

Chaucer's Canterbury Tales

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An NEH Summer Seminar for School Teachers
July 19 – August 14, 2010

Seminar Location

Mile End Campus of Queen Mary College, University of London

Dear Colleague:

We are pleased to hear of your interest in our 2010 NEH summer seminar, *Chaucer's Canterbury Tales*. The four-week seminar will be held in London, England, from July 19 to August 14. Participants should plan on arriving on July 19 to settle into lodging at the Mile End campus of Queen Mary College, University of London, and join together for an opening dinner. This letter explains seminar goals and content, the program schedule, our background, and the practicalities of housing and facilities in England. Application forms and additional information about the seminar are available at the seminar web site: <http://www.eiu.edu/~neh2010>.

Focus and Scope

Why read Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* today? This complex work is a masterpiece of narrative styles, dramatic voices, interwoven themes, and poetic expressions that evoke strong responses, from tears to shock to laughter, and to recognition of profound insights on the human condition. The seminar will explore how Chaucer looks out upon the world, as participants consider the relevance of Chaucer's poetry for readers now, that is, how his vivid ideas on human relationships and desires mesh with and yet challenge modern attitudes. As we progress through the tales with the seminar's participants, we will join together in making discoveries about the distance that separates us from the lived details of Chaucer's fourteenth-century England; about the continuities of artistry, philosophy, emotion, and meaning that render Chaucer's writings still important; and about the variety of responses to Chaucer that may combine to reach understandings richer than what might be achieved by reading alone.

Ideas matter. In a complex world it is essential that citizens have the intellectual tools to understand and evaluate both their own culture and foreign cultures. As much as any writer can, Chaucer helps in enabling readers to think more clearly, because without being in any way pedantic he was an exceptional observer of both people and their environment. In narratives like the *Knight's Tale* and the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, Chaucer displays what it means to be forgiving toward human nature and its frailties. In poems like the *Franklin's Tale* and the *Clerk's Tale*, he offers in-depth and challenging explorations of humans in reference to God and nature. In stories like the *Man of Law's Tale* and the *Prioress's Tale*, he requires us to interrogate our attitudes toward foreign beliefs. Across the *Canterbury Tales* he explores a wide range of social

networks, displaying how they organize people for better and for worse. And throughout the book he demonstrates how language can be used either to illuminate or to deceive. As we read closely through the *Canterbury Tales*, we will pay close attention to Chaucer's mastery of rhetoric and tone. As we note ambiguities, ironies, puns, multiple meanings, and the play of bluntness, irony, and problematic shadings in-between, we will see how Chaucer puts these tools to careful use.

Honor and trust, sin and sanctity, wit and deceit, love and desire, marriage and fidelity, male and female, absolute and contingent truths, seriousness and play, destiny and free will, persistence in the face of adversity: these are Chaucer's subjects. In various combinations these issues will enter our discussion each day of the seminar. The focus of our reading will generally be on Chaucer's language as it relates to the details of a particular tale or to fourteenth-century English attitudes. But Chaucer's thinking so often seems universal that most readers inevitably relate his ideas to current situations and problems, and we will certainly embrace this.

Method and Schedule

All four weeks of the seminar will focus on reading and responding to the *Canterbury Tales*. We will generally hold four three-hour sessions per week, supplementing these sessions with five field trips to medieval sites. Over the course of the seminar, the group will read the *General Prologue* and twenty-four tales in the order in which they appear in the fifteenth-century Ellesmere Manuscript and standard editions of the *Tales*, with sessions devoted to either one long tale or two short ones. The seminar's work will be done in the way we have found to be most effective: through deliberative close reading of the tales in Chaucer's Middle English, with a focus on significant passages and engaged discussion of the issues raised in them.

The text we will use is Larry D. Benson's *Canterbury Tales Complete*, a paperback edition that provides a good glossary, abundant explanatory notes, and helpful introductions on Chaucer's life, works, and language. We will distribute to participants a copy of our new book, *Chaucer: Contemporary Approaches*, along with a collection of articles on individual tales, selected for their clarity and good ideas. The reading of secondary material will be optional, in accordance with the interests of individual participants. Participants will also have access to libraries and computer facilities at the University of London, though we caution that these facilities are not at the level typical in American universities.

Participants should be aware that we will read Chaucer's texts in the original Middle English. For those with little or no background in Middle English, the daily reading will initially present a challenge, but one that is manageable. What typically happens when people first encounter Chaucer's language is that they struggle with unfamiliar spellings and a few strange words, gradually start to recognize repeated key words, grow accustomed to the word forms and syntax, and soon become comfortable enough with Middle English to appreciate Chaucer's precision while engaging with the stories and ideas. A growing mastery over the poet's language is one of the many rewards of discovering Chaucer.

We will expect all members of the seminar to be active participants in discussion. The storytelling contest that provides the frame to the *Canterbury Tales* is premised on the idea that

the winning tale will incorporate *sentence* and *solaas*, that is, serious meaning as well as pleasure. Our intent is to frame and direct a seminar in which participants learn what it means to embrace simultaneously the cheerful and the serious, the bawdy and the devout, the pub and the cathedral, the up, down, and sideways digressions of the experience even as they increase their appreciation and understanding of a poet and a book of poetry that have continued to enrich readers for upwards of six hundred years.

Assignments, Consultations, and Individual Projects

Participants will keep a journal/portfolio in which they respond to each day's assignments and discussions. In addition, each participant will be required to produce a final project that may take the form of a critical essay, a teaching website, a creative response, a teaching unit, an audio or video recording, or a scholarly project. We hope to distribute copies of these projects to all participants shortly after the close of the seminar.

We will schedule two individual consultations with each participant, once during the first week of the seminar, and again toward the end of the seminar. We will be available for regular office hours throughout the seminar.

London, Oxford, and Canterbury

The seminar is located in London so that we may study Chaucer *in situ*. We will tour London-area Chaucer sites including Southwark Cathedral, Westminster Abbey, Cheapside (Chaucer's birthplace), the British Library, and the British Museum (with its fine display of medieval artifacts), along with other medieval sites in and around the city. Very few structures remain from Chaucer's day, but those that do—St. Bartholomew's Church, Temple Church, the Guildhall, remnants of the ancient (originally Roman) London walls, and the Tower of London—will help us to uncover a Thames-centered culture and geography that readers of the *Canterbury Tales* often do not fully comprehend. A day trip to Oxford will allow us to see another of Chaucer's worlds, the medieval university town, including a tour of the old city and visits to Christchurch College and the Bodleian Library.

An overnight trip will go to Canterbury by chartered bus (return by train), with several stops at towns mentioned in the *Canterbury Tales*. In Canterbury itself, we plan to visit the Cathedral, St. Martin's Church (the oldest parish church in England in continuous use), the ruins of St. Augustine's Abbey, and other sites.

Participants in the seminar will have many opportunities to explore on their own, including extra time in Canterbury and Oxford. Occasional group activities will encourage collegiality without inhibiting this freedom. The *Canterbury Tales*' author was well aware that the comforts of food, drink, and good lodging may loosen the tongue, enhance the spirit, and hold together a company of disparate, sometimes cantankerous folk. We stand firm in this philosophy.

The Seminar Directors

Susanna Fein is Professor of English at Kent State University. David Raybin is Professor of English at Eastern Illinois University. We directed a similar NEH Summer Seminar on *Chaucer's Canterbury Tales* in 2008, and it was one of the most stimulating experiences in our many years of teaching. Our other joint projects include editorship of *The Chaucer Review: A Journal of Medieval Studies and Literary Criticism*, two books on Chaucer—*Rebels and Rivals* (1991) and *Chaucer: Contemporary Approaches* (2009). Each of us has a longstanding commitment to working with school teachers, and as humanists who are drawn to the communal study of poetry, we eagerly look forward to the seminar experience.

Statement by David Raybin: My interest in working with teachers is deep and long-established. In the autumn of 1987, freshly returned from an NEH Institute on Chaucer, I applied to the Illinois Humanities Council for support to organize a springtime conference for school teachers on the *Canterbury Tales* at Eastern Illinois University. I thought of the conference as a one-time event, a way to share my experiences with a larger community. As it turned out, I have now organized an annual EIU Literature Conference for over twenty years. The distinguishing characteristic of each conference is our focus on understanding, discussing, and appreciating a major author and text. I find my work with teachers to be extremely satisfying and entirely natural, perhaps for the simple reason that I am passionate about teaching. I have been granted EIU's two principal teaching honors: the Distinguished Honors Faculty Award in 1993 and Faculty Laureate in 2002. Though I occasionally return to the medieval French studies that were the subject of my graduate degree at Columbia, Chaucer is the main focus of my scholarship. I am now editor of *The Chaucer Review*, and I teach and write about the *Canterbury Tales* regularly.

Statement by Susanna Fein: Teaching Chaucer is integral to my life, and it has been for thirty years, ever since I studied at Harvard with Larry D. Benson while the monumental *Riverside Chaucer* was in production under his editorship. I'm now editor of *The Chaucer Review* and an elected Trustee of the New Chaucer Society. I teach the *Canterbury Tales* to undergraduates every spring term, and to graduate students on a regular basis. Early in my teaching career, in 1989, I co-directed an invigorating four-week NEH-sponsored Institute for High School Teachers on the *Canterbury Tales* held in Aberdeen, South Dakota, and I have been working with teachers ever since. My most recent graduate classes (on Chaucer, on Arthurian texts) have attracted a good contingent of high school teachers, in part because my department maintains an active M.A. for teachers. In my scholarly life, I conduct research on medieval literary manuscripts and their contents in verse and prose. This past year, I have published extensively on the rare manuscript that contains the works of fifteenth-century writer John Audelay, producing an edition of his poems and carols, and a collection of essays treating his poetry.

Guest Speakers

We will invite two or three distinguished scholars to speak with the seminar about Chaucer. We will determine who these speakers will be in the Spring, when British academics have a clearer idea of whether they will be in London during the Seminar period. Our two guests were a highlight of our 2008 seminar, and we expect no less this year.

Professional Development for Participants

The seminar will not carry academic credit, but we will assist participants in gaining equivalency credit (such as CPDUs) in whatever ways are most helpful.

Accommodations, Facilities, Costs, and Stipends

The National Endowment for the Humanities provides a \$3,300 stipend per person to help participants pay for living and travel expenses for this four-week seminar. The cost of accommodation in London, as described below, will be about \$1,000 and will be deducted from your stipend with your approval. (Because the exchange rate between the dollar and the British pound is highly variable, the precise cost of lodging cannot be predicted this far in advance.) Transportation to Oxford and Canterbury will be paid from the NEH grant, along with the costs of most Seminar activities. Your personal travel, including transportation to England and local transportation in London, will be your responsibility. You will also be responsible for the cost of one night's lodging in Canterbury. (We will provide a list of B&Bs and other accommodations.) You will receive a check in June for the balance of your stipend, about \$2,300, to help defray a substantial portion of your expenses. Applicants should be aware that London is a very expensive city, made even more so by a relatively weak dollar. With summer airfares at \$1,000 and up, you are likely to spend some of your own money, beyond the stipend, to meet daily costs for food, entertainment, and other expenses. Additional information about projected costs is available at the seminar web site: <http://www.eiu.edu/~neh2010>.

Housing and Facilities in London

The seminar will be held in London, one of the worlds' most exciting and expensive cities. To provide for affordable housing in a communal university environment, we will stay in dormitory suites at the Mile End Campus of Queen Mary College, University of London. The Mile End Campus is located in east London, about a mile east of St. Paul's Cathedral, with convenient access to the central city by the Underground Tube (station: Mile End).

The price for single rooms with individual bathrooms, clustered in suites sharing a communal kitchen, will be about £600 (about \$1,000) for the duration of the seminar, an excellent rate for furnished London lodging. Queen Mary will also provide our meeting space. Library and computer facilities with internet access will be available. If you wish to bring your own laptop, wireless connection in your room should be possible.

In order to receive the very attractive rates offered at Mile End, it will be necessary to deduct the lodging costs from your stipend. Private accommodations outside the university are likely to be difficult to locate, much more expensive, and less conveniently located.

New Chaucer Society Biennial Congress (Optional)

Interested participants are invited to join the seminar directors in attending the biennial Congress of the New Chaucer Society, which will be held immediately prior to the seminar, on

July 15-18, in Siena, Italy. This will be at your own cost. The officers of the Society have agreed to allow teachers participating in the seminar to register for the Congress at the reduced student rate. The Congress is the principal gathering in Chaucer studies, and it usually attracts two to three hundred scholars from around the world. The seminar directors will meet with attendant seminar participants to discuss conference events as they relate to our seminar experience, and we will also arrange interactions with distinguished Chaucer scholars.

Application Procedures and Deadlines

Application information is included with this letter. Materials can also be downloaded from <http://www.eiu.edu/~neh2010>. Your completed application should be postmarked no later than **March 2, 2010**, and addressed as follows:

David Raybin
NEH Summer Seminar
English Department
Eastern Illinois University
600 Lincoln Avenue
Charleston, IL 61920

Your application includes two letters of reference. Please ask each of your referees to sign his or her name across the seal on the back of the envelope containing the letter, and enclose the sealed envelopes with your application. A local committee will review your application. We will inform you of the committee's decision on April 1. Should you be selected to participate in the seminar, you will have until April 5 to accept or decline the invitation.

Perhaps the most important part of the application is the essay. This essay should include your reasons for applying to the seminar; your relevant personal and academic information; your qualifications to do the work of the seminar and make a contribution to it; what you hope to accomplish by participating; and the relation of the seminar to your teaching. The essay should be no more than four double-spaced pages in a readable font.

In selecting participants, we will follow NEH guidelines with no special criteria other than the desire to include highly motivated teachers from a variety of backgrounds. Prior knowledge of the *Canterbury Tales* or of Middle English is welcome but neither required nor expected.

If you have further questions, do not hesitate to get in touch with us. David Raybin may be most easily reached by e-mail at draybin@eiu.edu. His office phone number is 217-581-6980. Susanna Fein's e-mail address is sfein@kent.edu. She may be reached by phone at 330-678-2628. We look forward to hearing from you.

With best wishes,

Susanna Fein and David Raybin