

The great schism of 1970

As football seasons go, the 1970 season was not one to remember. Mind you, the team under fifth-year head coach Joe Paterno finished 7-3, which is decent, but compared with coming off back-to-back 11-0 seasons and Orange Bowl victories, 7-3 was so-so. In 1970, the Nittany Lions finished 18th in the Associated Press rankings and did not go to a bowl game. Jack Ham was named an All-American linebacker.

I looked up all of that information

But, otherwise, I remember the fall of 1970 vividly.

It was my senior year at Penn State. My wife and I were new parents. I was a full-time student and working 4 p.m. to midnight as the city editor of a local morning newspaper, the Pennsylvania Mirror. I was an English major. I wrote short sentences and paragraphs by night and long ones by day.

With those hours, I didn't have a lot of scheduling flexibility and thus ended up in an elective 400-level Chaucer course. Chaucer was fine, but the course met Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday (yes, we had Saturday classes then) at 8 a.m. Maybe it was 9:30, but when you work

nights and don't get to bed until 2 a.m., what's the difference?

Not only that, we had to "learn" Middle English. You and I would write about April showers, but in Middle English, Chaucer opened

THE CANTERBURY TALES		[A 194-238]
este of a lond;	And eek with worthy women of the toun;	
under his chyn, 195	For he hadde power of confessioun,	see for + not
<i>Carefully made</i> a ful curious pyn;	As seyde hymself, moore than a curat,	priest
r ende ther was.	For of his ordre he was licenciat.	licensed 220
oon as any glas,	Ful swetely herde he confessioun,	
le been enoynt.	And plesaunt was his absolucioun:	
good poynt; 200	He was an esy man to yeve penaunce	give
e in his heed,	Ther as he wiste to have a good pitaunce.	where he knew he would have a good dinner
a leed;	For unto a povre ordre for to yive	give 225
in greet estaat.	Is signe that a man is wel yshryve;	shown
r prelaat;	For if he yaf, he dorste make avaunt.	give + would dare boast

"The Canterbury Tales" this way: "Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote, The droghte of March hath perced to the roote ..." Fortunately for us, Chaucer's poems were heavily annotated, which helped us learn that "his" was "its," "shoures soote" were really "showers sweet" and "droghte" was "drought."

You may have heard that the stories in "The Canterbury Tales" are rather ribald. Only if you speak the language. There's nothing sensual about annotated Middle English.

The instructor was Bruce A. Rosenberg, young, vigorous, serious about the subject. He worked with us diligently to help us understand the language, and my textbook is filled with my own annotations as we read "The Parlement of Foules" (with that great opening that needs no annotation: "The lyf so short, the craft so long to lerne") and "Troilus and Criseyde" before tackling Chaucer's most famous work, those ribald tales mentioned earlier.

As if struggling with Middle English wasn't enough, we also had to write a term paper. I wrote about the great schism in the Roman Catholic Church. Finding the time to research such a paper proved to be a challenge and I did what a lot of others do during a home football game—use the lull to run errands. I ran my errands in the stacks of Pattee Library. I had the place virtually to myself.

I sorted through the names of popes legal and illegal trying to figure out who was in charge of the Vatican during any given period between 1378 and 1455. My library sources consisted of “The History of the Decline and Fall of the Medieval Papacy,” “The History of the Popes,” “Medieval Panorama,” and “A Popular History of Priestcraft in All Ages and Nations.” Light reading all.

My Chaucer textbook survived several moves, but I don't think I ever looked at it again until I started to write this essay. It stirred many memories of that fall in 1970, but my best memory was of the comment Professor Rosenberg wrote in red ink on my paper underneath the grade, an A:

“This is as clear a presentation as I've seen in an undergraduate paper; good job!”

I still have the paper. It was a memorable fall.

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