

Summer Project Report

As a History and English student, I enjoy approaching sources and texts from an interdisciplinary perspective, and the Merton summer projects scheme was the perfect opportunity to pursue an area of research in this way. With a particular interest in medieval England, I chose to use Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale* as a springboard from which to explore attitudes towards marriage in the 14th and 15th centuries. The initial text raises several issues relating to the various aspects of medieval marriage, including how it was defined, how these ideas were circulated and to what extent social realities corresponded with ecclesiastical guidelines. My research incorporated an examination of the legal, ecclesiastical and literary positions of the period, and in addition to Chaucer's poem, I drew upon a variety of other primary sources, ranging from translations of Latin legal documents to satirical poetry.

Being able to stay in college accommodation for the eight weeks of my project was invaluable in enabling me to access the vast resources of the Bodleian Libraries, with many of the texts I used being unavailable remotely. Often my research took me in an unexpected direction, as I followed leads and references to find other sources which broadened my view of the medieval social and religious landscape; I particularly enjoyed discovering John Mirk's prescriptive poem *Instructions for Parish Priests*, written in the 14th century, which sets out in verse the models of behaviour which the clergy were expected to embody and instruct their parishioners to follow. In compiling my research into a final essay, I could connect representations of marriage in medieval literature with the predominant religious teachings of the period. I also brought into consideration the questions of textual purpose and audience, and built an argument demonstrating the importance of intersections between text, language and belief in constructing and conveying perceptions of marriage in medieval England.

I thoroughly enjoyed the time I spent in Oxford over the summer, and staying in the city meant that I could even continue to row in my free time! Whilst the freedom of structuring my own project was at times daunting, it has given me an exciting insight into creating and following an independent research plan. I was able to use the skills I have developed with the guidance of my tutors to pursue my interests by combining historical enquiry and literary criticism. The experience of undertaking a project in Oxford, supported by the college, has consolidated my hopes of pursuing further interdisciplinary research at a graduate level.