English 310A

Chaucer: The Minor Poems.

Neil Hultin
Office Hours:
Tuesday: 1:30--3:30 885-1211; 3775
Thursday: 1:30--3:30 H.H. 325
Other times by appointment

Master Geffray Chaucer, that now lyth in grave,
The nobyl rethoricien, and poet of Grete Bretayne,
That worthy was the lawrere of poetry have
For thys hys labour, and the palme attayne;
Whych furst made to dystyll and reyne
The gold dew-dropys of speche and eloquence
Into Englyssh tong, thorow hys excellency.


English 310A is an introduction both to the so-called "Minor Poems" of Geoffrey Chaucer and to a small selection of late medieval English and Scots poets who adapted to their own ends some of the stories also to be found in Chaucer. The purpose of the course is thus twofold: first, to make you familiar with a few works of a writer who has been called "the nobyll rethoricien, and poet of Grete Bretayne;" and a second--no less important--function is to acquaint you with the ways medieval writers thought about literature and its function in society.

We will begin, however, by reading a seminal text from a period of Western history even earlier than Chaucer but one which greatly influenced him and his contemporaries. Boethius' Consolation of Philosophy, a book which Chaucer himself translated, remained influential throughout the Middle Ages and, indeed, well into the twentieth century. Its view of a mutable world touched medieval people deeply and its questions continue to perplex and disturb us, even by those who reject the solutions it proposed.

Texts for the course:

Geoffrey Chaucer, The Riverside Chaucer
Boethius, Consolation of Philosophy
Supplemental Texts; and edition available through Kinko's: including portions of Lydgate, Henryson, Ovid, Gower, Dunbar.
ENGLISH 310A Fall 1993

Essays:
Essay 1. Subject: Either "An ABC" or "Anelida and Arcite."
   Length: A short paper of approximately 1000 words.
   Weighting: 15%
   DUE: October 5, 1993

Essay 2. Subject: Some aspect of the minor poems of Chaucer. Suggestions will
   be discussed following submission of the first essay.
   Length: Approximately 3000-3500 words (ca. 10-12 double-spaced
   pages).
   Weighting: 35%
   DUE: November 18, 1993

Be sure to talk with me in advance if you have any questions or doubts about topics
for either paper.

Exams:
Mid-term: Scheduled for the class period on 26 October 1993
   The mid-term will be open-book.
   Weight: 20%

Final:
   Scheduled by the university during the examination period. The final will
   cover all of the material from the term. It will be open-book.
   Weight: 30%

Syllabus:
We will read the texts in the following sequence:

I. Introduction
   Boethius,
   Consolation of Philosophy
   William Dunbar,
   "Timor mortis conturbat me," "This Warld unstabille."
   John Lydgate
   "Timor mortis conturbat me."
   Geoffrey Chaucer,

II. Geoffrey Chaucer, "Book of the Duchess"
   Ovid,
   "Ceys and Alcyone," Metamorphoses
   John Gower,
   "Ceys and Alcyone," from Confessio Amantis
   John Lydgate,
   "Complaint of the Black Knight."
III. Geoffrey Chaucer, "Parliament of Fowls"

IV. Geoffrey Chaucer, "House of Fame"

V. Geoffrey Chaucer, "Legend of Good Women"
   Ovid,
   "Lucrece," from the Fasti
   John Lydgate,
   "Lucrece," from Fall of Princes
   John Gower,
   "Lucrece," from Confessio Amantis

VI. Geoffrey Chaucer, "Troilus and Criseyda"
    Robert Henryson,
    "Testament of Cresseid."

Middle English is not a particularly difficult stage of English but it will require some
time and attention, especially at the outset. We will not spend much time in class on
linguistic matters but the Riverside Chaucer has an introductory section on "Language and
Versification" (pp. xxix-xlv) which you should study carefully at the beginning of the term.
Those who wish to pursue the question of the language might look into some of the texts
listed in the Dana Porter catalogue under "English Language--Middle English."

As you read the texts assigned on the syllabus you will quickly develop a vocabulary
of Middle English words and gain some feeling for the range of their significance. Keep in
mind that it is not those words which are recognizably "foreign" that will cause you the
greatest difficulty; it is more likely to be those words which look the same as modern English
but which, in fact, may differ considerably in meaning that mislead you. For example, the
word "lust" in Middle English does not always have the negative overtones we expect in
modern English, but it may convey a sense of "pleasure" or "delight," "joy" as well as
"desire" (cf. Modern German Lust, "delight, enjoyment, desire"). Your texts attempt to gloss
these differences for you but you should be prepared to read carefully in an attempt to
determine the nuances of meaning in any given passage.

Supplementary Reading

There are a number of critical works in the Library for those who wish to examine
some other approaches to the texts at hand. I will not list the books here for they are all
available in the catalogues of the Dana Porter Library.
Some initial study questions.
These are not the only questions we will consider in our discussion but they are some that you might consider as you read and contemplate Boethius’ Consolation of Philosophy:

1. Are there any differences between the sections marked "Poem" and those marked "Prose"?
2. Who are the major figures in the Consolation and how do they differ from each other?
3. What is the purpose of organizing the book around the story of Lady Philosophy and the narrator? Why not write a philosophical treatise instead?
4. What is Philosophy’s attitude towards poetry and why does she have this attitude?
5. How is Philosophy characterized?—e.g. why is she viewed as a physician, etc?
6. What is Chance?
7. Is there any "progression" in the characters in the course of the book?
8. In what way is the narrator’s mind "deceived" [p. 6]?
9. In what way is the narrator a prisoner? and of whom or what is a prisoner?
10. In what way is the narrator an exile? and from what is he exiled?
11. What is the "supreme good."
12. How is it possible to assert that there are "no evil men" or that "evil is nothing" or, even more that "the good are always powerful and the evil always weak and futile, that vice never goes unpunished nor virtue unrewards. . . ."?
13. What is the role of Nature in the scheme of the universe?
14. How can one obtain true happiness?
15. How does Philosophy arrive at the proposition that "the essence of God is to be found in the good, and nowhere else"?
16. What is the function of reason in Boethius’ scheme of things?
17. Is it merely simile to say that "the man who is driven by avarice to seize what belongs to others is like a wolf; the restless, angry man . . . you will compare to a dog. . . ." [Book IV, F.3]?
18. Why does Philosophy not speak of what follows death?
19. What is the relationship of Providence and Fate? How are these related to reason, intellect, time, eternity?
20. Why must humanity have free will and how is free will possible if God has foreknowledge?