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## Geoffrey Chaucer: The Father of English Poetry

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### Consider Middle English

My growing experience with the broad-based Committee that develops the AP Exams in English Language and Literature leaves me with the impression that many AP students think that "literature" maybe began with Shakespeare but moved as quickly as possible in the direction of Mark Twain before coming to rest with Steinbeck and Toni Morrison. On their exams, they not infrequently use the term "Old English" -- a language linguists think fell out of use about 1200 -- to describe the vocabulary of *Hamlet*. While I don't advocate teaching real Old English literature in an AP course, I do want to encourage teachers to consider Middle English and Geoffrey Chaucer. Not without reason has he been called "the father of English poetry" and "the wellspring of English undefiled."

By any sensible assessment, Chaucer is among the greatest of world poets -- by turns funny, solemn, deeply religious, and ribald. He is among the most technically varied and accomplished of English poets -- meaning that it is possible to learn a great deal about poetry from relatively short passages of his text. He is preeminently the master of the greatest neglected genre in our literature -- narrative verse, poems that tell stories.

Although the question of language is not the only or even principal question that needs to be addressed, it is obviously an intimidating one for students and teachers alike. Chaucer's English is very different from ours, but any intelligent student will, with a few moments' patience, recognize it as English. The same cannot be said of the language of *Beowulf*. The *Course Description* describing the AP English Language and Literature course does suggest that some knowledge of the historical development of our language is a necessary part of literary study, and while we cannot expect high school students to become Germanic philologists, we can expect them to comprehend that "April" might once have been spelled *Aprille*. It is possible, of course, to read Chaucer in a modernized text, just as it is possible to take a bath with your socks on. The question is not whether you *can* do it, but whether you *should* do it. The late Neville Coghill, once a famous Chaucerian at Oxford, published a readable verse translation of the *Canterbury Tales* for Penguin Books, but I recommend the facing-page bilingual edition prepared by A. Kent Hieatt and Constance Hieatt for Bantam Classics. This little book has an introduction that is adequate without being overwhelming. Since there are no living native speakers of Middle English, all reconstructions of Chaucer's sounds are to a degree hypothetical, but many excellent expert tapes and records are now available. You should try to get your students to read in a manner that does some justice to Chaucer's metrical genius, his fluent and witty rhymes, and his often outrageous puns.

### Focus on the Pilgrims

As everybody knows, the *Canterbury Tales* is a collection of "framed narratives." The fictional frame is that of a religious pilgrimage from London to Canterbury: a diverse company of 29 pilgrims, including a fictionalized version of the first-person poet, meet up by chance as they are setting out from the city. They decide to travel as a group, and, to while away the journey more pleasantly, they tell stories as they ride along. In the masterful prologue to this anthology of tales, Chaucer describes the pilgrims in vivid and often satirical detail. The ostensible religious motive of the pilgrimage is of rich thematic importance, since it becomes quite clear that the attitude of most of the pilgrims is far from conventionally pious. Chaucer makes brilliant and economical use of the "dramatic principle" -- that is, the relationship between the tellers and the tales they tell -- and the dynamic interactions, competitive and often vicious, among the pilgrims themselves. The poem poses in an inescapable way a fundamental question about all fiction: does literature amuse or does it instruct?

It would be easy to create an excellent Chaucer unit for an AP course by reading the "General Prologue" and one or two of the tales. The tales by the Miller, the Wife of Bath, the Franklin, the Pardoner, and the Nun's Priest are perennial favorites for survey courses. I particularly recommend the "Pardoner's Tale." Since it is, according to the fiction of the frame, a sermon designed to have a great impact on illiterate medieval peasants, it should be difficult, or at least embarrassing, for AP students to claim they don't "get" it. Some very bad guys win their horribly just desserts in a richly ironic fashion. But its deeper subjects,

also conspicuous to any reasonably careful reader, are of the kind that nearly guarantees engaged classroom discussion. They include hypocrisy -- a medieval vice that has only reached full maturity in our own day -- the moral and immoral uses of literature, and the limits of artistic self-consciousness, among many others. The Pardoner himself is a masterpiece of enigmatic presentation from the moral, psychological, and even sexual points of view.

### **Appreciating Chaucer's "Differentness"**

As a medievalist, I try to lead my students to an appreciation both of Chaucer's accessible modernity and his fascinating alterity -- his "differentness." That "differentness" -- which is on the surface of his Middle English language and just beneath the surface in the religious and moral ideas that animate his poetic vision -- can often be approached and closely examined in terms of individual images, lines, or couplets. When we are told of the Wife of Bath that

Of remedies of love she knew per chaunce,  
For she koude of that art the olde daunce

students may not know *exactly* what Chaucer is suggesting, but they are pretty sure he's not talking about the Virginia Reel! Chaucer concludes the description of his doctor with a typically eviscerating couplet:

For gold in phisik is a cordial  
Therefore he lovede gold in special.

What this means literally is that since in the pharmacopoeia gold is a heart medicine, he loved gold above other things. There is a little engaging philology here. How great a distance is there between a physician and a physicist, for example? What are "cordial" greetings, and what is so "cordial" about Grandma's elderberry wine? But the punch in the couplet, easily apprehended, is its satirical thrust. The doctor especially loves gold for the same reason all miserly, avaricious, or greedy people do. Toward the end of his prologue, Chaucer insists that the word must be the "cousin" to the deed described. He generally practices what he preaches.

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