

English 311
Chaucer: *The Canterbury Tales*
Spring 2011



T/Th 11:00AM – 12:15PM, Oddfellows 105B

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Office: Oddfellows 213 (x2320)

Office Hours: M&W, 10:30AM – Noon; T&Th, 1:30PM – 3:30PM; & by appointment

This course offers an introduction to and thorough survey of *The Canterbury Tales*, the most famous work of the medieval English poet Geoffrey Chaucer and a central text in the English canon. An unfinished and somewhat experimental narrative, the *Tales* include nearly every genre of medieval literature, including the fable, the chivalric romance, grotesque and bawdy comedies, and religious sermons and satires. By reading these works we gain not only an understanding of Chaucer's great poetic skill and unique view of his world, but also an insightful, and often sardonic, look into medieval English society.

Written in an antiquated form of English known as "Middle English" and coming from a culture separated from our own by over 600 years, the *Tales* provide many challenges to the modern reader. But Chaucer also gives his readers many gifts, if they are attentive and persistent. Since we will be reading these texts in Middle English, our first task will be to develop a working knowledge of it as a written and spoken language. Additionally, we will spend time studying the culture from which Chaucer and his works emerged, and as such we will address a variety of issues pertinent to the *Tales*: medieval social structure and class rivalries; faith, religious hierarchies, and institutional corruption; gender and sexual difference; medieval misogyny and anti-Semitism; courtly and non-courtly culture; and poetry and the relation of aesthetics to truth. Finally, we will supplement our study of Chaucer and his time with selected scholarly works in order to develop an understanding of the variety of critical approaches to the *Tales*. By the end of the course, we will have developed a deep appreciation for Chaucer and the ability to actively engage with his writings on multiple levels.

Course Goals

At the end of this course, you will be able to:

- Describe/Summarize the major details of Geoffrey Chaucer's life and career
- Read and translate texts in Middle English
- Discuss the historical context of medieval England & its relation to Chaucer's work
- Describe the structure, styles, and major themes of *The Canterbury Tales*
- Identify the distinguishing narrative, formal, and thematic features of individual tales/speakers
- Analyze and Interpret the language, form, style, and themes of the *Tales*
- Synthesize your knowledge of form, style, language, and history to articulate complex, original interpretations of the *Tales*

Student Responsibilities

In order to reach these goals, you should:

- Attend class every day
- Prepare for every class thoroughly by completing all assigned readings and reviewing your notes
- Take copious notes on class lectures and discussion
- Participate actively in class discussion with original and insightful comments
- Complete all assignments
- Meet with your fellow students or your instructor outside of class as necessary to discuss course materials and assignments
- Adhere to all Allegheny College and classroom policies on academic integrity, classroom behavior, etc.

Course Texts

Required:

Geoffrey Chaucer. *The Canterbury Tales*. Ed. Robert Boenig and Andrew Taylor. Broadview, 2008.

Norman Davis, et al. *A Chaucer Glossary*. Oxford University Press, 1979.

Robert P. Miller, ed. *Chaucer: Sources and Backgrounds*. Oxford University Press, 1977.

Additional readings provided by instructor.

Recommended:

The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms or similar handbook of literary terminology.

The MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers. Seventh Edition.

A good dictionary. In addition to keeping a pocket dictionary with you when you read, I would highly recommend you familiarize yourself with the *Oxford English Dictionary*, available online through the Pelletier Library website. It is far superior to free online dictionaries and should *always* be used instead. You should also make use of the *Middle English Dictionary*, available online (<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/>) and in print at the Pelletier Library.

Some Additional Helpful Resources:

Teach Yourself to Read Chaucer, Lessons 1-5
(<http://www.courses.fas.harvard.edu/~chaucer/teachself/less-0.htm>)

Chaucer's Language (<http://courses.fas.harvard.edu/~chaucer/pronunciation/>)

Edwin Duncan's Basic Chaucer Glossary (<http://pages.towson.edu/duncan/glossary.html>)

Grades

Oral Pronunciation Exercise: 5%

OED/MED Exercise: 5%

Translation Exercise: 10%

Quizzes: 10%

Class Participation: 10%

Paper 1: 10%

Paper 2: 15%

Midterm Exam: 15%

Final Exam: 20%

Active participation in class discussion and activities is essential for your success and the success of the class as a whole. So, attendance and class participation are **mandatory**. You should come to class every day prepared and excited to engage with the material and your fellow students. Every student will be expected to contribute to class regularly and consistently.

One-fourth of your grade will be determined by your work on two short analytical essays, which will demonstrate your ability to construct a sophisticated interpretation of Chaucer's work. Also, you will be graded on your participation in daily discussion, your understanding and retention of key concepts, historical facts, and narrative facts, and your performance on various writing assignments both in and out of class. This will be evaluated by regular quizzes (some announced, some not), a midterm exam, and a final exam; these may test you on passage identification, short answer (factual information), translation, and short response (interpretation). There will also be a few assignments that will directly test your ability to read and understand Chaucer's language. In addition to the material explicitly outlined on the syllabus, you are responsible for any information or ideas that come up over the semester. Take careful notes, review them regularly, and internalize all the material we cover.

A significant amount of the work for this course will occur *outside* of class. We will not cover every aspect of every text or topic during our meetings, but you are still responsible for all the material assigned. The work done in the classroom is designed to provide you with models for literary analysis; your job is to take the tools and lessons learned and master them through diligent practice.

Each student is allowed 3 unexcused absences without penalty, with each additional unexcused absence incurring a 3% penalty to your final grade. Medical, college-related, and religious absences will be excused only with proper documentation, and advance notice is greatly preferred.

All students are responsible for making up any missed work; in-class assignments missed for unexcused absences cannot be made up. If you know in advance you will be absent on a day that a paper is due, turn it in early or make other arrangements with me. Late papers are penalized 1 letter grade per class-day late. All papers will be turned in online via SAKAI's "Dropbox" function.

Students with disabilities who believe they may need accommodations in this class are encouraged to contact Disability Services at (814) 332-2898. Disability Services is part of the Learning Commons and is located in Pelletier Library. Please do this as soon as possible to ensure that such accommodations are implemented in a timely fashion.

Daily Schedule

This schedule is subject to change with reasonable notice.

<u>Date</u>	<u>Topics & Readings</u>
	<i>Be sure to have read the assigned material by the date listed</i>
Th 1/20	Introduction to the Class: The Middle Ages & Middle English
T 1/25	Chaucer's Life & The Structure of the Tales <i>CT</i> : Intro pp. 9-19; <i>The General Prologue</i> l. 1-42 <i>S&B</i> pp. 11-12, 41-43
Th 1/27	<i>General Prologue</i> l. 42-164 <i>S&B</i> pp. 74-76, 86-91, 155-160, 210-213
T 2/1	<i>General Prologue</i> l. 165-528 <i>S&B</i> pp. 215-217, 221-227, 255-258
Th 2/3	<i>QUIZ.</i> <i>General Prologue</i> l. 529-end <i>S&B</i> pp. 231-234
T 2/8	<i>The Knight's Tale</i> l. 859-1029
Th 2/10	<i>OED/MED Exercise Due.</i> <i>The Knight's Tale</i> (finish Part 1) <i>S&B</i> pp. 161-186

- T 2/15 *The Knight's Tale* Part 2
S&B pp. 66-68, 192-205, 322-327
- Th 2/17 *The Knight's Tale* Part 3
- T 2/22 *The Knight's Tale* Part 4
S&B pp. 289-290, 328-343,
- Th 2/24 *The Miller's Prologue & Tale* l. 3109-3396
S&B pp. 231-234
- T 3/1 **QUIZ.** *The Miller's Tale* (finish)
S&B pp. 286-288
- Th 3/3 **Midterm Exam**
- T 3/8 *The Man of Law's Tale*: Intro, Prologue & Part 1 (l. 1-385)
- Th 3/10 *Man of Law's Tale*: Finish (Parts 2, 3, & "End-Link")
S&B pp. 13-15
- Friday 3/11 **Translation Exercise Due to SAKAI by 5pm.**
- T 3/15 *Wife of Bath's Prologue* l. 1-430
S&B pp. 365, 370-371, 373-376, 391-396, 399-405
- Th 3/17 **QUIZ.** *Wife of Bath's Prologue* l. 430-856
S&B: pp. 385-390, 411-420, 428-436
- Friday 3/18 **Paper 1 Due to SAKAI by 5pm**
- 3/21 – 3/25** **Spring Break: No Class**
- T 3/29 *The Wife of Bath's Tale* l. 857-1264
- Th 3/31 *The Friar's Prologue & Tale* l. 1265-1664
- T 4/5 *Clerk's Prologue & Tale* Parts 1 & 2 (l. 1-448)
S&B: 136-151
- Th 4/7 **QUIZ.** *Clerk's Tale* Parts 3 & 4 (l. 449-784)
S&B 218-220
- T 4/12 *Clerk's Tale* Part 5 (l. 785-1176)
L'Envoy de Chaucer l. 1177-1213

- Th 4/14 *The Merchant's Prologue & Tale* l. 1213-1865
S&B pp. 271-281
- T 4/19 *The Merchant's Tale & Epilogue* l. 1866-2440 (Includes part of
The Squire's Prologue)
- Th 4/21 **QUIZ.** *The Pardoner's Introduction, Prologue, & Tale* l. 288-968
(Begins at the end of *The Physician's Tale*)
S&B: pp. 229-230, 484-495; Figs. 16 & 17
- Monday 4/25 **Paper 2 Due to SAKAI by 5pm**
- T 4/26 *The Prioress's Prologue & Tale* (l. 453-690)
- Th 4/28 *The Nun's Priest's Prologue, Tale, & Epilogue* l. 2766-3446
S&B pp. 41-53, 55-57, 66-73
- T 5/3 *The Parson's Prologue* (l. 1-74)
Parson's Tale (l. 75-135, 220-250, 283-315, 387-425)
Chaucer's *Retraction* (pp. 454-455)
S&B pp. 34-37, 484-487 (review)
- TBA: **Final Exam**

Additional Class Policies

Please turn off all electronic devices when you come to class. You may use laptop computers, but **only** for taking notes or other work directly related to class.

Students are encouraged to stop by during office hours with any questions or concerns. You may also stop by my office at any time convenient for you, but I may or may not be available. If you absolutely cannot make my office hours, you may set an appointment with me for an alternate time.

If you would like to meet with me to discuss an assignment, please do not wait until the day before it is due. Meet with me as early as you can so that we can develop a productive course of action.

The best way to contact me is via email. I am regularly available during "business hours" (Monday – Friday, 9AM – 5PM), and if you email me during this time I usually will respond within a few hours. If you email me in the evening, over holidays, or during the weekend, I probably will not get back to you in less than 12 hours. I **do not** chat or instant message through the Allegheny webmail system.

I do not discuss grades via email or phone.

Essay-grading Criteria

So you can understand what is expected of you, I have indicated the general criteria I use to evaluate all writing assignments in this class. I base my grades on careful consideration of all aspects of a writing assignment, from the author's fluency with language to the concepts being explored. Grades are determined based on actual product, not on intention; if you intend to make a particular argument but are unable to do fully articulate it, you will be graded on the quality of the argument you do produce, not on the ideas that you were trying to write.

An essay in the A range is founded on an original, logical and coherently organized set of ideas; it makes a clearly discernible and persuasive argument (even if the reader disagrees with its argument) and articulates this argument with a clear, direct, and thoughtful thesis statement. Its thinking is, at each turn, absolutely clearly articulated: words carry thought, they don't obscure it; its sentences use only the words their ideas require, not any more; its paragraphs have distinct though related roles in the essay's larger argument, each holding one thoroughly asserted idea (not two competing ideas, not one idea half-asserted). Its sentences are without the grammatical, spelling or typographical mistakes that exacting proofreading would catch. An A paper produces a nuanced argument, considers multiple perspectives, carefully examines and explains the evidence put forth by the author, makes a clear and persuasive case for the validity of its thesis, and clearly and cogently states the significance of its argument. All of this takes *a lot of work*. If it is all very nearly accomplished, the essay usually earns an A-.

An essay in the B range: a very good paper, founded on solid, persuasive thinking, the writing of which is clearly and effectively executed. What usually prevents an "A" is a lack of originality, complex and thorough thinking, or careful proofreading. If two of these virtues are absent, the essay will usually earn a B- or rest between a B and a C; these papers often contain potential but some crucial flaw (a weak thesis statement, unclear organization, etc.) keeps it from being a solid B. Other common attributes of a B paper include: a thoughtful but not entirely persuasive argument, omission of key examples or textual evidence, inability to integrate textual evidence smoothly into your own writing, failure to fully address a perspective important to making the argument, a conclusion that does not articulate the full significance of the argument, some tangents or digressions that detract from the coherence and logic of the argument.

An essay in the C range: some conspicuous flaw usually earns an essay a C; its argument is really underdeveloped, it lacks a clear thesis statement, it is disorganized, its diction is consistently inarticulate, or it is in dire need of proofreading. Note that a C denotes "average" or sufficient work: it accomplishes the bare minimums established by the assignment and demonstrates that the student has "done the work" to a level of adequate competence but has not shown a mastery of the material or assignment. A C paper will put forth an argument, but one that is simple, obvious, or vague; it supplies some evidence from the text, but this evidence is often not suited to the case being made; its conclusion simply restates the introduction without articulating the overall significance of the essay; its introduction is often too broad and vague, or it does not suit the topic and/or argument; it follows slavishly the five paragraph structure. C papers also often include many assertions without explanation, clarification, or support; for example, a C paper will include statements like "I will analyze the importance of X" or "Y is a significant moment in the text" with little or no follow-up.

A D essay either contains more than one of the large problems cited in the "C" description or finds another way to convince its reader that the author has not spent nearly enough time on the thinking or writing in the essay. It is insufficient in multiple areas, usually lacking an argument, focusing on summary rather than analysis, and without a clear articulation of distinct ideas in each paragraph across the paper. D papers often contain numerous factual errors, unsupported assertions, digressions completely inappropriate to the topic, illogical or incomprehensible interpretations, or numerous and distracting problems in organization, grammar, spelling, etc.

An F essay misses the mark on all criteria (originality, articulateness, persuasiveness, organization, the absence of writing mistakes) or is handed in very late.

Some other factors:

A paper that lacks an identifiable thesis or argument will earn *at best* a C-

A paper that lacks evidence in the form of direct textual quotation (or contains only minimal textual evidence) will earn *at best* a C-

A paper that contains no argument or analysis but instead is largely summary, description, or observations lacking a unifying thesis will earn *at best* a C-

A paper that adheres slavishly to the five paragraph structure or is otherwise not organized logically based on its content and argument will earn *at best* a C-

A paper that contains numerous errors in spelling, syntax, word usage, formatting, citation, etc. will earn a *minimum* penalty of one full letter grade (from an A to a B, from a B- to a C-, etc)

Please note that these factors are solely negative, and if your paper does not fall under one of these flaws that does *not* guarantee a higher grade. For example, if you have an abundance of textual evidence that does not mean you will necessarily get a grade any higher than a C-

Class Participation

While it is difficult to quantify the success of a student's contributions to class discussion (at our best we all of course contribute differently), here are the general standards I will use to grade participation:

A range: Participation at this level is marked by its active nature, its consistency, and its quality. When **A** participants read an assignment, they *prepare* to participate in a class discussion; they read the assignments fully, carefully and critically enough to be ready not just to respond to my questions but also to initiate discussion with comments and questions of their own. Such participants will also come to class ready to make and argue assertions about the reading and to think out loud about a text's relation to its contexts; they will attend to the comments of others in class, agree, elaborate or civilly disagree with them, bring our attention to passages from the

reading to make their point and at times connect such thinking with earlier readings or previous class discussions. In short, students who by their engagement in class discussion throughout the semester show themselves to be true students of the course material –persistently conscientious and inquiring – will get an **A** for their efforts. They will also make the course a lot better. (By the way, substituting quantity of participation for quality will not work.)

B range: Students who come to every class, have almost always done all the reading, and consistently respond to the questions of others in a way that demonstrates their command of the reading will earn a **B** participation grade. What separates this effort from an **A** one is not so much quantity (teachers are remarkably good at detecting bs) as the level of preparation – one's reading and thinking – that has gone on before one gets to class, especially the kind that enables students to *initiate* discussion. But you can't get a **B** participation grade by just showing up, either, or by talking every once and a while.

C range: A **C** participant comes to almost all the classes, usually has done most of the reading most of the time, but not with the energy necessary to demonstrate through participation their ongoing engagement with the material. Such a discussant contributes infrequently, maybe one time every other class.

D range: Automatic pilot mode. You were physically there most of the time, spoke a few times all semester maybe, but that was it.

F: Not coming to class is the traditional route.

Please Note: Students who are reluctant to talk in class can partially compensate for their silence by e-mailing me comments and questions about the reading *before* the class discussion of it. If you define yourself as “shy,” though, please don't convert this definition into permission not to talk. People get “writer's block” but still must hand papers in on time; others have “test anxiety” and take tests. In this class, participating in discussions is an obligation as important as test and papers, so keeping mum isn't really an option for those who expect to succeed.