay from a website—or, more recently, an AI Chatbot—would be a better path for a good grade. Additionally, students' concerns about their own writing can cause them to overuse their sources, to present large chunks of quotations with little of their own ideas, a technique called "patchwriting" (See Goldsmith [2011], who argues this is part of the learning process for beginners). So, in some ways, the difference between an experienced and an inexperienced writer is not genius but rather that the former is able to work through the panic associated with writing and revising. This difference inspired me to find a way to address students' specific fears with respect to source use when I joined the First Year Writing Program at Queens College at the City University of New York (CUNY) during my doctoral fellowship in 2014.

At that time, new faculty were given a choice of themes around which syllabi for College Writing 1 (the first required writing course for all students college-wide) had been organized. My own decision to teach "Celebrity Culture" related directly to my familiarity with Chaucer. The syllabus, which was originally created by Jennifer Holl, now an Associate Professor at Rhode Island College, appealed to me because it contained four poems, including his *House of Fame*. Since my own undergraduate days using the Norton Critical Edition of Chaucer's *Dream Visions and Other Poems* (Chaucer 2008), I have associated this text with theories of authorship and the related concept of intertextuality. Intertextuality is a topic common to both medievalist scholars, on the one hand, and composition and rhetoric scholars, on the other, although their conversations about it do not tend to overlap (For medievalist scholarship, see Minnis 2010, Plumley, Di Bacco, and Jossa 2011 and 2013; for comp/rhet, see Irwin 2014 and Porter 2020). James Porter (2020) offers a helpful definition from the field of composition, which is also applicable to medieval literature: "Not infrequently, and perhaps ever and

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always, texts refer to other texts and in fact rely on them for their meaning. All texts are interdependent: We understand a text only insofar as we understand its precursors" (544). The particularly digital aspect of intertextuality is nicely described by Ruth Evans (2007) in relation to *The House of Fame*. In "Chaucer in Cyberspace," she imagines the "author" sitting in front of a computer: "On the screen is the poem he is currently working on. Behind this, he has opened a number of windows on which are copies of Latin, French, and Italian texts he has downloaded from the Internet, texts he intends to use as sources" (Evans 2007, 229). This is the world our students are accustomed to, whether the writing we assign them allows source-use or prohibits it altogether.

Although Chaucer is not an academic writer, his poem encourages a productive discussion of source citation around two important pedagogical principles, particularly for adult learners. First, it makes the discussion more student-centered, which is often the goal of our classrooms (See Davidson and Katopodis 2022). Rather than just telling our classes "Do this" or more often with plagiarism, "Don't do that!!! (with several exclamation points), student-centered learning makes the conversation about them, asking such questions as, in this case, "How do you feel about writing and using sources? What are you worried about? What confuses you?" And the second principle is the "why": the reasons for citing sources beyond simply "we were told to" and "to avoid punishment." Scholars of adult learning have noted that discussing the "why" is particularly important: college students, especially those who have gone back to school after establishing careers and families, want to know why they are learning what they are learning (See Binder 2023). And we, too, as teachers, should take these questions as opportunities to help students think more critically, a goal of the humanities. The following lesson I will present has a twofold purpose: to use Chaucer's *House of Fame* to start thinking about sources—how and when to use them and why we reference them—and to help us discuss intertextuality, particularly in relation to students' fears about writing.

The Lesson

To begin, the following are the basic materials needed and the overall structure of the lesson. As homework prior to the class session, the students should read *The House of Fame* Book I. In the case of a first-year writing course, the ultimate goal with this lesson is not about teaching Chaucer or reading his language since students might already be skeptical about reading this poem in a writing course (that said, I have also had students who, hearing that I was a medievalist, thought it was intriguing). For ease of access, I recommend looking at the text in translation, although I shall be giving examples in the original Middle English here. In a class where Middle English is studied more extensively, such as a writing intensive early English literature course, the original can be used; however, for a composition class, the students usually have never encountered it before and possibly may never encounter it again (although we can hope that they gain interest in it from this lesson!). Therefore, looking at a translation simplifies, at least to some extent, what is still a very complex text, even in Modern English. At the time this lesson was conceived in 2014, I held the class in a computer lab so that the students could emulate Evans' (2007) imagining. Students can also access these materials on their smartphones, of course, but a larger monitor is preferable for accessibility and the large amounts of text on the screen. Depending on the student body, students may more regularly bring laptops to class, as often happens in my current institution, and so these can be an alternative. The exercise can be done individually or

in groups, or possibly with the whole class (although finding answers on the spot might be more difficult). One class session, usually sometime before a paper draft is due, is sufficient unless the topics crop up again, as they did in my "Celebrity Culture" class, in which my students read the entire poem.

I recommend starting by establishing some of the background discussed earlier in this essay about ideas of authorship and current laws on intellectual property. I usually like to illustrate this with a song, one that has a plagiarism controversy associated with it. In the past, I have used Ed Sheeran's (2014) "Photograph" next to Matt Cardle's (2011) "Amazing," but there are more current possibilities such as Olivia Rodrigo's (2021) "Good 4 U," which bears close melodic similarities to Paramore's (2007) "Misery Business." One of the goals in using contemporary music is to get the students to think of an individual's work in terms of intellectual property (Lunsford, Fishman, and Liew 2013, 471). Doing so can help them take more pride in their own work and see themselves as authors and perhaps reduce incidences of plagiarism—or AI use—in that way. This conversation is important whether Chaucer is included or not, but Chaucer's poem does offer a greater historic trajectory, demonstrating that even one of the earliest English authors struggled with a sense of what we would call ownership.

This lesson continues by making a connection between Chaucer's feelings and the students' own. At the opening of the dream vision, we can direct their attention to the passage where Chaucer the narrator literally reads the writing on the wall and famously translates the opening lines of Virgil's *Aeneid*: "I wol now synge, yif I kan, / The armes and also the man" (Chaucer 2008, I.143-4). Some background on the importance of and widespread familiarity with Virgil's text is necessary because contemporary students often do not recognize these lines outright. It might be useful to compare these to famous opening lines they are more familiar with such as the ubiquitous "Once upon a time," which can work in a modern classroom without feeling dated. It can also be helpful to elicit writing advice students have received about attention-grabbing opening sentences, advice sometimes to their detriment (see Rose 1980, 789, 793–94), and thus labelling a particular moment of anxiety that they can address there and then. Armed with this knowledge, the students' task is to find Chaucer's source. When I did this lesson in a computer lab, I provided my students with a link to the Perseus Digital Library (Crane 2022) from Tufts University, which is a convenient, easy-to-use website for classical texts. The first difference I wanted my students to notice, of course, is that the *Aeneid* is in Latin; in order to use his source, Chaucer had to translate the lines into English. At this point, I like to have a brief chat with students about translation software, putting the Latin "Arma Virumque cano" (Vergil 1900, A.1.1) into Google Translate (2023), which is a familiar resource to many students, especially English Language Learners. In this case, the results, "I sing of arms and a man," are not terrible, but it is helpful to talk about the pitfalls of the software for more complex sentences.

The obvious difference students should see is the "yif I kan" line (I.143). I ask them to consider why Chaucer might have added this line to his otherwise pretty close translation. This addition has also puzzled critics: is this phrase just a loose translation or an interpolation by Geoffrey the narrator? John M. Fyler (2008) in his explanatory note to *The Riverside Chaucer*, describes it as "Add[ing] an un-Virgilian tentativeness to Virgil," (979). In an edition of the poem edited by Kathryn L. Lynch (2006), she uses similar language but adds that "Chaucer is [more] likely mocking the narrator's tentativeness here" (47). The extra phrase may have poetic uses required by English— "kan" rhymes with "man." In addition, Joseph A. Dane (1981) suggests that "kan" sounds like the Latin word "cano" [I sing] from the original line of the *Aeneid* (134–35). But whether this tentativeness is a tool of mockery or

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an expression of real anxiety, it should sound familiar to us as teachers and to our students as characteristic of beginning writers.

It might be difficult, at first, for students to believe that an established author could be expressing this hesitation sincerely and not just as a humility topos. For this reason, we discuss the earliness of the poem, that it was likely written when he was a novice like them. Scholars have generally dated the poem as between 1379 and 1380 (Chaucer 2008, 347). If that date is correct, then it is one of his earliest known works, just after the surmised date for *The Book of the Duchess* (although that dating is more controversial) (Foster 2007; Lynch 2007). It is most likely earlier than *The Canterbury Tales*, as suggested by the octosyllabic couplets (Chaucer 2008, 978). That being the case, students can think of Chaucer as a beginning writer and therefore as potentially having something in common with them. Mark Gaipa (2004), in his work on engaging with sources, notes the students' lack of authority, asking, "What authority do [students] have as writers in our classes? Apart from some little firsthand experience, not much" (421). He then describes an assignment on *The Sun Also Rises* in which the students examined multiple articles by scholars, noting that "At the start of the unit, students often feel overwhelmed by the criticism and more than a few lament that they cannot say anything about the novel that the critics have not already said" (Gaipa 2004, 421). *The House of Fame's* "yif I kan" could be an expression of that feeling, which is important to acknowledge and talk about (Chaucer 2008, I.143). Though Gaipa (2004) encourages students to view their lack of experience as a challenge, there is the possibility that they will think "No, I can't." Such doubts can lead students to plagiarize: they think that someone else literally can say (and has said) it better than they can. Speaking about this feeling in class, then, can hopefully take some of the pressure off and help students learn that they are not alone, that even canonical authors had to start somewhere. As mentioned with the popular "Shitty First Drafts" (2020) example, learning how to overcome this fear can transform an inexperienced writer to an experienced writer. Chaucer, of course, "kan" do it, that is, speak of Aeneas and the contents of the epic. And he does so in such a way that his work is considered new and different, while still, to use Gaipa's (2004) term, "breaking into the conversation." His success can, therefore, be used as a form of encouragement to show our belief in our students.

From First Line to Research

Just as the first two lines can facilitate a discussion of students' fear of writing, other parts of the poem can help students understand intertextuality. Students are ultimately learning how to deal with several sources, and similarly, Chaucer's work is neither a simple one-on-one conversation with Virgil nor a rehashing of Virgil's text. This point is easily made with Dido's speech. Because this story is unfamiliar for many of my students, I recommend giving some background and, additionally, a trigger warning since the speech occurs just before she commits suicide.[2] Chaucer has Dido say the following:

> So when she saw al utterly
> That he wolde hir of trouthe fayle,

[2] The latter is especially important to include as the topic can hit close to home with many students in the present, who often struggle with mental health.

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> And wende fro hir to Italye,
> She gan to wringe hir hondes two.
> "Allas," quod she, 'what me ys woo!
> Allas, is every man thus trewe,
> That every yer wolde have a newe,
> Yf hit so longe tyme dure,
> Or ells three, peraventure?
> As thus: of oon he wolde have fame
> In magnyfyinge of hys name;
> Another for frendshippe, seyth he;
> And yet ther shal the thridde be
> That shal be take for delyt,
> Loo, or for synguler profit."
> In suche wordes gan to pleyne
> Dydo of hir grete peyne,
> As me mete redely—
> Non other auctour alegge I (Chaucer 2008, I.296-314).

The first question is where the speech comes from. The most likely response is the *Aeneid*, which is, of course, incorrect. Chaucer drew on Ovid's *Heroides* for this section, a text he would also use again in his *Legend of Good Women* (See Chaucer 2008, 587-64; Ovid 1997), and he also made up his own lines. An exercise that breaks down the lines into Virgil's, Ovid's, and his own can show students how Chaucer is able to create his own poem although, or maybe because, he is using other authors, as apparent in the final line of the quotation, "Non other auctour alegge I" (Chaucer 2008, I.314). This line could indicate the poet's awareness of "originary authorship" versus "mimesis," to use Howard's (1995) terms (790). The split is quite unbalanced. An explanatory note in *The Riverside Chaucer* tells us, "Norton-Smith (Geoffrey Ch, 50) remarks that of the sixty lines in Dido's lament, only six or so have any parallel in Virgil; Chaucer is indeed his own auctour, since most of this lament appears to be original" (Chaucer 2008, 980). Chaucer is thus developing this story. We might take it as a case of medieval fanfiction: Chaucer using someone else's characters but creating new written material for them —in this case, telling the story over again, a mode of writing that students are quite familiar with today (See Olson 2019).

The lines following this passage relate to another practice the students are learning, citation. Chaucer says,

> Whoso to knowe hit hath purpos,
> Rede Virgile in Eneydos
> Or the Epistle of Ovyde,
> What that she wrot or that she dyde;
> And nere hyt to long to endyte,
> Be God, I wolde hyt here write (Chaucer 2008, I.377-382).

These lines function as an informal version of an in-text citation, and so bring up the more practical side of the lesson about using sources and citing them. Chaucer here tells his readers where they can go if they want to read more, rather than telling them the rest of the story himself, and this direction to sources, not the prevention of plagiarism, is the primary goal of using citations. This is a good moment to go over formatting and explain how the in-text citation directs readers to the reference list and then to the source itself to find more information. Ironically, in all our concerns about academic integrity, we as teachers sometimes lose sight of that purpose and, therefore, do not convey it to our students, who are often confused as to why proper citation matters so much (See Power 2009, 653). Kurt Scheck and Laura Miller (2021), in their textbook, aptly named *So What?*, indicate this goal in bold: **"Scholars value accurate citations because they illuminate the genealogy of our work**" and continue to explain that "Missing or incorrect citations can hinder other scholars' efforts to evaluate the credibility of an argument or to relocate a source" (65). Chaucer tells his readers where to go, just as an in-text citation directs the reader to a Works Cited page, and then provides his own response.

At this point, a synthesis of what the students have learned is helpful (Binder 2023) because adult learners like to understand the "why" of what they are doing. Pedagogy experts like Davidson and Katopodis (2022) suggest exit tickets for students "to write down one idea from the class that they can't stop thinking about or a lingering, burning question that they would like to discuss further" (111). Whether as an exit ticket or a more informal discussion as a group, guiding questions might involve the following: What can we glean from today's activities? How does Chaucer use his sources? Is he a plagiarizer? Why or why not? In this way students can come to see Chaucer as a good model for source citation, for providing what Sheck and Miller (2021) call "the genealogy of [their] work." Writing is not, in fact, produced in a vacuum by a genius, but rather by building their own ideas onto and thoughtfully talking back to a long trajectory of other writers (65).

This lesson can go in a variety of directions. If there is time, students can practice summary, which is often a tricky skill that can lead to accidental plagiarism. After putting away their text and notes, students can write a plot summary of Book I in three to five sentences. These summaries could be shared with the larger group or as a Think/Pair/Share activity, with each student sharing what they wrote with a partner first before or instead of discussing it in the class as a whole. If *The House of Fame* does not fit into the themes of the course, the lesson could use another Chaucer text or that of another medieval author like his contemporary John Gower (whose *Confessio Amantis* has recently been translated with an open access digital edition; see Gastle and Carter 2023) or even something non-medieval. Instead of a full lesson, I have also used this text as a base to create a brief instructional video for online courses (Alberghini 2023). Whether in part or a whole, whether with Chaucer or another author, those of us who identify as "medievalists" can use our knowledge to contribute to the composition classroom and to policies on plagiarism.

Conclusion

Bringing our knowledge as medievalists into the field of composition is now necessary since the state of medieval studies is one of precarity (Reitter and Wellmon 2021, 18). Chaucer scholars in English departments often find ourselves wearing two hats, not just teaching and researching in the field for

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which we have trained but also getting involved in first-year writing courses. These courses are still required in many colleges across the United States. When the National Census of Writing (2017) posed the question "Does your institution have a first-year writing requirement, whether explicit or embedded?", 96% of 446 schools surveyed answered "Yes." Many members of the New Chaucer Society work with college writing in some way, from graduate students teaching composition as a required part of their fellowship to tenured professors, such as Wallace Cleaves, one of the plenary speakers on the "Where Medieval Studies Joins Up" panel at the NCS Congress in Durham, who co-authored the *St. Martin's Guide to Writing* (2022). Medieval studies as a field is not, therefore, completely distinct from composition and rhetoric, but rather, on the medieval side at least, deeply intertwined. A composition and rhetoric scholar may not have to know much about Middle English literature, or so they think, but usually a medievalist, at least in the United States, will need to know something about college writing from a pedagogical perspective, if not a research-oriented one. This involvement of medievalist scholars in composition pedagogy is a heavy responsibility that includes teaching about and enforcing policies on plagiarism.

Though this responsibility is perhaps unfair, and part of a larger problem, our knowledge of Chaucer can help us make conversations about plagiarism less about imposing more fear onto our students and more about easing the fears that they already have. It can also help those in charge of policies and/or who have voting power on university committees to change the way our institutions address plagiarism. Instead of judging students as always-already-guilty (see Lunsford, Fishman, and Liew 2013, 476), we should be sympathetic to them as beginners and use these moments as teaching opportunities as well as outreach for those who may be struggling. Doing so can both improve our relationships with our students and also create an atmosphere of support for them. It may also bring about changes to university policies in the long term.

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