Creating a Chaucerian Pilgrimage: An Activity for Teaching Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* in the High School Classroom

The power of a pilgrimage usually lies more in the journey than in reaching the destination. When members of a British literature class embark on a pilgrimage based on Chaucer's "General Prologue," they find themselves in places they may have never seen: the dugout of the baseball diamond, the orchestra pit in the school theater, the darkroom of the photo lab. More importantly, the students gain new insights into themselves, their classmates, and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.

One of the many benefits of a Chaucerian pilgrimage, in which students write and deliver "tales" based on the General Prologue, is that such an adventure establishes relationships. Whether your school is public or private, large or small, urban or rural, recognizing the connections that exist among students is an essential element of building a classroom community. If the students undertake the journey near the beginning of the course, they get to know their new classmates quickly: who is a ballplayer, who a thespian; who will take risks in leading the class beyond the four walls of the classroom, or within the tight structure of the iambic verse; who is funny, who is philosophical, who can skillfully wield that double-edged scythe known as satire.

When designed as a year-ending exercise, the pilgrimage offers students, especially seniors, an opportunity to reflect on their school experience, to pay homage to those who have touched their lives, and to laugh one last time with the unique collection of characters who comprise their English class. Regardless of when your class embarks on its pilgrimage, your students will learn to incorporate a variety of Chaucerian literary devices in their writing, and will practice speaking and listening skills. They may also develop the love for literature that comes when we climb into the author’s shoes and walk for a few miles.

When students create and experience a pilgrimage, their understanding of *The Canterbury Tales* is significantly enriched. They begin to perceive the relevance of Chaucer’s vivid *Tales* to their own lives, as they hold a satirical lens to the cultural surroundings they know best: their own school and American society. When students write tales to share on pilgrimage, they learn to appreciate Chaucer's style, complex characters, and sustained control of narrative and tone.

Planning a successful pilgrimage requires groundwork. The teacher must make sure that the students understand Chaucer’s historical allusions and literary techniques. Students must learn to identify and employ such elements of satire as hyperbole, verbal irony, and tone. Chaucer’s satire relies heavily on direct and indirect characterization; since the genre criticizes human foibles, the student-generated "characters" must exhibit the range of strengths and weaknesses which Chaucer illuminates in his portrait of medieval English society.
Through a careful study of the "General Prologue," students come to appreciate Chaucer’s use of descriptive detail, simile, and dialogue as he brings characters such as the wife of Bath, the Miller, and the Pardoner to full, robust life. Chaucer's allusions to contemporary and historical events place his characters in contexts which help readers understand them more fully. Since the students will be writing a tale in the Chaucerian style, they must also master poetic techniques such as iambic meter, alliteration, rhyme, or even rhyme royal for those writers who want an additional challenge.

After analyzing Chaucer’s "General Prologue," students should read several Canterbury Tales. As students are writing their own Prologues, we have them read "The Pardoner's Tale," "The Wife of Bath's Tale," "The Miller's Tale," "The Knight's Tale," and "The Prioress's Tale." Exposure to these widely different tales provides students with a knowledge of Chaucer’s work that is both broad and deep—and they may just find themselves waking up in the morning speaking in rhyme!

The requirements of the written portion of the pilgrimage assignment must be clearly stated. The students are to write a minimum of six ten-line stanzas; the stanzas must approximate iambic meter, contain ten syllables per line and follow an AA, BB, CC rhyme scheme. The first ten-line stanza establishes a setting, or frame for the tale, as in Chaucer’s famous opening to the "General Prologue." After students choose a setting and decide which five "characters" they wish to portray, the teacher should break the rest of the assignment into two parts and establish due dates. For example, you might have the first three stanzas due on Monday and the final three on Friday, making time during the week for students and teacher to evaluate the first stanzas for quality of content and structure.

Because satire often contains volatile ingredients, clear guidelines regarding content are crucial. Once they have been introduced to the genre, most adolescents are adept at satire, but not always so clear about knowing where to draw the line. Chaucer's pilgrims represent types rather than specific people, but he develops them carefully as individual characters. As the students write their satirical portraits, their subjects often emerge as recognizable individuals. While Chaucer’s more earthy characters such as the Miller serve to disabuse students of the notion that medieval literature is dry, inaccessible, highbrow stuff, high school students who encounter such characters might be tempted to inflate the bawdiness quotient in their original tales.

Satire’s volatility elicits wonderful conversations about the power of language as a tool that can create, destroy, tickle, entertain, or put to sleep. Students must recognize the difference between material appropriate for the locker room and that appropriate to the classroom. They should come to realize that private citizens, including people at their school, enjoy a standard of protection from criticism different from that of public figures. A dependable way to make sure that students wield their pens gently when portraying people at school is to have the writer show the appropriate stanza to its subject, and ask the subject to initial it on the draft submitted to the teacher. Similarly, the teacher must assert that defamation or personal attacks are not acceptable. As in Chaucer’s "Prologue," each stanza should provide either a celebration or criticism of the beliefs, behaviors, values and attitudes of those people whom the students observe around them. Remember, Chaucer's head remained attached, in spite of his satirical remarks about others. The limits and dynamics of this activity will change as the groups change, either from period to period or from year to year. In over a decade of conducting Chaucerian pilgrimages with hundreds of students, we have never had a subject complain that he or she was unfairly treated by one of our students. We have had occasion, however, to require revisions of rough drafts that threaten to cross the line of good humor or fair play.

One excellent way to give students a sense of appropriateness is to augment Chaucer’s tales with either teacher-generated verse, or examples from previous students. We offer an excerpt from a student stanza
below, in which the satirist pokes gentle fun at the Host of that year’s pilgrimage:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{We have an English teacher named Hogan;}
\text{"More muscle, less fat!"—that is his slogan.}
\text{A pedagogue who keeps us up all night}
\text{Satire in verse he expects us to write,}
\text{(Containing more syllables than it should)}
\text{Gee, thanks, Mr. H, you sure teached us good!}
\end{align*}
\]

Though the iambic verse is not perfect, students quickly see that they can write Chaucerian satire—and that it can be great fun. Once the tales are complete, the students provide two copies by the date of embarkation. One is for the teacher to evaluate, and one for the author to read on the pilgrimage. With the teacher serving as Host, the students draw numbers to determine who will go first. In the order of the numbers drawn, the students read their tales to the class. At the end of the activity, the class votes on which tale wins the prize for providing "...best sentence and most solas" ("General Prologue," 800). Since the prize in The Canterbury Tales has to do with food and drink, "...a soper at oure aller cost" (801), our class prizes are usually gustatory.

Simply reading the tales in class does not sufficiently recreate the experience of the Chaucerian pilgrims’ journey from London to Canterbury. During their pilgrimage, students journey throughout the school's campus - - which may require permission from the administration. The teacher asks students to select locations most meaningful to them or appropriate to their tales. A softball player may deliver her tale from the pitcher’s mound, or the chess team captain from that secret room in the back of the library. Thus, the cafeteria, the attendance office, the stage, the gym, the darkroom, and the football field all become stations of the pilgrimage. The results can be quite powerful. We have actually seen both writers and audience in tears, either from pathos or pure hilarity—often related to the setting as much as to the content itself. When students bring their classmates into their "sacred places," their peers begin to see them in new ways. They listen to each other more carefully, and perceive aspects of character that they may never before have noticed. These sojourns to new places also remind students that the school they think they know so well still holds many secret enchantments, even for graduating seniors.

The tales are evaluated for quality in both technique and content. Rubrics are helpful for the type of assessment appropriate to a pilgrimage. Divide the rubric into two sections, one for technique and one for content, and tell students in advance those elements you will evaluate. For example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Technique</th>
<th>Content</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>___Contains 10 syllables per line</td>
<td>___Offers direct and indirect characterization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>___Maintains Chaucerian meter and rhyme</td>
<td>___Appropriate criticism or celebration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>___Employs verbal irony/satirical tone</td>
<td>___Profile is insightful, funny, illuminating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>___Uses alliteration, metaphor, other techniques</td>
<td>___Uses descriptive detail</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The rubric can be adjusted to fit those elements which the teacher emphasizes. Assign points to each element, either for each stanza, or for the student’s tales taken as a whole.
This assignment inevitably engages students at an emotional level, often eliciting both laughter and real reflection. An oral debriefing session is a useful way to address these emotions, and can also help the teacher evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the activity in the context of a particular group. Following are a few questions that are useful for oral debriefs:

- How did you feel during this activity?
- What did you learn from this activity?
- What will you do with what you learned?
- What would you change about this activity? Why?
- What aspect of the activity did you like the best? Why?

Our students have frequently told us that their class pilgrimage was the most memorable lesson of the school year. First of all, their knowledge of and appreciation for Geoffrey Chaucer increases. Students come to appreciate how difficult writing poetry can be, and find new respect for poets and poetry, as they learn to apply iambic meter, simile, alliteration, and rhyme.

In addition, students learn about themselves, their peers, their teacher, and their school as they make their pilgrimage. They may also learn to see themselves in a context of human experience and endeavor which is both ancient and forever new. "Pilgrimage" is a metaphor for our lives. By embarking on a story-telling journey modeled on Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, students learn that their world, like Chaucer’s, is filled with all types—the hypocritical, the noble, the licentious, the corrupt, the ambitious, the generous. As they encounter both Chaucer’s and their classmates’ tales, students come to recognize the universality of the human condition. As Dr. Helen Cooper said at the 2002 New Chaucer Society Congress in Boulder, Colorado, the job of teachers is "to create the enthusiasts of tomorrow." The pilgrimage activity is one way to start future enthusiasts on their journey. The trip may start in a tavern in Southwark, in your room, or in your students’ imagination—but you never know where it may lead, once you decide to leave behind the four walls of your classroom and embark.

Donna Dermond, Lewis and Clark College  
Paul Hogan, Jesuit High School  
Portland, Oregon