



PROJECT MUSE®

Teaching Chaucer (review)

Louise D'Arcens

Studies in the Age of Chaucer, Volume 30, 2008, pp. 337-340 (Review)

Published by The New Chaucer Society

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/sac.0.0031>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/268765>

sented by chess pieces other than the king), Adams suggests that Hoccleve is implying “that the king might want to model himself on the virtues appropriate to other men” (p. 131). The second half of the fourth chapter treats differences between Caxton’s two editions of *The Game and Playe of the Chesse* (his English translation of a French translation of Jacobus de Cessolis’s *Liber*). Whereas the 1474 edition was addressed to the king’s brother to teach him good governance, the 1483 edition was addressed to all people as containing “wholesome wisdom necessary for every estate and degree.” Furthermore, Caxton illustrated the text of the new edition with a series of woodcuts that gloss the text in ways discussed above and also picture the different chess pieces (“such persons as longen to the playe”). Adams points out analogies between Caxton’s second edition of *The Game and Playe of the Chesse* and his second edition of *The Canterbury Tales*, to which he added twenty-three woodcuts showing Chaucer, the individual pilgrims (representing different estates and professions), and also the pilgrim group seated at a table.

In a brief but evocative epilogue, Adams suggests that drama became the most powerful way to represent social order in the Renaissance, displacing political symbolism “from board to stage.” *Power Play* makes an important contribution to our understanding of how late medieval thought is expressed in and elaborated around images.

LAURA KENDRICK
Université de Versailles

GAIL ASHTON and LOUISE SYLVESTER, eds. *Teaching Chaucer*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. Pp. xi, 167. \$27.95 paper.

As a volume dedicated to addressing Chaucer pedagogy in the age of new media, *Teaching Chaucer* is an uneven offering. Its essays range from those that engage closely and creatively with the demands of teaching particular Chaucerian texts to those where Chaucer is all but lost within the authors’ fascination with pedagogic technology.

One of the volume’s main strengths, beginning with Gail Ashton’s introduction and continuing throughout the essays, lies in its diagnosis of the many challenges posed by students who are products of the “information age,” and in the various essays’ pragmatic acknowledgment

that the problems created by undergraduate Web research are here to stay but can be negotiated by effective pedagogy and strategic use of Internet technology. Moira Fitzgibbons's essay is especially attentive to the need to guide the "point-and-click" generation into solid critical research, and to tackling the often flabby relativism that replaces analysis. Peggy Knapp also astutely diagnoses the key assumptions that an undergraduate student body is likely to have about Chaucer, and describes how she crafts classes that respond to and challenge these assumptions.

Taken together, these essays offer heartening evidence of how teachers of Chaucer are combining creativity and contemporaneity with historical sensitivity. Stephen Kruger's discussion of the linked assignment program he developed left me admiring how carefully he had devised the trajectory of his students' path toward familiarity with Chaucer and with research methods. Knapp's paper similarly focuses on the integrated suite of intellectual approaches (historicist, aesthetic, hermeneutic) she brings to teaching Chaucer. Louise Sylvester addresses the problems of teaching Chaucerian language in the context of literature classes by suggesting that integrating pragmatics and stylistics might offer a way forward. The emphasis of most essays, however, is on pedagogic technologies and methodologies. Lesley Coote argues, for instance, that since our culture is arguably the most visual since the Middle Ages, teaching through visual materials is historically apt, economical, and speaks to our students. Others, such as Fiona Tolhurst, advocate dramatic and performative methods for teaching Chaucerian voice. Simon Horobin's essay outlines his intelligent use of recent technological resources in Chaucer studies, such as the CD-Rom of *The Canterbury Tales Project* and electronic concordances, to construct problem-based classes in which students explore manuscript and dialect variation, as well as scribal, compilatorial, and modern editorial interventions, thus engaging with the complexities of manuscript work in a virtual environment.

Other essays, however, such as Coote's, become preoccupied with technical matters such as file sizes and software without explaining their specific significance for teaching Chaucer. Her immersion within electronic teaching culture is such that she does not offer sufficient explanation of the difference between Web sites and virtual learning environments, or of "gist" learning and its benefits. Ashton's contribution at times reads more like a paper on electronic learning than on

Chaucer teaching, and, apart from underdeveloped remarks about how certain techniques seem apposite for teaching medieval subjects, is more concerned with outlining her learning philosophies than with applying them expressly to teaching Chaucer. Philippa Semper's essay offers a more detailed and specific discussion of which e-resources are most useful, and is thoughtful on the subject of how to build a site that accommodates Web-surfing behavior but ensures quality control directed at medieval content. Knapp's essay is mercifully free of promotional claims about the "innovative" nature of her teaching. Indeed, her productive combination of Raymond Williams, Kant, and Gadamer gives the lie to the notion that "innovation," crudely construed, in teaching is always to be embraced, a notion that some contributors to this volume could have treated with greater skepticism given the widespread instrumentalization of "innovation" by university management to secure market share. Knapp's classroom is the model of a creative yet solidly intellectual reading and research environment, where skills are acquired organically, rather than in accordance with a "Best-Practice" manual.

The highly privileged classroom conditions described in many of the essays threaten at times to undermine the more universal nature of the volume's diagnosis of student culture. Other than Ashton's essay, there is little on offer for those who are compelled to face contemporary pedagogic dilemmas in the context of crowded classes. Fitzgibbons admits to, but does not elaborate on, the influence of her very privileged classroom conditions: she mentions that her assessment methods were less successful in a larger class, but does not reflect any further. Similarly, Tolhurst does not address the extent to which her extremely privileged teaching environment (seminars of approximately ten students, daily fifty-minute readings of Chaucer) makes her extensive assessment regimen possible in a way it would not be for many teaching Chaucer in less advantaged environments. Despite her avowal that the performance project she undertakes could be adapted for larger classes, she offers no guidance as to how this might work. Kruger's environment is less privileged, but since he does not specify how many students were subject to the very labor-intensive assessment process he describes, it is difficult to evaluate whether his methods might work in the context of large classes.

One disconcerting feature of some of the essays in this volume is their relatively unreflective use of currently fashionable para-pedagogic jargon, such as Ashton's "blended learning," "student-centredness," and

the egregious “value-added lectures.” Tolhurst’s discourse similarly reflects her adherence to the ongoing current para-pedagogic assault on the shibboleth of the magisterial, “top-down” teacher. This seemingly untroubled acceptance of the consumerist ideology underlying much of the drive toward “student-centered” techniques represents one of this volume’s missed opportunities. While there are numerous astute analyses of the pressures involved in communicating Chaucer to new-media-savvy undergraduates, there is a puzzling silence on the pressures of the institutional imperative to abandon challenging traditional pedagogic techniques in order to attract and retain students. Because of the many scholarly demands Chaucer studies places on information-age undergraduates, it offers a particularly fertile ground for exploring not just the technological opportunities but also the ideological stakes of transforming our teaching to accommodate our students. *Teaching Chaucer’s* frequently admirable pragmatism would have been helpfully complicated by such an exploration.

LOUISE D’ARCENS
University of Wollongong

ANTHONY BALE. *The Jew in the Medieval Book: English Antisemitisms, 1350–1500*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. Pp. xiv, 266. £45.60; \$85.00.

Meticulously researched and lucidly composed, Anthony Bale’s *The Jew in the Medieval Book* combines rigorous historicist readings with excellent manuscript work. The book contributes to the vigorous conversation that has unfolded over the past decade on the relation of England’s Jews to its literary culture. Scholars such as Sheila Delany, Denise Despres, Steven Kruger, Lisa Lampert, and Sylvia Tomasch (among literary critics); Ruth Mellinkoff and Debra Higgs Strickland (among art historians); and Jeremy Cohen, Kathleen Biddick, Robert Chazan, Gavin Langmuir, David Nirenberg, and Miri Rubin (among historians) have provided the foundation for Bale’s project. The book’s achievement is to have synthesized much of this work without offering a monolithic culmination or alternative. The analytical strength of *The Jew in the Medieval Book* derives from its rejection of the idea that the figure of the