

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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In this thesis I explore the ways in which twenty-first century Americans have access to Geoffrey Chaucer and his works. I look at issues surrounding Chaucer within the canon debate, high school history and literature textbooks, and Chaucer in popular culture, such as in movies like *A Knight's Tale*. I also take an in depth look at *The Pardoner's Tale* and *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, since they most frequently appear in textbooks and anthologies. Ultimately, I argue that access is limited for the average person interested in Chaucer and other historical writers, but that it would not be difficult to improve access for all readers.

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The Accessible Chaucer

by

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

Natasha M. Luepke, Author

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Introduction

I am the lone medievalist in my cohort. While we get along personally, there is a disconnect in our academic lives. Even as we are connected through our interest in literature and writing, we prefer different directions and different methods. In this group, I am the only one who studies the distant past (not that the Middle Ages is that far gone, but it may as well be). The program is weighted towards post-nineteenth literature. In many English programs across the country, it is easy enough to receive a Bachelors degree in English without studying many “older” authors. This can lead to both a lack of access and a lack of choice. A wide range of courses ensures students are receiving access to authors and literature from many different times and places. Choice without availability, on the other hand, is useless. Offering the student the opportunity to enroll in any course she wishes, but then presenting only a few courses is not providing her with access to education. That said, a proposal of a graduate-only class focused on Geoffrey Chaucer, shocked my fellow graduate students. They were not happy to have access to a new choice, or at least to this choice. This I could not understand. Surely to be a grad student, in English studies or otherwise, means to explore all areas of the field, even as one seeks to specialize. Surely it means seeking out access to works of the past and works from a variety of genres.

Something seems to be lacking from the popular consciousness when graduate students, trained in English discourse, shy away from one of the most important authors of the canon. Their access (and perhaps exposure) to Chaucer, and to other authors, has been limited. I decided to investigate the causes for my colleagues’ hesitation. I wanted to see what sorts of access they have to Chaucer through both

academic and popular culture. To that end, I investigated a variety of different media. Both the quality of the materials, and the information presented, were important.

This work is composed of two separate but related halves. The first half looks at Chaucer's accessibility at the academic level. This section begins with the canon debate and Chaucer's place within it. The canon debate serves as a frame and lead-in to the examination of history and literature textbooks. The canon serves as tool for offering accessibility to students. Active debates also show Chaucer's position within the literature field. In this section, I include textbooks and literature anthologies used at both the high school and college level. I also look at how translation from Middle English to Present Day English is used within these books. From there, I move to the tales most commonly taught in school, *The Pardoner's Tale* and *The Wife of Bath's Tale*. Children's books based on Chaucer's works serve a bridge to the second half of the essay. While children's books are certainly texts, they also contain images and are often more accessible – that is, easier to understand – for many readers. Illustrations found in these books also seem to be a natural connection to modern popular representations of Chaucer, which tend to be more visually oriented than most anthologies. As I move into popular representations of Chaucer, I look at cover art and the availability of his works in bookstores. Finally, I look at modernized versions of Chaucer and his works. This includes the rap version created by Baba Brinkman, Geoffrey Chaucer's internet blog, and the 2001 movie *A Knight's Tale*.

It is important to note that while I am looking at accessibility in both the academic and popular realms, I am using different standards. In looking at academic sources, I am concerned with the accuracy of the information. With cultural

representations of Chaucer and his works, I am more interested in what is available. When looking at popular culture, something is better than nothing. Scholarly resources, on the other hand, should be held to a higher standard, since they are meant to disseminate information in a way pop culture does not. If one is exposed to inaccurate or incomplete depiction of Chaucer through pop culture, one can seek out more academic works to fill in the gaps. These academic works, then, should be accurate; “something is better than nothing” is not good enough in this case.

These diverse sources present a picture of Chaucer’s presence in early twenty-first century America, one that has not received much scholarly attention. He is held up by critics such as Harold Bloom, but also obscured by textbooks and lack of representation in bookstores. While major chains such as Barnes and Noble and Borders may pride themselves on their selections, buyers have little input at all as to what is stocked on the shelves. Shoppers have little choice. Online retailers, such as Amazon, provide greater accessibility. However, this assumes the person seeking Chaucer out has access to a computer, or is willing to buy a book without being able to flip through its pages. The ability to choose is irrelevant if there is nothing from which to choose. Access to texts cannot be offered if readers do not know for whom or for what they are looking. My hope is that the findings from my research can be extrapolated to other authors of the past. Providing people with more access to Chaucer means providing them with greater access to history and literature in general. Audiences seem to want history. The success of movies such as *Gladiator* and *300* show that being set in the past is not necessarily the problem. Ken Follett’s novel

World Without End, set in the fourteenth century, might bring more people to the Middle Ages.¹ Many, if not most, Americans want history.

Over the course of my research, I discovered things that both met my expectations and challenged them. Textbooks remained as I remembered, burdened with constraints that mean they can only represent a limited amount of material. Discovering the most commonly represented works was intriguing; the reasons those works (*The Pardoner's Tale* and *The Wife of Bath's Tale*) were included was never quite clear. Most surprising, however, were the results of an informal experiment I conducted in one of my classes. I always disliked *The Pardoner's Tale*, so I wanted to see what my students thought of it. They loved it. Perhaps those boring textbooks had it right: either the books had succeeded in conditioning their readers or the editors knew what teenagers wanted to read.

Of course, Chaucer is just one piece of the whole. I chose to write about Chaucer because I like his writing specifically and medieval literature in general. But the work that follows is meant to be extrapolated. How easy is it for a reader to step off the path and find something new? Chaucer is somewhat obscure in the pop culture consciousness, but he is still an important part of the canon. The level of access I have to him and his works can be indicative of the level of access to other authors and other works. I cannot offer a solution – libraries, book stores, and textbooks are limited by space and financial considerations – I was simply curious about the availability of material.

¹ As of December 21, 2007, *World Without End* was ranked the nineteenth best-selling book on Amazon.com. It was ranked sixth on the *New York Times* Bestseller list. http://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/23/books/bestseller/1223besthardfiction.html?_r=1&oref=slogin As of March 25, 2008, *World Without End* was ranked 50th on Amazon's "Best Books of 2007" list.

As its name suggests, *The Accessible Chaucer* is concerned with accessibility. I started this thesis wanting to know if Chaucer had been hidden from others and in what way, and whether one could find Chaucer if so desired. This survey is meant to inspire those who read it, if only so that readers may be inclined to seek out new works. In that way, this survey offers suggestions for new avenues to try. Finally, in offering these suggestions and in surveying these materials, *The Accessible Chaucer* seeks to make Chaucer, and other authors like him, less frightening, more palatable – more accessible.

Chaucer and the Canon Debate

Through schooling, people access cultural artifacts and myths. School provides the foundation for understanding a specific society's culture. Education, of course, is not without its controversies – what should be taught, by whom, and to whom? Questions over science education attract national attention, but there is also debate about history and literature education. History textbooks provide a view into a carefully crafted past. The canon debate ensures that the nature of the Great Books is constantly changing. Students are rarely a part of the processes that determine what they learn in the classroom. Their access to the history of works of literature is often limited to what is in the classroom. Students could find other points of view on the internet or at the library, but if they do not have access to the canon debate, they would probably see no reason to seek out other works.

The canon debate can also lead students, or readers of any sort, to other books. These books might appeal to them in a way the books that are taught in school are not – these books might really be good. Jane Tompkins examines the issue of a text being “good” or “useful” in her essay “But is it Good?” She points out that

the one element that, ironically, remains unchanged throughout them [anthologies] all is the anthologists' claim that their main criterion of selection has been literary excellence. But, as has by now become abundantly clear, while the term 'literary excellence' or 'literary value' remains constant over time, its meaning – what literary excellence turns out to be in each case – does not. . . . [G]reat literature does not exert its

force over and against time, but changes with the changing currents of social and political life. (125)

Here, Tompkins brings up several key concepts. In the first place, any piece in an anthology or a textbook must serve a purpose. As Tompkins points out, this is because that piece has literary excellence or value. But there is always a reason works are included and, generally, the reasoning is somewhat beyond “because I like it.”² But Tompkins also points out that definitions change. It seems that when discussing the canon, writers and editors assume that their definition of “great” is the same one used by their audience – and that even as the debate continues, there are certain authors/works that have *always* been considered great and will continue to be considered great. Tompkins gets to the heart of the matter, saying, “[G]reat literature does not exert its force over and against time, but changes with the changing currents of social and political life” (125). What is considered great in the twenty-first century might not be considered great in the twenty-second; a piece that is considered great now may still be considered great in the future, but for different reasons. It is difficult to discuss “greatness” without a common definition. Any work could belong to the canon, or no work. But this points out the difficulties of the debate, and the flexibility of the canon. The canon will continue to grow and change, regardless of the debate around it.

Many critics seem to fear that if there is no concrete canon, people will not read at all. Katha Pollitt suggests,

² Obviously this is something I cannot prove. One could certainly include a story because he or she just likes it and then hide that fact by saying the story has literary merit. But I know that I and my colleagues all include works on our “literary merit” lists that we do not like. As a personal example, I will probably never read *Heart of Darkness* again, but I think it has literary merit, whatever that is, and I am glad I read it in school.

In America today the assumption underlying the canon debate is that the books on the list are the only books that are going to be read, and if the list is dropped no books are going to be read. Becoming a text book is a book's only chance. . . . But all sides agree, if it isn't taught, it doesn't count. (Pollitt 190)

Inspiring a love of reading is not considered to be enough. Critics might worry that a love of reading will not take, that no one will ever read again or, worse yet, read the wrong thing. Pollitt hits upon what many in the canon hint at: that the canon is *correct*; whatever is not on the official reading list is wrong, perhaps even morally corrupting. If left to their own devices, people would choose Stephen King over William Shakespeare. I seek to avoid that rhetoric in my own work, in that I view reading of any kind to be valuable.

Regardless, textbooks (and often anthologies) tend not to engender a love of reading in students. About the way books are taught in school, Pollitt comments,

School might frankly be the place where one read the books that are a little off-putting, that have gone a little cold, that you might pass over because they do not address, in reader-friendly contemporary fashion, the issues most immediately at stake in modern life, but that, with a little study, turn out to have a great deal to say. (190)

Pollitt views this as a positive. Not that the books are off-putting, of course, but that school can be the one place where we read books that challenge us. Certainly there is value in having to occasionally work to make meaning or in being exposed to works outside of one's comfort zone. We do a disservice to our students if we give them

only what they expect. Unfortunately, as I discuss later, textbooks are not living up to Pollitt's assertions. Textbooks do not give students the tools they need to learn what these texts have to say. Without context, these pieces become meaningless. Further, if textbooks provide a straight-forward moral, with leading questions or prompts that stifle foster critical inquiry, students will not be able to process what they have just read or make connections to other works.

Finally, there are different *kinds* of canons, something else that is rarely presented to students: the Western Canon, the Poetry Canon, the American Canon, etc. What is required reading in one school, or one set of classes, is not required in another. If the canon should include the Great Works everyone should know, then everyone should read them. But as E.D. Hirsch points out

[T]he ideal of accommodating individual differences by offering different types of courses became institutionalized as “tracking” and “grouping” – systems that put bright students in one class, average students in another, and poor students in a third. The principle of adjusting to diverse capacities produced, in effect, three academic castes, each of which received different kinds of information. In language arts courses, for instance, where content became an arbitrary vehicle to inculcate the “fundamental processes” of reading and writing, the tracking system led to Shakespeare for some, sports and fantasy stories for others. (144)

This suggests that there is a canon for different levels of readers, not one canon in which everyone can share. Hirsch raises questions about English or Language Arts as

a subject. The canon debate, then, is not so much about what books should be taught, but the purpose English and Language Arts classes serve and whether or not these classes are meant to foster a lifelong love of learning or to foster obedient, productive citizens (Hirsch 144). Further, there is the question of whether secondary education should be challenging or affirming. What is the student supposed to learn: writing and literature, great works (however that may be defined), the ability to challenge oneself and think critically – or utility, application, usefulness? If the latter is true, books are simply a commodity – not to be read for enjoyment, but to serve instructional purposes only. As we shall see later, that is exactly how many textbooks present Chaucer.

The canon debate is not restricted to English or the Arts. History, too, is up for debate – a debate often hidden from students, much like the canon debate. Sociologist James Loewen, in his book investigating history textbooks, *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, describes textbooks thus:

Textbooks also keep students in the dark about the nature of history. History is furious debate informed by evidence and reason. Textbooks encourage students to believe that history is facts to be learned. “We have not avoided controversial issues,” announces one set of textbooks; “instead, we tried to offer reasoned judgments” on them – thus removing the controversy! Because textbooks employ such a god-like tone, it never occurs to most students to question them. (16)

If students never question their textbooks, their teachers, or their texts, they will leave class thinking there is only one way to interpret history and stories. This means

students have limited access to American cultural heritage – and to critical engagement.

As I will demonstrate, Chaucer and his works are in the fabric of all of these debates. Some critics, like Harold Bloom, uphold him as a master of the Western Canon, and thus proclaim Chaucer should be taught for that reason. Some textbooks, on the other hand, may paint Chaucer with that rhetoric, but instead of including stories for their power or beauty, they include those that have an easy-to-teach moral. In this case, pedagogical strategies for Chaucer are not important; Chaucer himself is pedagogy. Reading the Great Books will allow students to absorb greatness. At the other extreme, any controversies surrounding Chaucer are overlooked. Textbooks might comment on his feminism or lack thereof, or the role of women in medieval society, but readers are generally not invited to think about the issues of sex, violence, media, and how the fourteenth century connects with the twenty-first.

S.S. Hussey, in *Chaucer: An Introduction*, presents a rather optimistic view of Chaucer studies. Writing in 1971, he suggests “Chaucer rightly holds his place at the centre of the increasing number of courses in medieval English literature in universities and colleges” (Forward). But then, perhaps this is the trouble with Chaucer studies. If Chaucer is placed in the center, there is no more room for him – he can only be pushed out to make room for other authors and poets. This is a problematic view; opening up the canon does not mean that authors, such as Chaucer are lost, it means authors are *added* – it is a net gain, a positive for everyone (though there is still the problem of what to include in anthologies). Yet, the center, and Chaucer as the center, cannot hold. Hussey continues this thought with,

But whereas formerly these courses were accompanied by rigorous investigations of Middle English language and ‘background,’ nowadays the reader is more likely to be well informed about the literature and critical principles of later periods but somewhat at sea when he ventures into the Middle Ages. (Forward)

This helps to explain one of the inherent problems one encounters in reading Chaucer: there is much more to the text than the words. There is a world behind them, a time period, real human lives. While fourteenth-century England has some things in common with the twenty-first century Western world, it has many differences as well. While Chaucer’s works can be enjoyed without much background information, going into detail about medieval life helps bring out the fullness of his tales. For example, one can read *The Pardoner’s Tale* and enjoy the narrative itself, but the story is much richer when one understands what a medieval pardoner was and why the tale is ironic.³ If one decides to teach Chaucer, one must factor in the additional time spent on background information. As many of the textbooks show, there is the temptation to rush through the information or condense, reducing an entire time period to a few sentences.

If these few sentences are the only access students have to Chaucer or the Middle Ages, students might misunderstand the nature of the past. It is more difficult to make connections. The editors of any texts must decide what is important; instead of enriching and enlarging the past, these texts limit it, if only by virtue of the fact that

³ In this tale, three men attempt to kill death, but instead kill each other. While this is meant to be a moral tale, the teller, the Pardoner, is a corrupt man selling indulgences for the Church. After his tale, the Pardoner asks the other pilgrims to buy relics, after mentioning earlier that they were fake.

one cannot include every relevant text. In *The Importance of Chaucer*, John H. Fisher poses a question in this vein that has guided my research. He points out,

Most college students who go further into the humanities take a course in Chaucer, and learn about him, along with Shakespeare and Milton, as one of the “fathers of English literature.” Behind the study of this triumvirate lurks an awareness of their “importance.” But importance in what sense? (Vii)

This explanation for Chaucer’s inclusion in textbooks and anthologies is the most common: he was the first major author to write in the vernacular, or the first to make English a respectable language. While this is important from a historical point of view, it seems a tenuous reason to read a particular work or author. Further, readers do not always have access to these reasons. Students are often told that Chaucer (and Shakespeare and Milton) is important simply because he has always been deemed important by academia.

This leads us back to Fisher’s question, “Important in what sense?” (vii). Chaucer was the first major poet to write in English. Is this enough to include him in literature or history classes? Or is it enough to justify his inclusion because his poetry is beautiful or his stories relevant? I would suggest that Chaucer is important because of all of these reasons; he is important because he was a real person who wrote works fully embedded in the fourteenth-century that still speak to people living in the twenty-first century. Fisher suggests “But as we sum up the importance of Chaucer, the miracle is how well his poetry lends itself to twentieth-century social and psychological literary theory” (168). We read Chaucer and teach Chaucer because he

endures, because he still has lessons to teach. In part, this work seeks to investigate what those lessons are; that is, what are textbooks and anthologies suggesting about Chaucer – and to investigate the pedagogical culture surrounding Chaucer.

Building on that, part of this research is about access. Not only am I interested in the information presented in textbooks, but also in sort of access they provide students. I wanted to know whether students are allowed access to enough events to create their own portrait. Having access to solid information means students will be more comfortable seeking out other texts, be they history or literature, on their own. And if they do choose to read and learn on their own, students will be better able to make sense of what they read and add new information to their store of knowledge.

High School History Textbooks

Most students access their information through textbooks, television, and the internet. Books are often at a disadvantage. Textbooks are not something one often picks up to read on his or her own time. Textbooks are limited by space, time, and financial constraints. With this in mind, I investigated what information about the Middle Ages and Chaucer is being presented to students, and what is hidden from them, by examining a variety of secondary textbooks.⁴

Starting with history textbooks seems a natural step since students receive historical background before interacting with the text. The editors of these books provide students access to what they (the editors) deem important. This, in turn, informs what the students will think and experience upon reading Chaucer and other authors. I began my research with *World History: The Human Experience, The Early Ages* by Mounir A. Farah and Andrea Berens Karls published by Glencoe McGraw-Hill in 2003. I wanted to begin with the most up to date book I could find in order to understand the current academic landscape, and see how it has changed since I was in school. This specific book features many beautiful illustrations and sidebars. True to the title, it did not focus on Western Civilization or Europe, but included chapters on Asia, Africa, and the Americas. This is a history text, but it also includes pieces of literature, such as excerpts from *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and Niccolo Machiavelli's

⁴ While I would have loved to look at every high school textbook, I obviously had to narrow my scope for this thesis. I chose textbooks that reflected a variety of interests, books meant for advanced as well as remedial students, high school and college. This was also an experiment in access – I was limited by what I could access from the library. Sometimes, I could not get the books I wished for; other times I found books I would have otherwise passed over. But then, my experience mimics that of most students, as they do not have much say in the textbooks they have access to, either.

The Prince. In the introduction to the section on the High Middle Ages, the book explains,

The Crusades accelerated the transformation of western Europe from a society that was crude, backward, and violent – showing little cultural and technological advancement – to a civilization that exhibited some early features of modern Western civilization. Towns grew, trade expanded, and learning and the arts thrived. (Farah and Karls 322)

This is a problematic view for a variety of reasons. First, “crude, backward, and violent” is relative. More to the point, can the authors prove that there was little “cultural and technological advancement”? They do not seem to be taking into consideration the inventions of the eleventh century, such as the plow and horse-collar that allowed peasants to grow more food and led to a population boom. Scholarship continued in the monasteries and troubadours and artists continued to create. This text also succeeds in positing modern society as better in every way. Without acknowledging this background, it feels as if Chaucer steps out of a vacuum instead of building on an existing tradition. Yes, this textbook compares him to Dante and Boccaccio, but all of these men seem as if they sprang from nothing. Indeed, a caption describes “Troubadours appear in scenes of romance, a novel idea in medieval times” (Farah and Karls 325), suggesting no concept of romance appeared before the Middle Ages or the Crusades. But then, this text’s treatment of Chaucer is brief, so perhaps one should not worry about the background students are receiving; they are not really receiving any foreground either. Farah and Karls simply say, “In England, Geoffrey Chaucer produced *The Canterbury Tales*. These narrative poems describe a varied

group of pilgrims who tell stories to amuse one another on their way to Thomas a Becket's shrine at Canterbury" (328). This is certainly not the most exciting description of Chaucer's work. Unfortunately, this book seems to pass on many misconceptions about medieval society: nothing but violence. Chaucer is not as lively as war and death.

The fourteenth edition of *Western Civilizations: Their History and Culture*, on the other hand, gives Chaucer his own subheading. This textbook, edited by Judith C. Coffin, Robert C. Stacey, Robert E. Lerner, and Standish Meacham, was published by W.W. Norton and Company in 2002. In this text, Chaucer is placed within a community of writers – mainly contemporaries (Boccaccio) and those still to come (Shakespeare). Chaucer does not come from nothing. While the text does not place him on a pedestal exactly, it presents Chaucer as an untouchable master:

Similar in many ways to Boccaccio as a creator of robust, naturalistic vernacular literature was the Englishman Geoffrey Chaucer (c. 1340-1400). Chaucer was the first major writer whose English can still be read today with relatively little effort. Remarkably, he was both a founding father of England's mighty literary tradition and one of the four or five greatest contributors to it: most critics rank him just behind Shakespeare and in a class with Milton, Wordsworth and Dickens.

(Coffin et al 412)

This is a remarkable paragraph. It acknowledges that Chaucer was not the first person to write in English or the first poet, but that he is the first poet that the modern reader

can understand with only some difficulty. There is the subtext of greatness – he is the founder of the English poetical tradition – but not of supreme greatness.

Chaucer is not only credited with being the father of English poetry or literature. Sometimes he is credited as the very founder of the language. Jackson J. Spielvogel's *Western Civilization: A Brief History* (Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2002) explains that "Geoffrey Chaucer brought a new level of sophistication to the English vernacular language in his famous work *The Canterbury Tales*. His beauty of expression and clear, forceful language were important in transforming his East Midland dialect into the chief ancestor of the modern English language" (230). This is such a troubling passage, because it is both true and false at the same time. Spielvogel makes Chaucer's work sound inviting and relevant; he makes it sound like something that is worth reading. Due to space and/or other limitations, however, Spielvogel must neglect the complexity inherent in history. Yes, Chaucer was one reason the East Midland dialect became Standard English. But there were other forces at work; more to the point, the transformation took several hundred years. In a way, Spielvogel is short-changing students by presenting such a simple picture.

The trouble with history textbooks is that history often (though not always) simply means war, with smaller sections devoted to art, literature, and culture. Literature textbooks are lucky for having more through-line options than do history books. It is rather difficult to discuss history without being linear. With a literature textbook, one can group works by era, by subject matter, by genre, by geographic region. These texts present historical literature with just a little bit of historical

background. Literature textbooks have the luxury of letting the work speak for itself; they do not *have* to dress up Chaucer or his work.

High School Literature Textbooks and Anthologies

Literature textbooks often serve as the primary prose and poetry access point for many students. This is not necessarily a negative thing – providing access in this way means students are exposed to genres and authors they would not choose on their own. This might also mean the pieces found in textbooks are the *only* things students are reading. Literature textbooks must also deal with the same constraints that history books face, but they can be more exciting, since the emphasis is on primary material. However, since only a few authors, genres, and works can be included, students may come away with an inaccurate picture. It can be difficult for students to realize that Chaucer was a real person, as were the people about whom he wrote.

Elements of Literature, Sixth Course: Literature of Britain (Robert Anderson, et al) is one of the oldest textbooks I looked at; it was published by Holt, Rinehart, and Winston in 1993. This book sets the tone for the later textbooks to come: it includes timelines, basic historical background, a subsection on women’s roles, and suggestions for further study – including movies! This book also places Chaucer firmly on a pedestal. The authors explain, “Geoffrey Chaucer is often called the father of English poetry, and without question he was the greatest English poet of the Middle Ages” (84). If there is no room for questions, there is very little room for discussion. The authors go on to say “Most important, in 1387 Chaucer began *Canterbury Tales*, a work he never completed, but must be considered one of the very greatest works in the English language. *Canterbury Tales* alone – perhaps even only the Prologue to the *Tales* – would be sufficient to place Chaucer in the company of Shakespeare and Milton” (85). Again, the text leaves no room for questions or discussion. There is no

doubt that the *Tales* is Chaucer's most important work. And, of course, Chaucer is pretty good, worth reading, almost as good as Shakespeare and Milton, even if the *Tales* are a sort of poor man's *Paradise Lost*.

McDougal Littell, a large textbook publisher, has published a variety of titles dealing with Chaucer. *The Language of Literature: British Literature*, an anthology, includes part of the Pardoner's tale and prologue with the comment, "Chaucer's Pardoner, whose desire for money outweighs his sense of honesty, is one of the least likeable pilgrims" (Applebee et al 87). One has to wonder, then, why was this tale included over all of the others. Especially given that a little later, the authors go on to say, "This plump and gentle poet gave the world some of the finest and most memorable characters ever created in the English language" (Applebee et al 108). But if there are a wide variety of fine and memorable characters from which to choose, one wonders why one of the "least likeable" characters is included. That the Pardoner is not paired with even the Wife of Bath, suggest that his story was chosen for the moral it presents. Of course, the Pardoner could have been chosen for other reasons; the reasons and debates surrounding what pieces are often hidden when they could add a valuable dimension to students' education. Still, if Chaucer is held up as such a master, it seems logical that one would want to include a variety of his stories. After all, one reads several plays and sonnets by Shakespeare, not just one.

In 2002, McDougal Littell published *The Canterbury Tales: Selected Works and Related Readings*. This book includes sections from the *Canterbury Tales* translated by Nevill Coghill, as well as relevant background texts, such as works by Marie de France and Boccaccio. To help students make connections between the past

and the present, the book also includes a selection from *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and “Chaucer Aboard a Spaceship,” a poem by Naoshi Koriyama. This is a very lively text; while it contains the tales other texts do (*Pardoner, Wife of Bath*), it also includes *The Knight’s Tale, The Nun’s Priest’s Tale, the Summoner’s Tale, the Clerk’s Tale, and the Franklin’s Tale*. This book not only historicizes the *Canterbury Tales*, but makes them relevant to modern readers. It serves as an example of access: students read about the background of the tales, and also see what impressions the tales have left on modern literature and culture.

Some textbooks structure and direct students’ reading experiences more than others. *British and World Literature for Life and Work* by Christine Bideganeta LaRocco and Elaine Bowe Johnson (South-Western Educational Publishing, 1997) is one such text. It includes *The Pardoner’s Tale*, with this sidebar: “Theme Connection . . . Choosing Between Good and Evil” (LaRocco and Johnson 229). There is no question about what the authors intend for students to get out of this tale. But this sidebar seems to do a disservice to students in that they are not necessarily allowed to form their own opinions of the story. Readers should be allowed to read the story (and others) and then make their own meaning. To conclude the tale, the authors ask, “A Last Word. We make so many choices every day that it is sometimes hard to see if we are choosing too much. Where do we draw the line between ‘enough’ and ‘too much’?” (LaRocco and Johnson 236). The connection to the tale is tenuous, other than in morality.

A companion text titled *Context: Teaching Western Literature in a World Context. Volume One: The Ancient World through the Renaissance and Volume two:*

The Enlightenment through the Present (Paul Davis et al, 1995) offers some insight into what exactly students should be getting from Chaucer, at least according to textbook editors. This text does not elevate Chaucer per se, but it does refer to *Canterbury Tales* as a “masterpiece” (51) – and few would disagree with that. The guide takes a very positive attitude towards Chaucer, emphasizing his “jolly good sense of humor” (51). While the guide does not make explicit statements about the similarity between the fourteenth and twenty-first centuries, it also points out that in Chaucer’s

world where things were scarcely what they seemed. . . accident, misfortune, and death tested the faith of even the most pious. As the Canterbury pilgrims engage in their lively merrymaking, their tales remind them (and us) that the medieval world, despite its spiritual and chivalric ideals, was full of falsehood, hypocrisy, greed, pride, gluttony, lust, despair, and finally death. (51)

One would be hard-pressed to argue that the modern world is very different. As a result, “Students catch on quickly to the excitement and irony of these tales and thoroughly enjoy seeing through the masks of their tellers” (51). Part of that joy comes from recognizing themselves in the past. The guide even manages to make the moral Pardoner’s Tale sound interesting. *The Pardoner* is referred to as “rakish, greedy” (51). Who would not want to read that? But the guide’s enthusiasm cannot hide the purpose of the tale: to teach a moral lesson. The guide suggests

an essential question about the rakish, greedy Pardoner’s tale is whether or not a man of his moral failings can tell a moral tale. His tale of the

three greedy young men who kill each other in their lust for gold carries a powerful moral, despite the fact that the Pardoner himself ignores the moral implications of his tale and in fact brags about his successes at extorting money. (51)

This passage seems to take most of the fun out of this tale. It is certainly important to explore the connection between tale and teller – such as whether the Pardoner is a reliable or unreliable narrator. Why? People matching the Pardoner’s description certainly still exist, and it is important to be able to recognize them for what they are. If literature is political, if teaching is a political act, it makes sense to have a specific intention in teaching this tale, that students should be able to gain something specific, be it an issue or morality or of narrator reliability.

A textbook from 2005 answers some of these questions. *Elements of Literature, Sixth Course: Essentials of British and World Literature*, published by Holt, Rinehart and Winston, explains the pedestal upon which most texts place Chaucer. The book points out, “By composing in the vernacular. . .Chaucer lent respectability to a language that would develop into the medium for one of the world’s greatest bodies of literature. In this sense he is indeed the father of English poetry” (s113). It would be difficult to find someone who disagrees with this. This text also includes images from the Ellesmere manuscript, background on the language, the first 42 lines of the *General Prologue* in Middle English, and a translation by Nevill Coghill. Unfortunately it falls into the trap most other books do: it presents the same stories, the Pardoner’s and the Wife of Bath’s. While there is nothing inherently

wrong or bad about either tale, it is disappointing to see the same thing peddled over and over. I will examine these tales and their popularity later in this work.

These trends continue at the college level; indeed upper high school textbooks and lower level college textbooks often overlap. One such book that straddles the high school/university line is *The Norton Anthology: English Literature, 8th Edition: The Major Authors Volume A: The Middle Ages through the Restoration and the Eighteenth Century* (Stephen Greenblatt, general editor, W.W. Norton and Company, 2006). It is probably one of the most commonly used anthologies. This anthology has clearly been influenced by modern English and history theory and criticism. Instead of simply calling Chaucer the “Father of English” or “Father of English Poetry,” it explains

The decision of Chaucer (d. 1400) to emulate French and Italian poetry in his own vernacular is an indication of the change taking place in the status of English, and Chaucer’s works were greatly to enhance the prestige of English as a vehicle for literature of high ambition. He was acclaimed by fifteenth century poets as the embellisher of the English tongue; later writers called him the English Homer and the father of English poetry. (2)

This passage points out that while Chaucer’s use of English was important in bringing legitimacy to English, it was also a reflection of changes that were already taking place. Interestingly, there is still use of the term “father of English poetry” but with the addendum that Chaucer was “acclaimed” by fifteenth-century writers and that this title comes from later writers – not necessarily from twentieth and twenty-first century

teachers, professors, or textbook writers. The text goes on to discuss Chaucer's life and variances in the manuscripts/Middle English, but, again, there is no mention of the *raptus* case⁵. However, this anthology does offer a much wider selection of tales than any textbook and many other anthologies: *General Prologue*, summary of *Knight's Tale*, *Miller's Tale* and *Prologue*, *Wife of Bath Prologue's* and *Tale*, *Pardoner's Prologue* and *Tale*, *Nun's Priest's Tale*, *Parson's Tale*, and Chaucer's *Retraction*. One can get a much better sense of Chaucer's capabilities as a writer and the kind of characters he could flesh out with a varied selection such as this.

With a greater variety of selections in a text, students have greater access to various authors, even if they do not read all of those selections in class. A curious student who wanted to read more on his or her own could simply turn to the textbook, and from there to the library or bookstore. Though some access is better than none, textbooks must still navigate the issues of selection (which tales) and translation.

A problem inherent with textbooks is the issue of translation. While Chaucer's language can be difficult, it is also important for students to read the original Middle English so that they can understand the evolution of their own language and Chaucer's place within that evolution. While the difficulties surrounding translation are rarely brought up in textbooks, it is a thorny issue. Translated texts can serve as an important tool for investigating the past. Translated texts provide access to a wider word of literature. While many academics argue that Chaucer is best read in the original, many students secretly turn to translations, anyway.

⁵ In 1380, Chaucer was charged with *raptus* against Cecilia Chaumpaigne. While the court documents are unclear as to what exactly happened, as Christopher Cannon puts it, "the gravity of the matter is itself measured in the public records in the considerable sum (ten pounds) Chaucer paid to Chaumpaigne in July 1380" (42).

The Bedford Anthology of World Literature: The Middle Period, 100 C.E. – 1450 (Paul Davis, et al. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2004) shows some of the problems inherent in translation. Not only does the book offer the first 18 lines in Middle English, but there is also discussion of the various manuscript versions of *The Canterbury Tales*. The anthology offers the entire *General Prologue* and the Wife's prologue and tale in Present Day English. This is useful for high school students or for an instructor who does not have the time to brief the class in the intricacies of Middle English. But one has to wonder how the translator came up with this line: "When zephyrs have breathed softly all about" (Davis et al 885). The original line – line five in *The General Prologue* – reads "Whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breeth." This is usually translated as something like "When Zephirus [the West Wind] also with its sweet breath." The translated line from the Davis et al text could be read as suggesting that zephyrs – that is, blimps – are floating around the countryside, breathing softly. This is completely nonsensical. Zephyrs do not breathe, and more to the point, they did not exist in fourteenth-century England. The reader should question the rest of the translation – what story, whose story, is he or she really reading? This entire text re-appears in another Bedford/St. Martin's publication, *Western Literature in a World Context. Volume One: The Ancient World to the Renaissance* (Davis et al 1995). It is frustrating to note that there had been time to tweak the translation, though time or financial constraints may have prohibited this.

The Pardoner and the Wife

If the same tales are included in each text, students do not have much access to Chaucer, translated or not. Students cannot read more even if they wish to if they encounter the same few pieces in every anthology available to them. With one or two exceptions, every textbook, anthology, and children's book I surveyed included *The Pardoner's Tale*. *The Wife of Bath*⁶ was the next most frequently represented work, followed by the *General Prologue*. Only one book included a piece from something other than the *Canterbury Tales* – one anthology included an excerpt from *The Legend of Good Women*. Students, then, are clearly not given full access to Chaucer. One small piece of the whole does not accurately represent Chaucer. Since the majority of students – and readers in general – only have access to the Pardoner and the Wife of Bath, it is useful to investigate these tales in more detail. Chaucer is not made very accessible through these tales. He comes across as someone who is only concerned with morality. While these tales are not the same, they do have much in common, and by focusing exclusively on these tales, students may not realize how varied Chaucer's writing (or medieval writing in general) really was. In turn, the Middle Ages may come across as boring or stuffy, when the inclusion of a greater variety of tales would show students just how much choice they really have.

Obviously, someone must be the gatekeeper for access – someone must decide which tales to include. To that end, Louise Cowan and Os Guinness, in *Invitation to the Classics*, provide some useful insight into why certain *Canterbury Tales* reappear

⁶ For a summary of *The Pardoner's Tale*, see above. *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* includes her personal history, such as the fact that she has been married five times and is looking for husband number six. The *Prologue* also includes misogynist sentiment. Her *Tale* is set in King Arthur's court and seeks to answer the question, "What do women want?"

over and over in various anthologies and textbooks. Cowan's and Guinness's book provides a basic background to various classics, as a way to help readers into the texts. Their point is that people should read the classics because the classics are good, enjoyable works.

Cowan and Guinness provide a very rough sketch of Chaucer and *The Canterbury Tales*, including snippets of Middle English, illustrations, and where to go for further reading. They suggest that readers start with *The Pardoner's Prologue and Tale*. Of course! So does every other textbook. But then Cowan and Guinness give an explanation for *why* one should start with this tale, and it is not because it fits into some thematic unit about good and evil:

“The Pardoner’s Prologue and Tale” makes perhaps the best starting point. On approaching any of the individual narratives, the reader should reread the storyteller’s portrait in “The General Prologue” for its revelations about the person telling the tale. The pardoner [sic] is the most depraved person on the pilgrimage, guilty of such offenses as fraud, greed, hypocrisy, and sexual perversion. . . . The pardoner’s [sic] story is much praised for its clear structure, its vivid portrait of three young rioters, its evocation of setting and mystery, and its irony.

(111)

Here, the authors make an excellent case for the Pardoner: his tale is clear and vivid. If one is reading *The Canterbury Tales* for the first time, it makes sense not to start with the most complicated tales. *The Pardoner’s Tale* is not necessarily easy, but it is very straightforward and easy to understand, compared to many of the tales. The

casual reader or student may be turned off by reading something more complex, in terms of structure or symbolism, such as *The Knight's Tale*. *The Pardoner's Tale* is a way to provide greater access to Chaucer. His tale is a sort of building block; after his tale, readers can confidently move on to other ones. Following the general pattern found in textbooks, Cowan and Guinness also suggest reading *The Nun's Priest's Tale* and *The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale* after reading *The Pardoner's Tale*.

The Pardoner's Tale seems to be a logical choice for inclusion in anthologies and textbooks because it is relatively easy to read. However, it is rarely presented in this manner. Instead, it is valued for its moral qualities. Its moral is very clear: greed is wrong. There are several ways into the tale; *Teaching Western Literature in a World Context* suggests:

[A]n essential question about the rakish, greedy Pardoner's tale is whether or not a man of his moral failings can tell a moral tale. . . .

Discussion here might center around the social or didactic function of narratives, the apparent moral blindness of the Pardoner, or the contempt for material wealth taught, if not practiced by, the medieval church. (51)

While such discussion prompts are intriguing, and could lead to useful insights for both students and teacher, this text is making several assumptions. There are several assumptions attached to the final sentence: students have been taught enough about medieval Christianity in order to understand both the Pardoner and his tale; his moral failings are obvious and the instructor has provided enough background in how narratives function. This passage suggests a level of instruction that is sometimes,

though certainly not always, lacking. It is, after all, much easier to discuss the rightness and wrongness of this tale than to look at the deeper meanings. Looking at its themes in depth does require background and time; often, time is very much lacking in the classroom.

The Wife of Bath's Tale, like the *Pardoner's Tale*, raises similar issues in terms of making the tale more accessible to students. She demonstrates that not all medieval women were subjugated; that they could have minds and opinions of their own and even be well educated. This means modern students may have an easier time relating to her and her tale. The Wife also presents a complex view of gender roles – not just in her time period, but in modern times as well. The Wife realizes that her society has mixed views on marriage and wrestles with that. Her tale is timeless. The question of "What do women want?" still fuels a variety of modern media, from books to movies to magazines to television shows. Her tale also sheds light on some of the more stereotypical aspects of medieval gender roles, and thus is a useful tool in showing how attitudes change (and remain the same). Finally, her story takes place in the time of King Arthur, a perennial favorite. The Wife's tale also carries with it some controversy. After all, it is a rape that sets the events of the tale in motion; Queen Guinevere, rather counter-intuitively, pleads for the rapist's life; and in the end, the rapist is rewarded. This can lead to very productive class discussion, or a very uncomfortable class discussion.

Like the Pardoner, it seems strange to include the Wife because of the background required. In order to read her *Prologue*, and more importantly, comprehend it, students must learn a lot of background information. Students have to

learn about the discussion in which the Wife is participating. Students need to understand the historical context in which the Wife lives. This seems like a lot of work, especially because, as we have seen, textbooks often devote only a paragraph or two to what is a very complicated topic.

Teaching Western Literature in a World Context does offer some advice for teaching the *Wife's Tale*:

In contrasting the Wife's own story with the story she tells, many questions arise about the sexual politics of the medieval period. . . . It is useful to compare the Wife of Bath to Margery Kempe, and to discuss their very different relation to or use of church doctrine. The Wife's defense of women certainly invites comparison to that of Christine de Pizan. . . . It is useful to ask students about the strengths and limits of the Wife of Bath's apparent feminism. (51)

This particular anthology does include selections from the women mentioned; however, many textbooks gloss over Margery Kempe and Christine de Pizan, thus making it difficult for students to make connections to other medieval writers. This passage also shows the background students need to comprehend fully the *Wife's Tale*. It also seems to stress a rather teacher-centered learning focus. The teacher must ask the questions and direct the conversation. Students do not have much direct access to the text, or the ability to insert themselves within it.

There is also the issue of the Wife's "apparent feminism." Gender considerations are often important in looking at literary texts. Examining these roles, however, does require extra work for both instructor and student. Students must

understand women's place in medieval society, and how paradoxical it was. There is the issue of how her prologue fits with her tale. Her prologue is also very complex; students must work to grasp its allusions. Finally, there is the very issue of feminism itself: what is it; what does the word mean? The Wife cannot be a feminist because feminism did not exist in the fourteenth century; where does that leave her and her tale? These sorts of questions should not be seen as a barrier to teaching the *Wife's Tale*; indeed, discussing these issues could lead to meaningful interactions with the text.

While it is difficult to say exactly why these tales are included over so many others, it is important to keep in mind the bureaucracy involved publishing textbooks. James Loewen describes the process by which textbooks are created and adopted. While his work looks at American history specifically, this process applied to all textbooks in general. He explains, "Special pressures in the world of textbook publishing may account for the uniformity and dullness" of textbooks (278). This is not surprising; schoolbooks must adhere to some kind of standards to, at the least, ensure students can pass standardized tests. Loewen continues, "Some of these [textbook adoption] boards function explicitly as censors, making sure that books not only meet criteria for length, coverage, and reading level, but also that they avoid topics and treatments that might offend some parents" (278). The fear that one parent might be offended hampers what goes into the book and what goes into the class. *The Pardoner's Tale* might be taught because it is easy to understand, but it is also less problematic than, say, *The Miller's Tale*⁷. What might be enjoyable to the

⁷ *The Miller's Tale* includes infidelity, possible rape, naked buttocks, red hot poker, and violence. These can be troubling issues to bring up in the classroom.

students or what they can truly engage with is not taken into consideration. Also, as Loewen points out, textbooks can run to hundreds of pages and evaluators do not have much time to go through them all. We can see, then, how the issue of access is related to the canon debate. The canon dominates what goes into textbooks and denies access to students about discussion concerning their texts. Politics is often a greater consideration for what goes into a book than what students will enjoy or to what they can relate.

Public Access

Surprisingly, children's books provide the greatest amount of availability and access to Chaucer. One would think books aimed at children would suffer the most from censorship. Instead, these books offer a wide variety of tales and often keep their spirit, if not their language. Also, the fact that these books include pictures offers another layer of access. The images can provide a level of meaning and understanding that might be lost in image-less anthologies. Moving from children's books, I will look at cover art. Many people, after all, do judge books by their covers. The most accessible text of the *Canterbury Tales* will be passed over if the cover is unappealing. From there, I will examine the availability of Chaucer's works at local bookstores. Knowing what books are out there is a moot point if readers do not have access to them at the bookstore.

There are three main collections of the *Canterbury Tales* aimed at children: *The Canterbury Tales*, adapted by Diana Stewart (1991), *The Canterbury Tales*, adapted by Geraldine McCaughrean (republished in 1997; originally published 1984), and *The Canterbury Tales*, adapted by Marcia Williams (2007). While Chaucer enjoyed some popularity as a children's author in the early part of the twentieth century, these books are the primary means of access to Chaucer as modern children's literature.

As critic Velma Bourgeois Richmond points out, "children's literature is chosen and written by adults" (216). Even though children's books provide a greater

variety⁸ of Chaucer's work to choose from, one must still question the underlying messages and themes of these books. Geraldine McCaughrean's retelling, specifically, seems interested in pointing readers to certain conclusions. Each tale has been renamed. Some of the titles are certainly fitting – “*The Knight's Tale of Chivalry and Rivalry*” for example (McCaughrean 7). Other titles seem to miss the point of the tale, especially “*The Miller's story is A Barrel of Laughs*” and “*The Reeve insists on recounting A Racket at the Mill*” (McCaughrean 19, 38). In renaming *The Miller's Tale*, McCaughrean has removed the darker undertones from the story, such as issues of infidelity, violence, and lack of consent. But even if these titles can be misleading, McCaughrean at least presents a variety of stories to her readers, unlike most anthologies and textbooks. About McCaughrean's and others' updated *Canterbury Tales*, Richmond comments, “The creation of new versions of Chaucer's stories for children suggests an ongoing recognition of the fourteenth-century poet, but the tales in a post-modern context have not been successful” (215). However, one must examine the meaning of “success.” If success is measured in simply bringing attention to Chaucer and his work, these books have been successful. If success is measured by fidelity to the original material, then perhaps these books have failed. One could argue that Chaucer also based his works on the work of others; these authors seem to be doing the same thing. But then, Chaucer never tried to pass off his own work as someone else's; his audience understood the borrowing and embellishment that was going on. When books promise *The Canterbury Tales*, the modern reader expects that – not changed versions.

⁸ In general, the children's books offer 7 – 10 tales, compared to the 1 to 3 of textbooks. Between the three main children's books by McCaughrean, Hastings, and Williams, 15 tales are represented (including the *General Prologue*).

Regardless, children's books provide the greatest accessibility to Chaucer. Instead of presenting just one tale, these books offer a variety that suits every reader's taste. While high school textbooks seem to want to shelter students from Chaucer's bawdier tales, children's books often revel in them. Children are generally obsessed with bodily functions, and as such, Chaucer is tailor-made for them. More to the point, once children get hooked on *The Miller's Tale*, there is nothing to stop them from seeking out other works by Chaucer.

The illustrations – and the very nature of storybooks -- also provide a link between past and present. After all, the Ellesmere manuscript from the fifteenth century is famous for its illustrations; story books merely continue that tradition. Richmond suggests, however, that these pictures can be problematic: “the privileging of the illustrator over the reteller signs a decline of commitment to language and its power for storytelling in our visual age, which itself is a reenactment of the role of images in the Middle Ages, a time when many could not read” (216). Certainly, medieval audiences had to imagine the characters and settings as they were read to. Still, the Ellesmere⁹ manuscript, and others, offered some visual depictions of the action. Visual literacy is increasingly important, and it is not entirely disconnected from textual literacy. The audience reading a picture book still needs to be able to connect the words to images. In exploring the resources Chaucer worked with, Peter Brown offers visuals Chaucer and his audience would know, such as images of Adam and Eve as well as the months. Certainly, these images were understood by their original medieval audience and were as important as text.

⁹ The Ellesmere manuscript dates from the fifteenth century and includes detailed illuminations and illustrations of the Canterbury pilgrims.

Books for adults, though, generally limit images to the front cover. Often, the images in cover art are stereotypical: history textbooks usually include some sort of historic artifact on the cover, such as the pyramids or a famous painting from the Renaissance. Literature textbooks are fond of pre-Raphaelites, or just plain covers with words on them. Volumes that deal specifically with Chaucer usually include pictures of the pilgrims on their horses – either images from the Ellesmere manuscript, the woodcut from the Caxton manuscript, Blake, or others. These images make a promise: they relate directly to the text. One knows that a pyramid signifies old things; pre-Raphaelites mean English poetry, and medieval people on horseback are Chaucer’s pilgrims. All of these images symbolize *old*. However, these typical images may be working against the text. If a reader is not interested in medieval literature or history to begin with, the typical cover art will not draw them in. Books need not necessarily change to contemporary images, or deck out models in medieval garb. However, the 1996 edition of the Everyman *Canterbury Tales* plays with the expectation of a Chaucer book. The cover features an image from the *Romance of the Rose*, another medieval text from the same time period, on the front cover. This is clearly a medieval illustration, yet it feels very modern: a nude woman and man lie in bed; the woman seems to be trying to entice the man. This picture prompts discussion about important issues in the Middle Ages such as gender roles. It depicts a scene with which most modern people are familiar, unlike the depiction of Chaucer’s pilgrims on horseback. This is an image that can draw people in and ultimately provide greater visibility and access to Chaucer’s works.

It seems that cover space is often being wasted. When it comes to history in any form, it can be difficult to engage students. Even if he is the author, a static picture of Geoffrey Chaucer does not seem to be the way to draw them in. After all, very few modern novels have cover art that features nothing but the author. Many classic works are being repackaged and remarketed (see the Folger Library editions of Shakespeare, for example); Chaucer's works are certainly due for such an update. By including such static and typical images, students are disconnected and disengaged before they open the text.

William K. Finley and Joseph Rosenblum look at visual depictions of Chaucer and his tales in their book, *Chaucer Illustrated: Five Hundred Years of the Canterbury Tales in Pictures*. They point out that even as far back as the Ellesmere manuscript, images did not always match the text (xx). Artists relied on types to illustrate the tales – a tradition seen still in contemporary covers. The important thing was showing what people expected. In this way, it is not surprising modern covers do not always show something relevant to the text – what matters is a cover that matches people's conceptions of the Middle Ages.

Cover art means nothing, however, if people do not have access to books in the first place. If bookstores provide a limited selection of texts, readers do not have a real choice at all. In 2007, I conducted a survey of the availability of Chaucer texts in bookstores in the college town of Corvallis, Oregon (population 50,000). This small case study is meant to show what is accessible to the general public. Other towns might lead to different conclusions about the accessibility of Chaucer. However,

given that Oregon State University (OSU) does offer courses on Chaucer and medieval history, it is relevant to investigate what the local bookstores offer.

I surveyed five bookstores: the university bookstore, a small used bookstore, a large used book store that also sells some new books, an independent book-seller, and a large chain store. The bookstores are fairly close to one another as well as the university. Many students use bicycles or skateboards as transportation; there is also public transport that is free to students. Except for the chain books store and university bookstore, all of these stores are 10-15 minute walk or about a seven minute bike ride from campus. The chain bookstore is about 20 minutes away by foot, ten by bike. The university bookstore is centrally located in the student union.

The large used bookstore had eleven books by or about Chaucer. These books included four versions of *Troilus and Criseyde*, three biographies, a copy of *The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*, an interlinear version of *Canterbury Tales*, a book of background sources, and Cliff's Notes. The multiple copies of *Troilus and Criseyde* was quite surprising, since it is not taught as frequently as *The Canterbury Tales* at the high school or college level. However, this is a used bookstore – these are the books people do not want to keep. The oldest book on the shelf was originally published in 1932 (a modernized version of *Troilus and Criseyde*); the most recent was from 2000 (a Chaucer biography). The smaller bookstore had even more Chaucer – thirteen books total, with multiple copies of several titles. On the counter, as one walked in, the small bookstore displayed bookmarks with a medieval theme. The greater selection, then, is not surprising – this bookstore seemed more geared toward the classics. Their books included nine versions of *The Canterbury Tales*, two

introductions/guides to Chaucer, one biography, and Maxnotes, a kind of Cliff's Notes. The oldest text was originally published in 1926; the most recent one was published in 1995. While there was a slightly greater selection, one must wonder who would buy a copy of *The Canterbury Tales* from the 1930's. Unfortunately, these books are for a more limited audience than the books at the larger bookstore.

Both the independent bookstore and the university bookstore had no works by Chaucer. In some ways, this makes sense for the independent bookstore. It is small and cannot afford to offer room for books people do not want to buy. In general, the store runs to very recently published books. That the university bookstore did not have any Chaucer is quite troubling. Unlike the independent bookstore, the university bookstore did have various copies of Dante, Boccaccio, and Shakespeare. The university itself even offers an entire class devoted to Chaucer – one would think, then, there would be a market for Chaucer books, besides in the textbook section.

The chain store did somewhat better. It only had six titles, but at least they were much newer than the ones at the used bookstores. All six books were versions of the *Canterbury Tales*. The different versions included annotated texts, modern translations, and interlinear versions. The oldest book was originally published in 1908 (but reprinted as recently as 1992), the latest in 1985. Many of the "older" books had been recently reprinted. Still, in some ways it is no wonder people do not just pick up a copy of *Canterbury Tales* to read for fun. While people may acknowledge the text is from the Middle Ages, reading a book from the 1960s can be a turn off. How can the reader be sure the translations and footnotes are up-to-date? Being reprinted does not mean the book has been corrected. A brand new version, such as

the Seamus Heaney translation of *Beowulf*, might bring more readers to Chaucer. In November 2008, The Modern Library (a division of Random House) will publish Burton Raffel's new translation of *The Canterbury Tales*. Obviously, its appeal remains to be seen.

I returned to the chain store about two months after my original survey. This was during the holiday season; the bookstore had a large shelf devoted to new editions of various classics (buy one, get one half off!). The version offered by the chain store (published 2007) was branded with the store's name – as if the store were endorsing this copy. This seems problematic. In truth, their copy was not very good. It was modernized and offered very little in the way of notes. The only information to be found – a basic overview of Chaucer's life -- was on the inside cover and on the back cover. The cover, however, was lovely – it featured Chaucer from the Ellesmere manuscript as well as cathedral windows. Who is this text serving? Students need something with more notes. Casual readers might enjoy it – but they might also appreciate more background information. On the other hand, the attractive cover and simplified text might be a good way to draw in otherwise reluctant readers. Looking at the back cover gives some indication: this book is for those unfamiliar with Chaucer. The blurb explains:

A supreme achievement of skill, wit, irony, and intelligence, the collection ranges from lofty expressions of love (the knight's tale) to bawdy slapstick (the miller's and the reeve's) to fables (the nun's priest's)[*sic*]. Several deal with the trials of marriage. . . and these show a rare, true sympathy for women.

This is a description for those unfamiliar with the tales. Like the cover, it serves as an advertisement. Still, one wonders if the book is forcing readers to understand these stories in specific ways. Surely there is more to *The Knight's Tale* than just “lofty expressions of love” just as the *Miller's* and *Reeve's Tales* function as more than bawdy slapstick, especially when read in conjunction with the *Knight's Tale*. But if space is limited, as it is on covers, these simplified descriptions may suffice in getting people interested.

Chaucer in Popular Culture

Technology in the early twenty-first century allows greater access to Chaucer, thanks in large part to the Internet. A basic Google search turns up about 814,000 hits for “Geoffrey Chaucer.”¹⁰ Google includes links to books, online versions of his works, and biographies. There are also links to modern updates of Chaucer’s works, such as Geoffrey Chaucer’s blog, Baba Brinkman’s rap, and the *Knight’s Tale* movie. These updates may not appeal to all audiences but all serve as a way to draw people in who might otherwise avoid Chaucer. These modern media depictions allow students greater access to Chaucer and serve as a way to step into his works. They provide layers to the tales that words in a textbook cannot. Once Chaucer had been understood and perhaps mastered in a more familiar context, readers can move on to more difficult or older works.

Both the first page of Google hits and the Links section of Chaucer’s Wikipedia entry direct people to the website *Geoffrey Chaucer Hath a Blog* (<http://houseoffame.blogspot.com/>). This blog, written in Middle English, re-imagines Chaucer writing in a world that is a cross between the fourteenth and twenty-first centuries. He takes jabs at Gower and writes reviews of shows like *Serpentes on a Ship*, a parody of the movie *Snakes on a Plane*. The layout is distinctly medieval looking, but the blog is clear and easy to navigate – there are even helpful links to scholarly websites such as *The New Chaucer Society* (listed as the *New Me Society*). This, in turn, allows people – not just students – greater access to Chaucer. Anyone in the blogosphere has the chance to come across this blog. By using the normal blog conventions, such as links and images, this website introduces people to Chaucer. Not

¹⁰ As of March 16, 2008.

only do internet users gain greater insight into Chaucer, they gain greater access to him. Recently, the blog has run a series of pictures that could only be called LOLPilgrims.¹¹ Here, the blog author is joyously mixing past and present, with very funny and illuminating results. By adopting another common internet meme, this blog has ensured even greater access to Chaucer.

The LOL phenomenon began with a picture of a fat cat that circulated the internet. Someone created the caption “I can has cheezburger?” LOLCats were born. The most famous site is <http://icanhascheezburger.com/>; one can find a variety of animal pictures with captions. The *Chaucer Blog* author, in turn, took images from the Ellesmere manuscript and superimposed humorous captions. This is quite useful on several levels. The author has drawn attention to Chaucer by capitalizing on a current, popular, very modern phenomenon. But the captions also offer a layer of meaning that helps more casual Chaucer readers understand the pilgrims. For example, on the image of the Summoner, the blog author writes, “No jail for u? Give cheezburger unto me lolz.” The juxtaposition of a medieval manuscript with text-speak is funny enough, but in a sense, this is the very character of the Summoner; explained simply, in an easy to understand way. This blog could also serve as a useful pedagogical tool: why not have students create their own LOLPilgrims? Students could create their own meaning by mixing media from the past and the present. They could see that Chaucer’s words are not fixed, are not dead on a page, but that his concepts are still alive and still relevant.

A similar re-imagining of Chaucer can be found in Baba Brinkman’s *Rap Canterbury Tales*. These modernized versions are available on Brinkman’s website,

¹¹ LOL is a common internet acronym that stands for “Laugh Out Loud.”

CD , and through live performance. Through format and translation, Brinkman provides greater access to these tales. As Brinkman explains in the book version of *The Rap Canterbury Tales*,

The problem, as I saw it, was that Chaucer’s literary importance has always been a function of his popularity, and his popularity was waning. I wanted to bring these stories back to life, but translating them into prose would only stifle the lyricism. . . . [T]ranslating them into a contemporary iambic pentameter would still feel archaic to the modern ear. (5-6).

While using rap can often be a naked appeal to young audiences, it can bring these older stories to a new audience. Rap, and music in general, is alive for many people in a way that words on a page are not. Since generally these works were meant to be heard, not read, the *Rap Canterbury Tales* introduces students to the spirit of Chaucer’s works.

While Brinkman’s translation of the *Tales* is not complete, it is worth noting he translates tales that most commonly appear in textbooks and anthologies. His rap versions include *The Knight’s Tale*, *The Miller’s Tale*, *The Pardoner’s Tale*, and *The Wife of Bath*. In his introduction to the print collection, Brinkman says, “I chose to translate only the specific *Canterbury Tales* that would work best in a live performance context – stories with a narrative coherent thread, a solid and conclusive ending, and intrigues involving those old stalwarts of pop culture: sex and violence” (6). In his printed collection, Brinkman offers commentary on the tales he modernized; he also includes the original Middle English text along with his interpretation.

Illustrations also add another level to the tales. By using these tales, then, Brinkman can spark more interest in Chaucer than a textbook.

By incorporating poetry, rap, and illustrations, Brinkman can still provide a complex view of Chaucer's characters. Modernized in this case does not mean simplified. *The Knight's Tale*¹² offers the first point of access in character complexity. Emelye's feelings are conveyed through illustration and modern-day prayer to Diana:

“Diane, you know that I am wild/
 I have no wish to be defiled/
 By the hand of man, nor got with child/
 Therefore, I pray, be mild/
 Don't let my honour be beguiled!” (152-153)

Compare this with Chaucer's original words:

I am, thow woost, yet of the compaignye/
 A mayde, and love huntynge and venerye
 /And for to walken in the wodes wilde/
 And nogt to ben a wyf with childes/
 Noght wol I knowe the compaignye of man. (2307-2311)¹³

In both versions, the audience clearly feels her distress. In the Brinkman version, however, it is clear that Emelye is not a romance heroine or a pretty princess; this is a young woman who wants her independence, and knows that she has no agency to

¹² *The Knight's Tale* is a tale of chivalry and courtly love about two knights who fall in love with the same woman, Emelye. They decide to have a battle over who shall marry her; she prays to Diana that she might remain a virgin. Instead, Diana tells Emelye she must marry, but she will marry the man who truly loves her.

¹³ From *The Riverside Chaucer*.

achieve it on her own. While her situation is part of a very specific (if somewhat fictional) time and place, it is one modern audiences can understand.

Yet Brinkman's treatment of Alisoun, another woman with no choice, is rather different. Chaucer himself is not the kindest in describing Alisoun. Brinkman, however, goes a step further; he says Alisoun's cheeks are "painted up slutty pink" and that she has a "naughty stink" (195). The word "slutty" is very problematic – it implies *choice*. Generally, a modern woman who is called a "slut" is seen to have made the choice to be one. A woman who simply enjoys sex might be called a "slut" or a woman who has any kind of sexual experience at all. Yet choice is always involved, or at least perceived. Further it is a pejorative term. But Alisoun has no choice, at least none explicitly stated in the text. While women in modern (Western) societies marry men who are much older than they are, and women in modern (Western) societies commit infidelity, modern (Western) women have more choices than Alisoun.

Moving to other tales, Brinkman provides some of the best reasons for studying the Pardoner and his tale. Brinkman likens the Pardoner to the 1990's musician Kid Rock and remarks that the Pardoner is "is a spiritual crack dealer" (251). This seems to be a responsible translation: it is a modern image that is easily grasped and really does get to the heart of the Pardoner's character. Brinkman also says about the Pardoner that he "is Chaucer's most unapologetically corrupt characters, and also one of his most keenly intelligent" (249) and "one of Chaucer's most dangerous and ingenious characters. The Pardoner uses language as a weapon to achieve wealth and power, and exercise influence over people" (251). This description provides new

access to the Pardoner and his tale. It is not simply a morality tale, but something more powerful, something more dangerous. This tale could be interpreted as an analogue to modern media – how so many seemingly innocuous forms hide an uglier motive. The message isn't so much about the rioters and why one should not try to murder one's friends but, instead, to pay more attention to who or what is behind the message. By pointing out its politics, Brinkman brings something fresh to this story. It is a morality tale, but we have been focusing on the wrong moral.

When it comes to morality tales, though, the most powerful cultural influence comes from film. Rap is still perceived as a subculture; to boost the cachet of any author, his or her work is best represented on film. The most recent cinematic representation of Chaucer is the 2001 movie *A Knight's Tale*¹⁴, directed and written by Brian Helgeland, with Heath Ledger starring as William Thatcher (the knight of this tale) and Paul Bettany as Geoffrey Chaucer. While not a box office hit, a Google search from March 2008 shows just how pervasive this film is:

Search Terms	Number of Hits	First Website	Second Website
“knight’s tale”	975,000	Internet Movie Database’s page on the movie	Wikipedia’s page on the movie
“a knight’s tale”	452,000	Internet Movie Database’s page on the movie	Wikipedia’s page on the movie
“the knight’s tale”	58,600	Luminarium’s page on Chaucer’s tale	Wikipedia’s page on the tale

¹⁴ The movie *A Knight's Tale* is not based on Chaucer's *The Knight's Tale*. Simply, the movie is about a man who wants to be a knight, and features Geoffrey Chaucer as a character. Chaucer's main role in the film is not as creator of *The Canterbury Tales* but as someone who knows enough about heraldry to forge the documents the main characters needs.

While Chaucer's works cannot compete, the movie's Wikipedia page does point to pages about Chaucer. In this way, the movie is an access point – not only does the film lead to Chaucer, but so does information about the film.

Besides Wikipedia and other websites related to the movie, the DVD also offers information on the historical Chaucer. The DVD was released in 1995 and includes behind-the-scenes footage and “featurettes.” The featurettes are brief treatments of different technical and historical aspects of the movie. Only one, “Stories for the People,” deals specifically with Chaucer and even then, it is difficult to figure out exactly what the point of it is. It is neither biography of Chaucer nor overview of his works (or even just an overview of his *Knight's Tale*). Instead, Helgeland gives his reasons for including Chaucer as a character in the film.

Helgeland explains that he included Chaucer “as my gift to the English majors of the world” (“Stories”). It is not entirely clear what he means by this; after all, this depiction of Chaucer gave many people pause. He goes on to say, “The tendency is to think of him as a dusty old professor and in fact he was a very interesting guy” (“Stories”). In this Helgeland is correct; at least, many of the textbooks surveyed above present Chaucer in this way. Perhaps, then, Helgeland means this Chaucer as a gift in that this depiction will cause people to seek out his works. As portrayed in the movie, Chaucer is dynamic, resourceful, funny – and dirty. But this depiction does a disservice as well. If one only knows Chaucer from this movie, picking up one of his books will likely be disappointing, especially if he or she starts with *The Knight's Tale*.

Helgeland implies that Chaucer is drawing inspiration for his later stories from the plot of this movie – the William, the main character of *A Knight's Tale*, leads in some way to the Knight in *The Canterbury Tales*. Also, the Summoner (Simon) and the Pardoner (Peter) are characters in the film; their makeup and costumes are based on the descriptions from *The General Prologue*. In the actual film itself, however, Philippa Chaucer says to Geoffrey, “They [the movie’s main characters] seem much more fun than those boring old pilgrims you hung out with last year” (*A Knight's Tale*). The featurette also includes comments from Paul Bettany, the actor who plays Chaucer. He points out, “He wrote books with fart gags in them. Comedy. Books that appeal to the masses” (“Stories”). Bettany and Helgeland show a kind of hope that is not found in many textbooks and anthologies. They think that “the masses” of today can understand Chaucer’s work, and without much difficulty and they get this thought across in a way textbooks often do not. Drawing parallels between the twenty-first and fourteenth centuries also make Chaucer and his time period more real and accessible.

This accessibility, however, can be confusing if one is not familiar with history or with Chaucer’s works. Helgeland suggests that *A Knight's Tale*’s plot is in some way based on Chaucer’s story. Yet the two have very little in common. If anything, the tale this movie most resembles is the Wife of Bath’s – William spends much of the movie trying to learn what women want. Chaucer’s depiction in the film, however, does stay consistent: he is a risk-taker, a poet, an earthy man, and a spiritual one. This version both matches and is at odds with what we know; since we do not know much about Chaucer, it is possible this is an accurate depiction. But at least, it does seem

possible for this flesh-and-blood character to be related to Chaucer the pilgrim in the manuscripts.

When the main characters William, Wat, and Roland first meet Chaucer, he is walking down the road, naked and covered in mud. The audience later learns that he has a problem with gambling and has lost his clothes to the Summoner and the Pardoner. This does seem to be a rather degraded view of Chaucer; it is hard to imagine a man in the civil service falling to such a fate. But at least this is a cue that Chaucer will not be boring, that this is not the stuffy guy found in textbooks. What could be seen as alienating instead draws the viewer in. Chaucer shows off his prowess by inventing the word *trudge*, then stops to suck a thorn out of his foot. At Roland's prodding, he finally introduces himself: "Geoffrey Chaucer's the name, writing's the game." The men are silent, unimpressed. "Chaucer? Geoffrey Chaucer? The writer?" "A what?" they ask. He explains, "For a penny, I'll scribble you anything you want, from summonses to decrees to edicts creeds, warrants, patents of nobility. I've even been known to jot down a poem." This does seem to be a rather apt description of writing in the fourteenth century. No one would consider him- or herself an author, and indeed, Chaucer did far more than simply write poems. This statement, at least, gets at some of what few truths we have regarding Chaucer. Geoffrey ends up joining the group, serving as William's herald.

Throughout the rest of the film, Chaucer serves as a promoter, confidante, and poet. He warms up the crowd, encouraging them to cheer for William. Chaucer then tells William, "I got their attention, you go and win their hearts." Strangely, even though Chaucer is lauded by Helgeland and Bettany for writing for the masses, much

of Chaucer's poetry confuses the other characters onscreen. When introducing William for the first time, Chaucer says, "We walk in the garden of his turbulence." This is a nonsensical phrase, both in the film and to those watching it. Over time, though, Chaucer is able to hone his craft. He is able to calm down a crowd threatening William by asking, "I ask you, what makes a man noble? Is it his lineage or his heart?" Perhaps this is meant to show his evolution as a writer, as he goes from the high-minded allegory of *The Book of the Duchess* to the bawdy mass appeal of *The Canterbury Tales*.

In the film, though, Chaucer never gives in to the bawdiness one might expect. While he does make comments regarding sex, there is a refreshing lack of fart jokes. When William angrily asks his love interest, Jocelyn, "Don't you ever get tired of putting on clothes?" Chaucer whispers to him, "She's talking about taking them off." Here is the Chaucer one might expect – or perhaps his opposite, if one is used to the "dusty professor" version of Chaucer. But this Chaucer is also a cliché – a trope often found in comedies. He is the joking best friend, the sex-obsessed comic relief. These words do not so much represent Chaucer as they do a typical movie character. Someone must make this kind of remark; it might as well have been Chaucer. However, these words would feel the same coming from one of the other male characters; there is nothing actually Chaucerian about them. In the same vein, when Wat complains that he does not understand women, Chaucer replies, "Nor do I, but they understand us." This sounds very profound, especially from the man who crafted the Wife of Bath. But ultimately, these words are meaningless since they could have been said by any of the male characters.

Then there is Philippa Chaucer. Since she is so often left out of his biographies, it is refreshing to see her in the flesh (literally; her one scene is spent naked in Geoffrey's bed). We know far less about Philippa than Geoffrey, but her brief screen-time makes her seem like a person with whom one would want to spend time. She is lovely and lusty, and clearly Geoffrey's equal. Given that what little there is written about Philippa seems to be rather negative, I kept expecting there to be a punchline – that this was a mistress or prostitute simply posing as Mrs. Chaucer. But no, she is real. Indeed, she is a bit of a marvel as a character. Even though this movie is set in the 1300s, it has a very feminist sensibility – the female love interest, Jocelyn, does not want to be silent and hates to be complimented solely for her beauty. Kate the Farrier is a blacksmith. This is what we expect of our modern medieval heroines. Philippa, in contrast, is not meant to be a type, she does not conform to stereotypes, she just is. She is a woman clearly in love with her husband who is his equal in wit yet she does not need to speak in heavy-handed platitudes about equality. Having medieval heroines to remind us about the importance of equality or respecting women reveals that we have not yet reached total equality.

Ultimately and inevitably, this film tells us far more about the later twentieth century than it does about the fourteenth. In this way, it is helpful in showing the confusion people may feel towards Chaucer. We can only handle the classics after they have been knocked around or brought low; we can handle a naked Chaucer, not a Chaucer in the king's employ. We can love stories about knights and princesses, but the knight must be of low origins and hard-working; the princess must be beautiful, brave, and outspoken. Indeed, even though this is a movie set in the Middle Ages, it

can only contain modern ideas. As Candace Barrington points out, this is an American Chaucer; he “validate[s] a distinctly American ethos: risk-taking for personal gain” (Barrington 143). The movie Chaucer is a risk-taker, and his historical counterpart was as well. He risks writing in English about “normal” people instead of writing in Latin or French about the nobility (Barrington 148). In this way, we can use anachronism to draw comparisons (Barrington 145). However, in this film, which takes itself seriously only part of the time, which is interested in historical details one moment and in artistic license the next, it can be difficult to see those comparisons.

This film has not gained much scholarly attention, even in compilations looking at Chaucer in popular culture. The reason for this is most likely that it is simply too recent. Barrington is one of the few scholars to mention the film; her book, *American Chaucers*, was published in 2007. Steve Ellis’s *Chaucer at Large: The Poet in the Modern Imagination* seems like the perfect candidate for a scholarly treatment of the movie. However, it was published in 2000, one year before the movie was released. The movie itself was only mildly successful; its imprint on the national consciousness is more for including the Queen song “We Will Rock You” than for including Chaucer. Indeed, even though I saw the film not long after it was first released, I had forgotten that Chaucer was a main character until I re-watched it for this project. More to the point, *A Knight’s Tale* does not bill itself as a Chaucer movie. Panicked students might watch a modernized version of a Shakespeare play, but it is the very rare person who would watch *A Knight’s Tale* hoping to learn something about *The Canterbury Tales*.

However, the movie's stereotypes and ambiguity do fit well with the themes found in *The Canterbury Tales*. Most of the plot is devoted to questions of identities; people are rarely what they seem. This is made explicit when William asks Jocelyn for her name and she refuses to give it. Instead, they create nicknames for one another, personas they think or hope the other person will fulfill. Kate the Farrier upsets gender roles by being a female blacksmith. The movie itself hinges on William being what he is not. He is a thatcher's son, and a peasant, but under the created name of Ulrich von Lichtenstein of Gelderland, he is a powerful and respected knight. Midway through the movie, William writes love letters to Jocelyn. When she asks him to recite poetry, he cannot; the text of the love letters is not his but the collaborative effort of all of the characters of the movie.

Chaucer's characters also often assume multiple and ambiguous identities. The Loathly Lady from *The Wife of Bath's Tale* is a beautiful woman in disguise. In *The Miller's Tale*, Nicholas pretends to be Alisoun when Absalon comes courting. Walter hides the truth about their children from Griselda during *The Clerk's Tale*. Griselda, in turn, comes from humble beginnings but has a pure and noble heart (somewhat like William in the film). The modern movie and medieval manuscript, then, share a link. At the most basic level, people are trying to decide who they are – and who the people around them are. Identity is not necessarily tied to an inborn trait; people are often not what they seem. Just as Chaucer negotiates this in his work, Brian Helgeland navigates this in his film. These are uncertainties all humans can share in; while attitudes towards women, marriage, and knights may change, working through one's identity does not.

Conclusion

While many avenues to Chaucer exist (textbooks, translations, modernized versions, blogs, movies), access itself remains limited. One or two tales in a high school text does not allow for much choice, nor does the often leading questions that follow the tales. In terms of translations and modernized versions, one must know what to look for, and how to evaluate the resource (a translated version of *The Canterbury Tales* that is censored does not offer more accessibility than a complete version in Middle English). Internet and movie sources suffer from the same problem: one cannot search for Geoffrey Chaucer's blog if one does not know that Geoffrey Chaucer has a blog.

This research does not affect just Chaucer. If access to one of the most famous writers in English literary history is restricted, other medieval writers have little chance of being (re)discovered by new generations. One of the most obvious, but most difficult to implement, solutions would be to improve textbooks. Exciting and dynamic textbooks (history and English) would draw more students into exploring the past and into seeking out other authors on their own. New translations and editions could bring attention to Chaucer and other writers. A greater variety of medieval literature courses at the college level would also allow for greater access to works from the Middle Ages. A greater presence on the Internet or in popular forms of entertainment, such as television and movies, would also do more to provide at least awareness, if not true access.

However, there is a great irony underpinning my work: though I have explored how students and readers gain access to Chaucer, I have not had much interaction with

his texts for this thesis. I have picked snippets from one tale or another in order to prove a point or provide a contrast, but there is no analysis of any of his works. I did not take full advantage of the access offered to me. In writing this thesis, I had to stay away from the primary source in order to read all of the secondary sources I needed. However, I found access of another kind: access to what students learn in school, to what is available on library and bookstores shelves, and to what is in the popular consciousness. As an instructor, I can gain better access into the kinds of background information students bring to my classroom. As a medievalist, I can better understand why my colleagues are reluctant to register for a class focused solely on Chaucer. In discovering the ways Americans access Chaucer, I have gained a new kind of access for myself.

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