

Teaching Chaucer

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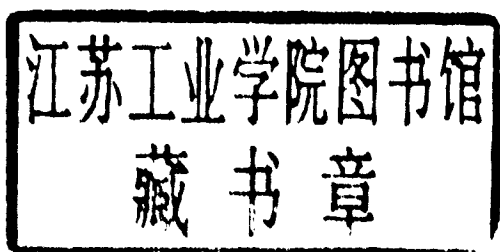
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Series Preface

One of many exciting achievements of the early years of the English Subject Centre was the agreement with *Palgrave Macmillan* to initiate the series “Teaching the New English.” The intention of the then Director, Professor Philip Martin, was to create a series of short and accessible books which would take widely-taught curriculum fields (or, as in the case of learning technologies, approaches to the whole curriculum) and articulate the connections between scholarly knowledge and the demands of teaching.

Since its inception, “English” has been committed to what we know by the portmanteau phrase “learning and teaching.” Yet, by and large, university teachers of English—in Britain at all events—find it hard to make their tacit pedagogic knowledge conscious, or to raise it to a level where it might be critiqued, shared, or developed. In the experience of the English Subject Centre, colleagues find it relatively easy to talk about curriculum and resources, but far harder to talk about the success or failure of seminars, how to vary forms of assessment, or to make imaginative use of Virtual Learning Environments. Too often this reticence means falling back on received assumptions about student learning, about teaching, or about forms of assessment. At the same time, colleagues are often suspicious of the insights and methods arising from generic educational research. The challenge for the English group of disciplines is therefore to articulate ways in which our own subject knowledge and ways of talking might themselves refresh debates about pedagogy. The implicit invitation of this series is to take fields of knowledge and survey them through a pedagogic lens. Research and scholarship, and teaching and learning are part of the same process, not two separate domains.

“Teachers,” people used to say, “are born not made.” There may, after all, be some tenuous truth in this: there may be generousities of spirit (or, alternatively, drives for didactic control) laid down in earliest childhood. But why should we assume that even “born” teachers (or novelists, or nurses, or veterinary surgeons) do not need to learn the skills of their trade? Amateurishness about teaching has far more to do with university claims to status, than with evidence about how people learn. There is a craft to shaping and promoting learning. This series of books

is dedicated to the development of the craft of teaching within English Studies.

Ben Knights
Teaching the New English Series Editor
Director, English Subject Centre
Higher Education Academy

The English Subject Centre

Founded in 2000, the English Subject Centre (which is based at Royal Holloway, University of London) is part of the subject network of the Higher Education Academy. Its purpose is to develop learning and teaching across the English disciplines in UK Higher Education. To this end it engages in research and publication (web and print), hosts events and conferences, sponsors projects, and engages in day-to-day dialogue with its subject communities.

<http://www.english.heacademy.ac.uk>

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We are grateful to the contributors to this volume for their wonderful and lively projects and for writing about their teaching in such engaging ways. We are also grateful for their incredible helpfulness in accommodating a schedule which occasionally demanded work from them at short notice. We should also like to thank Stewart Brookes for his editorial assistance in the final stages of the project.

*Gail Ashton
Louise Sylvester
March 2006*

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Steven F. Kruger is Professor of English and Medieval Studies at Queens College and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. His most recent book is *The Spectral Jew: Conversion and Embodiment in Medieval Europe* (2006), and he continues to work on medieval interreligious interactions.

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Fiona Tolhurst is Associate Professor of English at Alfred University, New York. She has published articles on medieval Arthurian literature in a variety of journals and has contributed to volumes such as *Eleanor of Aquitaine: Lord and Lady* and *Re-Viewing Le Morte Darthur*. Her current research interests include C. S. Lewis's Arthurian connections and Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*. Her teaching interests include medieval and modern Arthurian literature, Chaucer, the Middle Ages in literature and film, and women writers of the Middle Ages.

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Introduction

Gail Ashton

Introduction

The *New Chaucer Society's* colloquium on teaching Chaucer that was inaugurated in Dublin in 1994 is now a regular event. The New York meeting in 2006 had a panel on pedagogical issues, organised by Larry Benson, and was open to teachers in schools and colleges as well as universities. The present volume of essays springs from a panel presentation and discussion on innovations in Chaucer teaching that Louise Sylvester and I organised for the *New Chaucer Society* in Glasgow in 2004. Implicit within its rationale was the question of how far pedagogical theories and practices have moved in the intervening years and it is here that I would like to begin.

In her introduction to the collection of papers that emerged from that 1994 meeting, Christine Rose identifies the state of Chaucer teaching in the 1990s. Her list of the concerns common to teachers of Chaucer include the following: the place of Chaucer in a shrinking course catalogue; the effects of historical and cultural difference; how to integrate theoretical scholarship into teaching; the need to respond to a restructuring of course provision according to the principles of cross-genre, cross-period and interdisciplinarity; and a diminishing, even resistant, literacy in Middle English and medieval contexts more generally (Rose 1996: 3). Then, as now, the near-impossibility of negotiating all of these issues in a single semester, or less, is the driving force of our teaching. I would certainly agree with Rose that, despite this, so many Chaucer teachers continue to devise stimulating courses for their students, often leading the way in an innovation partly borne of the necessity of responding to the dwindling take-up of medieval literature (Rose 1996: 3).

At first glance, it seems then that little has changed. There is, however, one crucial difference. In 1994, Rose speaks of the “teacher-scholars” and “master-teachers” who contributed to that forum (Rose 1996: 1). It is precisely this top-down, authoritative model of the teacher disseminating a body of knowledge (scholarship) that has shifted. *This* collection explores the notion of teacher as guide, facilitating a hands-on supported learning that takes place *in dialogue* with active learners. Some of our contributors directly confront this move (Ashton, Coote, Fitzgibbons). *All* engage it at some point to reflect on the sorts of activities we expect our students *to do*, the concomitant changes in styles of teaching and in the methods of assessment we construct.

Rose also comments on what she perceives as the happy marriage of academic research and investment in teaching and learning (Rose 1996: 2). One of the threads of my own discussion is the sense that Rose’s optimism was misplaced and that the alliance is far from unproblematic. That said, there are signs of a more positive commitment to the integration of these two crucial activities: external and in-house financial support for innovative projects, investigations and career development; the establishment of a national English Subject Centre, based at Royal Holloway, University of London, Centres of Excellence for teaching throughout the UK and of fully supported National Teaching Fellowships; the proliferation of pedagogical journals and the inclusion of such research in the Research Assessment Exercise 2008; and so on. In this more welcoming environment, perhaps what Rose hoped for over ten years ago might finally begin to come about.

Contexts

A glance at our list of contributors reveals the diversity of their backgrounds and interests. Our authors work in the UK in research-led redbrick universities and post-1992 institutions like the University of Central England, and in liberal arts colleges and large state universities in the US. Their essays mainly centre on undergraduate teaching (except Horobin and Knapp) and, save for the two in which the focus is on language, on teaching Chaucer to students of literature. Their work sets up cross-currents and a cross-pollination of ideas to speak in dialogue to and amongst each other, hence the lack of a summarising introduction; we would rather readers dip in and read across articles as well as selecting those of personal interest.

Here, and in the classroom, probably the most crucial factor influencing what we teach, and how, is the context of our particular environments.

We all begin by taking into account class size; the logistics of timetabling; aims and outcomes; whether a course is optional, compulsory, introductory, survey, or specialised stand-alone; and its place in a wider programme provision. We can and do respond to these external impositions in a variety of flexible and interesting ways, but we can't begin to design our courses until we have accounted for their contexts. Of course, we all make value judgements and philosophical choices when we teach. My intention in reminding us of some of those approaches that are unique to teachers of Chaucer, is an attempt to make them available for scrutiny and to stimulate further debate about the ways in which we might continue to negotiate them.

To some extent, the main divide appears to be between those who privilege a theoretical and critical study of Chaucer and those "pure" historicists who explore his works as a medieval cultural phenomenon (see Knapp, Kruger, Tolhurst, this volume). Interestingly, none of the essays in our volume directly discusses the former. It is as though this approach has become the new orthodoxy in Chaucer Studies, an assumption that we would do well to scrutinise further. Equally, others deploy manuscript evidence or the study of language (Horobin and Knapp), a context more readily available than in the past, thanks to the Internet and a wealth of electronic resources and projects. Some approach Chaucer through performance (Fitzgibbons, Tolhurst) and collaborative learning-as-process (Ashton, Coote, Fitzgibbons, Horobin, Kruger, Tolhurst), with the aim of allowing students some responsibility for their own learning. Others structure and deliver learning through electronic mediums (Ashton, Coote, Semper) or else use a building block model of learning, guiding and supporting students through bite-sized research tasks (Horobin, Knapp, Kruger, Semper, Coote). Above all, many teachers mix these approaches and keep in play a tension between the alterity of Chaucer and his continuities with our own time that is not unique to Chaucer Studies.

It does, though, promise "an important site for its exploration" (Field 2005: 13), a challenge that we would do well to take further if we are to continue to influence students' perceptions, provoke questions and side-step the demands of goal-oriented, passive learners. In the age of student-as-consumer, this is sometimes an unwelcome or uneasy negotiation. And so we need, once more, to think through and clarify our agendas. What do we teach: the *Canterbury Tales* or other texts, and which editions, printed or on-line? Theory or history or both? What sorts of questions do we want our students to engage and to ask of themselves? What are our hopes and visions? Are our conflicting

approaches to Chaucer a danger or key to his survival in academia? And if we do want to retain this plurality, to do *everything* in one short time, then how best might we create effective learning environments?

Even the briefest consideration of the nuts and bolts of our classrooms reveals some of the ways in which our choices as teachers actively shape and construct Chaucer Studies in equal measure to the kinds of research and scholarship we undertake. We need to ask to which resources do we guide students? How do we compile reading lists and what kinds of critical material do we use? Possibly one of the most overlooked questions is which Chaucer texts do we study?

Rosalind Field's survey of Chaucer teachers in the UK indicates that the *Tales* is our first-choice text. We seem, too, to be heavily reliant on tales like the Miller's, the Wife's, and the Pardoner's, as well as the *General Prologue* (Field 2005: 10). One of the most obvious consequences of this packaging of Chaucer is that it encourages a limiting world-view of him as simply a bawdy comedian. Less clear is the unarticulated assumption of shared values that lies behind these selections. Is it pragmatic, a decision to "sell" fun or accessible tales as part of the ways in which students might be encouraged to confront close reading of difficult or different texts? This emphasis upon the *Canterbury Tales* implicates too the afterlife of poems like *Troilus and Criseyde* or the *Legend of Good Women*, an issue taken up by Tolhurst in this volume. We need to air the possibility that the effect of our preferences, intentionally or otherwise, sidelines Chaucer's other works, or even imbues them with a sense that only these are worthy of committed, specialist study, a manoeuvre that, in the long term, further isolates Chaucer Studies.

This dichotomy is also embedded in the increasing gap between study guides to Chaucer or introductory critical texts and academic scholarship, a gulf that widens in the face of institutional disparagement of the former in spite of the considerable research investment and writing expertise they demand. Field calls for more "high-quality, scholarly works of general applicability" to mediate this divide (Field 2005: 10), but this important interface of research/teaching still lacks sufficient esteem or adequate reward. Perhaps another way forward might be to integrate introductory guides with more academic material, to offer a series of starting points and questions that invite critical analysis and reflection on *both*.

Chaucer as living tradition

The creation of any learning environment is coloured as much by what our students bring to our classrooms as by our own particular ethos. It is

often the case that students are drawn to medieval courses by awareness, however slight, of a culture they erroneously construct from contemporary and popular sources. The range of material is vast. Peter Ackroyd's *Clerkenwell Tales* (2003) is Chaucerian in spirit only. So, too, *A Knight's Tale* (2001) which features a naked Chaucer and breaks all the rules of medieval "estate." Jonathan Myerson's animated BBC TV *Tales* presents a palatable Chaucer delivered in both modern and Middle English (1998–2000), while BBC1's series of contemporary "writing-back" takes six tales to produce some interesting new versions (2003). The Royal Shakespeare Company presents the complete *Canterbury Tales* (seemingly save for the *Melibee*) at the Swan Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon (2005), before taking it on a nationwide UK tour (2006).

However welcome this initial sparking of interest might be, many versions of Chaucer circulating in popular culture do tend to give the impression that "the story of the Middle Ages is one long *fabliau*" (Remley 1996: 32), something our selection of "set" poems from the *Canterbury Tales* often aggravates. It is sometimes difficult to strike a balance between an accessible "showcase" Chaucer and one that satisfies the demands of academic rigour. My own view is that anything that has students sign up for our courses, from where we can then offer a taste of "the real thing" (Camargo 2005: 246), is a bonus. We might also use these early impressions as a starting point for dialogue. One of my openers on the electronic discussion board asks what students expect from this course and what they currently "know" about Chaucer. Sharing these perceptions allows teachers to address these issues in seminar discussions, lectures, through questions and activities, and through the readings to which we direct our students. In other words, we can construct units of study *in conversation* with students, working out from their own experiences and prejudices and actively countering them, rather than imposing answers and critical "truths." We must also remember that Field's study of Chaucer teaching testifies to the continuing popularity of Chaucer, once students overcome their initial tendencies towards reluctance and anxiety about an author whom most have never studied before and who writes in an unfamiliar language (Field 2005: 4).

Teachers of Chaucer ultimately face many demands upon their resourcefulness. It seems that either students don't want to "do" Chaucer at first, or else they expect only the bawdy comedy of popular Chaucer. There is also a certain ambivalence amongst many teachers who, on the one hand, struggle to "correct" these assumptions, and, on the other, believe that prior study of Chaucer at AS and A2 level (still the

predominant entry route into higher education in the UK) actively disadvantages students, presumably because of the conservative approaches encouraged by our examination systems (Field 2005: 5). In universities and colleges, Chaucer is increasingly offered as either a stand-alone example of medieval literature and culture, or as part of a compulsory survey or introductory course. Both occur early on in the degree programmes of many institutions. These usually first year undergraduate modules are often our only chance to advertise Chaucer in preparation for later specialist options. Yet it is also the point of entry at which our student uptake is likely to be most diverse. At the same time, there is an inherent problematic in using Chaucer as a snapshot of medieval culture. Of course, he is highly adaptable and responsive to a range of approaches; in the process he becomes accessible and up to date, especially given his poetry's pliability in the face of gendered or other theoretical manoeuvres, such as post-colonial and eco readings. Yet, this very modernisation also risks detaching Chaucer's work from its medieval context, at exactly the same time as he remains peculiarly "*unmedieval*" (Field 2005: 7). It certainly seems timely for us to revisit this practice and to consider further some of the issues arising from Chaucer's continued afterlife, both in and outside our higher education settings.

Elaine Tuttle Hansen is concerned that confining Chaucer Studies to the higher echelons of education will give us a cachet of sophisticated readers and active graduates that, nevertheless, misses "the large numbers of more underprepared, more difficult-to-teach college students who are less interested in reading" (Hansen 2005: 286). Hansen maybe overstates her case; many of the essays in this volume bear witness to some lively and innovative teaching in sometimes difficult circumstances (see especially Coote, Fitzgibbons, Kruger). Yet, paradoxically, the danger she identifies may be more acute than ever. The thorny issue of Middle English is pivotal here. More generally, we sometimes threaten to disappear behind a cultural divide, aided and abetted by a "publish or die" pressure that enforces academic specialisation and leaves Chaucer Studies stranded, to become simply elitist and bookish.

A way to negotiate this potential impasse, and to ensure that Chaucer thrives, is to take him out into schools and colleges of further education. Colloquia like Steve Ellis's "Teaching Chaucer Today" (Birmingham, June 2005) bring together higher education and school teachers to share good practice and try to build a "productive, fruitful" interface between the academy and a culture "at large" (Ellis 2000: 165). At the same time, they demonstrate "the vitality of Chaucer teaching" at all levels, often "in the face of all institutional obstacles" (Gibson 2005). Projects that

focus on digital images and visual media (Coote, this volume), on reading aloud and/or performance of Chaucer's works (Fitzgibbons, Tolhurst), CD-ROMs of performances or related material, electronic audio clips of Middle English, and creative writing projects—such as the competition accompanying BBC TV's 2003 adaptations of Chaucer—all actively contribute to a vigorous afterlife that we would do well to nurture. A heavily stratified education system that still prioritises a print medium and the academic research of the lone scholar plays its own part in skewing perceptions of Chaucer by suppressing a group dynamic, the oral and performative aspects of his works. This is, after all, vernacular poetry. It adapts and tells stories, most of them not original. Some are incomplete. All of them require and respond to an audience. Why then are we not thinking about more fluid, tentative, collaborative projects and building-in assessments that mingle product (written exam or essay) *and* process (portfolio, workshop, outcomes in forms other than written)? After all, no one can perform, modernise, translate, adapt or otherwise “write-back” unless they have already engaged an original. These are possibilities that all of our contributors confront in various ways. Steve Ellis asks “whose loss will it be if fifty years from now Chaucer remains known outside the academy only as the mouthpiece of an uncomplicated bawdy affability” (Ellis 2000: 163); we have both the answer and the means, if only we could open up a dialogue between our ivory towers and the world out there.

A question of language

The impetus for what follows is Lee Patterson's provocation that “no-one can teach Chaucer without also teaching how to read and pronounce Middle English accurately” (Patterson 1996: 20). In an era of easy access to those on-line modernisations that, as teachers, we ignore at our peril, Patterson's declaration—in reality, a clarion call for a particular ideological approach—is demonstrably untrue. Yet the question of which language, authentic Middle English or contemporary idiomatic translation, clearly remains a dilemma for most of us. I suggest that it is not the simple binary it appears; instead, it foregrounds other assumptions and issues about Chaucer Studies that, in turn, impact upon our teaching.

Writing as part of a *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* colloquium on the welfare of Chaucer Studies, Martin Camargo wonders how much longer he can go on teaching Chaucer “as a poet, while pretending that even the very best of my students are regularly reading his works in the original Middle English” (Camargo 2005: 246). For some, the decision to allow