

Approaches to Teaching
World Literature

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Approaches to Teaching
Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*

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Digitizing Chaucerian Debate

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In an attempt to enhance classroom discussion and improve student writing in my early British literature survey course, I tested the use of a blog. I selected the sparest template available, authorized only the basic functions of posting and commenting, and assigned the blog the (admittedly bland) title of *EngL 3003W*. Unlike stimulating blogs on medieval subjects such as *In the Middle* (Cohen et al.), my course blog became populated by uninspired postings, which elicited few comments that moved beyond superficialities such as “picturing them hanging in tubs made me laugh.” I soon realized that I needed to establish a dialogic structure for the blog that would compel students to engage with one another—much as the pilgrims do in *The Canterbury Tales* in their efforts to “quit” each other through tale telling. Ultimately, I became convinced that this model of Chaucerian debate offered a stimulating means of engagement with literary texts across the early British literature curriculum.

To encourage classroom dialectic, I often turn to the “quitting” structure of *The Canterbury Tales*, within which pilgrims offer requitals of previous tales that range from exuberant acclamations to raucous attacks. Within these extremes lie productive forms of correction that emerge as subtle critiques, opposing arguments, and timely (or sometimes untimely) interruptions. The now well-known *Geoffrey Chaucer Hath a Blog* embodies this spirit of corrective debate (Bryant). The (until recently) anonymous author of this blog assumes the voice of Chaucer to “endyte” (“write”) on topics ranging from the composition of *Troilus and Criseyde* to the death of Heath Ledger. Even the blog’s subtitle, “Take That, Gower!,” champions the blogosphere as a quitting space in which incisive commentary is de rigueur. When I first encountered this blog, I suspected that its imaginative role playing and Chaucerian requital could provide a model of interaction for students, which could intensify and enrich students’ discussions of difficult texts. Perhaps if I had my students impersonate literary characters, they could fully immerse themselves in their roles and quit each other through the voices of their characters.¹

As a result, I revised my course blog and assigned it a more combative title, *Quitting Your Classmates*.² I also selected a more medieval-looking template for the site, which fostered the impression that students were modern-day Adam Scriveyns inscribing their author’s thoughts on a hypertextual manuscript. The blog remained basic in its functioning—still no images or video clips—because I was primarily concerned with students’ written dialogues. To replicate Chaucerian correction, I had students respond to each other on the blog through an avatar assigned to them during the first week of the course, which demanded that they assume the personalities, perspectives, and sometimes even the language of characters in their postings and comments. Since the course surveys both medieval and early modern literature, the avatars ranged from Beowulf

to Milton’s Satan. To ensure active and informed dialogues, students were required to read their characters’ texts during the first week of class and contribute postings and comments periodically throughout the semester. As they wrote from their characters’ points of view, students debated issues relevant to assigned texts and their characters’ historical and literary moments. For example, a reader of the blog could witness an exchange in which Spenser’s Sir Guyon and Chaucer’s Miller discuss the merits of Queen Elizabeth’s identity as a virgin queen and her claim to have a “heart and stomach of a king” (326). It soon became clear that Chaucerian quitting was a heuristic that could integrate the seemingly disparate texts of the early British literature curriculum while also illuminating the distinctions between them. The students began to see themselves as embarking on a pilgrimage with unlikely literary companions such as Grendel, Julian of Norwich, Bertilak’s Lady, and Prospero.

In addition to provocative postings and debates, such as Margery Kempe’s “If Only I Could Write,” students happily grappled in textual combat and hatched subplots within and between texts as the course proceeded. One notable example was Satan’s acquisition of Marie de France’s Lanval as a knight of his retinue, an alliance that Lanval regretted once he read *Paradise Lost*. He reproached Satan in a post that inspired the following versified response from Chaucer’s Miller:

You ask why does this Lucifer go on
With plot to take up arms against high God.
Although he’s not as strong and fit to fence
This Satan dude has got some eloquence.
I’ve never heard of such an argument
That God above is quite a cruel tyrant.
Now Satan’s got me leaning on his side.
Perhaps I’ll send him whiskey for the ride.
How boring and oppressive it would be
If none did question rules and appointees.
I’m glad this Satan’s going on his way
Though soon he’ll find himself with hell to pay.

These heroic couplets are striking in the way they showcase the Miller’s interruptive irreverence and confront Miltonic politics, a rhetorical feat that would have been difficult to achieve in standard classroom dialogue. Lanval’s default on his demonic bond provoked Satan to follow the Miller’s response with some quitting of his own:

Dear Lanval, why all the animosity? You were happy to accept my generosity, with a wife and riches that the heavens would envy. Yet now you question and doubt when the time draws near, could this be perhaps due to some hidden fears? If God could destroy my powerful empire, why were we left alive to plot and conspire? . . . If He could destroy us, don’t

you think he would? . . . If you wish to scorn us and take the enemy's side, you must return to me your riches and your bride. . . .

Miller, my good man, I would love to sit and have a drink, so you can tell me exactly what a cuckold thinks.

In rhyming prose Satan denounces Lanval's disloyalty, interrogates Milton's theology, and even establishes a new alliance with the Miller. This interaction was not the exception to the rule. In almost every case, the students embraced the identities of their avatars and produced dialogues that demonstrated close and nuanced readings of course texts and their developing proficiency in social and literary argument.

The guise of the avatar and the asynchronous nature of blogging—an important quality for my students at an urban commuter campus—afforded students safe identities and discursive modes to explore and disagree about answers to difficult questions regarding human sexuality, gender roles, and theological debates that pervade early British literature. One of the most vexed topics, unsurprisingly, was the role of women, which invited a number of passionate perspectives and surprising revelations. In the post “Don't Anger Grendel's Mom,” Beowulf complains that he has been forced to grapple with an inferior foe:

Why is this? We would not expect Guenevere to take up the gauntlet and slay Mordred for the wrongs he dealt to Pendragon. . . . Why was I forced to slay a female, a mother, a woman, and not a more powerful father?

In the mock “Speech to the Troops at Tilbury,” Queen Elizabeth takes up “the gauntlet” and responds with characteristic intestinal fortitude:

Although you have showed great courage in a time of crisis and dissolved the anathema plaguing the Danes, I found your remarks . . . to be ignorant and contemptuous. Let me remind you that God hath made me His instrument and the defender of my humble people . . . I have the heart, stomach, and soul of a king, a king of England with royal blood. . . . Think not that I distrust your heroic intentions: perhaps, your articulation could have been better sharpened had you some time to spare with Roger Ascham.

Identifying Beowulf as an illiterate misogynist, Queen Elizabeth offers a scathing correction that could not have come from the mouth of Wealhtheow. These pairings of unlikely rivals opened up new avenues of inquiry across literary time and space, which encouraged students to juxtapose competing viewpoints and realize the metacritical potential of these texts.

Furthermore, these debates did not remain hermetically sealed within the blogosphere. As a result of this online prewriting, classroom discussions were

enriched and student papers proved to be more argumentative. To cap the course, students had an opportunity to “out” themselves in a final seminar assignment that required that they revise one of the texts on the syllabus from their avatar's point of view and share their revision and reflection on this experience with their classmates. While many students expressed their initial frustration with the difficulty of assuming a voice other than their own, they recognized and appreciated the opportunities literary impersonations provide for academic debate.

I believe that such a blog format suits what has been called the “contestive spirit” of *The Canterbury Tales* and provides an imaginative and dialogic structure for a survey course that is often connected superficially and linearly through chronology alone (Fein, Raybin, and Braeger; Knapp). By anchoring the course in Chaucerian conflict, the course texts become subject to the volatility of quitting, an inherently dramatic reading practice. As Seth Lerer puts it,

The drama of quitting illustrates what happens when an unintended reader gets ahold of literature. Texts always escape their makers, and no protestations of will or claims to specific intention or interpretation can control how everyone will take a tale. . . . The social function of literature—the meaning of specific stories, the communal uses of the written word, the political implications of utterances—rests with us.

(*Yale Companion* 282–83)

As the “unintended” readers of Chaucer and the rest of the early British literature curriculum, the blog avatars authorize imaginative readings and produce new texts on a pilgrimage in cyberspace.

NOTES

¹As it turns out, I am not the only one to have this idea. See Fitzgibbons for a clever “cross-voiced” assignment that also asks students to write as Chaucerian characters.

²See <http://blog.lib.umn.edu/muel0274/quite/>; see also the more recent version at <http://quittingyourclassmates.wordpress.com/>.