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Judging a Book: For Megan Cook the Value of a Volume is more than the Words on the Page

Gerry Boyle

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Judging a Book

For Megan Cook the value of a volume is more than the words on the page

By Gerry Boyle '78

Megan Cook doesn't judge a book by its cover. She also considers the historical context, the manner of binding, the illustrations on the contents page, marginalia penciled in by various owners, food stains that are reminders of someone's long ago lunchtime reading.

Cook, assistant professor of English, is an expert in Middle English, Geoffrey Chaucer, and the history of the book. As such, she recently helped Colby acquire a 1602 folio edition of Chaucer's works, not because it's valuable in a rare-books sense, but because it is a literary, historical, and cultural artifact—one that can be read, touched, smelled, explored.

Students ask her, "Can we open this, Professor Cook?"

Her answer: "Of course you can."

Cook's interest in early manuscripts can be traced to a text called *The Book of Margery Kempe*, the story of an English woman who made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem in the early 15th century. Cook was fascinated by the discovery of a long-lost single copy of the manuscript and the ways it had been subsequently reprinted. That led to an interest in the history of editing, a doctoral program

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—Assistant Professor of English Megan Cook

at the University of Pennsylvania, and, among other things, Chaucer—specifically the 1602 edition with its supplemental glossary and illustrated family tree.

Cook is fascinated by the ways the print process in the Renaissance was used to make old books like Chaucer's seem new. That became her dissertation and is the subject of a book she hopes to finish writing this year. Why was other material—love poems, the Ten Commandments—bound into original works of the time? What does that tell us about the people who lived at that time?

Opening the 1602, Cook points to arithmetic scrawled as a reader carefully calculated how old the book was in 1751, to the page where previous owners' names were crossed out and replaced. “There's a couple of pages where I'm pretty sure someone was eating while they were reading. Grease stains—you wonder what was going on with that.”

She points out that this book is very much like the Chaucer that Shakespeare would have read, spreading it out on the desk as he penned *Troilus and Cressida*. The family tree includes an illustration of the tomb of Chaucer's son, Thomas, a very successful politician, rather than Geoffrey Chaucer's modest tomb in Westminster Abbey. “One of the most

interesting things this book is doing,” Cook said, “is showing an articulated relationship between past and present.”

It's an interdisciplinary book, she says, with references to 15th-century coins and words in German and Arabic, Greek and Roman. “It's a reading that asks readers to make connections across what we would today think about as boundaries in different fields,” Cook said.

But Cook has held off on digging too deeply into the Chaucer, because she wants students to do their own exploring. Students in her History of the Book course will dig into Colby's 1493 edition of the *Nuremberg Chronicle* and the multilingual Bible known as *Hutter's Polyglot* (both in Special Collections), as well as studying the Chaucer.

“Seeing that moment where the idea of an old book comes off the page and becomes a three-dimensional object,” she said. “I think it's an important shift in students' perspectives.”

“One thing I'd like to do is read old books by candlelight, but that's not going to happen for very good reasons,” Cook said. “But you can give students a sensory understanding of what it means to engage with the book that will hopefully make them more critical users of media of all kinds. I think that's a really powerful thing to do.”

Left: Assistant Professor of English Megan Cook, center, makes a point during a lively discussion of the history of books.



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TWO PAGES: MANY CLUES

Assistant Professor of English Megan Cook helped us “read” the title pages of this 1602 edition of the works of Chaucer, which she helped Colby purchase with the intention of using the venerable and much-read book as a teaching tool. Here is what Cook sees:

This version of Chaucer's family tree depicts some high-ranking individuals, including King Henry IV and Henry VII of England. The connection is through Chaucer's sister-in-law, Katherine Swynford, who was first the mistress and later the wife of John of Gaunt.

The tomb at the bottom of the page is the very fancy one belonging to Chaucer's son, Thomas Chaucer, and his wife, Maude. Chaucer's own tomb was the first in what is now Poet's Corner in Westminster Abbey, but engraver John Speed chose to depict the much more elaborate one belonging to Chaucer's son.

John Speed signed the engraving with his monogram, an interlocking I and S. Speed also provided engravings for the King James Version of the Bible and created a widely admired series of maps of the shires of England.

The portrait resembles those of Chaucer found in manuscripts of Thomas Hoccleve's poem *The Regiment of Princes*. That means the engraver, John Speed, must have had a manuscript of Hoccleve's poem handy when he made this image. The caption below explains that Hoccleve (“Occleve”) “lived in [Chaucer's] time, and was his Scholar.”



This was the sixth edition of Chaucer's collected works printed. They first appeared in 1532. The collected works of Chaucer were the largest collection of poetry printed in Renaissance England.

The title page calls Chaucer, who died in 1400, "ancient," a term that in the period is usually reserved for Greek and Roman writers.

The note at the top reads "1602 Novemb[er] xij. price . ix s[hillings]." This is a typical price for a book of this size in the early 17th century, and would be about \$120 in today's money.

The title pages of Renaissance books were a form of marketing. This one lays out six different reasons why this version of the works is different from the last, which had been published just four years earlier, in 1598.

Item number six describes the two new pieces included in this edition of the works. The A.B.C. is genuinely Chaucer's, but "Jack Upland" was definitely not written by Chaucer. The process of establishing Chaucer's canon was long and complex, and early modern editions of his writings include many apocryphal pieces.

Owners have always written their names in their books. Here, a later owner has crossed out previous inscriptions by John Dodesworth stating his ownership of the book, but left the signature in the bottom margin.

The same Latin proverb is written in the center compartment and in the bottom margin. It has no special connection to Chaucer. In Latin, it reads "Adam, Samsonem, Lot, david, sir salomonem: fæmina decepit, quis modo tutus erit." In English: "Adam, Sampson, Lot, David, Sir Solomon: woman deceived them, who is safe?"

Readers often use blank space in early books for arithmetic and other notes. Here, it looks as though a reader from the 18th century has done a quick subtraction in order to calculate the age of the book.

