

Chaucer in UK schools before and after Curriculum Two Thousand *Mark Ryan, King Edward VI College, Stourbridge*

For out of olde felde, as men seyth,
Cometh al this newe corn from yer to yere,
And out of olde bokes, in good feyth,
Cometh al this newe science that men lere. (PF 22-5)

The following reflections are borne out of over thirty years' teaching, twenty of which were in a Sixth Form College. I wish to acknowledge at AQA the help of Hilary Nicholls in Manchester and Anita Cooper in Guildford; Emma Parker and Jacky Danson also of AQA offered invaluable advice. Officers at UCLES, now OCR, were admirable in their support: Mike Smith, Cathy Finnigan, and Richard Powell were of considerable help. Jean Simpson's MA thesis 'Chaucer at A Level: A Consideration of Chaucer Questions in A Level Examinations from 1963-1995, with Particular Reference to Links with Developments in Chaucer Studies and Criticism' was an invaluable starting-point, while Clive Spicer, Joyce Fellows, Mike Smith, Viv Wood, and Carole Westwood, long-time teaching colleagues, provided many helpful suggestions. In particular Sue Green was my amanuensis not to say the technological arm of my writing.

'Pacience is an heigh vertu...' I have taught A Level English to over 900 students since 1969. Most of these 900 startled me with their interest in and enthusiasm for Chaucer. Two particular years (1994/5, 1996/7) were memorable for a series of unforgettable lessons on the 'Miller's Tale'; laughter was the essence; 'sentence' and success were the outcome. In a letter to me from one of my most accomplished students, I was referred to a short passage in A.S. Byatt's *Possession*:

'And you? Why do you work on Ash?'
'My mother liked him. She read English. I grew up on his idea of Sir Walter Raleigh, and his Agincourt poem and Offa on the Dyke. And then *Ragnorak*.'
He hesitated. 'They were what stayed alive, when I'd been taught and examined everything else.'
Maud smiled then. 'Exactly. That's it. What could survive our education.'

It is this sense that I have of Chaucer. It is the case with him and some of his works that something 'survives' the ordinariness of timetables and tests, the something of wisdom 'lost in knowledge' that T.S. Eliot wrote of in a chorus in *The Rock*.

School, A-level, Chaucer, and me

And forth we riden a litel moore than paas
Unto the Wateryng of Seint Thomas;
And there oure Hoost bigan his hors areste
And seyde, 'Lordynges, herkneth, if yow leste...' ('GP' 825-8)

In addition to the University Entrance Test in English (Use of English), my own school A-level studies in English Literature consisted of *King Lear* and *The Tempest*, practical criticism, selected poems of Matthew Arnold, Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* and *The Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot*, Milton's *Paradise Lost* Books IV and IX, Edward Gibbon's *Autobiography* and Chaucer's '*Pardoner's Prologue and Tale*' and

'Prioress's Prologue and Tale'. This list will certainly place me in an historical context!

Sixth form study then consisted little of dialogue and debate except perhaps when unseen passages of prose and poetry were presented for general literary criticism. Major texts were placed in a literary-historical perspective in a few lessons on the development of poetry, prose and drama from the Greeks and Romans, through Anglo-Saxon poetry, an Elizabethan/Jacobean background, the Augustan period and the Victorians. The whole A-level course lasted two years, with an internally assessed examination at the end of the Lower Sixth (Year 12); almost regardless of how badly one performed in this examination (I think I obtained 36% a mark which in some sixth form colleges prior to Curriculum Two Thousand (C2K) might have seen my exit) transition into the Upper Sixth (Year 13) was invariably automatic. As students, the looming of the real examination was not something that was emphasised by our teachers. Most were more concerned about my role as opening bat in the School First XI. There was no stress on results or league tables; I recall I was in a Geography set of 16; 15 failed. Imagine the inquest today.

Chaucer's two tales were my first introduction both to A-level study and to medieval literature itself. I am sure the shock was then the same as it must be now to modern students. Did we begin with the hardest text?

If we needed any help outside the text, Coghill's Penguin translation was recommended but it was stressed one should attempt to cope with the Chaucer original as it was on the page. Individual reading aloud in class was compulsory. Each student was given a passage for reading, translation and commentary. All of us fell about laughing at the seeming ridiculousness of what it was we were reading – accents, pronunciation, lilting final '-e' sounds – and the question (which is still asked today) how do you know this is the way to read this? None of us was convinced that we were 'doing it right'.

Both prologues and tales of the Pardoner and Prioress were set in a context of the 'General Prologue', so from the latter we looked at several pilgrims in an edition carefully and strategically bowdlerised. Interestingly, the line 'I trowe he were a geldyng or a mare' (691) was omitted from our edition of the 'General Prologue' but not from the edition of the tale itself; two or three lines were omitted from the Friar's portrait.

Modern students are really well-served with editions of texts. Although I do not possess copies of all the editions of the 'Pardoner's Tale', a glance at my own library shelves shows six:

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|-------|---|---|
| (i) | edited by F. W. Robinson | James Brodie—no date |
| (ii) | edited by Carleton Brown | OUP—first edition 1935 |
| (iii) | edited by Nevill Coghill
and Christopher Tolkien | Harrap—first edition 1958 |
| (iv) | edited by A. C. Spearing | CUP—first edition 1965 |
| (v) | edited by N. R. Havely
(with tales of Summoner
and Friar) | University of London Press
—first published 1975 |
| (vi) | edited by A. C. Spearing | CUP—revised edition 1994 |

Here perhaps is not the place for an extended analysis of the relative merits of these editions. However, a few reflections are, I think, instructive. In school we used the

F. W. Robinson text for both Pardoner and Prioress. There are fourteen pages by way of introduction (notes and bibliography, brief life of Chaucer, setting of the Tale, information on Pardoners, on the tale itself, Chaucer's Grammar, Pronunciation, Versification, final '-e'). The text itself, including the portrait from the 'General Prologue', is nineteen pages long, with sixteen pages of notes, two pages on 'words which present special difficulties', a glossary of twenty-one pages and culminating in nineteen tasks for students – these are fascinating in themselves. For example:

1. Describe the Pardoner's personal appearance.
7. What three vices did the Pardoner attack in his sermon? Show how he deals with each one.
11. Relate fully the incident of the meeting with the 'oold men and a poure'.
12. What reference to contemporary events do we find in the tale?
16. Give some instances of Chaucer's humour in the tale, and in the account of the Pardoner in the 'General Prologue'.
18. Give the meaning of the following words and phrases—45 listed.
19. Explain, put into modern English, and give the context of ...
there follow 23 phrases including, for example, 'a gentil pardoner of Rouncival', 'by corpus bones', 'an hundred mark', 'me thynketh', and 'with sory grace'.

A. C. Spearing's revised CUP edition has an updated bibliography to reflect the growth of Chaucerian scholarship and is evidently intended to encourage wider reading. The Introduction is forty-nine pages long with many footnotes cross-referencing bibliography and critical debates and there are fifteen pages of notes and ten of glossary.

There are no 'tasks' as in the Robinson edition. Robinson suggests we listen to 'the gramophone records' made by Professor H. C. Wyld which are 'indispensable for those who wish to know how Chaucer's English sounded to those who heard the poet read it'. Obviously the bibliographies in each edition reflect their times; today Robinson's list seems dry, even antiquarian, while Spearing's engages with the burgeoning modern studies into gender, Lollardy and homosexuality with frequent references to learned periodicals. One senses with Robinson a feeling of the instruction manual, of a greater interest in the origins of words (a contrast between the two glossaries for example reveals no origins in Spearing but references to Old English, Old French, and Latin in Robinson), whereas in Spearing the student is drawn more acutely into a world of debate, opinion, and contrasting literary judgements, the very stuff of vital engagement with texts. In offering us no set tasks, there is a sense in which the Spearing (and other modern editions) reflect a change in the style of teaching.

We read aloud (with exhortations that here were passages to be learned off by heart - no open books) and translated. We looked at grammar especially: there seemed little on the sheer poetry, and the use of vocabulary, rhetoric, the art with which the whole was organised, and certainly nothing controversial in terms of critical views or interpretations.

Another upward glance at my own library shelves shows only two editions of the 'Prioress's Tale' but several student guides and books of collected essays:

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|------|---|------------------------|
| (i) | <i>The 'Pardoner's Tale'</i> edited by D. R. Faulkner | Spectrum 1973 |
| (ii) | <i>The 'Pardoner's Tale'</i> Graham Handley | Penguin Passnotes 1986 |

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|--------|---|--------------------------------|
| (iii) | <i>The 'Pardoner's Tale'</i> P. Gooden | Pan Books 1986 |
| (iv) | <i>The 'Pardoner's Tale'</i> C. W. R. D. Moseley | Penguin Master Studies 1987 |
| (v) | <i>The 'Pardoner's Tale'</i> Geoffrey Lester | Macmillan Master Guides 1987 |
| (vi) | <i>How to Study Literature: How to study Chaucer</i> Rob Pope | Macmillan 1988 |
| (vii) | <i>The 'Pardoner's Tale'</i> edited by L. Cookson and B. Loughrey | Longman Literature Guides 1990 |
| (viii) | <i>Chaucer: The 'Canterbury Tales'</i> Gail Ashton | Analysing Texts Macmillan 1998 |

This is unlikely to be an exhaustive list of guides. But the publication dates are instructive.

When we had 'completed' the texts we either copied notes from the board and/or made notes on a series of observations, which the teacher dictated for us to write down – only the new, young members of staff gave handouts. The world of Roneo, Xerox and Banda had been discovered. Recall that our Chaucer experience was two tales not one. When it came to the A-level examination (Paper Two–four texts–three hours–Chaucer, Pope, Gibbon, Arnold–closed book) I was confronted with:

EITHER

- (a) Which of the two tales do you consider to be the more successful as narrative? Give reasons and illustrations from BOTH poems.

OR

- (b) What do we learn of medieval attitudes to religion from these tales? How have the poems gained from the revelation of these attitudes?

Not much had changed by 1988 with questions such as:

- EITHER (a) 'The Pardoner is essentially a mediaeval figure.' Comment on this description, and bring out the attraction of the character for modern readers.

- OR (b) Discuss Chaucer's skills in presenting the character of the Pardoner. (Three passages were given for reference.)

Indeed, as late as 1995 one might find:

- EITHER (a) 'The Pardoner takes great pride in his own professional expertise, but shows no shame for his sin.' Consider Chaucer's presentation of the Pardoner in the 'Prologue and Tale'.

- OR (b) Consider the variety of poetic skills which Chaucer shows in the 'Pardoner's Prologue and Tale' using the following three extracts, and any other sections of these poems which you find helpful.

For thirty years or so questions ranged through the paradox of wicked men/moral tale, narrative skills, attitudes to religion, to passages for analysis as to their vividness and persuasiveness. Questions were nearly always formulated with ‘discuss’, ‘comment’, ‘consider’, ‘how’, ‘what’, ‘show’. And only in recent years were candidates allowed to take their carefully annotated texts with them into the examination room.

Since questions are nearly always related to tales (perhaps with links to the portraits of their tellers) there is little room for reflecting upon the interest which recent Chaucer scholarship has shown in the links and prologues to tales. More recently there has been the vogue to refer students to line-referenced passages in the text (since the students have the text with them) and often questions begin with ‘explore’. Frequently, questions are provided with bullet pointed guidelines. One may ask whether this makes the tasks easier to handle. Nevertheless, the topics of the questions remain almost unchanged, reflecting little on the exciting sense of polarities with which the Wife of Bath begins her Prologue—‘experience’ and ‘auctoritee’—or the challenge of the antitheses which modern scholarship has discovered in the opening lines of the ‘General Prologue’: Carolyn Dinshaw calls these antitheses ‘binary oppositions’, listing fourteen of them including summer/winter, active/passive, knowledge/unknown, public/private. To approach the texts in this manner seems much more engaging and rewarding, enabling one to respond more directly with the poetry and the drama.

And how often do we as teachers forget that it is poetry we are dealing with? So should we allow students to escape the embarrassment of reading aloud? How else can one savour the text, to ‘taste’ it? What better way to reveal the dynamics of Dame Alice and the rhetoric of the Pardoner? Indeed, do the examination questions reflect too much on character and plot at the expense of the sheer energy of the spoken word? (See my comments on Michael Camille in the Bibliography).

Rarely do I remember being given lists of past questions or receiving guidance on how to write an essay or tips on developing one’s own style of writing. Today, the educational publishing business, internet and web sites thrive on providing all kinds of support material for students. I wonder if today the tensions of league tables and performance indicators are the binary oppositions to intellectual engagement and creative writing?

Perhaps as school children we received the ‘auctoritee’ of the schoolmaster too easily and the ‘experience’ was still to be encountered. I would like to think that, if there has been progress in the educational ‘system’, then response to ideas is the hallmark of how teachers now approach literature in the classroom. Was I alone, as a naive 16-year-old, in wanting more from my texts than learning by rote?

It is only since writing this piece—and reflecting—that I have realised how much I had been influenced by Chaucerian studies and the medieval world. His works were what ‘stayed alive’ and still do. In re-imagining Chaucer reading, reinventing his audience(s), his pilgrims, their stories, a whole cohort of listeners, it is possible to find a satisfying engagement with literature. For sure he is demanding; and, like the Franklin’s question ‘Which was the mooste fre?’, he not only asks questions of fourteenth-century pilgrims, he also asks us today to be alert, to question, to challenge. It could be that his distance from us demands more than a too easy sympathy elicited by the modern.

In my very first term of teaching A-level in September 1969 I started with Chaucer – I have been doing so ever since.

Curriculum Two Thousand (C2K) and English in C2K

be myrie of cheere,
For ye shul telle a tale trewely.
Ryde forth, myn owene lord, brek nat oure game. ('MoP' 1924-7)

Curriculum Two Thousand (C2K) began in September 2000 for all examination boards; some boards merged, some syllabuses (now specifications) disappeared. Advanced level was divided into two, Advanced supplementary (AS) to be taken in the Lower Sixth (Year 12) and A2 in the Upper Sixth (Year 13). The two were added to give the full A-level qualification. AS and A2 were 'modularised', each consisting of three modules. In each of AS and A2 there could be a coursework module.

Students were expected to take four AS subjects in Year 12 (intended to *broaden* subject experience) with three of these to be carried on to full A-level. In addition were Key Skills in Communication, Application of Number and IT. Offered at levels One, Two and Three, sixth-form students were expected to perform at Level Three.

As a subject, English (a term covering English, English Language, English Language and Literature and English Literature specifications) had to follow certain guidelines:

- (a) ensure a wide range of reading.
- (b) ensure texts offered were of sufficient quality and demand.
- (c) require texts in time frames i.e. Post-1900, Pre-1900, Pre-1770.

It's a matter of intense debate as to whether the new specifications offer a better choice for students than the previous A Level syllabuses. Some observers feel some texts on offer are lightweight in order to facilitate a modular system. As part of the new guidelines, there were 'assessment objectives'. In English Literature these include critics' interpretations, contemporary influences (on the text, author) and, in the case of a play text, how a contemporary audience would have reacted in contrast to one of today. As one of my students suggested, though interesting in themselves, the objectives (requirements ?) were 'stifling'. Constant reference to them—losing marks for not listing them—could deny an intuitive, imaginative leap of critical response. She went on to suggest that, in the 'arts', the examinations and specifications were 'soulless', tests of memory rather than creative intellect; they lacked 'challenge'. What cannot be quantified is somehow not education. If you were to put English into the context of C2K as a whole and of modularisation in particular, then you might observe an over-prescription, a tightness in schedule. Straying into connected areas for discussion, personal research and wider individual reading might be excluded because of a lack of time: a module needed to be completed by a certain time; a coursework deadline loomed.

Nevertheless, as Table 1 illustrates, English continued to be the most popular subject in C2K, to judge from the overall percentage of students taking it and from student numbers:

Table 1

Popularity of Subjects at A Level						
	Overall		Boys		Girls	
2001	1. General Studies	11.70%	1. Maths	12.10%	1. Eng	13.50%
	2. Eng	11.20%	2. Eng	6.50%		
2002	1. Eng	10.30%	1. Maths	10.50%	1. Eng	13.40%
	2. General Studies	8.30%	2. GS	8.60%	2. Biol	8.50%
	3. Maths	7.70%	3. Eng	6.70%		

Table 2

Popularity of English Literature at A level 2001			
AQA*	English Language and Literature	3206	Edexcel* 4015
	English	10678	0
	English Language	10732	1739
	English Literature	<u>23340</u>	<u>9321</u>
		48951	15075

Examination Board — *Assessment and Qualification Alliance (AQA)

*Edexcel Foundation (now London Qualifications Ltd)

English Literature (in Table 2) at A level 2001 was the most popular course within the menu. It is possible, therefore, for a sixth former to avoid the study of his or her native language; indeed from the figures this is precisely the position. Interestingly, from my own experience, prior to C2K, a mixed Language and Literature course was the most favoured option; after the introduction of C2K, it became less favoured, partly because of the introduction of more technical aspects of grammar, linguistics, socio-linguistics, the need to learn technical terms and speech patterns and with the loss of the more creative, imaginative 'free composition' aspect of the old syllabus.

I will now turn to some of the specifics of some English Literature courses before and after C2K. I do not claim a comprehensive review of all boards and all specifications.

In the years immediately before C2K the Associated Examining Board (AEB), now Assessment and Qualifications Alliance (AQA), in common with other boards offered open and closed book (i.e. no texts to be taken into the examination room) papers, combined Language and Literature papers, single Language specifications and separate Literature specifications. In most Literature specifications there were papers on practical criticism (poetry and prose), Shakespeare and anything from 12-22 texts of drama, poetry, and prose to choose from. An AEB specification 652, discontinued in 1995, was unusual in offering a Chaucer/Shakespeare paper, Chaucer being 'tested' by the assessment of extracts from a choice of two tales and an essay on one of four tales.

Overall, it can be seen that syllabuses prior to C2K offered a wide range of texts and an almost unlimited freedom of choice for teachers - and indeed for students, especially the most dedicated, who might wish to offer their own selection for examination.

The introduction of C2K meant all boards and all specifications had to follow the QCA guidelines referred to above. Alternative specifications allowed for non-coursework options. However, the striking feature of new Literature specifications

was the reduction (narrowing?) of the choice of texts for staff and students and the almost arbitrary decision to insist on certain dates before and after which texts may be selected, i.e. Pre/Post 1900 and Pre-1770. The agreed 'core' is that students will study at least one work of poetry, one of prose, and one of drama, one of these to have been written between 1370 and 1900, and also a play of Shakespeare; some boards insist on two works before 1900 and at least one more from before 1770, as well as a Shakespeare play. Coursework is limited to one module in each of AS and A2.

In some English specifications there is a heavy reliance on linguistic analysis; in Literature specifications there are 'texts in context' (i.e. in their historical/literary/philosophical/period). It is worth looking at past questions on Chaucer. For readers who are interested in taking this aspect further, see Jean Simpson's thesis referred to above. I am delighted to acknowledge her kindness in sending me a copy of her thesis while I am well aware that some trains of thought in my own writing here were begun by her work.

One extremely important observation Simpson makes is the place of examiners' reports in the examination system. The contrast between these reports before about 1989 and after that time is fascinating. Add to this the fact of examining boards providing (at a cost!) mark schemes and skeletal answers together with the even more recent innovation of releasing students' scripts (especially if a school or college should ask for an extensive re-mark), and students and staff have a much better and more secure idea of what is required by examiners. But this has also increased the number of appeals against the marks and grades awarded. How creative and imaginative one can be as an examinee is another matter. The assessment objective template requires 'a line'. Coursework may be more liberating.

The modern examiners' reports are full, explanatory, and constantly iterate Chaucer's popularity and appeal.

Whan seyde was al this miracle, every man
As sobre was that wonder was to se,
Til that oure Hooste japen tho bigan,
And thanne at erst he looked upon me,
And seyde thus: 'What man artow?' quod he;
'Thou lookest as thou woldest fynde an hare,
For evere upon the ground I se thee stare.

'Approche neer, and looke up murily.
Now war yow, sires, and lat this man have place!...' ('PST' 691-9)

Chaucer in Curriculum Two Thousand (C2K)

O maister deere and fadir reverent,
My maister Chaucer, flour of eloquence,
Mirour of fructuous entendement,
O universal fadir in science!

(Thomas Hoccleve, *The Regement of Princes*, 1961-4)

Conversations with subject officers at various examining boards and with QCA's subject officer for English indicate that Chaucer will retain his place as one of the authors for examination in the foreseeable future: whichever of his poems is selected, he is deemed to be of sufficient difficulty, and quality, to demand a place.

Unfortunately, his place is certainly not as prominent as it was in, say, the AEB 652 syllabus prior to C2K where an almost unrivalled choice of four alternative Chaucer poems/tales was offered as well as passages provided for commentary and analysis. One has to hope his place is not retained as a kind of historical or linguistic oddity but that he is there so that teachers can choose to study him as part of an historical and literary perspective, perhaps even as an antidote to the 'modern'! His appeal is in a kind of universality, the medieval immediacy and the modern resonances of characters and stories. In those 'binary oppositions' there is also the tension between 'felaweshipe', the 'fraternitee' (feigned, authorial or otherwise) and the opportunistic, the individual. But of course when one has to study only ONE tale/poem, references to the Shire Returns of 1389, or to the nature of Southwark in the later fourteenth century may well be beyond the immediate task.

Of course, Chaucer has to be fought for. His place is there only as an alternative to other texts. His poems have to be chosen by teachers. More often than not Chaucer is in the AS part of the specification, as one module. It is to be observed that in one AQA specification only the 'Wife of Bath's Prologue' is set: the length of the module precludes the additional study of her tale. One may consider this as perverse as the character herself. In another AQA specification for 2002 the 'Miller's Tale' is set as part of the AS examination but reappears in the A2 as a comparative text with Alan Bennett's *Talking Heads 2*.

One might consider this a bizarre pairing, like some Canterbury pilgrims perhaps. Rarely is there in C2K a comparative exercise using two Chaucer tales as in the 1970s. It is also highly unusual for Chaucer to be offered as part of a student's coursework folder. Prior to C2K coursework could be an almost free choice for teacher and/or student; if I had any students particularly taken with Chaucer, we would negotiate tales and topics for written work. Chaucer is usually offered as an *open* book option. As he is offered as only *one* poet from a selection of poets (see table on next page) he has to compete with all those poets pre-1900 as prescribed by QCA guidelines. If you should choose post-1900 poetry as a module—relevant, modern, fun—Chaucer is automatically excluded. Your pre-1770 text also means Chaucer has to compete with other authors, not necessarily poets. Much will depend upon how each examining board decides which texts will be on offer over a period of time. Consideration of expense is not an unexceptional view; schools/colleges cannot afford to buy new texts each year, hence the long run of the same text, say over three, four, and five years. Nevertheless, at present Chaucer is in the specifications. But who and how many will choose him for study? And why? How many prospective teachers will have studied Chaucer at university? If they have, will Chaucer be high on their list of authors to present to modern students?

2001-2002 - NEW AS/A2 SPECIFICATION – Chaucer and other set Texts

EXAM BOARD

OCR Lit AS	Open Book	Unit 2	Set against Donne, Wordsworth, Tennyson
AQA Lit AS	Open Book	Unit 3	‘Wife of Bath’s Prologue’ (not tale) set against Rossetti, Larkin, Fanthorpe, Duffy, Victorian Poets; Chaucer coursework an option
OCR Lang/Lit AS	Open Book		
AQA Lang/Lit AS	Open Book	Unit 2	Set against Keats (Poems/letters), Rossetti; reappears as linked text in Unit 4 to <i>Talking Heads 2</i>
OCR Lit A2	Closed Book	Unit 4	

EDEXCEL in both Lang/Lit Open Book set against Milton, Metaphysicals, Gray and pre-1770 anthology

NOTES:

1. Specifications for AS/A2 require choices for pre-1900 and pre-1770 texts
2. Some units are open book; some units are closed book
3. Each specification has a coursework option in both AS and A2.
4. AS = 3 units/modules; A2 = 3 units/modules

Turne over the leef and chese another tale;
 For he shal finde ynowe, grete and smale,
 Of storial thyng that toucheth gentillesse,
 And eek moralitee and hoolynesse.
 Blameth nat me if that ye chese amys. (‘MP’ 3177-81)

From a wider point of view, when one looks at the poets against whom Chaucer is set, there are huge gaps of literary poetic experience left unexplored by the choices on offer (the same is true if we look at post-1900 choices for poetry in one specification where after Edward Thomas (d.1917), the poets next set are Grace Nicholls, Carol Ann Duffy and Simon Armitage). So in AQA Literature the choice is Chaucer or three Victorian Poets or Rossetti (fulfilling both pre-1770 and pre-1900 guidelines).

Earlier I alluded to the ‘Wife of Bath’s Prologue’ being set and *not* the tale as well and opined this was because of a ‘time’ problem caused by modularisation: managing such a ‘difficult’ text in a ‘foreign language’ needing a ‘translation’ for Prologue and tale (total number of lines 1264) would be less of a problem for the Prologue on its own (856 lines). Is this in popular parlance ‘dumbing down’? In contrast to, say, a 1960s NEAB choice, two tales for comparison would have been required. How much wider reading might one be able, or expected, to manage here? I

myself, prior to C2K, would have looked at the portraits of the Pardoner, Summoner, and Friar to develop discussion of the interactive nature of the pilgrimage; in particular I would have pursued the linguistic feature of ‘I wol’; I would also have found time to look at two poems by Chaucer, ‘Truth’ and ‘Gentilesse’, concepts alluded to in the tale and themselves threads in Chaucerian tales, as well as works opening up the ‘marriage debate’. Over a leisurely two-year lineal system there was time for absorption, sidetracks, development. At present, the AQA English Literature specification has as its synoptic module the theme of war; this theme has to be looked at using all three genres of poetry, drama, and prose. So the in-depth study of one author in an historical period is precluded. This was the point of my suggestion to QCA of a medieval literature paper.

The table below shows the relative frequency and time-span of Chaucerian tales set for examination. I do not claim it to be exhaustive since it is based on only three examination boards and a not quite complete set of examination questions. Nevertheless, it is a revealing table – does it reflect ‘fashion’, critical debate(s) in academic circles, hardness/difficulty of the tale, panels of teachers idiosyncratically choosing a particular year’s texts?

1952 – 2002 A Level (sampled from JMB / NEAB / AEB / UCLES / AQA)		
	Number of times set	
General Prologue	46	1952 – 1997
Wife of Bath P&T	35	1971 – 2002
Franklin P&T	29	1973 – 2002
Nun’s Priest P&T	20	1952 – 1994
Miller P&T	20	1975 – 2002
Pardoner P&T	18	1956 – 1995
Knight	18	1961 – 1995
Merchant P&T	15	1969 – 1994
Prioress P&T	7	1952 – 1976
Clerk P&T	5	1959, 1965-6, 1975-6
Man of Law P&T	5	1986 – 1990
Canon Y P&T	4	1967-8, 1989
Squire P&T	2	1957, 1965
Reeve P&T	1	1991
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. In early years examining boards set two tales as one text and asked comparative, linked questions. AEB 652 had four tales on offer. 2. Wife of Bath first set 1971 3. Miller first set 1975 4. Open book regime by mid 80s 		

Of course the frequency of some tales reflects the long-ish runs of a set text (three, four, five years) to respond to school departments’ finances. Indeed selecting Chaucer in any one year might have been based on relative costs of texts, possibly the availability of an appropriately priced edition: does one replace the 1966 CUP edition of the ‘Franklin’s Tale’ with A. C. Spearing’s own revised version of 1994? Which edition of the ‘Miller’s Tale’ – CUP or OUP? As for the ‘Wife of Bath’, OUP or CUP (1965, revised 1994) or Routledge?

Nevertheless, of the fourteen tales (I am calling the ‘General Prologue’ a tale and, it must be noted, Chaucer set in C2K *is* the tales not the dream visions or a selection

of poems, and no invitation to parallel his work with other late fourteenth-century literature – say Langland or the Gawain Poet) set from 1952 to the present day a modern trend is discernible. Apart from the overwhelmingly popular ‘General Prologue’, Wife, Franklin, and Miller (overtaking the Nun’s Priest in recent years) have each become *the* text. Pardoner, Knight, and Merchant have fallen out of favour. Even so the revised CUP edition of the ‘Pardoner’s Tale’ does little to reflect the most recent critical work. I have to confess that I have always been unsure whether the ‘Knight’s Tale’ was the best way to introduce students to Chaucer. I think only Chaucer specialists might applaud the daringness—even the foolhardiness—of choosing Reeve, Squire, Clerk, Man of Law, Canon’s Yeoman for study. Why was their presence in the lists so short-lived? Conversely the dates for the introduction of Merchant, Wife, and Miller to delicate, susceptible, innocent sixth formers may tell us more about the liberalities of our own times than about Chaucer scholarship! What is the enduring appeal of the Franklin? One might argue that setting only *one* tale for study is, almost, pointless. Unlike say novels and Shakespearean or Jacobean plays which might stand alone, the links between Chaucer’s characters and tales are an essential element of studying him.

In the 2001 AQA AS Literature Examination Chaucer was the most popular of the poetry texts chosen by students – as against Larkin’s *Whitsun Weddings* and Duffy’s *Mean Time*, with three Victorian Poets, Rossetti and U. A. Fanthorpe being in the minority. Indeed, Chaucer was overall the third most popular text in this examination after Marlowe’s *Dr Faustus* and Williams’s *The Glass Menagerie*. Unfortunately, no exercise in ‘counting’ the popularity of texts studied for examination was conducted in 2002.

Teaching strategies

My strategy in tackling Chaucer has always been one of almost total immersion, hoping students would not be submerged; some drops might cling. Of course, some students felt extremely uncomfortable with being asked to read out the text in the original. Nevertheless, I stressed the need to do so in order to appreciate the rhythms, pace, sense patterns, to ‘taste’ the work. In opting, too, for ‘translating’ difficult words and phrases here was the place to play word-games—to look at origins, derivations, word shapes, spellings, ‘borrowings’ from French and Latin, changes in meaning, how words carried ideas. Thus in the ‘Miller’s Tale’ there was plenty of play in ‘pryvetee’. Providing one is purely positive in approaching the language, in my experience the initial horror at seeing the text on the page can be, relatively, easily overcome. If modern students can cope with *A Clockwork Orange* and *Trainspotting* Chaucer is ‘easy’. With regard to translations, I recommended only the Coghill - but purely because I wanted students to access other tales quickly and easily, and I encouraged them to *avoid* the translation of the ‘Miller’s Tale’.

A Coghill translation published by Book Club Associates was also mentioned - but only for its wonderful collection of colour illustrations so that students could have a feel for the wider artistic accomplishments of the medieval world. I tried to divert students from the all too easily accessible study guides; the range is huge but the quality variable. Better personal purchases I suggested were different scholarly editions from which to take a variety of interpretations. So much for exhortation and idealism! Busy students will find their own way in their own time. ‘Traditional’ it may be, but the text on the page is the central focus.

Nevertheless, there are a number of alternative approaches to immersing students, approaches which may indeed have appealed to Chaucer himself, especially following

the medieval tradition of re-working traditional portraits and styles. Teachers have tried:

- PowerPoint presentations - images, texts, animation.
- Using the text to produce collages/illustrations/pictures/re-creations of the pilgrims and the characters in the tales; poster designs, newspaper headlines, using key words from the text. This leads to a discussion of how 'exact' one might be in interpreting the details, vocabulary, and images used by Chaucer.
- Selecting some passages for immediate translation so students in small groups can have fun in discovering new meanings, nuances; use A3 paper, plus dictionaries and glossaries.
- Selected sections, or passages via OHT projected on to white board for the whole class to work together on the text - students provide comments, observations which can be written up; this has the advantage of seeing *how* the text might function in terms of

Language]	
Metre]	You can draw lines
Rhyme]	Use colour pens
Imagery]	
Syntax]	

- Videos of the recent animated versions.
- Listening to audio-tapes for outlines of plot, narrative, and character.
- Enactment, to include:
 - role play - choosing a pilgrim to present
 - hot-seating characters, pairing students for dialogue and dramatisation of action.
 - interviews - as in popular TV shows; questions from audience.
 - rendering passages in Standard English, colloquially, Modern Black Country dialect, newspapers/magazine article, gossip column.
- Consider modern versions of the 'characters' (as in, say, John Betjeman's poem 'Executive') and here the 'General Prologue' *must* be a starting point.
- Adapting the *Guardian* website for 16-19 year olds - www.learn.co.uk/glearning/primary
- INTRANET
 - class could create a Chaucer biography
 - add notes/observations
 - supply essays
 - provide critical material
 - links to good sites

- Discussion on the concept of pilgrimage using modern parallels e.g. The Haj, Lourdes, Graceland, Disneyworld, Neverland, the package holiday, to include aspects of ‘souvenir’ hunters—just as the Pardoner might sell his ‘relics’.
- Attempt to use students’ other subjects for some interdisciplinary material, e.g. Religious Studies, Art History, History.
- Too much background may be counter-productive: best perhaps to drip-feed elements such as the concepts of Sin, Damnation, Redemption, Alchemy, Theory of Humours, Medieval Astronomy, Courtly Love, Rhetoric.
- On specific topics, such as

Love and Relationships:

students brainstorm ten characteristics one would look for in a partner, put in rank order, discuss role of marriage today.

Religion:

watch video of an American TV evangelist

observe body language, paralinguistics, rhetoric (see Larkin’s poem ‘Faith Healing’)

watch/read something on present crises in Roman Catholic church and discuss ‘corruption’.

- At some point it will be necessary, because of the variety of types of tales Chaucer uses, to distinguish between the nature of fabliaux, romance and chivalric literature, saints’ stories - ‘diverse folk diversely they seyde.’ (‘RP’ 3857).
- Stressing that Chaucer’s fictional world with its men and women full of anxieties, desires, dreams, dilemmas, ambitions, and dark sides is a world so disarmingly recognisable and thus *not* a cobweb covered, incomprehensible period piece.

I offer below how I structured my approach to teaching the ‘Miller’s Prologue and Tale’ (I would use a similar approach to whichever tale was being studied).

1. Beginnings

- (a) Map showing London (Southwark) to Canterbury route, Tabard Inn to Cathedral, Hell to Heaven, and illustrating the places at which the pilgrims stopped. The story-telling ‘game’. Questions and Answers.
- (b) A list of the pilgrims as ordered in the ‘General Prologue’. Discussions on ‘order’—of tales, of pilgrims, who is who/what.
- (c) A blank photocopy of the text separate from the college textbook, a reading list of source materials (see Bibliography at end). The object of the blank? For students to scribble! Later, for revision purposes, only the *essential* points need be transferred to the textbook which students could take with them into the open book examination – a useful *clarifying* process.
- (d) The whole text divided into sections and a pair of students assigned to each section (depending on the size of the set and the difficulty of the various sections it may be necessary to have threes or quartets of students). Each pair would be responsible, after eight weeks of research and study, for a detailed presentation of their section. The presentation would involve a

reading-out in the original. I was available for consultation. Each week during these initial eight weeks additional material would be handed out by me, usually abstracts of articles from *Chaucer Review* or other journals and/or from books.

- (e) The 'General Prologue' lines 1-42—style, structure, concepts, themes. Portraits of the Knight, Miller, Reeve, the 'Reeve's Prologue'. Discussions—style, character, narrative, guessing meanings of words!

2. The Text

Student presentations. Sometimes it would take two weeks to 'complete' each section – much would depend upon the students themselves, how much they had read and absorbed, how sidetracked we became, whether they had asked for help/advice, as well as the complexities of each particular section to be presented. Everyone in the whole group was encouraged to have their say. Students were warned in advance of the need to adapt their own material in the light of what other students might have said about previous sections. Each group was expected to read *all* the material handed out, *not* just their own part. After each presentation additional material was provided by me from books and articles:

- e.g. On the fabliau, once we reached lines 80–140 of the poem, extracts from Muscatine, Hines, Benson, David and Cook and Honeycutt.
- e.g. On Alison and the medieval portraiture of women ('A Catalogue of Delights', 'Blow Northerne Wind', Sir Launfal, Emily, Criseyde, the Prioress, Dame Ragnell, Chauntecleer).
- e.g. At l. 578 handout — David Fuller ('Hevest up the Door...')
at l. 652 handouts — R. P. Tripp ('The Darker Side to Absolon's Dawn Visit')
P. G. Beidler ('Art and Scatology...')
W. F. Woods ('Private and Public Space...')
At end discussions based on two approaches: T. D. Cook, C Muscatine

3. Two tests:

- i. *Facts* - including extracts with gaps for key words to be filled in.
- ii. *Style* - extracts for commentary; no full text allowed. Analysis of vocabulary, imagery, verse, anything!

4. Four 'study' essays would have been set overall:

- (a) On the Prologue to the 'Miller's Tale' and relating it to several portraits of other pilgrims, on the interactive nature of the *Canterbury Tales*
- (b) On lines 79–252
- (c) On lines 253–505
- (d) On a choice of questions from previous past examination questions (a comprehensive list having been provided).

5. Ends; Revision:

- (a) Use of edited extracts of books, articles for discussion.

- (b) More selected passages of text for analysis, commentary under timed conditions and/or class discussion.
- (c) Essay practice, under timed conditions.

The first 'Miller's Tale' questions I have been able to locate on examination papers occur in 1975:

- EITHER (a) What reply would you make to the assertion that the 'Miller's Tale' is nothing more than an amusing bawdy story?
- OR (b) The 'Miller's Tale' is related with speed and economy. Discuss.
- OR (c) Show how Chaucer includes various aspects of everyday and social life to give colour and realism to the 'Miller's Tale'.

Given the popularity of the 'Miller's Tale' as an A-level text there is a considerable body of questions. Excluding those above, from 1976 to 2000 questions on the character of Alison figure five times, Alison linked to John, Nicholas linked to Absolon, John alone, and Nicholas alone each figure once, while Absolon's rejection in relation to comic elements also occurs once. On three occasions each of the following areas appear: the tale as a world of facts, solidity, living community; comic spirit; the lack of a moral viewpoint (or its reverse); a 'churl's' tale; the 'fantayse' of the central characters. Only twice were candidates asked to consider the merits of crude farce/bawdiness against literary quality though this was paralleled with two questions on the tension between subject matter and its treatment. Narrative skill and intricate plotting were referred to twice. On one occasion poetic justice and male chauvinism were each asked about. In 1994 an intriguing topic was posed on the oppositions of clever/stupid, natural/affected, young/old. As the years passed, some subtle changes in question pattern can be discerned, chiefly with the inclusion of the word 'explore' and frequently with the enjoiner for candidates to offer their personal view. Since the text became open book, students have often been referred to specific passages 'as starting points' for 'consideration'. In the even more recent questions candidates are asked to consider:

- Form and style
- Narrative technique
- Any other features of language you consider important.

Concluding thoughts

But why Chaucer? Why should we, as Harry Bailly exhorts, 'lat this man have place!' ('PST' 699)? Are we to expect 'som deyntee thyng' (711)? What do we need to do before the text itself? Why study someone from so long ago? Teachers should 'lat be [their] shamefastnesse' ('GP' 840). There is much to be made of the man himself and the various references made by himself and to himself in the *Canterbury Tales*. The concept of the story-telling competition, its art and artifice, the whole context of an author who, having 'spoken with hem everichon ... was of hir felaweshipe anon' ('GP' 31-2), and who having seemingly melted into the background is then exhorted to come forward:

Approche neer, and looke up murily.

Now war yow, sires, and lat this man have place!
He in the waast is shape as wel as I;
This were a popet in an arm t'enbrace
For any womman, smal and fair of face.
He semeth elvyssh by his contenance,
For unto no wight dooth he daliaunce. ('PST' 698-704)

A pilgrim 'felawe' who is recalled by another:

I kan right now no thrifty tale seyn
That Chaucer, thogh he kan but lewedly
On metres and on rymyng craftily,
Hath seyde hem in swich Englissh as he kan
Of olde tyme, as knoweth many a man;
And if he have noght seyde hem, leve brother,
In o book, he hath seyde hem in another. ('MLI' 46-52)

There is so much material here to make this poet interesting, relevant and post-modern - I think he might have enjoyed some of the irony of the last epithet.

In being so potentially 'popular' then, how do teachers 'sell' Chaucer? How to extinguish those initial groans and protestations—'It's not English—it's a foreign language'? How to avoid the early resort to translations, especially the modern versions in some of the cheaper study guides? Well, of course, there is little difficulty with the most popular current texts on offer—ripping yarns, sex, heroes and villains, the penchant for bawdiness, the laughter (however sordid), even the parallel of Dame Alice with Sybil Fawcett (as I once heard many years ago in a BBC Radio 3 rendition with Prunella Scales reading). Today an appeal to parallels with Whitehall farce is less rewarding since this is almost an alien concept.

But here I want to reject what I've just written, implying as I have a level of student ignorance. Turn this on its head. It may be that rather than avoid the necessary learning we can again make it acceptable. Chaucer and his time—surely no better period in history with which to enthuse young students. That there may be ignorance of The Bible, of epic, of myth, of religious concepts, so what? We can enlarge minds and widen cultural horizons. This is a period of change, of political, social, and economic events of more than considerable importance, a turbulent time, the era of the Peasants' Revolt in 1381, of re-statements of kingship (and here we could cross reference with Shakespeare's tetralogy *Richard II* to *Henry V*), of the House of Commons, a Ricardian age of Langland, Gower, the Gawain poet, the world of the *Wilton Diptych*, stained-glass windows, misericord carvings, cathedrals, churches built on the economic success of the wool trade with the continent, the time of Margery Kempe, Julian of Norwich (evocatively encapsulated in a modern poem by Kathleen Jamie entitled 'Julian of Norwich'), Walter Hilton (*The Cloud of Unknowing*), Christine de Pisan, of Wyclif and Lollardy, a world of inventive and exquisite manuscript illumination, of Ellesmere and Hengwrt – what can be learned from those margins? Between staff and students here is plenty of material to reject Harry Bailly's 'In compaignye we wol have no debaat' ('FP' 1288).

Naturally there is the story, the narrative to call on: Wife and Miller recount a good tale, the Franklin less so. In my experience this is where to start, especially as Chaucer is part of AS and hence the literary knowledge of first-year sixth formers may not be as wide and as deep as one might like. What better time, with new

enthusiasm for study as students enter the Sixth Form (Year 12), to present such an author and his time, to place the poet in a time of turmoil? How many teachers will use Chaucer as part of key stages up to GCSE?

It is only once one has emphasised the narrative and the characters (larger than life? Exotics? Modern parallels? Exaggerations? Or rather that these pilgrims are not larger than life but life itself) that one can get to grips with a host of features which may engender a fascination for Chaucer as a whole (as with any author). For example, in the 'Miller's Tale' there is much to be made of 'no man his reson herde' (3844) and the earlier 'But stonde he moste unto his owene harm' (3830). How are we to gloss these? Which exegetes might we follow? Lee Patterson, the *Riverside Chaucer*, Kolve-Olson and David Wallace's further exploration of this climactic scene in his *Chaucerian Polity*?

Except that, for me, Chaucer exhibits *more* than most authors who write poetry - a function of his work being *read aloud*?

Might our fascination in him be found here:

- Structure
- Grammar
- Rhetoric
- Vernacular
- Speech Forms
- Verse - rhyme and rhythm
- Word derivation/change variety
- The interactive drama of characters

And all of these in the *context* of the stories, *how* they are delivered, who delivers them, and to *whom*, and this opens up a huge range of productive engagements in the light of much modern scholarship but little reflected in modern editions and the easily accessible A level guides and, indeed, in the questions necessarily asked on the texts in an examination of short duration.

How many teachers or school/college libraries subscribe to e.g. the *Chaucer Review* and *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*? How frequently are editions up-dated to take into account current scholarship and debate? How accessible—and cheap—are books on Chaucer? How soon do paperback editions become available? There is, of course, the world of the internet and web site to summon up; and here is not the place to rehearse its dangers and pitfalls as an undigested resource despite its wealth of material. Is there too much theory? How can the world of Higher Education connect with the schoolroom debate so that whatever lies in the Chaucer poem can be enlivened and deepened? In a time when the 'how to pass examinations' industry thrives, perhaps to the exclusion of more academic and intellectual pursuits, how is it possible to engage young and lively minds on how 'modern' is Chaucer (perhaps how 'medieval' are we) when immediate goals are more important?

And how to 'knytte up wel a greet mateere'? As one pilgrim responds 'why sholde I sowen draf out of my fest, / Whan I may sowen whete, if that me lest?' ('Pars P' 28, 35-6)

Bibliography

1. For teaching the 'Miller's Prologue and Tale':

Books

Gail Ashton: *Chaucer: The 'Canterbury Tales'* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998)

This book analyses important, vital sections of a select few tales, including that of the Miller. The analysis is provided under the headings 'Style and Narrative Skills', 'Voice, Narration and Form', and 'Themes, Tensions and Ambiguities' in Part 1—just the kind of thing to find useful in the classroom as student exercises. Part 2 offers 'The Context and the Critics' which provides a judicious selection of critics over whose views students can argue.

C. David Benson: *Chaucer's Drama of Style: Poetic Variety and Contrast in the Canterbury Tales'* (Chapel Hill: University of N. Carolina Press, 1986).

Peter Brown: *Chaucer at Work: The Making of the 'Canterbury Tales'* (Harlow: Longman, 1994)

Thomas D. Cooke and Benjamin L. Honeycutt: *The Humour of the Fabliaux* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1974)

Alfred David: *The Strumpet Muse: Art and Morals in Chaucer's Poetry* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976).

Ralph W.V. Elliott: *Chaucer's English* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1974).

John Hines: *The Fabliau in English* (Harlow: Longman, 1993).

V.A. Kolve: *Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative: The First Five Canterbury Tales* (London: Edward Arnold, 1984)

Stephen Knight: *The Poetry of the 'Canterbury Tales'* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1973).

One of the best books I've read on the poetry of Chaucer—but out of print and difficult to obtain. Simple, clear, straightforward assessment of the poetic techniques Chaucer employs; useful because once you pick up on Knight's illustrations, you can find your own. No tendentious theories or deep socio-linguistic traps!

Priscilla Martin: *Chaucer's Women: Nuns, Wives and Amazons* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996).

C. Muscatine: *Chaucer and the French Tradition: A Study in Style and Meaning* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957).

Janette Richardson: *Blameth Nat Me: A Study of Imagery in Chaucer's Fabliaux* (The Hague: Mouton, 1970).

David Williams: *The 'Canterbury Tales': A Literary Pilgrimage* (Boston: Twayne, 1987).

Articles

P.G. Beidler: 'Art and Scatology in the "Miller's Tale"', *Chaucer Review*, 12 (1995), 90-102.

The author wishes to offer a corrective to the view that the piece is just a churl's tale and we might turn over the page. Beidler examines carefully the various indelicate incidents by commenting upon how the details (diction, imagery, tone) so fit the contexts of plot and character. A useful piece on which to base a minute examination of short passages of text; it also shows students how to link various aspects of vocabulary through the whole tale.

David Fuller: "Hevest up the door" — Overcoming Obstacles to Meaning in the "Miller's Tale", *Journal of the Rocky Mountain Medieval and Renaissance Association*, 9 (1988), 17-28.

James H. Morey: 'The Cultour in the "Miller's Tale"', *Chaucer Review*, 29 (1995), 373-81.

Lee Patterson: "'No man his reason herde": Peasant Consciousness, Chaucer's Miller and the Structure of the *Canterbury Tales*', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 86 (1987), 457-95; rpt. in Lee Patterson (ed.), *Literary Practice and Social Change in Britain, 1380-1530* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 113-55.

Forgotten about John? Is John so easily dismissed from our thoughts and discussions? An excellent corrective.

R.P. Tripp: 'The Darker Side of Absolon's Dawn Visit', *Chaucer Review* 20 (1986), 207-12.

A succinct (only five pages) and clear discussion as to whether it is possible to 'control' and 'trap' love, and a precise summary of the close of the tale where Tripp suggests 'the offenders are punished in kind ... with humbling humiliation'.

W.F. Woods: 'Private and Public Space in the "Miller's Tale"', *Chaucer Review*, 29 (1994), 166-78.

Something of a challenge but well worth it. In a sense, self-explanatory as Woods explores the 'space' of the tale, the locality, the house, the rooms and the physical details of Alison in particular, together with the spatial roles or places of the main characters. All the private space and private enactments become public!

2. Books and articles cited elsewhere in the text and some suggestions for further reading

Larry D. Benson (general ed.): *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd edn. (Oxford: OUP, 1988).

Peter Brown (ed.): *A Companion to Chaucer* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001).

Over 480 pages ranging across the whole of Chaucer's work under such headings as 'Authority', 'Chivalry', 'Comedy', 'Genre', 'London', 'Pagan Survivals', 'Science', 'Visualising', and 'Women'. There are some significant references to the 'Miller's Tale'; a trawl through the index will find them. A splendid readable compendium to dip into at regular intervals.

A.S. Byatt: *Possession: A Romance* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1990).
The reference in the text is on p.55.

Michael Camille: *Image on the Edge: The Margins of Medieval Art* (London: Reaction Books, 1992); *The Gothic Idol: Ideology and Image-Making in Medieval Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

I only discovered these books when I read the *Times* obituary on Michael Camille's death in 2002. Each volume reveals the world around the poetic texts. I would like to think one might be able to capture students' imagination with medieval tapestries, illuminated manuscripts, stony arcades, pilgrim routes, cathedrals, and so on. It is in one of these volumes (*Image on the Edge*) that I found my view about reading aloud reinforced: Camille recounts how St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1152) in his commentary on the Song of Songs suggested reading aloud enabled him to think in metaphors, to contemplate the significance of things; also, Peter the Venerable, Abbot of Cluny (1122-56), complained that his tonsillitis prevented him from reading. Reading for monks was reading aloud and this shouldn't be lost on Chaucer teachers and students of Chaucer especially given the famous *Troilus* frontispiece where the poet is depicted reading aloud to an audience.

Nevill Coghill (trans.): *The Canterbury Tales* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, rpt. 1977); *The Canterbury Tales* (London: Guild Publishing, Book Club Associates by arrangement with Penguin Books and Century Hutchinson, 1986).

Carolyn Dinshaw: *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham, NC.: Duke University Press, 1998), pp. 118-136

V. A. Kolve and Glending Olson (eds.): *The Canterbury Tales: Nine Tales and the 'General Prologue'* (New York: Norton, 1989).

James Ortego: 'Gerveys Joins the Fun': A Note on "Viritoot" in the "Miller's Tale", *Chaucer Review*, 37 (2003), 275-9.

How much ink has been spilt on 'viritoot'? Ortego analyses and glosses the words of Gerveys at the smithy and offers some ingenious and thought-provoking ideas for the interpretation of a short passage students often find difficult. Ortego offers some useful observations on Absolon's nature.

Peter Monk and Chris Walton (eds.): *The Miller's Tale*, Oxford Student Guides (Oxford: OUP, 1995).

I would suggest this is an indispensable parallel edition to that of A. C. Spearing's revised 1995 edition. Notes are provided on the various sections of the prologue and tale; these are supplemented with a section on 'Approaches', including 'Sources and Influences', 'Themes', 'Poetic Technique'. I particularly liked the inclusion of the 'Reeve's Prologue' since I believe

classroom teaching of the tales too often precludes us from talking about the links and the interactive nature of the Canterbury concept or the pilgrims on their journey. Four pages of illustrations are useful. The section 'A Note on Chaucer's English' is clear, simple, and accessible.

Helen Phillips: *An Introduction to the 'Canterbury Tales': Reading, Fiction, Context* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000).

Twenty-three chapters, more or less one per pilgrim tale. Neat, concise, and up-to-date, offering both critical and historical perspectives.

Jean Simpson: 'Chaucer at A Level: A Consideration of Chaucer Questions in A Level examinations from 1963-1995, with particular reference to links with developments in Chaucer Studies and Criticism'. MA Dissertation, University of Birmingham, 1998.

Jean Simpson's thesis was completed after thirty years in the classroom. Most teachers will find it a rewarding read. Essentially, it is in three parts: (a) an analysis of three examination boards syllabi, examiners' reports and the questions set (the questions are put into six broad categories: (i) characterisation (of teller or main protagonist) (ii) relationships between tale and teller (iii) narrative/poetic skills (iv) use of context passages (v) humour (to include satire/irony) (vi) themes and issues) (b) Chaucer criticism and how far new ideas might have affected questions set (c) a survey of questions and critical influences on three selected tales with some observations on student guides. In one of a number of revealing judgements she writes 'Mikhail Bakhtin's account of carnival as a context for reading fabliau has *not* percolated through to A-level work'. This assessment is probably still true today and think how much more work has been done on Chaucer since Simpson wrote it.

David Wallace: *Chaucerian Polity: Absolutist Lineages and Associational Forms in England and Italy* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1997).

For the real fan. Offers a whole new range of ideas to those of us who have been outside university and academic circles for a long time. One might be put off by the exhaustive references to Italian parallels and links to Chaucer's work, but the book is never less than rewarding - insights abound through a comprehensive survey of historical and social sources and authoritative judgements in tales, tellers, and Chaucer.

Kathryn Walls 'Absolon as Barber-Surgeon', *Chaucer Review*, 35 (2001), 391-8.

A delightful blend of historical references to the place and role of barber-surgeons, but combining some excellent insights into the character and characteristics of Absolon; it has, too, the advantage of being pithy and to the point, with clear, apposite textual references, especially to the notorious branding incident.