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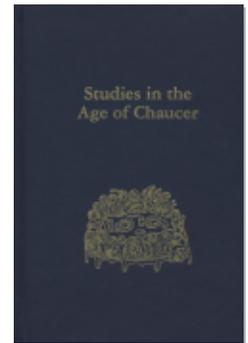
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Response: Chaucerian Values

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FRANK GRADY URGED participants in this colloquium to speak to our concerns about the future of Chaucer studies in light of our “practical administrative experience” and to reflect on our “dual role” as scholars and administrators. Each of the preceding four essays has taken the first part of this charge especially seriously, as each contributor tells a story rooted specifically in local institutional circumstances. Sylvia Tomasch writes from the point of view of a department chair searching for a medievalist at a large urban public university; Mary Carruthers as Dean of Arts and Sciences, interested in the “future of humanities as a whole,” at a private research university; Martin Camargo from his comparative experience moving from one large Midwestern university to another; Peter Brown from across the Atlantic, focusing on one moment of crisis at an institution with a special, “natural” reason for studying Chaucer—its location in Canterbury. From each perspective, we see a cautiously, partially, and contingently sunny view of the landscape of Chaucer studies. Clouds on the horizon are acknowledged, but the good news is that crisis either has not materialized or has been averted—often through collaboration—and the forecast is not as bad as we might hear or suspect.

Contributors give far less explicit attention to their status as scholar/administrators. They note that in some cases the cooperation of deans, chancellors, and other senior administrators has been essential; as Brown observes, administrators can be “enlightened,” and Camargo reiterates that the good things he has experienced could not have happened without the dean’s support. Nonetheless, on the few occasions when they

I am grateful to several colleagues who took the time to share some of their thoughts about the future of Chaucer studies, including Susan Crane, Columbia University; Jennifer Summit, Stanford University; Anne Thompson, Bates College; and Craig Williamson, Swarthmore College.

speak directly about their dual role, our participants remain skeptical of administration and valorize the scholarly side. Wry parting comments are a vehicle for expressing this attitude, without overly dwelling on it. Carruthers says she is “thinking as a dean” and, in closing, calls for historians to be deans, but instructs them not to do so for “too long.” And Camargo ends with a (perhaps tongue in cheek) warning to readers—pragmatic, heads-up advocacy and administrative savvy are essential, but watch out; if you are too good at it, “you just might end up an administrator yourself.”

In closing, I will take some brief issue with this mildly negative attitude toward administration, but first let me focus in more depth on my worries about the future of Chaucer studies from the perspective of my particular institutional past and present, which is different enough that a quick personal preface may be in order. I was not originally trained as a Chaucerian. In my dissertation, first book, and a few early articles, I wrote about Old English poetry, but I have never had the opportunity to teach my graduate-school specialty. The job market being what it was when I completed my dissertation in 1975, I was grateful to find immediate employment at the Middle English Dictionary in the first year of its mid-1970s Mellon grant, when seven young medievalists were hired to ratchet up production. After three years (from approximately M-4 to P-6), this postdoc immersion in Middle English sufficiently enhanced my credentials for Chaucer jobs, which were a little less scarce than the Anglo-Saxon jobs, and my best first teaching offer just happened to come from a small liberal arts college. Two years later, I moved to a tenure-track position at another small liberal arts college, where I remained for the next twenty-two years. Like most faculty at such institutions, I probably taught more courses outside my field than inside, and my writing, as an outgrowth of my teaching, has been focused on other areas of interest as well as on Chaucer.

Moreover, I may already have been an administrator way “too long.” My first foray into administrative matters involved collaborating on the creation of an interdisciplinary, inter-institutional program in feminist and gender studies in the mid-1980s. I then chaired my department for a term, served as the college’s chief academic officer for seven years, and only recently moved on to become president of another liberal arts college in the Northeast. My dual career has thus been comfortably nestled in an increasingly small and in many ways atypical segment of the higher-education community—the highly selective private liberal arts

college—not otherwise represented by the voices speaking here or in most other conversations about higher education today. With these caveats about my biases and limitations in mind, I reflect on four broader issues and trends in which my own worries about the future of Chaucer studies are at this point embedded.

What Can You Do with a Major in Classical and Medieval Studies?

Three years ago, when I arrived on this campus, the Bates Program in Classical and Medieval Studies (a successful interdisciplinary program of which our senior Chaucerian was a founder) ran a visible and popular ad campaign featuring posters entitled “What can you do with a major in CMS?” and displaying the pictures, degrees, and careers of several “celebrities”—Toni Morrison, J. K. Rowling, Steven Cohen, Ted Turner, James Baker, and me, the new president of Bates.

The Bates CMS poster campaign responds to a familiar fact of life: when Chaucerians seek to cultivate student interest in the literature and culture to which we have dedicated our professional lives, the practical value of doing so is almost always an issue. As an administrator advancing the cause of liberal education in a residential community, I deal with the same reality. We offer a four-year undergraduate program dedicated to the liberal arts and sciences, where the humanist disciplines are still strong, where humanities courses are still required and popular, and where a few students who never thought of doing so before they came to college will end up studying Chaucer or other ancient or medieval texts. To attract many students (and their parents) to this kind of education, we have to pitch relevance. Fortunately, it’s possible to marshal a strong case for the practical value of both studying premodern literature and pursuing a liberal arts degree. As we often say, a CMS degree, an English major, or indeed any major in the liberal arts and sciences trains you for nothing and prepares you for everything. It is increasingly evident that the analytical, critical, and interpersonal skills fostered in the liberal arts college environment in general and in the humanities in particular are essential for people who will change jobs many times in their lives, pursuing careers in fields and disciplines that we cannot even name now. While it’s a point we have to keep making, massaging, and marketing (even as we also understand the privilege and luxury of a four-year degree that doesn’t guarantee immediate employment, and work

hard to make our education available to those who can't afford it), it remains a valid, resilient, often persuasive argument.

At the same time, one of my worries is that something can be lost in pushing the relevance argument too far—namely, the idea of learning for its own sake, for the fun and joy and wonder of it. Even as we can, should, and do tout the practical, instrumental value of studying Chaucer or attending a liberal arts college, we may ask ourselves what we could also do to tackle a more daunting challenge—to preserve and widen the space for appreciating the intrinsic merit of our enterprise, or its worth to culture and the common good, apart from its value to individuals seeking top careers and high earnings.

Premature Specialization and Selective Admissions

Let me push this concern about the potential downside of the “relevance” issue a little further in order to raise a second worry. My younger daughter is a high school senior in the middle of her college search. Having spent the first fifteen years of her life living on the campus of a small liberal arts college and having been transplanted recently, against her will, to another one located at what she considers the frozen edge of civilization, she has been wondering whether she might prefer to attend a large university, as far from New England as possible. So in June of 2004, we visited the campus of an elite private university on the West Coast. Our attractive, articulate tour guide began by asking all the prospective students in the group to state their names, where they were from, and what they were interested in studying. One by one, these young teenagers (later we found out that the group consisted mostly of fourteen-, fifteen-, and sixteen-year-olds) from all over the country spoke confidently about their highly certain and specific plans: “I’m Jane Smith, I’m from Omaha, Nebraska, and I want to major in molecular biology with a focus on bioinformatics,” “My major will be international relations, and I have a special interest in Southeast Asia, but I also plan to minor in Spanish,” “I plan on a double major in econ and computer science, and I’m really interested in applied mathematical models,” and so on. With the exception of my child, every young person identified a definite and specific major—none of which were in the humanities—as well as one or two even more specific subfields or minors—one or two of which were in the humanities, although none in English or medieval studies. When my daughter’s turn came, I listened with some suspense,

as she visibly straightened her spine and spoke clearly and with a familiar edge of defiance: “My name is Isla, I’m from Maine, and I have no idea what I want to do.” (After our tour, she asked me an interesting question: “So, Mom, what is the biggest small liberal arts college?”)

The drive to specialize early—and thereby to distinguish, disambiguate, and promote oneself as a committed specialist in something—is part of the strategy for winning the elite admissions race, and as such it trickles down to far more students than will actually enroll in selective colleges and universities. Witnessing this spectacle of precocious or premature career-building must heighten the anxieties of both Chaucer scholars and small-college administrators. Those top students who know (or think they know, or think they ought to know) what they want to be at fourteen, fifteen, or sixteen, and so commit themselves to a narrow, pre-professional educational path, rarely identify themselves early on as interested in literary studies, since that is not a strategic, high-status choice. For similar reasons, they are somewhat less likely to choose liberal arts colleges.

But if undergraduates are pursuing a major in the social sciences or natural sciences at a large research university, where and how will they learn to care about humanist issues, ideas, and approaches? By taking one or two large lecture classes to fulfill a distribution requirement (assuming there is one) in the humanities, will students just happen to come to love books and appreciate the work of philosophers, artists, and writers? Busily fulfilling the requirements of their double majors or multiple secondary concentrations, will they get a chance to meet Chaucer in Middle English, and maybe other writers and periods and genres (not to mention theories and disciplines) that they haven’t studied in high school? Who will care whether or not that happens? From my perspective, college is a time to find out who you are and what you love. To foster the love of literature and the reading of Chaucer, we need more, not fewer, liberally educated students who are permitted the luxury of exploring, sampling, finding, and following their passions. Early specialization, increasingly perceived as providing competitive advantage in admissions to our most prestigious universities, seems to me to stand starkly in contrast to the conditions that will over the long haul best preserve and enhance the study of Chaucer.

“And after wyn on Venus moste I thynke . . .”

My third worry entails the issue of relevance yet again but in a different way, as it touches on matters far from the normal purview of Chauceri-

ans, extraneous to the academic curriculum and faculty concerns, and all too familiar to administrators. Apart from the demands of encouraging philanthropy and managing people (two activities faculty are not normally trained or temperamentally inclined to do), what often distresses me the most in my administrative position are issues of student residential life. Among these, arguably the most intransigent problems arise from cases of student misconduct in which young women, admittedly drunk (and mostly underage), report that they have been raped or sexually assaulted by male students. The men involved, who have almost always been “feeling the effects” to some degree themselves, normally acknowledge that sexual activity took place but insist that they asked for and received—sometimes directly and sometimes indirectly, sometimes once and sometimes repeatedly—the young women’s consent. The women involved say that they did not give consent, and/or that they were too drunk to remember the events, and/or were so impaired by their use of alcohol that it is impossible for any alleged consent to have been meaningful consent. The evidence of witnesses—fellow students who often testify as to “how drunk” one or both parties were or weren’t—is partial, subjective, clouded, and contradictory.

College administrators must and do take these charges very seriously; we are morally concerned and legally constrained to do so. We construct, publish, and discuss widely our detailed definitions of terms like “sexual harassment,” “sexual assault,” “rape,” “consent,” and “force.” We have elaborate, quasi-judicial procedures for investigating, bringing charges, and holding disciplinary hearings and appeals, often in cases where the police would be unlikely to take a charge forward. There are high stakes here. If an accused student is found guilty, that student’s career will be fundamentally disrupted; if there is a finding of innocence, the effect on the accusing student and on the campus climate for women can be equally life-altering. The students, staff, and faculty charged with adjudicating these cases are sincere, well meaning, strongly opposed to violence against women, and eager to construct a community in which young men and women can live and learn together. A decision about whether consent was or wasn’t given must be reached, but it is almost impossible for reasonable people to determine with certainty what took place.

To Chaucerians, however, at least one thing appears perfectly certain. More than six hundred years after the *Wife of Bath’s Prologue* was written, female sexual desire seems to be just as hard to understand, and in

some cases to de-couple from the effects of alcohol, as it is in the Wife of Bath's musings on her relationship with her fourth husband, a "rev-elour":

And after wyn on Venus moste I thynke,
 For al so siker as cold engendreth hayl,
 A likerous mouth moste han a likerous tayl.
 In wommen vinolent is no defence—
 This knowen lecchours by experience."

(Riverside, III.464–68)

In difficult cases, moreover, we appear to be no more capable of answering the question today, "What do women want?" than was the young knight-rapist in the Wife's *Tale*.

But how is this observation relevant to the future of Chaucer studies? At first glance it seems that Chaucer scholars are turning their back on the difficult questions about sexual politics that the Wife's *Prologue* and *Tale* pose. In her essay, Tomasch observes that feminist work on Chaucer has been "supplemented—if not yet entirely supplanted" by work on gender and sexuality and queer studies. This point was echoed in my recent conversation with a medievalist of a generation younger than my own, Jennifer Summit. Writing a chapter on recent feminist studies of Chaucer, Summit discovered that there has been far less work in the last five years than she expected to find. She expected to find it, in part, because she believes as I do that feminist or "women's issues" in Chaucer are not imposed or anachronistic but intrinsic, and so should be somewhat resistant to critical fashion. As Summit says, "Whenever I'm teaching Chaucer, I feel I'm teaching feminism," because that's what comes up in the classroom, that's what today's students want to know: was he sympathetic or hostile to women, pro- or anti-feminist, in our terms? If we look more closely, however, we see that what feminist work there is on Chaucer is increasingly about the very issues that most trouble student life: rape and consent.

I am not about to suggest that a course in *The Canterbury Tales*, or *The Legend of Good Women* or *Troilus and Criseyde* taught from a feminist perspective (whatever that might be) ought to be required of all undergraduates as a way of discouraging sexual misconduct. I've talked to too many young men and women and seen how they can know things in theory and ignore them in practice, as we all can. But one of the con-

cerns that we focus on at residential colleges in particular is how to integrate academics and student life. We profess to teach, and to a large extent really do teach, “the whole student,” with the understanding that learning goes on inside and outside the classroom, and that as a highly intentional learning community we will do a better job when the oversimplified and undertheorized boundaries between work and play are blurred and crossed. And because I remain interested in bridging the divide between reading/theory and living/practice, I am perhaps naive enough to believe that in this instance the relevance of Chaucer is not just a hook but a reality that we need to explore more fully. While Chaucerians have no panacea for late adolescent Americans’ problems of binge drinking and date rape, what might we be able to do to educate students about issues of uneven power and violence if we yoked the reading of Chaucer and our preventive education around issues of alcohol and consent? Here the issue may be not so much what is threatening Chaucer studies, but the opportunities we may be missing.

One final word of caution on this point. My worry that we fail to consider how and where we can explore the relevance of Chaucerian texts to our students’ lives is deepened and complicated by Sylvia Tomasch’s comment on the health of Chaucer studies at Hunter College. Tomasch suggests that student interest in Chaucer at her institution has something to do with the fact that “remediation” programs have been removed from the senior colleges like Hunter to the community colleges. Are Chaucer studies/reading Chaucer then only surviving, even thriving, by moving up in the educational hierarchy—away from the lower-division curriculum to English majors and graduate students only? If so, this means we are reaching not only smaller numbers but also more sophisticated readers, hardly likely to be paying much attention to the value of reading great literary texts to the personal, social, and psychic development of young people.

Reading at Risk

In early July of 2004, the NEA released a study entitled “Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America.” Based on interviews conducted by the Survey on Public Participation in the Arts over the course of three decades (1982, 1992, and 2002), polls show that the percentage of Americans who read at least one book of any kind has declined from 60.9 percent to 56.6 percent. The percentage who have

read a work of literature declined even more, from 54 percent to less than half, or 46.7 percent. The report goes on to examine many intriguing demographic differences: women read more literature than men, self-identified white people read more literature than self-identified Hispanics and African Americans, people with higher incomes read more literature than people with lower incomes, and the sharpest decline in literary reading rates has occurred among people between the ages of eighteen and thirty-four. Identifying this as a crisis situation, chair of the NEA Dana Gioia says, "If literary intellectuals—writers, scholars, librarians, book people in general—don't take charge of the situation, our culture will be impoverished."

My experience confirms the results of the NEA report and suggests to me that we ought to be talking more about why we need readers and how to develop them. By "we" I mean at least three different groups. First, "we," not just as "book people" but as human beings "in general," need readers, and we especially need literary readers, because even as other sources of information may supplant books in terms of the widespread circulation of certain kinds of data and even knowledge, books remain a singularly important source of literary values, perspectives, and approaches. And literary values include things like what Martha Nussbaum writes about as the narrative imagination, the cultivation of empathy, understanding how others very unlike ourselves see, feel, and know, and the safe exploration of alternative identities and perspectives. Now more than ever, our world needs people who care about how other people see things, who can imagine things otherwise, who can reflect and discuss and change their minds.

Second, "we" as educators and administrators need readers for related reasons. Much of our professed mission and perceived value lies not only in preparing individuals for private lives that are rich, satisfying, textured, full of healthy, supportive, enriching relationships but also—although some may mistrust this claim, and it is not unrelated to my concern about student misconduct—in preparing citizens for civic life. We need readers quite literally to make both parts of this mission viable, to keep our doors open and to bear witness to the impact of our programs and policies.

Third, "we" as medievalists need readers because if you do not read much to begin with, you probably aren't going to find your way to Chaucer, and so you can't fall in love with Chaucer and understand or support or share our passion for studying Chaucer and passing Chaucer

on to subsequent generations. In expressing this concern, I return to the anxiety I expressed above, that Chaucer studies may be thriving, but chiefly at higher levels in the educational system, with more mature and sophisticated readers rather than with the large numbers of more underprepared, more difficult-to-teach college students who are less interested in reading. The division of labor among postsecondary institutions may make pragmatic and pedagogical sense, but what does it say about our ability as educators to reach poorly prepared, less-privileged students and thus expand the shrinking population of readers? Perhaps this is not something that Chaucerians can worry about, but someone needs to wonder whether students who attend community colleges for “remediation” will have the opportunity to read any literary texts, let alone any medieval texts, taught by passionate teachers, and to become readers themselves.

Not asked to speak of solutions to the challenges I have reflected on here—ranging from prevailing careerism to the overall decline in literary reading—I propose none beyond what this forum in itself represents: the rare chance for Chaucerians to think together about a few of the broader issues in which our future is embedded. Returning briefly now to the issue of the “dual role” of the scholar/administrator, I close by suggesting that there are reasons why in fact Chaucerians are particularly well suited to think and act like administrators, and why we might encourage them to do so.

Successful administrators, for example, need to bring intellectual energy to the task of welcoming or at least dealing patiently with intractable problems and finding common ground for differing factions, and Chaucerians are scholars who have chosen difficulty and complexity, who relish irony and ambiguity, and who have experience in unifying the creativity of criticism with the discipline of history. Effective administrators today also need to think about the meaning and possibility of institutional stability during a time of economic, demographic, and technological transition—an issue that Chaucerian texts constantly examine. And as fellow medievalist and experienced college administrator Craig Williamson also reminded me, good administrators need to combine “a hard eye” with “an embracing heart,” *auctoritee* with *gentillesse*. Like Chaucer the poet, administrators need to be ready to listen to everyone’s story, keeping their judgments in the background, and keeping themselves in the background, always present yet never appearing,

enabling the fabric to weave itself. For the sake of many worthy causes, then—Chaucer studies, the humanities in general, and the goals of an undergraduate education in the liberal arts and sciences, to name a few that are dear to my heart—I hope we can bring more Chaucerians, and more of what we might call Chaucerian values, to the administrative table.

