

Chaucer in American higher education, past and present

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Chaucer is unique among British cultural exports to the United States because he is so inextricably tied to the classroom. Shakespeare as a general rule may first be introduced to modern Americans in high school, but his work has a life outside school in the theater, and it is possible for an American to discover Shakespeare first on the stage rather than on the page. British music, classical or folk, is known primarily in the concert hall and on radio; British films, in the movie houses; British art, in the museums. None of these really needs the classroom to be transplanted across the Atlantic. Although it is true that Chaucer is distinguished from his contemporaries like Gower or Hoccleve because he continues to appeal to modern sensibilities in a variety of ways, it is also true that, in the United States even more than in England, Chaucer depends on teachers to cultivate those sensibilities so that his work continues to be read.

It has always been so. Yet, one might wonder (indeed, in recent years people have asked aloud) why American students need to study Chaucer. In England, logic demands that students learning about their own heritage read an author who has been referred to, accurately or not, as the Father of English Literature. In the United States, the imperative is not quite as strong. For obvious reasons, the literary heritage of England and America are closely tied. Moreover, the self-evident linguistic and historical connections have been reinforced by a traditional Anglophilia that has been entrenched in schools, especially in the South, where wealthy city fathers in Richmond, VA, were being typical when they named the streets around their estates Canterbury, Malvern, Oxford, Cambridge, Exeter, Banbury, and Dover. For most of Chaucer's tenure in American higher education, students have studied his work and the literature of England as a precursor of America's literary heritage.¹ This cross-Atlantic cultural nationalism has been used to justify teaching Chaucer and Shakespeare in American universities. But that, surprisingly, has not always been so. Chaucer did come into American universities fairly early, but what has changed over the years are the reasons Chaucer has survived and usually thrived in the classroom.

Chaucer's place in the literary canon has been secure at least since Dryden said, 'Here is God's plenty,'² but it took much longer for his work to find a place in the college curriculum. In America, especially, Chaucer spent years looking for a home, and in a way, he came in by the back door. Appropriately for the first great ironist in English literature, there are distinct ironies in the way American students came to be studying Chaucer today. To understand how it happened, we have to look briefly at the complicated history of English studies and English departments in the United States.

Ben Franklin and Robert E. Lee: Chaucer on the coat tails of pragmatism

It is well known that Latin and Greek were the bedrock of liberal education in colleges and universities on both sides of the Atlantic until well into the 19th century, when classical education was gradually supplanted by the study of English. Chris Baldick and Terry Eagleton, drawing heavily on Baldick's work, have argued persuasively that in England this slow replacement of Classics with English was affected significantly by class distinctions and often opposed on grounds of social class. The English language was recommended for the lower and middle classes to study because, being native, it was easy

for their 'limited intellects', and its installation in the universities was opposed for its lack of rigour and intellectual effeminacy.³ Anyone can read a novel, after all. Why would you need a teacher to guide you through it? (For American opinions of the ease of English literature, see Applebee⁴). What, in fact, would the teacher teach? At the same time, the study of English had a nationalist appeal, perhaps most famously exemplified in Winston Churchill's notions about learning English first, and Latin and Greek second.⁵ And, especially in Eagleton's view, English studies became a means to assimilate the lower classes and keep them from rebelling against the status quo (*Literary Theory*, pp. 17-53). The reasons for the rise of English studies in America were analogous in some ways but were significantly different. Nationalism had to be invoked, if at all, at one remove, and in a purportedly classless society one could not argue for or against a curriculum because it suited lower classes rather than upper. In America, the case had to be made for the study of English, of English literature, and eventually of Chaucer by an appeal to pragmatism. The American self-perception as a practical people is everywhere in the history of the American college curriculum, as we see below.

English, as both grammar and literature, had been taught, of course, in primary and secondary schools from a very early date, but chiefly as a means of teaching ethics, but it could not crack a university curriculum dominated by Latin and Greek (Applebee, *Tradition and Reform*, pp. 1-19). The Yale Report of 1828 famously defended the classical curriculum, and the idea of studying English at the college level was so abnormal that 'English' is not even defined as a subject of study in Webster's unabridged dictionary as late as 1925 (or in the *OED*).⁶ But Latin and Greek were really doomed from the start in American colleges. For one thing, for most students, the study of classical languages was superficial. In 1891, Eugene H. Babbitt, a professor of modern languages at Columbia and previously at Harvard, wrote that the average student 'has probably not [learned] to read Latin, and still less probably, Greek, well enough to use them in further literary or scientific studies, if he should have occasion'.⁷

More importantly, even a profound knowledge of Latin and Greek was seen by many educated people as limited in usefulness. As early as 1750, Benjamin Franklin had proposed a curriculum in English for the Philadelphia Academy (later the University of Pennsylvania) (Parker, 'Where Do English Departments Come From?' p. 342). Franklin already recognized that English, native tongue or no, was not as easy as it seemed for boys, who tended to parrot what they read without understanding.⁸ He sounds positively Churchillian when he writes, 'tho' unacquainted with any antient [sic] or foreign Tongue, they will be Masters of their own, which is of more immediate and general Use' ('Idea of the English School', p. 29) to prepare students for business, as well as the professions. Though it would be over a hundred years before his outrageous idea took root, pragmatic rumblings against an ivory tower classicism span the entire 19th century. Laurence R. Veysey devotes an entire chapter of his book, *The Emergence of the American University*, to 'Utility'.⁹ Thomas Jefferson's 1818 plan for the University of Virginia supplements the usual classical course of study with more immediately useful courses in modern languages, as well as mechanics, acoustics, chemistry, and mineralogy.¹⁰ In 1851, Francis Smith, the president of Virginia Military Institute, one of the first scientific and engineering schools in the country, wrote, 'This is a practical age, the American people are emphatically a practical people', and complains that the educational system requires mechanics and merchants to learn Latin and Greek while the public demands

useful, technical training.¹¹ Finally, Eugene Babbitt concluded his 1891 essay by saying the study of English ‘is worthy of as high a place as any in the college curriculum; and I hope and trust that the time is speedily coming when the practical American mind will come to a realizing sense of this, and the problem will be taken up by practical American teachers and wrought out in a practical American fashion’ (‘How to Use Modern Languages’, pp. 62-3).

Though more compatible with the American character than a classical curriculum, English studies spread only gradually, partly because of the very conservative nature of the educational establishment, most notable in the aforementioned Yale Report of 1828. There were scattered lectures on English or even on English and American literature from the 1820s into the 1840s (for example, at Dartmouth and Amherst) (Parker, ‘Where Do English Departments Come From?’, p. 343). Francis A. March, who had been teaching English literature at a secondary school, began teaching at Lafayette College in 1855, first as Professor of Rhetoric and Evidences of Christianity, then as Adjunct Professor of Belles Lettres and English Literature and finally as the first American Professor of English Language and Comparative Philology in 1857.¹² Despite Lafayette’s innovation, other colleges did not follow suit, however. Francis James Child had been teaching English literature and philology at Harvard since 1854 (Parker, ‘Where Do English Departments Come From?’, p. 346), but he was not made Harvard’s first Professor of English Literature until 1876 (Applebee, *Tradition and Reform*, p. 27). It took a political cataclysm to transform a few courses and professors into a nationwide system of English departments: the Civil War.

Histories of American education and the university curriculum have recognized that the Civil War led to the beginnings of African-American colleges¹³ and to calls for greater vocational training (Graff, *Professing Literature*, p. 64) and final ‘acceptance of the idea that practical or useful courses had a place in higher education’ (Parker, ‘Where Do English Departments Come From?’, p. 348). But they have not explained specifically how the aftermath of the war created an environment in which English would supplant the classics and English departments would evolve. The process can be seen clearly in the way General Robert E. Lee, president of Washington College, now Washington & Lee University (W&L), responded to the devastation of the South with educational innovation that eventually would be recognized as far away as England, by Frederick James Furnivall and the Early English Text Society.¹⁴

Before the Civil War, Washington College had a traditional curriculum and was not very distinguished. W&L historian I. Taylor Sanders used to say that in the 18th century, Washington College students ‘could have studied a wide range of subjects: they could have studied Greek, Latin and Mathematics. Or Latin, Greek and Mathematics. Or Mathematics, Latin and Greek’.¹⁵ In 1853, one observer noted that students at Washington College received ‘a smattering of the classics, some premature vices, and a little froth of philosophy, mixed with great bubbles of conceit, rather confused ideas of mathematical harmonies, and a spirit of insubordination’.¹⁶ After the war, the trustees of the college offered Lee the presidency as much to honor and support him in defeat as anything else, but Lee took his duties as an educator seriously. He approved of traditional classical education (Pusey, *Interrupted Dream*, p. 55), but he recognized as a practical matter that the Civil War had kept young men from pursuing the Latin and Greek that would advance their careers and that they would be at a disadvantage if they had to take

up their studies where they left off. In 1867 therefore Lee proposed a reorganized curriculum that included modern languages, 'which could be learned rapidly and would be of immediate practical use' (Crenshaw, *General Lee's College*, p. 161). In a report to the trustees, Lee wrote, 'The introduction of the study of the English language has shown how widely the want of such instruction is felt . . . The study of the Mother tongue in any country is an important element of polite education, & is moreover valuable for its practical utility and necessary relation to other branches of learning'.¹⁷ Lee does not mention the teaching of English literature, however.

For some time, in fact, English literature and Chaucer were itinerants at Washington College, sometimes even going their separate ways as courses in English 'were shunted back and forth between modern languages, history, and moral philosophy' (Pusey, *Interrupted Dream*, p. 28), largely because of changes in student enrolment and faculty availability. While English philology was taught with other modern languages (Crenshaw, *General Lee's College*, p. 161), English literature was taught in the separate School of History and Literature, and it was treated mainly as rhetoric and elocution (W&L Catalogues). In 1869, Lee established a chair of English Language and Literature, the first so designated in the United States (Crenshaw, *General Lee's College*, p. 163), although it was probably not significantly different in purpose from March's professorship of English Language and Comparative Philology. In 1876, the study of belles lettres was added to the curriculum, but to neither the School of Modern Languages nor to the School of History and Literature, but to the School of Moral Philosophy (W&L Catalogues).

By the 1880s, English literature had migrated to the Department of Moral Philosophy and Belles Lettres, but Chaucer had stayed behind in Modern Languages. His work was not, in fact, being taught as literature at all, and this was typical at other schools. The literature textbook at Washington College was Henry Reed's *Lectures on English History and Tragic Poetry as Illustrated by Shakespeare*. Chaucer appears only briefly and generally in the lecture on Shakespeare's *Richard II*: 'the first great English poet, Geoffrey Chaucer, displayed the power of English imagination and of the English language in a series of poems, which, in variety of feeling and scope of subject, are surpassed only by the productions of Shakespeare'.¹⁸ This short shrift is still better than Chaucer's complete omission in another widely used textbook of the period, the Rev. Hugh Blair's *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*. Blair's approach to literature is either purely stylistic or broadly historical. When he treats pastoral, lyric, or epic poetry, he skips from classical Latin writers directly to the Renaissance.¹⁹ For Blair, medieval English literature is a black hole. Chaucer is never mentioned. Even March's courses in English literature seem to have gone no further back than Shakespeare and Milton.²⁰ The only text of Chaucer that was being taught at Washington College in 1868 was an otherwise unidentified edition of 'Selections from Chaucer' to be used, not in a literature course, but in its philology course (W&L Catalogues).

The English department that taught both language and literature thus developed in fits and starts to meet the practical needs of a generation, and what English had to offer became more vital as enrolments doubled in the post-Civil War years (Parker, 'Where Do English Departments Come From?', p. 348). But this pragmatic vocational training would not by itself have led Americans directly to the essentially impractical study of Chaucer and Middle English in place of Virgil and Latin. William Riley Parker wrote, 'To the best

of my knowledge, no one has ever shown why it is more “useful” to know Anglo-Saxon than to know Latin’ (Parker, ‘Where Do English Departments Come From?’, p. 347), and he could just as easily have said ‘Middle English’. (I had one alumnus who took a postgraduate course in Afrikaans and told me he was the only person who made an A in the class because he pronounced it so well from learning to read Chaucer’s work aloud for me. That is the only purely practical benefit I’ve ever known one of my students to get from my Chaucer course). Though Chaucer could find no place in vocational education *per se*, he became entrenched in the American college curriculum by way of that other typical expression of 19th-century pragmatism, science, eventually by that back door to become a central figure in the humanities.

Child and Kittredge: the autocrats at the lecture table

It took about thirty years for colleges and universities to prepare a home for Chaucer by creating the modern English department. Meanwhile, Francis March and Francis James Child were preparing Chaucer to take up residence, making him fit for scholarly study by examining his work under the microscope of German philology. A German model of education had already been important to the American system. Thomas Jefferson had studied German schools when he was planning the University of Virginia, and the Ph.D. was a German degree (McMurtry, *English Language*, p. 16). But it was the German scientific approach to language, something previously thought to be unsuitable for objective study, that opened the door for Chaucer and medieval literature. March had been inspired to treat literature almost as an archeological artifact by Noah Webster at Amherst. ‘He had imported Anglo-Saxon books, then curiosities. He held them up and exhibited them to us, as he lectured, exactly as the natural history men did precious shells, or minerals’ (March, ‘Recollections,’ p. xx). Meanwhile, Child had learned in Germany directly from Jacob Grimm that any literary texts could be treated as scientific specimens of a language with a rigor comparable to the study of Greek and Latin (McMurtry, *English Language* pp. 71ff). Here was the answer to the charge that studying English was too easy, too subjective, too much a matter of taste. Thus, while it was pragmatic egalitarianism that created the English department in America, it was ironically old fashioned intellectual elitism that allowed older literature into the new English curriculum. Reflecting on his teaching career, March famously wrote, ‘The early professors had no recondite learning applicable to English, and did not know what to do with classes in it. They can now make English as hard as Greek’ (‘Recollections’, p. xxi).

March was talking about any English literature, but he had in mind mainly Shakespeare and Milton. It was Francis Child at Harvard who demonstrated that Anglo-Saxon and Middle English, especially Chaucer, were the best answers to the sneers of the classicists. Here was literature with aesthetic value in versions of the native tongue that were as alien and difficult as the ancient Mediterranean languages. One didn’t have to make Chaucer’s text as hard as Greek. It was nearly that hard already. Medieval English literature quite comfortably filled the gap left by the departure of Latin from center stage. The difficulty of the language even leant itself to the traditional pedagogy of the classical curriculum, daily recitation by students, punctuated by occasional lectures by the teacher. Recitation would involve the student’s reading a few lines aloud, followed by ‘rigid examination of the student on the text’ (W&L Catalogue 1867) in the minutiae of grammar and lexical meaning.

To the modern student, the recitation-lecture method conjures up images of Gradgrind's school in Dickens's *Hard Times*. In the hands of unimaginative and uninspired teachers, that is what it became, and eventually it did lead to a reaction against philology as a pedagogical method, as well a critical approach. A Harvard alumnus of the class of 1886 complained about a Radcliffe philologist who would trace the pedigree of words but never explain what they meant: "Can you expect literature", demanded the man of the class of Eight-six, "to sprout in ashes like that?"²¹ Recollecting his education in the early 1900s from the vantage point of 1925, former professor Fred Lewis Pattee called philology 'the deadest of all the sciences'²² and described a course on Marlowe's *Jew of Malta* that he took in Germany, in which it took the entire semester to get through the first 200 lines: 'Every separate word and phrase in the text of these two hundred lines had been subjected to the blowpipe and the test-tube and the whole battery of the reagents'.²³ Of course, any teaching method can be done badly and made boring. Likewise, a deadening classroom technique can be made exciting and inspiring by the right teacher, and by all accounts, Child and his disciple and successor, George Lyman Kittredge, were able to make the philological approach to Chaucer memorable to generations of Harvard students. They did so by replacing the rigid pedagogy of line-by-line recitation and analysis with a lecture style that was more spacious and wide ranging, and that would dominate the American classroom for years.

In the mid- to late 1860s, like everyone else, Child taught Chaucer in a course called 'The English Language', combining the 'General Prologue' and the 'Knight's Tale' with Anglo-Saxon passages and Renaissance works (McMurtry, *English Language*, p. 76). After he was given Harvard's first chair in English in 1876, he taught two literature courses, one on Shakespeare, and one that focused on Chaucer, Bacon, Milton, and Dryden. While he employed student recitation in the classroom, Child became known more for his own performance of Chaucer's and Shakespeare's poetry and for his vivid lectures. His dramatic readings enthralled his colleagues, as well as his students. Poet James Russell Lowell, medievalist Francis Gummere, and anonymous students testify to Child's ability especially to convey the humour in the verse.²⁴ His oral interpretations became so popular that, when he offered to hold an outside session for his classes, so many people would show up that he would have to find a bigger lecture hall (McMurtry, *English Language*, p. 80).

As a performer, Child drew his audience closer to Chaucer and to himself. As a classroom lecturer, he tended to be authoritarian, sometimes intimidating, even fiery. His temper seems to have been a feature of his passion for the literature, and he was able to impart this to his students through his lectures, which could be as much a performance as his reading of the verse. Once Child actually threw a textbook edition of the *Canterbury Tales* out the window during class and bellowed to the students, 'This man [the editor] is an Oxford graduate and, according to England, a scholar, and yet he has substituted the nauseating adjectives "gay" and "blithesome" in that immortal description of the [Summoner] in the line which runs: "As *hoot* he was and *lecherous* as a sparwe"'.²⁵ It is very clear that, like March and other philologist-teachers, Child made students pay close attention to the text, but unlike March, in Child's case, it was first and foremost in order to help them care about the literature, not just to understand the history of the language. Child saw the scientific method of philology as a way to appreciate aesthetics. 'When the charm of poetry goes . . . it seems to me best not to stay. If the world is nothing but

Biology and Geology, let's get quickly to some place which is more than that' (Bradford, *As God Made Them*, pp. 223-4). With Child, Chaucer's works began a gradual move from being treated as linguistic artifacts to being studied as literary art.

In his use of histrionics and of dynamic, densely packed lectures to engage his students, Child is a prototype of the modern conception of the English professor as someone who professes rather than teaches. It is certainly true that his method was to bring his learning to the classroom as if down from the mountaintop, and there is little evidence of the so-called Socratic method in his approach to students. Child did not believe that the teacher's role was to draw the student out (Franklin, 'English Studies', p. 367). His view was that you put the material before the students and left it to them to take it, even material as demanding as Chaucer. Teaching and learning were separate activities, and the professor and student were separately responsible for them. It is undoubtedly true, however, that he inspired a large number of students to pursue medieval studies. From 1876, when Child became Professor of English, to 1899, more than half of the English dissertations that earned a Ph.D. in the department were about medieval literature (Franklin, 'English Studies', p. 366).

The most famous and influential of Child's students, though one who never took the PhD, was George Lyman Kittredge, who in many ways was a tall, imperious version of his mentor. He shared many of Child's traits and attitudes as a teacher. Like Child, he lectured and read verse aloud to the students, he had a sense of classroom drama, and he believed that a teacher couldn't force or cajole a student to learn anything.²⁶ Though deeply learned in philology, like Child, Kittredge was less interested in the scientific value of literature as an artifact than in its aesthetics.²⁷ In fact, Harvard president Charles William Eliot, who was trained as a scientist, remarked to Kittredge that his 1899 article on Chaucer's originality, 'Chaucer and Froissart', seemed a 'rather wasteful' application of 'so much knowledge and acumen to so unimportant a question' (quoted in Hyder, *George Lyman Kittredge*, p. 111). Kittredge believed separating linguistic questions from literary issues would be harmful to the study of both (Hyder, *George Lyman Kittredge*, p. 121).

Kittredge's lectures in and outside the classroom, like Child's, drew crowds of interested students, professionals and enthusiasts. It is worth remembering that his landmark 1915 book, *Chaucer and his Poetry*, is a collection of public lectures aimed at non-experts.²⁸ Kittredge's classroom lectures, however, were quite different in form from those collected in his book and quite different from traditional lectures. They were more in the nature of a vocal annotated edition of the text. He would read through a poem dramatically, stopping to illuminate the meaning of the text, sometimes at great length, walking his students through a reading of a tale, teaching them by example how to read. Unlike the philologist who got lost in the minutiae of *Jew of Malta* (above), Kittredge would expatiate on every aspect of the text, not only points of grammar and lexical meaning, but issues larger and more literary than umlaut and etymologies (Whiting, 'Introduction', p. xxiv). His approach to the lecture as a dramatic reading with extended footnotes surely reflects, or more likely informs, his interpretation of the *Canterbury Tales* frame as a drama in which the tales themselves are dialogue. In that respect, Kittredge's scholarship and pedagogy are a perfect match. His strong opinions on the nature of Chaucer's work inculcated his students through the method, as well as the

content, of his teaching, and he influenced a generation of American students and scholars to think of Chaucer as a dramatic realist.

Kittredge's imperious manner, as well as his technique, did not leave much room for student participation, however, even if he did try to elicit this with periodic questions. B. J. Whiting notes that his lectures were 'a steady and uninhibited interplay between the poet and the teacher, and neither suffered in the process. It was not Kittredge's fault if the interplay did not include the students as well. He constantly stopped to invite, indeed demand questions, and could become fretful if they were not forthcoming' ('Introduction', p. xxv). As one of Kittredge's best students with an aptitude for medieval studies, Whiting was inclined to blame the students if they did not respond to the teacher. Less gifted students saw Kittredge's 'invitations' in a different light. '“Every now and then at irregular and harassing periods”, a former student wrote, “he pauses to ask a question, picking out at random a name from the class list and making that name uncomfortable for three generations”' (Hyder, *George Lyman Kittredge*, p. 53). This is consistent with Child's and Kittredge's belief that a teacher can only present Chaucer's work with erudition and enthusiasm and the rest is up to the student. Several changes in the classroom environment that began near the end of Kittredge's career made his approach to teaching no longer viable.

Donaldson and Robertson: variations on a theme

Beginning in the nineteen teens and coming to fruition after World War II, three major developments led to greater variety in the American approach to teaching Chaucer. Firstly, there was the reaction already mentioned against philology, as both a critical school and a teaching method. Secondly, and perhaps even more significant, Chaucer research increased our historical and cultural knowledge to the point where it was no longer possible to lecture like Kittredge. Thirdly, by mid-century, the demographic of the American classroom had changed radically, first with the G.I. Bill of 1944 (which provided tuition for World War II veterans to get college degrees and to go to graduate and professional schools), then with racial integration, and finally with the influx of women. Like Child and Kittredge, E. Talbot Donaldson and D.W. Robertson were the two most influential Chaucer scholars of their period and also typical of Chaucer teachers in their approaches to the classroom.

The scientific mindset that entrenched Chaucer in the American classroom had become limiting to the students and narrowing for the understanding of Chaucer's work. To some extent, Child and Kittredge have taken blame they don't deserve for the poor teaching of others, but they did represent a methodology that had to adapt to changes in student attitudes and demographics. The attack on the philological method as rigid pedagogy and dry scholarship, led by Irving Babbitt, is well known (Hyder, *George Lyman Kittredge*, pp. 122-30; Graff, *Professing Literature*, pp. 81-118). Kittredge and professors in his mould were criticized not only for getting lost in technicalities, but for being bereft of ideas with any real substance. Moreover, the desire for both practicality and rigour, features of American education that had once laid the foundation for Chaucer's position in the curriculum, began to work against it. Medieval literature had replaced classics partly because it was old and difficult, while still being native English, but now it had become the established, dusty canon that was blocking the way for the study of modern English and especially of American literature. Chaucer studies had to

compete again, this time not with Latin, but with Tennyson and Whitman. Of the Harvard PhD theses produced by the time of Kittredge's retirement in 1936, less than half dealt with medieval literature and only a few were linguistic (Hyder, *George Lyman Kittredge*, p. 126).

Chaucer courses remained safe, however, because the study of English had always been closely connected to the study of cultural history, so as English departments expanded, scientific thoroughness demanded that they build their curriculum according to the principle that Gerald Graff calls 'field coverage' (*Professing Literature*, pp. 6ff). English departments had become departments of literary history, and Chaucer was the main representation of the Middle Ages, as Shakespeare was of the Renaissance. Consequently, Chaucer could not easily be replaced by modern literature, but Chaucer courses had to expand their own coverage of the enormous amount of new information and new critical approaches to medieval literature. One good measure of this change is in probably the most widely used Chaucer textbook of the 20th century, F. N. Robinson's *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*. The first edition of Robinson in 1933 was a breakthrough textbook, not only for the quality of its editing but also for the comprehensiveness of its notes. It was basically able to cover all of Chaucer scholarship to that time. By 1957, Robinson had had to publish a second edition, referred to as 'Robinson²', in order to incorporate all the new developments in research. By the 1970s, it had become clear, not only that a new edition was necessary, but that the planned 'Robinson³' could not even begin to cover all the scholarship that had flourished since the War.

The effect on classroom teaching of the amount and variety of this research can be seen in two of the most erudite and influential scholars of the mid-20th century. E. Talbot Donaldson and D. W. Robertson had one thing in common with Child and Kittredge, they were both dogmatic about their notions of intellectual rigor and used their classroom as a platform for their critical methods and interpretations. Unlike Child and Kittredge, as scholars they were at odds with each other, and neither tended to allow their students to give credence to the other's views or sometimes even to be aware of them (Profs. Thomas Farrell, Grover Furr, Norman Hinton, and Elizabeth Kirk, personal communications). But they also had important traits in common. They were inspiring teachers and used a greater variety of methods than Child or Kittredge to teach their classes.

Donaldson conducted his undergraduate class on the *Canterbury Tales* by traditional lectures, given from memory and from his heavily annotated Robinson², taking a few questions at the end of class. He managed to make material that he had taught for decades seem fresh to his students with a mixture of enthusiasm, wit, and a touch of irascibility. He also read Middle English with flair, more interested in prosody than philology. Prof. Thomas Farrell likes to say 'We may not have any native Middle English speakers, but Donaldson had naturalization papers'. Students did not have much latitude in choosing paper topics. One might describe Donaldson's approach as moderately authoritarian, but he was accessible to his undergraduates. Unlike Kittredge, who was notorious for coming into the classroom right as the period began and exiting at the very last second, sometimes still lecturing with his hand on the doorknob, Donaldson would come early and chat with students, something unusual at Yale at the time (Prof. Thomas Farrell, personal communication).

Donaldson's teaching methods in graduate courses were decidedly different. His graduate class on the *Canterbury Tales* was a seminar and consisted almost entirely of student papers, with Donaldson making occasional remarks, usually at the end. This tended to be frustrating to students looking for more guidance, but the fifteen minutes at the end of class he might devote to his own ruminations often made up for it (Profs. Elizabeth Kirk and Gretchen Mieszkowski, personal communication). If he seemed to be taking a sink-or-swim approach with budding professional academics, he gave more direction in the paper assignments, topics always chosen by him and calculated to introduce students to critical issues and methodologies in Chaucer studies. In another course devoted mainly to the earlier works, rather than write seminar papers students each led an hour of lecture and discussion on a topic from a list provided by Donaldson (Prof. Elizabeth Kirk, personal communication). While he drew on his extensive background knowledge of the Middle Ages, the fundamental principle he taught his graduate students was to derive their interpretations from the text rather than impose readings from knowledge of something outside the poem. Elizabeth Kirk writes, 'we must have all our historical, philological, philosophical, editorial, etc. knowledge about us ready, like trained hunting dogs, to spring, but they must not spring until summoned, only those summoned must spring, and the summons must come from the poem' (personal communication).

That principle, and a statement he once made to a student, 'I'm tired of people who have read everything except the text'²⁹ seems aimed at least partly at D.W. Robertson. Robertson's scholarship depended on immersion in the cultural history of the period in order to establish a range of possible meanings in any medieval text, and to read his contribution to the MLA's *Approaches to Teaching Chaucer's 'Canterbury Tales'* in 1980 (pp. 129-35), you would think that his advanced undergraduates and graduate students read so many primary sources as background that they had no time left to read Chaucer himself. Indeed, his approach to graduate seminars was quite different from Donaldson's. He talked rather than lectured and was informal but demanded that students do as much work with primary sources as with Chaucer (Prof. Grover Furr, personal communication). Robertson's undergraduate courses, however, were very similar to Donaldson's. Introductory courses at Princeton in the late 1950s and early 1960s consisted of two formal lectures per week by the professor, followed by a 'preceptorial' (or quiz section) led by instructors. Like Donaldson, Robertson gave densely packed lectures spiced with sometimes bawdy and infectious levity, but without notes or an annotated text. He began by establishing his exegetical approach, and he covered all the major works, essentially ignoring any controversies about his method or alternate viewpoints, but so amiably that he never sounded doctrinaire. His lecture style was conversational; however, like Kittredge, he always finished just at the bell and did not take students' questions, which then had to be dealt with in the quiz sections (Prof. Norman Hinton, personal communication). In classes at both levels, Robertson was a memorable reader of Middle English, and he demonstrated a 'gift for impersonation [that] gave life to the dead: he could stage a conversation between John of Gaunt and John Wyclif as though he had been a fly on the wall'.³⁰ He did not, however, spend much time teaching the students to read and translate Middle English, which he seemed to think was easy (Prof. Norman Hinton, personal communication).

For all their differences, Donaldson and Robertson had much in common as teachers, and their juggling of different teaching modes was typical of the way Chaucer was taught in the 50s, 60s and 70s. Their generation of professors also had to deal with a greater variety of students than Kittredge had to face. In the 50s and 60s, college enrolment grew to the point that virtually everyone needed a college degree to get jobs that before the War required only a high school diploma. Finally, in the 60s and 70s, the transition had to be made to teaching women students along with men. This involved for Robertson reining in his bawdy humor, but both teachers were notable for supporting their women students (Staley, 'Remembering Robbie'; Prof. Elizabeth Kirk, personal communication). As director of graduate studies for the Yale English Department, Donaldson did even more to encourage women, quintupling their admission. When asked why he did this, he said, 'Because it was right' (Carruthers, 'Speaking of Donaldson', p. 369). That demographic shift was only a presage of how Chaucer classes would change in the decades that followed.

A world new and old: the uses of diversity and a return to pragmatism

In 1980, at the tail end of the careers of the generation of Donaldson and Robertson, the MLA recognized that the methods of teaching Chaucer had become so varied and, in some ways, so problematical, that it published *Approaches to Teaching Chaucer's 'Canterbury Tales'* as the first in its series on teaching literature. Joseph Gibaldi gathered fifteen professors, including Robertson, as mentioned before, to discuss their own methods of teaching undergraduate English majors, graduate students, and non-majors in Chaucer classes, Brit Lit surveys, and special topics courses. Gibaldi began with a section on materials, and the individual essays ranged from the general (Donald Howard's 'The Idea of a Chaucer Course') to the specific (Robert M. Jordan's 'A Rhetorical and Structural Emphasis').

Florence Ridley, in her introduction to this volume, aptly titled 'The Challenges of Teaching the *Canterbury Tales*', succinctly identifies the problems of teaching Chaucer in the second half of the 20th century. Mostly, these come down to how to balance all the things we want our students to know about his work, usually in a single semester. This is especially true of the historical and cultural context, which loomed so large in the research of the first half of the century and continues to do so. How much of the background can you teach without giving short shrift to close reading of Chaucer's own words? A more basic problem is reading the language itself, which students in Ridley's experience did not find easy (in his own section, Gibaldi laments that students' poor language skills made it difficult to use Robinson² anymore, *Approaches*, p. 3). You must decide not only how much time to devote to language, but how to go about it: how to balance pronunciation and translation, how comprehensive and detailed to be and what to do for students who can't seem to understand it. A related challenge that Ridley sees is Chaucer's ambiguity. On the one hand, she identifies this as one of the enduring attractions of his work, but she also recognizes that, after years of an expanding student body, it is a hurdle for a generation of students who are more attuned to visual signals than verbal ones and can have difficulty picking up on irony in Swift's modern English, much less Chaucer's alien, polysemous, and nuanced language.³¹

Eleven years after Gibaldi's handbook appeared, Indiana State University sponsored a roundtable discussion on teaching Chaucer with a panel of distinguished

Chaucerians: Larry Benson, John Fisher, Derek Pearsall, and Alfred David.³² Significantly, the first question asked by Robert Kindrick, the moderator, was how they had changed their approach to teaching over the past 20 years. The panel kept coming back to this issue and to the observation that Florence Ridley had made in 1980, that students no longer had the shared cultural and literary baggage that professors had once counted on. The trend in which video culture was eclipsing literary culture had continued, and, of course, continues today. But in 1991, the panelists recognized another cause of the decline of a shared cultural background, the growing cultural diversity of the American population. John Fisher especially emphasized that, because the student body had become so culturally diverse, they could no longer take the importance of Chaucer for granted. Faculty could no longer count on a tradition of Anglophilia or a sense of inherited tradition in a student population that didn't have a European background, much less an English one, and that included African-Americans, Latino-Americans, Chinese-Americans. Fisher saw this as an opportunity to transform the study of Chaucer into 'a vehicle for talking about the evolution of American culture' ('Teaching Chaucer', p. 7) as in the present essay itself. But even then, not only English literature but English language literature was being pressured away from the centre of the canon by multiculturalism and a movement towards world literature courses ('Teaching Chaucer', p. 17).

The twelve years since the roundtable have borne out these observations. Diversity of knowledge and diversity in student culture has been joined by a new understanding of the diverse way individuals learn (for example, the Myers-Briggs Learning Styles), and Chaucer pedagogy has had to accommodate all these developments with an increasing diversity of method. The number and range of articles in the last decade about teaching Chaucer are impressive. The journal *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Teaching (SMART)* alone has published articles on teaching Chaucer classes using feminist theory,³³ sociological methods,³⁴ and psychological doctrine.³⁵ More than one writer has suggested teaching Chaucer, even *Troilus and Criseyde*, in freshman general education courses.³⁶ Jean Jost's article, 'Teaching the *Canterbury Tales*; The Process and the Product,' draws on educational theories about 'active learning'. She seeks to replace 'the fairly passive lecture-discussion format' with a writing-based project that involves the whole class from beginning to end.³⁷

Luckily, Chaucer teachers now have a greater diversity of materials to teach Chaucer in innovative ways. In 1980, Gibaldi provided an impressive array of texts and supplementary materials, most of which are still available (*Approaches*, pp. 3-32). At that time, teachers were awaiting publication of what was being called 'Robinson³', published by Larry Benson in 1987 as *The Riverside Chaucer*. Since then numerous editions of individual or selected tales have been published, including V. A. Kolve's Norton critical edition and Michael Murphy's 'reader-friendly' editions. More supplementary texts and guides are available now, like the *Oxford Guides to Chaucer* by Helen Cooper (*Canterbury Tales*), Barry Windeatt (*Troilus and Criseyde*), and V. J. Scattergood and A. J. Minnis (shorter poems) and Helen Phillips's *An Introduction to the 'Canterbury Tales': Reading, Fiction, Context*.

In the 1991 roundtable, Benson said that one of the main things he was doing differently was using audio tapes to teach pronunciation and performance ('Teaching Chaucer', p. 6). At that time, records, tapes, and a few videos were the only non-print teaching aids. Computers and the Internet, of course, have enriched the possibilities for

teaching Chaucer as well as research. The Canterbury Tales Project has published CD-ROM editions and facsimiles of the 'General Prologue', the 'Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale', and the entire Hengwrt manuscript (<http://www.cta.dmu.ac.uk/projects/ctp/>), and the University of Calgary Press has a CD-ROM of *The Book of the Duchess* (<http://www.ucalgary.ca/UofC/departments/UP/1-55238/1-55238-002-5.html>). Medieval web sites of all kinds, especially for Chaucer, have proliferated to the point where no survey can do them justice, but a few hub sites are most valuable for teachers. The first is the 'Chaucer MetaPage' (<http://www.unc.edu/depts/chaucer/>), which includes links to essays, bibliographies, and teaching aids, including the largest collection of audio files on the Web and the Meta Mentors project, distinguished emeritus professors who answer questions from teachers. An offshoot of the MetaPage of particular value for teachers is 'Dan Kline's Pedagogy Page' (<http://hosting.uaa.alaska.edu/afdtk/pedagogy.htm>). Two venues where educators can exchange ideas are the SEMA 'Teaching Chaucer BBS' (<http://panther.bsc.edu/~shagen/chaucerb.htm>) and the Chaucer Listserv (<http://listserv.uic.edu/htbin/wa?SUBED1=chaucer&A=1>). For those who want to stay relatively low tech, the Chaucer Studio (<http://english.byu.edu/chaucer/>) has undertaken a large scale project of recording Chaucer and other Middle English literature, and Films for the Humanities has several videos for the Chaucer classroom (http://www.films.com/Films_Home/Index.cfm?S=1). Finally, an animated adaptation of the *Canterbury Tales* is available in modern and in Middle English (http://www.libraryvideo.com/sm/canterbury_tales.asp?mcsid=W136EVDTJ4WK9LECA4H5MVUHFVXG953A). (For a more complete list of electronic resources, see Philippa Semper's essay on this web site.)

The explosion of texts and supplementary material in diverse forms is a sign that Chaucer teachers are adapting to the new realities of American colleges, in other words, a sign of renewed pragmatism among faculty giving modern students what we think they need in a way that they think they want. If this sounds like commerce, it is. Increasingly in the United States, higher education is being treated as a type of market. In 1993, the journal *Liberal Education* devoted an issue to 'Consumerism in Higher Education' with articles by Lee Knefelkamp, Frederick Rudolph and Robert Zemsky.³⁸ The title of Rudolph's article, 'Consumerism in Higher Education, A Case Study: Williams College, 1793 to 1993', shows that this is nothing new in the United States. In the mid-19th century, Francis Wayland, president of Brown University, referred to students as 'our customers' (Smith, *College Reform*, p. 22).

If anything, the market economy model of education in the United States has gotten stronger over the years. As tuitions continue to rise, it becomes harder to justify taking exclusively what one might call the 'Castor Oil' approach to education—the grown-ups decide what medicine is best without considering what the children want. Since the government does not guarantee higher education in the U.S., students have to pay at least some of their own costs, usually through loans, and as the number of grants and scholarships shrinks and the number of high school graduates competing for those funds expands, students (or their parents) understandably think of higher education in terms of getting their money's worth. It makes no difference that tuition pays only a fraction of the costs. The endowments and, in the case of state supported universities, tax revenues that make up the rest are linked to the size of the student body. Consequently, virtually every university is concerned with recruitment and retention. Institutions need to

maintain ever higher enrolment in order to gain those funds and balance their budgets. There is another side of this balancing act, however. Colleges don't want to drive their customer-students away, but the curriculum obviously cannot be entirely market driven. Each university wants to be selective in admissions and maintain high academic standards. At the departmental level, this means balancing the requirements that students need with electives they will desire. In the Chaucer classroom, especially, this has meant having to adapt teaching methods in order to make difficult, alien material accessible to the greatest number.

In 2003, over fifty American professors of Chaucer answered an informal survey I devised in which they confirmed the picture of teachers on the front lines using a variety of approaches, but always keeping their eye on the practical goal of helping their students read, understand, and appreciate Chaucer. The survey asked at what level faculty are teaching Chaucer (e.g., undergraduate survey, undergraduate Chaucer course, graduate course), how often they teach Chaucer, what textbooks they use, whether they use translations, which works they teach in a given course, and how they teach them. The results show some trends, but the strongest trend is diversity.

Graduate courses seem not to have changed much over the years and are pretty much the same everywhere. The emphasis is still on the presentation of papers, on heavy supplementary reading, and on the introduction to critical approaches, though obviously the critical approaches have multiplied with Feminism, Marxism, New Historicism, and so forth. The basic undergraduate Chaucer course, however, is a kaleidoscope of variations.

A clear majority use *The Riverside Chaucer*, or its newer version of the *Canterbury Tales* (67% in undergraduate classes, 83% in graduate), but many use other texts, and a significant number experiment, changing texts every few times they teach. Virtually all teach in Middle English, even in a British literature survey (74%), but most allow students to get help with translations, and a few teach Chaucer in translation in introductory survey courses. The amount of time professors spend teaching students how to read Middle English varies widely, from one day to several weeks, but most try to give equal time to teaching students pronunciation and translation, and many have students read aloud in the first few minutes of every class. A majority assigns all or most of the *Canterbury Tales* in an undergraduate Chaucer course, and many teach a selection of the tales along with one or two of the dream visions and *Troilus and Criseyde*. Others teach a smaller selection of the tales only, on the assumption that their students cannot learn Middle English well enough in a short time to read and comprehend a large number of the works, but can learn a few of them really well.

Perhaps the biggest challenge is finding ways to test students to see if they are keeping up with the reading. Standard reading quizzes prevail for most faculty, but others use short response papers or brief translations, often oral. One teacher noted 'I've gotten out of the quizzing business, though. I give translation exercises that I go over in class, give an ungraded midterm to simulate the exam experience, & give a graded translation & short answer final. This way, people with a slower learning curve can still do well at reading Middle English, which is what most matters to me'.

The greatest variety might be in the ways professors conduct class. Most use a mixture of lecture and discussion, with an emphasis on lecture in the classes with the heaviest reading. Teachers use lectures in different ways, however. Some begin each tale

with a lecture on the issues and controversies of interpretation, followed by student discussion. Others give only a few lectures during the term on background material and let the students discover what the issues are in discussion. It is significant that Norman Hinton, who was a junior instructor under D. W. Robertson, and Thomas Farrell, who was a student of E. Talbot Donaldson, both remarked that, while they admired the lectures of their mentors, they could not imagine teaching that way any longer. On the other hand, a large percentage (47%) follows the time honoured practice of having students memorize passages to recite outside of class. Only a few (8%) have them make a tape of themselves reading.

Many professors use supplementary texts, especially Cooper and Phillips, but a relatively small percentage use computer and Internet resources or allow their students to. Somewhat surprisingly, given some of the *SMART* articles mentioned earlier, relatively few teachers actually devote much time in undergraduate classes to approaches taken from critical theory, such as Bakhtinian, Lacanian, or Queer Theory. Even Feminist Theory, which is unavoidable in discussions of medieval antifeminism, is seldom the foundation of an entire undergraduate course. I think the reason that computers and critical theory have not made significant inroads into undergraduate classes, even when the same professors use both heavily in their scholarship, is not hostility towards either. It is the purely practical reason that so much class time is taken up in translation and analysis of Chaucer's genres and themes. In that respect, we are not so different from Kittredge.

Chaucer under siege, or the *Canterbury Tales* as canon fodder

No survey of the teaching of Chaucer in America can ignore the occasional attacks on his place in the curriculum. These are nothing new, though the reasons for them have changed. The *Canterbury Tales* has been on various lists of censored books produced by local school boards, parents' watchdog groups, and other organizations since 1963 (Applebee, *Tradition and Reform*, p. 205). There are still the occasional utilitarian arguments against Chaucer studies. In the 1990s, the most frequent attacks came as part of a movement to expand the canon beyond the Dead White Males that dominated it. Predictably, it was discovered that, while you can expand a canon indefinitely, curriculum growth has its limits, so to add marginalized authors, some DWMs had to be removed. Chaucer was a natural target because of his difficulty, his distance, and his allegedly suspect attitudes (towards women and Jews, for instance) at a time when people were worried about promoting various kinds of bigotry. Few, if any, of these attempts succeeded. Typical was a proposal to remove Chaucer from the catalogue at East Stroudsburg State University in Pennsylvania. The resident Chaucerian at the time, Prof. John McLaughlin, enlisted the aid of the Chaucer electronic list (the Chaucer Listserve mentioned above) and was able to fend off the attack. What was interesting was the variety of rationales he was offered by colleagues for keeping Chaucer in the classroom. Some appealed to modern educational trends, like the fact that the study of Chaucer is by nature interdisciplinary. Others pointed to the value to multiculturalism of teaching an author who deals in multiple meanings or to the very modern issues that his work raises, regardless of which side of the issue he was on. A remarkable number of arguments were extremely old, often historical, including the defense on the grounds that learning Middle English can help modern students with grammar and writing.

Ultimately, Chaucer is probably safe in the curriculum because of a prevailing conservatism in the United States, evidenced by the continued or renewed prominence of Shakespeare courses. Parents, students, and legislators, therefore administrators, want their students reading Shakespeare, and his rising tide lifts all canonical ships. But I don't believe Chaucer is merely riding Shakespeare's coat tails. An encouraging number of professors who answered the survey teach Chaucer every year (40%) or at least every other year (33%). For various reasons, Chaucer is in fair demand, whether because the course fulfils a requirement, or because of the reputation of the teacher, or because of the reputation of the work. A large percentage (47%) of the respondents who had taught ten years or more found their students somewhat less prepared now than when they began teaching, following the trend seen in 1980 and 1991, but encouragingly a slightly larger percentage (50%) thought they were about the same. Of course, this may mean that this situation has bottomed out, but it may also mean that teachers are learning to cope with the realities of their students.

One thing has not changed over the period considered here. In the 1991 roundtable discussion, Larry Benson and Derek Pearsall asserted that Chaucer was 'easy to teach' (pp. 6, 13). They did not mean that it was easy to teach students to understand Middle English or learn Chaucer's cultural context or comprehend the multiplicity and intricacy of his meaning. They meant that, once students learn enough of the basics to open the door, it is easy to make students appreciate Chaucer, to see why he is important and enjoyable. That was as true in 1891 as in 1991, it is true now, and it is why, in American colleges and universities, Chaucer is secure.

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Notes

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⁴ Arthur N. Applebee, *Tradition and Reform in the Teaching of English: a History* (Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1974), pp. 6, 16n.

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⁸ Benjamin Franklin, 'Idea of the English School Sketch'd Out for the Consideration of the Trustees of the Philadelphia Academy', in *The Writings of Benjamin Franklin*, iii, ed. Albert Henry Smyth (New York: Macmillan, 1907), 24.

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- ⁹ Laurence R. Veysey, *The Emergence of the American University* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 1965), 57 and *passim*.
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- ¹² Phyllis Franklin, 'English Studies: The World of Scholarship in 1883', *PMLA*, 99 (1984), 361.
- ¹³ Frederick Rudolph, 'Consumerism in Higher Education, A Case Study: Williams College, 1793 to 1993', *Liberal Education* 79 (1993), 148.
- ¹⁴ Ollinger Crenshaw, *General Lee's College: The Rise and Growth of Washington and Lee University* (New York: Random House, 1968), 229.
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Geoffrey Chaucer, the outstanding English poet before Shakespeare. His *The Canterbury Tales* ranks as one of the greatest poetic works in English. He also contributed in the second half of the 14th century to the management of public affairs as courtier, diplomat, and civil servant. Chaucer's forebears for at least four generations were middle-class English people whose connection with London and the court had steadily increased. John Chaucer, his father, was an important London vintner and a deputy to the king's butler; in 1338 he was a member of Edward III's expedition to Antwerp, in Flanders, now part of Belgium, and he owned property in Ipswich, in the county of Suffolk, and in London. He died in 1366 or 1367 at age 53.

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During the last decade of the twentieth century, significant changes occurred in American higher education generally and in the undergraduate curriculum in particular. These changes were propelled by several developments. Together they provided the momentum to enable higher education to make unprecedented strides. Educational leaders debate whether these changes are primarily additive and limited to small scale programmatic innovations or truly transformative for institutions and higher education. Nonetheless, there is widespread agreement that the academy and the undergraduate curriculum have.

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Geoffrey Chaucer, hailed as the Father of English literature, was the greatest English poet of the Middle Ages. He was also the first poet to be buried in Poet's Corner of Westminster Abbey. Chaucer was also famous as an author, philosopher, alchemist and astronomer. He also had an active career in the civil service as a bureaucrat, courtier and diplomat. His most prominent role was developing the legitimacy of the vernacular, Middle English when French and Latin were the dominant literary languages in England. It is not known when he first started writing, but his first major poem, "The Book