

# A ROSE BY ANY OTHER NAME? TRANSLATIONS AND THE READING EXPERIENCE OF LITERARY TEXTS

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**Abstrakt:** Tento článok skúma, ako výber prekladov literárnych textov ovplyvňuje zážitok z čítania a formuje ochotu začínajúcich učiteľov angličtiny ako druhého jazyka používať literatúru vo vyučovaní a sebazvedávaní. Prvá časť tohto príspevku sa zaoberá radikálnym pokusom súčasného britského autora Petra Ackroyda „prerozprávať“ Chaucerove *Canterburské poviedky* pre súčasných čitateľov. Ackroydov „preklad“ sa hodnotí so zameraním na syntax, realie a hlas s cieľom stanoviť hypotézu týkajúcu sa jeho potenciálneho využitia v kurze literatúry v rámci programu prípravy učiteľov na univerzite. Druhá časť príspevku predstavuje prieskum uskutočnený medzi študentmi prvého ročníka bakalárskeho štúdia predmodernej britskej literatúry na Univerzite Komenského s cieľom zistiť, ako študenti hodnotia prínos dvoch rôznych prekladov Chaucera vrátane Ackroydovho.

**Kľúčové slová:** kritika prekladu, Peter Ackroyd, vyučovanie literatúry na hodinách EFL, CLIL na univerzitách, zážitok z čítania

**Abstract:** This paper investigates the ways in which the choice of translations of literary texts affects the reading experience and shapes the willingness of pre-service ESL teachers to use literature in their teaching and self-education. The first part of this paper discusses a radical attempt of contemporary British author Peter Ackroyd to “retell” Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* for a present-day audience. Ackroyd’s “translation” is assessed with a focus on syntax, *realia*, and voice to establish a hypothesis concerning its potential uses in a literature course of a teacher training program at a university. The second part of the paper presents a survey carried out among first-year BA students (pre-service ESL teachers) of pre-modern British Literature at Comenius University to explore students’ appreciation of the benefits of two different translations of Chaucer, including Ackroyd’s.

**Keywords:** translation criticism, Peter Ackroyd, teaching literature in the ESL class, CLIL at universities, reading experience

## INTRODUCTION

“What’s in a name? That which we call a rose / By any other name would smell as sweet.” (Shakespeare, 2.2.46–47) Juliet’s words from the balcony scene of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* may though be valid for love, they certainly do not stand for the translations of literary texts. Not all the translations smell sweet in the teaching practice; some of them are rather thorny.

This paper investigates the ways in which the choice of translations of literary texts affects the reading experience and shapes the willingness of pre-service ESL teachers to use literature in their teaching. In order to address such complex questions, I will use contemporary British author Peter Ackroyd’s translation of Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* as a case study. Following the criticism of Ackroyd’s “retelling” of *The Tales*, the paper will formulate assumptions concerning the popularity of such a modern English adaptation in a literature course of a teacher training program at a university. In order to verify my initial assumptions, I have carried out a survey among first-year BA students of pre-modern British literature at the Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Education, Comenius University in Bratislava to explore the impact of various translations of Chaucer’s text on students’ reading experience. The findings of this survey may help us understand our students’ reading habits and their personal dispositions underlying their efficiency of coping with literary texts.

## ACKROYD’S “RETELLING” OF CHAUCER’S *CANTERBURY TALES*: A CASE STUDY

While the benefits of using literature in the ESL class have long been recognized (Collie and Slater 1987; Ghosn 2002; Javorčíková and Šipošová 2017; Khatib, Rezaei, and Derakhshan 2011; Lazar 1993; Mainland 2013), attempts to teach language through literature are often thwarted by students’ inability to access the literary language. Very often, the access is impeded by the lack of good modernisations or translations of older literary texts which university courses of literature or ESL classes still want to teach as part of the target language culture and a perceived literary canon. Yet, modernisations and translations are needed more urgently than ever due to the rapid changes of the reading

habits of the contemporary generation of pre-service teachers and young ESL learners.<sup>1</sup>

Two major responses have been provided to counter the current tendency affecting reading habits: the radical revision of the literary canon by eliminating “oldies” and reinterpreting the “classics” on the one hand, and the recycling of old works into new translations and adaptations on the other. In the 1980s–90s, the multiculturalist and post-colonial discourse in the USA produced a critical mass of reflections on the nature and necessary revision of the American literary canon, while in Britain the introduction of the National Curriculum in 1988 and its revision in 2014 fuelled debates over the English literary canon taught in schools (Bona 2017; Elliott 2021). Responding to curricular revisions and the new demands of canon formation, translators have been experimenting with radical translations and reinterpretations to address the tastes of an expanding audience.<sup>2</sup>

In the following, I will discuss a radical example of the recycling of old literature (Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*) by Peter Ackroyd. I will assess Ackroyd’s “translation” with a focus on syntax, *realia*, and voice. Peter Ackroyd is an author of fiction and non-fiction (Britannica 2021; Higdon 2005). He is known as a passionate teller of stories in the contemporary British literary scene (Gibson and Wolfreys 2000, 5; Onega and Ackroyd 1996, 208). He is obsessed with biographies of English/British authors and urban history. His enthusiasm for the Middle Ages and London intersects in his works about Chaucer, who inspired his novel *The Clerkenwell Tales* (first published in 2003 by Chatto and Windus), a biography of Chaucer (2004, Chatto and Windus), and the “retelling” of *The Canterbury Tales* (2009, Viking).

“Retelling” is the word with which Ackroyd labels his recycling of Chaucer’s text, which resists any category of textual reworking, such as translation, adaptation, or paraphrase. In his “A Note on the Text”, however, Ackroyd explicitly calls his creation a translation, and explains its preliminary principles.

<sup>1</sup> In the past two decades, a plethora of surveys investigating the changes in the reading habits of college students (typically belonging to Generation Y) were published. As any attempt to summarise the burgeoning research interest in the transformation of reading habits would be futile, I am referring only to relevant research related to students affiliated with higher education in Slovakia, because they constitute my sample: Javorčíková and Kováč 2021; Javorčíková, Šipošová, and Kováč 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Several chapters of *The Routledge Handbook of Literary Translation* address these issues (Washbourne and Van Wyke 2021). For the discourse of retranslations and the literary canon, see the epitomic case of Shakespeare (Gregor 2019).

“There are no laws of translation,” he claims at the outset, “there are no general rules” (Ackroyd 2010, xix).<sup>3</sup> Ackroyd situates his own retelling in the middle of a translation spectrum ranging from “exuberant”, transformative, and “free” translation (exemplified by John Dryden’s late seventeenth-century translation of Chaucer) to “strict” and “faithful” translation (exemplified by Nevill Coghill’s translation of *The Canterbury Tales* from 1951). He “chose to follow neither example” (xix). He considers his own text as the “liberation” of Chaucer’s original, “releasing an older work into the contemporary world” and “infusing [it] with new life” (xix). Ackroyd justifies his own translation strategy by the claim of following Chaucer’s method, while he does not deny some arbitrariness in his decisions:

I thought it best to approach my own task in the manner of Chaucer himself, whose translation of part of the *Roman de la Rose* (to give one of many examples) was faithful to the spirit if not always to the letter of the great original. He seems to have worked on the principle of inspired improvisation, guided by no other criterion than his own good sense. Sometimes he closely follows the text; on other occasions he will add his own gloss or interpretation in order to smooth the path of a difficult passage. [...] I have not included [‘The Tale of Melibee’ and ‘The Parson’s Tale’] in the belief that they will not be missed. (xix–xx and xxii)

Ackroyd unarguably created an inspired translation, but one that significantly intervenes in Chaucer’s text and voice. His retelling pursues the ambitious aim of fusing Chaucer’s taste with that of a contemporary audience, whom Ackroyd still envisions in terms of reading rather than in terms of reading *and* listening. As Ackroyd attempts to adapt *The Canterbury Tales* to a presumably young generation of readers, his textual strategies predominantly involve shortenings and cuts in various forms to adapt the text to the transforming reading habits addressed in earlier parts of this paper.

Concluding from the entirety of Ackroyd’s translation, the most conspicuous intervention of the translator is fragmentation. Ackroyd relentlessly cuts up long syntactic units into short sentences. In modern editions, the first sentence of “The General Prologue” of *The Tales* meanders for eighteen lines, out of which the first eleven lines are a series of subordinated clauses preceding the main clause starting in line 12. Chaucer’s syntax results in suspense, lost entirely in Ackroyd’s translation, as he cuts up the original first twelve lines into eight sentences, anticipating the main clause immediately in the very first sentence:

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<sup>3</sup> All references to Ackroyd’s *The Canterbury Tales: A Retelling* will be made to the Penguin Classics edition of 2010 with page numbers in parentheses.

<p>Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote</p> <p>The droghte of March hath perced to the roote, And bathed every veyne in swich licour</p> <p>Of which vertu engendred is the flour; Whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breeth Inspired hath in every holt and heeth</p> <p>The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne Hath in the Ram his half cours yronne, And smale foweles maken melodye, That slepen al the nyght with open ye</p> <p>(So priketh hem Nature in hir corages), Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages</p>	<p>When April with its sweet-smelling showers Has pierced the drought of March to the root, And bathed every vein (of the plants) in such liquid By which power the flower is created; When the West Wind also with its sweet breath, In every wood and field has breathed life into The tender new leaves, and the young sun Has run half its course in Aries, And small fowls make melody, Those that sleep all the night with open eyes (So Nature incites them in their hearts), Then folk long to go on pilgrimages</p> <p>(Chaucer 2022: lines 1–12)</p>
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In Ackroyd's retelling: When the soft sweet showers of April reach the roots of all things, refreshing the parched earth, nourishing every sapling and every seedling, then humankind rises up in joy and expectation. The west wind blows away the stench of the city, and the crops flourish in the fields beyond the walls. After the waste of winter it is delightful to hear birdsong once more in the streets. The trees themselves are bathed in song. It is a time of renewal, of general restoration. The sun has passed midway through the sign of the Ram, a good time for the sinews and the heart. This is the best season of the year for travellers. That is why good folk then long to go on pilgrimage. (3)

In Ackroyd's translation, restructuring is characteristic not only on the level of sentences, but on the level of larger textual units as well. As mentioned earlier, Ackroyd omits two entire devotional tales written in prose, since he assumes that readers would not miss them. Often he would anticipate or suppress delayed moments, thus decreasing or deleting suspense. Besides the example of the "General Prologue", quoted above, in "The Knight's Tale" Ackroyd deletes the intriguing detail of which of the two knights first noticed Emily (34), a moment that incites the fatal feud between the sworn brothers.

Most typically, Ackroyd works against tension through his explicitations of contents only suggested or implied by Chaucer. To make sure that the contemporary reader does not miss Chaucer's implications, Ackroyd inserts didactic restatements of the original. The most memorable character of *The Tales*, the Wife of Bath, starts her own Prologue with a didactic upbeat unprecedented in the original: "I don't care what anyone says." (147) In the conclusion of her tale, the ugly old crone explicitates the knight's plight in the marriage bed again without any precedent in Chaucer's text: "So, am I in control? [...] May I decide what is best for our marriage?" (175)

Explicitations most frequently appear in form of glossing over medieval *realia*, such as saints, ecclesiastic holidays, and everyday details of medieval life. Ackroyd is a keen expositor of medieval culture. Unlike Chaucer, he does not live in the medieval world, but he constantly mediates it. Ackroyd's medievalism is reconstructed along the stereotypical binary of the bawdy vs. devotional, with frequent shifts to the former at the expense of the latter. As Bloom (2009) also remarks, "Ackroyd is happiest and in his best form with Chaucer's sublime ribaldry: the tales told by the Miller, the Reeve and the Summoner."<sup>4</sup>

Ackroyd's editorial interventions into Chaucer's text affect the narrator's voice most radically. The retelling creates a new narrative voice, which is much more imposing on the reader than Chaucer's. Ackroyd's text insists on repeating the narrator's status and perspective in formulations entirely alien from Chaucer: "I am only the narrator. I cannot be everywhere at once." (9) At the same time, Ackroyd as a narrator is more interventionist: he inserts numerous new dialogues and interactions between Chaucer the narrator and the characters. In the "General Prologue", the translation adds interactions after the description of every pilgrim, occasionally also giving voice to the characters where Chaucer did not intend at all:

He [the Knight's Yeoman] had a horn hanging at his hip from a broad belt of green. "I have often seen such a horn," I [Chaucer the narrator] told him, "in the woods and forests." "Yes," he said, "it rouses the buck." Then he rode on. He was not a chatterer. (6)

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<sup>4</sup> Not everyone agrees; Ackroyd's ribaldry is a matter of taste. Acocella (2009) considers it "downright obscene" as opposed to Chaucer's indelicacy. She provides a selection of Ackroyd's vulgarities with the aim of illustrating Ackroyd's outswearing Chaucer. Reviews of Ackroyd's *Canterbury Tales* definitely oscillate between celebrating Ackroyd's inventiveness in the vocabulary of obscenity and flattening Chaucer's dirty language by an excessive use of the f\* word.

To conclude the major transformations of the retelling, Ackroyd's narrator speaks Chaucer's text, but not Chaucer the narrator's voice.

## TRANSLATIONS AND THE READING EXPERIENCE: A SURVEY

Some assumptions naturally follow from the analysis of Ackroyd's translation. Given the fact that Ackroyd's interventions, glosses, and didacticisms keep his intended readers on a tight leash, while rendering the text more dynamic and updated, firstly I assumed that Ackroyd's version would be more popular among students. Secondly, I also assumed that Ackroyd's text would enhance a positive reading experience. Thirdly, I would conjecture that the availability of such texts would be more motivating for pre-service teachers to use literary works in their own self-education and their teaching practice. The first two assumptions can be checked against a more conventional translation of Chaucer (as a control sample), while the third one requires longitudinal research which I plan to carry out in the future.

In the first phase of research (spring 2022), designed to verify the first two assumptions, I asked my first-year BA students of the English Literature 1 course at the Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Education, Comenius University in Bratislava to read the same parts from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* in two different translations.<sup>5</sup> In the experiment, the relatively close verse translation of A. S. Kline (Chaucer 2007) was used besides Ackroyd's retelling. Subsequently, students were asked to fill in a two-part questionnaire.<sup>6</sup> The first part enquired about their preferences. Students were asked to opt for the translation (1) they would choose for an English Literature seminar and (2) they are more positive about. They also had to scale to what extent the translations determine their idea of Chaucer, as well as their reading experience. The five-scale rating ranged from "not at all" to "radically" with the intermediate values of "a bit", "moderately", and "quite a lot".

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<sup>5</sup> The selected parts included the "General Prologue", "The Miller's Tale", and "The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale".

<sup>6</sup> Participation in the survey was voluntary and anonymous. Thirty-four students (out of thirty-eight) completed the questionnaire. According to the academic protocol, students were informed about the objectives of the research. I emphasised their potential invaluable contribution to the improvement of the English Literature 1 course. Reading excerpts from *The Canterbury Tales* is part of the course curriculum; thus, it was not an additional task. The two translations were read consecutively in two weeks, starting with Kline's.

Still in the first part, students were asked to provide maximum two reasons for their preference and for the potential advantages of the other translation. In the second part of the questionnaire, students were given a list of sixteen statements in order to decide which of them better describes either translation. Statements were related to aspects of comprehension and involvement (ease of reading, interest, enjoyability, understanding the plotline, identification with characters, and triggering emotions), translation (awareness of reading a translation and understanding medieval *realia*), and educational potentials (use for self-education and motivation of knowing more about the original). The survey was based on the self-assessment of students. The statements did not check students' reading efficiency, as it was not a relevant factor in measuring reading experience. In a later phase, however, it will be worth completing the questionnaire with some control of reading efficiency.

Responses to the first part of the questionnaire confirmed my initial hypotheses. 91% of the respondents were more positive about Ackroyd's version, and 88% would prefer using this translation in a university literature course. The commonest reasons for Ackroyd emphasised important aspects of a positive reading experience: the up-to-date language of the translation, the easy and effortless understanding, and its more entertaining quality. In case of Kline's translations, students most commonly referred to its "authenticity of language" (even though reflecting the mistaken belief that Kline has preserved traces of Chaucer's Middle English idiom), its historicity, and its poetic qualities.

Two further questions of the first part of the questionnaire investigated students' translation awareness, more precisely the changes in their own translation awareness. Only 24% believe that the choice of translation does not or does minimally determine their idea of Chaucer, while 73% said that the translation determines their idea of Chaucer moderately or quite a lot. Even more revealing were the answers to the question whether the translation determines the reading experience. Noone opted for "not at all". As opposed to 9% who said it changed minimally, 85% think it did from moderately to radically.

In the second part of the questionnaire, students had to compare the two translations according to sixteen pre-formulated statements. The top ratings of both texts were not surprising. An overwhelming majority of respondents found Ackroyd's version easier to read (100%), clearer in its plot line (100%), more enjoyable (88%), more successful in maintaining interest (85%), more involving (82%), and allowing better identification with characters (79%). Kline's translation was found closer to students' idea of a medieval text (85%), more informative on medieval *realia* (59%), and more revealing about the Middle Ages (56%).

The unexpected and therefore more surprising findings are represented by certain polarising statements answered by low margins of difference. In spite of



Ackroyd's contemporary idiomatic and more outspoken, often strongly obscene language, its potential to embarrass students and to provoke emotions are comparable to Kline's.<sup>7</sup> The two texts almost equally reminded students of reading a translation (10 for Kline and 14 for Ackroyd), but Kline made slightly more students wonder what the original may be like (17 for Kline and 11 for Ackroyd). Finally, in spite of the obvious preferences of Ackroyd, 11 students said they could use Kline better for their own language development vs. 19 for Ackroyd.

In conclusion, the survey confirmed that in spite of the interventions of Ackroyd's retelling in Chaucer's authentic language, voice, and narration, which teachers of literature may well resent, the text has numerous assets to count with in a literature class or in an ESL class using literature. If most of the literature class is spent on the struggles to understand the basic plotline of *The Tales* and the fundamental character features of the pilgrims, Ackroyd certainly does the favour of eliminating these struggles. At the same time, the easier readability, simpler sentence structure, more accessible language should not lead us to discarding translations that more faithfully preserve Chaucer's diction and style in a way that challenges the reading process and experience of students. Teachers do not face an either-or choice. The research, particularly students' free answers in the first part of the questionnaire, revealed that a simultaneous or side-by-side use of several translations yields maximum benefits. In an optional question, the last item of part 1 of the questionnaire, students were asked to reflect on how their overall view of *The Canterbury Tales* changed after having read Ackroyd's translation following Kline's version. Responses not only attested to an enhanced positive reading experience, more involvement in reading, and more attention to details, but also highlighted the educational potentials of a spontaneous co-reading of two translations. Three students said that they are likely to read parts or the whole of *The Tales* again. Further individual answers pointed out the gains of the co-reading of the two translations for personal enrichment and self-development, as it contributed to a better understanding of the period, the realisation that *The Canterbury Tales* is a good work, the discovery of its subtle humour, and the discovery of the "common human".

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<sup>7</sup> Twelve students said that Kline's translation provoked stronger emotions compared to eighteen for Ackroyd. (Four opted for "neither".) Eight respondents found that Kline managed better to make them embarrassed compared to ten for Ackroyd. This statement also resulted in the highest number of uncommitted answers: sixteen students revealed that neither translation embarrassed them, which reflects the sensitivities of the generation rather than the aptitude of the translations to embarrass.

## CONCLUSION

The survey, even in its initial phase, has revealed several results that are worth considering in the teaching of literature for pre-service teachers and that may also have far-reaching consequences on the use of literature in their ESL classes. Firstly, the conventional way of accessing literary works through one privileged translation may be timesaving, but counter-effective to reading efficiency and the reading experience. Using more than one translation can help us better understand our students' reading habits and their personal dispositions underlying their efficiency of coping with literary texts. Secondly, despite the obvious shortcomings of a given translation, it may still be more adequate for teaching certain aspects of culture and language. Finally, enhancing the translation awareness of students provides them with tools that help them and their future pupils to become engaged readers.

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