

Sabbatical Report

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I am deeply grateful to SSU for providing me with the funding to take a one-semester sabbatical at full pay in Fall 2015. Over that semester, I managed to reach all of the major goals I set for the sabbatical. The time away from my usual work allowed me to further my research, maintain connections with scholars in my field, and keep up with exciting recent academic developments, all of which will benefit my classroom teaching. My sabbatical has given me deeper scholarly expertise, the chance to finish and start meaningful projects, and a renewed sense of the possibilities of fruitfully combining research and teaching. This sabbatical has allowed me to keep my teaching and research in dialogue with my students', and our culture's, investment in the medieval, balancing my specialized scholarly projects with examinations that consider the larger stakes of engaging with the European Middle Ages.

Projects Completed:

In my sabbatical project description, I proposed four projects, listed below. I have completed these projects or an equivalent version of them during the Fall 2015 sabbatical time:

A. Proposed Projects:

- 1) Turn conference paper on truth telling in medieval poetry into article and submit for publication.
- 2) Turn conference paper on Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess* and ocean ecology into an article and submit for publication.
- 3) Develop course on medieval literature and ecology.
- 4) Develop writing plan for a book *Weird Chaucer* that introduces students to Chaucer's works via a range of recent critical perspectives.

B. Projects Completed:

In each of these cases, I have completed or made significant progress on the proposed items.

1-2) I decided to work on one more substantial article rather than two shorter articles. I researched, developed, drafted, and completed an article on Geoffrey Chaucer's (c. 1340-1400) first poem, *The Book of the Duchess*, in relation to medieval and contemporary attitudes about the ocean. During my sabbatical leave research, I discovered a completely new angle on this project: I investigated medieval writing about oceans and found ways that Chaucer's poetic imagination of the ocean significantly overlaps with discussions of the ocean in medieval texts of natural lore (what we could call "scientific" writing or "medieval nature writing.") I completed a 12,000 word draft, shared it with colleagues in the field, revised it based on their suggestions, polished the prose, and submitted it for

consideration by a major journal in the field in January 2016. I am awaiting a decision from the journal as of the writing of this document in May 2016.

3) Through reading related to article research, and through additional reading of scholarship, literature, and primary sources, I developed a new course: English 481, *The Medieval Wilderness*. This class combines 1) an introduction to late medieval British literature with 2) an introduction to ways of reading literature that focus on “nature” (broadly and critically conceived) and that draw on ecological concepts (“eco-criticism”). In this course, students interested in medieval literature are invited to think in new ways about those old texts, while students interested in ecological topics are invited to consider the surprising relevance of medieval literature to contemporary concerns. The “wilderness” in the course’s title is meant to be a broadly provocative term, of course, since scholars have argued for the contingency and constructed nature of the concept of “wilderness” itself. The course features several literary texts I had not taught before along with a set of critical and theoretical readings drawn from work I encountered during my sabbatical. The course also includes a brief study of J. R. R. Tolkien’s medieval-inspired *Lord of the Rings* books as a 20th century reaction to the medieval (the links are quite direct, since Tolkien, an Oxford academic, studied, translated, and edited several of the original medieval texts assigned for the course). I taught the course to 29 upper-division English majors in Spring 2016. Although I have not received SETE results for the course, the general impression given by students is that it was an interesting, challenging, and relevant addition to the roster of literature courses offered by the department. From my perspective, the course was both challenging and rewarding to teach.

4) In perhaps the most exciting development, I decided to take a collaborative approach to the idea of creating a fresh and compelling introductory book about Chaucer. If the goal is really to show a variety of perspectives, why not involve other scholars? And if the goal is to be broadly introductory, why not make it an open access resource? From the end of Spring 2015 through to the end of my sabbatical (and now beyond), I have helped plan, lead, and manage the production of the *Open Access Companion to the Canterbury Tales*, a resource that will offer high-quality scholarly introductions to first-time readers of Chaucer for free online. This is an in-progress, massive undertaking and, to my knowledge, the first completely open-access companion volume to the *Canterbury Tales*. The *OA Companion* will be made up of separate chapters written by individual scholars, each of which introduces an aspect of Chaucer’s work in relation to an important historical context, topical focus, or theoretical approach. While many excellent “companion” volumes already exist, this one will be set apart by being *truly open access* (free of charge and released online) and by using a distinct set of editorial principles that will allow for both fresh scholarly approaches and also broad accessibility to a non-specialist readership. This project has been especially sustaining, since I have been able to collaborate with an international network of Chaucer scholars. Although this project is ongoing, the vital sabbatical time in Fall 2015 allowed me to work with colleagues to create foundational documents *at a crucial moment* and to do the significant communications and outreach work needed to give the project momentum.

Additional Work:

In addition to the projects listed above, I also read consistently, reviewing or freshly encountering works of medieval literature and scholarship.

I also researched, wrote, and delivered a roundtable conference paper, “The Politics of Scraps: A Foray on Texts as Agents in the Medieval English Parliament,” for the panel “Books Doing Things,” at the 4th Biennial Meeting of the BABEL Working Group, University of Toronto, October 9-11 2015. This conference paper bridged the gap between earlier studies of mine in English bureaucracy and institutional history and newer focuses on ecocritical approaches and the “new materialism.”

I also served, with payment (and with approval by SSU’s President), as an external reviewer for the CSU Fresno English department’s B.A, M.A., and M.F.A. programs, which involved a multi-day visit to CSUF to work with a team of reviewers. The sabbatical allowed me the additional flexibility needed to take on this project alongside my research obligations.

In addition to the above tasks, I remained present in departmental life when necessary. While on sabbatical, I was able to help the English Department move its Program Review Self Study document (written AY 2014-15) through the “closing the loop” process with the Dean of Arts and Humanities and the Arts and Humanities Curriculum Committee. I also attended the English department’s fall retreat and kept up necessary long-term advising, thesis supervision, and recommendation-letter writing duties as needed.

Respectfully submitted,

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