

CHAUCER AND THE POETICS OF CORRUPTION

A NEW APPROACH TO *THE CANTERBURY TALES*

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Course:
Time:
Location:

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Office:
Office Hours:
Course Website:

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course examines Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, which we read in the original Middle English, focusing on the issue of corruption in the characters, author, and text. I suggest we approach *The Canterbury Tales* with a "poetics of corruption," a way of reading Chaucer's masterpiece that unites his intentional poetic performance with the accidents of history and with the reader's experience encountering manifold layers of textual intrigue in a work that is both ethically and intellectually challenging. Recognizing the congruity between Chaucer's theme of corruption and the complicated providence of the text offers entrance into a reading of *The Canterbury Tales* that illuminates the author's representation of religious society in fourteenth-century England with reference to the reader's experience with a frustrating and deceitful text.

COURSE ARGUMENT

Chaucer and the Poetics of Corruption investigates the relationship between the problematic providence of *The Canterbury Tales*, the odious moral order of this text, and the modern reader's emotional and intellectual response to these two aspects of Chaucer's masterpiece. Students of *The Canterbury Tales* have long felt the text offers a microcosm, a suggestion I want to take as literally as possible, insofar as the corrupt material condition of *The Canterbury Tales* figures a morally fragmented and ethically unreliable society.

Chaucer's audience encounters five kinds of textual corruption in any close reading of *The Canterbury Tales* – *variance*, *discrepancy*, *attribution*, *interruption*, and *imperfection* – and modern readers have the unenviable task of deciphering which corruptions are intentional and which accidental.

In the past few decades, there have been arguably two ways of interpreting the textual abnormalities that arise from a close reading of *The Canterbury Tales*. The first way points to these incongruities as limitations on the dramatic unity, and sometimes the accomplishment, of Chaucer's poetic masterpiece. The second way recuperates the contradictions in Chaucer's text, ascribes them to the author's intent, and employs them in a reading of *The Canterbury Tales* unified by a thematic consistency. Both focused so closely on what *The Canterbury Tales* actually is, neither the historicist interpretation nor the formalist interpretation offers to students of Chaucer what they really need: a way to order the experience of reading *The Canterbury Tales* that explains the relationship between text and audience. Interpretations of Chaucer's intent, while inevitable, are ultimately limited because they attempt to apply a modern hermeneutical theory of a singular text and a stable intent upon a poem that grows from a radically different conception of textuality.

The material corruptions in the document we call *The Canterbury Tales* anticipate a number of thematic corruptions in the formal structures of the tales themselves, and these corrupt literary forms in turn figure the moral corruption that runs rampant throughout the sick society that Chaucer represents. If *The Canterbury Tales* represents a sick society, and Chaucer is its physician, then his concern is not the right prescription but an accurate diagnosis. Chaucer takes the ethical challenge of church corruption, which struggles to ensure that religious officials act according to Christian principles, and refashions this discussion as a narrative representation of individual and social epistemology, describing how these clerics came to stray from the Christian path in the first place.

I shall insist the *Tales* is an epic, but I want to narrow this generic classification by asking what kind of epic Chaucer presents, given the two most familiar traditions, the unified epic and the episodic epic. An interpretation of *The Canterbury Tales*, however, will not be complete if it rests upon the ideology of form. Indeed, Chaucer directs much of his poetic project to the suggestion that entire formal systems – be they ethical or literary – can be co-opted and corrupted by the members of a sick society, which means that our approach to *The Canterbury Tales* must account for not only what the form is but also how it is used. To the ideology of form, the systematic scheme of typical concepts to be found when the form and the content of the epic are taken together, Chaucer's students must add an articulation of the ideology of mode. This study encourages readers to pluralize their approach to literature by recognizing the multiple agents and events that produce a text, and the multiple avenues of analysis that must be employed in order to account for this complicated production.

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REQUIRED TEXTS

Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, third edition, ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Chaucer MetaPage (<http://englishcomplit.unc.edu/chaucer/>)

Larry Benson, *The Geoffrey Chaucer Website* (<http://www.courses.fas.harvard.edu/~chaucer/>)

Via the UCI Libraries' English and Comparative Literature Subject Guide

(<http://www.lib.uci.edu/online/subject/subpage.php?subject=engcomp>):

The Oxford English Dictionary

The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics

Cambridge Companions Complete Collection

MLA International Bibliography

COURSE SCHEDULE

- Session 1 Chaucer and the Poetics of Corruption: A New Approach to *The Canterbury Tales*
Session 2 The Contingency of Virtue: Nominal Ethics and the Irony of Complement in Chaucer's Religious Pilgrims
 Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* (ca. 1380s-90s; p. 1483): General Prologue

CHAUCER'S LOVELY ANALOGY:

CONJUGAL AND COMPOSITIONAL AUTHORITY IN THE MARRIAGE GROUP

- Session 3 "That am nat I": Authority, Experience, and *Digressio* in The Wife of Bath's Prologue
 Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* (ca. 1380s-90s; p. 1483): The Wife of Bath's Prologue
Session 4 Lions Learning to Paint: Sovereignty and the Power of Poetry in the Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale
 Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* (ca. 1380s-90s; p. 1483): The Wife of Bath's Tale
Session 5 "Thyng that wol nat be, lat it be stille": Activity, Passivity, and the Reception of Incongruity in the Clerk's Tale
 Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* (ca. 1380s-90s; p. 1483): The Clerk's Tale
Session 6 "This question, thane, wol I ask now": Authority and Interpretive Equity in the Franklin's Tale
 Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* (ca. 1380s-90s; p. 1483): The Franklin's Prologue and Tale

MORAL AND MATERIAL ROT IN *THE CANTERBURY TALES*:

THE POETICS OF CORRUPTION IN THE CHAUCERIAN FABLIAUX

- Session 7 The Ideology of Form: Epic, Romance, and the Narrative Structure of *The Canterbury Tales*
Session 8 Virtue, Epic, and Exemplarity: The Poetics of Honor in the Knight's Tale
 Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* (ca. 1380s-90s; p. 1483): The Knight's Tale
Session 9 Mysspekyng and Reheryng: Ethical and Poetic Corruption in the Miller's Prologue and Tale
 Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* (ca. 1380s-90s; p. 1483): The Miller's Prologue and Tale
Session 10 "Til we be rotten, kan we nat be rype": Ethical Nominalism and the Fableaux in the Reeve's Prologue and Tale
 Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* (ca. 1380s-90s; p. 1483): The Reeve's Prologue and Tale
Session 11 "It rotie al the remenaunt": Ethical and Poetic Corruption in the Cook's Prologue and Tale
 Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* (ca. 1380s-90s; p. 1483): The Cook's Prologue and Tale
Session 12 Variance, Vice, Fableaux, and Satire: The Poetics of Corruption in the Shipman's Tale
 Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* (ca. 1380s-90s; p. 1483): The Shipman's Tale

THE IRONY OF EXEMPLARITY IN *THE CANTERBURY TALES*:

RELIGION AND THE POETICS OF CORRUPTION

- Session 13 Chaucer and the Lollards: The Catholic Church in England in the Fourteenth Century
Session 14 "In sondry wyse / Of sondry folk": Moral and Material Corruption in the Tale of Melibee
 Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* (ca. 1380s-90s; p. 1483): The Man of Law's Prologue,
 the Tale of Melibee, and the Monk's Prologue
Session 15 Chaucer's Clergy and the Irony of Exemplarity: The Poetics of Corruption in the Friar's Prologue and Tale

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- Session 16 Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* (ca. 1380s-90s; p. 1483): The Friar's Prologue and Tale
His Own Worst Enemy: Religious Corruption and Narrative Interruption in the Friar's and Summoner's Tales
- Session 17 Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* (ca. 1380s-90s; p. 1483): The Summoner's Prologue and Tale
"T'assoille yow in contree": Ethical Monstrosity and the Origins of Goods and Evils in the Pardoner's Tale
Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* (ca. 1380s-90s; p. 1483): The Pardoner's Introduction, Prologue, and Tale

CHRISTIAN TRAGEDY AND THE TROUBLE WITH PERFECTION: GENRE AND MODE IN THE HAGIOGRAPHIES OF *THE CANTERBURY TALES*

- Session 18 The Silent Satire: The Role of the Reader in Chaucer's Dramatization of Vice
- Session 19 Constancy, Hagiography, and Exemplarity: The Poetics of Honor in the Man of Law's Tale
Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* (ca. 1380s-90s; p. 1483): The Man of Law's Tale
- Session 20 The Legend of a Bad Man: Patience, Irony, and the Poetics of Corruption in the Clerk's Tale
Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* (ca. 1380s-90s; p. 1483): The Clerk's Tale
- Session 21 "A litel clergeon": Religious and Poetic Immaturity in the Prioress' Tale
Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* (ca. 1380s-90s; p. 1483): The Prioress' Prologue and Tale
- Session 22 Beheading the Church: Christian Tragedy in The Physician's Tale
Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* (ca. 1380s-90s; p. 1483): The Physician's Tale
- Session 23 "Fortune covered with a clowde": Medieval Tragedy in the Monk's Tale
Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* (ca. 1380s-90s; p. 1483): The Monk's Prologue and Tale;

CHAUCER'S CLERGY AND THE END OF AUTHORITY: CORRUPTION AND HONOR IN *THE CANTERBURY TALES*, FRAGMENTS VIII-X

- Session 24 "Pray yow that ye wole my werk amende": Readerly Business and the Poetics of Imperfection in the Second Nun's Tale
Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* (ca. 1380s-90s; p. 1483): The Second Nun's Prologue and Tale
- Session 25 "This sweet preest, this goodly man": The Nun's Priest and the Poetics of Honor
Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* (ca. 1380s-90s; p. 1483): The Nun's Priest's Prologue and Tale
- Session 26 Artistic Composition and Reception in the Canon's Yeoman's Tale: Magic, Skepticism, and Chaucer's Allegory for the Reader's Development
Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* (ca. 1380s-90s; p. 1483): The Canon's Yeoman's Prologue and Tale
- Session 27 "Be noon autour": The Poetics of Corruption in the Manciple's Prologue and Tale
Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* (ca. 1380s-90s; p. 1483): The Manciple's Prologue and Tale
- Session 28 "Fable noon ytold for me": The Poetics of Honor in the Parson's Prologue and Tale
Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* (ca. 1380s-90s; p. 1483): The Parson's Prologue and Tale, and Chaucer's Retraction

THE POETICS OF IMPERFECTION AND THE ENGLISH TRADITION: THE IRONY OF ENGLAND'S NATIONAL POETS

- Session 29 Inspiration and the Poetics of Imperfection: Irony and Allegory in Chaucer, Spenser, and Milton
Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* (ca. 1380s-90s; p. 1483): The Squire's Introduction and Tale
Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene* (1596): IV.ii
John Milton, *Poems* (1645): "Il Penseroso" (ca. 1632-33)
- Session 30 Choice and the Poetics of Imperfection: Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton on Mirth and Melancholy
Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* (ca. 1380s-90s; p. 1483): The Prologue and Tale of Sir Thopas
Edmund Spenser, *The Sheapheardes Calendar* ():
William Shakespeare, *Sonnets*
John Milton, *Poems* (1645): "L' Allegro" and "Il Penseroso" (ca. 1632-33)

ASSIGNMENTS AND GRADING

My evaluation of your performance in this course will be based on eight papers of increasing sophistication, as well as some more routine forum posts:

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Due	Weight	Assignment
Daily	10%	Forum posts, around 200 words each, due by midnight the night before class
Ses. 2	5%	Quiz 1: Open-book quiz on pilgrims.
Ses. 7	10%	Paper 1: 250-word (one page) exemplar of a point about a passage in the marriage group
Ses. 11	5%	Quiz 2: Open-book quiz on tales.
Ses. 13	10%	Paper 2: 500-word (two pages) essay on a passage in one of Chaucer's fableax.
Ses. 15	10%	Quiz 3: Closed-book quiz on pilgrims.
Ses. 18	10%	Paper 3: 750-word (three pages) essay on one of Chaucer's religious pilgrims.
Ses. 22	10%	Quiz 4: Closed-book quiz on tales.
Final	20%	Paper 4: 1,500-word (six pages) research article on the relationship between a pilgrim and a tale.
Final	10%	Final: Test on pilgrims and tales.

When evaluating student writing, my philosophy is to grade tough and offer tons of extra-credit. That is, I abide by the traditional scale in which a C really is average, and an A is something exceptional, but I want the option to reward improvement. The student who comes to my class with a gift for writing should have an A on his or her official transcript, and so should the student who couldn't construct a sentence at the start of the class but worked with me to write effective (even if not exceptional) papers. This system allows me to reward students for either an exceptional performance (they just write A papers because they're that good) or an exceptional effort (they work hard to improve their writing through the extra-credit assignments). There are several extra-credit exercises designed to introduce you to Chauceriana:

Due	Credit	Assignment
Ses. 2	2%	Memorize the first 18 lines of the General Prologue, and recite them for the class.
Ses. 7	1%	Read a 25-line passage for the class with reasonably correct Middle English pronunciation.
Various	2%	10-minute presentation on a tale, including at least one close reading, a thesis, and discussion questions.
1 wk. after rtn.	1-3%	Perform a substantial revision of a paper, based on instructor's comments.
Ses. 24	3%	Four-entry annotated bibliography for your research article.
Ses. 29-30	1%	Create an artistic response to <i>The Canturbury Tales</i> and present it to the class.

POLICIES

Reading: Reading assignments should be completed before the dates for which they are assigned (i.e. in time for class discussion).

Papers: Papers should be typed double-space in 12-point Times New Roman font, and printed on a laser-quality printer. They should be handed in on separate sheets of 8 1/2 X 11 paper, stapled in the upper left-hand corner. Margins should be one inch; paragraphs are to be indented one normal tab. Spaces should not be skipped between paragraphs. Bibliography and/or notes should follow MLA or Chicago Style.

Late Work: Late work will be marked down one-third of a grade (e.g. from a B to a B-) for each school day after the due date.

Attendance and Participation: I assume you will come to class, on time, and participate in our discussions, so you will not be graded on these points. Egregiously poor attendance (i.e. missing more than two classes) or egregiously poor participation (i.e. no questions or comments all quarter) will lower your final grade significantly. The upshot of my attendance and participation policy is that remarkably impressive students can expect me to raise their final grades. This policy is not arbitrary, but it is subjective, so you should do your best to get me to like you. The way to get me to like you is to come to class, always, and always prepared to contribute; make perceptive comments and ask intelligent questions in class discussion; come to office hours, and e-mail me, to discuss ideas; and be a generally decent human being.

Electronic Devices: Please don't use laptops, cell phones, and other electronic equipment, which offer too many temptations to your attention.

Plagiarism: All students are responsible for reading the UCI Academic Honesty Policy (see http://www.senate.uci.edu/9_IrvineManual/3ASMAApp.endices/App.endix08.html). If you have specific questions about what constitutes plagiarism, please ask. We shall approach our texts from a unique perspective, so it will be impossible for you to convincingly submit work that wasn't written for this class. That said, if you plagiarize work that you submit to me, I will do my best to make your life miserable, to the choral tune of an F for the course, a note on your official transcript, and a letter in your permanent file.

Disabilities: Students needing support services should contact the Disability Services Center at (949) 824-7494 (www.disability.uci.edu) as soon as possible to ensure that accommodations can be met in a timely manner.