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Abstract

This essay describes the author's varied ways of teaching Chaucer in Middle English with *The Norton Canterbury Tales* (2019) using translation and the OED to keep language at the forefront of literary study. The author also pays homage to her own teachers, Kathryn L. Lynch and Derek Pearsall, who shaped her understanding and approach to Chaucer.

It feels a bit odd for me to write here about teaching *The Canterbury Tales*, seeing as I recently published a book about how I do just that. However, the opportunity allows me to augment that practical guide for undergraduates reading the poem for the first time with some meta-commentary on those issues of practicality, the pressures of our current climate, and the contingencies of historical frameworks that are faced by teachers of Chaucer's tale collection. The emergency shift to online learning in 2020 made many of us newly introspective overnight. Not only did we have to learn to create asynchronous lessons in learning management systems like Canvas and Blackboard, as well as master the capabilities of Zoom, we also confronted decisions about which kinds of learning were necessary and which could be done without, perhaps even which were time to retire for good. In distanced learning environments, language rose to the forefront. While not an entirely new concern, the challenges of teaching students how to read Middle English online made the question of translation a fresh one. Was it time for Chaucer to go the way of *Piers Plowman*, *Pearl*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in the undergraduate classroom: to be encountered in Modern English translation in place of direct contact with the "original"?

My quotation marks around "original" are meant to signal the unstable nature of any origin for Chaucer's works, for, of course, even a Middle English text is a highly mediated one. Promulgated by different scribes in distinct textual environments and gathered into varied manuscript exemplars, the poem is reconstituted anew by all kinds of text-building endeavors. So, while reading *The Canterbury Tales* in Middle English can be no direct experience with what the author wrote, it still offers an imperative to engage with the contingencies of medieval texts first-hand. Of course, I can bring up matters of manuscript and editorialization while working in translation, but they threaten to appear as mere curiosities rather than being *a priori* matters of engagement. I think the engaged struggle with language is an important part of the experience of reading *The Canterbury Tales*. The work is not just a set of topical stories of thematic interest, but a field of rhetorical, dramatic, and playfully linguistic, signifying elements.

From the very beginning, language has been the driver of my love affair with Chaucer's poetry (and yes that's how I'd characterize it). I found Middle English seductively intriguing from the start. Wandering into a course on Medieval English Literature in the spring of my freshman year of college, I came for content, expecting to read tales of courtly romance with which I was already familiar. I quickly found myself in very different territory, reading Middle English lyrics and, eventually, encountering parts of Chaucer's works among those of Gower, the *Pearl*-poet, and the first few passus of *Piers Plowman*—the latter two of which were offered in verse translation. Fascination with that language, its sound as well as its ghost effects beneath the way we speak today, led me to two further courses on Chaucer, the only other classes in Middle English that were offered. Eventually I read more of *Confessio Amantis* and Langland in Middle English, among others in translation (Chretien, Boethius, and the *Romance of the Rose*—this last text in three different classes!). But Chaucer was always and only encountered in his own language. Not until I was teaching a decade later would I have to consider the issue of translation and the potential de-centralization of language when reading *The Canterbury Tales*. For a long time, these were unthinkable for me, and in many ways, they remain so though perhaps in different form.

In most general terms, I teach my students that Chaucer is a medieval poet worth knowing and, moreover, knowing in and through his own words and manner of composing. Fortunate to be writing in the London dialect that became standardized into modern English and to be printed by William Caxton, his works became a means by which classical literature was encountered in later periods. And that was how Chaucer's works became English classics in the first place. Important writers of subsequent eras (like Shakespeare, Dryden, and Dickens) read Chaucer. So too have the Moderns (Woolf, Eliot, Ford). Despite no longer being considered "a well of English undefiled," Chaucer remains a resource for newly emergent voices—most recently, Patience Agbabi and Zadie Smith. As Nabokov reminds us, good writers are at base good readers, and their new works emerge from an engagement, if not a full-out struggle, with the literary past that has helped shape them.

Chaucer's works are full of material that is difficult, not merely hard to translate. As I have discussed elsewhere*, The Knight's Tale* opens with a scene of marriage accomplished by siege before it even gets to its romance in which the lady prays not to have to participate. And that is only the first of its many issues. But rather than opening a semester of apologetics for a literature that reflected a world frustratingly different "back then," this strangeness coincides with the challenges posed by Chaucer's words and poetic syntax to make students stop and think harder about what he exposes in these stories. Few of Chaucer's tales (or works for that matter) arise out of the real world in which he lived. That is, they are not set in the courtly environment in which he served, nor are they the about the bureaucratic urban world in which he worked. Rather, they tend to be themselves imaginative renderings of the past infused with the concerns and anxieties of his present in both personal and more global terms, making direct assignation far too simplistic, as well as unfair. Chaucer may indeed be guilty of living in a past we now revile, but his works are better than he or that past may have been, and they do far more than transmit their white European hetero-masculine assumptions unquestioned.

In fact, *The Canterbury Tales* is all about questioning assumptions. Most pervasively, the stories question the assumption about who can speak both inside and around their narrative fictions. Chaucer does so not only through a character like Griselda, who must bear in patient silence the imposed will of her husband's painful designs, but also in the creation of a set of differentiated narrative personae who would have little opportunity to voice their opinions. Many are mere literary types rather than anything we'd call highly developed characters, and they are nothing like the figures inhabiting the modern novel or even Shakespeare's plays. But their stories transmit a depth of focus and shifts of perspective that many have found to host subtle institutional and social critiques that go well beyond the stopping point of estates satire. The varying levels of development for his narrating figures—particularly pointed for those with extended prologues who talk about themselves and their habitual behavior—name the different tales contained in the larger collection and distance the stories from the author who supposedly found himself among them "in a seson, on a day" (1.19). The various pilgrims tell a variety of stories; but most speak out of social locations that would normally render them, like the poor, obedient Griselda, silent. That is a radical reformulation of a literary tradition in which only those with "auctoritee" speak. Like a manuscript miscellany, Chaucer's collection contains all kinds of genres and literary types, some suited to their tellers, others more randomly assigned. Blame him not "if that ye chese amis" (1.3181) reading their offerings; sometimes his pilgrims are mere churls, as you might well know. Moreover, Chaucer thereby creates the fiction of a more authoritative posture by fabricating what sounds like a naive, slightly inept version of himself who encountered the other

pilgrim storytellers "by aventure yfalle" (1.25), gaining his authorial power in the very act of giving it away.

We forget that Chaucer was not always CHAUCER, that he was once a voice crying out from a wilderness, writing in an unprivileged language and in an unpatronized environment that left him "sitt[ing] at [his] book / til fully daswed is [his] look" (HF 658-59). This caricature of himself from the *House of Fame*, humorous as it may be as a picture of a furtive, insomniac writer, resonates in co-ordination with the fact that Chaucer has no official life as a courtly composer or royal poet of any kind. No life-record yet found records payment for any poetic productivity; instead, Chaucer wrote on his own time. Scribbling late into the night after his official business day was over and largely for a small coterie of London bureaucrats who shared his literary interests and vernacular skills, he was hardly empowered by his servile status even if he used it, and his proximity to royal households, to his best advantage. These features may very well have been the enabling conditions leading to his later prominence, but at the time they in no way afforded him the kind of social power many want to impute to him. These features would be better read (as indeed they have been in the not-so-distant past) as sites of friction, if not outright dissent. Indeed, Chaucer's choice to write in English is itself a radical decision and something of a gamble in the Anglo-Norman and Latinate environments in which he trafficked. And it is one that paid off.

Historicizing Chaucer's position, then, comes with a set of ambivalences at odds with one another and in some conflict with current prioritizations. He was an educated man, whose well-off but merchant-class father afforded him a life on the outskirts of royal circles, but he was never living an aristocratic life. His "Complaint unto his Purse," for instance, attests to the precarious and contingent nature of an existence beholden to the vicissitudes of preferment where one cannot speak directly. As recently as a decade ago, critics would have largely treated these conditions as a form of censorship and investigated ways Chaucer wrote in obscured terms about matters incapable of more direct representation. But such conditions need not signal a "coded" set of references. A more subtle set of concerns about precarity, position, and authority haunts his entire corpus. More recent pressures to rethink canons and their reifications stand in danger of collapsing these subtleties into unambiguous ideas of privilege and flattening the situations in Chaucer's poems to serve a different, but no less politically engineered, set of ends.

This discussion has wandered somewhat far from the practical, but it does represent the kind of introduction to Chaucer that I make in the first days of class. Students at my large, public university come to him for different reasons. Some come based on the time of day the class is offered, while some are urged because the course fulfills a pre-1650 area requirement for the major. Quite a few have never really heard of Chaucer. Some have read a tale or two in the large British survey course. A few have encountered him in high school. My introduction, then, is a way of selling them on this old British dude whom they likely have the wrong impression of (both ways: they just as often think he's a mere satirist and bawdy writer as well as "the Man" whose been given too much attention) and defending (silently) an entire course devoted to one work. And then the reading begins.

As outlined in the opening pages of my *Handbook*, I teach (and encourage my students to read) with the online *Oxford English Dictionary* open on the computer. A vast majority of the words in Chaucer can be easily found in the OED because of the verbal forms the OED records, even for obsolete terms. The *Middle English Dictionary* is much harder to use. If one does not have the spelling

of the headword (aka, lemma) right or does not know how to back-form it from the form one sees in one's book, the MED hits nothing. So I do not find it a great resource for learners who can't move the vowels around to make up other spellings of the words they seek. But the OED is a better resource for the question we are often asking at this point: why does the word mean what the gloss says it does? This question assumes a relation between the Middle English words students read in class and the language (often languages) they speak today. I will admit that my students are surprised to find out that they have never thought about why the words they use now mean the things that they do. This activity is as much of a reveal about Modern English as it is, for them, about learning Middle English, and that is typically fun. We spend a good part of the time looking up etymology and usage, thinking about the kind of word Chaucer has chosen, borrowed, or adapted into English for his poem. The work can often be done in the OED alone. Occasionally we have to use a resource like Wiktionary to find out what something (or the parts of something) mean in Latin or another source language.

This way of thinking gets installed in my first two weeks of term when we are reading *The General Prologue*. Here's an example of what we do with the description of the Friar, "a limitour, a ful solempne man" (1.209). Both "limitour" and "solempne" typically garner glosses (and in some cases footnotes) in various editions. Oddly, "solempne" more easily signifies its modern English equivalent, "solemn," serious or dignified, if we just remove a few letters. It's an opportunity to teach them about metathesis (the flipping of letters over time to make pronunciation easier). But "limitour" makes little sense to them without thinking about how friars live and work. So far, so good.

But reading the gloss for "limitour" tells them the denotation of the ME word is "friar." Not only do some need help on the difference among religious professions (priest, friar, and monk, among others) at this point, they also benefit from knowing why "limitour" means "friar." Its etymology, from Anglo-Norman *limiteur*, *limitour*, ultimately derived from Latin limit-, limes, meaning boundary ("of a plot of land" or "piece of land enclosed within boundaries") can be traced by clicking through the etymons on the OED site. Now the definition offered makes new sense. Limited to the convent in which they reside and, more importantly, restricted to a delimited area in which they are allowed to beg, friars are defined by the boundaries that name their profession. The work not only helps us remember why "limitour" means friar but also how friars are different from those other religious men. Meaning is *in* Chaucer's words (as well as our own) if we learn how to look for it. Such opportunities are all over the place. In *The Man of Law's Tale*, we find "deyntee to chaffare" (2.139)—a word they might recognize as "dainty" from its ME pronunciation—but that has a wider and more interesting meaning than merely "delicate," as now. Going in the opposite direction, I might ask them to look up "lusty bacheler" (from *The Wife of Bath's Tale* 3.883), two words they think they already know, or to think about the word "quyte" in fragment 1. "Lusty," "quite," and "quit" are words they recognize and therefore might not normally investigate. And yet, a look into their origins expands the range of matters signified by Chaucer's usage and, at times, their own.

One expression related to this work that I undertake early is the phrase "had levere than," which comes up often in Chaucer's writing. It might be easy to memorize that this phrase means "would rather," but I had levere that they knew why it does. "Levere" is difficult because when you type it in to the OED, you don't hit anything useful, and THAT is useful in learning how to re-search the OED. The "Quick search" results offer three answers (none of which are right): lever (n.), liver (n.), and livery (n.). However, just below the header and before we get to the list of those three useless results,

we can click to widen the search by choosing etymologies (three results), quotations (forty-eight results) and full text (forty-seven results). It's good to know how to probe the OED this way. Results for both quotations and full text will get us where we need to go: a result containing the expression "hadde levere than" or have + levere. They can go through the lists of forty-eight and forty-seven results (either will do), which are listed alphabetically. I have them sort by date, since we know we are looking for an early and obsolete usage (again, another practical lesson). And voila! Our answer is item 3: "lief, adj. (and n.) and adv." "Levere" is a form of "liefer," a word that descends from OE *leof*, *liof* > ultimately MHG lieb, liep > Gothic *liuf* -s and to the hypothesized Aryan root **leubh*- back-formed through *loubh*- and *lubh*- out of which we get words for "believe" and "love." "Lief" means "beloved" or "dear."

We see that meaning throughout *The Canterbury Tales* when someone is called dear in this way. For instance, in *The Pardoner's Tale*, the Old Man pleads to end his mortal suffering, "leve moder leet me in" (6.731), as he knocks on the ground that he calls "my modres gate" (6.730) with his staff. Applied to the phrase we are seeking to understand, "had(de) levere than" roughly means he (the subject) "had" or found something "dearer than" (some object). Harry Bailly's exclamation at the end of *The Monk's Prologue* is a famous example: "I hadde levere than a barel ale / That Goodelife my wif hadde herd this tale" (7.1893-94)—he had or considered "dearer than a barrel of ale / that Goodlief, my wife, had heard this story." The syntax is much moved around from Modern English, but we get his drift. More than memorization or just looking matters up, this way of understanding Chaucer's language makes for a different kind of engagement with the poet's works, one that gets one's hands dirty as it wrestles with the text.

Translation has been on others' minds even as the field of Chaucer studies stands in need of new Middle English editions of the poet's works, for scholarly uses as much as for potential teaching texts. In a postscript encouraging the use of translations in the recent *Cambridge Companion to* The Canterbury Tales, David Matthews (2020) urges that we (at long last) admit their necessity. He rightly calls upon us to stop telling students that Middle English is easy, offering a more open approach to the challenges posed by Chaucer's language. I too would admit it's time to embrace translation, but I would not exchange Chaucer's language for it. Instead, I *assign* a translation of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* in order to teach his ME writing and the compromises that translation is always forced to make. As Matthews recognizes, students "go straight to the translations and cribs we have condemned, and use them covertly side-by-side with the prescribed edition of Chaucer" anyway (235). This means that we need to think creatively about how to use translation as we teach students how to perform their own acts of translation. It should not be a secret so much as a skill.

One of the reasons I assign a particular translation for general use (among the others I use for other kinds of comparison) concerns form. I want students to read a poetic translation rather than a prose rendering to understand better the formal constraints of the content they are trying to process. Once they have to calculate the cost of the choices a verse translator has to make (at its simplest, sound or sense?), Chaucer immediately becomes more than mere content because to render that content to a modern reader something must be lost. The mirage of fullness or completeness that a prose version might proffer can too easily allure students into the complacency of thinking all of the text's meaning is to be found at the surface or, rather, that the surface is in some sense transparent in its signification. Anyone who has ever taught *The Miller's Tale* and opened a discussion of the term

"queynte" understands that the more simplified the lines are for comprehensibility, the more impoverished in style and limited in range. In order to understand where Nicholas's hands have gone and what it means to present his action in that way, what are we willing to pay?

When trying to follow these stories, it can sometimes be hard to remember that Chaucer also uses the techniques and constraints of poetry to tell (most of) his stories and give them their effects. Where is a particular word placed in the line? What are the rhyme words that are perhaps afforded more attention in their terminal position? How do they participate in the syntax of sentences that might run across many more lines of poetry than the rhyming couplet of most tales? How do his rhyme royal stanzas "think" differently than such couplets? But he also tends to write in a way that makes reading his words a participatory event. His fictional characters and his narrators address our sympathy and understanding in terms over which we must struggle. I'm thinking here of the many places the Wife lays bare her soul to us, confiding how "can ther no man / swere and lie as a woman can" (3.327-28). Yes, she tells us she has lied and is proficient at lying and bearing "on honde" (3.326), but does that mean we're being so "handled"—is she's lying to us too?

As teachers we are not only faced with questions about how to use and manage students' reliance on translations, we must also choose our editions. For some time, I think most of us were happy to have a single text, *The Riverside Chaucer*, for our teaching and scholarly needs. However, economic conditions have made *Riverside* a less than ideal choice. Now owned and left languishing for an update by publishing conglomerate Cengage, the obscenely expensive and outdated condition of *The Riverside Chaucer* has inspired a number of new editorial projects from major publishing houses, with the recent *Norton Chaucer* the earliest to appear. Norton has long offered a student edition of *The Canterbury Tales* in its Critical Editions series, bringing students a readable text with some focused critical essays. But the limitations of that series restrict the kind of annotations many often seek. In an almost ironically Chaucerian gesture, it's glossing that now takes center stage in such conversations about choice of edition. For while students often need the information conveyed by a heavy set of glosses and annotations, they can be overwhelmed by the cluttered look of such a page or the need to refer to endnotes continually, whether in printed or online form. These are not entirely new problems, but they are made acute in the wake of the smartphone's small format, touch-screen immediacy. A translation of Chaucer won't satisfy the matter, but a TikTok might: Chaucer condensed to meme signification. We are in the disappearing realm of long-form reading and thinking in which we swim against a current of pre-digested "messaging" from the past. I am asked all the time about the message of various tales, as if there were only one idea Chaucer seeks to convey.

The Norton Chaucer is based on the beloved edition of *Chaucer's Poetry: An Anthology for the Modern Reader* edited by E. T. Donaldson. This was my first Chaucer book, too, and I remember how relatively easy it was to read with its regularized spelling and familiar look, hard words glossed and minimal notes at the bottom of the page. Donaldson's easy conversation about each of the poems he included in the anthology was at the back of the book and was worth its hefty weight. Without Donaldson's own writing, it would have been half its size and might even have made it into softcovers. But like his editing, his commentary was also smart and welcoming. Donaldson's book (like his criticism, really) made one feel like Chaucer was easy to know. This familiarized Chaucer is not the one offered by Norton in the new edition based on Donaldson's text. The commentary is entirely gone (with the exception of very brief headnotes for each poem), and the edition as a whole aspires to a broader

audience than just the "modern reader" Donaldson addressed: a reader who was really just a beginning undergraduate who might have wandered (like me) somewhat unawares into a Chaucer class. In today's terms, this is both a bug and a feature. Donaldson did not aspire to scholarly citation; F. N. Robinson (whose edition[s] became *The Riverside Chaucer*) was for that. Donaldson's edition was a student edition only. By contrast, Norton is a complete edition of Chaucer, which complements Donaldson's selections with all of the other works one might thus expect. In doing so, it "addresse[s] . . . all kinds of readers—general readers, students, their teachers, researchers—at all levels" (vii), an audience much wider than Donaldson aimed for. Given the number of "modern" editions of Chaucer before Robinson / *Riverside* (indeed, since Skeat's "monumental" Oxford edition), there's always been a potential scholarly / student split—even if, for a time, *Riverside* made it possible to bypass. Thus, looking for a single edition (for both teaching and personal reading) may be the exception rather than the rule, but it has disappointed a lot of the colleagues I know to teach out of an edition they feel they can't, or just simply don't, use for their own critical purposes.

At this unique moment, Norton has field advantage. I like the new *Norton Canterbury Tales* for its conventional presentation of Chaucer's text and its affordability. (Affordability is one of the reasons I took my *Handbook* idea to them in the first place.) The other books seeking to explain matters tale by tale in simple undergraduate terms were neither simple anymore nor affordable; most cost well above $50. Norton excels at providing high-quality books at reasonable prices. My teaching text of choice need not make edgy editorial decisions (especially those that might make reading criticism difficult by renumbering "fragments" or in Norton parlance "parts"). There have been strong arguments to this effect about fragment 5 and fragment 9, but until an edition takes up those arguments and withstands the court of academic opinion (by becoming perhaps the authoritative scholarly edition for professional publication) or even merely standing a certain test of time, I won't be looking to confuse my students with a collapse of Chaucer's fragments into nine or eight instead of the standard ten; the same principle guided the *Handbook*. Yes, this makes for another matter of critical habit rather than a proven truth about the assemblage of tales, but it succeeds by being the one that makes for more coherence in and understanding of the critical field rather than less, and that has its own value. While new editions typically owe their existence to an emergent need, only so much "new" is warranted or can be absorbed in particular situations, and the classroom has many of its own problems and needs already.

Much of the present essay has mused autobiographically on my teaching of *The Canterbury Tales*, but it has been silently formed by the models provided by two wonderful teachers of my own. Stories of academic life and training tend, these days, to be stories of trauma. But my graduate and even undergraduate experience had none. This good fortune deserves some commemoration. I have remained in close contact with both of my principal teachers since graduation, and they have both been enormously generous resources for me throughout my career. Sadly, one of them has recently passed away, and his death makes this opportunity to reconsider my own teaching and research interests in light of what and how I was taught a bittersweet one.

As a freshman at Wellesley College, I happened to be reading an historical novel, Anya Seton's *Katherine*, when I wandered into Kathryn Lynch's medieval literature classroom. Being a science and math major at the time, as well as someone who read mostly for pleasure, I had no real idea who

Chaucer was and had barely heard of *The Canterbury Tales*. I found it delightful to find stories written by a character in my novel on her syllabus, and I remember finding the situation a kind of kismet that I had not been aware was possible. I took every class she taught over my four undergraduate years and thought she had the best job I could ever imagine, which is how I wound up applying a bit too blithely to graduate school. I am pleased to count her, still, as a mentor and one of my best academic friends.

In preparation for my senior thesis that she supervised, I purchased the first critical study of Chaucer I would ever own, a copy of Derek Pearsall's *The Canterbury Tales*. Yet again, this made for another form of kismet, because I had no idea of applying to Ph.D. programs when I started reading for that project over the preceding summer. Tattered and with a separated front cover, it is still on my bookshelf. I have so long agreed with the approach to Chaucer's *Tales* in that book that I find myself misrecognizing its insights for my own thoughts. It's no understatement to say that his readings were formative. Better still was Derek's delightful (if sometimes puckish) demeanor, care, and generosity as a dissertation advisor. He did all the things teachers are supposed to do: he read our work and taught classes we needed. But he also helped us grow into the field. We had lunch with him (and Larry Benson) every Thursday before the Medieval Colloquium, where we each eventually practiced a first conference paper when we were not entertaining a visitor that he had often asked us to choose. He socialized us at Kalamazoo by introducing us to other colleagues (and made sure we had proper meals--often at very nice places like the Black Swan—when we were on tight budgets). He came to our talks. He and his wife Rosemary invited us for dinner when there were visiting medievalist guests. He made graduate study an absolute delight (which is something, I think, we rarely hear these days), even when it was hard or frustrating. He stayed in close contact with us long after we left and well after his retirement from Harvard. He visited me in Austin and hosted me (on a number of occasions), even recently, in York. Of course, Derek taught me most of what I know about Chaucer (or he said things I needed to argue with, which he often did on purpose) but, even more, how to be a good teacher to my own students both inside and out of the classroom. I strive to remember him in my own professional behavior every day but fear his like won't be seen again.

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