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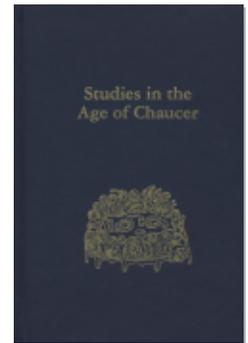
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Chaucer and Medieval Studies in Canterbury

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CANTERBURY IS a natural home for Chaucer studies. Ever since the Board (now School) of English was founded at the University of Kent in 1965, undergraduates in their second and final years have had access both to a core, or survey, module that includes the *Canterbury Tales* (currently Medieval and Tudor Literature) and to a more specialized option focusing on particular aspects of Chaucer's works (e.g., *Troilus and Criseyde* and its cultural contexts). Chaucer has also featured in a first-year module, Explorations in Reading, which ran from *The Pardoner's Tale* to *Waiting for Godot* (or from Becket to Beckett). It follows that the department has always maintained a post for a medievalist (preferably one with broad sympathies), while other academic staff with different but related specialties have been prepared to make common cause. One example is a highly successful first-year module, Early Drama (from the liturgy to *Dr. Faustus*), which has run for many years. Most of the texts have a Canterbury connection, and the module (current enrollment 118) is available to all students of English but is not compulsory. It challenges students' preconceptions about literature and dramatic representation, introduces them to key images and ideas in biblical mythology, and allows them to undertake a practical project. The end of the spring term sees a veritable mini-festival of medieval and early modern plays performed on campus and in the city. If students are at first discombobulated by the extent to which they are encountering a Christian culture (an early guided tour of the cathedral as theatrical space is a baptism of fire), the majority rise to the challenge and end as apologists for the literature of the period. Whatever their high school background (where the teaching of Chaucer, let alone of other medieval literature, is in decline), many students of English do come to the Uni-

versity of Kent at Canterbury with the reasonable expectation that Chaucer, and medieval literature more generally, will be on the agenda.

However, this contribution to the colloquium is not primarily about undergraduate studies as organized by individual departments, but about cross-departmental postgraduate studies; and not just about Chaucer, but about medieval (and adjacent) studies. Specifically, it is about a recent crisis that engulfed the Canterbury Centre for Medieval & Tudor Studies. Although the issues raised are not Chaucer-specific, they are relevant insofar as the teaching of Chaucer at the postgraduate level frequently takes place within the broader context of a medieval studies program. The issues concern interdisciplinarity, collegiality, the place of medieval (and Chaucer) studies in the curriculum, the impact of government and University funding policies, and the emphasis placed on departmental research ratings and teaching quality assessments as modes of evaluating the worth of staff.

Just as the enthusiasm generated in a first-year medieval module generates good recruitment into second- and final-year core and special modules in medieval literature, so well-received undergraduate modules in turn generate a thirst for postgraduate study in the same area. Colleagues in History at Kent, teaching a similar undergraduate program structure, and with the added benefit of more staff in the medieval and early modern periods, had experienced similar demands. So it seemed appropriate to join forces and mount an M.A. in Medieval and Tudor Studies, drawing on the resources of both disciplines, and with additional input from Drama and French. The M.A. enjoyed modest success throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, and was helped on its way by the loose interdisciplinary structure of the Faculty of Humanities and the collegiate structure of the University.

However, in the early 1990s, under pressure from the Thatcherite philosophies of accountability and line management, the University adopted more *dirigiste* policies toward both Faculties and colleges: "Boards of studies" became fully-fledged departments, located in a single place, and, as a consequence, colleges ceased to be sites of interdisciplinary interchange. The formation of the Canterbury Centre for Medieval & Tudor Studies was a direct response to these developments. It became, in effect, a postgraduate department responsible directly to the Dean of the Faculty (though without the power to appoint its own staff). It was an occasion also for development and self-definition. The Centre acquired the right to award its own research degrees, and it

promulgated certain distinguishing features: an interdisciplinary outlook and practice; an insistence on the continuities, as well as the disjunctions, between the medieval and “Tudor” periods; a commitment to the culture of Canterbury and its region within a European context; and an expansion of existing links with Canterbury Cathedral Archives and Library, and the Canterbury Archaeological Trust. Within this framework, CCMTS has gone from strength to strength. At a time of declining postgraduate enrollments in the humanities, both locally and nationally, it steadily increased its intake; became the best-recruiting postgraduate M.A. in the Faculty; and raised its international profile by taking more overseas students and by participating energetically in international conferences.

Thus, at the beginning of academic year 2003–4, CCMTS was flourishing, but it was vulnerable—as it had always been—to cross-currents affecting the main departments that support it by providing staff: English and History. The prosperity of a Humanities department at Kent, as elsewhere in the U.K., depends upon two funding streams: research and teaching. Research income is dispensed to the University by a government agency, the Higher Education Funding Council of England (HEFCE), and is directly related to the grade awarded to a department in the previous Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). The RAE is a national peer review, managed by HEFCE, which takes place once every five or six years. “Research active” members of the department submit items for evaluation (typically four), and although other criteria come into play (such as success in winning research grants), it is research output that carries the day. The results are calibrated on a scale of 1 to 5*. A department in the latter category is one where research output is predominantly of international standing.

A top RAE award is not enough. For a department to be financially viable, student recruitment also needs to be buoyant. To some extent, the two are linked: a department with a high RAE grade is likely to prove more popular with high-quality applicants. Applicants also take account of teaching quality, and there is another government regimen targeted at just that. Formerly, as with the RAE, teaching-quality grades were awarded to individual departments, but recently the process has changed to become that of an audit (again, by means of peer review) of the institution’s internal mechanisms for ensuring that teaching quality is satisfactory. The outcome of an institutional audit is not reduced to numbers (the highest accolade is an assertion of “confidence” on the

part of the auditors), and it is not directly tied to funding, but it is of crucial importance. The result, as with the RAE, is made public and, like the RAE grade, it is factored into the league tables beloved of quality newspapers. The league tables are required reading for applicants and their parents. Consumerism, quality control, the audit and review culture, a premium on research productivity, and a close regard for the bottom line are thus facts of life for a Humanities department. Somehow, in spite of it all, colleagues retain their enthusiasm for teaching and research, and students their enthusiasm for learning.

The results of the latest RAE were published in December 2002. English at Kent advanced from 3a to 5, while History stayed at 4. The latter grade might not have mattered so much but for a national tendency for departments to improve. HEFCE found that it could maintain full levels of funding only for top-rated departments. In real terms, History's level of research funding dropped significantly, while English's increased. Generally, departments at Kent did well, but because the University is keen to improve its research standing yet further, it launched its own reviews, involving external assessors, into the strategies that might be adopted to improve the research ratings of underperforming departments. One recommendation in the case of History was that it should take advantage of its distinctive location and strengthen research-active staff in the medieval period. At the time, History was facing a serious budget deficit exacerbated by its RAE result, and it saw matters differently. The then existing medievalists were not among the most research active of their staff. Here was an opportunity to reduce the budget deficit and improve research productivity by restructuring the department—with University support—precisely by shedding staff in the medieval and early modern periods.

All History staff received a letter offering generous terms for early retirement, but the letter also made clear that the target audience lay at the earlier end of the curriculum. Unfortunately, the policy had not been aired with representatives of CCMTS, who saw it as a direct threat to the Centre's continued existence. A person or persons unknown contacted the press, and both *The Times Higher Education Supplement* and *The Guardian* published lengthy reports. Ironically, *The Guardian* headline (September 26, 2003) used the same words from Chaucer's description of his Clerk, which, in earlier times, the University had used to promote itself. The headline ran "And gladly wolde he lerne—but not in Canterbury." The articles appeared at a time when BBC television was broad-

casting modernized versions of several Canterbury tales, and *The Guardian* was quick to point out that a department worth its salt should have been capitalizing on the sudden upsurge in interest in things medieval associated with Canterbury, not negating it. It also juxtaposed a glamorous picture of the singer and actress Billy Piper, who played Alisoun in the BBC's *Miller's Tale*, with solemn reportage about CCMTS—surely, in other contexts, a publicist's dream. The crisis deepened with the resignation of the Centre's director; e-mail inboxes filled up with protests from medievalists worldwide; and the postgraduate students in CCMTS began to express concern about the viability of their M.A.

The University authorities were taken by surprise. They had no intention of closing CCMTS, and said so publicly. At the same time, they were left in no doubt about the Centre's prestigious nature: the vice-chancellor received a carefully drafted letter from some eminent medievalists pointing out the international significance of its work and reputation. It was a moment of institutional embarrassment: two aspects of the University's policy were unintentionally in conflict, and the School of History was getting a bad press. An acting director of CCMTS was appointed to bring some stability to the situation.

There was also a somewhat more wide-ranging risk on the horizon. In mid-December, the university was due to enter into its first Institutional Audit. It is the nature of such audits that, if one part of the institution's provision is deemed unsatisfactory, then the whole of its provision is tarred with the same brush. The impact on recruitment of a substandard assessment could be severe. Now, institutional auditors, in assessing the teaching-quality regime of a particular university, focus in particular on the quality of the student experience, and are eager to talk to students to ensure that their educational experience is all their elders and betters claim it to be. In CCMTS, the quality of the student experience was being dramatically—and very publicly—affected by policies that the university had itself endorsed. So the first task of the acting director was to determine the perceived quality of CCMTS, the extent to which—especially in the student experience—that quality was being adversely affected, and how the situation might be remedied.

It was not difficult to establish the perceived quality of the Centre. There was the evidence of recent e-mails and letters in its support, written by people of some weight; and, more substantively, there was a recent, adulatory, official monitoring report by a panel (including a dis-

tinguished medievalist from another institution) commissioned by the University as part of its routine cycle of periodic review of programs. Neither was it difficult to determine the impact of the crisis on the students then enrolled in M.A. and Ph.D. programs: either through their representatives, or individually, they reported a loss of confidence in the University's and Faculty's commitment to CCMTS, a lowering of morale, and an uncertainty about the immediate viability of the curriculum. Some expressed their intention to leave, or to transfer to another university. International students felt the crisis with particular force, since their personal and financial investments tend to be greater than those of home students. Nor was the remedy far to seek: that the threat of staff redundancy be removed. (For one member of the staff, it was due to come into effect at Christmas, that is, in mid-program.)

The evidence was collected, submissions received, recommendations made, and the whole dossier, together with a "quality report," sent to appropriate senior members of the administration. To their credit, and perhaps with minds focused by the imminence of the institutional audit, they recognized the force of the evidence and key recommendation and removed any immediate threat of redundancy. Students were thereby relieved of much anxiety and were able to continue their studies into the spring term in a calmer atmosphere, and with confidence that they would be able to complete the program. As it happened, the institutional auditors did not focus their attention on CCTMS (although they indicated that they were aware of the press reports), and the University emerged from the audit with the highest level of approbation.

The next step was to secure the medium- and long-term future of the Canterbury Centre. To some extent, that meant revisiting familiar issues, and especially those to do with resources. The program-monitoring report had pointed out that the Centre's provision tended to depend on too few staff; that it lacked a single physical location with which students could identify; and that the Faculty's budgetary provision was inadequate. These and other topics were featured in a paper written by the acting director and at present are under discussion. Among its recommendations are that the participating departments should make formal staffing commitments to the Centre; that the staff involved should be credited with the hours they work as part of their regular work allocation, and not as extra to it; and that the job of director should be shared between an academic director and one responsible for the quality-assurance aspects of the program. The paper cleared a meet-

ing of CCMTS itself, attended by members of all the participating Schools, and by student representatives, and it is now before departmental chairs and the Dean of the Faculty. The signs for its eventual acceptance are reasonably promising: members of the faculty not previously involved in the Centre have expressed interest in teaching; proposals for new modules have come forward (including one on Chaucer and Gower); and there has been some exploration of ways in which the M.A. program might be extended to include art history and more archaeology.

History's restructuring plan has now run its course. It has resulted in two voluntary redundancies within earlier periods (one in medieval history, one in Tudor) with effect from the beginning of 2004–5. So the provision of teaching in History for the Centre is somewhat depleted, but not disastrously so because it is to some extent compensated for by offers of help from new quarters. There is even talk of a new History appointment at the earlier end of the curriculum. English, meanwhile, has made a new permanent appointment in medieval literature. And, after a period of inactivity, teams of staff and research students are once again appearing at international gatherings (currently at Belfast and Leeds). Recruitment for the 2004 intake of coursework and research students was strong.

What are the *moralitees* of this cautionary tale? That extensive consultation is a prerequisite of effective consensual action. That the press is a powerful but unpredictable outlet for academic grievances. That university administrators can on occasion offer enlightened leadership. That too narrow a focus on departmental self-interest can be counterproductive. Perhaps, above all, that Canterbury not only is, but is seen to be, a natural home both for Chaucer studies and for medieval and Tudor studies.

