An Open Access Companion to The Canterbury Tales

Information for Contributors

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This document serves as a mission statement for this project and contains guidelines for current or potential writers.

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The Goals of the Open Access Companion to The Canterbury Tales

1) The Open Access Companion to the Canterbury Tales supports readers encountering The Canterbury Tales for the first time. The intended audience includes solitary readers as well as readers in a class or reading group. The OA Companion is addressed to readers in a wide variety of geographical and institutional contexts. While the OA Companion is intended for an audience with little familiarity with medieval British literature or literary theory, it assumes its readers are interested in academic inquiry, deep reading, creative adaptation, historical exploration, and active scholarly engagement. Instructors, students, and other readers can easily use and share the OA Companion at no cost.

2) The OA Companion project takes the concept of open access broadly, thoroughly, and seriously as a central goal:
- The OA Companion is free of charge.
- The OA Companion is written with a global audience (reading in English) in mind.
- The OA Companion assumes little or no prior knowledge in theory, medieval history, or literary history.
- The OA Companion is intended for students at a wide variety of institutions as well as those reading outside of formal academic contexts.
- The OA Companion is made available in an accessible format compatible with the widest variety of devices, screen sizes, readers, software, hardware, and printing/reproduction resources possible.
- The OA Companion is created with the goal of opening access to the Tales themselves, creating original and dynamic connections between past and present.
3) The *OA Companion* connects the most important and exciting current scholarship (in theoretical approaches, historical work, interpretation, manuscript studies, and other specializations) with a new generation of students and readers.

4) The *OA Companion* provokes cross-temporal, comparative, and emerging interpretations of the tales, encouraging new analyses that show how medieval texts like *The Canterbury Tales* can speak urgently to the interests, concerns, desires, nightmares, fears, and fantasies of our shared world.

5) The *OA Companion* further energizes the study of premodern literature by making a high-quality companion volume available to a wide audience at no cost.

6) On a larger scale, The *OA Companion* project explores how working outside of traditional publishing frameworks can open up different ways of reaching an audience and shaping a book, methods governed by the needs of the field and readers – not the needs of the market.

**What the Open Access Companion Looks Like:**

Certain logistical aspects of this project will remain in development as the contributors are writing. The project will develop in response to the input of all involved and the circumstances and opportunities that arise during its creation. The three most open-ended aspects of the project are the specifics of: 1) the website used to house the *OA Companion* (hosting, format, maintenance), 2) the file formats and distribution methods used for the *OA Companion*, and 3) the legal licenses used for the materials in the *OA companion*. Other variables include the possible role of review or crowdsourcing by focus groups of students and instructors and also the potential for supplementary/interactive elements on the website.

No matter what the precise details of these underlying structures and the process of distribution, however, the **end result** of the project will match the following core principles:

-- The project is expressly non-commercial. Its goal is to provide the broadest access possible to high-quality, thought-provoking, and useful accompanying material for reading, teaching, and group or individual study of the *Canterbury Tales*.

-- The main goal of the project is to produce a virtual "volume" of interrelated and loosely-connected chapters that inform, interest, teach, and provoke. Some chapters will be **essay chapters** that discuss one tale in relation to one topic, while other chapters will be **reference chapters** that introduce readers to broad contexts. This volume will exist virtually as a collection of distributable texts (the essay and reference chapters), which can be downloaded, read, printed, and distributed in a variety of methods depending on the needs of users. The volume will be modular, allowing users to download it in part, in whole, or in user-arranged segments to fit different needs, interests, and pedagogies. The volume will be made available on one central, curated website.
--The core of the *OA Companion*’s virtual volume is a series of approximately 26 **essay chapters** and a smaller number (5-7, depending) of **reference chapters**:

Each 3,000 word **essay chapter** will examine a broad topical focus in relation to one major “text” within the *Tales* (26 possible: General Prologue, Knight, Miller, Reeve, Cook, Man of Law, Wife of Bath, Friar, Summoner, Clerk, Merchant, Squire, Franklin, Physician, Pardoner, Shipman, Prioress, Thopas, Melibee, Monk, Nun’s Priest, Second Nun, Canon’s Yeoman, Manciple, Parson, Retraction). The essay chapters will have as their titles a key word or phrase that relates to broadly shared interests or concerns (for example, "Language Politics and Translation: The Second Nun’s Tale"). The essay chapters are designed to be read modularly, in any sequence. Each chapter has a set, three-part format (see **Essay Chapter Format** below). The editorial collective will loosely coordinate the short chapters and their topics to avoid unproductive overlap, although the precise contours of each chapter will be left up to the writer. A list of **Essay Chapter Topics** is provided below.

Each 3,000-4,000 word **reference chapter** will provide broad contextual information for first-time readers. See the list of **Reference Chapter Topics** below.

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--All core materials (essay chapters and reference chapters) will be designed for online or offline reading. Materials will be easily downloadable. All essay and reference chapters may contain *unobtrusive* hyperlinks (available to add depth but not necessary for comprehension of the main text), so that chapters can be circulated in copies/print or read offline.

--The publication format will allow for **modular** arrangement. Material will be able to be read or downloaded in one continuous volume, individually, or in user-designed groupings.

**Beyond the First Season**

--The project’s first and most important goal is to create the volume described above, containing at least one essay chapter for each *Canterbury Tale* and a few key reference chapters. The resulting selection will depend on the decisions of the writers and contributors who are willing to join the project. While the initial volume will be an achievement and a useful resource in itself, there are also additional and exciting possibilities for continued future expansion.

--More material could be added. After the initial virtual volume is created (one essay chapter for each tale plus several reference chapters), new “seasons” of material could be released, both in the form of additional essay or reference chapters and also in the form of different genres of text (short provocative readings, brief discussions of key concepts, fictional or poetic responses, and so forth). The editorial collective will agree upon a set schedule for opt-in additions or revisions that will be announced in advance, so that the
site will not be constantly or confusingly in flux. For example, the next set of additions might be scheduled for three years after the online publication of the initial volume.

--In addition to the volume itself, a hosting website could include additional, specifically online resources. The nature and function of these resources will depend on the individuals willing to join the project and add their expertise and assistance. Possible additional resources could include:
- Curated link lists
- Videos or podcasts (pedagogical, performative, etc.)
- Reference lists or glossaries: theoretical terms, medieval terms, other works (perhaps with quiz or study functions)
- Forums for commentary and discussion
- Forums for posting creative and adaptational works
- Potentially, such a site could become a virtual community or gathering-place and a staging area for future projects…

**Editorial Principles**

In order to fulfill the *Open Access Companion*’s goals, writers are encouraged to keep the following principles in mind when preparing materials.

1. **Accessibility:** Companion chapters should be written to be as accessible as possible to as broad an audience of English readers as possible. To that end, companion chapters will:
   - Assume minimal prior knowledge of theory, literary criticism, medieval history, medieval literature, popular culture, or Chaucer studies. When possible, terms should be contextualized, explained, and introduced with care.
   - Be written in a style that emphasizes clarity and reader engagement.
   - Clearly and intentionally imagine an audience with a wide and intersecting variety of cis/trans, class, cultural, disability/ability, ethnic, gender, linguistic, national, racial, religious, and sexual identities.

2. **Critical canonicity:** Companion chapters should consider the issue of authorial canonicity in a critical way.

3. **Allow Readers An Active Role:** Companion chapters should aim to provide the audience with resources for understanding (such as historical contextualizations, theoretical concepts, and sample interpretations), while provoking an open-ended engagement. To express this point humorously: any student trying to plagiarize from these chapters should still need to do a lot of thinking and writing to have a coherent paper or argument.

4. **Outward Focused:** Companion chapters should imagine the connections that can be made between the advanced study of medieval literature and other pursuits. While containing depth, they should not aim to transform readers into career Chaucerians. Companion chapters should enable readers to make active comparisons between the age
of Chaucer and our own. Such comparisons, however, should be made indirectly and with considerable nuance, avoiding heavy-handed moralizations or pre-packaged interpretations. Companion chapters should suggest relations to contemporary issues and problems without “leading the witness” (first, to encourage independent thinking among a diverse audience; second, because specific references will become dated very quickly; third, because the goal is the emergence of unexpected new knowledges and not the replication of dogma). Companion chapters should aim to help foster and sustain an engaged, searching, and questioning relationship between readers, the text, and the world.

5. Wear Scholarship Lightly: Companion chapters should acknowledge critical history and the achievements of previous scholars, but should not aim to provide a history of the field. Companion chapters should avoid summaries of previous critical opinion. Chapters should take care to use the best insights from scholarship but to create an experience in which readers feel the possibilities rather than the professional obligations of the push and pull of scholarly research.

Essay Chapter Format:

In order to help address core goals, to provide readers with a consistent experience, and to foster a distinctive identity for this volume, every interpretive essay chapter will use a standard three-part format. Chapters may include a brief introduction of the tale and/or the major issue under discussion, then will be made up of three parts: TOOLS, TEXT, & TRANSFORMATION. The “Tools” and “Text” sections will make up the bulk of the chapter, with the “Transformation” section taking up a smaller amount of space at the end. [Note that the more directly informative reference chapters do not need to adopt this format.]

~Tools: Goal: give readers ideas, concepts, or contexts for their own interpretation. The "tools" section of the chapter provides readers with some key information about the topic considered in the chapter. The chapter might also present them with a manageable amount of historical, theoretical, or scholarly concepts, tools, methods, or techniques. The goal here is to provide readers with the material for making their own interpretations and engaging in discussions.

~Text: Goal: Model engagement with the tale and offer various avenues of examination. This part of the chapter performs a reading of the given text in relation to the larger topic of the chapter. The readings or interpretations provided in this section should aim for relative open-endedness, provocation, and use of multiple perspectives rather than striving to create definitive, magisterial arguments.

~Transformation: Goal: Provide material for further group or solo exploration, thinking, discussion, and adaptation of the Tale and the chapter’s ideas. This shorter section will include a list of questions or projects for the reader. The questions could bring in connections to other tales, invite further application or questioning of the concepts discussed, or suggest writing projects, exercises, and explorations. These questions could be used either in a class, in a reading group, or by an individual reader. The transformation section will
also include a **suggested reading** section. Suggested readings will include a variety of works, including related texts, theoretical works, adaptations, and present-day analogues, as well as key scholarly references. Contributors who have any difficulties creating this section can receive ideas and assistance from the Editorial Collective. [For some models, consider the study questions in Dan Kline's *Medieval British Literature Handbook.*]

**Essay Chapter Topics List:**

Below is the list of chapter titles/topics initially proposed for OA Companion essay chapters. As of January 2016, many of these topics are already taken; please see the current CFP for available tales & topics. The complete list is nevertheless provided here to show the intended general shape and scope of the project.

This list of topics is designed to avoid excessive overlap (as much as reasonably possible) with pre-existing companion resources and also to address the OA Companion’s goal of speaking to a global, twenty-first century audience. As much as possible, topics are potentially trans-historical (“touching” both the time of the *Tales* and our own), outward-directed (attuned to general interest and not scholarly industry), and yet also congruent with some recent interests and broad preoccupations in the humanities. In short, these are designed to be engaging, important, fun, or all three. Topics that are not addressed in the first "virtual volume" of essays could provide the topics for further essays in the future.

- Ability/Disability
- Animals
- Authority: Familial, Political, Written
- Brotherhood, Sisterhood, Friendship, and Fellowship
- Clothes, Dress, Status, and Identity
- Colony, Empire, and Conquest
- Comment, Argument, Debate, and Polemic
- Creating Gendered and Sexual Identities
- Cultural Crossings, Conflicts, and Collaborations
- Dance, Drama, Performance, Music, and Beauty
- Death, Disease, Illness, and Mortality
- Education, Literacy, Law, and Privilege
- Emotion, Feeling, Intensity, Pleasure
- Entertainment versus Education
- Fantasy, Imagination, Dreams, and Illusions
- Feminism and Women’s Experience
- Hatred, War, and Murder
- Imagining the World: Maps and Stories
- Interpretation, Deciphering, Coding, and Confusion
- Invention, Discovery, Problem-Solving, and Innovation
- Jokes, Jests, Pranks, and Play
- Environment, Landscape, Nature
- Language Politics and Translation
- Local Government: Power, Lordship, and Resources
- Love, Courtship, Marriage, and Extended Family
Objects, Things, Devices, Gadgets
Pregnancy and Childbirth
Protest, Complaint, and Uprising
Race and Racism
Relating to the Past, Imagining the Past, Using the Past
Religious Devotion and Spiritual Feeling
Religious Identity, Difference, and Debate
Sexuality and Intimacy
Subsistence: Farming, Agriculture, Food
The Body and its Politics
Travel, Transit, and Journeys
Trends and Trendiness
Wages, Work, Wealth, and Economic Inequality
Water: Ocean, Rain, River, Reservoir
Weather, Extreme Weather, Elements, Climate
Youth and Age

Reference Chapter Topics List:

3,000-4,000 word reference chapters will be designed to introduce key contexts for understanding the *Canterbury Tales*. Although it would be impossible to give a “complete” or “comprehensive” list, the following would be useful potential topics for reference chapters. The initial volume will ideally have between five to seven of these.

~Daily Life in England c. 1390
~Society and Politics in England c. 1340-1400
~Late Medieval England in a Global Context
~The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer
~Chaucer’s Middle English: An Introduction and List of Resources
~The Genres of Medieval Literature in the *Canterbury Tales*
~The Sources of the *Canterbury Tales*
~Manuscripts and the Production of the *Canterbury Tales*
~Global reception of the *Canterbury Tales* c. 2015
~What does “medieval” mean? What does it mean to read a text from late Medieval England?