

Assignment instructions for ENGL 390

English poetry from manuscript to print

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Fall 2022

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1 Writing systems and speech sounds

Prompts for 09-06. Write about 250 words in response to one of the following prompts. Post your reply to the Sakai Blog.

1. From the readings for this week, select any concept, theoretical approach, argument, or claim that you have not previously encountered in your study of English literature. Make a connection to some aspect of your studies to date in other coursework.
2. In a book about the “phonographic claims” of literary writing — that is, its capacity to encode and transmit sound — Shane Butler asks us to consider the relations between literature and letters:

“doubt [about the purpose of writing] may perhaps best be understood in terms of the alphabet itself, the single elements of which are capable of expressing sounds that are less than words, but which, as an ensemble, simultaneously makes possible the inscription of something that is *more* than (mere) language. This latter category is dominated by that class of texts we have come to call ‘literature,’ after the Latin word for the very letters (*litterae*) of the alphabet. In such texts, literary heights plunge back to their alphabetic base in search of such ‘sound effects’ as alliteration: to give us more than words, the writer calls attention to what is less than one.”¹

Unpack Butler’s contrast between what is “more than words” and “what is less than one.” How might the readings for this week contribute to a critical project like the one sketched by Butler in this passage? What possibilities do you see here, in connection to your previous study of English literature?

¹Shane Butler, *The Ancient Phonograph* (New York: Zone Books, 2015), 15.

2 Exploring Middle English words

Prompt for 09-13. From the primary-text reading assignment for this week, select one [word-token](#) glossed in the edition from which you are reading. Then do the following:

2.1 Supply bibliographic details for the edition you use

Do this if you are not reading from the preferred edition listed on the syllabus. Skip this step if you are reading from the preferred edition.

2.2 Identify the word-token that you have selected

Quote the line in which the word-token appears and give the line number. Quote the editor's gloss on this word. Here are two examples:

his, glossed 'its' in *Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote* (line 1).

corages, glossed 'hearts' in *So priketh hem Nature in hir corages* (line 11).

2.3 Identify the appropriate entry in the Harvard Chaucer Glossary

Look your word up in the [Harvard Chaucer Glossary](#); copy the full text of the appropriate entry.

The initial task here is to identify the word-type that most nearly corresponds to your word-token. For this token-to-type matching, use the criteria of sense (as conveyed in the editorial gloss) and part of speech (as implied in the editorial gloss and required by grammatical context).

Finding your way to the correct glossary entry may require ingenuity and creative ctrl+f searching. For *his*, I scroll to the *h*- section of the glossary; or I perform a ctrl+f search for "his@" (the keys with the @ symbol are supplied to facilitate searching). For *corages*, a ctrl+f search for that character string takes me directly to the entry I seek:

his pron.(1) "(sg. masc. and neuter poss.) his," s.v. his poss. pron., 3rd sing. masc., and neut sb. OED. KEY: his@pron1
his pron1 5011 his 4872 hise 17 hys 122

courage n. "courage, valor; heart; feelings, disposition; inclination, desire," s.v. courage sb. OED. KEY: courage@n
courage n 94 courage 78 corages 15 courage 1

Some annotation on these glossary entries:

- The element in bold is the **headword**. This is the spelling under which a glossary or dictionary organizes information about a given word.

- After the headword comes notation of the **part of speech**. If there are two or more words with the same headword spelling and the same part of speech, these are disambiguated with a numeral in parentheses.
- The headword, the part of speech, and the numerical disambiguators together form the **title** of the glossary **entry**.
- After the title comes a brief **definition** of the word. The Harvard Chaucer Glossary places this definition within quotation marks.
- After the definition comes a cross-reference to the corresponding entry in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. “s.v.” is an abbreviation for Latin *sub voce* ‘under the word’. “s.v. courage sb.” means “You will find more information about this word in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, within the entry titled ‘courage, n.’” (“sb.” = “substantive,” here synonymous with “noun”).
- The “KEY” is supplied to facilitate ctrl+f searches on the Harvard Chaucer Glossary webpage.
- On the second line of each entry, the Harvard Chaucer Glossary repeats the entry title (headword + part of speech + numerical disambiguator). Then follows the total count of occurrences of this word in [the edition that supplies the text analyzed in this glossary](#). Finally, the glossary lists all the forms (i.e., spellings) of this word in the edition analyzed and the count of occurrences of each form.

2.4 Look the word up in the *OED* and *MED*

Supply a link to the relevant entries and report something interesting about what you find there.

The cross references supplied by the Harvard Glossary (see annotations, above) are usually accurate and sufficient to locate the correct corresponding entry in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. The headword in the *Middle English Dictionary* is usually the same as the headword in the Harvard Glossary. Once you have identified the correct entries in these two dictionaries, consider questions such as these:

- Do the dictionaries cite the line in which you initially found your word? Do they cite other occurrences of the word in Chaucer’s works? What senses do the dictionaries assign to the occurrences of the word in Chaucer’s writings?
- Where did the word come from? (See the “Origin” and “Etymology” sections of the *OED* entry.)
- What happened to the word in the centuries between Chaucer’s time and our own? Did the word develop new senses, lose the sense(s) in which it was used by Chaucer, or fall out of use entirely?

Here is a sample response, again using *his* and *corages*:

The relevant *OED* entry for *his* is “[his, adj.](#)”; the *MED* entry is “[his pron.\(1\)](#)”. (The *OED* treats the pronoun and the possessive adjective in separate entries, whereas the *MED* groups them together in one entry.) Chaucer’s use of this word in line 1 of the General Prologue is quoted by the *OED* as an illustration of sense I.2 “Referring to a thing: its.” Clicking links within the *OED*’s etymological essay,

I come to the *OED* entry “its, adj. and pron.”, where I learn that *its*, possessive of *it*, did not exist yet when Chaucer wrote. For Chaucer, the possessive of *it* is *his*; *its* first appears in the English language towards the end of the sixteenth century, not long before Shakespeare began writing. In fact, the system of English pronouns has changed a lot since Chaucer’s time and continues to change today.

The relevant *OED* entry for *corages* is “[courage, n.](#)”; the *MED* entry is “[corāġe n.](#)”. Both dictionaries cite the line in which I found this word in Chaucer’s poem, in both cases as an illustration of the sense “The heart as the seat of feeling, thought, etc.; spirit, mind, disposition, nature”. (I quote the *OED*’s definition; the *MED*’s corresponding definition differs only slightly). The *OED* marks this sense (the first recorded in either dictionary) with an obelisk aka dagger (†), [indicating that this meaning is obsolete](#), that is, [no longer in use in the English language](#). The *OED*’s etymological entry shows me that this word was assimilated into English from French and that the French word derives from Latin *cor* ‘heart’. The English word has lost the original concrete meaning of its ancestor, yet an associated abstract meaning remains in frequent use.

2.5 Reflection

Step back and reflect on the work you have done in this assignment. What larger issues do you perceive here, in terms of methodology, interpretation, and the relationship between literature and language? What connections can you draw to previous readings or discussions in this course or in your other courses?

Bon courage!

3 Translation and commentary

Select a passage of about 12 lines from any of the works of Chaucer that we have read thus far. The passage should make grammatical sense on its own. (Do not start or stop in the middle of a clause, for example.)

3.1 Supply bibliographic details for the edition you use

Do this if your text derives from a source other than the preferred edition listed on the syllabus. Skip this step if you are reading from the preferred edition.

3.2 Keyboard the passage

If you copy and paste from an on-line text of the *Canterbury Tales* supply bibliographic details for your source. Check the text, letter-by-letter, against the one printed in our textbook; summarize the differences.

3.3 Translate

Translate the passage into modern English prose. Your translation should express the meaning of the Middle English poem as precisely as possible, but in fluent modern English. There are translations on the web and in the library. My advice is that you not look at them for this assignment. Here is an example of an acceptable translation of the opening of the Knight's Tale:

Once, as old stories tell us, there was a duke named Theseus. He was lord and governor of Athens and in his time he was such a great conqueror that there was none greater under the sun.

For comparison, here is the passage as printed in our textbook:

Whilom, as olde stories tellen us,
Ther was a duc that highte Theseus:
Of Atthenes he was lord and governour,
And in his time swich a conquerour
That gretter was there noon under the sonne.

3.4 Discuss

Write a critical commentary on your passage. Critical commentary aims to show how the details of language and form contribute to the meaning of a selected passage of literary verse or prose. Critical commentary should explain what is said in the passage under consideration:

- Who is speaking?
- What is the scene?
- How does the passage fit within larger arcs of narrative and thematic development?

Yet the focus should be on the *how* of saying:

- vocabulary and word choice
- metaphor, simile, and other figures of speech
- rhyme and other sound patterns, if significant
- sentence structure, style, and tone

Consider the following questions:

- What is distinctive about the vocabulary; what do individual words contribute to the meaning of the passage?
- If there is figurative language, how does it work and what does it contribute?
- Is the style colloquial, formal, or a mix of the two? What details create this impression?
- How do the qualities of the passage under consideration relate to the wider stylistic, thematic, or narrative development of the poem?

Write about those details that promise the best return on the attention you invest in them.

Be sure to read the editor's notes and marginal word-glosses on your passage. The glossary at the back of our textbook may also be of use to you. You should refer at least twice to a historical dictionary of the English language (either the *Middle English Dictionary* or the *Oxford English Dictionary*). Your critical commentary should be approximately 500 words in length.

The due date and other instructions are stated in the syllabus.

4 Rubric for poetry recitation

Each student will memorize a passage of the *Canterbury Tales*, as described in the course syllabus, and recite these lines in office hours or at another time to be arranged. The objective in this exercise is to sharpen your understanding of Chaucer's language and art.

There are three components to a good recitation of poetry:

1. **phonological.** Vowels and consonants are pronounced in accordance with scholarly understanding of the poet's language.
2. **formal.** The reading expresses the rhythmic and metrical form of the poet's verse.
3. **semantic.** The reading expresses the meaning, style, and tone of the passage, typically through modulation of voice and pacing.

To prepare for this assignment, do the following:

- read the passage with care and attention
- follow the 'Reading Chaucer Tutorial' and listen to readings of Chaucer's lines at <https://digital.wwnorton.com/canterbury>
- read the description of "Chaucer's Language of Meter" at pp. 35–45 in our edition of the *Canterbury Tales*
- complete the 'word study' exercise on the forum

Grade rubric:

- **A:** Successfully embodies all three components of a good recitation. Fluent delivery.
- **B:** Displays effort and thought about the three components.
- **C:** Incomplete memorization; rote or unreflective delivery.