

Identity and the Medieval Author

Chaucer, the Gawain Poet, and Christine de Pizan

English 98r – Rob Brown | robertbrown@g.harvard.edu



Is the medieval poet an Author?

In this course, we will explore the entangled categories of identity and authorship through the exciting, humorous, and engaging work of three of the most celebrated writers of the late-medieval period, in order to better understand how these categories functioned within the pre-modern field of literary production, as well as how they function for us today. We will ask why some medieval texts enter the ranks of “the canon” while others languish in obscurity, and how, if at all, our own theories of identity and authorship might be mapped onto medieval writers and their works.

How might the forms or functions of identity in the medieval period differ from our own historical moment? Does the identity of the originator of any work of literature inflect our reading of that work? Where is the line for us between “The Author” and “The Work,” and where might it have been for a fourteenth-century reader? How can we, and should we, separate aspects of pre-modern literature or its creators which we find objectionable, distasteful, or wrong-headed from those we find interesting or aesthetically pleasing? Do we approach texts differently based on the perceived identity or ideology of the person they have been produced by? These questions are complicated by the fact that the very *idea* of the medieval is muddled by latter-day cultural fantasies and the historical misprisions of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century scholarship. We have inherited vague images of knights, castles, witch-burnings, and damsels in distress alongside more specific notions about medieval misogyny, sexual violence, governmental cruelty, scientific ignorance, and superstitious religiosity.

Therefore, this semester we will seek to move beyond these half-formed impressions to gain a clearer understanding of the literature of late-medieval Britain and beyond. In so doing, we will focus on three key figures of the period between 1350 and 1450. Still sometimes referred to as “The Father of English Poetry,” the hyper-canonical Geoffrey Chaucer (1343-1400) looms large over the early history of British literature. The poet today known only as the Gawain Poet is, on the other hand, almost entirely unknown to us. While the sole manuscript within which this extraordinary author’s work survives is generally dated to between 1340 and 1410, there is no scholarly consensus on his (or her?) identity. Hailed by Simone de Beauvoir as the first woman to “take up her pen in defense of her sex,” Christine de Pizan (1364-1431) was a poet, teacher, moralist, and political commentator who, though born into privilege and provided with an education rare for women of the period, had to work hard to be heard within an overwhelmingly male milieu. All three lived and worked during a time of political and social instability, famine, pandemic, revolt, philosophical and scientific advancement, and religious upheaval. We will consider how and why the works of these three poets have survived the subsequent centuries to speak to us today, and what we, in turn, might overhear by placing them in close conversation with one another.

Course Goals

- ❖ Develop an appreciation of Middle English poetry in its original forms, meters, and dialects.
- ❖ Establish a firm understanding of theories of medieval authorship and identity.
- ❖ Gain valuable experience with a range of literary theoretical methods of analysis.
- ❖ Engage with the material traces of medieval authorship through digitally accessible manuscript resources.
- ❖ Produce a final research paper which foregrounds your own original intervention within the coursework.

A Note on Language

Chaucer’s Middle English is noticeably different from the English we speak today yet similar enough to read with comfort after some practice. The Gawain Poet’s more northerly dialect also differs significantly from Chaucer’s. We’ll be reading the Gawain Poet’s works in the original, in a glossed and annotated edition with modernized letterforms. Don’t panic! While this may prove challenging at first, you will very quickly develop a familiarity with the sound, rhythm, and sense of this extraordinary verse.

PART 1 – The ~~Death~~ Birth of the Author?

We'll begin by approaching the idea of "the author" in general and its place within the history of literature as well as within our primary texts. We'll spend some time in our first class thinking about the difficulties inherent in conceiving of "the author" from both a historicist and a theoretical or deconstructive position, here emblemized by the foundational work of Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes respectively. Throughout these first five weeks, we'll primarily focus on modes of literary criticism that foreground the historical (and occasionally the biographical) in order to illuminate the possible locations and functions of authorship prior to the advent of print culture.

NOTE: *In Weeks 4 and 8, you'll get to choose which readings we'll focus on for Weeks 5 and 9. Also, in advance of our first meeting, the following episodes of the BBC's In Our Time podcast provide enjoyable general overviews of each of our key authors and you might find them worth a listen!*

- ❖ [Geoffrey Chaucer](#) with Carlyne Larrington (Oxford), Helen Cooper (Cambridge), & Ardis Butterfield (Yale)
- ❖ [Christine de Pizan](#) with Helen Swift (Oxford), Miranda Griffin (Cambridge), & Marilyn Desmond (Binghamton)
- ❖ [Sir Gawain and the Green Knight](#) with Laura Ashe (Oxford), Ad Putter (Bristol), & Simon Armitage (Leeds & Oxford)

Week 1 - Introducing "The Author"

- ❖ Michel Foucault "What is an Author?"
- ❖ Roland Barthes "The Death of the Author" from *Image, Music, Text*
- ❖ Nicholas Watson "Desire for the Past"
- ❖ Alastair Minnis "Introduction" from *Medieval Theory of Authorship*

❖ CHECK-IN

Schedule meeting with Instructor

Week 2 - Patronage & Politics

- ❖ Geoffrey Chaucer *The Book of the Duchess* (p.329) & *Lake of Stedfastnesse* (p.654)
- ❖ Paul Strohm *Hochon's Arrow* (Selections)
- ❖ Jenni Nuttall "Patronage" in *A New Companion to Chaucer*
- ❖ James Simpson "Richard II" in *A New Companion to Chaucer*

❖ SHORT RESPONSE

Approx. 100-words

Week 3 - Allegory & Influence

- ❖ The Gawain Poet *Pearl* (p.5)
- ❖ Dante Alighieri *Paradiso* (Selections)
- ❖ Gordon Hall Gerould "The Gawain Poet and Dante: A Conjecture"
- ❖ Harold Bloom "Introduction" from *The Anxiety of Influence*
- ❖ Annette Kolodny "The Influence of Anxiety"

❖ SHORT RESPONSE

Approx. 200 words

Week 4 - Education & Critique

- ❖ Christine de Pizan *Debate on the Romance of the Rose* (p.41) & *The Path of Long Study* (p.59)
- ❖ Geoffrey Chaucer *The Romaunt of the Rose* (p.685) (Selections)
- ❖ Ellen Thorington "Writer, Teacher, and Voice of Wisdom"
- ❖ Alastair Minnis "Theorizing the Rose" from *Magister Amoris*

❖ SHORT RESPONSE

Approx. 200 words

NOTE: *We will schedule a **Research Training Session** with the Harvard resource librarian during either Week 4 or Week 5. This session will coincide with the development of your Short Essay, which is due in Week 6.*

Week 5 - Choose Your Own Adventure #1

- ❖ CHECK-IN Schedule meeting with instructor
- ❖ SHORT RESPONSE Approx. 300 words

Political Animals

OR

Allegorical Women

- | | | | |
|--------------------|------------------------------------|----------------------|---|
| ❖ Geoffrey Chaucer | <i>Parliament of Fowls</i> (p.383) | ❖ Christine de Pizan | <i>Book of the City of Ladies</i> (p.116) |
| ❖ Charles Wuest | "Enigmatic Thing" | ❖ Fiona Tolhurst | "The Great Divide" |
| ❖ Michael Warren | "Kek kek" | ❖ Patricia Phillippy | "Establishing Authority" (p.329) |

PART 2 - Theorizing Medieval Identity

As we move into Week 6, we'll shift our focus onto methodologies that involve what are generally considered to be explicitly modern or post-modern modes of analysis in order to begin expanding our conception of medieval identity. As well as learning more about "doing theory," in this section we will consider the applicability of modern critical lenses and modern questions of identity to pre-modern works. We'll explore some of the kinds of scholarship that have, over the past thirty years or so, galvanized the field of medieval literary studies and driven it into new and productive avenues of thought. In particular, we'll think about how modes of reading driven by feminist, queer, or critical racial approaches might help illuminate our primary texts in creative and compelling ways.

CONTENT WARNING: *Please be aware that some of the primary and secondary materials we'll cover in this section portray or deal with themes of sexual violence and racialized forms of oppression.*

Week 6 - Racial Spaces in Chaucer

- ❖ Geoffrey Chaucer *The Man of Law's Tale* (p.87)
- ❖ Patience Agbabi "Joined-up Writing"
- ❖ Kathy Lavezzo "Ethnicity" in *A New Companion to Chaucer*
- ❖ Carolyn Dinshaw "Pale Faces"
- ❖ Geraldine Heng *The Invention of Race* (Selections)
- ❖ **SHORT ESSAY DUE** 5-7 pages

Week 7 - Queerness & "Cleanness"

- ❖ The Gawain Poet *Cleanness* (p.85)
- ❖ Calabrese and Eliason "The Rhetorics of Sexual Pleasure"
- ❖ Elizabeth B. Keiser "Homophobic Wrath"
- ❖ Michelle M. Sauer "Where are all the Lesbians in Chaucer?"
- ❖ **SHORT RESPONSE** Approx. 400 words

Week 8 - Christine's Pre-Modern "Feminism"?

- ❖ Christine de Pizan *The Letter from Othea* (p.29) & *The Book of Fortune's Transformation* (p.88)
- ❖ Simone de Beauvoir *The Second Sex* (Selections)
- ❖ Roberta Krueger "Towards Feminism"
- ❖ Beatrice Gottlieb "The Problem of Feminism" (p.274)
- ❖ **PROSPECTUS & ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY DUE**

NOTE: *We will schedule a **Digital Manuscript Session** during either Week 9 or Week 10. This session will introduce some key tools and resources for online manuscript research.*

Week 9 - Choose Your Own Adventure #2

- ❖ **CHECK-IN** Schedule meeting with Instructor
- ❖ **BEGIN DRAFTING** Draft 1 due next week

<i>Medieval Blackness</i>		OR	<i>Problematic Texts Problematic Authors</i>	
❖ Anonymous	<i>The King of Tars</i>		❖ Geoffrey Chaucer	<i>Reeve's Prologue and Tale</i> (p.77)
❖ Cord J. Whitaker	"Black Metaphors"		❖ Christine Rose	"Reading Chaucer Reading Rape"
❖ Jamie Friedman	"Making Whiteness Matter"		❖ Eve Salisbury	"Carried Away by the Law"
			❖ Sebastian Sobceki	"Wards and Widows"

PART 3 - Afterwords and Echoes

For the final four weeks of the course, your focus will naturally be on the development of your final projects. Our last encounters with each of our key authors will involve shorter primary and secondary reading assignments with an emphasis each week on in-depth discussion of specific observations grounded in your work thus far. Keeping in mind our more theoretical or creative readings, we'll also spend time on more recent interpretations of works by our key authors and attempt to put these post-modern echoes in conversation with their pre-modern sources. During these weeks, we'll flesh out our thinking on the reading and analysis we've done throughout the course and we'll hold a draft workshop in Week 12.

NOTE: *At least one cinematic work has been assigned each week. Access to these works will be ensured in advance.*

Week 10 - Geoffrey's Last Words

- ❖ Geoffrey Chaucer *Chaucer's Wordes unto Adam* (p.650)
- ❖ Geoffrey Chaucer *The Retraction* (p.328)
- ❖ Stephen Partridge "The Makere of this Boke"
- ❖ Brian Helgeland [A Knight's Tale \(2001\)](#)
- ❖ Julian Jarrold [The Man of Law's Tale \(2003\)](#)
- ❖ **DRAFT 1 DUE** **Minimum 10 pages**

Week 11 - Sir \The/ Gawain \Poet/ and the Green Knight

- ❖ The Gawain Poet *Patience* (p.197)
- ❖ Simon Armitage *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*
- ❖ Geoffrey Chaucer *The Prologue and Tale of Sir Thopas* (p.212)
- ❖ Simon Armitage [BBC 4 Bookclub: Simon Armitage on the Gawain Poet \(2008\)](#)
- ❖ David Lowery [The Green Knight \(2020\)](#)
- ❖ **CONTINUE DRAFTING**

Week 12 - Draft Workshop

- ❖ **NO ASSIGNED READING** - This week you'll read your working drafts as a group, provide constructive feedback, and set goals for your writing as you move towards the final drafting phase of your papers.

Week 13 - Christine's Female Legacy

- ❖ Christine de Pizan *The Tale of Joan of Arc* (p.252)
- ❖ Nancy Bradley Warren "French Women and English Men"
- ❖ Suzanne Savoy [Je Christine: A Medieval Woman in Her Own Words](#)
- ❖ Luc Besson [The Messenger: The Story of Joan of Arc \(1999\)](#)
- ❖ **DRAFT 2 DUE** **Minimum 15 pages**

PART 4 - Class Conference and Final Paper

Class Conference - Date TBD

- ❖ Five-minute presentations. You'll produce five slides with PowerPoint or the presentation software of your choice and give a presentation on your final project to your classmates.

Final Paper - Date TBD

- ❖ Your final research paper should be **20-25 pages** in length with a full bibliography.

The Socially Distanced Classroom

The difficulties inherent in most models of distanced learning have been much discussed these past few months, but online learning does present us with the opportunity to embrace alternative ways to learn as a group. As such, the “Participation” aspect of your final grade will encompass not only our online tutorial meetings but also your contributions to some ongoing class projects. It is important that the form and nature of these projects be something that you can have input on from the outset, so in our Week 1 meeting we’ll discuss what we think will work best. We’ll likely include some or all of the following:

- ❖ **Slack Channel:** Slack can be useful as a forum where everyone can raise comments, ideas, or questions as and when they arise, and fire discussion about each week’s reading in advance of the class meeting. This can help to keep everyone feeling supported and invested in their reading during some of the more challenging periods of the semester.
- ❖ **Group Annotations:** At several points I will provide a digital text for you to annotate together. Given our tutorial’s focus on dialect and poetics, as well as notions of authorship and literary praxis, this method of annotation can be a real help in bringing out developed and nuanced readings as a group.
- ❖ **Google Docs/Responding to Responses:** Everyone’s assigned short responses will be posted to a communal Google Doc each week in advance of class. In between classes, you’ll provide constructive comments and feedback on your classmates’ work. This will help you grow as writers and readers as well as give you all the opportunity to expand on work that we do while “in the classroom.”

It will also be very important that everyone feels comfortable and confident in their work in these challenging circumstances. We’ll use the first one-on-one check-in in Week 1 to discuss your set-up, where you’ll be working, as well as your interests and thoughts on the course in general.

Additional Optional Sessions

Middle English Reading Sessions

Whether this is your first encounter with Middle English literature in the original or not, getting to grips with the language of the poetry we’ll be studying is essential. However, reading Middle English should not be something to cause trepidation. Some links to helpful resources are included below and more will be forthcoming, but given the nature of this course, I’ll be offering additional informal sessions on reading Middle English which will run from one to two hours. These will not be compulsory, but they are highly recommended, especially for any students who have never read Middle English before.

Digital Manuscript Session

For many scholars of medieval literature, spending time with the original sources of the texts which they study can be both an intellectually and emotionally rewarding experience. However, for a variety of reasons, sometimes getting in the room with that twelfth-century Book of Hours is impractical. This is often when researchers turn to the ever-increasing array of online manuscript resources. Now more than ever, these resources can prove a vital component of primary manuscript research. In lieu of a visit to the Houghton Library, I’ll be organizing a two-hour session on digital manuscript resources. This session will not be compulsory but will be open to those interested.

Grading Breakdown & Timing

WEEKS 1-13	Participation		20%
WEEK 6	Short Essay	5-7 pgs.	10%
WEEK 8	Prospectus	2 pgs. & annotated bibliography	10%
WEEK 10	Paper Draft 1	10 pgs. minimum	10%
WEEK 13	Paper Draft 2	15 pgs. minimum	10%
TBD	Final Paper	20-25 pgs.	40%

Texts

Please obtain a copy of each of the following as soon as possible. All additional readings will be provided to you digitally via the course site.

- ❖ *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson (Oxford University Press, 2008) | ISBN: 978-0199552092
- ❖ *The Works of the Gawain Poet*, eds. Myra Stokes and Ad Putter (Penguin Classics, 2015) | ISBN: 978-0140424140
- ❖ *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, translated by Simon Armitage (W.W. Norton & Company, 2008) | ISBN: 978-0393334159
- ❖ *The Selected Writings of Christine De Piz̄an*, eds. Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski & Kevin Brownlee (W. W. Norton & Company, 1997) | ISBN: 978-0393970104

Class Policies

Accessibility - If you have any accessibility-related requests or concerns, please contact me as soon as possible to arrange any accommodations necessary.

Attendance - Absences for religious holidays or illness are excused but, where possible, please let me know as far in advance as you can. Persistent absence without documented reason will be reflected in your participation grade.

Participation - Productive and enjoyable classes are driven by the quality of everyone's participation. Please ensure that you have done the reading each week, are ready to share your thoughts and ideas and to hear those of your classmates, and that you have any assigned texts in hand. As noted above, given the limitations of the digital classroom, participation will also involve ongoing online exercises throughout the semester.

Academic Integrity - Please ensure that you are familiar with the college's academic integrity policies (Harvard Honor Code etc.) and standards. If you have any questions or uncertainties about academic integrity issues, do not hesitate to contact me.

Emails - You can email me at any time, and I will always do my best to get back to you within 48 hours or the next business day for weekend emails.

Extensions - Extensions on assigned writing can be organized if deemed necessary, but please ensure that you contact me as soon as possible about arranging one.

Some Helpful Middle English Resources

The Middle English Dictionary at the [University of Michigan](#)
Harvard METRO (Middle English Teaching Resources Online) [Resources](#)
David Crystal for the British Library on [Middle English](#)
David Wallace reads Chaucer at [Pennsound](#)

Sebastian Sobocki reads John Skelton's *Speke Parrot* (Note: Skelton wrote roughly a century *after* our authors, but this excellent reading gives a humorous and lively rendering of the rhythm and sound of Middle English.)

