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# “Illuminated and Unsettled: Literary Forms and Cultural Power, Medieval to Early Modern”: A Pop-Up Exhibition for the 2022 Harvard English Department Bloomfield Conference

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## Introduction

Geoffrey Chaucer's (ca.1342–1400) *House of Fame* is full of incredible images—names carved in ice, Geoffrey clutched in the eagle's talons—but the one that sticks with us is this: great authors stand on pillars in the goddess Fame's palace, bearing the reputations of nations and heroes on their shoulders. It is at once impossible to picture (what does a reputation *look* like?) and impossible to forget. The poet sees Homer, “hy on a piler / Of yren [...] besy for to bere up Troye”; he gazes at Ovid, who “hath ysowen wonder wide / The grete god of Loves name,” hoisting it “also hye / As I myghte see hyt with myn ye.”<sup>1</sup> This is an argument for what literature

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## Notes

This exhibition appeared in conjunction with the 2022 Harvard English Department Bloomfield Conference, “Illuminated and Unsettled: Literary Forms and Cultural Power, Medieval to Early Modern,” held in honor of Professor James Simpson's retirement, September 22–24, 2022.

Thanks to Rob Brown, who was vital in the object selection stage and who contributed the exhibition logo as well as improvements to the exhibition copy. The conference pop-up came to be because of Nicholas Watson's initiative; along the way it benefited from the support and expertise of Peter Accardo, Christina Stone, and Mitch Nakaue.

does: like Atlas, it supports the world, or at least humanity's understanding of it. It is also a plea for readers to see Chaucer as possessed of the same writerly might as Homer and Ovid, or, in the unfinished poem's last words, as "a man of gret auctorite" (2158).

James Simpson's scholarship shares this notion of authors and texts undergirding ways of knowing. Whether his subject is iconoclasm, reading, liberalism, or revolution, James reveals the intellectual infrastructure hidden in plain sight. His approach revitalizes colleagues' and students' understanding of canonical and non-canonical authors. Time and again, he expertly arrives at the *aha!* moment—equal parts awe-inspiring and silly—when the poet is revealed, balancing under an unwieldy load.

I am fortunate to have been advised by James and to have participated in his "Trans-Reformation English Writing" seminar during coursework—itsself a long-standing pillar of the Harvard English Department. This year, to mark James' retirement, the biannual Morton W. Bloomfield Conference at Harvard will be convened in his honor on the theme "Illuminated and Unsettled: Literary Forms and Cultural Power, Medieval to Early Modern." The temporary Houghton Library exhibition I curated with the help of Rob Brown is, like the conference, a tribute to James' impact on the field as a teacher and a scholar. It is also a reflection of our own experiences as James' graduate students. "Trans-Reformation English Writing" seemed the perfect blueprint for "Illuminated and Unsettled" because the course encapsulates both James' scholarly ethos and his commitment to working with Harvard's special collections.

"Trans-Reformation English Writing" challenged students' understanding of "medieval" and "early modern" periodization in two ways. First, it progressed thematically rather than chronologically. Second, it made the English Reformation—rather than, say, the succession of Elizabeth I, or the opening of London's public theaters—the fulcrum on which everything pivots. Though not entirely isolated, this framing is far from the norm in English, which by and large considers "modern" literary studies—if not all literary studies—a secular discipline. The syllabus began with a provocation to this effect:

English literary history shies away from one of cultural history's most momentous revolutions: the Reformation.

The course positioned itself as an exercise in re-reading, in re-learning. The first unit, "Fame," invited students into a House of Fame of a kind—the literary canon—and encouraged them not only to contemplate its pillars but also to excavate its very foundation. Thus, in the unit titled "The Church," students read both William Langland's (ca.1330–1400) *Piers Plowman* (ca. 1370) and Edmund Spenser's (1552–99) *The Faerie Queene* (1590); in another called "Animals" they read both Chaucer's "Nun's Priest's Tale" (ca. 1390) and Ben Jonson's (1572–1637) *Volpone* (1606). Some units explored literary forms ("Elegy and History," "Tragedy and Chivalry," "Comedy"), while others dealt with cultural experience ("Reading," "Playing") or issues contended by both pre- and post-Reformation writers ("Work and Works," "The Image," "Statecraft"). Each week, students carefully considered texts' differences and similarities, their investments, and their borrowings. The result was a dialogue among texts despite (or, perhaps,

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<sup>1</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry Benson, 3rd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), lines 1465–72; 1486–92.

because of) social and political upheaval. An impression of continuity quickly superseded any notion of division or rupture with which students began.

James' syllabus also articulated a method, positing that the best way to ground literary history is in the material text. Fittingly, the course culminated in student papers on Trans-Reformation objects in Houghton. In some later iterations of the course, students also worked with items digitized on Early English Books Online ([EEBO](#)), a resource for which James passionately advocated.

In its choice of materials, this exhibition attempts to echo and condense the rich variety of materials and ideas contained within "Trans-Reformation English Writing." The 2022 Bloomfield Conference's two themes—literary forms and cultural power—here replace periods as ways of organizing texts and charting their relations to one another. The story that emerges is one of striking continuity from the 14th to the 17th centuries. Like James' teaching, this exhibition sees the works of Jonson, William Shakespeare (1564–1616), John Milton (1608–74) and the like less as the birth of something new than as a continuing growth of English literature—a growth dependent on and, in many ways, derivative of Langland, John Gower (ca.1330–1408), William Caxton (ca.1420-92), and others who came before. So, too, this exhibition illuminates the relative freedom of discourse and religion in pre-Reformation England alongside the unsettling censorship, surveillance, and violence of the regimes from Henry VIII to Cromwell.

"Illuminated and Unsettled" also echoes the seminar format by employing one of James' favorite pedagogical conceits. During each meeting, James involved participants in co-writing a hypothetical article. Every comment, every observation was recorded. Agreements were synthesized; disagreements were seen through. The arc of the "article" followed the arc of the conversation, an arc which James frequently articulated as "yes, no, and so ...". Like a Simpson seminar, this exhibition seeks to encourage a spirit of inquiry and to upend viewers' tacit assumptions. It is meant to be dialectical, bringing objects to readers of this journal and visitors to Houghton Library in a new way to facilitate a process of discovery.

Along with the 2022 Bloomfield Conference, we hope that the "Illuminated and Unsettled" exhibition honors James's time teaching at Harvard. His ongoing work to reshape the fields of medieval and early modern English literature bespeaks a legacy that will not soon vanish from Fame's halls.

## Exhibition Labels

Geoffrey Chaucer, *Workes* (1598)<sup>2</sup>

STC 5077 (C). Henry Saltonstall Howe Fund, 1999.

This 1598 *Workes* (fig. 1, below) imagines Chaucer as the larger-than-life patriarch of both English literature and England’s “medieval” past, marrying literary form and cultural power. Playing on the Christian iconography of the Tree of Jesse, this portrait centers Chaucer towering above his family’s tomb while highlighting Chaucer’s genealogical proximity to the English throne via John of Gaunt. The poet, this page seems to tell us, is immortalized, his fame grounded in the body of literature he bequeathed to his nation.



Figure 1. Portrait of Geoffrey Chaucer.

<sup>2</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer, *The workes of our antient and lerned English poet, Geffrey Chaucer, newly printed ...*, London: A. Islip, 1598. STC 5077 (C), Houghton Library, Harvard University, <https://id.lib.harvard.edu/alma/990029685780203941/catalog>.

**John Gower, *Confessione Amantis* (1532)<sup>3</sup>  
STC 12143 (B). Anne E. P. Sever Bequest, 1878.**

In one preface, Gower claims he wrote the *Confessio*—in which Venus’ priest instructs a lover through a series of tales—“for England’s sake.” As it turns out, the poem spoke to post-Reformation uncertainty as much as to the troubled reign of Richard II. Gower’s ghost narrates Shakespeare’s 1607 play *Pericles* (based on a *Confessio* tale), while Gower and Chaucer are the two “grave laureates, the types of England’s excellence for poetry” in Greene’s “Vision Written at the Instant of His Death” (1592).

**Ben Jonson, *Volpone* (1607)<sup>4</sup>  
STC 14783. Gift of Frank E. Chase, 1924.**

Jonson adapts techniques from beast fables such as Chaucer’s “Nun’s Priest’s Tale” and Caxton’s *Reynard the Fox* for this city comedy. In the play, *Volpone* (whose name means “fox”) is a miser who pretends to be dying, soliciting gifts from men as self-interested as he. By giving his human characters animal names, Jonson highlights their (mostly vicious) qualities, satirizing the increasingly consumeristic world of the early seventeenth-century.

**William Shakespeare, *Troilus and Cresseid* (1609)<sup>5</sup>  
STC 22332. Bequest of William Augustus White, 1928.**

Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde* serves as inspiration for Shakespeare’s most brutal comedy. While Chaucer focuses on the lovers’ tragic separation (when Cressida is traded from one side to the other in the Trojan War), Shakespeare’s theme is hypocrisy. Both love and war prove to be hollow fictions as Cressida betrays her vows to Troilus and Ulysses manipulates his Greek comrades—even in his famous “degree” speech, shown here.

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<sup>3</sup> John Gower, *Jo. Gower de confessione amantis*, London: Thomas Berthelette, 1532. STC 12143 (B), Houghton Library, Harvard University, <http://id.lib.harvard.edu/alma/990056024490203941/catalog>.

<sup>4</sup> Ben Jonson, *Ben: Jonson, his Volpone, or, The foxe*, London[?]: printed for Thomas Thorpe, 1607. STC 14783, Houghton Library, Harvard University, <http://id.lib.harvard.edu/alma/990058020720203941/catalog>.

<sup>5</sup> William Shakespeare, *The famous historie of Troilus and Cresseid: Excellently expressing the beginning of their loues, with the conceited wooing of Pandarus Prince of Licia*, London: Imprinted by G. Eld for R. Bonian and H. Walley, 1609. STC 22332, Houghton Library, Harvard University, <http://id.lib.harvard.edu/alma/990096374620203941/catalog>.

**Caxton House Fragment (ca. 1471 [alleged])<sup>6</sup>  
MS Eng 1703. No source, no date.**

After transporting his press from Bruges, William Caxton produced the first book printed on English soil: an edition of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. Without the press, it is hard to imagine humanism and the Reformation reaching England decades later. Yet, Caxton's career (which saw the Tudors' rise) exemplifies how new technologies ensured continuity as well as change. Though its authenticity is dubious, this souvenir (fig. 2, below) is further testament to the 14th and 15th centuries' hold on "modern" literature and culture.



Figure 2. Fragment of William Caxton's house.

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<sup>6</sup> Fragment of William Caxton's house, London, ca. 1471. MS Eng 1703, Houghton Library, Harvard University, <http://id.lib.harvard.edu/alma/990133947940203941/catalog>.

**Anonymous, *Pore caytif* (ca. 1400)<sup>7</sup>  
MS Eng 701. Gift of Imre de Vegh, 1949.**

*Pore caytif* is a collection of English-language devotional texts; its title refers to the wretched sinner in need of God's grace. The texts respond to Wycliffe's teachings on lay spirituality and his demand for accessible, vernacular scripture (not outlawed until 1409). Seven of the 30 known complete manuscripts of *Pore caytif* reflect Wycliffite or "Lollard" beliefs deemed heretical; those copies remove the passage on "ymagis" (images) as "kalendars to lewde folk" (guides for lay people) shown in figure 3, below.

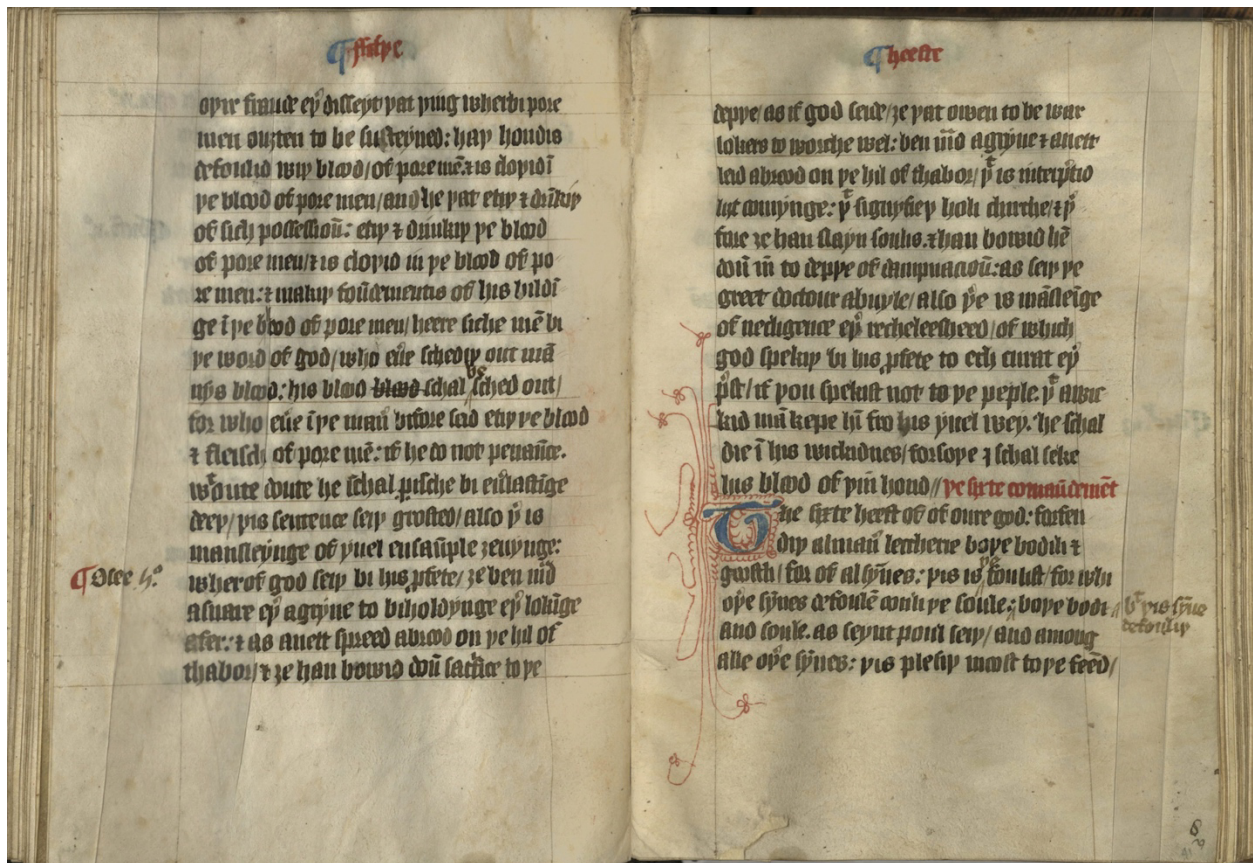


Figure 3. *Pore caytif*, 16v.–17.

<sup>7</sup> Here bigyneþ a tretis þat suffisþ to evry c[hri]sten man and woman to lyve aftir for to be saved by which is clepid a pore caytif: manuscript. MS Eng 701, Houghton Library, Harvard University, <http://id.lib.harvard.edu/alma/990097113090203941/catalog>.



**Christopher Goodman, *How superior powers ought to be obeyd (1558)*<sup>8</sup>  
STC 12020. John Harvey Treat Fund, 1939.**

Goodman fled England when Mary I ascended, taking charge of the English Protestant community in Geneva (along with Knox and Calvin). *Superior Powers* began as a sermon arguing—through Scripture—for rebellion against an “ungodly” sovereign. In print, Goodman’s words were intended to travel: the prefatory letter prays the sermon will “dilate” the hearts of the faithful in England, while this device shows Isaiah beckoning readers to “enter in at the strait gate,” as the “Geneva Bible” (which Goodman helped to translate) renders Matthew 7:13.

**John Milton, *Eikonoklastes (1649)*<sup>9</sup>**

**\*EC65.M6427.649e (B). Bequest of William Augustus White, 1928.**

Printed mere months after Charles I’s execution, *Eikonoklastes* is a riposte to his *Eikon Basilike*; Charles’ title translates to “the king’s image,” Milton’s to “the broken image.” Recalling the previous century, in which one Cromwell (Thomas) destroyed English church art and relics, Milton implicitly defends another Cromwell (Oliver) who toppled the idols of “Tyranny and popery” and explicitly condemns those who “martyr [Charles] and saint him” in the new Puritan republic.

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<sup>8</sup> Christopher Goodman, *How superior powers ought to be obeyd of their subiects and wherein they may lawfully by Gods worde be disobeyed and resisted ...*, Geneva: John Crispin, 1558. STC 12020, Houghton Library, Harvard University, <http://id.lib.harvard.edu/alma/990056367150203941/catalog>.

<sup>9</sup> John Milton, *Eikonoklastes, in answer to a book intitl'd Eikon basilike, the portrature of His sacred Majesty in his solitudes and sufferings*, London: printed by M. Simmons, 1649. \*EC65.M6427.649e (B), Houghton Library, Harvard University, <http://id.lib.harvard.edu/alma/990067178140203941/catalog>.