

Middle English

Dr Alison Wiggins

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Drop in hour: Thursdays 3-4pm, Zoom joining link on Moodle



Exploring Middle English and the *Miller's Tale*

Lecture topics:

1. **Middle English + Chaucer's life**
2. Spelling and sounds + the portrait of Alisoun
3. Style and lexicon + the portraits of Nicholas and Absolon
4. Syntax and morphology + the fabliau plot and the trick
5. Narrative viewpoints + exam revision

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Multiple narrative viewpoints

A series of narratives within narratives:

- **John** – the Noah narrative / Alison as a rebellious Noah's wife figure
- **Absolon** – the courtly narrative / Alison as the idealised courtly lady
- **Nicholas** – the exuberant farce / Alison as means of sexual satisfaction





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- **The Miller** as storyteller – quits the knight / Alison as a counterpoint to Emily

The Miller – a cherl

What sholde I moore seyn, but this Millere
He nolde his wordes for no man forbere,
But told his **cherles tale** in his manere
M'athynketh that I shal reherce it heere.
And therfore every gentil wight I preye,
For Goddes love, demeth nat that I seye
Of yvel entente, but that I moot reherce
Hir tales alle, be they bettre or werse,
Or elles falsen som of my mateere.
[from line 59]

The Millere is a **cherl**, ye knowe wel this,
So was the Reve eek and othere mo,
And harlotrie they tolden bothe two.
Avyseth yow, and put me out of blame,
And eek men shal nat maken ernest of game.
[from line 74]



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- **Chaucer** as author – the wider *Canterbury Tales* / Alison as the Virgin Mary



Beato Angelico, *Annunciazione* (c. 1442), Firenze, Museo di San Marco

The Annunciation,
Church of San
Domenico in
Fiesole, 1430-32



The Annunciation
from the Beaufort
Hours (probably
owned by Lady
Margaret Beaufort,
Henry VIII's mother),
produced in London
in the mid-15th-
century





The Annunciation



Nicholas plays the *Angelus ad Virginum* ('The Angel to the Virgin' – a hymn about the Annunciation) on his psalter, line 106

POLYVOCALITY:

The use of multiple voices as a narrative mode with an text, to encourage diverse readings and viewpoints.

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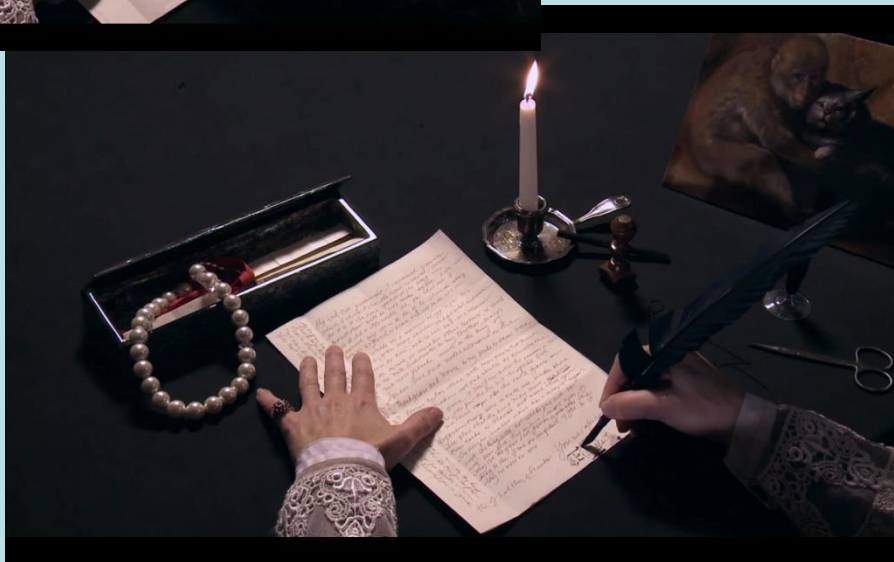
What next after Level 1?

Level 2:

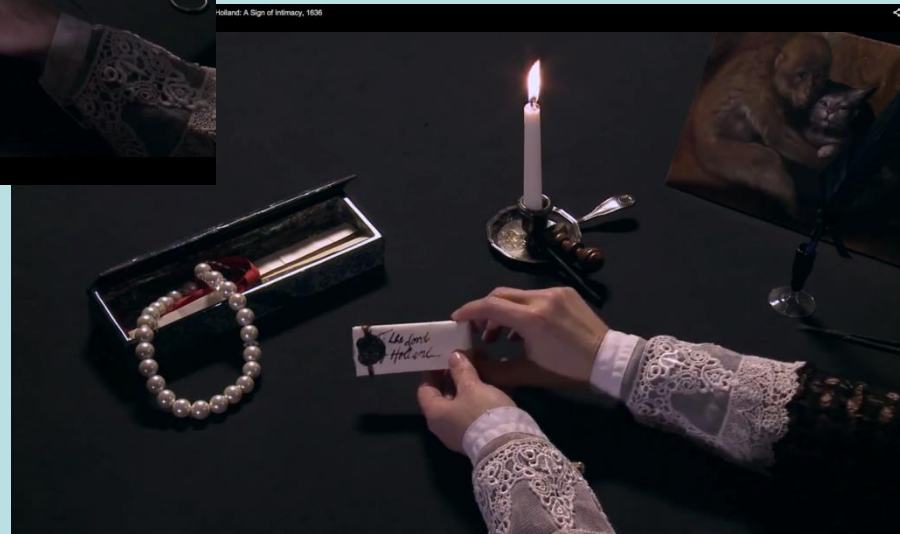
- *The Pardoner's Tale* – Chaucer returns...!
- Early Modern English – Shakespeare's language and Tudor letter writing

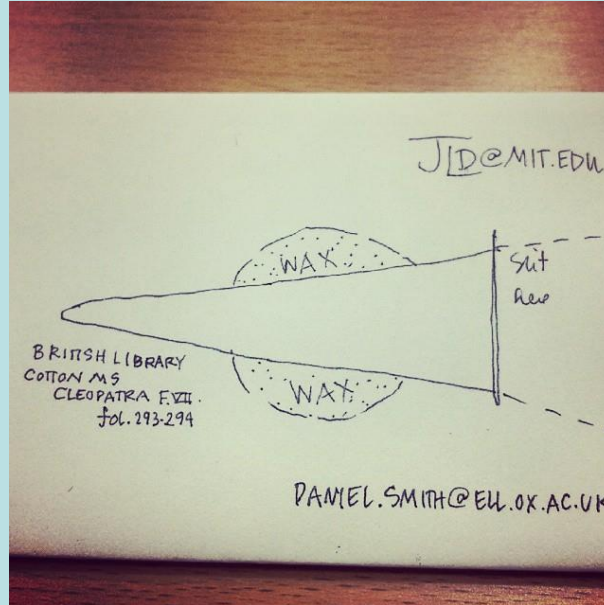
Honours:

- Reading the Past: From Script to Print – how books of English were created and used c.700-1600, from the Lindisfarne Gospels to early printed copies of Chaucer; team taught by Dr Lowe and Dr Wiggins
- History of English – how the English language changed from medieval to early modern; team taught
- Editing Historical English Texts – learn the skills to digitally edit texts in English (that include sources for everyday English and everyday life, such as letters, household account books, plays, court records); Dr Wiggins
- Medieval Literature – sample more widely from Middle English literature; team taught



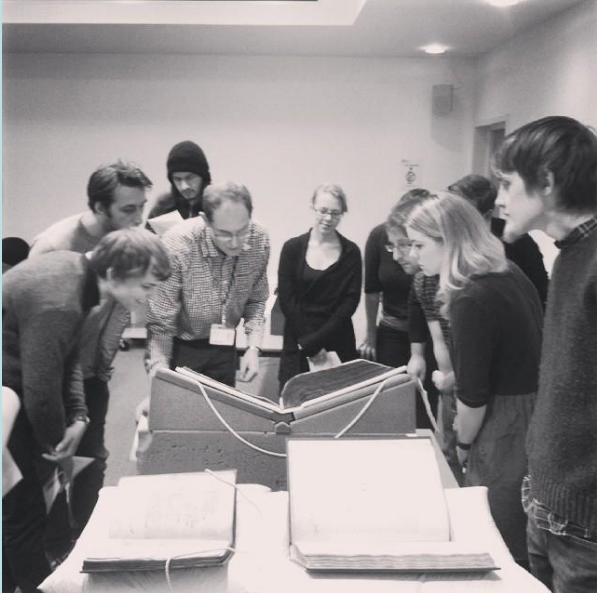
Richard: A Sign of Intimacy, 1838



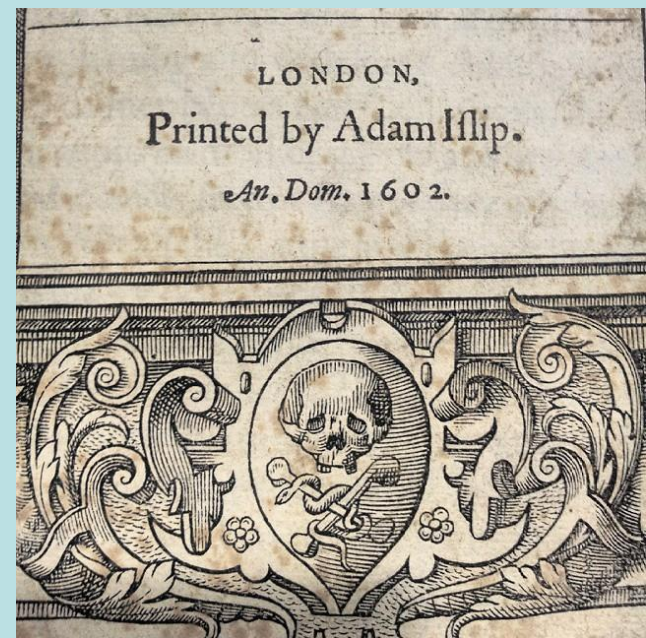


***Hands on letter-
locking workshop –
making replica early
modern letters***





**Honours students visit to Special Collections – for the course: Reading the Past:
From Script to Print**



Exam preparation

- Plan writing a commentary
- Build your own store-house of examples that are meaningful and memorable to you, e.g. *fox, gent, conclusiouns, Tehee!*
- Use the revision slides from the lectures

Plan writing a commentary:

What forms and features you can observe in the passage? For example...

- **place of the passage in the tale** (e.g. where does this passage appear in the tale and what is its function?)
- **historical context** (e.g. are cultural, social and historical features mentioned that are specific to the period? such as glosses of obsolete words or explanations of period-specific assumptions or practices?)
- **spelling** (e.g. can we observe spelling features that are characteristic of Middle English?)
- **sounds** (e.g. rhyme, homophones, puns, pronunciation – can we observe features that are characteristic of Middle English or being used by Chaucer for particular purpose or effect?)
- **vocabulary** (e.g. French or Latin borrowings, colloquialisms, plain speaking, shifts in register – can we observe any of these and, if so, what is their purpose and function at this point?)
- **pragmatics** (e.g. can we observe the use of politeness strategies, or the choice of pronouns and address terms to indicate the relationship between two people?)
- **grammar** (e.g. can we observe grammatical features characteristic of Middle English?)
- **narrative viewpoint** (e.g. who is the narrator and what is the narrative viewpoint being presented?)

What are the forms that we can observe in this passage?

What purpose and function do these forms have within the passage?

Overall, what do they indicate to us about the nature of Middle English and Chaucer's use of the language?

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fox

gent

conclusions

tehee!

FOX

'His berd as any sowe or fox was reed' (The Miller's Portrait, line 552)



GENT

‘As any wezele hir body gent and smal’ (The Miller’s Tale, line 126)



CONCLUSIOUNS

And koude a certeyn of **conclusiouns**
[line 85]

And hende Nicholas and Alisoun
Acorded been to this **conclusioun**
That Nicholas shal shapen hym a wyle
This sely jalous housbonde to bigyle
[from line 293]

TEHEE!

He felte a thyng al rough and long yherd,
And seyde, “Fy! Allas! What have I do?”

“Tehee!” quod she and clapte the wyndow to
[The Miller’s Tale, lines 630-32]

Colloquial language, e.g.:

- onomatopoeic words (Tehee!)
- interjections that are rare in the written language (Fy!
Allas! come of, have do)
- discourse markers (lat se now, so moot I gon)
- words that are rare in the written language (gnof at line
80)

- *carl* (Miller's portrait and 361)
- *cherl*
- *brawn* (Miller's portrait)
- *gnof* (80)
- *hende* (91, 164, 278, 289, 293)
- *deerne* (92, 170)
- *wenche* (146)
- *lemman* (170, 172)
- *joly* (240, 263)
- *ye* (254, 279, 329, 593-94)
- *come of*

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Lecture 1 – Revision

- What are the dates of Chaucer's birth and death?
- What social station was Chaucer born into and what was his family's business?
- The Peasants' Revolt, Black Death, Hundred Years' War and the rise of 'Lollardy' all occurred during Chaucer's lifetime. Can you give dates for each and comment on their social and cultural implications?
- Make a list some of Chaucer's main duties and responsibilities in his paid employment (i.e. during his career).
- Who was John of Gaunt?
- Which languages did Chaucer know? When did he use these languages – i.e. in what circumstances and for what purposes?
- What do you think are the likely reasons and influences upon Chaucer when it came to his decision to write *The Canterbury Tales* in English?

Lecture 2 – Revision

- Can you give a brief definition of Middle English?
- Can you give some typical examples of spelling variations found in Middle English?
- In what ways and for what purposes did Chaucer exploit spelling variations in his poetry? Can you give some examples?
- What advantages and opportunities did the pilgrimage setting offer to Chaucer for his fictional tale telling contest in *The Canterbury Tales*?
- The Miller's intervention has been described as a kind of 'literary Peasants' Revolt', can you explain what is meant by this description?
- Translate each of the following words from the description of Alisoun, and then comment on how Chaucer's particular choice of each adds to her portrait: *gent, sloo, pere-jonette, wether, popelote, wenche, bragot, meeth, joly, prymerole, piggesnye*.
- Do you think the Knight's portrait of Emily, in his tale, is outdone by the Miller's portrait of Alisoun? Give reasons and examples.

Lecture 3 – Revision

- What are 'borrowings'?
- Can you explain some of the reasons why Chaucer would chose French over English synonyms?
- What effects are achieved by Chaucer's particular choice of words to describe Nicholas, John and Absolon?
- What effects are achieved by Chaucer's particular choice of words spoken by Nicholas, John and Absolon?
- The word 'hende' is used in association with Nicholas 11 times in *The Miller's Tale*. Why does Chaucer repeat this word so often? What effects are achieved by its repeated use as we read the tale?
- What is scatological language? Where and how is it used in the *Miller's Tale*?
- How important is the 'town versus gown' theme in the *Miller's Tale*?
- What kind of language is Alison using when she calls Absolon 'Jakke fool' and tells him 'Have do'? What effect is achieved at these points?

Lecture 4 - Revision

- How would you characterise the relationship between Old, Middle and Present Day English grammar?
- Can you give some examples of the differences between Middle English and Present Day English syntax and morphology?
- In PDE the third person plural pronouns are 'they, their, them', but what was Chaucer's usage and where do the <th-> forms come from?
- Middle English has both <y-> and <th-> forms for the second person pronoun. Can you explain their different functions?
- As you re-read *The Miller's Prologue* and *Tale*: pay attention to how the characters address each other and pick out every use of the second person pronoun in direct speech (including the Miller himself and the Host). Then, write a short summery to explain how Chaucer's precise use of terms of address contributes to the depiction and definition of the relationships between these fictional characters.
- Why might the linguistic field of pragmatics be especially relevant to analysis of the language of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*?
- Do you feel sorry for any of the men after they are punished, Absolon, Nicholas and/or Absolon? Can you justify you answer with reference to specific lines from the text?

Lecture 5 - Revision

- Describe the different views of Alisoun that are presented to us in *The Miller's Tale*.
- How is the Annunciation typically represented in medieval art? Based on the evidence of the text, to what extent do you agree that an outline Annunciation story can be detected in *The Miller's Tale*?
- The *Canterbury Tales* has been praised for its polyvocality. Explain what is meant by a 'polyvocal' narrative in relation to *The Miller's Tale*.
- *The Miller's Tale* is much longer than Chaucer's sources and analogues, which tend to simply recount the basic plot. What does Chaucer gain by his additions and changes to the story, and by the *Canterbury Tales* setting? You may find it helpful to re-read the summary of Heile of Beersele, a Dutch source or analogue to *The Miller's Tale* in just 95 couplets (see slide above).

Thanks!

thanken v. Also *thank(e, thanki, thankke, thanc(e, thanck(e, dang, thonk(e(n, thonki, thonkken, thong & (early) pankie, pankiæn, pancian, pancige(n, panchige, ponkie(n, -ian, ponce, ponckin, poncki, ponchen, (infl.) pancigene & (?error) thenk, (errors) pane, pokie, ponciæm*. Forms: sg.3 *thanketh*, etc. & *thonket*; pl. *thanken*, etc. & (early SWM) *ponkiet*; ppl. *thanking(e, etc. & (error) thakyng*; p. *thanked(e, etc. & thanket, thankud, thank(e, thangede, ðahankede, ʒanked, thonket, thonke, thongkid, donkede, ʒonked, (early) pancode & (?error) thenket*; pl. *thanked(e(n, etc. & thonket, thongedon(e*; ppl. *thanked(e, etc. & ithanked(e, i)thanket, thanged, ithonked(e, thonkidde, thonkud, ithongede, (early) ðancod, iponket, iðoncked, iponcket & (?error) ipandked, (errors) thankynd, thaked, pocked*. Contraction: *thankestou* (**thankest thou**).