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Thoughts on Directing NEH *Canterbury Tales* Seminars for Secondary School Teachers, 2008–2014

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Thoughts on Directing NEH *Canterbury Tales* Seminars for Secondary School Teachers, 2008-2014

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Abstract

This essay reflects on our experiences in directing four National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Seminars for K–12 teachers on *The Canterbury Tales*, and on the value of basing these Seminars in London. In light of the political pressures that led the NEH to require that Seminars now be conducted in the United States, we encourage our American colleagues to propose Chaucer Seminars at U.S. locations.

The National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), as described on its government webpage, “is an independent federal agency created in 1965. It is one of the largest funders of humanities programs in the United States.” The Endowment’s record of Funded Projects indicates that, from 1984 to 2014, the Division of Education Programs sponsored twenty-two programs for K–12 Educators that touched on Chaucer. Fourteen of these programs were Summer Seminars and Institutes focused on *The Canterbury Tales* (see Appendix). It is a remarkable record of support that reflects not just the NEH’s commitment to the study of early literature but school teachers’ specific interest in reading and teaching *The Canterbury Tales*. The NEH supported Chaucer Seminars because its staff and reviewers considered the poetry worth studying, and because teachers applied for the Seminars in large numbers and evaluated them glowingly.¹ The personal statements of the over 200 applicants to the Seminar we directed in 2014 documented the deep interest of many K–12 teachers in engaging with Chaucer. It is not just us: we have not met a participant in one of Lee Patterson’s NEH Chaucer Seminars at Yale who did not describe it as a transformative intellectual experience.

Each of us has a long history of reading Chaucer with school teachers. In 1988 and 2008, with support from the Illinois Humanities Council (IHC), David organized two-day teacher workshops on *The Canterbury Tales* at Eastern Illinois University; in 2004 and 2005, he directed weekend IHC Seminars for School Teachers and Librarians at a lodge in a state park, reading five of the *Canterbury Tales* that treat love and marriage. In 1989, Susanna joined Jay Ruud in Aberdeen, South Dakota, to co-direct a five-week NEH regional Institute for twenty-five K–12 teachers in the Dakotas, Minnesota, Nebraska, and Iowa; in 1991, with the support of the Ohio Humanities Council, she directed a two-day set of public performances and teacher workshops on *The Canterbury Tales* at Kent State University. It was with this experience that, from 2008 to 2014, we co-directed four four-week K–12 *Canterbury Tales* Seminars based in London, in line with long-standing NEH policy of encouraging subject-appropriate international settings. The vast body of the Seminar meetings was spent in close study of *The Canterbury Tales*, but we gave time each week to visiting places that shed light on Chaucer’s personal, cultural, and intellectual life.

The Daily Working of the Seminar

Part of what was satisfying about directing the *Canterbury Tales* Seminars is characteristic of NEH K–12 Seminars and what has led many organizers to repeat their programs every two years: the stimulation that comes from working tightly with self-selected, highly motivated adult learners who bring distinctive intellectual and pedagogical skills to bear on a common subject. Unconstrained by grades, evaluations, exams, and essays, teachers create a meeting space with a tone unlike any we have found in university classrooms.² We did not have to wonder whether participants would be prepared for discussions and presentations; of course they were, and so we could focus on interaction that prioritized engagement with the poetry, challenged assumptions about medieval attitudes, and

¹ Seventeen Seminars and Institutes for Higher Education Faculty have touched on Chaucer. Seminar directors include Larry Benson, Talbot Donaldson (2), Jerome Taylor, Russell Peck, Robert Hanning (2), Donald Howard, Jane Chance, Martin Stevens (2), Robert Edwards, and Susanna Fein/David Raybin. Institute directors include Hugh Richmond, David Benson, Giuseppe Mazzotta, and Elizabeth Robertson.

² Patterson called the K–12 Chaucer Seminars his favorite classes.

experimented with alternate ways of thinking about Chaucer's subjects and ideas. This might sound trite—isn't it the kind of thing teachers always do?—but the circumscribed environment of adjacent rooms, shared kitchens, and full-day meetings and activities did more than just intensify concentration; it promoted comity, tolerance, and intellectual respect among people diverse in age; gender and social background; relationship and family status; personal, educational, and professional experience; and institutional clienteles and duties (along, at times, with all the instances of petty annoyance one can expect in a closed circle). Teachers from inner-city schools with high school-lunch eligibility and from elite private academies where hunger is a non-issue; from underfunded rural schools and high-tech suburban schools; and from what Peter J. Rentfrow et al. have called the “friendly & conventional” Great Plains and South, “relaxed & creative” West, and “temperamental & uninhibited” New England and Middle Atlantic necessarily appreciated how their different resources, responsibilities, and demeanors informed each other's professionalism (2013, esp. 1005–6). The small size of the Seminars (sixteen teachers) enabled small-group study, including many evenings of group reading with a program director, and allowed for regular one-on-one meetings with each teacher, both formal and, quite often, spontaneous. Friendship groups tended to be elastic and accommodating, with space also for participants to be alone. One person's particular interest—a prostitutes' graveyard, for example, or a chic Bengali restaurant—led to new experiences for many others.

The Seminars met for four weeks, and everyone involved worked long and hard. Three-hour morning discussion sessions started off seventeen of the days—enough time to treat the entire *Canterbury Tales*—and these were followed by group events on many afternoons and evenings, along with two rounds of individual conferences. Visits to Chaucer-related places outside of London filled three additional days. In preparation for the discussion sessions, participants read the text in Larry Benson's *The Canterbury Tales Complete* (2000), along with articles and chapters associated with each day's tale(s). The textbook and pdfs of two or three articles per tale were distributed prior to the Seminar, allowing participants to prepare in advance to the extent that they wished. *Canterbury Tales* reading assignments were shorter at first, to allow time for getting accustomed to Middle English, and grew more substantial as the month progressed.

A typical morning began with a seventy-five-minute introduction to a tale. The directors led these sessions for the first week, modeling the text-based analytic approaches we find most fruitful. After that, two-person teacher groups took over for eight mornings. Groups were encouraged to present the material in whatever way they preferred. In most cases, the teachers demonstrated participatory methods they use in their high-school classrooms, but occasionally we would listen to a presenter's research-based lecture. We have vivid memories of a presentation on the Holocaust that brought a powerful contemporary perspective to the *Prioress's Tale*. The directors led the final sessions, so as to give participants time to work on individual projects (an NEH requirement).

After a short break, we would resume discussion for another ninety minutes, with the directors filling in blanks and bringing alternate scholarly approaches into the discussion. As a general rule, we avoided dwelling on our own interpretations of the tales—participants had pdfs of much of our Chaucer scholarship that they could read as they wished—but pointed out cruxes and other textual moments that we considered particularly revealing or problematic. The point was to encourage close analysis (facilitated by much reading aloud) and unscripted response. When ideas got a little wild, that was fine: after a couple of weeks of reading in Middle English, the teachers were quite able to

distinguish wheat from chaff. Directing a Seminar requires the humility that allows one to recognize when a participant's perspective on or knowledge of a subject is more illuminating than one's own.

High points in each Seminar were the mornings when distinguished guest scholars joined the group, introducing their own approaches and teaching methods, and then staying on to talk with participants over lunch. We are grateful to Alcuin Blamires, Ardis Butterfield, Robyn Bartlett, and David Wallace for their extraordinary generosity of time and spirit. No participant will forget the magnificently awkward silence when, deep into a discussion of the *Wife of Bath's Prologue*, Alcuin held out a volume and challenged us book lovers to take it in our hands and rip it apart. Beyond these moments, participants were granted a privilege few medievalists have experienced: a hands-on introduction to prized manuscripts and early Chaucer editions in Senate House, curated by A. S. G. Edwards and Julia Boffey.

Chaucer's Places: London and Beyond

The point of setting the Seminars in London was to bring us closer to Chaucer's lived environment, which only a handful of participants had experienced even slightly. Early in each Seminar we would lead an afternoon walk along the south bank of the Thames from Southwark to Westminster, a two-and-a-quarter-mile stretch that tracks pivotal moments in Chaucer's life. The Tabard was destroyed in a 1669 fire, but, just two hundred feet from a marker memorializing the site, the George (a coach house frequented by Shakespeare and Dickens) retains the form of the inn where Chaucer sets the beginning of *The Canterbury Tales*. A stained glass window in Southwark's Cathedral and Collegiate Church of St. Saviour and St. Mary Overie displays Chaucer's portrait above a splendid modern depiction of the pilgrims setting out for Canterbury.³ Upstream, across from the reconstructed Globe, is the site of Chaucer's birthplace on Upper Thames Street in the Vintner District, which may be contemplated peacefully from Whittington Garden, a pocket park named for the celebrated Lord Mayor (Bestul 2008, 12). Chaucer's final months were lived in a tenement in the garden of the Lady Chapel on the north side of Westminster Abbey, torn down during expansion of the chapel in 1503–9. Chaucer's tomb (1556) in the Abbey's Poets' Corner is famously surrounded by markers memorializing centuries of writers.

Other afternoon walks took in some of the few structures surviving from medieval London: the Guildhall (1411–40, with crypts dating to the mid-eleventh century), remnants of London's Roman Walls, St. Bartholomew-the-Great (founded in 1123), and Temple Church (dedicated in 1185), along with the medieval galleries in the British Museum and the Museum of London (featuring Becket pilgrimage badges and a magnificent carved wooden panel, ca. 1410–15, depicting three scenes from the *Pardoner's Tale*⁴).

Further afield, a day trip to Oxford included tours of Christ Church College and Duke Humfrey's Library in the Bodleian. An overnight trip to Canterbury included stops along the Pilgrims' Way at Deptford, Greenwich, Rochester, and Sittingbourne. In Canterbury we toured the Cathedral and St

³ Viewable at: <https://cathedral.southwark.anglican.org/about-us/our-history/stained-glass-windows-at-southwark-cathedral/stained-glass-in-the-north-west-wall-and-north-aisle/>. The neighboring John Gower window is just above that poet's tomb.

⁴ Viewable at: <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/panel-depicting-scenes-from-the-pardoners-tale>.

Martin's Church (in continuous use since the sixth century), walked through the heart of the old city, and ate a group dinner in a fourteenth-century tavern that was in operation during Chaucer's lifetime.

Note the Past Tense

In September 2014, under pressure from Alabama Senator Jefferson Beauregard Sessions III, ranking minority member on the Senate Budget Committee, the NEH discontinued funding for Seminars and Institutes outside of the U.S. and U.S. territories.⁵ While Sessions's attack on the NEH is most frequently cited with regard to an October 22, 2013 letter in which he challenged Division of Education grants to study philosophical "questions that are very indefinite" and the purported favoring of Islam in the "Bridging Cultures Bookshelf: Muslim Journeys" program (U.S. Senate 2013; see also MLA 2013), his more lasting triumph lay in curtailing international programming. In committee testimony on April 10, 2014, Sessions first annotated a small part of the program description for Richard Golsan and Nathan Bracher's magnificent K–12 Seminar on French memorialization of the inhumanities of World War I and World War II,⁶ and then listed the four international Seminars selected for summer 2014 and derided their cost:

In one successful application for a Summer Seminar, a day is set aside to "[visit] the Museum of the Great War at Peronne, the Devonshire Cemetry [sic] at Mametz, the British Memorial at Thiepval, and the Newfoundland Memorial at Beaumont-Hamel." Later in the seminar, the group is led to two memorials "in the heart of Paris." For part of the trip, the group resides at an apartment building in Caen where "each participant will have a completely furnished studio apartment with a fully equipped kitchen, bathroom, television, and balcony. Linen and cleaning services is [sic] provided once a week..."

... This summer you plan to pay the expenses for people to travel to, among other places:

- London—"Chaucer's Canterbury Tales";
- Berlin—"Migration and German Culture: Berlin's Diversity Across Two Centuries";
- Paris and Normandy—"Memories Divided and Reconciled: World Wars I and II in France Today"; and
- Vienna—"Mozart's Worlds: The Marriage of Figaro and Don Giovanni."

⁵ International programs already approved for summer 2015, such as Bill Stefany and Ron Herzman's oft-repeated Siena-based K–12 Seminar on *Dante's Commedia*, were allowed to proceed. Other medieval programs conducted in 2015 were a K–12 Seminar on *Dante's Inferno: Influence, Adaptation, and Appropriation* (dir. D. W. Parker); Higher Education Seminars on *The Irish Sea Cultural Province: Crossroads of Medieval Literature and Languages* (dir. C. W. MacQuarrie), *The Materiality of Medieval Manuscripts: Interpretation Through Production* (dir. J. Wilcox), *Between Medieval and Modern: Philosophy from 1300 to 1700* (dir. R. Pasnau); and, indicative of deep NEH support for cross-cultural programming, especially in light of Sessions's assault on "promoting" Islam, a Higher Education Institute on *Negotiating Identities in the Christian-Jewish-Muslim Mediterranean* (dir. S. Konoshita).

⁶ Golsan and Bracher's detailed description of *Memories Divided and Reconciled: World Wars I and II in France Today* is viewable at:

https://www.neh.gov/sites/default/files/inline-files/remembering_world_wars_i_and_ii_in_france_today.pdf.

While a number of people enjoy travel and would like to explore these areas, I doubt they would expect others to pay for it. (U.S. Senate 2014)

We were thankful that Sessions's testimony had not focused on Chaucer, but were as unsurprised as we were saddened when his questioning of visits to sites memorializing the Normandy landings was soon followed by the elimination of international Seminars and Institutes: if D-Day is not suitable for on-site study, what is? What has surprised us is that in subsequent years the Middle Ages have disappeared from K–12 Seminar programming and, to a large extent, from Higher Education Seminar programming. To the best of our knowledge, the NEH has sponsored no K–12 Seminars on medieval subjects since 2015. When we proposed conducting a variation on our K–12 Seminar at Kent State in 2018, one member of the NEH review panel (a group distinct from NEH staff) commented that school teachers would not be interested in studying Chaucer in Ohio. Much as we value conducting Seminars in London, we do not agree with this assessment. In 2016, we directed an energetic *Canterbury Tales* Seminar for Higher Education Faculty at Kent State, which has been followed by a steady flow of important scholarship.⁷ No Chaucer Seminars and Institutes for Higher Education Faculty have since been funded, and Seminars and Institutes on medieval subjects, which had been abundantly represented for thirty years, have been offered only four times, and only one of these programs was centered on literary study.⁸

We do not share this history to critique the NEH, where the Division of Education Programs provides essential leadership and support for teacher-centered Humanities initiatives across the nation, and where the staff has been immensely supportive of medieval projects, as evidenced by the nearly two hundred individual and institutional grants awarded from 2014 to 2022 for projects involving medieval studies, most notably the NEH's continuing support for editions in the TEAMS Middle English Texts Series.⁹ We fear, though, that the cessation of internationally-based NEH Seminars, coupled with the abandonment of medieval programs in American (and British) colleges and universities, reflects and encourages the progressive devaluation of medieval studies, and especially medieval literary studies, that we have all seen. Medievalism is vibrant in TV series, movies, video games, advertising, and reenactments. Medieval studies are disappearing steadily from university English Departments and classrooms and, as a direct consequence, from high-school curricula. Only three of the 2014–2022 NEH grants (including the grant for our 2016 Higher Education Seminar) supported projects with a focus on Chaucer.

⁷ The participants in the Seminar were Justin Barker, Stephanie Batkie, Jack Bell, Melissa Elmes, Christopher Flavin, Paul Gaffney, Matthew Irvin, Hope Johnston, Wendy Matlock, Betsy McCormick, Cynthia Rogers, Will Rogers, Lynn Shuttters, Joseph Turner, and Charles Wuest. The intellectual experience was enhanced by guest speakers Ardis Butterfield, Stephen Fliegel, Daryl Green, Richard Firth Green, and Bobby Meyer-Lee. Extra-curricular highlights were a performance of *Sir Orfeo* with harp and tours of the medieval collections in the Cleveland Museum of Art and Akron's Stan Hywet Hall.

⁸ The programs were: in 2017, *Will, Commandment, and Human Perfection in Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (dir. J. A. Jacobs); in 2018, *Courthy Lyric in the Medieval French Tradition* (dir. C. J. Callahan) and *Thresholds of Change: Modernity and Transformation in the Mediterranean, 1400-1700* (dir. K. Petkov); and in 2021, *Law and Culture in Medieval England* (dir. J. K. Schulman and R. F. Berkhover).

⁹ Although most of these projects have treated Western European topics, increasing attention has been given to the global Middle Ages.

Bridging the University—Secondary-School Divide

Our *Canterbury Tales* Seminars, like those directed by our many predecessors, were designed to foster and maintain effective teaching of Chaucer's poetry in American high schools. By many measures, they were successful. Over the years, we have kept in touch with participants, answering questions that arise as they teach Chaucer, and learning about their teaching. At NCS meetings, they have provided the largest school teacher cadre for over a decade: we organized the 2008 Seminar group so that teachers could attend the Siena Congress beforehand, and three did; at Durham 2022, one teacher spoke; at Toronto 2018, two teachers organized sessions; at London 2016, a dozen teachers representing each of the Seminars joined us for a reunion, with six of them on the program; and we joined a half-dozen teachers at Portland 2014. Beyond this, teachers have pursued their own initiatives in maintaining their communities. We have met up with teachers in many Chaucer sessions at ICMS Kalamazoo and once at a session on *The Canterbury Tales* two of the teachers organized for NCTE. In 2016, David spent a morning in Chicago teaching two senior literature classes as part of a participant's three-week Chaucer unit. (The students in this dual-language English-Spanish high school seemed quite comfortable with Chaucer's language.) We are always happy to hear about the teachers' life-events, contacts, and mini-reunions.

Though meaningful to us, these are small triumphs. Notwithstanding the persistent efforts of NCS leaders to promote outreach to school teachers at one Congress after another, attendance has remained sparse. Congress sessions focusing on secondary-school pedagogy attract almost no university faculty (and the same holds true at ICMS). As best as we can judge, the three principal locations for successful Chaucer-related contact between university and secondary-school faculty have been university- or English Department-sponsored community programs (of which we hear occasionally), scattered ICMS pedagogy sessions without a secondary-school focus, and, until 2014, NEH K–12 Chaucer Seminars.

It is with the hope of fostering university/secondary-school collaboration that we encourage American Chaucerians, especially mid-career scholars, to flood the NEH with proposals for K–12 *Canterbury Tales* Seminars, and perhaps Chaucer/Shakespeare and *Gawain*-poet or Arthur Seminars, too. It is easy for a review panelist to dismiss a single proposal as an applicant's hobby horse and unlikely to attract school teachers, but it is harder to make a case against studying an author or era when faced with a slew of cogent proposals, as happens, for example, with Shakespeare. The history of NEH Chaucer Seminars confirms their popularity. Lee Patterson had no problem attracting participants to his six-week New Haven Seminars (even in 2010 when we offered our second London Seminar), and Jay Ruud established that twenty-five teachers of Chaucer from the Upper Great Plains were interested in spending five weeks studying *The Canterbury Tales* in north-central South Dakota, where summer temperatures in 1989 topped 100° F.¹⁰ It was our own experience, as we sorted through piles of applications to our Seminars from teachers in every state across the nation, that there is enormous untapped interest in engaging with Chaucer alongside a group of like-minded school teachers. We have not changed our view that reading Chaucer in London adds a dimension that cannot be matched in the States, and we continue to believe that international programs are of inherent value in expanding minds and promoting cross-cultural understanding. That said, locating our Higher

¹⁰ The Institutes directed by Thomas Roche and Sean Hoare enrolled 35 teachers and 32 teachers.

Education Seminar at Kent State enabled a tightened focus on scholarship, and while the teachers in our K–12 Seminars took full advantage of the opportunity of studying in London, most would have been delighted to read Chaucer anywhere.

We will be happy to discuss our experiences and proposals with scholars who might be interested in proposing a Chaucer Seminar to the NEH or to their own national funding agencies.

Appendix

NEH Chaucer-Related Seminars (S) and Institutes (I) for K–12 Educators

- 1984 Chaucer and the *Canterbury Tales* (Russell A. Peck—S)
The English Heritage: from Chaucer to Pope (Thomas P. Roche—I)
- 1986 Dissolving Paradigms: Chaucer and Joyce in Changing Worlds (Lillian M. Bisson—I)
- 1987 Chaucer and the Medieval World (Sean Hoare—I)
- 1989 *Canterbury Tales* Institute (Jay Ruud and Susanna Fein—I)
Chaucer and the World of *The Canterbury Tales* (Robert F. Yeager—S)
- 1990 Chaucer and the *Canterbury Tales* (Russell A. Peck—S)
Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* (Ronald B. Herzman—S)
- 1991 Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* (Ronald B. Herzman—S)
- 1992 Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* (Lee W. Patterson—S)
- 1993 Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* (Ronald B. Herzman—S)
- 1996 Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde* (William A. Stephany—S)
- 2005 Chaucer’s *Canterbury* Comedies (Peter G. Beidler—S)
The Canterbury Tales and Medieval Culture (Lee W. Patterson—S)
- 2007 *The Canterbury Tales* and Medieval Culture (Lee W. Patterson—S)
- 2008 Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* (David Raybin and Susanna Fein—S)
Religion in English History and Literature from *The Canterbury Tales* through *Pilgrim’s Progress*
(John N. King—S)
- 2010 Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* (David Raybin and Susanna Fein—S)
The Canterbury Tales and Medieval Culture (Lee W. Patterson—S)
- 2012 Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* (David Raybin and Susanna Fein—S)
- 2014 Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* (David Raybin and Susanna Fein—S)

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