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**From the Selected Works of Alison (Ganze) Langdon**

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2015

# Introduction to Innovative Approaches to Teaching Chaucer

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# Introduction: Innovative Approaches to Teaching Chaucer

**Alison Langdon and David Sprunger**

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Many a medievalist has been seduced by Chaucer. Perhaps it's the totality of Chaucer's enduring characters, memorable tales, elusive narrator, and fragmented whole that keeps us coming back. We are fascinated and delighted, too, by his linguistic play and the lyrical cadence of Middle English. Chaucer may have led us to graduate study in the first place and remains a treat that organizes our pedagogical lives. For some who teach in smaller programs or two-year colleges, Chaucer's canonical status may provide the only guaranteed place for medieval texts in the curriculum and thus represents one small chance to share our love with students.

Yet not everyone who encounters Chaucer is immediately enthralled. For some teachers, the field is too large and the plow too small. They are discouraged by the thought of compressing the totality of Chaucer studies into a single-semester seminar class or, even more daunting, into a brief module of a survey course. A similar divide separates students. Some are enthusiastic about all things Chaucerian; others, less so. The historical gulf may be too wide. Students may lack intellectual context or language skills to make meaning of Chaucer or to make him meaningful to their modern selves. A number of excellent resources exploring pedagogical approaches to Chaucer are available; however, they generally offer little in the way of specific assignments or activities.<sup>1</sup> The essays in this collection offer practical, classroom-tested strategies for closing the sort of gaps outlined above and bringing Chaucer to life in new ways for teachers and for students. In soliciting and reviewing submissions, we emphasized innovation—ideas we had not encountered elsewhere—and adaptability—ideas that could be reworked by different instructors and for different contexts. The result is a set of seven essays that can help both the veteran and the novice teacher of Chaucer.

The first two essays offer holistic strategies for dealing with two potential hurdles for students: Chaucer's rich, intensive intertextuality and his challenging, unfamiliar dialect. In order to help students gain

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a historically grounded understanding of Chaucer's works, Glenn Steinberg seeks to reconstruct "the horizon of expectations within which Chaucer wrote and Chaucer's readers read" by creating a case study of Chaucer's sources and analogues. Although Steinberg's "Teaching Chaucer through Chaucer's Bookshelf" focuses specifically on the "marriage group," the essay outlines a versatile strategy that would work well with a wide range of text selections and thematic foci. Such a course structure offers advantages to the instructor as well, for while teaching Chaucer is exhilarating, the same Chaucer unit repeated semester after semester can lose its sparkle. Steinberg suggests a course design that could provide welcome variety for teachers while providing students with a consistent understanding of Chaucer's intertextual strategies. Steinberg's model is flexible, allowing a single unit or an entire course, depending on an instructor's resources.

George Bernard Shaw once said, "England and America are two countries divided by a common language." The same can be said of the Chaucer language barrier. Chaucer and the modern reader may speak the same language, but 700 years of language evolution and a trans-Atlantic divide have made the differences more immediately recognizable than the similarities. Some students are energized by the language difference and take pride in mastering the spelling, syntax, and sounds of Middle English. Other students are repelled. In "Teaching Chaucer in Middle English: A Fundamental Approach," Candace Barrington tackles the problem of students' discomfort with and resistance to Chaucer's Middle English by incorporating a sequence of scaffolded assignments across the term. These assignments not only help build students' understanding of the language itself but also of why that language matters. Though the essay deals with a full-term course dedicated to Chaucer, the assignments that Barrington shares could easily be adapted for other texts and classes.

To some extent, editorial practices may unnecessarily sustain the language barrier and thus inhibit students' engagement with Chaucer. To resolve potential disconnect, our third essay, "Chaucer: The Text and the Teaching Text," by Michael Murphy, suggests that Chaucerians follow the precedent established in Shakespeare studies, using texts with modern spellings but retaining the original words and word orders. Rather than attempt to recreate a speculative Middle English pronunciation, students read aloud the respelled text in

modern English, freeing them to focus on literary rather than linguistic concerns.

The remaining four essays address issues of language and translation within the context of a single assignment. Because students often wish for translations, this collection offers several ideas for getting students to work with translation theory in a variety of forms ranging from the linguistic to the conceptual. Roberta Milliken's "Using Rap Music to Teach an Appreciation of Chaucer's Language in the British Literature Survey Class" shares an exercise in which students in survey classes translate rap lyrics into modern English. Their discovery of lost nuance and wordplay transfers to a defensive appreciation for Chaucer in its Middle English form and a more profound understanding of the process and implications of translation. In "Lost and Found in Translation: Updating Chaucer's Status with the Millennial Generation," Sarah Powrie offers a strategy for using student understanding of modern cultural references to work back to Chaucer's general strategies in *The Canterbury Tales*. Students in her course first practice decoding more familiar visual signs from modern popular culture and then apply these skills to analyzing The General Prologue portraits, identifying any continuities that exist among medieval and modern "types." This classroom exercise prepares students to translate one of *The Canterbury Tales* for a contemporary target group and to explain their rationale for the changes made and the impacts of those changes.

Students today are very comfortable with digital media platforms, and two essays suggest ways that instructors might take advantage of new technologies to facilitate student engagement with Chaucerian texts. As she explains in "To Caunterbury They Tweete: Twitter in the Chaucer Classroom," Rebecca Brackmann challenges students to distill the essence of a Canterbury tale into a series of 140-character tweets, an assignment that requires interpretation of both tone and theme into a modern idiom. This experience leads students to a deeper engagement with "their" tales and, in turn, results in more serious investment in the research paper that follows. In a similar vein, Melissa Ridley Elmes's "Prdn Me? Text Speak, Middle English, and Chaucer's Pardoner's Tale" proposes a series of assignments that use phone-texting language—first to draw students into the language of The Pardoner's Tale and then to recognize the coded nature of language itself.

Taken together, these seven essays offer a rich range of approaches to teaching Chaucer in the twenty-first century. In drawing

on ideas from our contributors, teachers will reinvigorate our pedagogy and deepen students' appreciation of Chaucer's works.

### Note

<sup>1</sup>A notable exception is Gail Ashton and Louise Sylvester, eds., *Teaching Chaucer* (New York: Palgrave, 2007). Though focused more on conceptual approaches rather than specific assignments and activities, Joseph Gibaldi's *Approaches to Teaching Chaucer's Canterbury Tales* (New York: MLA, 1980; new edition forthcoming, 2014) and Tison Pugh and Angela Jane Weisl's *Approaches to Teaching Chaucer's Troilus and Criseyde and the Shorter Poems* (New York: Modern Language Association, 2006) are also valuable resources.

