Teaching Chaucer in a Bilingual High School

Elizabeth LaBarge

Cristo Rey Jesuit High School

I teach in a school with a unique student population. Cristo Rey Jesuit High School, less than twenty-five years old, was created to specifically serve a low-income, Spanish-speaking, immigrant community. As a result, all my students are bilingual (in Spanish and English), all are considered low income, and many are the first in their family to attend college (at least in the United States). While Chaucer may not seem the author best fit for this population, I think that in fact, he is. I will discuss three reasons why I consider it imperative to teach Chaucer to my students, and why I think they are ideal readers and interpreters of his texts. First, immigrant students should be introduced to some canonical British texts so that they feel part of the conversation in college. Secondly, reading *The Canterbury Tales* teaches my students not only that classic texts can be interesting, but that they can also help students reflect on their own lives and cultures. Lastly, my bilingual students are especially equipped to understand the complexities of reading a text in translation. I am hesitant to speak for my students or put words in their mouths, so I include their reflections and feedback along with my own.

As a teacher in a college preparatory school, one of my main objectives is to make sure that my students have the skills and the confidence required to succeed in college. *The Canterbury Tales* fits this role perfectly. I teach this text in a British Literature class for seniors.
Before I began teaching at Cristo Rey, this British Literature class was created based on the feedback of graduates who were then in college. These students said that they felt unprepared to converse with their peers in college classes because they were not familiar with the texts these peers had read in high school. One of the texts that these students mentioned by name was Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*.

It is undeniable that there exists a canon of white authors on both high school and college reading lists. I am not trying to debate the merits or detriments of the canonical literature here. However, I do want my students to be prepared when they enter a college classroom which means they should be familiar with and believe they can access the texts that they are reading. In the words of one of my students, “If we feel part of the conversation, we will feel comfortable. If we are comfortable, we are more likely to stay in college.” Another student added on, saying “It is not just knowing what others are talking about. We will be able to join the conversation. We can add our own opinions and arguments.” Coming from a homogeneous Latino school community, my students will have enough adjusting to do when they go to college. I will take any way that I can to help them feel prepared and like they belong in their classes, and it has been my experience that teaching *The Canterbury Tales* is one way of doing that.

*The Canterbury Tales* is a challenging and complex text that helps students become critical readers. Not only is it a complicated poem full of imagery, symbolism and other poetic devices, but it covers many different genres and themes. It is a poem, a narrative, and many genres of short stories all in one. Reading this text helps students be familiar with all of these elements, and also exposes students to many ideas that they can connect to future readings. For example, when I was reading *Jane Eyre* with my students last year, they understood many of the novel’s critiques of religion and depictions of the role of women from reading *The Canterbury Tales*.
Tales. They were able to draw on their knowledge from *The Canterbury Tales* to find meaning in the scene in which Jane is looking out the window, wishing she could have the same freedom men have. My students reminded me that Emily in Chaucer’s *Knight’s Tale* is also trapped in a garden and lacks the freedom to make her own choices. Similarly, when I said Charlotte Bronte was criticizing religious figures rather than religion as a whole, one student asked: “Isn’t that what Chaucer does with the religious figures in *The Canterbury Tales*?” Through reading Chaucer, my students learned to evaluate gender roles and to understand religious criticism which helped them read another text. That is college preparedness.

In a self-guided discussion of an excerpt from *One Amazing Thing* by Chitra Divakaruni, one of my students said: “There was a moment when we were all like, we know this because we read *The Canterbury Tales*. We felt smart.” That is my goal for all of my students, and one of the reasons why I continue to teach *The Canterbury Tales*.

Along with wanting my students to be exposed to texts that they will encounter in college, I want them to understand that old texts can be interesting and relevant, and one of the best texts for that is *The Canterbury Tales*. To begin, the overall premise of pilgrimage and storytelling makes sense to my students. Most of my students come from a tradition of Catholicism and understand the religious concept of the pilgrimage. Many also have personal or familial experience with the idea of pilgrimage through traveling themselves to other countries (usually Mexico) to visit family or through stories of family members immigrating to this country. They are familiar with the idea that “everyone has a story,” which is a recurring theme they experience on retreats throughout high school. Specifically, during their senior year, all students go on a three day Kairos retreat. On this retreat, student and adult leaders share personal stories that have impacted their faith and shaped their lives. Participants also consider their own
stories and share them in a small group. On this retreat, students learn that the stories we tell about ourselves can either reveal our true selves or they can be masks to hide who we truly are. As we read *The Canterbury Tales*, we also consider what the characters’ stories and interactions reveal about them and whether their stories align with the image Chaucer paints of them in the “The Prologue.”

What’s more, Chaucer, much like Shakespeare, understands people and writes richly and complexly about humanity. This understanding of humanity gives the modern reader something to understand and connect to. One of the series of tales that we read in my class is the *Knight’s Tale—Wife of Bath’s Tale—Franklin’s Tale*. We read these tales together to examine the development of themes and genre. All three of these stories deal with the treatment of women and with relationships between men and women. In the *Knight's Tale*, Emily desires to remain chaste and unmarried but is forced to marry by Duke Theseus and thus becomes a prize to be won. The Wife of Bath tells a tale about women wanting the “self-same sovereignty/ Over her husband as over her lover”¹ and achieving the decision-making power in their relationships. In the *Franklin’s Tale*, the husband and wife both promise to obey each other; although their seemingly ideal marriage gets complicated along the way, the end result is happy.

This past year, we began by reading the *Knight’s Tale*. When we’d finished the story, one of my outspoken female students was outraged and angrily demanded to know why we read stories that portray women as objects to be won by men. After reading the other two tales, she relented, saying, “Chaucer is tricky. We thought he believed one thing about women, and then he tricks us.” Another student recognized that Chaucer’s viewpoints made him potentially feminist by today’s standards and put it this way: “When did Chaucer write this? He was a man of 2017 in the Middle Ages!” Ultimately, these comments sparked conversations about the different ways
that women are portrayed in the text and how those different roles play out in our society. While my vocal student did change her mind about Chaucer and enjoyed examining the various women in the text, her comments enabled us to use the text as a starting point for conversations about whose voices are heard most in literature and whose are often silenced.

In the wake of the current cultural context and the #MeToo movement, conversations about gender and power dynamics between the sexes couldn't be more relevant. These three stories force us to confront questions of power, objectification, and even abuse issues head on by examining relationships between men and women. These issues are also directly related to our school culture. We have two new student groups born out of the current climate: Las Chicas and Los Chicos. These groups for young women and men address the Latina and Latino cultural stereotypes of what it means to be female or male, and help students confront them. Not only is there inherent gender inequality in American culture, but my students’ Latino culture has traditional gender roles that are male dominant. As the charter of Las Chicas puts it, the school environment is one in which students deal with the “intersection of American sexism with Machismo culture.” Issues of gender identity and relationships are ones that my students are working through in their own lives. Chaucer wrote about these same issues in the Middle Ages, and discussing his work helps students address their own reality. As my student acknowledged when she said “Chaucer is tricky,” Chaucer portrays more traditional gender roles and expectations as well as characters who openly reject those expectations, like the Wife of Bath, or who complicate those expectations, like the characters in “The Franklin’s Tale.” By examining these differences in Chaucer’s stories, students can examine those in their own lives.

Throughout our reading of the General Prologue and some of the tales, we focused on Chaucer’s criticisms of the Church and society and examined the hypocrisy of some of the
characters. We are all aware of negative behavior and opportunities for criticism of religious authority. At a Catholic school, these conflicting messages present a clear dichotomy between what we preach and what we practice. When I asked my students later in the year to reflect on Chaucer’s criticisms of institutions, as well as society’s views on women, they came up with the following insights:

- “We see the same things in our society today.”
- “We keep fighting the same thing over and over again and make no progress.”
- “We need to read this, and notice it, so we can change.”
- “Reading this can reveal truth about humans.”

I think any text that helps students reflect on their own society and make connections to their own lives is worth reading.

When I asked my students to reflect on their overall experience of reading The Canterbury Tales, they said that more than anything else they read throughout the year, this text was “fun” and “entertaining.” They got quite animated and excited when discussing this, insisting that there was “so much going on” and that it was “unexpected” for a text from the Middle Ages. Each student was required to read and write about a tale of their choosing in addition to what we read and discussed together, but they wanted to know “Why can’t we read all of the tales?” As a high school teacher, it is my dream to see students excited about the literature that we read. I want them to engage in learning, to think that it is “fun,” and—it is my great hope—to become lifelong learners. I believe that Chaucer has helped me achieve some of these goals.

I am convinced that my students’ bilingualism make them ideal readers of The Canterbury Tales as well as other canonical texts in translation such as Beowulf and Sir Gawain
and the Green Knight. As one of my students noted: “Because we are bilingual, we understand that meaning gets lost, that something might get lost in translation.” I have a gift in having a room full of bilingual students. I utilize this gift by focusing on the language of the texts we read. Although we do the majority of our reading in modern English, I intentionally focus on translation of the text with my students. As part of this study, we read Seamus Heaney's introduction to his translation of Beowulf and compare different translations of that text. We also watch Simon Armitage’s documentary in which he discusses his translation of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. I then have my students translate some Spanish poetry into English.

After the students spend some time translating the poetry into English, we have a dialogue about this process. The students tell me how difficult it was to translate. They say that they struggled to find the right word to express the Spanish meaning in English and that the words don’t translate directly. They also often tell me that they tried to express the overall meaning and mood of the poem in their translations. When I tell my students that the idea of gentilesse that Chaucer writes about in Middle English doesn’t translate directly to modern English, they understand perfectly what I mean. In fact, they quote from the poetry that they translated. In translating one poem, they found certain words, like “acariciar,” that they could not exactly explain to me using English, just like some of the words in Chaucer do not directly translate: “It’s like ‘acariciar,’” they tell me. “It means ‘caress’ but with different connotations.” They can understand from experience the challenges of translating a text.

Then I ask them: Did they think about how the poem sounds? Rhyme? Rhythm? Did they consider how to translate literary devices? Did they consider the tone? When I ask these questions, they are surprised. They were so focused on finding the word, they never thought about the poetic elements of the text or how complicated it is to translate a text. In Seamus
Heaney’s introduction to *Beowulf*, he discusses the choices he made because of his “prejudice in favor of forthright delivery.” He says he allows himself “transgressions” in meter and devices in favor of letting “the natural ‘sound of sense’ prevail over the demands of convention.”¹ My students were awed by how complicated it is to translate a text like *The Canterbury Tales* or *Beowulf*. Engaging in the process of translation allows my students to have an authentic understanding and appreciation for the translators of our Old and Middle English texts.

When my students translate poetry from Spanish to English in my class, they are the experts trying to explain things to me that I don’t understand. My students possess language abilities that I don’t have. Focusing on language and translation is a way of honoring, celebrating, and utilizing my students’ unique talents

Notes


*The Once and Future Classroom*. Volume XV, Issue 1 (Spring 2019)
© 2019 TEAMS: Teaching Association for Medieval Studies