

Sophister Module Description Template 2024-25

Full Name: Reading Chaucer in the 21st Century

Short Name: Reading Chaucer

Lecturer Name and Email Address: Brendan O'Connell (oconneb2@tcd.ie)

ECTS Weighting: 10

Semester Taught MT/HT: Hilary Term

Year JS/SS: Senior Sophister

Module Content:

While Geoffrey Chaucer has been considered a foundational figure in the English canon for hundreds of years, the 21st century has witnessed a remarkable array of new critical and imaginative perspectives on the writer. This shift has been fueled in part by startling new discoveries in the field, but also by dynamic creative and critical responses that provide new perspectives on the complexity and ongoing relevance of his work. Throughout the module, we will situate Chaucer's exceptionally diverse canon within the literary and historical contexts that produced them, while also considering how archival discoveries and fresh theoretical approaches make possible new understandings (or at times misunderstandings) of the medieval author and his works.

Given the increasingly diverse and global readership of Chaucer's work in 21st centuries, it is unsurprising that these works elicit such varied and often contradictory responses. Chaucer's traditional position as 'father of English poetry', for example, has been challenged in feminist and postcolonial responses to his works, but also reimagined in the works of global authors and in critical perspectives from marginalized voices. Throughout this module, we will take the opportunity to explore the very different ways in which some of the most important questions facing humanity have been framed in the middle ages and in our own times, including issues of economic and social justice, hierarchies of gender and sexuality, the nature of consent (and its role in interpersonal and political relationships), the racial and religious tensions within and between nations, the changing understanding of humanity's relationship with the natural world, not to mention the role of the writer and artist in an imperfect and often unjust society. While we will focus in particular on *The Canterbury Tales*, we will also examine some of Chaucer's lesser-known works, and explore modern and contemporary rewritings (by writers such as Patience Agbabi and Zadie Smith) that make bold claims for the continued vibrance and relevance of Chaucer's works in the present day.

As readers of Chaucer in the 21st century, students will be encouraged and supported to develop their own voice and critical skills, and it is not expected that you will have extensive previous experience with medieval literature. If you have any queries or concerns, please do reach out and I will be very happy to discuss it with you.

Brendan O'Connell

oconneb2@tcd.ie

Learning Outcomes:

On successful completion of this module, students will be able to:

- Assess the evolving significance of Chaucer and his works for a 21st century audience
- Identify a representative range of genres, styles and themes that characterize the canon of Chaucer's works
- Apply a range of contemporary critical theories and approaches to the works of Chaucer
- Comment on the ways in which modern writers have adapted Chaucer to suit the concerns of the current time

Assessment Details:

- Number of Components: 1
- Name/Type of Component(s): Essay
- Word Count of Component(s): 4500-5000 words
- Percentage Value of Component(s): 100%

Preliminary Reading List:

A full reading list will be provided at the start of the module. Students should purchase a suitable edition of the works of Chaucer. As we will focus mainly on the *Canterbury Tales*, you may wish to purchase just an edition containing that, but there are a couple of easily available and useful copies of Chaucer's complete works:

- *The Norton Chaucer*, ed. David Lawton (New York: Norton, 2019)
- Or**
- *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988)

Editions of the *Canterbury Tales* only:

- *The Canterbury Tales*, ed. Jill Mann (London: Penguin, 2005)
- *The Canterbury Tales – Seventeen Tales and the General Prologue*, ed. Glending Olson and V.A. Kolve (New York: Norton, 2018). While not a complete edition, it contains pretty almost everything we will cover, and lots of useful critical essays.

If you would like to purchase a translation of the text in Modern English, the classic is Nevill Coghill's Penguin translation of the *Canterbury Tales*, or I also recommend David Wright's Oxford translation. Students interested in modern adaptations of Chaucer may like to invest in a copy of Patience Agbabi's *Telling Tales* and Zadie Smith's *The Wife of Willesden*, but these are not compulsory purchases.

Please note:

- Curricular information is subject to change.
- Information is displayed only for guidance purposes, relates to the current academic year only and is subject to change.