

St Jerome's University
ENGL 310B
Chaucer: *The Canterbury Tales*
Wednesdays 2:30–5:20 Fall 2021

Contact Info:

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Course description (from the calendar):

A study of Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*.

Course overview:

Chaucer is a love poet, a satirist, and a late medieval Christian humanist. *The Canterbury Tales* is his most accessible and popular work, his signature piece. It combines a vision of a fellowship (redeemed humanity) on pilgrimage with a collection of stories. The work includes numerous virtuoso achievements in the mouths of arresting figures, such as the Miller's Tale, the Wife of Bath's Prologue, and the Pardoner's Prologue and Tale. *The Canterbury Tales* is a prominent landmark in any journey through the country of English literature.

Chaucer displays a profound interest in the English language; he probes human delights, limitations, and the messiness of sociality; and he celebrates the embeddedness of stories in other stories – classical, biblical, oral, learned, class-based, gendered. *The Canterbury Tales* is at once familiar and strange. The challenge of this course is to develop a solid working knowledge of Chaucerian Middle English, to read and hopefully find delight in a wide selection of tales, and to bear in mind questions of literary, historical, and metaphysical (that is: intellectual and spiritual) significance that open up in different ways with each tale read, even as the language delights and reorients us.

Course objectives:

- To introduce students to the fourteenth-century poet Geoffrey Chaucer and to his wonderful work *The Canterbury Tales*
- To teach students the importance of Chaucer to English literature, to Western thought, and ultimately to shared human tradition
- To introduce students to the fascinating early form of English known as Middle English and the richness of the prevailing medieval attitude towards language

Required texts:

Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, ed. Jill Mann, London: Penguin, 2005.
Norm Klassen, *The Fellowship of the Beatific Vision*, Eugene: Cascade, 2016.

Course requirements

Readings and Translations (x3)	Fridays: 17 Sept., 1 Oct., 8 Oct.	(15%)
Mid-term	Friday 29 Oct.	(25%)
Reading	Friday 12 Nov.	(15%)
Essay outline	Friday 3 Dec.	(5%–10%)
Term paper (2100–2300 wds)	Monday 13 Dec.	(35%*)
Participation		(10%)

*The weighting of the essay will depend on the value of the outline. All assignments are due at 11:59 pm on the given date. Most due dates are Fridays, but note that the final essay is due on a Monday. Late papers will be docked 2% per day; late papers may not receive comments.

Course Schedule and Rationale

This version of my favourite course is offered in tandem with a remote version that I prepared last year. I wanted to be back with students and figured some of you would want to be back in person as well...but that others wouldn't or couldn't. Since I had already prepared videos, I thought I would offer students the flexibility of taking the course in either format. Students always have the option of attending a class/lecture in person. Conversely, if the term gets weird with Covid, we should all be able to finish the course in a timely and coherent way.

*The material isn't identical in the two formats, but the main themes, emphases, and reading strategies are consistent. The only difference marking-wise is how you participate. In the in-person version of the course, the readings from *The Canterbury Tales* are the same. The readings from my book *The Fellowship of the Beatific Vision (FBV)* are optional as they represent material normally covered in class, so they appear in parentheses.*

(Having the videos at hand while preparing live lectures every week allows me to be extra flexible, but there is a trade-off: some of the videos will have references to times and course circumstances from last year. This may make some moments seem inauthentic or stale. I will do my best to add or edit videos so that your experience of my course is as immediate as it can be, but this may not always be possible or practicable.)

*In remote learning, the video component is considered more taxing than ordinary interaction. In the remote version of this course, the video component is as succinct as possible. There's an irony here: full-body, in-person stimulus is *less* taxing than the seemingly reduced load of only having to attend to sight and sound. Certainly Chaucer celebrates and meditates on embodied life together. We do important work just by coming together to talk about what we've read and to explore Chaucer's world. Let's enjoy that!*

Wk 1: Pilgrimage (8 Sept.)

Intro to course; intro to Middle English; Wk 1 readings

Readings: The Symbolism of Pilgrimage

TCT: The General Prologue 1.1–42

(FBV: 21–28; 38–42; 42–58)

Readings: Portraits and the Plan in the Prologue

TCT: The General Prologue 1.43–78 (the Knight); 1.165–207 (the Monk); 1.361–78 (the Guildsmen); 1.445–76 (the Wife of Bath); 477–528 (the Parson); 747–858 (the plan for the pilgrimage)

Wk 2: The Classical World (15 Sept.)

Intro to Wk 2

Readings: The Problem of Tyranny

TCT: The Knight's Tale 1.859–1913; 2438–3108

(FBV: 61–85)

Reminder: 4-line translation and reading due Friday 17 Sept.

Wk 3a: From Classical to Christian (22 Sept.)

Intro to Wks 3 and 4

Readings: The Real Context of the Miller's Prologue and Tale

TCT: The Miller's Prologue and Tale 1.3109–3854

The Reeve's Prologue and Tale (1.3855–4324)*

The Shipman's Tale (7.1–434)*

*Other fabliaux (not required reading)

(FBV: 85–91; 136–40)

Recommendation: Do the reading below on MLT as part of Wk 3

Wks 3b–4: Pilgrim Interactions (29 Sept.)

Intro to Wk 3b–Wk 4 readings

Readings: The Man of Law, the Host, Chaucer, and the Parson

TCT: Intro and Epilogue to the Man of Law's Tale 2.1–98; 1163–90

Recommendation: Do the reading above on MLT as part of Wk 3

Readings: The Wife of Bath and the Pardoner

TCT: The Wife of Bath's Prologue 3.1–204; 453–828

Readings: The Wife of Bath, the Friar, and the Summoner

TCT: from the Wife of Bath's Tale, The Friar's Prologue, and the Summoner's Prologue 3.829–56; 3.1265–1300; 3.1665–1708

Reminder: 4-line translation and reading due Friday 1 Oct.

Wk 5: Forms of Tyranny and the Women Who Oppose Them I (6 Oct.)

Intro to Wks 5–6

Readings: A Husband and a Wife

TCT: The Clerk's Prologue and Tale 4.1–1212

The Merchant's Prologue and Tale (4.1213–2418)

(esp. 4.1213–66; 1816–65; 2021–41; 2132–2418)*

The Franklin's Prologue and Tale (5.709–1513)

(esp. 5.709–28; 729–52; 895–924; 1499–1513)*

*Other husbands and wives (not required reading)

(FBV: 95–106)

Reminder: 4-line translation and reading due Friday 8 Oct.

Reading Week (9–17 Oct.)

Wk 6: Forms of Tyranny and the Women Who Oppose Them II (20 Oct.)

Recap and Intro to Wk 6

Readings: A Judge and a Virgin Daughter

TCT: The Physician's Tale 6.1–968

(FBV: 106–117)

Readings: A Ruler and a Saint

TCT: The Second Nun's Prologue and Tale 8.1–553

(FBV: 117–127)

Wks 7–8: The Prudent Pilgrim as Linguistic Artist (27 Oct. – 3 Nov.)

Intro to Wks 7–8 (27 Oct.)

Readings: The Problem of Representing Reality

TCT: General Prologue 1.715–46; The Miller's Prol. 1.3167–86

(FBV: 143–59)

Readings: Drasty Rhyming

TCT: The Prologue and Tale of Sir Thopas 7.691–918; The Prologue to the Tale of Melibee 7.919–66

(FBV: 159–72)

Reading: The Inner Word

FBV: 173–88

Readings: Poetry and Prudence

TCT: from the Tale of Melibee 967–1010; 1392–1442; 1806–1886

(FBV: 189–92)

Reminder: Mid-term due 11:59 pm Friday 29 October

Wks 9–12: The Last Word? (10 Nov. – 1 Dec.)

Intro to Wks 9–12

Intro to The Pardoner's Prologue and Tale (10 Nov.)

Readings: Enveloped in Language

TCT: The Pardoner's Prologue and Tale 6.287–968

Intro to The Canon's Yeoman's Prologue (17 Nov.)

Readings: Diabolic Silence

TCT: The Canon's Yeoman's Prologue 8.554–719

Intro to The Manciple's Prologue and Tale (17 Nov.)

Readings: Imprudent Clarity

TCT: The Manciple's Prologue and Tale 9.1–362

(FBV: 192–97)

Intro to The Parson's Prologue; the Retraction (24 Nov.)

Readings: Words for Us All

TCT: The Parson's Prologue 10.1–74

(FBV: 197–202)

Readings: A Word of Belonging

TCT: Chaucer's Retraction 10.1081–1092

(FBV: 202–205)

Summary of the Course (1 Dec.)

Reading: Conclusion

(FBV: 207–209)

Reminders: Reading due Friday 12 November

Essay Outlines due Friday 3 December

Essay due Monday 13 December

Translations (with accompanying readings) (15%):

Two benefits from taking this course in-person are clarifying meaning as we go and hearing Middle English regularly. In the past I have endeavoured to teach the course on a MWF pattern to maximize proximity to the language. Among other practices, I have given opportunity for people to read aloud to one another in the relative safety of small groups. Necessity, though, is the mother of invention. We can compensate in the following way:

on 17 Sept., 1 Oct., and 8 Oct. submit a video in which you read two rhyming couplets (4 lines) and supply on Learn a literal translation of those same lines. There's no need to say anything about the lines or why you chose them, though it would be a nice way for me to connect with you, if you want to offer any personal context! Be sure to identify the lines clearly and accurately: prologue or tale name + line numbers OR fragment number + line numbers. (15% for all three, marked as a whole, not individually: ie, don't worry about how the first one reads in translation and sounds, just try to do better and better; you'll be amazed at how much you improve over time!)

Basic guidelines for translation:

1. Try to produce as literal a translation as possible. Strive for precision and accuracy.
2. Pay attention to syntax. Supply the necessary punctuation to guide the modern reader.
3. Don't worry about preserving meter, rhyme, or cadence.
4. You must choose: you cannot include options (eg in brackets) where ambiguity and multiple possibilities present themselves. Welcome to the translator's dilemma! (Hint: try to choose the best word that preserves the ambiguity you are sensing.)
5. Feel free to use the glossed words in your text. Otherwise, avoid looking up words or phrases.

Basic guidelines for pronunciation:

1. Lengthen the vowels. Concentrate on a, e, and i.

a can be short, as in bat, fat, rat; often, though, it's long, as in father or all.

-open your mouth; let your jaw and your tongue drop; hold the sound for a ridiculously long time

e can be short, as in set, get, met; often, though, it's long, as in eight or weight (even though there is no i to alert you)

-open your mouth; drop the jaw and the tongue; spread out the corners of your mouth; hold the sound for a ridiculously long time

i can be short, as in thin, tin, bin; often, though, it's long, as in machine

- spread out the corners of your mouth like you're the Joker; don't let anything drop; perch your tongue behind your lower teeth; hold the sound for a ridiculously long time. It's easy-peasy.

-say the pronoun "I" this way: not "Aye, Captain," but "one e please." Saying "I" properly is an easy win.

2. Think French. Concentrate on the -ioun ending.

this ending has two syllables

-say the i in the long way: it gets its own syllable

-say ou like you are saying ooh, la, la! or like Alexis saying "Ew, David!"

3. Think German. Concentrate on the gh and the ch sounds.

-make things sound rough, like a blender or a coffee grinder getting started.

N.B. Resource! The General Prologue, with one of the earliest manuscripts, read in ME with accompanying modernization. A very cool (new) resource. www.sd-editions.com/CantApp/GP.

Portrait Reading (15%)

Choose one of the portrait descriptions of a pilgrim or group of pilgrims from the General Prologue. Make a video of you reading it. Feel free to be dramatic and creative with it. You have almost the whole term to get comfortable with the language. You'll be fine. The portraits vary in length. **Starting at 12:01 am Wednesday 15 Sept, it's first come, first served!!!** Declare your choice on the dedicated discussion board.

Mid-term Essay (25%):

The mid-term is based on Wks 1–6 and consists of two questions: (1) characterize the interactions of the pilgrims, supported by close reading of specific phrases and short passages; (2) describe Chaucer’s concern with the problem of tyranny as he presents it with reference to Creon and to one other problematic powerful figure considered in the course so far. NB: your task in (2) especially is to demonstrate your understanding of the argument that has been presented in the course. (Approx. 1200–1300 wds)

Research Essay (35%–outline):

Write a 2100–2300 wd essay with a strong thesis, careful close reading, and evidence of consideration of at least two relevant scholarly sources. In general, the advice from *The Norton Introduction to Literature* applies: “When an assignment allows you to create your own topic, you are much more likely to build a lively and engaging essay from a particular insight or question that captures your attention and makes you want to say something, solve a problem, or stake out a position. The best papers originate in an individual response to a text and focus on a genuine question about it.”

The Essay Outline (5%–10%):

Submit, by Friday 3 December, an essay outline including a clear thesis statement, major and minor premise, and skeleton of the essay’s structure. Include a sample paragraph in which you discuss a *single phrase or line of poetry*. I am looking for your ability to do close reading, to be observant (alliteration, assonance, enjambment, internal rhyme, polyvalence and pun, repetition, rhythm, syntax, tone, visual effect, etc) and to read poetry for the relationship between form (eg what’s in the list) and content (what the poem seems to be saying). If the outline is sufficiently detailed, and it is to your advantage, I will give it a mark out of ten. Otherwise, I will give it a mark out of five. I will return the outlines as quickly as possible with suggestions for exploration or if I think there are serious issues with the proposed plan.

Select Bibliography:Primary Sources

Augustine, *The City of God; On the Trinity; Confessions*

Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*

Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *The Romance of the Rose*

Evocative Novels

Sigrud Undset, *Kristin Lavransdatter* (1922), trans. Tiina Nunnally, 2005.

Set in medieval Norway, this trilogy follows the life of the spirited daughter of a local lord.

Eugene Vodolazkin, *Laurus* (2012), trans. Lisa C. Hayden, 2015.

Set in post-medieval Russia, this novel follows the life of an orphaned boy taken in by the local herbalist and healer.

Other Sources

John Bossy, *Christianity in the West, 1400-1700*, Oxford: OUP, 1985.

D.S. Brewer, *A New Introduction to Chaucer*, London: Routledge, 1998.

C.S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image*, Cambridge: CUP, 1963.

David Steinmetz, “The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis,” in *The Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, ed. Stephen E. Fowl (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 26-38.

Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Boston: Belknap Press, 2007.

Rowan Williams, Introduction in *Dostoevsky: Language, Faith, and Fiction*, Waco: Baylor UP, 2008.

Online Resources

The General Prologue, with one of the earliest manuscripts, read in ME with accompanying modernization. A very cool (new) resource. www.sd-editions.com/CantApp/GP.

The Harvard Chaucer website. <https://chaucer.fas.harvard.edu/>

Dante's *Divine Comedy*. <https://digitaldante.columbia.edu/dante/divine-comedy/>

Info about the *Roman de la Rose*.

<https://www.gla.ac.uk/myglasgow/library/files/special/exhibns/month/feb2000.html>

The Intellectual-Spiritual Milieu

By Chaucer's day, some intellectuals had decreed that the realm of ordinary life and that of the supernatural were entirely separate. It seemed an attractive proposition: grace was something extraordinary and came to humanity (and all of creation) from beyond, from a God obviously detached from and above the created order. This view, however, represented a radical shift, and it fell to poets like Dante and Chaucer, mystics like Julian of Norwich and Catherine of Siena, political reformers like William Langland, philosophers like Nicholas of Cusa, and artists like the anonymous maker of the *Lady and the Unicorn* tapestries, to remind people of an earlier insight: that nature itself resists the kind of easy definition that might allow people to label it, box it, manipulate it, mine it, clear-cut it, conceptualize it, commodify it, and in turn do the same to people, to the things that people do (like get an education), and to God. *Chaucer's time period is one of artistic response to the separation of the natural from the supernatural.*

In preserving nature from such a seductive and nascently modern picture of self-containment, this band of intellectuals was actually calling people back to a *more difficult* way of thinking of things, one which became increasingly counterintuitive until the advent of existentialism (with honourable mention to Nietzsche). For a start, there was recognition of continuity or synthesis between the realm of God and that of humans and nature. For instance, the word *pneuma* could refer to wind, breath, or spirit, and the distinction between these realities was not at all clear (or even important). This understanding was common to ancient Greek and Christian thought alike.

The Judeo-Christian tradition did introduce a distinction, *though without sacrificing this pre-modern understanding of a synthesis*. It involved (1) recognizing a distinction between God and that-which-is-not-God and (2) continuing to acknowledge the presence of the divine in that-which-is-not-God. On this understanding, the continuity between God (or the Good) and creation underwrites the meaningfulness and rationality of the universe; the discontinuity between them allows one fully to appreciate individuality and freedom. Rationality amounts to an inhabiting, or what Chaucer refers to as "herbergage," and is inseparable from love. Reason and love cannot help but reveal themselves, but they simultaneously confound any search for beginnings, order, or clarity that attempts to escape mystery. *Strange though it may seem given the way many people project rigidity or barbarism onto the Middle Ages, such non-foundationalism became the occasion for the flourishing of humanism in Europe towards the end of the Middle Ages.*

Human history of the sort Chaucer portrays amounts to a partial record of flawed attempts to be reconciled to mystery. Through *The Canterbury Tales*, one can see that *any* society needs to worry about rationality gone amok: the desire for control, which in the Middle Ages primarily manifests itself as tyranny. A good Greek ruler can accomplish a lot for the good of all people, but even a good ruler is stumped by life's tragic possibilities. For Chaucer, Christianity declares that there will always be hope, but mostly it disrupts human efforts (in politics, in religion, and in private life) to control and manage reality. A good author wouldn't dare to claim to have the last word him or herself, but he or she can model what it can look like to live in the recognition of a shared mystery, a shared reality.

UW Policy Regarding Illness and Missed Tests:

The University of Waterloo Examination Regulations (www.registrar.uwaterloo.ca/exams/ExamRegs.pdf) state that:

- A medical certificate presented in support of an official petition for relief from normal academic requirements must provide all of the information requested on the “University of Waterloo Verification of Illness” form or it will not be accepted. This form can be obtained from Health Services or at www.healthservices.uwaterloo.ca/Health_Services/verification.html.
- If a student has a test/examination deferred due to acceptable medical evidence, he/she normally will write the test/examination at a mutually convenient time, to be determined by the course instructor.
- The University acknowledges that, due to the pluralistic nature of the University community, some students may on religious grounds require alternative times to write tests and examinations.
- Elective arrangements (such as travel plans) are not considered acceptable grounds for granting an alternative examination time.

Official statements on other relevant University of Waterloo policies:

Academic Integrity: In order to maintain a culture of academic integrity, members of the University of Waterloo community are expected to promote honesty, trust, fairness, respect, and responsibility. [Check www.uwaterloo.ca/academicintegrity/ for more information.]

Grievance: A student who believes that a decision affecting some aspect of their university life has been unfair or unreasonable may have grounds for initiating a grievance. [Read the St. Jerome’s University Policy on Student Petitions and Grievances.](#) www.sju.ca/sites/default/files/upload_file/PLCY_AOM_Student-Petitions-and-Grievances_20151211-SJUSCapproved.pdf. When in doubt, please be certain to contact the St. Jerome’s Advising Specialist, Student Affairs Office, who will provide further assistance.

Discipline: A student is expected to know what constitutes academic integrity, to avoid committing an academic offence, and to take responsibility for their actions. [Check www.uwaterloo.ca/academicintegrity/ for more information.] A student who is unsure whether an action constitutes an offence, or who needs help in learning how to avoid offences (e.g., plagiarism, cheating) or about “rules” for group work/collaboration should seek guidance from the course instructor, academic advisor, or the Associate Dean. When misconduct has been found to have occurred, disciplinary penalties will be imposed under the [St. Jerome’s University Policy on Student Discipline](#), www.sju.ca/sites/default/files/PLCY_AOM_Student-Discipline_20131122-SJUSCapproved.pdf. For information on categories of offences and types of penalties, students should refer to University of Waterloo Policy 71, Student Discipline, www.adm.uwaterloo.ca/infosec/Policies/policy71.htm. For typical penalties, check the Guidelines for the Assessment of Penalties, www.adm.uwaterloo.ca/infosec/guidelines/penaltyguidelines.htm.

Appeals: A decision made or penalty imposed under the [St. Jerome’s University Policy on Student Petitions and Grievances](#) (other than a petition) or the [St. Jerome’s University Policy on Student Discipline](#) may be appealed if there is a ground. A student who believes they have a ground for an appeal should refer to the [St. Jerome’s University Policy on Student Appeals](#), www.sju.ca/sites/default/files/PLCY_AOM_Student-Appeals_20131122-SJUSCapproved.pdf.

Note for students with disabilities: [AccessAbility Services](http://www.uwaterloo.ca/accessability-services/), located in Needles Hall (Room 1401) at the University of Waterloo, collaborates with all academic departments to arrange appropriate accommodations for students with disabilities without compromising the academic integrity of the curriculum. If you require academic accommodations to lessen the impact of your disability, please register with AccessAbility Services at the beginning of each academic term, www.uwaterloo.ca/accessability-services/.