

MUSE Proposal

January 17, 2009

The Pure Well Head of Poesie?: Chaucer, Spenser, and Lydgate

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Professional Title: Associate Professor

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Title of Project:

The Pure Well Head of Poesie?: Chaucer, Spenser, and Lydgate

Number of Student Collaborators: 1

NO approval by IACUC or IRB needed

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Project and Learning Plan:

I) Intellectual Merit

Virtually every course that surveys English literature includes Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* as one of its cornerstone texts. Chaucer's position as one of the great writers in English history is secure, and his work is justly admired. But Chaucer's frequent characterization as "the father of English poetry" may be undeserved in some respects. The narrative poetry and drama of writers in the centuries immediately after Chaucer, while sometimes indebted to Chaucer for storylines or characters, seem distant from their great English precursor in terms of style, imagery, versification, and language. In the 1590s, Edmund Spenser characterized Chaucer as the "pure well head of Poesie" (*Mutabilitie Cantos* 7.9.4), but Chaucer's fourteenth-century poetry is in fact unusually far removed from Spenser's sixteenth-century writing, even when Spenser attempts to write in a consciously archaic style for poetic effect. For this reason, Adam Engel and I propose to reexamine Chaucer's reputation as "the father of English poetry" using the tools of modern literary and linguistic analysis. We propose to attempt to measure and reevaluate Chaucer's role as an influence on later writers, especially Spenser and his fellow Elizabethans. By way of contrast to Chaucer, we also propose to examine the corresponding influence of the poetry of John Lydgate, who wrote just one generation after Chaucer and was almost as famous and admired in Spenser's day as the author of the *Canterbury Tales*. While little known or read today, Lydgate may actually have contributed more to the development of English poetry in subsequent centuries than Chaucer did.

The projected final outcome of our research will be an article published under my name with appropriate acknowledgements for Adam's contributions. Suitable publication venues for such an article include *English Literary Renaissance* (published by the University of Massachusetts-Amherst with an 8-13% acceptance rate from submitted articles), *English Literary History* (Johns Hopkins University Press; 10-11% acceptance rate), *The Chaucer Review* (Penn State University; 20% acceptance rate), *Exemplaria* (University of Florida; 20% acceptance rate), and *Language and Literature* (the Poetics and Linguistics Association; 20-25% acceptance rate).

II) Role of Student and Mentor

In order to gather sufficient evidence to reevaluate Chaucer's reputation as "the father of English poetry," Adam Engel and I will need to go through a four-step process. Throughout the process, Adam will be my "fellow traveler," helping to find relevant scholarship, assisting in thinking through concepts and theories, deciding on avenues of research to pursue, gathering data, and drawing conclusions. We will therefore meet regularly (perhaps every other day or so) in order to divide tasks between us, review with one another the progress we have made on our assigned tasks, and discuss "the big picture."

First, we will need to research and read current theories about the stylistic characteristics of

poetry and poetic language. Semiotics, pragmatics, and discourse analysis should be a fruitful place to begin. Theorists such as Michael Riffaterre, Geoffrey Leech, Winifred Nowotny, and Michael Halliday will likely provide an important foundation for describing exactly what defines poetic language and how one poet's style might differ from or imitate another's in measurable ways. While I have rudimentary knowledge in this area of linguistic and literary theory, it is a field that Adam and I will need to explore in much more depth together.

Second, Adam and I will need to decide which elements of poetic style and language will serve us best in terms of evaluating the stylistic influence of Chaucer and Lydgate on later poets. The conventions of medieval and Renaissance writing are quite different from writing today, and poetic style has changed appreciably. As a result, some aspects of stylistics, poetics, and discourse analysis today may be less relevant or less revealing than others when analyzing poetry written 400-600 years ago. Using small samples from the poets under scrutiny, we will assess the relative importance of various stylistic and linguistic elements by noting their presence or absence and their prevalence. We may also find assistance for this work through research into medieval and Renaissance poetics, as well as into extant poetic style manuals from the Middle Ages and Renaissance.

Third, Adam and I will need to examine our chosen stylistic elements using appropriate samples from the works of Chaucer, Lydgate, Spenser, and other writers in order to generate sufficient data from which to draw conclusions about the influence of the earlier writers on the later ones. This work will require time and painstaking attention to detail.

Finally, Adam and I will need to review the work of other scholars on Chaucer and Lydgate, especially published research on these poets' influence on Renaissance writers. Stephen Reimer has published preliminary work that analyzes the poetic styles of Chaucer and Lydgate in comparison with one another, but little other work has been done in the area of linguistic or stylistic analysis of medieval and Renaissance poets. Many scholars, however, have addressed Chaucer's influence on Spenser and other Elizabethan writers more broadly, including Alice Miskimin, Judith Anderson, and Theresa Krier. I myself have published in this area in the past.

III) Broader Impacts

Adam Engel is considering going to graduate school in English. The research that he and I would be doing on Chaucer and Lydgate would be an excellent preparation for his graduate work and would give Adam an opportunity to “test the waters” and experience what is required for scholarly research in English.

This particular project is one for which I began very preliminary work several years ago. I gave papers on this topic at the New Jersey College English Association annual conference in 2003 and at the Mid-Atlantic Renaissance and Reformation Seminar at Johns Hopkins University in 2002. In the 5-6 years since then, I have been busy with administrative work at TCNJ (e.g., as coordinator of the First Seminar program) and have been unable to continue the work on Chaucer and Lydgate that I had begun. Participating in MUSE would give me an opportunity to re-engage productively with this research project.

II) Budget:

Student stipend	\$2,500.00
Student housing	\$1,305.00
Faculty stipend	\$1,000.00
Project-related expenses: Funds to purchase <i>The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer Newly Printed...</i> (facsimile of 1532 edition of Chaucer’s works – in order to have the actual edition and text of Chaucer that Renaissance writers would have read and used)	\$350.00
TOTAL	\$5,155.00

III) Past MUSE/SURP award report:

NOT APPLICABLE. This is the first time that I am applying.

IV) Student Application

Student Information

Adam Engel

Major: English (ENGA) / Philosophy (PHIA)

Year: Junior

Completed Credits: 102

Graduation Date: Spring 2010

On-Campus Housing Requested: Yes

Student Statement:

I plan to pursue a master's degree and eventually a PhD in English literature following the completion of my undergraduate degree at The College of New Jersey. Medieval literature is one of my main areas of interest within the field. By participating in MUSE with Professor Steinberg, I will be able to determine whether I would like to focus on the medieval period in my graduate studies. As a double major in English and philosophy, researching with a professor will also allow me to narrow my interest to one subject while utilizing analytical and argumentative skills gained from both majors.

I would like to eventually become a college professor after graduate school, and MUSE will give me the opportunity to engage in the type of academic research that I must be able to perform throughout my career. Doing research with Professor Steinberg will provide me with an important look behind the scenes of a scholarly life; I will see the time and effort involved in producing work worthy of publication, all the while learning more about one of my favorite areas of literature. This collaboration will show me what it is like to delve deeply into the work of poets, synthesize what I learn into a useful whole, and present my discoveries as practice for when I will someday teach classes of my own. I am looking forward to working alongside a professor whose research I have already seen and appreciated in class.

I am qualified to collaborate with Professor Steinberg because I have both a high quality undergraduate course record in English and previous experience researching for an independent project. During the Fall 2008 semester I produced an honors project of my own creation for Professor Pearson's "Race, Gender, and the News" journalism course. This project involved extensive research on the Obama and Lincoln campaigns and required me to utilize resources external to TCNJ, including Princeton's Firestone Library. The paper took a semester to complete and its thesis went through several stages of development; as a result I made useful discoveries about American politics and was left with the satisfaction of having done work I was proud of.

I have experience presenting papers and research; I presented my project for Professor Pearson to her class, and I also gave an English paper at the Spring 2008 Celebration of Student

Achievement. By the summer I will have attended the Sigma Tau Delta English Convention in Minneapolis and presented a collection of original poetry there. While I take part in this panel I will be exposed to many scholars and authors; talking to them and listening to their presentations will give me a clearer picture of what it means to draw meaningful conclusions from research. I have taken a graduate class on Chaucer with Professor Steinberg, and this has familiarized me with the content we will examine for MUSE. Chaucer, Spenser, and Lydgate are just a few of the writers Professor Steinberg and I propose to analyze. We will attempt to determine whether Chaucer was the father of English poetry. To accomplish this, we will analyze Chaucer's poetics and those of other medieval and Renaissance poets to determine which medieval poet the later poets' styles most closely resemble.

As a student of medieval literature and a creative writer, the research of poetic and linguistic theory this project entails interests me greatly. The politics of medieval Christianity and its role in the period's literature as well as medieval poets' social criticisms fascinate me. Studying the transition from medieval to Renaissance poetics will not only enhance my knowledge of theory and history, but also improve my ability as a growing writer. To do this while working closely with a professor and analyzing some of my favorite literary figures will be a fulfilling experience; from it, I hope to gain a clearer sense of direction for my future studies.