

Sabbatical Report: One Semester at Full Pay, Spring 2023
Dr. Brantley L. Bryant, Professor of English

I am deeply grateful to Sonoma State University for a sabbatical in the Spring 2023 semester at full pay. This sabbatical semester was especially meaningful after the monumentally difficult years of teaching during the Covid-19 Pandemic in 2020, 2021, and 2022, which involved, among many other challenges, emergency shifts to online teaching, development of new online modalities for courses both previously taught and newly-developed for those years, and then a complicated and nonlinear shift back to in-person teaching. This Spring '23 sabbatical was a vitally important and meaningful opportunity to take time off from teaching in order to pursue research in my field that I plan to bring into scholarly circulation and, even more importantly, into the classroom. For the sabbatical, I proposed work on two different projects, and I was able to make substantial progress on both.

The first project was to further explore a developing analysis, initially delivered as a conference paper, of ecological aspects of the critically-acclaimed queer time-travel science fiction novella *This is How You Lose the Time War* by Amal El-Mohtar and Max Gladstone (2019). The sabbatical project gave me time to read significant recent scholarship on contemporary science fiction, a new field for me, both in order to inform my discussion and in order to best position the project to meaningfully contribute to research in the field. I was able to begin significant drafting of an article-length expanded version of the conference paper, especially focusing on developing moments of productive connection with published scholarship. Moreover, the opportunity to engage with this field is important to my teaching. Students in major and GE courses express significant and profound interest in studying contemporary science fiction, fantasy, and other speculative literatures, and although colleagues already offer excellent courses in these areas there is still room for even more curriculum to address student interests. Guided and inspired by the important work of colleagues in my department who have already long engaged with these fields in their research and teaching, I have intentionally directed my own research and teaching-preparation time towards this important and developing area for future course design. My sabbatical time helped lay the groundwork for plans to design and teach a course in fantasy fiction for the fall 2024 semester or soon after.

The second project, in my main research area, was to read widely and deeply in scholarship, both literary and historical, related to human engagement with, and use of, water in medieval Europe and adjacent periods/regions. The larger goal of this project is to investigate the representations of water in medieval literature in order to trace long-term attitudes about water, landscape, and humankind that inform later policies and worldviews. This project draws from, and aims to contribute to, the thriving humanities scholarship on water, a varied and dynamic field given different names by practitioners. The field (or different emphases in it) can be referred to as Hydro-criticism or the Blue Humanities, among other names. Specifically for my area of focus, James L. Smith and Hetta Howes have coined the term "Medieval Water Studies." This research direction continues work I have previously presented at conferences and have published in the article "The Power of Water in Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Book of the Duchess*" in *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*. The sabbatical allowed me invaluable time to locate and study several kinds of key sources; larger theoretical works on water use in general, key explorations of water in Early Modern Studies (to provide an awareness of work being done on a

contiguous but later literary period), scholarly analysis of representations of water in medieval literature, and historical works about the technical aspects of water use in medieval England. This sabbatical work has prepared me for my next medium-term goal, which is to bring this research to bear on *The Canterbury Tales* in a long-form article that connects Jamie Linton's concept of the "hydrosocial cycle" to the twinned representations of water and social structures in the *Tales*.

I was also able to work on several new projects, not included in the original sabbatical proposal, connected to my research on Medieval Water Studies. The sabbatical gave me time to consult New York, Columbia University Manuscript Plimpton 263, a handwritten manuscript from England in the early fifteenth century (the funding for this trip was not provided directly by SSU but my time off made the travel possible). Plimpton 263 contains one of the only complete copies of the 14th century Middle English translation by John Trevisa (d. 1402) of the medieval Latin encyclopedia *On the Properties of Things*. Trevisa's fascinating Middle English version, recognized by scholars as distinct enough in its style and approach to amount to a literary work of its own, has been identified as "the first encyclopedia in English" (Fradenburg Joy). This Middle English encyclopedic text, as specialists widely recognize, is an invaluable source for study of late medieval European attitudes about the natural world. The text includes elaborate discussions of topics such as weather, the behavior of animals, health and the body, and more. My initial work with a key manuscript containing this text could, I hope, lead to possible future work in producing an edition for student use. An authoritative scholarly edition of this text already exists (Seymour et al. 1975), but it is available in only a small number of copies and is designed for professional scholarly use, so it is completely unsuited for teaching in the undergraduate classroom. I hope to be able to work to produce a formal student edition, but even in the short term I will be able to create informal editions or translations for course readings. My goal would be to make this important text accessible for undergraduate students. This work will directly inform my teaching of historical attitudes about the environment in my literature courses.

In terms of turning sabbatical research into scholarly presentations, I used my time and research during the sabbatical to prepare contributions to the upcoming 2024 Biennial Congress of the New Chaucer Society, the major international conference for the field of late medieval English literature. Drawing from my engagement with Medieval Water Studies in the sabbatical, I co-proposed a paper panel, "Consuming Waters/Nurturing Waters," that will be on the conference program. I also proposed a paper of my own, drawing on sabbatical work, for another panel; the paper was accepted and I will be presenting it at the conference.

In addition to these projects, I voluntarily made sure to participate in my department's program review process during the spring '23 semester, including online and in-person meetings. I am again deeply grateful for the opportunity to use this sabbatical time to explore and connect with topics new and old and to connect with my field -- and to further inform and develop my teaching through engagement with specialized research.