

# Reading medieval colour: The case of blue in *The Canterbury Tales*

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Contemporary readers struggle with the terms of colour in medieval literary texts due to the difference in our colour systems. The current dominant colour model is hue-based. The approach of this model is to perceive colour as part of the electromagnetic radiation, which is measurable in wavelength. Therefore, elementary colour terms in contemporary language predominantly correspond with prismatic colours. As a result, interpreting medieval colour terms with a contemporary hue-dominated perspective creates numerous misunderstandings. In the Middle Ages, the fundamental guidelines for colour perception were luminescence, surface reflectivity, and colour intensity. In medieval literary texts, colour terms frequently described the materiality of the colour, the tactile qualities of the colour, and the general appearance (e.g. glittering or matt). In *The Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer, as discussed in this paper, there are four terms used to describe the colour blue, of which only one can be identified as a hue term. Accordingly, this paper will analyse the terms that portrayed blue in *The Canterbury Tales* from the perspective of medieval colour measures and explain how they are different from the colour blue, as we know it today.

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## Introduction

All colours can be described through the aspects of hue, brightness, and saturation. Hue is a term that describes colour as being different from another colour (e.g. blue as being different from yellow). The definition of colour in this sense relies on the measurement of wavelength [1 p27]. Hue corresponds to prismatic colours, which is the property of light determined by spectral positions [2 p224]. Brightness defines a colour in terms of the degree of its luminosity – its lightness as opposed to its darkness. Brightness is occasionally defined as an indication of the ‘degree of surface reflectivity’ present in the object of any hue [2 p224]. Finally, saturation describes a colour in terms of the degree of its intensity and brilliance. Saturation reflects the ‘relative dullness-vividness of a hue, determined by the amount of its admixture with either white or black’ [2 p224]. Saturation primarily relates to the pigmentary colour. It depends on the tinctorial qualities of pigments and colourants, their colourfastness, their durability, and the degree of the intensity of the colour irrespective of the hue. It is well-established that ancient and medieval textile dyeing processes, which used natural colourants, could result in all sorts of colour hues.

In most contemporary languages, basic colour terms describe a colour as a hue and coincide considerably with prismatic colours, which is the reason why the prevalence of hue terms is often blamed on Newton. However, the idea that colour was equal to its hue was rooted in the Renaissance [1 p32]. In the Middle Ages, most colour terms in Indo-European languages defined colour by either brightness or saturation and rarely by hue [1 p33]. Medieval treatises spoke of pigmentary colour, and the recipes focused on the processes of pigment preparation. On the contrary, Alberti's treatises from the Renaissance proposed colour systems: the colour of fire (red), air (perse), water (green), and the earth (ashes).

### ***The difficulties in the interpretations of historical colours***

Michel Pastoureau repeatedly stressed that there was no place for blue, which only emerged around the twelfth century, in the colour systems that dominated the Antiquity and the Middle Ages. Pastoureau depicted this fact through the lack of interest (*désintérêt*) in blue in the Antiquity and the Middle Ages periods. However, blue was widely used as a pigmentary colour at the time, and some blue pigments (i.e. lapis lazuli and indigo) enjoyed enormous prestige [1 p30]. Additionally, uncertainty exists around the translation of most Biblical colour terms [3 p19]. These complexities originated from the interpretations of historic colours as hues. All efforts to determine the essence of the historic colour – through identifying its meaning at the hue level – have been anachronistic and misleading.

Similarly, the ancient Greek colour terms are misinterpreted when approached with the current hue-dominated perspective. In his *Studies on Homer and the Homeric Age* (1858), Gladstone was one of the first to realise that we were far from 'being able to render the language of the ancients for colour into our own with the confidence, which we can feel in almost every other department of interpretation' [4 p458]. The chromatic language of ancient Greece inclined towards 'the vast predominance of the most crude and elemental forms of colour, black and white, over every other' and the predilection to use 'the same word to denote not only different hues or tints of the same colour but colours which, according to us, are essentially different' [4 p458]. Upon further analysis, Gladstone noticed that some colour terms 'refer to light, and not to colour, and bear the sense of sparkling', while others 'indicate a dark hue but cannot be referred to any one of the known principal colours' [4 p472]. Gladstone's study has highlighted how the ancient Greeks perceived colours on the darkness/lightness axis and focused on the aspects of brightness and saturation. Furthermore, intensely coloured objects of different hues were categorised using the same colour term.

Contrary to the current widely accepted approach of perceiving colour as a hue, in earlier periods, languages used words that described the 'complex sensation of colour' [5 p246]. Therefore, interpreting historic colour words in a contemporary language often requires descriptions that involve chromatic aspects but are not limited to them e.g. 'a dark murky hue' for *fuscus*, 'chestnut colour' for *spadix*, 'brown with a touch of gold' for *fulvus*, and 'something between red and black' for *rubidus* [5 pp246–247]. The abovementioned Latin colour terms can be loosely interpreted as brown in today's hue-dominated colour naming system. Ancient Greeks and Romans were not colour-blind – as claimed by some evolutionary theories – they were hue-blind [5 p247].

A similar approach to colour is also typical for medieval culture. Additionally, a special focus is placed on light, which played a crucial role in the aesthetics of the Middle Ages. The notions of *lux* and *lumen* were introduced in that period, which had an impact on medieval colour perception. In Book XVI of *Etymologies*, Isidor of Seville described a variety of stones and metals, which made this part of his opus a rich display of colours and textures as seen by the medieval person. It is interesting to observe how the author described the appearance and features of natural objects through the abovementioned idea of light, which is typical for medieval culture. Almost every natural substance described in this book is

judged through either presence or absence of inner light (alternatively referred to as heat or fire). Sometimes, like in the entry for *alumen* (alum) [6 XVI, ii, 2], the conclusion was drawn from the name of the substance itself: ‘Alum (*alumen*) is named from “light” (*lumen*) because it furnishes brightness to the cloth being dyed.’ Several substances are mentioned as either having inner heat or being capable of revealing heat once touched, squeezed, or rubbed. Some of these examples are quite comprehensible to the contemporary perspective, like the description of pyrites (*pyrites*) that ‘give off sparkles’ and ‘burn the hand of anyone holding it tightly’ [6 XVI, iv, 3]. Others are quite surprising, like the purplish or violet amethyst (*amethystus*) that is said to be able to ‘gently give out a sort of little flame’ [6 XVI, ix, 1].

## The evolution of the English colour vocabulary

### **General aspects of historical colour in English**

Historic English colour terms experienced a similar path of evolution as described above. This is evident through the existence of the lightness–darkness opposition in Old English literature [7 p175], which often acquired metaphysical dimensions of symbolically evoking heaven and hell, joy, and sadness, respectively [8 p17].

For the Anglo-Saxons, colours were the visual attributes of objects – many Old English words that were typically interpreted as colour terms – were ‘appearance’ words [8 p18]. In addition to the lightness–darkness scheme, another significant factor in colour perception in the ancient and medieval periods was surface reflectivity. The characteristics included in the chromatic term were the ‘tactile, light-reflecting (or light-absorbing) qualities, specifying whether it is fully saturated, dappled, glittering, or shiny’ [9 p5]. For example, the colour term *brun* was specifically used with reference to well-polished metal surfaces as well as ‘helmet, a sword-edge, the waves of the sea, the feathers of the Phoenix and an Ethiopian (*brune leode*)’ [5 p247]. These objects did not have the ‘brown’ colour in common. The common factor was the quality of glistening in the sunlight/brilliance (i.e. a high level of surface reflectivity). In relation to this, it is not surprising to find fascination with the glittery nature of surfaces of minerals and other natural objects described in Isidor’s *Etymologies* (Book XVI). For example, ‘gold flecks’ are observed in sapphire (*sapphirus*) – a stone that is not likely to appear to have golden sparkles to today’s viewers [6 XVI, ix, 2].

The contemporary hue-based colour perception is substantially disconnected from the materiality of colour, which was another factor utilised in the historic colour naming process. Since all medieval colours originated from natural sources, their hue aspects were unstable and inconsistent [10 p5]. Therefore, medieval colour terms often referred to the material source of colour (i.e. pigment, dyestuff, colourant) rather than the hue potentially obtainable from it. Treating fabric with natural dyes often resulted in a variety of hues.

Chronologically, the semantic shift from the brightness/saturation terms to hue colour terms started in the Middle English period [2 pp223–224, 232]. Of course, some of the Old English (c. 600–1150) colour terms were ‘minimally conceptualised’; however, hue domination started to manifest itself more prominently in the Middle English period (c. 1150–1500) [2 p225]. The association of the brightness aspect was phased out from the Old English colour terms (with a few exceptions) and was converted to predominantly hue terms in the Middle English period.

### ***The evolution of blue***

The Old English term *haewen* (often interpreted as blue) was practically absent from Middle English, where it was replaced by *blew(e)*. The etymology of the term was traced back to the Old French *blau* (or *blo*), descended from the Latin *blavus*, which in turn derived from the Germanic *blewaz*, and, earlier still, from the Indo-European *bhle-wo* [2 p230]. Although the Latin language used the term *caeruleus* for blue, the Vulgar Latin introduced to the people conquered by the Roman Empire absorbed a Germanic term *blaveus* (*blavius*, *blavus*). The vernacular form of *bleu* resulted from the influences of Gallo-Romance, Germanic languages, and possibly the introduction of Old Norse *blá-r* (blue, dark) [10 p122]. In her study of English colour terms, Alice Pratt also suggested that there was an influence of the Old Norse. She believed that the colour term *blo* was not a French borrowing and was used to describe pale bluish, greenish, or greyish shades, often applied to the complexion of a bruised or ill person, or smoke: ‘Langland’s vocabulary ... contains ... no real blue, for “*blo*” as used by him means “livid” – Old Norse *blar*, not Old French *bleu*’ [11 p2].

The Middle English *blew(e)*, or *bleu*, was first introduced as a basic term shortly before the year 1300 [2 p230]. There were numerous spelling forms of the Anglo-French *bleu* (e.g. *blau*, *blew*, *blieus*, *bliu*, *bloe*, *blou*, *blu*, *blue*, *bluef*, *bluw*, *blwe*, *blef*, *bleif*, *blief*). Furthermore, the chromatic range of this colour term was all equally varied and disconnected (e.g. discoloured, livid, bluish, blue, azure; blue-grey, ashen, grey, pale, unstained; fair, golden, tawny; dark, stern, gloomy) [10 p123]. It remains uncertain as to whether this was a pure hue term. The term was occasionally used – depending on the context – as a brightness term referring to paleness and discolouration. The reference to the blue colour is evident in the uses of *blewe* or *bleu*, which as Middle English hue terms were applied to all sorts of blue-coloured objects like ‘flowers, pigment, dye and enamel, cloth and clothing, and skin or complexion affected by a blow or severe cold’ [2 p230].

### ***Chaucer’s colour vocabulary***

Chaucer’s use of colour words highlights many features that support the abovementioned outline of the evolution of colour terms from brightness/saturation to hue terms. His literary works are also notable, chronologically, because they were created during the shift to hue colour terms. While most of the Old English poetry displayed a mastery in the usage of colour terms, which described the aspects of pale and dark, by Chaucer’s time, it was a widespread practice for French, Italian, and English poets to choose basic colour terms to ‘create a riot of color’ [12 p45]. Chaucer’s usage of certain colour lexemes illustrated their decline in Middle English, as compared to Old English – words like *dun* and *falow*, which were quite popular Old English brightness/saturation terms, occurred only several times in Chaucer [12 p42]. Statistically, Chaucer used most of his hue adjectives in poetry [12 p48]. Chaucer’s basic colour terms and most frequently used colour words in *The Canterbury Tales* were hue lexemes of English origin – *whit*, *reed*, *grene*, *blak*, *yelow*, and *grey*. The extent of his colour vocabulary was exceptional. A study by Alice Pratt (1898) revealed that while Langland had only used 12 colour terms, Gower had used 15 terms, and Chaucer had used 42 terms [11 p4]. As a colourist, Chaucer occupied the leading position among his contemporaries, with his colour vocabulary only lower than Elizabethan writers [11 p4].

Chaucer’s categorisation of blue was unusual for many reasons. The colour, blue, in *The Canterbury Tales* was represented exclusively by French borrowings: *asur*, *blew*, *pers(e)*, and *waget*, which should not be surprising considering the author’s French origin and familiarity with the court life of England, where the French language was influential at the time [12 pp41–42]. Chaucer’s contemporary, Gower, who was equally familiar with the French language, used ‘from the Romance languages only 4 of his 14

colour terms, as contrasted with Chaucer's 17 Romance words out of 42' [11 p3]. According to Biggam's study (1993), Chaucer used an average of five synonyms per one colour category [12 p43]. Since Old English terms for blue (*haewen*, *waeden*, and *blaewen*) were generally abandoned by the speakers of Middle English, Chaucer's use of French loans allowed him to fill the category of blue with approximately the same amount of colour terms as other colour categories. He also used at least one or two French colour terms in other colour categories [12 p45].

The development of heraldry, sumptuary laws, guilds, and a centralised religious and secular government 'stabilised' the symbolism of medieval colours in the Romanesque and Gothic period [9 p7]. One of the blue terms used by Chaucer – *asure* – was a well-established heraldic colour code in Europe. On one occasion, Chaucer used it in the description of the wedding gift in *The Clerk's Tale* [13 line 254–5]: Of gemmes, set in gold and in asure, / Brooches and rynges, for Grisildis sake. On another occasion, it was used in the colourful description of the Chauntecleer (rooster) in *The Nun's Priest's Tale* [13 line 2862–64]. This line was remarkable since Chaucer's general descriptions of wild birds, hunting birds, or domestic fowl are conventionally monotonous throughout his oeuvre. It was suggested that Chauntecleer's colours allude to the heraldic codes of Henry Bolingbroke, Duke of Hereford [12 p47]. This seems like a reasonable conclusion as in the description of Chauntecleer the term *asure* is closely followed by *gold* – its typical heraldic colour opponency.

If the colour terms were not heraldic codes with clear allusions to the values attached to them, or dyestuff terms with the obvious reference to the saturation and colourfastness of high-quality textiles, colour symbolism within medieval literary texts should be analysed through the prism of its brightness/saturation. A positive symbolism is attributed to brightness/saturation colour terms, while a negative symbolism is connected to paleness/darkness colour terms. For example, a yellow colour often had a negative connotation due to its connection to Judas and has been used as a stigmatising code since medieval times. In medieval literary texts, yellow often indicated jealousy. On the other hand, yellow hair combined with brightness indicated beauty in both men and women. When deprived of the quality of brightness, however, yellow hair indicates ill health or ugliness. Similarly, the augmented surface reflectivity of the object establishes the positive symbolism to it, irrespective of the hue. The shininess factor could reverse an otherwise established symbolism; therefore, grey can also be attractive when shiny [12 pp51–52].

Colour terms connected to garment descriptions, names of dyestuffs, and coloured textiles were one of Chaucer's favourite subjects [11 p4]. In this sense, *The Canterbury Tales*, a 'parade of many varied characters' was certainly remarkable [12 p48]. Statistically, the most frequently used colour terms regarding clothing were *blak* (18 occurrences), followed by *grene* (16), *whit* (14), and *reed* (8 occurrences, five of which describe hose), black, green, white, and red respectively [12 p47]. Since textile colour terms in medieval literary texts were closely connected and often synonymous with dye terms, symbolically, they suggested wealth and a high status [12 p47]. The following is a list of the four descriptions of blue-coloured garments in the portraits of four different characters in *The Canterbury Tales* [13], which illustrates the use of saturation and hue colour terms to highlight the symbolic hierarchy of characters:

- In sangwyn and in pers he clad was al, (*General Prologue*, v. 439, describes Doctor of Medicine)
- A long surcote of pers upon he hade, (*General Prologue*, v. 617, describes Reeve)
- Al in a kirtel of a lyght waget, (*The Miller's Tale*, v. 3321, describes Absolon, the parish clerk)
- A whit cote and a blew hood wered he, (*General Prologue*, v. 564, describes Miller's garment)

In these descriptions, the reader can observe the gradation in the saturation of the textile colour. Considering the functioning and symbolism of medieval coloured garments, such gradation can be related to the social status of the wearer. Textile colour terms *pers* and *waget* describe the most expensive fabrics of intense blue, purplish-blue, or dark blue hues dyed with woad (*Isatis tinctoria*). The first garment description pertains to the portrait of the Doctor of Medicine, a wealthy, respectable member of society. The description of the highly saturated blue garment of the Doctor is heightened by another medieval textile colour term (*sangwyn*) equally connected to fabrics of intense colour (red). Reeve, a person lower in rank to the Doctor of Medicine but also quite wealthy, wears the garment described by the word *pers* – a high saturation textile colour term. The gradation is observable in both the saturation of the coloured textiles, expressed by the dyestuff colour terms, and in the quantity of coloured fabric. The Doctor is fully clothed (*'clad was al'*) in highly saturated red and blue garments, while Reeve has only one garment item (*'a long surcoat'*) of saturated coloured fabric. The parish clerk named Absolon wears the kirtel, and the textile colour term which describes it – *waget* – is preceded by the word light (*'lyght'*), which presumably tones down the chromatic intensity of the fabric described. Finally, the Miller, the fourth Canterbury Tales character dressed in blue, wears a *'blew hood'*. This garment item is not described by a textile colour term. The colour term *blew*, as previously mentioned, was a predominantly hue term of Middle English. Literary texts of the period also used this colour term to refer to the sky. Therefore, it is likely the only coloured part of the Miller's outfit is a pale blue hood. With this approach, the author created chromatic hierarchy by describing the outfits of characters in colour terms that signify different saturation or colour intensity. This served to accentuate the social hierarchy of the characters, as the ones with a higher social standing were dressed in garments of higher saturation (which we can learn through the textile colour terms). Additionally, the amount of coloured fabric worn by the pilgrims in *The Canterbury Tales* indicates their position in society.

## Conclusions

The contemporary colour perception assumes that hue and colour are identical. Nevertheless, it is obvious that brightness and saturation can change the appearance of a colour, irrespective of the hue. If we imagine a pale green cloth and the bright green of spring verdure, we will understand how these two are different visual sensations.

Since colour words in modern languages refer almost exclusively to hue, yellow and green are perceived as different colours. Figure 1 shows the word 'colour' in yellow written on the green background. Indeed, yellow, and green look different if their saturation/brightness is maximised (Figure 1, right). However, when it is minimised (Figure 1, left) and if seen from a distance, the inscription will be practically indistinguishable, and the two different hues will look almost identical.



Figure 1: The words 'colour' written in yellow on a green background with varying saturation levels.

Similarly, the glittery and matt surfaces of the same hue will look different to the viewer and will most likely evoke different emotional reactions.

Therefore, the hue-dominated colour perception diverts our attention from other aspects of colour (saturation, brightness, surface reflectivity of coloured objects, and colour materiality) and makes us overlook the fact that colour is a complex sensation.

The aspects of brightness, saturation, and surface reflectivity should be the core factors to take into consideration while interpreting and translating historic colour terms.

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