

## **Summer Project Report – Rowan Wilson**

Over the past two years as an English student, I have fallen in love with the world of medieval literature, and have often felt that Oxford terms were too short for me to properly explore the texts that most fascinated me. The Merton summer projects scheme thus represented an exciting opportunity for me to commit to sustained and focused research over a longer period. Developing on work I had done for a paper on medieval lyric poetry, I chose to examine modes of discursive and associative memory in lyric collections, focusing on an anonymous 15<sup>th</sup> century collection of songs and carols, held in the Bodleian as MS Eng. poet. e. 1. I examined previous studies of medieval memory as a disciplined, extensively theorized process, in particular the influential work of Mary Carruthers, and called into question the extent to which this concept of a rigid medieval *ars memoria* was applicable to the more fluid and unruly processes of memory governing the transmission of popular music and poetry.

Staying in Oxford for the eight weeks of my project, I not only had access to the Bodleian's vast research resources, but thanks to the kindness of Martin Kauffmann, the Bodleian's curator of medieval manuscript collections, I was able to work directly with the manuscript on which my research was focused. This was the first time I had been able to examine a medieval manuscript independently, and though parts of this process were challenging—for a while I wasn't sure if I'd even be able to decipher the rather messy cursive hands of the manuscript!—it was also thrilling to be working with a genuine 15<sup>th</sup> century document. I was able to look closely at the ways in which medieval readers might have interacted with the material text, and to theorize about how that might have impacted their reception of the songs contained in the manuscript. It was also wonderful to be able to follow the various threads thrown up by my research to their conclusion, something not really possible within the weekly deadlines of term-time essays. I ended up looking far beyond the world of medieval English lyric, to consider French and Arabic lyrics, modern theoretical works on the nature of collective memory and memorial culture in the US and Germany, and even neurological studies of the ways in which music is processed in the brain!

I thoroughly enjoyed my summer project. As an undergraduate who hopes to continue on to graduate work, the freedom to structure my own research and timetable was an invaluable experience, and has left me eager to continue exploring medieval literature—and especially medieval manuscripts—in greater depth.