Seth A. Cureton

Dr. Fleming

Chaucer

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Unessay Companion

My Unessay project, while unfortunately is more like an essay than not, was taking the General Prologue section of *The* *Canterbury Tales* and re-writing them into a more modern, prose-like style, titled: “The Canterbury Tales: Abridged.” While not necessarily abridged in the sense of simplified, it is abridged in the sense that it is shortened. I took a majority of the General Prologue, translated and re-worked it into modern, standard English prose, and added bits and pieces to fill in the holes when necessary.

 The sources that I used were the Oxford English Dictionary, for looking up the meanings of words as well as their etymology, the Middle English Compendium, for similar reasons to the OED, the interlinear translation of the tales done by Harvard, which was used as a linguistic base for my project, and our textbook by Penguin, as an accompaniment to the interlinear translation.

My first hurdle in doing this project was the sheer length of the General Prologue, as I not only had it sitting before me, I had any extra characterization parts that I would put in as well to write. Therefore, I made the executive decision to only translate about sixty percent of the General Prologue. I decided which parts to translate based on the lengths of the characters’ corresponding tales, their places in the story and connection to other characters, and whether or not we had discussed them at length in our class. I picked fourteen of the pilgrims, as well as the host, to translate and edit. In addition to those character introductions, I also translated the general opening part to the Prologue (Whan that Aprill, etc.), as well as the parts with the Host introducing the idea of the storytelling game to the Pilgrims, as well as sprinkling in extra bits of characterization for the Chaucer, who is writing all of this. These ‘bits’ include: his opinions and observations based on textual evidence and his interactions with other characters, as well as extra comments and opinions that he made that I believe fit in with his characterization in *The Canterbury Tales* itself. These extra bits were necessary, in my opinion, as I figured out quickly that when you separate *The Canterbury Tales* from its original poetic form, it lacks in some of the finer detail that is essential in prose, particularly in terms of characterization. While some Pilgrims received a lot of description about their character in addition to their appearance, many didn’t. In other words, the Pilgrims were given some more character, as in interactions with each other, as well as the Host, outside their own personal introductions.

My second hurdle in this project was the translation work itself. While the interlinear translation was itself was very useful, I didn’t want to rely on it completely, as I didn’t want to copy from it, or to appear like I did. While I would use it alongside the book and the footnotes from the book as well, I would sometimes have to break down passages and use the two dictionaries to look up words and find out what they mean. One example being in the Squire’s introduction, how the book talks about how ‘embroidered he was, like a *mead*,” (GP, ll. 89), and that I had no idea what that meant. I used the OED to find the meaning in another sense: a meadow. Situations like this popped up again and again, but between the two versions of the text and the dictionaries, I had no trouble figuring it out. Also, while the interlinear translation used a modern English most of the time, it kept some of the language from the original work, mostly pronouns like thou, thy, etc. I wasn’t looking for a direct translation, rather a translation that fit with our current times.

My third hurdle was the Chaucer himself, not the writer, but the character that takes inventory of all the Pilgrims and describes them, as well as the keeps the story’s timeline moving. While the Chaucer received some characterization in the story, mostly from the Host’s diminutive treatment of him before he tells the Tale of Sir Thopas, and from the seemingly self-deprecating remarks about how “my wit is short,” according to him, we don’t get much more about the Chaucer’s character. He is more of a device for the reader and less of a character. I wanted to balance the Chaucer’s character more and give him more of opinions and things to say about the Pilgrims. After all, the Chaucer was most likely based off of Geoffrey Chaucer himself, and he was a man who lived, and therefore he had opinions about people, and especially about his characters, from whom he could very well have based off of real people. Since the purpose of this abridgment is not only to give an accurate, modern English translation of a portion of the *Canterbury Tales*, but also to entertain, I believe that having the Chaucer as more of a protagonist and less of a device was a necessary step to take.

Finally, the last hurtle was similar to the second one, in that how do I make my translation unique? When I read through my draft after finishing, I saw that several of my sentences were similar or even the same to the interlinear translation. Did I accidently plagiarize, I thought to myself. No, because some of these passages in *The* *Canterbury Tales* can only be translated a handful of ways, and I believe that several peoples’ translations of those passages would be either the same or similar. One example is, “And he was clad in cote and hood of grene. A sheef of pecok arwes, bright and kene, Under his belt he bar ful thriftily… (GP. Ll.103-105), where the Yeoman is introduced and described. There are only so many ways one can say, ‘he wore a green coat and hood, and he carried a sheaf of peacock arrows, bright and keen/sharp under his belt,” and I had to do what I could to make it not only correct, but distinct from my source. My project is distinct from the other translations because of its formatting and intended audience.

To conclude, I would like to say that this project was not only beneficial for my learning and reading of Middle English, but also put my prose and fiction skills to the test. While *The* *Canterbury Tales* is an excellent work of writing, I want people of all kinds to enjoy it, and that means separating it from its original Middle English. While years ago, when I was starting my undergraduate degree, I was not privy to the idea of simplifying works not unlike this one, or works of Shakespeare, or other writings that were mutually intelligible with today’s English. However, I’ve since learned that language is a fickle thing, and moving these works into more modern English allows more people to enjoy them, and that language change benefits more people than it hinders. Therefore, with this project, I wanted to take an, albeit amateur, stab at making *The* *Canterbury Tales* more available and accessible to anyone.