Teaching Chaucer in Secondary Schools: Three Views

David Raybin

Eastern Illinois University

From 2008 to 2014, Susanna Fein and I directed four London-based NEH Summer Seminars for School Teachers on Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales. Competition for the sixteen places in each seminar was intense—we received over two hundred applications in 2012 and again in 2014—and the teachers we chose were the best of the best. They were always prepared for our daily seminar meeting, they were smart and innovative in their thinking about how to approach Chaucer’s narratives, they pushed each other and fed on each other’s insights, they grew steadily stronger in their reading of Middle English, and they made the directors work hard to keep up.

These teachers came from across the country, from schools rural and urban, public and private, and friendships made during the Seminars have proven to be lasting. In the years since the seminars ended, groups of us have joined together at various conferences, and a mini-reunion in East London during a meeting of the New Chaucer Society united over a dozen teachers with representatives from all four seminars. When we get together, they tell us about their experiences: hence this collection.

In 2017, five teachers, representing three different seminars, came to Kalamazoo for a roundtable on Teaching Chaucer in Secondary Schools. The presentations were tremendous, and encouraged by TEAMS President Tom Goodman and Once and Future Classroom Editor Gale Sigal, we determined to develop the papers into a cluster of articles for the journal. Four of the articles, reflecting the perspectives of teaching in quite different environments, are included here. A fourth will appear in a future issue.

Mark Randolph’s essay will be posted in a future issue. He teaches at the Greenhill Schools, an elite private school in Ann Arbor, Michigan. His classes are small, his students are college prep, he has abundant resources and support, and as an acknowledged master teacher he’s free to teach pretty much what and how he wishes. Yet even Mark’s privileged students are stressed by their competitive learning environment and worried about their futures—he uses a string of suicides at an elite high school in Palo Alto as a point of comparison—and it’s his job to get them through the immediate challenges of classes and personal crises while teaching the skills that will make them stronger people after they’ve moved on. Mark’s goal is to empower
his students to make a world that’s better not just for them, but through them. His method, as he describes it in “Teaching Chaucer and the Power of Telling Stories,” mixes storytelling, Moth-inspired performance, and approaching Chaucer and the Canterbury Tales narrators as storytellers. It could be adapted to almost any classroom.

Elaine Griffin teaches at the University School of Milwaukee, an independent K-12 school in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. University School bills itself as “one of the top college prep schools in the country,” and also as “one of the most racially and ethnically diverse schools in the state of Wisconsin,” with students of color making up 30% of the student body, and 22% of enrollees receiving need-based aid. Elaine uses the Canterbury Tales as an entry for encouraging students in the digital age to bridge what Sherry Turkle calls the “empathy gap.” “How a Fourteenth-Century Text Teaches Twenty-First-Century Skills: New Reasons for Teaching The Canterbury Tales in the Digital Age” argues for the value of having students struggle through rich face-to-face conversations about Chaucer’s complex, multivalent characters. In her device-free classroom, students and teacher have to think together without external crutches. As a result of their hard work, students’ brains stretch, and they develop the grit that’s needed to approach problems not by looking for easy answers, but by recognizing the truths that lie in subtlety, difference, and diversity of thinking.

Elizabeth Labarge teaches at Cristo Rey Jesuit, a bilingual high school just west of the Loop in downtown Chicago. Cristo Rey was “created to specifically serve a low-income, Spanish-speaking, immigrant community,” and it succeeds: almost all students graduate and go on to college. That said, the challenges that come with difference are substantial. Beth teaches Chaucer so that her students will feel comfortable among their peers when they get to college (former students, now in college, tell her how important it is that they know Chaucer), because the diverse and alien voices in the Canterbury Tales help “them to reflect on their own lives and cultures,” and because, as she has discovered, “bilingual students are especially equipped to understand the complexities of reading a text in translation.” I’ve visited Beth’s classes at Cristo Rey, and it’s clear from her students’ active, eager, and informed discussion that “Teaching Chaucer at a Bilingual High School” isn’t just a title: it’s what Beth is doing.

Lee Read teaches at Wilde Lake High School, a public school in Silver Spring, Maryland. For a few years she was a district administrator, coordinating instruction across a large district, but she missed the contact with students and went back—forward!—to her classroom. “Across Time and Space: Teaching Chaucer in the Modern Classroom” speaks about the power of engaging with language and why it’s so important that students read fiction as they negotiate a culture in which social media distract them even as they try so hard to determine truth and value. “Truth,” Lee argues, “is a construct that we create to better understand the world,” and “it is only through fiction,” with its complications and uncertainties—and here the questions that lace Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales provide the perfect medium for exploration and understanding—that we can sort through the confusion to “discover the truths in our own lives.”

The authors of these articles leave implicit how much they value the personal experience of reading Chaucer, yet their deep appreciation of his poetry shows through in all that they write. In their classrooms, they model the pleasure that comes with being immersed in a book, and their
intellectual enthusiasm rubs off on their students. Their articles exhibit how we all can use the *Canterbury Tales* to foster classrooms where students are better able to read, write, and think.