

Chaucer's Books: Suggested Discussion Questions

These questions are based on ['Chaucer's Books', a seminar given at the Bodleian Libraries by Nicholas Perkins](#). The questions could be used for classroom discussion, revision, or to help you structure your notes on the seminar.

Part 1: Books & Reading in Chaucer's Time

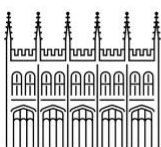
- A. What does the [quotation from Richard de Bury's Philobiblon](#) tell us about the importance attributed to books by medieval thinkers?
- B. What is the evidence for Chaucer's own reading? What were the main types of texts which influenced his writing?
- C. Books and reading were a highly political topic in this period. What can the 1381 Peasants' Revolt tell us about the importance of books, written records and access to knowledge and authority in medieval politics?
- D. Chaucer's own writing is full of reading and texts – can you think of some examples? What might these tell us about his attitude to authority and the written word?
- E. *The Canterbury Tales* is presented as a series of spoken narratives – is it really a book, as we usually understand a book?

Further reading:

Explore the British Library's Sources from History pages for the [Sources from History pages for the 1300s](#) and [1400s](#) to find out more about books in Chaucer's time.

Part 2: How do Medieval Manuscripts help us read Chaucer now?

- A. How does the Latin Bible look different to a conventional modern printed Bible?
- B. How might the culture of marginal commentaries and glosses affect how a medieval person read an authoritative text like the Bible?
- C. Can you think of examples from *The Canterbury Tales* when a critical commentary on an authoritative text or person becomes part of the narrative?
- D. In the copy of *The Canterbury Tales* which is shown, how does hierarchy in the scripts help the reader navigate a long text? Which features does your modern edition of the text share with the medieval manuscript? Which extra technologies do you have to help you read the text?
- E. What influence did an individual scribe copying *The Canterbury Tales* have over the text? How might this affect the work of modern editors?
- F. In the third manuscript shown, what types of other texts are included alongside *The Clerk's Tale*?



- G. Who were the likely owners of each of the three manuscripts? Which books (if any) might characters in *The Canterbury Tales* have owned or been able to access themselves?

Further Reading:

You might want to [find out more about how a medieval manuscript was made](#), to understand how the handwritten nature of the texts affected the way that they were read at the time and survive today.

Dr Perkins discussed handwritten books – manuscripts – here. But the fact that *The Canterbury Tales* was one of the first books to be **printed** in England was also hugely significant for its reception and status. [Find out more about William Caxton's 1476 and 1483 editions in this article from The British Library.](#)

[This article on manuscripts of the Canterbury Tales examines the manuscripts in which Chaucer's works survive](#), and looks at how Chaucer uses books as a symbol of the imperfection of human knowledge.

[Part 3: Wife of Bath and Merchant's Tale extracts](#)

In a close reading of these two extracts:

- [The Wife of Bath's Prologue: lines 788-816](#)
- [The Merchant's Tale, lines 2364-2389](#)

Dr Perkins explores how books and acts of interpretation are central to how Chaucer presents relationships and dramatic action in *The Canterbury Tales*. These themes are present as part of the narrative, and they also inform debates about how we read the tales.

You might want to make some notes on the extracts mentioned, or find other relevant passages which consider reading and multiple interpretations of narratives or sources.

