

‘Chaucer’s World’ Study Days in Oxford for Post-16 Students: Enhancing Learning and Encouraging Wonder

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Abstract

This collaborative essay, structured as a collection of tales akin to Chaucer's, provides a multiperspectival reflection on enhancement study days, entitled 'Chaucer's World', co-organised by the University of Oxford, the Ashmolean Museum, the Bodleian Library, and secondary schools from the area. The event is aimed at UK secondary school students in their final two years of study, and is intended not only to help students with their preparation for the A-Level English Literature exam but also to instil in them appreciation for Chaucer's works, as well as for medieval literature and culture in general.

¹ Declaration of interest: Rodger Caseby's work in the Bodleian's Education Team is supported by funding from the Helen Hamlyn Trust.

Prologue by Marion Turner

One of the most difficult issues for educators is how to balance the desire to inspire with the imperative to help students to pass their exams or assessments. In recent years in the UK, as schools have been subjected to league tables, and standardised assessments have been used for very young children, this has been an ever more intractable issue. Focus too much on teaching to the test, and the joy of learning (and teaching) can vanish; focus too little on the test, and students and their parents quite reasonably feel short-changed. In this collaborative essay, we focus on one particular initiative, in which partners from the Faculty of English at the University of Oxford, the Ashmolean Museum, the Bodleian Library, and local secondary schools have worked together to try to enhance the study of Chaucer for Year 12 and Year 13 students (the final two years of secondary school). Throughout our years of delivering this day of learning activities we have tried to teach *and* to delight, to help students to feel more confident about their studies but also to encourage them to enjoy and be fascinated by the traces of medieval culture with which we are surrounded.

It is still relatively common in the UK for those in their last two years of school who have chosen English Literature as one of their specialisms (Advanced or A-level) to study a *Canterbury Tale*, most usually *The Merchant's Tale*, *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*, *The Pardoner's Tale*, *The Nun's Priest's Tale*, or *The Franklin's Tale*. In 2017, we began to run enhancement study days, called 'Chaucer's World'. These have evolved over time in a number of ways, but the core has remained the same. They have been extremely popular and successful and tend to fill up very quickly, so after a year or two we started running them twice a year. To fit in with school timetables and rhythms we usually hold these days in March, a period of the school year before the Easter holiday and before exam pressures would make it very difficult for teachers to remove pupils from school for a whole day. (Or, as Chaucerians might think of it: a time when the drought is keeping everyone at home, not yet venturing on their pilgrimages).

We made many of the key resources and lectures available online during the pandemic and these are still freely available. The basic structure of the day involves about seventy students attending from different schools. They all attend a lecture, given by me on the topic 'Chaucer's Marketplace Poetics', followed by a question-and-answer session. In this lecture, I situate their set texts in the broader context of the *Tales* and pilgrimage culture, talk specifically about historical conditions and some passages of the tales that they are studying, and open up some ideas about interpretation and reader response using medieval and modern theories. For the rest of the day, they split into smaller groups and move around three different sessions: a manuscript workshop with Nicholas Perkins at the Weston Library in the Bodleian; an object-based session at the Ashmolean, run by Clare Cory and Jim Harris with graduate students assisting; and a graduate student-led seminar, pioneered by Eleanor Baker. The day is co-ordinated by the education department at the Bodleian, particularly by Rosie Sharkey and Rodger Caseby. While many local schools are involved, one that has been particularly active is Cherwell School, a large, local, diverse secondary school. The student body is mixed in terms of social background and ability, drawing from a catchment area that includes wealthier and more deprived parts of the city. One year we ran an entire day for this school alone as they had so many students studying Chaucer, and one of the English teachers there, Charlotte Richer, is also their Academic Enrichment Ambassador. Every year, we collect detailed feedback forms from the students

and teachers which, over the years, have helped us to see what is particularly valued and effective, what works less well, and what we might develop.

One of the things that I have particularly valued in these 'Chaucer's World' days is their collaborative nature. In the first couple of years, when we were trying things out, the different partners very much worked together to shape the day and to work on its evolution. For instance, initially we did not have a graduate student-led seminar, but as feedback suggested more textual discussion would be valued and our graduate student assistants at the Ashmolean were so excellent, we decided to bring this in, and it was a great success. It is very effective that those delivering the day have different levels of experience, so that the school students encounter graduate students who were themselves in high school only a few years earlier as well as more senior professors.

What follows is a kind of collage, very much in the collaborative spirit in which we have organised and run the 'Chaucer's World' study days, giving multiple perspectives on different aspects of the experience.

For more information, visit the online resources [here](#).

The Academic's Tale by *Nicholas Perkins*

The Bodleian Library houses one of the world's great collections of medieval manuscripts. Some have been digitised, or had their highlights made accessible [online](#). However, with excellent support from the Bodleian's curators and outreach team, the Chaucer study days enable students to examine and (carefully!) touch some of these items. One immediate, hard-to-quantify, benefit is encouraging secondary school students to feel that this place is for them. That is especially important in a city whose beautiful buildings, some dating back to Chaucer's time, can seem like another country to many people living in Oxford and beyond.

The sessions also allow space for something not directly pedagogical: wonder and pleasure. My university teaching collaborations with Ashmolean curator Jim Harris have helped me understand the value of this response. It might seem frivolous alongside the highly structured assessment objectives for UK A-Level English, which students can see as an end in themselves, despite the best efforts of imaginative teachers. For that reason, I smiled when in 2018 one student feedback form, in answer to 'Which session did you enjoy most, and why?', had the simple response 'The books, I really like seeing old books'. Nevertheless, the session involves more than wonder and pleasure. I introduce the variety of late-medieval written forms, linking those forms to themes or ideas in Chaucer; I give a guided tour of a manuscript page; and I suggest how paying attention to material forms can support literary analysis, for example in debating authority, gender, intention and persona. We use examples from whichever Chaucer texts the students have read, with participants' questions shaping the session.

The featured texts have included a Genesis manuscript (MS. Auct. D. 3. 10) with commentary and glosses crowding around the scriptural text; a printed single-sheet indulgence (Broxbourne 95.16); and a parchment roll with an illustrated world history (MS. Barlow 53 [R]), which we can stretch out on a long table. I also use MS. Rawlinson poet. 223, a fifteenth-century copy of *The Canterbury Tales*; and MS. Rawlinson C. 86, a much scappier manuscript, many of whose texts relate to women's stories or voices, including the 'loathly lady' romance *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*, and Chaucer extracts. Part of the session is more practical. In small groups, students transcribe a few lines

reproduced from MS. Rawlinson 223, and discuss moving from medieval manuscript to modern edition, including issues of spelling, punctuation, glossing and notes. I go round each group to chat, give help and answer questions.

The key things that I hope students and teachers take away from this session are: a moment of wonder about an old book; realising that medieval writing is very varied; connecting material form to literary reading; seeing that books are the product of many processes and makers; and becoming more likely to come back into a library or museum and feel that they belong there.

The Graduate Student's Tale by Eleanor Baker

For many students, the English Literature A-Level will offer their first point of contact with the works of Geoffrey Chaucer and the late-medieval literary landscape. A-Level teachers are therefore faced with a huge pedagogical challenge: they must introduce a range of material that their students may never have encountered before, impress upon them the impact of Chaucer's writings on English Literature, and encourage their students to embrace Chaucer's writings in Middle English, rather than through modern English translations alone. To accomplish all of this *and* instil within students an appreciation or even an enjoyment of Chaucer's work is no mean feat.

The text-based seminar run as part of the Chaucer A-Level study day had four main aims: to broaden students' understanding of how the natural world was perceived in Chaucer's world, to encourage students to use their close-reading skills expertly when analysing small sections of *The Canterbury Tales*, to introduce students to a style of teaching used in undergraduate seminars (that is, small-group teaching that is discursive and collaborative), and, perhaps most importantly, to show students that Chaucer's writing was, and still is, rich, exciting, and relevant. It was vital that this seminar did not attempt to override the expertise and knowledge of A-Level teachers, who of course know their students and the A-Level syllabus best. Instead, this seminar was used to explore a particular facet of late-medieval understanding that students and teachers may not have sufficient time to explore in class, but which is called for in exam papers which specify students should discuss 'relevant contextual factors' in their essays.²

The seminar was constructed around an exploration of the natural world, that is, any description of nature or natural processes. From my experience in teaching outreach sessions for A-Level students, the natural world appears to represent something of an analytical safety-blanket: students are comfortable discussing pathetic fallacy and natural imagery, but they often find these observations difficult to incorporate into a wider discussion on, for example, gender, divinity, or authority. This focus on the natural world also allowed for a degree of flexibility: no matter whether students were studying *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, *The Nun's Priest's Tale*, or *The Merchant's Tale*, the overarching critical and contextual information was still applicable, and extracts from each text could be used in the close-reading exercises towards the end of the session in order to emphasise its relevance.

The seminar began with an introduction to Ecocriticism, and students were encouraged to contribute ideas as to what they might look at in *The Canterbury Tales* if they were an ecocritic (they

² This is a common phrase used in standardised exams in the United Kingdom. For instance, *Pearson Edexcel Paper 3: Poetry* exam questions often ask students to consider two extracts from one of the *Tales* considering a particular theme, and 'relate [their] discussion to relevant contextual factors'.

suggested, for example, descriptions of the landscape, understandings of bodily workings, or understandings of divine order). The seminar then moved to examine *The General Prologue*, and students were given five or so minutes to close-read the opening lines and feed back on the different kinds of understandings of the natural world shown in the short extract. These tended to start with observations about the springtime setting and the act of pilgrimage, but with some coaxing students were able to make mature and developed remarks about divine and human control over the landscape, the medicinal, culinary, and craft uses of natural products, and the connection between the natural world and first-degree relics (which are, of course, human body parts).

Students then examined some manuscript images from Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Rawlinson D. 939, a late fourteenth-century illustrated almanac of six parts that includes a prognostic thunder chart, a calendar of each month accompanied with pictures of associated agricultural activity, a zodiac calendar, a zodiac man, and a Saints' Days calendar. The illustrations within the almanac are lively and entertaining, and students especially enjoyed identifying which body parts their zodiac signs were associated with (or, more likely, consoling the unfortunate student who was born in Sagittarius). The aim of this exercise, however, was to illustrate how interconnected these different kinds of knowledge about the natural world were, and that Chaucer was astutely aware of these nuances of understanding.

Finally, we moved to a close-reading exercise which directly related to the tale the students were studying as part of their syllabus. They did so in pairs or groups, and by this point in the seminar, their reflections on the extracts were often more developed and insightful than those performed on *The General Prologue* at the start of the session. When asking them to reflect on what they enjoyed about the session, students consistently stated that they relished moving beyond surface-level observations about the natural world, and gaining a greater understanding of different late-medieval perceptions about it. The intelligence, creativity, and enthusiasm I encountered in these A-Level students, whether they were seeking an A grade or a pass grade, were remarkable. I sincerely enjoyed introducing them to Chaucer's natural world, and hope that they carry something of our investigation with them in their further pilgrimage into medieval literary culture.

The Education Officer's Tale by *Rodger Caseby*

As an Education Officer at the Bodleian Library, my job is to offer and facilitate opportunities for schools to engage with our extraordinary resources. We do this in a number of ways, for instance through exhibition visits, through collections-based workshops, and through virtual classes. For several years, one of our key activities has been study days, including the 'Chaucer's World' study days, and part of my role is to organise these days and to find ways to overcome any challenges.

Challenges in developing the 'Chaucer's World' study day included making items in the collections accessible to a wide range of students, understanding the needs of schools, and overcoming barriers that might have prevented them from attending. The pandemic posed additional challenges but also an opportunity to think creatively.

UK schools have a high degree of flexibility in choosing which texts to study, resulting in a wide variety of experience prior to post-16 study when, as well as understanding the text, they must also develop their awareness of the historical and cultural contexts of Chaucer's writing. The study day format provides students with access to expert academics alongside opportunities to engage with

contemporary texts and historical artefacts. Plenary lectures and expert panels combine with smaller workshops and seminars where groups of students study detailed elements of texts and gain an insight into the university style of teaching. The format also addressed the need of schools, highlighted in our initial consultations with teachers and reinforced in post-event feedback, for an event with sufficient benefit and relevance that would justify a day away from school to school leaders.

Considerations include:

- The benefits of the day to student progress.
- The impact on learning in other subjects because students are absent.
- The financial costs: transport to Oxford and paying substitute teachers.
- Travel time to the venue.

While some of these barriers are beyond our control, we can best support schools by maximising the benefit of the day. We consult with teachers about which elements of the *Tales* students are studying, how advanced their study is, and their objectives for the study day. This information is shared with academic colleagues in advance and guides the focus of their teaching. Combined with evaluation of post-event feedback, this information-gathering over several years has enabled us to make significant improvements. These include better access to advance resources, elimination of elements of repetition, and gathering questions in advance so we can focus on those most frequently asked.

The 2020 day was cancelled because of a national lockdown and safety measures meant we could not follow our model in 2021. We nevertheless saw an opportunity to bring some elements to a wider audience by moving online. Video recordings of talks by Marion Turner and Nick Perkins were uploaded to the schools' pages of the Bodleian's website, together with a Chaucer reading list developed over several years.

After canvassing schools who had attended physical events, it became clear that there was demand for a live virtual expert panel Q&A. We posted a web form alongside the videos that enabled students and teachers to submit questions for Marion and Nick in advance. The event ran successfully in late May 2021 and was repeated in March 2022. This latter event attracted not only schools that had attended previous study days, but others that had been unable to do so because of constraints such as loss of teaching time and transport.

The Museum Curators' Tale by Clare Cory and Jim Harris

Using the collections of the Ashmolean Museum has been a fruitful way of encouraging students on the 'Chaucer's World' study days to think beyond narrative and into the material and visual culture within which the stories are located. To examine objects of the period, considering them materially, functionally and contextually offers an approach to evidence and analysis which forms an invaluable counterpoint to textual study.

It also makes Chaucer's world a tangible, living thing. We have seen how looking closely, interrogating objects, and sharing ideas in discussion have stimulated the curiosity of students, allowing them to see in *The Canterbury Tales* a real world of real people eating, drinking, travelling, and telling stories, rather than a code to be cracked, a puzzle to be solved or an exercise in translation. To do this in the Museum, alongside university students and early-career researchers sharing new research on (for example) medieval medicine and cookery, also offers the school students a refreshing and

stimulating learning environment and role models just a little older than themselves, making the prospect of academic study more accessible and less distant.

The Ashmolean's collections make possible a thematic approach to Chaucer's stories that can then be applied to whichever texts are set. Pilgrimage can be seen through the contrasting lenses of a magnificent, enamelled and gilded reliquary casket or a humble, lead pilgrim badge. Ivory casket panels and gaming boards carved with ladies and their suitors give insight into the rituals and conventions of courtly love – and how they are ironically subverted by Chaucer, for example in *The Knight's Tale*. The sensory world of a busy, mercantile city can be evoked by cooking pots and drinking vessels found here in Oxford, and by sharing spices and herbs to smell. Samples of other materials – leather, fur, wool and linen – are used to give life to a domestic arena embodied in dress accessories like buckles, pins and purse clasps.

Not all objects are as orphaned as lost badges and broken pots. The Museum can also use objects to bring real people to life, making personal some of the seemingly impersonal institutions of Chaucer's world. A wooden angel from Ewelme, commissioned by Chaucer's granddaughter Alice de la Pole, speaks not only to the relationship between individuals and the church but also to the church's role as provider of health- and end-of-life care, as a locus of power and as a place where images, objects, colour, and ceremony gave physical form to the rhythms and seasons of the medieval year.

The value and impact of collections-based learning, though, doesn't reside simply in a better understanding of Chaucer. As Nick Perkins discusses in relation to manuscripts, it also lives in the experience of wonder and the pleasure of experience. Text is immeasurably rich in its capacity to spark the imagination. But text and object together can bring Chaucer's world within touching and breathing distance of every kind of student, sealing it in the memory as something more than a construct of word alone.

The Teacher's Tale by Charlotte Richer

Teaching Chaucer's *The Merchant's Tale* (to sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds, in classes of twenty to twenty-five), students' early questions fixate on authorial intent: 'What did Chaucer think?' and 'What does it mean when ...?'. Students crave the single, authoritative view that gives them security. They enjoy the text as a 'window' into another time and space, but they seek reductive certainty of tangible context and sentences they can start with 'In the fourteenth century, people believed that...'. As their knowledge develops, they challenge the texts with alternative readings but they still look for one to 'win': 'Is Chaucer feminist or anti-feminist?'. For most, text is authority; historic text packaged in exam-endorsed form even more so. Most see this authority as something to accept or to reject, rather than something they can bend.

Universities, as cultural institutions, carry similar authority. As a teacher, this offers opportunity: knowledge from university outreach has far higher weight than anything delivered in the classroom. The 'Chaucer's World' study days would, we hoped, complement and extend students beyond the curriculum with clarity, rigour, and ambition. The university setting would give space away from preconceptions of the classroom. Perhaps most excitingly, seeing historic texts in person would bring them 'alive'.

Our experience surpassed these expectations. Framed by engaging, generous and lively academics, the combination of rigorous knowledge and 'real' material detail transformed the way students thought about text. Not only did students understand that there was no single attitude or 'person' in the fourteenth-century but they began to situate themselves within this. They were invited to be part of an academic conversation, rather than statically in receipt of its final wisdom. By doing so, they realised for the first time that not only can the texts 'speak' to them but that they can 'speak back'. Sessions on medieval paratext, ownership and editing guided them to unpick what it means to be a reader now and the dynamic relationship between text and society. Students began to challenge – in both medieval and modern contexts – what they meant by 'official', shifting their focus from intent to questions, new identifications and challenges. They began to *talk back* to texts and critics, rather than seeing interpretations as simply a chronological progression of influence.

Conversations about paratext and manuscripts challenged their thoughts on the relationship of text and society; they saw it as dynamic, not as a static thing but a dialogue. Analysing how Chaucer pokes fun at patristic texts through the Merchant and January's selective reading of perceived authorities like Solomon gave them the license to similarly challenge 'dead old white men' – Chaucer included. Reading the *Tale* out loud together proved uncomfortably provocative, with students disconcerted by hearing the words of statements that were so against their own worldview in their own voice. Considering May as both the villainess and the victim prompted conversations on the demonisation of women and victim-shaming in the media. Placing her as the commodified object of both January and Damyan's gaze led to unexpected comparisons, such as with superheroes from Wonder Woman to Captain Marvel and, from that, to applying Dworkin's theories of 'perception as a source of pleasure' and 'purpose as perception' and discussions about internalisation of dominant narratives. Interestingly, the historical, medieval aspect provided a safe distance, a removal by language and by context that helped them to express tangled and sometimes controversial views without feeling triggered or defensive. Lacing themselves inside the texts humanised the texts in a way the students hadn't felt before.

These new frames of thinking changed the language they used in their questions. They moved from 'did' and 'is' to a more modal and speculative 'if... , then ...'. They positioned characters, texts, and readers 'in conversation with' each other. They moved to the pluralism of '-ies', not '-y', embracing the challenge of ambiguity as a reward and not a threat. Perhaps most unexpectedly, this framework for better questioning created an approach of curiosity, playfulness and sparring wholly in keeping with the spirit of Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, and one that has brought a real energy back into the classroom. Whether it can be sustained as they return to the perceived rigidity of a timed exam response or not, it has opened up powerful new ways of thinking about and positioning texts and themselves in relation to their worlds.

Final Thoughts by Marion Turner

In Chaucer's lifetime, the riots of St Scholastica's Day bore testament to hostility between university students and townspeople in Oxford. While Chaucer depicts a student, Nicholas, living rather happily with a local family, he also shows Nicholas humiliating his landlord, John, and using his own learning to dazzle and mock him. Today, although the university and its institutions make considerable efforts

to be open and accessible, many still perceive the spaces of the university as exclusive, even unwelcoming, and of course many of the spaces of the university do remain closed to most people. There are a lot of locked doors and hidden gardens in Oxford, and it is incumbent on those of us who have the keys to work towards making more of the spaces obviously accessible. The ideal is not to welcome people as lucky guests, but to make as many people as possible feel a kind of joint ownership of the objects and books that cultural institutions such as museums and libraries look after.

Hopefully, our study days do something to break down negative perceptions and to make it clear to local school students that academics are interested in talking to them and hearing their views, and that libraries and museums are their spaces. The dramatic re-designs of the physical spaces of the Ashmolean and the Weston Library (part of the Bodleian) over the last decade or so have made a real difference to the feel of these prestigious locales. Both are now much more literally open and accessible spaces, dominated by glass and offering views into multiple floors as soon as you enter. The Ashmolean collections remain free to access, as is usual for most major museums in the UK. The Weston now opens into an enormous atrium with a public coffee shop, freely-available exhibition spaces, and a reading area.

I hope we continue running our 'Chaucer's World' days, and maintaining the small, focused feel of them: they work well because we keep numbers low so that everyone can actually touch the manuscripts and contribute to the discussions. At the same time, the online elements that we have added now allow a greater number of people to benefit from some aspects of the day. Looking forward, we'd like to find ways to engage more with younger children as well, to work with partners to try to get across to children from all backgrounds that the books and the objects are for them. Not only that, but we need each generation to learn to value, to interpret, to take care of, and to appreciate these marvellous remnants of the past. None of this is possible if we don't work collaboratively: the reason these events have worked well is, I think, that the organisers and academics have listened to school students and teachers and tried hard to provide a combination of pragmatic learning and wonder.