

Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and the Late Medieval Renaissance

The fourteenth-century author, Geoffrey Chaucer, is known as the "father of English poetry" and is one of the greatest literary artists who ever lived. He was fully engaged with the political and religious issues of his day, and his works continue to delight readers for their extraordinarily vibrant and varied expressions of human experience. In this course, we read a selection from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* within the larger historical and cultural accomplishments of late medieval Western Europe. Our interdisciplinary approach will allow us to explore topics such as authority and personal identity, ethical principles and the ideals of chivalry, religious orthodoxy and heresy, love and marriage, and the development of the English language. We shall discuss Chaucer's remarkable range of literary genres in relation to other authors and literary traditions of his time, for example Dante's *Divine Comedy* and the Tales of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. Medieval pilgrimage and the metaphor of journey will be a guiding principle that will help organize our readings and discussions. We shall devote some attention to Chaucer's writings in their original Middle English, but students will have the opportunity to read the texts in modern English translation.

No previous knowledge of Chaucer or the Medieval period is required.

- Jan. 19 Orientation to the course; the historical Chaucer: education, the courtly life, soldier and diplomat; Fourteenth-century England, and the late medieval Renaissance. The language of Chaucer: an introduction.
- Jan. 26 The historical Chaucer, continued. Chaucer and the Italians: Boccaccio and Dante; Medieval pilgrimage: *The General Prologue to The Canterbury Tales*.
- Feb. 2 *The General Prologue*, continued. Religion and social structures; Medieval portraiture.
- Feb. 9 Chaucer and medieval philosophy. Introduction: Boethius, *Consolation of Philosophy*. Topics for discussion: suffering, learning, and the pursuit of happiness; human freedom and divine providence.
- Feb. 16 *The Knight's Tale*: Medieval philosophy, mythology and the classical heritage. Epic and romance.
- Feb. 23 *The Knight's Tale*, continued: Honor, death, and destiny.
- Mar. 2 *The Miller's Tale*; Introduction: Chaucer and the French tradition.
- Mar. 9 Spring Break**
- Mar. 16 *The Miller's Tale*, continued. The Miller's response to the Knight. Literary genre and poetic style; social and literary authority.

- Mar. 23** **First Essay due.** *The Reve's Tale.* The Reve's response to the Miller. Medieval social structure and personal identity; Chaucer's presentation of pilgrims and community.
- Mar. 30 *The Wife of Bath's Prologue.* Introduction: Medieval women; Chaucer the poet of love. Medieval marriage.
- Apr. 6 *Wife of Bath Prologue*, continued. The Marriage Tales. *The Wife of Bath's Tale.* Arthurian Romance: chivalry and the ethical imagination.
- Apr. 13 *The Clerk's Prologue and Tale.* The Clerk's response to the Wife of Bath. Love and anger; sacrifice and suffering.
- Apr. 20 *The Franklin's Prologue and Tale:* Chaucer and the Breton Lay. *Trouthe, gentillesse*, and the obligation of honor.
- Apr. 27 *The Pardoner's Prologue and Tale;* Religious orthodoxy and heresy. Deceit and penitence. Chaucer's "Retraction."
Open discussion: Chaucer's inheritance of ideas and accomplishments of the medieval west and his contribution to later literary traditions, including Shakespeare.
- May 4** **Final essay due**

Course Requirements:

- 1. Attendance, close reading of assigned texts, presentations, discussion questions, student participation (40%)**
- 2. Two course essays (60%)**

Weekly assignments: class presentations, discussion questions, and student participation. Each student will be responsible for one presentation (at least 20 minutes in length), which will be assigned in consultation with the professor. Presentations should be based on your close, careful reading of the text. It is not necessary to go to secondary sources, although you may. If you wish the class to do any additional reading in preparation for your presentation (a poem, an essay, for example), announce the assignment in advance so materials can be distributed. Students presenting will provide, for each member of the class, a typed outline of the presentation (the outline need not be more than one page in length). You may refer to notes during your presentation, but you should not read from a paper. You should include, at the end of your presentation, further topics for discussion.

Students not presenting will come to class with (at least) one typed question per tale, essay, or other reading assigned for that class meeting. We shall use your questions to

facilitate class discussion. I will collect these discussion questions from you at the end of each class.

Essays:

Undergraduates: two essays, 6-8 pages. I will offer possible paper topics.

Graduate Students: two essays: (a) 6-8 pages; (b) 8-10 pages. You are required to read at least one secondary source (a book, or chapters from a book plus one or two articles would be a sensible plan) on your topic and incorporate the ideas of these secondary sources into your own essay, where appropriate. How does your analysis fit into the larger scholarly discussion of Chaucer's works in their historical and cultural context? I will offer possible paper topics.

Note: in order to pass the course, these requirements must be met.

No audio or video recording is allowed. This includes recording via a lap top computer.

No lap tops are permitted in class.

All other electronic devices should be turned off and put away. Students emailing or text-messaging in class will be asked to leave and will be listed as absent.

Required Texts:

Chaucer, Geoffrey, *The Canterbury Tales*. (Penguin Classics) (Paperback). Nevill Coghill, translator. Revised Edition (2003). ISBN: 0-140-42438-5

Cambridge Companion to Chaucer. Eds., Piero Boitani and Jill Mann. (Paperback). Cambridge University Press, 2nd edition (2004). ISBN: 0521815568

Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*. Translated, Introduction, and Notes by Richard H. Green. (Paperback). Prentice Hall Publishers (1962). ISBN: 002346450X

You are encouraged to familiarize yourself with *The Labyrinth: Resources for Medieval Studies*, sponsored by Georgetown University: <http://labyrinth.georgetown.edu/>

You will find on this website a collection of online Chaucer resources, including links to texts and sites about Chaucer and his time.

Academic Integrity and Responsibility

Academic Integrity: It is expected that all students abide by the Standard of Conduct outlined in Georgetown University's Honor System. Note especially the section on plagiarism, which is quoted here:

Plagiarism, in any of its forms, and whether intentional or unintentional, violates the standards of academic integrity. Plagiarism is the act of passing off as one's own the ideas or writings of another. While different academic disciplines have different modes for attributing credit, all value the contributions of individuals to the general corpus of knowledge and expertise. Students are responsible for educating themselves as to the proper mode of attributing credit in any course or field. Note that plagiarism can be said to have occurred without any affirmative showing that a student's use of another's work was intentional (IV.3.b).

Disability Notice:

Please note: if you believe you have a disability, you should contact the Academic Resource Center (arc@georgetown.edu) for further information. The Center is located in the Leavey Center, Suite 335. The Academic Resource Center is the campus office responsible for reviewing documentation provided by students with disabilities and for determining reasonable accommodations in accordance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and University policies.