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The End of Chaucer Studies

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The End of Chaucer Studies

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Abstract

The essay explores a few strategies that the author has found effective for combining teaching and scholarship. First, broadly falling under the category of medievalism, adaptations, translations, and popular culture manifestations of medieval texts and authors work well in the classroom and have increasingly gained academic interest and a journal presence. Second, any aspects of digital humanities that one can manage to incorporate into teaching and scholarship benefit both students who need technical skills and graduate students/early-career faculty who may be considering alt-ac (alternative academic) careers.

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Oxford English Dictionary

end n.

I.5. A piece broken, cut off, or left; a fragment, remnant.

II.8.a. Termination of existence; destruction, abolition.

II.14.a. An intended result of an action; an aim, purpose.

II.15. A final cause; the object for which a thing exists.

Urban Dictionary

ends n.

Money, payment. Short for dividENDS.

I write with a deep awareness of the privilege to be a tenured professor in the final years of a full career at a small liberal arts college. When I retire, my institution will in all likelihood no longer have a medievalist on staff in the English department. This is certainly one sense of an end, one that is more and more common, as Kisha Tracy and John Sexton (2018) suggest in *The Lone Medievalist*. I work at an undergraduate college (now a "university", largely for international marketing purposes) and in a traditional department that values a knowledge of literary history as one of our primary learning aims (ends!) for English majors. It's also a school that purports to value excellence in teaching, and a demonstration of such was once required to keep your job. Indeed, my position became available because my predecessor was apparently deemed insufficient in the classroom. Tenure, promotion, and annual merit raises are predicated, however, on peer-reviewed publications. The publish-or-perish paradigm obviously makes less sense at a university without a need to attract graduate students, and the rationale was that scholarship makes better teachers. The assumption, I think, is that knowledge creation fosters effective knowledge dissemination, but faculty hired before my institution's turn to R1 emulation in the 1990s and who published little were nonetheless among our most popular teachers. Now almost all English department faculty lines (except Shakespeare and African-American literature) are being filled by contingent faculty for whom scholarship is neither required nor rewarded, and indeed is discouraged given their heavy teaching loads (120 students each semester) and attendant

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advising and service duties. Add into this toxic mix a fifty percent reduction in the number of our English majors over the past two decades, increasing pressure to demonstrate the relevance and practical skills afforded by our discipline, and the relatively negligible material returns that scholarship garners (our institution is in perpetual financial crisis), and we come to another sense of an end: the purpose of our research. For those few of us who have a tenure line, we are motivated to soldier on by the anxiety of post-tenure reviews, hope for promotion or raises, fear of the stigma of dead wood, the continued joy of intellectual inquiry, or desire to contribute to the field. And, notwithstanding the institutional barriers, for those full-time non-tenure track faculty or tenure-line teaching faculty who desire to secure stable employment or to practice that which they were trained for, publications remain a necessity.

I have always envied those who could consolidate time and effort by achieving a symbiotic relationship between coursework and scholarship, that is, basing their teaching on their scholarship or doing publishable research on the subjects in their classes, but as the topic of this volume attests, it's not easy. We all do research for our classes. I teach one or two medieval literature courses a year but mostly (four to five) obligatory writing-intensive introductory literature courses for all students. Lacking intuitive critical insight, I habitually consult secondary sources for the texts in these core courses. And the same applies to medieval subjects I teach, ranging from the Arthurian tradition to Catherine of Siena. But obviously there is a wide gap between class preparation research and publishable scholarship. As I describe below, medievalism, and more specifically, adaptation studies, has provided a relatively productive field for the crossover between the two academic activities of teaching and scholarship, and a relatively wide journal market, including an increasing number of pedagogical journals, exists for such studies. But in addition to scholarship that addresses discipline-specific teaching strategies, I believe that incorporating the tools of digital humanities into our research and teaching is the future. To do so is to arm graduate students and early-career faculty with demonstrable, transferable skills, provide our decreasing numbers of majors with exposure to the online competencies that they will need in the workplace, and afford the practical relevance that humanities apparently lack in popular political perception.

A senior colleague once told me that to save some mental labor and class preparation time one should only do scholarship on topics one is teaching. But my PhD thesis and pre-tenure articles and book focused on the Chaucerian apocrypha, that is, on poetry included in the early folio print editions of his works (William Thynne 1532 through John Urry 1721), why they were attributed to him, and how they affected his reception history (short answer: he was viewed or constructed as a proto-Protestant). Manuscript and bibliographical history, not to mention works that Chaucer did *not* write, generally are not helpful in undergraduate medieval literature classes, although such extra-canonical works have increasingly received attention (see Brandolino and Smith 2013). Another senior colleague said to save time and mental labor by simply recycling the same syllabi and class preps and skimping on the teaching, an approach that certainly caters to the naturally charismatic. Having gotten tenure based on the "serious" research, and already interested in reception history and why Chaucer became and remains a canonical author, I found that adaptation studies and popular culture representations provided crossover potential for teaching Chaucer, other medieval texts, or indeed any text that enjoys an afterlife. For medievalists, medievalism or how the Middle Ages are reinvented by subsequent ages, is an especially fruitful field for literary analysis, fostering closer reading of the original texts and

providing students with some cultural insight about how the medieval is used and reinvented by modern artists. Some medieval historians are doubtful about the value of medievalism because it perpetuates fictitious perceptions of the past, but the cultural, textual, and artistic analysis and interpretation required for comparative inquiry works quite well with literary studies. And there is a large and diverse audience for such scholarship, which attracts readers interested not only in medievalism and medieval studies, but also film, cultural studies, popular culture, and pedagogy.

I stumbled on this field in the late 1990s, originally desiring to reinforce close reading and consideration of Chaucer's rhetorical method in the *General Prologue*. Supplementing one class meeting with a viewing of Pier Paolo Pasolini's introduction to the pilgrims in *I racconti di Canterbury* (1972), I asked students what was missing in his representations of the characters. My interest was less in Pasolini's purpose than in encouraging students to consider Chaucer's own narrative method and social observations in his characterizations. In a subsequent class, probably with the hope of filling up some time, and not having previewed the clip (ticking tenure clock), I shared Pasolini's version of the *Merchant's Tale.* My students were baffled, and my own inability to explain adequately what Pasolini was doing with Chaucer led to a first foray into adaptation studies. My research suggested that Pasolini viewed Chaucer both as a champion of pre-capitalist proletarian life of exuberance and transgression, and as a marginalized voice, celebrating casual sexuality as an act of ideological resistance to authoritarian repression and control. In other words, he projects his own politics onto Chaucer (whom he also plays in the film). The only problem is that while this exploration of Pasolini's cultural and artistic context deepened my own knowledge of his sexual politics and the aesthetics of realist film, enabling me to better frame class discussion the next time I included clips in class, the research yields TMI (too much information) for a Chaucer class. Moreover, I found that the most useful approach for keeping the focus on Chaucer is to discuss how Pasolini is unfaithful to the poem because such an elementary approach ensures close reading of the original. Useful for comparative analysis in the classroom, fidelity criticism was and is, however, a superannuated approach in adaptation studies scholarship. In other words, information important to my research or to a class on Italian cinema of the 1960s—Pasolini's political and cultural context and how he uses and abuses Chaucer (and other canonical authors) to further his own artistic ends— is somewhat less germane in a course on Chaucer and the Middle Ages.

Contemporary and conventional adaptations work better because students are more familiar with modern visual genres, narrative conventions, and socio-cultural concerns. Brian Helgeland's *A Knight's Tale* (2001) starring the late Heath Ledger was a godsend in this regard. While the film does feature "Geoff" (Paul Bettany) as a character, it has nothing to do with Chaucer's exploration of temporal happiness and justice in *The Knight's Tale* as those students who had labored through two weeks of the tale appreciated immediately. Indeed, they recognized that the narrative follows what Joe Queenan (2002) aptly summarizes as the "template for successful moviemaking": "give a good-looking man, preferably on the young side, a seemingly insurmountable problem, erect a series of obstacles, pit him against a resourceful and malignant foe and get him a girl" (7). Complementing our discussion with some theoretical framing drawn from David Cowart's *Literary Symbiosis*: *The Reconfigured Text in Twentieth-Century Writing*, I asked whether the film produces any kind of "epistemic dialogue" with the original, "forcing [viewers] into a recognition of the historical and diachronic differences between the voice of one literary age and that of another" (Cowart 1993, 1). And, of course, it does, replacing

Chaucer's dim view of cosmic justice with the capitalist myth of the American Dream that suggests hard work and a bit of pluck can overcome any social barriers to success and therefore happiness. Students also astutely observed that Helgeland's character of Geoff has similarities to Chaucer's narrative persona, both in his (false) modesty and in his social ease among both commoners and nobility, suggestions that I developed in an article. And apart from reinforcing the alterity of Chaucer's sober medieval view of human agency, *A Knight's Tale*, which I described as a "jousting rock opera," probably did more for the cultural currency of Chaucer than the half score of subsequent academic articles analyzing the film (Forni 2003, 255).

The past twenty years have been especially advantageous for those interested in the popular reception of medieval texts, and the *Global Chaucers* collaborative website provides a wealth of adaptations and translations of his poetry (Barrington and Hsy 2015). I have managed to both teach and publish on a number of visual, textual, and comic book adaptations of not only Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales,* but also *Beowulf,* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.* Translation is a form of adaptation, and this too presents crossover potential. In each case, the adaptation was an addendum to the original text in the classroom rather than serving as the focus of sustained inquiry as the adaptation might be in a journal article or book-length study. Since literary analysis demands some framing both for scholarship and pedagogy, I provided students with basic adaptation theory and cultural studies approaches distilled from my own research. Then, they were provided with a list of basic questions that I, myself, had about the adaptation: What changes were made? Why were certain characters, scenes, or events cut or added? What kind of audience is the adaptation intended for? How does the visual or textual medium dictate the alterations? What are the messages or central themes? How does the adaptation reflect contemporary values, beliefs, or concerns? Beyond a few observations for context, in-depth information about genre-specific conventions (film, television, comic book, translation aesthetics and techniques) and how they affect the adaptation, while necessary for scholarship, again represented TMI for a course on medieval literature. Nonetheless, students are quite astute in identifying changes, and crowd-sourcing discussions always yield valuable insights that escape a single reader.

Similarly, for part of a project on Chaucer in contemporary popular and commercial culture, I asked students to do the research and present on invocations of the poet and why and how he was being used to pitch a product or experience. Unearthing objects from eBay including ceiling fans, wine, leather goods, fine china, pottery, umbrella stands, to name just a few, students concluded that Chaucer's name is associated with quality artisanship, authenticity, reliability, and tradition. Formal evaluations of the course suggested that students enjoyed this research project and while the study that included their discoveries did not appear for three years after I taught the class, I like to think that they would have been pleased and impressed with the results of our collaborative research endeavor.

A now retired colleague once voiced his reservation that teaching medievalism distracted from a focus on the Middle Ages. Medievalism in the form of adaptation studies, however, does partly help to satisfy the perennial question of contemporary relevance for those students who remain skeptical that Chaucer's observations on power, corruption, gender, faith, and socio-economic class tensions have any bearing on contemporary concerns. The same retired colleague also did not appreciate our occasional blessed snow days, when classes were canceled, in the time before Zoom, because he could never make up the information he planned to deliver. But at least for our English undergraduates,

some of the point is less about content dissemination and mastery than about keeping them interested in one's topic and practicing so-called transferable skills or habits such as critical thinking, comparative analysis, clear written and oral communication, and the basic ability to create an arguable thesis and support it with textual evidence. (A few of our academic stars still shoot for graduate school, a career path that we in fact highly discourage given the heavy odds against their finding dignified and financially stable employment.) I am genuinely curious about why the Middle Ages and some of its literature still matter, or more specifically, how they are reinvented and used for commercial, ideological, political, and artistic ends. And while I have found ways to incorporate this interest in my teaching, and to produce some scholarship describing ways in which others might do the same, until recently pedagogical publications were considered, at least by some colleagues, to be second tier, not counting *per se* as theoretical, archival, or synthetic research (see Attar and Shutters 2015). This bias, however, given the faculty paradigm changes in higher education, which include an increasing number of teaching tenure-track positions and the attendant increasing value of research that addresses pedagogical approaches to teaching literature, has certainly dissipated profession-wide and within medieval studies itself, attested to by the pioneering efforts of *Teaching Association for Medieval Studies*, *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Teaching* (SMART), *Journal of Medieval Worlds*, and obviously *New Chaucer Studies: Pedagogy and Profession.*

I held a similar bias or suspicion about the scholarly value of digital humanities or "technologically enhanced scholarly work" (Pannapacker 2013), notwithstanding the existence of this field for well over three decades. Learning each new iteration of our institution's LMS (learning management system) posed enough of a technological challenge. Through the dogged efforts of our mid-career medieval philosopher who has incorporated digital tools in his research since graduate school, our institution funded a small group of students and me to attend the Digital Humanities Summer Institute (DHSI) at the University of Vancouver ("UVic"), held every June and offering one and two-week long workshops for both beginners and advanced practitioners. Faculty who voted against the funding for this educational opportunity voiced similar reservations to those found in online and peer-reviewed forums, viewing digital humanities as a manifestation of what Eileen Joy once called the "technomanagerial-bureaucratic capture of everything" (Joy 2014) or what others finger as the capitalist creep of "neoliberalism" (see Allington et al 2016; Greenspan 2019, 1-2), or as misguided efforts to "achieve the conditions of authority perceived to inhere in the natural sciences and their empirical methods" (Drucker 2017, 633–34). Timothy Brennan opines:

> Roughly a decade's worth of resources have now been thrown in their direction, including the founding of an Office of Digital Humanities at the National Endowment for the Humanities, unheard-of amounts of funding from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, a parade of celebratory anthologies backed by crossover articles in high-profile magazines, and academic job openings in an era of tenure-track scarcity. So, with all their promise, and all this help, what exactly have the digital humanities accomplished? (Brennan 2017).

But Brennan really answers his own question here: digital humanities have provided resources. Indeed, the funding sources and secondary "area of expertise" designations in academic job listings have steadily increased in the past six years, and libraries with special collections desire pre-modern PhDs for archival and curatorial positions. Using computing technologies, scholars have produced open access archives, textual and visual databases, searchable concordances, and text/ hypertext editions. Digital tools have aided in paleographical analysis, the decipherment and reconstruction of ancient languages, and manuscript stemmatics. Medieval scholars have been the vanguard in this endeavor partly because our primary texts are so difficult to access, and the texts are out of copyright—an advantage that for example, those who study Modernism and later movements do not have (see Weidman and Pastor 2021). Digital tools in the humanities can democratize access to information, making easily available manuscript and print texts that once required time, money, and the privilege of institutional support to consult.

Indeed, Stephen Nichols claims "nothing more nor less than that digitized manuscript resources propose a new epistemology asking us to conceive medieval culture and literature in a new light" (Nichols 2021, 6). Online technology has also opened up the canon, making available once peripheral primary texts that deepen our understanding of medieval cultural production. The controversy, as far as I can understand it, has to do with computational literary studies of large corpora used for text, stylistic, and network analysis, and the unreliability of quantitative approaches to provide reliable statistical patterns and results (see Da 2019). As for the *Canterbury Tales Project* (CTP), Thomas J. Farrell suggests that a fundamental misunderstanding of the methods and aims of the Project—which has effectively "developed an internally consistent process for analyzing and sorting textual variation into meaningful groups of witnesses that are plausible in light of previous analyses"—has resulted in critical neglect of its valuable resources (Farrell 2021, 94).

Nonetheless, we already depend upon digital tools in our teaching and scholarship, and knowledge of information technology is essential both for faculty beginning their careers whether in academia or alt-ac (alternative academic) and for students after graduation. Good communication, critical thinking, and creative skills, as difficult as they are to cultivate, do not stand out on applicant tracking systems without some attendant digital competencies, which are individually less important than a demonstration that one is familiar with navigating online technologies. College graduates will need to know how to effectively use ChatGPT, for example, an ability difficult to develop when the tool is banned from academic use as it has been at my institution (a stance now reconsidered). While I am a novice at digital humanities and probably don't have a decade left in my career to gain confident proficiency, much less expertise, experimentation is essential (see Cordell 2015) so that we can figure out how to use spreadsheets, conduct textual analysis, visualize data, and map. Even if one suspects that the use of digital humanities simply provides ornamentation of traditional interpretive literary scholarship, more familiarity with digital tools and their capabilities will no doubt afford better insight into how they can enhance our own research and scholarship.

For example, one of my projects on *Beowulf* included extensive examinations of adaptations in comic books and film. Given the costs of licensing and reproduction, I was only allowed a few black and white illustrations. An attendant website or online archive would greatly aid readers in understanding my own analyses and would provide access to the primary visual texts for their own teaching or research. I now have some basic competencies to undertake such an endeavor, but the

project would not count as a publication, although the Modern Language Association suggested over twenty years ago that "academic work in digital media must be evaluated in the light of these rapidly changing technological, institutional, and professional contexts, and departments should recognize that many traditional notions of scholarship, teaching, and service are being redefined" (MLA 2012). And since the most productive work in digital humanities is collaborative, the ideal of the single-authored article, book, or project is being redefined.

Even some simple tools can be helpful. My students and I recently struggled through Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, a text that is increasingly difficult to teach not only because of its length (8000+ lines) but also because of its intense focus on male desire. (One of my students described Troilus as a "needy stalker.") Notwithstanding my suggestion that we consider the alterity of medieval social assumptions or how Chaucer modified his sources to produce a more complex story, the poem does not fare well in the current #MeToo environment given its apparent aestheticizing of male sexual aggression. For one class period we used *Voyant*, a remarkably easy to use free web-based application for text analysis whose most basic function provides word counts. Having downloaded *Troilus* from Project Gutenberg and saved it as a .txt file we uploaded the poem and identified "stop words" or function words that the program should overlook, such as "the," "a," "and," "ther," "han," "seyde," etc.). Our *Voyant* textual analysis showed in a simple cirrus cloud image that apart from "hir" (her and their), "he," "him" and "his" are among the most common words in the poem, attesting to the fixation on masculine needs. The exercise certainly can supplement critical analyses that suggest, for instance, that notwithstanding the emphasis of courtly love on the lady and one's service to her desires, the real emphasis is on Troilus and his own myopic desires ("my," I"). We got rid of further function words to discover that the two most common nouns in the poem are "god" and "herte." Again, this exercise can help to emphasize or reinforce one's analysis that the poem is not only obviously concerned with love, but also, and equally, with questions about fate and free will. Although he sees himself as helpless and without agency, Troilus chooses to suffer; suffering gives his life meaning. While this is not scholarship, it does promote class discussion ("Why are 'god' and 'herte' the two most common words in the poem?"), and it provides students with tools to create their own topics. One could easily use this with other texts. A simple class assignment might be to choose a word or image in a novel (which needs to be available online and convertible to a text file), find the contexts in which it is used, and to analyze how its meaning might change over the course of the text, or in different contexts, or indeed over a whole range of texts.

Not surprisingly, "West Coast" digital humanities places more emphasis on media arts (Liu 2013, 416), and one can also incorporate alternative digital media assignments to supplement and sometimes replace traditional thesis-driven essays. At my institution, humanities departments operate in the black (we are cheap!) but resources have steadily been redirected to STEM and business programs; one result is that the enrollment caps on our introductory writing-intensive English courses have increased over my career from 20 to 28 students. As a result, the paper grading for multiple courses each semester has become unmanageable. Assigning shorter, two-page essays is one solution, but another is to ask students to compose a literary analysis of a short story or an explication of a poem in the form of a digital video essay with voice-over narration (the analysis itself) using iMovie or some combination of tools offered by Adobe Creative Cloud, Canva, or similar visual presentation tool, and complement the presentation by images, video, graphics, sound, or music, according to one's ability.

I work with the students by attempting to transfer my own current writing project into a similar format—and students are certainly heartened by the comparison with their own productions.

In the end, my reservation about digital media and computational programs is that I spend more time learning computer-based technologies than researching and preparing the primary materials for class, and the latter is certainly the more pleasurable intellectual activity. And students put more effort into learning how to present their literary analysis effectively in a multimedia presentation than they might spend on the analysis itself. As for scholarship, I would assume that the more one learns about the capabilities of digital tools, the better one can begin to formulate questions and the forms of analysis appropriate for the large corpora of medieval texts or little-studied manuscripts that are increasingly available online. In other words, in order for computer-based analytical tools to provide value to scholarship one needs to be able to frame the appropriate quantitative questions such technology might address. Having labored through Walter W. Skeat's rhyme tests (1900), the aspirational end of my studies on the Chaucerian apocrypha would have been to discover whether Chaucer wrote the works that were attributed to him in manuscripts and early folio editions, particularly those which still appear in the *Riverside Chaucer*. But alas, the poems appear to be individually too short in terms of sample size for accurate computational comparison. Nor, I think, are most medievalists exercised about the authenticity of the shorter canonical poems since regardless of authorship they still reflect Chaucer's artistic and cultural milieu and influence (see Boffey and Edwards 2018). Similarly, once the goal of twentieth-century *Canterbury Tales* manuscript stemmatology was to reconstruct an authorial text, but this editorial end appears to be at odds with the intransigent reality of the transmission history of the poem. As individual witnesses are digitized and transcribed, they have been increasingly valued in their own right as a testament to late medieval material and book culture (see Meyer-Lee 2008).

Digital humanities, however, is not the panacea for our apparently moribund profession. As I write in late 2023, the *MLA Job List* lists five tenure-track jobs in medieval English literature. *Academic Jobs Wiki* lists seven. Two of these, incidentally, designate digital humanities as part of the job title. In 2020–21 The Medieval Academy's "Job Market Data" listed four English medieval literature jobs, about which Merle Eisenberg observes: "Based on these trends and without any changes, access to full-time faculty positions in all the subfields that normally constitute Medieval Studies in North America can be defined for all intents and purposes as a *job lottery, not a job market*" (emphasis in original Eisenberg 2021, 1). In the following year, commenting on the dire job market data from the Medieval Academy for both 2021 – 21 and 2022 –23, Eisenberg concludes "*Unless the trends of the last three years are reversed, hiring in almost all fields of Medieval Studies has effectively disappeared*" (emphasis in original; 2023, 1). I have been unable to find statistics on how many PhDs in British medieval literature were granted in the corresponding years but have no reason to doubt the bleak assessment. Most of us did not attend graduate school, forgoing 6–8 years of income, for the "dividENDS" such an endeavor promised. But we are, perhaps unaccountably, drawn to the Middle Ages, and probably find teaching, researching, and thinking about Chaucer both a privilege and a pleasure. I have found that investigating *why* Chaucer continues to have some cultural capital (a genuine question as far as I'm concerned) is an effective way to explore his significance in both the classroom and within the larger scholarly community. For those who desire or are compelled to publish but are overwhelmed by the modern expectations of academia—the Facebook group "The Professor is Out" is surely sobering reading—

I believe that the most effective approach in the end (!) is to experiment, whenever possible, with digital tools that help to visualize your work and to incorporate your research interest into class discussions and student projects.

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