

LIT 520: Chaucer and the Natures of the Human

Dr. Ashby Kinch

Tuesday, 6-8:50, LA 204

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Office Hours: TTh 2-3; W 9-11; by apt.

Course Description

In an era when “human life” is both a contested category and a precarious mode of existence, we must take the question of the relationship between the human and nonhuman worlds seriously in both its historical and contemporary forms. This seminar will do just that, reading and thinking about a variety of recent work in medieval studies, as well as in the broader fields of anthropology, biosemiotics, and ecocriticism. What are the biological underpinnings of the human tendency to “read signs” in the world around us? What forms of thought spring from the animal world for medieval writers? When and where do the boundaries shift between definitions of the human and the animal, and how do these shifting boundaries change definitions of various forms of the human? What does it mean to contest these boundaries, both in medieval cultural formations and in our own?

In addition to Chaucerian anchor texts (*Book of the Duchess*, *Parliament of Fowls*, *House of Fame*, *Knight's Tale*, *Squire's Tale*, *Nun's Priest's Tale*, and *Maunciple's Tale*), we will read a range of medieval texts that take up some of these same problems in different historical and geographical co-ordinates, including Alain de Lille's *De Planctu Naturae*, Chretien de Troyes' *Knight with the Lion (Yvain)*, selections of Marie de France's *Fables* and *Lais*. Alongside these primary texts, we will read an array of criticism that thinks about medieval literature from the perspective of animal studies, anthropology, ecocriticism, and post-humanism.

Students will write weekly position papers; make two presentations; and write a seminar-length paper of 15-20 pages grounded in their independent research and thinking. Students will be encouraged to develop reading projects in areas of interest to them.

Texts: See email for detail about alternate texts

Chaucer, Geoffrey. *Dream Visions and Other Poems*. Norton Critical Edition, 2007.

Chaucer, Geoffrey. *Canterbury Tales: 15 Tales and the Gen Prologue*. 2nd Ed., 2005.

Marie de France, *Poetry*. Norton Critical Edition. 2015.

Course Requirements: See document on Moodle for detail

Weekly Moodle position papers: 30%

Two Seminar Presentations: 20%

Seminar Paper: 50%

Reading Schedule

**Nota Bene*: We may decide to alter this schedule in ways large and small. I will keep an updated syllabus on the Moodle page and draw your attention there when significant changes are made.

Aug 30th: Introductions, Concepts, Inclinations

Medieval Anthropology / Human in-of-and Nature

In-class reading: excerpts from Chaucer's translation of Boethius; *The Former Age*

Chaucer's Writing Career / Biography

Sept. 6: H(e)art-Hunting, Neoteny, and the Human Life-Cycle

Literature:

Chretien, *Knight with the Lion*

Marie de France, *Guigemar, Bisclavret*

Geoffrey Chaucer, *Book of the Duchess*

Background / Criticism / Theory:

The Medieval Natural World, Chapters 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 10 (MOODLE)

J. Allan Mitchell, "Being Born" (1-21)

Sept. 13: Sym-Bio-Semiotics: Signs of / and Life

Literature:

Chaucer, *Book of the Duchess* (cont'd)

Guillaume de Machaut, *Fountain of Love* (Norton Critical Edition)

Marie de France, *Le Fresne, Chevrefoil*

Background / Criticism / Theory:

Eduardo Kohn, "The Open Whole" (MOODLE)

Sept. 20: Nature-Human-Animal: Disjunctive Continuities

Literature:

Chaucer, *The Parliament of Fowls*, sources 258-81, 299-303, Norton Critical Edition

Alain de Lille, excerpts from *De Planctu Naturae* (MOODLE: Parts I and II)

Background / Criticism / Theory:

Stephen Epstein, *The Medieval Discovery of Nature*, 1-39 (MOODLE)

3 Student Presentations

Sept. 27: Beastliness

Background / Criticism / Theory:

Crane, Intro + "Cohabitation," from *Animal Encounters*, 1- 41 (MOODLE)

Hoffman, "Homo et Natura," 11-38 (MOODLE)

Fradenburg, "Living Chaucer," 41-64 (MOODLE)

3 Student Presentations

Oct. 4: Bird-Talk

Marie de France, *Milun, Laustic, Yonec*

Chaucer, *The Squire's Tale*

3 Student Presentations

Oct. 11: Nature and the Proliferation of Meaning

Chaucer, *House of Fame* + sources in Norton Critical Edition, 229-58

Optional: Kinch, "Mind Like Wickerwork" (MOODLE)

3 Student Presentations

Prospectus due Oct. 17th

Oct. 18: Human Type, Speciation and the Problem of the Portraits

Chaucer, "General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*"

Knight's Tale, I. 1462-1714; *Miller's Tale* I. 3187-3287

Sarah Stanbury, "EcoChaucer: Green Ethics and Medieval Literature" (MOODLE)

Oct. 25: "My Tale is of a cok": Between the Species and the Specific

Nun's Priest's Tale + 455-466 in Norton Critical Edition

Marie de France, *Fables*, Norton Critical Edition, 175-200

Peter Travis, "Aesop's Animal Tongues" (MOODLE)

Nov. 1: "By kynde, and by no other lore": Chicken Cognition

Read a chapter of Peter Travis, *Disseminal Chaucer*

Read any other article on Chaucer's *Nun's Priest's Tale*

Nov. 8: NO CLASSES; meet with me to discuss final projects

Nov. 15: Boundaries of the (In)Human

Franklin's Tale; selected criticism

Annotated Bibliography due Nov. 21st

Nov. 22: Problems with / in the Garden

Merchant's Tale, *Shipman's Tale*; selected criticism

Nov. 29: The (Self-)Destructive Nature of Human Imagination

Miller's Tale; selected criticism

Draft of Final Paper due on Moodle December 5th

Dec. 6: Presentations / Evaluations

Seminar Paper Due: Dec. 16th

Meet for final presentations