English 205 (British Literature I)

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Office Hours: Mondays and Wednesdays, 4:30-6:45

Tuesdays, by appointment

Welcome. I have four goals for this course:

--- To introduce you to a range of writing from Britain’s first thousand years, presented in chronological order. It is impossible to cover fully the spectrum of literature produced over a millennium, but English 205 will let you sample productions of several seminal authors. Because these writers’ influence is vast, familiarizing yourself with them will help you build a foundation for future reading.

--- To give you a literary vocabulary: terms that enable precise, meaningful discussions of literature that define aspects of its style. With these words you can move beyond the kind of purely content-oriented discussions that occur in book clubs.

--- To explore with you the relationship between British literature and history at a few select junctures. I base this practice on the belief that literature and history evolve inseparably.

--- To engender in you an appreciation of great literature that makes you want to spend the rest of your life reading it.

Toward these ends, we read representative writings in the context of cultures from which they emerged, viewing literature as the product of particular historical moments, generic traditions, and individual talents. We analyze the formal properties of each text, isolating the way style expresses content. We also focus on the pressures certain political and social events exert on style.

The class combines lectures, discussion, and group work.

In English classes, what you’ve probably read up to now is fiction. There is no fiction on this syllabus, because pre-modern literature is dominated by other forms that include epic, satire, character book, lyric, sonnet, and essay. These forms can be off-putting for contemporary readers who are used to novels. You will also notice that religion looms large in the work of medieval and Renaissance authors in a way it does not in modern fiction. Rather than viewing these factors as roadblocks, let’s see them as valuable challenges. Reading works written by pre-modern and early-modern westerners lets us see the world through their eyes and understand both their stated beliefs and tacit assumptions. This, in turn, helps us understand our own attitudes and question beliefs many of us take for granted.

Required Texts:

*The Broadview Anthology of British Literature, Volumes 1 and 2* (Ed. Joseph Black,

et al.).

*Actually, the Comma Goes Here: A Practical Guide to Punctuation* (Lucy Cripps).

Course Requirements:

Attendance

--- Attend and remain for the duration of all classes. Schedule dental appointments, job interviews, and college-advising sessions at other times.

--- An illness or emergency-related absence does not excuse you from coming prepared to the next class. Please get a list of five classmates whom you can contact to get notes, find out what you missed, and learn what is planned for the next session. You’re free to e-mail me, but please don’t expect a recapitulation of the lecture and/or discussion you missed.

**--- Don’t come to class if you’re sick. Specifically, if you are in the first seven days of an illness -- symptomatic and contagious -- don’t enter the classroom. If you do you will be asked to leave.**

--- After seven absences you’ll automatically receive the grade of F. No distinction is made between excused and unexcused absences.

Reading

--- Complete every reading on time, engage actively with the assignments, spearhead discussions, and make claims that demonstrate forethought. **Ask questions about everything you don’t understand.** Be curious. Take chances. Have fun.

Assignments

Presentation:

--- There is a fifteen-minute in-class presentation that analyzes a portion of *Beowulf*. You’ll work in pairs with an assigned passage. Your job is to demonstrate some of the reading techniques practiced in class. You’re required to turn in your written notes for this oral report. Please be aware that I do not accept electronic work under any circumstances.

Midterm Examination:

--- There is a midterm examination consisting of ten identifications. No obscure quotations are used. Everything on this exam is either a major section of a text and/or something discussed in class.

Quiz:

--- There is a pop quiz – a short unannounced test – at some point in the semester. It covers essential passages that have been discussed in class.

Final Examination:

--- There is a cumulative final examination, consisting of five identifications of crux sections of our reading and an essay question.

A Word About Plagiarism

Plagiarism is the unattributed use of someone or something else’s ideas or language -- deliberate or unintentional. Don’t do it. In the presentation and exams all ideas must be your own. You cannot present another writer or thinker’s concepts as yours. This comprises intellectual theft. A common form of plagiarism now involves using websites and other technology to execute the work for you. Don’t do this either. I consider cribbing from another person without attribution or having a computer program implement your assignments to be equally serious infractions. In general, they are equally obvious.

If you find valuable quotes in journals, books, newspapers, interviews, podcasts, or documentary films, use them, but cite the authors or filmmakers. Acknowledge these people by name and mention titles. A scholar (i.e., a trained expert who publishes -- not an uncredentialed person with a website) can deepen and enhance your interpretations. If you want to, use such specialists to make your claims clearer. But don’t hand mastery over your work to someone else. If you’re not sure whether to cite err on the side of caution; cite. Never regurgitate the contents of online summaries, biographies, and/or websites. (These are, by the way, usually inaccurate.)

If you plagiarize, you will receive an F for the assignment, with no possibility of redoing it. An academic misconduct report will be submitted to the Student Affairs Office, and its staff will take over from there. Remember: academic careers have ended (and are currently ending) over plagiarism.

Grading Breakdown:

--- Twenty percent for the presentation, 20 percent for the midterm, 20 percent for in-class participation, 10 percent for the quiz, and 30 percent for the final exam.

Class Decorum:

--- **In this class we read actual books, which is very different from screen reading. So, keep laptops, smart phones, and other electronic devices off and out of sight.** This rule does not apply to students with specific needs, who require the aid of such items. If that’s your situation, please speak with me about it.

--- Don’t bring food to class, but feel free to have beverages.

--- Latecomers, come on in, but please do so quietly, and take a seat at the side of the room, not moving furniture or walking in front of the lectern.

--- Don’t text in class. If you do it will be obvious to me and everyone else, even if you think you’re being crafty. Chronic in-class texting will affect your grade adversely.

--- Expect to be called on occasionally.

**--- Bring a name placard to every class. It should have your first and last name written in bright ink, on a piece of construction paper or cardboard that can be displayed on your desk. This will make it possible for us to learn each other’s names.**

**--- If you email me, include your full name, the course you’re in (including its section number), and a succinct description of what you need. Only emails with this information will get replies.**

Schedule:

01-23 Opening remarks and questions.

01-25 *Beowulf* (anonymous), lines 1-661.

01-30 *Beowulf*,lines 662-1888.

02-01 *Beowulf*: epic, patronymics, kennings, medial caesuras, alliteration.

02-06 *Beowulf*,lines1889-3180.



02-08 *Beowulf*: digressions, insult scenes, parallelism, narrative lacunae.

02-13 Presentations.

02-15 Presentations.

02-19 Presidents’ Day: No Class.

02-20 *The Canterbury Tales’* General Prologue (Geoffrey Chaucer).

02-22 *The Canterbury Tales’* General Prologue (Geoffrey Chaucer).

02-27 *The Canterbury Tales’* General Prologue (Geoffrey Chaucer): satire, estate satire, character-book writing, unreliable narration.

02-29 *The Canterbury Tales’* General Prologue (Geoffrey Chaucer).

03-05 *The Pardoner’s Prologue* (Geoffrey Chaucer): allegory, exemplum.

03-97 *The Pardoner’s Tale* (Geoffrey Chaucer).

03-12 Spring break: no class.

03-14 Spring break: no class.

03-19 *The Pardoner’s Tale* (Geoffrey Chaucer).

03-21 *The Pardoner’s Tale* *and Epilogue* (Geoffrey Chaucer).

03-26 Midterm.

03-28 *Rime Sparse*: Sonnets 134, 140, and 189 (Francesco Petrarch).

04-02 Sonnet 20 (William Shakespeare).

04-04 Sonnet 116 (William Shakespeare).

04-09 Sonnet 129 (William Shakespeare). Mechanics of the sonnet: speaker, tone, iambic pentameter, alliteration, caesura, enjambment, volta, quatrain, couplet.

04-11Sonnet 138 (William Shakespeare).

04-16 “To My Excellent Lucasia, on Our Friendship” (Katherine Philips).

04-18 “Friendship’s Mystery, to My Dearest Lucasia” (Katherine Philips).

04-23 “The Grasshopper” (Richard Lovelace): Lyric, Cavalier poetry: homo-sociality, vassalage, metaphor, metonym.

04-25 *The Arraignment of Women* (Joseph Swetman): Tract, pamphlet.

04-29 *The Arraignment of Women* (Joseph Swetman): Patriarchy, misogyny.

05-02 “Ester Hath Hanged Haman: An Answer to a Lewd Pamphlet, Entitled The Arraignment of Women” (Ester Sowernam).

Final-exam date to be announced.

English 205

First Set of Lecture Notes

*Beowulf*

1. General Features of *Beowulf*

--- *Beowulf* is a **syncretic** poem: a text that blends different traditions and styles. Some of its characters would have been familiar to an early medieval audience. The poem’s antagonist, Grendel, comes from Germanic pagan folklore. He is also, however, a character of intense evil, embodying the spirit of murder first committed by his ancestor, Cain. This merger of pagan myth and Jewish/Christian morality typifies the poem’s syncretism.

2. The Characters

Scyld Scefing, the abandoned (and presumably non-marital) child introduced early in the text as progenitor of the Danish line, crops up in Scandinavian genealogies. King Hrothgar appears in Saxo Grammaticus’s thirteenth-century *History of the Danes*. Beowulf’s uncle, the Geatish King Hygalec, is the most firmly documented character. He appears in the Latin *Liber monstrorum*, a catalogue of marvelous creatures written in England at some time between the mid-seventh and eighth centuries. (Note: these latter two books are written in Latin, the medieval language of the Church, not Old English, the spoken language in which *Beowulf* first appeared.) Hygelac had an actual identity but preternatural features. The *Liber monstrorum*, describes him as a giant with terrifyingly huge bones. Beowulf is a fictional character. The narrator says that during his battles with the Grendelkin, *Beowulf* is the strongest man on earth. However, his capacities have limits. While he can tear off Grendel’s arm, Beowulf, to his own disappointment, can’t hold the monster in his grip long enough to observe its demise.

3. Beowulf as an Atypical Epic Hero

Traditionally, epic heroes avoid reflection in favor of action, fight fearlessly and brilliantly, display strength on the battlefield, and frequently die young, often in some splendid but futile gesture. The epic hero knows little restraint; he does not acknowledge to anyone, including himself, his own physical limitations. He does not strategize or operate through ruses. With a few notable exceptions, epic heroes are not especially complex; spontaneity is their dominant characteristic.

Does Beowulf fit this mold? Yes and no. Self-confidence – bordering on extreme recklessness – is evident in his willingness to battle Grendel without a weapon or armor. When King Hrothgar mourns over the death of his best friend and advisor, Aeschere, Beowulf advises, “Sorrow not, wise one! It is always better/to avenge one’s friend than to mourn overmuch” (lines 1384-5). As well, readers see Beowulf’s powers fluctuating in the text’s first section. His fight with Grendel is swift and decisive; the dying monster slinks away, hemorrhaging blood from his wound. The battle with Grendel’s mother, who seems less human than Grendel and dwells underwater, gives the ogress a home-court advantage. Here Beowulf wears chain-linked armor, which saves his life. After a treacherous journey, Beowulf takes her on and is initially believed dead; his Danish fellows leave the lake that appears polluted by his blood – actually her blood. The narrator announces that Beowulf would have failed, had he not availed himself of a sword, placed in the monster’s lair by God.

Beowulf is an agile talker. When he first arrives at Heorot, King Hrothgar’s envious courtier Unferth insults him in front of the entire mead hall. Beowulf deflects the affront, making Unferth look petty and misinformed: “What a great deal, Unferth my friend,/drunk with beer, you have said about Breca,/told his adventures! I will tell the truth –” (lines 530-3). This cool rhetoric, which ironically describes Unferth as Beowulf’s “friend,” is not typical of an epic hero.

Then, upon returning triumphantly to Geatland, Beowulf makes a lengthy speech to King Hygalec. He predicts that despite the temporary cessation of attacks from Grendelkin, violence will carry the day. Hrothgar’s attempts to establish peace with the Headobards (“war beards”), a tribe occupying North Germany, are doomed. Hrothgar is planning a marriage of alliance; it will fail: Beowulf makes one of the poem’s many **digressions** by telling the Legend of Ingeld, a warrior who appears in various English and Scandinavian stories. Ingeld is the son of the Headobard King Froda. The Headobards fight a war with the Danes, who kill Froda. Hrothgar has a daughter named Freawaru.He sends her to marry Ingeld in an attempt to end the fighting. As is often the case with such alliances, the woman’s feelings are unclear; the perspective is that of a culture in which females are bartered in matrimony. What matters to this poet is not Freawaru’s state of mind but the union’s political ramifications. Freawaru is like a bandage stuck on a sensitive wound, but her marriage to the new Headobard king does not ameliorate relations between the peoples. An old, scarred warrior gives advice. He urges the Headobards to exact revenge for Froda’s life. Beowulf predicts that Ingeld will turn against Hrothgar, honoring his father’s life above that of his wife and her people. Earlier in the poem, readers learn that Heorot is ultimately destroyed by fire. Indeed, this may be what spurs that event.

Some scholars who first read *Beowulf* thought these digressions made little sense and distracted from the main action. As the poem came under prolonged scrutiny, however, it became clear that each tale relates to the action and serves some larger purpose. Here, while showing life as a repetitive cycle of violence, the Legend of Ingeld demonstrates that Beowulf is highly intelligent. He can hold complex historical narratives in his mind, recount them, and derive meaning from them. He is, therefore, qualified for the kingship (of Geatland) that he is about to assume. Unlike the average epic hero, he reigns successfully for fifty years, living a long life. But this too complicates his heroic status; readers observe him age and weaken.

4. **Features of the Writing**

---While the poem’s high points occur in confrontations, it has a melancholy tone. **Prolepsis** often achieves this effect. Immediately after relaying the construction of Heorot, the narrator announces that it will ultimately be destroyed by internal warfare. Effectively, this steals some of Beowulf’s thunder. His protection of the hall from Grendel’s depredations is problematized before readers witness it, which gives the entire undertaking a sense of futility. *Beowulf* shows a **patriarchal** culture where people use **patronymics** and one’s honor is carried forward by a biological son. Beowulf dies without a male child – or any child. This does not just denude his life of meaning; it leaves the Geatish kingdom, which he has stabilized, vulnerable to external violence. There is no clear successor to the throne.

The constant battling between protagonists reminds readers that *Beowulf’s* characters lack the perspective necessary to comprehend what the author probably thought: belief in Christ and adherence to his principles trumps everything else. Fred C. Robinson argues that the epic has more **ambiguity** than critics typically concede. Beowulf’s character is developed for 3,182 lines. This leaves readers wondering if a theology that consigns him to eternal damnation for not knowing about Christ is truly fair.

---The poem’s most puzzling feature is its **lacuna**: a gap in the story’s center. After the protagonist returns home, the narrator announces, “then came the broad kingdom /into Beowulf’s hands; he held it well /for fifty winters – he was then a wise king” (lines 2207-10). Why does an epic spend over 100 lines on an insult scene and condense the protagonist’s kingship into three lines? Shouldn’t we see Beowulf performing his various functions as king? Various explanations of this compositional gap have been put forth, but I would like students to venture their own.

---In the poem’s second part, **epithets** that were used to characterize Hrothgar are applied to Beowulf, suggesting that old age has denuded the Geatish king of courage. Likewise, the epithets that describe Beowulf in the first section are applied to Wiglaf, the king’s loyal comrade in arms. For instance, Wiglaf is called a “shield-warrior.” The poet shows aging and decline as inevitable: something no one who lives long can escape. Still, civilization remains a dear accomplishment of people beset on all sides by hostile forces, both human and other-worldly.

In the final confrontation, there is no thought of hand-to-hand combat. The older Beowulf has special armor prepared, but it does not protect him from his opponent, the dragon. **(This monster coveting his treasure, is an image of greed, which is empty and privative: defined by what it lacks.)** Terrified of the dragon, the king’s thanes (noblemen) abandon him. The mounting danger, and details such as Wiglaf returning to Beowulf’s side, add spice to a series of **oral stories** that the poem’s original listeners probably knew. Simultaneously, the sense of a hero’s challenges becoming more formidable as his powers wane prepares readers for a melancholy ending that may problematize the heroic code itself.

---*Beowulf* is an acquired taste for modern readers, because it does not conform to what they expect from narrative. There is minimal description of characters’ looks, clothing, or domiciles. Readers are told nothing about people’s erotic interactions. Like many early medieval poets, this one is not interested in romance or amorous trysts. The characters come from one elite group: a king and his retainers. Women’s activities are severely restricted. Even the male dramatis personae engage in a limited set of activities: formal greetings, public speeches, challenges, fighting, exchanging gifts, and making pledges. Regular digressions interrupt the poem’s main plot. These detail national crises and also convey morals. As well, the epic mingles heroism with undercurrents of regret. It shows zeniths of heroism and courage as well as resignation of people bearing up in a violent heathen world. **The funeral march in honor of Beowulf has the awful finality of death combined with additional horror: the fear of imminent violence, which his predictions validate. At the end of the poem, an anonymous Geatish woman shrieks in grief over Beowulf’s demise and untold depredations sure to follow.**

Professor Jaclyn Geller

English 205

Second Set of Lecture Notes

1. *Beowulf*:Some Basics

*---* Often described as the first great narrative poem in English, *Beowulf* comprises 3,182 lines. It was written in manuscript form in the year 1000. Experts have long argued about when it was composed, speculating that it was some time between the mid-seventh and eleventh centuries. **Leonard Neidorf’s anthology, *The Dating of Beowulf: A Reassessment*, argues that the poem was composed between 700 and 750**.

--- Poems in Old English manuscripts are untitled. Titles were appended by nineteenth-century editors, as is the case here. No one knows who wrote *Beowulf*. It appears originally in Old English, the language of early-medieval England. Old English sounds to us like German. As we have seen, this is because Germanic tribes invaded the Roman Empire, of which England was a part. Their incursions into Britain began in the third century and accelerated in the early fifth century, at which point Rome, having become overextended, withdrew its troops from Britain. Invading Germanic tribes ultimately settled in the English midlands, bringing their language. We read the poem in translation.

--- Old English poems, *Beowulf* included, frequently refer to a minstrel or bard who plays a stringed instrument sometimes called a harp, though it looks like a lyre in illustrations. These *“scops”* deliver poetry accompanied by instrumentation, though it’s unclear whether they sing interpretively (in the modern style) or chant in a kind of monotone. We should remember that the bards who appear in this poem may not be realistic. Scholar Roberta Frank points out that the *Beowulf* poet shows two *scops* recounting Germanic legends in lines 853-97 and lines 1068-159. This is not historically verifiable. It could represent something that actually happened, or the poet may have imagined sixth-century Danes doing this.

2. A Word About Multiculturalism

--- Many of you have heard the term “multiculturalism.” *Beowulf* exemplifies this term wonderfully. It is the first poem in England that extols national heroism. But it does not have one English character.The English poet seems to have looked back on events – actual and imagined – that took place hundreds of years earlier. It could have been an early-medieval English writer looking toward northern Germany and feeling connected to his Germans as ancestors. Such an author might have viewed Germany as the motherland, with England as its scion. If the poem was written later, the poet might have been descended from Vikings who invaded England in 793 (and came in waves for 300 years). She would see these Scandinavians as ancestors, know something of their genealogies and folk tales, and expect like-minded readers to be interested.

In any case, let’s be clear about a term like multiculturalism, which can be misused. **Literature and language are by their natures multicultural.** For example, I am a nonmarital woman living in Connecticut. My biological ancestors hail from Kraków, a city in Poland and from cordoned-off sections of Russia where Jews were allowed to live and where many died in pogroms. Yiddish was their primary language; they also spoke, respectively, Polish and Russian and eventually English. My non-biological family is diverse, with Spanish speakers from, among other places, Peru and Puerto Rico. Its members read widely, grabbing books from different countries and centuries written in different styles.

In the New York area, where I grew up, we did not speak or read Old English. I am not, therefore, imposing my “culture” on anyone by teaching *Beowulf*. I am not insulting anyone else’s culture by teaching *Beowulf*. I am not appropriating early-medieval culture by teaching *Beowulf*, since no one owns the poem. Its plot involves decapitations, supernatural monsters, and impossible feats of endurance such as swimming underwater for five days and nights. It looks as strange to me as it does to you. Likewise, *Beowulf* is no less moving to me because I am not descended from Danes or Britons, and I don’t live in a dank swamp. Literature’s ability to transport us to other worlds, rather than leaving us safely ensconced in our own, is one of its glorious qualities. Let’s make our way into this text together.

3. *Beowulf’s* Social World

--- **The central social unit of *Beowulf* is the *comitatus* or war band: a group of men who promise absolute loyalty to a lord in return for lavish gifts.** In *Beowulf*, the lord is King Hrothgar, great grandson of Danish line’s founder. (Beowulf hails from a people called the Geats, who live in what is now Sweden.) Hrothgar is generous with his retainers, who are expected to follow him into battle, even when the outcome is probably death. The king’s successful reign culminates in his building of a mead hall, which he names Heorot (Hart). It becomes the realm’s cultural, administrative, and social center. Historians have pinned down Heorot’s location to Leire, a town approximately fifteen miles west of Copenhagen.

Hrothgar and his queen, Wealhtheow, entertain in Heorot. The festivities end when Grendel, a descendent of the biblical murderer Cain, attacks the hall. Grendel’s monstrous appearance and demeanor are the result of his ancestry; he belongs to a group physically marked as outsiders and mandated to live away from human society. His home is a watery cave near the mead hall (yet somehow on the outskirts of civilization). He makes nightly attacks on Heorot, which take up to thirty lives at a time. Hrothgar’s *comitatus* is powerless against these assaults, during which Grendel snatches people from their beds. The mayhem lasts for twelve years until Beowulf, a young warrior from Geatland, arrives and fights Grendel, ripping his arm from its socket. Later, he retaliates against a counterattack from Grendel’s mother and again emerges victorious. Throughout, bonds between men are paramount. *Beowulf’s* social assumptions are quite different than those of the modern West, where the marriage-based nuclear family is said to rightly occupy a place of emotional supremacy. When Grendel’s mother seeks revenge for his death, she does not kill Queen Wealhtheow. Instead, she goes for a member of the *comitatus*, Hrothgar’s advisor and closest friend, Aeschere. This loss, the *Beowulf* poet presumes, will hit Hrothgar hardest.

4. Women

Although Maria Dahvana Headley’s recent, rather creativetranslation of *Beowulf* stresses female characters in the poem, the text is male-dominated and represents a **patriarchal** culture. By this I mean a culture in which male power has been institutionalized. Patriarchal cultures should not be seen simplistically. Even in the most chauvinistic societies, where power imbalances between the sexes are rarely questioned, some women stand on equal footing with or even dominate men in their lives. Women in patriarchal societies also find ways of asserting themselves through strategies of indirection. (Do we see this in Beowulf? If so, where?)

Women are not absent from the poem*,* but in its central plot they play a limited role; basically, they are hostesses. When Beowulf returns, having triumphed over the monster’s mother and enhanced his victory by decapitating Grendel’s corpse, Queen Wealtheow bestows upon him an opulent gold torque (neck-piece). This illustrates her position as one who, on her husband’s behalf, bequeaths tokens of appreciation.

5. Nature

--- *Beowulf*, like much Old English poetry, shows nature as hostile and foreboding, in contradistinction to nineteenth-century Romantic poetry, which generally presents the natural world in an awe-struck, celebratory manner. For instance, the scene where Hrothgar and his retainers lead Beowulf to Grendel’s mother’s lair (lines 1408-21) has the Danes traversing a bleak landscape of “towering stone-cliffs, unexplored passages,” and “steep headlands.” The narrator tells readers that these men must walk single file, and the region houses myriad “water-monsters:” not just Grendel’s mother. A barren cliff and downward-leaning trees create an ominous environment that prepares Beowulf, Hrothgar, and the king’s men for their first shock: a pool of opaque, bloody water. Their second surprise is the head of Aeschere, which Grendel’s mother has taken as a kind of trophy.

6. More on the Epic Hero

--- In traditional epic poetry a hero is supposed to be strong, courageous, loyal, and fierce in battle. But epic heroes are not especially complex; what readers see is what they get. (Homer’s “wily Odysseus,” who thinks his way through tough situations, is an exception.) The *Beowulf* poet goes to considerable lengths to establish the protagonist as immensely strong, skilled in battle, *and* intelligent. Beowulf’s astuteness stands out when he returns home and summarizes his adventures in Denmark, omitting certain struggles (e.g., a public argument with Hrothgar’s courtier Unferth) and focusing on the journey’s positive outcomes. He balances this report with a negative prediction about the Danes’ future. King Hygelac responds to Beowulf’s blend of martial and rhetorical prowess by rewarding the hero with vast property holdings and advancing him to a position of power in Geatland second only to his own. The *Beowulf* poet has shown that Beowulf possesses the qualities required of a ruler and, indeed, he becomes king of Geatland.

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Professor Jaclyn Geller

English 205

Fifth Set of Lecture Notes

This timeline should give Geoffrey Chaucer’s writing context. I don’t expect you to remember dates except for those of **the Norman Conquest**, **the First Crusade**, **the Magna Carta**, and **the arrival of bubonic plague** in England; please memorize these. Also note the bolded sections on Chaucer, as they demonstrate his multifaceted life, of which writing was one part.

**1042-1066 King Edward the Confessor rules England in relative peace. He marries Edith of Wessex, a woman of Viking descent. The relationship produces no biological children, and King Edward dies in 1066 without heirs.** Rumors spread that he took matrimonial vows of chastity and perhaps before marrying had pledged oaths of virginity. Numerous miracles are credited to him.

**The absence of a successor to the throne creates an opportunity for French encroachment.** **In 1066 William the Conqueror, Duke of Normandy, invades England with approximately 8,000 soldiers, wins the one-day Battle of Hastings, and takes the English Crown.** (The Bayeux Tapestry, shown on p. XLVII of our *Broadview Anthology Vol. I*, represents this incursion.)

**For the ensuing 300 years French is the language of the royal court, charters, and legal documents. Universities operate in French. Latin is the language of the Church. English remains the spoken language. Opting for the vernacular, Chaucer chose to write in English.**

Feudalism flourishes under Norman rule: The monarch grants lands to a nobleman. In return for the ability to use it, the nobleman or *fief* serves the king, paying additional taxes when necessary and providing soldiers during periods of war. These soldiers are the nobleman’s *fiefs*, granted land for which they owe loyalty expressed through military service and financial contributions. *Fiefs* or knights reserve ample land for themselves and grant the rest to peasants, who are obligated to *their* social superiors. The relationship of “vassalage” between lord and retainer is symbolically sealed, with the latter kneeling and declaring his devotion and a kiss between the men.

In the wake of the Norman Conquest significant numbers of Jews migrate to England, where they strengthen the economy as merchants with ties to business communities throughout the Mediterranean. They remain second-class citizens who are legally barred from joining trade guilds, serving as lords over Christian peasants, or even dining with Christians.

**1096 Pope Urban II receives a Byzantine request (an appeal from the Eastern Empire centered in Constantinople) to help expel Muslims from the “Holy Land.” He responds by initiating the First Crusade, which begins roughly 300 years of attempts to retake control of Jerusalem and recapture former Christian territories. Papal authorities promote the Crusades as a form of personal redemption and penance for sin.**

**--- Note that the most socially prominent figure among Chaucer’s pilgrims – he is described first in the General Prologue and tells the initial story – is the Knight. He is a seasoned crusader. This vocation does not impress contemporary readers, who generally view the Crusades as a historical disaster. Chaucer, however, emphasizes his worthiness, portraying the Knight as a virtuous Christian and a brave soldier for the faith. ---**

1161 Pope Alexander III canonizes Edward the Confessor as a Catholic saint. He is England’s only king to receive this honor.

1154-1189 **King Henry II (William the Conqueror’s grandson) solidifies feudalism in England, forbidding the erection of houses on royal land, centralizing legal records and documents under the crown’s control, and sponsoring the composition of the England’s first legal textbook. Henry’s reification of royal power diminishes that of the Church, prompting his reign’s most famous event: the death of Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury. Becket believes that clerics should be tried for crimes in Church (not government) courts. Henry II probably orders Becket’s execution. The first written account of the murder (by John Salisbury in 1171) has four knights pursue Becket to Canterbury Cathedral where, standing before the altar, he says, “I am prepared to die for my God, to preserve justice and my church’s liberty.” Henry II may not have ordered Becket’s execution, but public outrage is so intense that the king responds with acts of penance for his friend’s death. Henry II dies in 1189 in a horseback-riding accident.**

**1173 Pope Alexander III canonizes Thomas Becket as a saint. Becket’s martyrdom inspires the building of the Canterbury Shrine, which becomes a destination for English Catholics, especially during Lent. This is the destination of Chaucer’s pilgrims in *The Canterbury Tales*.**

**1189-1199 King Richard I (whom his subjects call *coeur de lion* [Lionheart’]) rules, spending only six months of his reign in Britain. He joins the Crusades in 1191.** Returning to England, he is captured by Leopold of Austria (who accuses Richard of arranging the murder of his cousin). King Richard spends two years in a German prison. His mother raises ransom funds, leading a popular cause that reflects his subjects’ esteem. Richard I captures Britons’ imagination as a monarch who embodies chivalry: knightly piety, courage, self-sacrifice, and courtly manners. After returning to England, he faces fellow crusader, King Philip II of France, who wants to break England’s hold on certain French dominions (Brittany, Cornwall, and Toulouse) and foments rebellion among the English. Richard I dies fighting with one of his lords over an alleged stash of Roman coins.

1199-1216 **King Richard’s brother, John I, rules.** **Pressured by forty barons to sign the Magna Carta in 1215, he succumbs. The Magna Carta states that the king cannot rule without his lords’ consent, prohibits unlawful imprisonment, affirms that new taxes require conciliary approval, protects the Church from governmental interference, and establishes landholding widows’ right to not remarr**y. **Though it basically protects wealthy landowners, the Magna Carta is a benchmark legal document, because it curtails monarchical authority.**

1216-1272 John I dies of a fever in 1216. His son Henry takes the throne at age nine; a succession of two lords serve as regents until he turns nineteen. In 1237 Henry III’s Treaty of York officializes the boundary between England and Scotland that remains to this day. In 1247 his Treaty of Woodstock establishes a border between England and Wales.

1263 English barons back Simon de Montfort, a nobleman of French descent who demands that parliamentary debates include popular input. De Montfort incites a rebellion with the avowed object of balancing government. He also pursues a rabid anti-Semitic agenda. (In 1262 his followers massacred most Jews living in Derby.) De Montfort’s followers slaughter Jews in Worcester and London. His son Henry and Robert Earl Ferrers head the Worcester attacks. In London John Fitzjohn takes the lead, allegedly killing the prominent Jewish figures Isaac fil Aaron and Cok fil Abraham with his bare hands. Five-hundred Jews are murdered. Each attack aims to denude England of its Jewish population while seizing secured legal documents called “archae.” These records of debts owed to Jewish lenders are systematically destroyed.

De Montfort’s son Simon spearheads another attack on Winchester’s Jews. Gilbert de Clare, Seventh Earl of Gloucester, leads soldiers to kill Jews in and expel them from Canterbury.  Further violence against the Jewish community occurs in Lincoln, Cambridge, Wilton, and Northampton.

1264 Henry III is captured and forced to establish a more inclusive Parliament at Westminster. Unwittingly, he inaugurates the House of Commons.

The greatest of all English patrons of medieval architecture, Henry III has London’s Westminster Abbey rebuilt in the Gothic style, with stained-glass windows, spires, and arches. After announcing his intention to join the Crusades, he dies of an unspecified illness.

1272-1307 Henry III’s son, King Edward I (aka Edward Longshanks) rules, having made an expedient marriage (at age fifteen) to thirteen-year old Eleanor, half-sister of the King of Castille. This union secures English control of Gascony as well as northern French territories she inherits. King Edward continues the tradition of Jewish persecution. In 1274 he issues a requirement that every Jewish person, upon turning seven years old, wear a six-by-three-inch yellow felt badge on their outer garment. In 1279 he has 300 Jews executed. In 1280 he orders Jews to attend conversion-oriented sermons delivered by Dominican friars. In 1290 he expels the Jewish community from England. (France would expel its Jews in 1306, Spain in 1492.)

Edward I convenes Parliament regularly. For the 1295 Parliament, in addition to secular and ecclesiastical lords, two knights from each county and two representatives from each borough are summoned. Traditionally the House of Commons was expected to defer to magnates. Now it incorporates the authority of local communities.

Aiming to unite Britain, Edward I defeats the Welsh Chieftans between 1277 and 1283, naming his eldest son Prince of Wales. For over 100 years relations between England and Scotland had been peaceful. King Edward jump-starts 250 years of war and border skirmishes, earning the epithet “Hammer of the Scots” for his incursions into Scotland. Compelling Scottish nobles to recognize his suzerainty, he names the English nobleman John de Balliol King of Scotland in 1292. Edward I’s insistence on holding jurisdiction in Scottish legal cases causes the country’s nobility to pressure de Balliol toward abandoning his monarch. Edward I invades Scotland in 1296, retrieving the Coronation Stone of Scone and transporting it to Westminster. The Scottish nationalist William Wallace leads a successful revolt in 1297; King Edward dies en route to fight Robert the Bruce, King of Scotland (from 1303 to 1329).

1307-1327 Kind Edward II, (Longshanks’ son) surrounds himself with favorites, most obviously a Gascon, Piers Gaveston, who is suspected to be the monarch’s lover. Feeling excluded from King Edward’s ambit of power, his barons rebel. Different baronial groups struggle to gain power and access to the king.

King Edward’s 1326 ordinance sets up compulsory wool-trade markets in fourteen English, Welsh, and Irish towns. It fails to create a compromise between the monarch and his nobles. In 1326 King Edward’s wife, Isabella of France, leads an insurrection against him. In 1327 he renounces the throne in favor of his son -- the first time an anointed king of England has been dethroned since 1013. Edward II is murdered at Berkeley Castle later that year.

1327-1377 At age fourteen Edward III is proclaimed king and crowned at Westminster Abbey on February 1st. His ascendancy empowers Isabella’s lover, Roger Mortimer, as the de facto ruler of England. Mortimer takes this opportunity to increase his lands and titles, treating Edward as a nonentity. Becoming increasingly hostile toward his guardian, Edward III marries Philippa of Hainault in January 1328. Edward of Woodstock, the child that arrives in1330 poses a threat to Mortimer’s power. Two years later Edward acts against Mortimer, launching a surprise attack at Nottingham Castle. Mortimer is taken into custody, tried for treason, and executed. Isabella spends the rest of her life in Norfolk, stripped of power and prestige. Mortimer’s death marks the beginning of Edward’s real kingship.

A painting of a group of people

Description automatically generated with low confidenceMortimer is seized

Tension between England and France comes to a head when King Charles IV passes away without heirs in 1328. Because Edward III is Charles IV’s nephew, he has a claim to the French throne. The French parliament elects King Charles’s cousin, Philippe V. French resistance to the English presence in Gascony intensifies. In 1334 Philippe offers support to David II of Scotland and two years later begins making military preparations for an invasion of England.

Edward III intends to claim the French throne. With Philippe V staking his claim to Gascony, skirmishes break out; a French invasion produces no clear outcome. Ongoing Anglo-French hostilities form a chain of events later known as the Hundred Years War. By 1340 King Edward has declared himself King of France and added the fleur-de-lys to his coat of arms. In June fighting at Sluys results in almost 20,000 French soldiers and sailors losing their lives. Fleeting truces follow.

In 1344, inspired by the legends of King Arthur, Edward III founds the Most Notable Order of the Garter. The group consists of twenty-six members (including the monarch and the Prince of Wales) who meet regularly in Windsor Castle. The order still exists.

Edward III launches a successful invasion of France in 1346, defeating his enemies at [Crécy](https://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/HistoryofEngland/The-Longbow/), where hand-to-hand combat enables the English to overwhelm French fighters, push forward, and lay siege to Calais, which they hold for two centuries.

**Early 1340s Geoffrey Chaucer is born in London (the exact date and location remain unknown), the great grandson of a tavern keeper, grandson of a wine purveyor, and son of a successful wine merchant. Chaucer’s surname is derived from the French *chaucier*, which means “a maker of leggings or hose.”**

**1348 The bubonic plague reaches England, probably through the Port of Bristol. *The Grey Friars’ Chronicle*, which reports events in and around London, names June 24th as the arrival date, though it likely came earlier and took time to spread. Within a few years the plague has killed between thirty and 45 percent of England’s population. England and France declare a temporary truce.**

**The plague will eventually claim somewhere between a third and half of Europe’s population, including King Edward’s daughter Joan. With a reduced working populace, survivors are inclined to demand higher wages, a goal Edward III seeks to suppress with the 1351 introduction of the Statute of Labour.**

Within six years, war with France resumes. During the 1340s and 1350s, King Edward’s son, Edward of Woodstock (aka the Black Prince) moves through France, seeing victory in the Battle of Crécy, the Siege of Calais, the Battle of Winchelsea, and the Battle of Poitiers. He captures Jean II, France’s new king.

**1357 - Chaucer becomes a page in the household of Elizabeth de Burgh, Countess of Ulster, the wife of Lionel, Earl of Ulster, second son of Edward III.**

King Edward III’s fortunes dwindle. In 1376 Parliament removes from court his power-wielding girlfriend, Alice Perrers. Edward III distances himself from the stress of court existence. For the remainder of his life England and France are at war.

1361 and 1362 - England witnesses severe spikes in Bubonic Plague.

**1365 - Chaucer marries Philippa Roet, a member of the queen’s entourage. She is the oldest daughter of Sir Paon de Roet, a Flemish knight.**

**1367 - Chaucer enters service in the household of Edward III. Chaucer is first recorded as a member of the royal household on June 20th, 1367, when he is granted a royal annuity of twenty pounds.**

**Chaucer’s son Thomas is born.**

**Chaucer translates parts of *Romance of the Rose*. He also writes poetry in French.**

**1368 Chaucer writes the *Book of the Duchess* about the demise of Blanche, Duchess of Lancaster, the first wife of John of Gaunt (Edward III’s fourth son).**

**1369 Chaucer travels to Northern France as a soldier in John of Gaunt’s army.**

**1372 Chaucer’s wife, Philippa, serves in the household of John of Gaunt’s second wife, Constance of Castille, daughter of King Peter of Castille.**

**Chaucer travels to Italy on a diplomatic mission. In Genoa he establishes an English port for Genoese trade and in Florence negotiates a loan for the king.**

1373 At age thirty, the never-married, severely ill mystic Julian of Norwich purports to receive sixteen revelations. She survives her illness (probably botulism) to record her experiences. Twenty years later, Julian expands this writing into *Revelations of Divine Love*, the earliest surviving work in English by a female author. Julian’s accounts include comprehending the Trinity during a vision of Christ, seeing the Virgin Mother as a young girl, and feeling tempted to look away from the cross as Jesus is dying. (See pp. 617-33 of our *Broadview Anthology of British Literature*, *Vol. I*.)

**1374 Chaucer is appointed Controller of the Customs for Hides, Skins and Wool in the Port of London, a position that includes free lodging in Aldgate Tower and a daily pitcher of wine from the king. John of Gaunt grants Chaucer an annuity of ten pounds.**

1377-1399 Edward III dies of a stroke, leaving his ten-year old grandson Richard, scion of the deceased Edward, Prince of Wales (the legendary Black Prince) to take the throne.

John of Gaunt (Richard II’s uncle), wants the throne for his son Henry Bolingbroke. To manage this threat, councils surround and guide King Richard. They include Robert de Vere, Ninth Earl of Oxford, who gains substantial control over royal affairs before the king reaches his majority. Viewing this council suspiciously, the House of Commons eventually discontinues it.

**1380 Chaucer is accused and acquitted of raping a woman named Cecily Chaumpaigne.** **She signs a document releasing Chaucer from all actions in the case of her rape and abduction *(“de raptu meo”*).**

**Chaucer’s son Lewis is born. Chaucer writes *The Parliament of Fowls****.*

**Fallout from the plague, which has made laborers more valuable, and a recent poll tax of four pence per person, generate anger that culminates in the 1381 Peasant’s Revolt. In Kent and Essex a group of peasants led by Wat Tyler (about whom little is known) gather. The army of peasants, roughly 10,000 strong, marches on London.**

**The peasants burn John of Gaunt’s palace to the ground and proceed to kill Simon Sudbury, Archbishop of Canterbury – also Lord Chancellor. Lord High Treasurer Robert Hales is also murdered.**

**Outbreaks of protest erupt throughout London. Richard II, who is still a teenager, takes shelter in the Tower of London, surrounded by advisors who suggest negotiation. Richard meets twice with the rebel group, positively receiving their calls for reform. Wat Tyler doubts King Richard’s sincerity. This, combined with tension on both sides, leads to a chaotic skirmish in which the Mayor of London, William Walworth, pulls Tyler off his horse and kills him.**

**The king tells rebels, “You shall have no captain but me.” The rebel group is led away as Walworth gathers his forces. Richard II gives the peasant group an opportunity to return home unharmed. However, in the coming weeks, uprisings occur across the country. King Richard becomes more dictatorial, proclaiming, “For as long as we live we will strive to suppress you, and your misery will be an example in the eyes of posterity.” Leaders of uprisings are executed and the last rebels defeated in Billericay. While Richard II subdues the revolutionaries, Parliament does not share his absolutist philosophy.**

**1381-86 Chaucer writes *Troilus and Criseyde*.**

1382 - Richard II diplomatically marries Anne of Bohemia, daughter of Charles IV, the Holy Roman Emperor; Bohemia is a useful ally against France in the continuing Hundred Years War. In England the union is unpopular and fails to produce an heir. Anne of Bohemia dies from plague in 1394.

King Richard handles lawlessness in Ireland by invading with more than 8,000 soldiers. He negotiates a thirty-year truce with France, which lasts almost twenty years. This agreement involves his concession to marry Isabella, Charles VI’s six-year-old daughter, when she comes of age.

**1385-1389 Chaucer serves as Justice of the Peace for Kent.**

**1386 Chaucer becomes a Member of Parliament for Kent. He retires from Controllership of Customs, probably moving, since the lease on his Aldgate house ends.**

**1387 Death of Philippa Chaucer. Chaucer begins work on *The Canterbury Tales*.**

**1389 Chaucer is appointed Clerk of the Works at Westminster, Tower of London, and other royal estates. In this demanding position he oversees myriad workers and vast properties.**

**Chaucer is appointed Commissioner of Walls and Ditches, which makes him responsible for works on the Thames between Woolwich and Greenwich.**

**1391 Chaucer retires from Clerkship of the King’s works. In June 1391 he is appointed Deputy Forester of the Royal Forest of North Petherton, Somerset. Because English forests are sources of revenue, this position requires skill in handling finances and employees.**

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| 1394 King Richard sends Henry Bolingbroke into exile for ten years. He extends the sentence when John of Gaunt dies in 1399.  **1395 Thomas Chaucer marries the heiress Maud Burghersh.**  Henry Bolingbroke’s estates are seized, creating an atmosphere of menace. In 1399 Bolingbroke overthrows Richard II in a few months, becoming King Henry IV of England. In January 1400 Richard II dies in captivity at Pontefract Castle in West Yorkshire.  **1400 Chaucer writes *The Complaint of Chaucer to His Purse*.**  **Chaucer passes away on 25 October. A tomb, erected by a fifteenth-century admirer, marks his grave. His remains are subsequently moved; he is the first writer buried in Westminster Abbey’s Poets Corner.**   |  |  | | --- | --- | |  |  |  |  | | --- | |  | |
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