

3-29-2010

Library Scholars Grant Presentation

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Library Scholars' Grant
Presentation
Michael Johnston
Assistant Professor of English

“Compilatores generosi: The Gentry and Middle English Romance in the Late Middle Ages”
(1350-1500)

1305—William Wallace executed

1348—Bubonic Plague strikes for first time

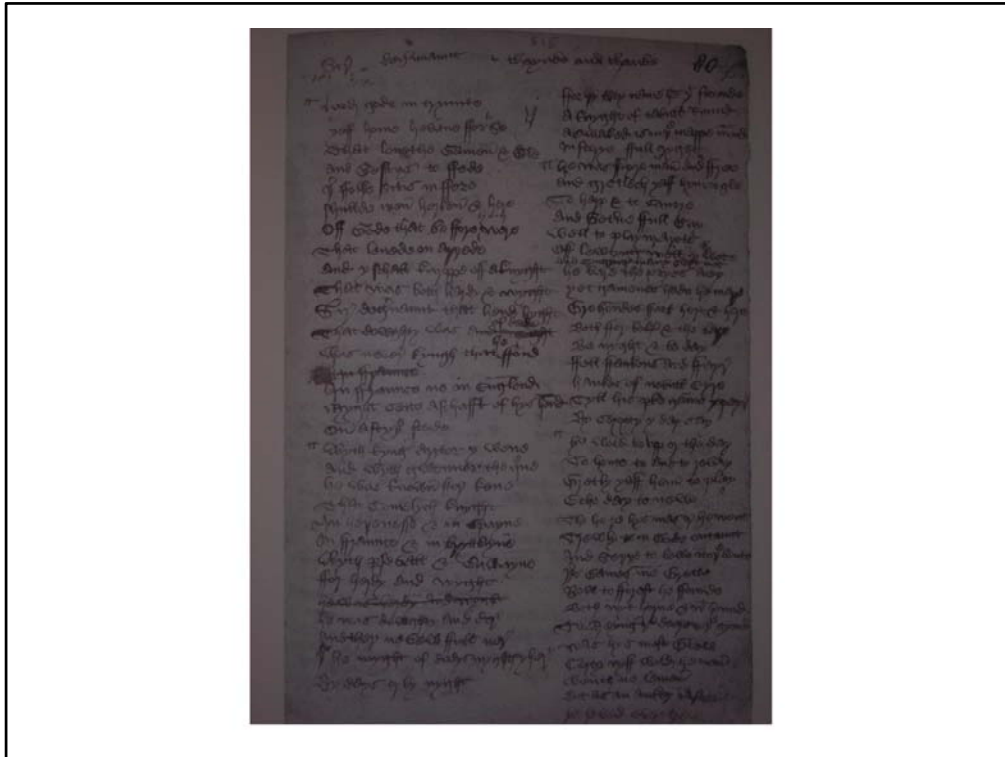
1400—Geoffrey Chaucer dies

1453/54—Gutenberg’s first printings

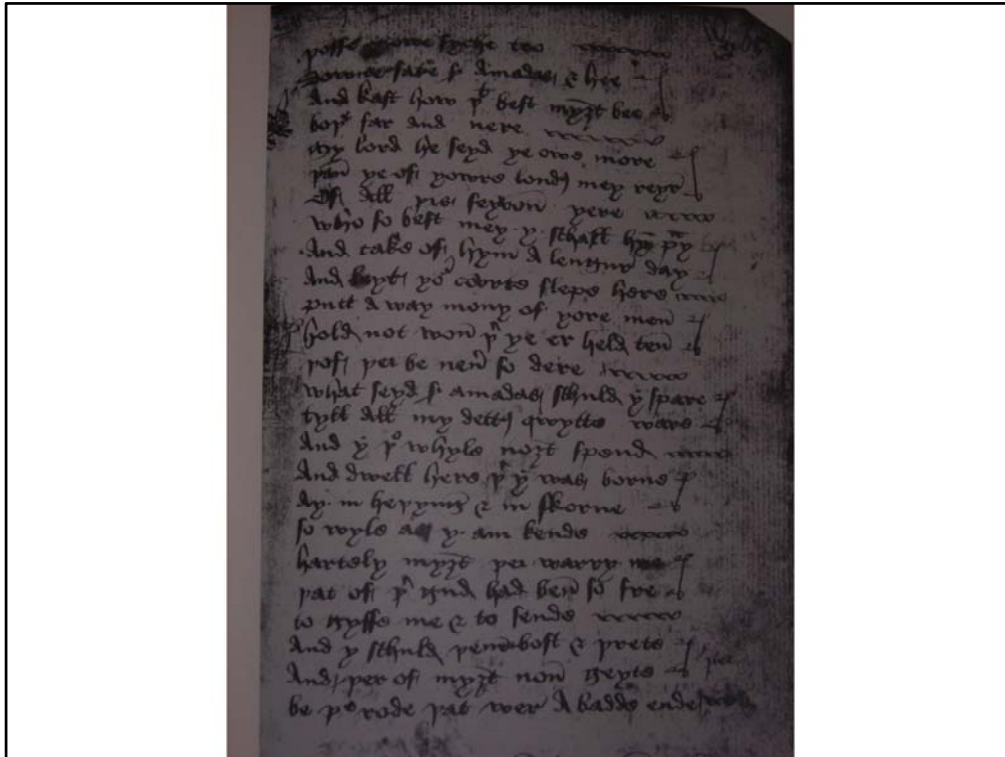
1455-1485—Wars of the Roses

1476—William Caxton prints first book in England

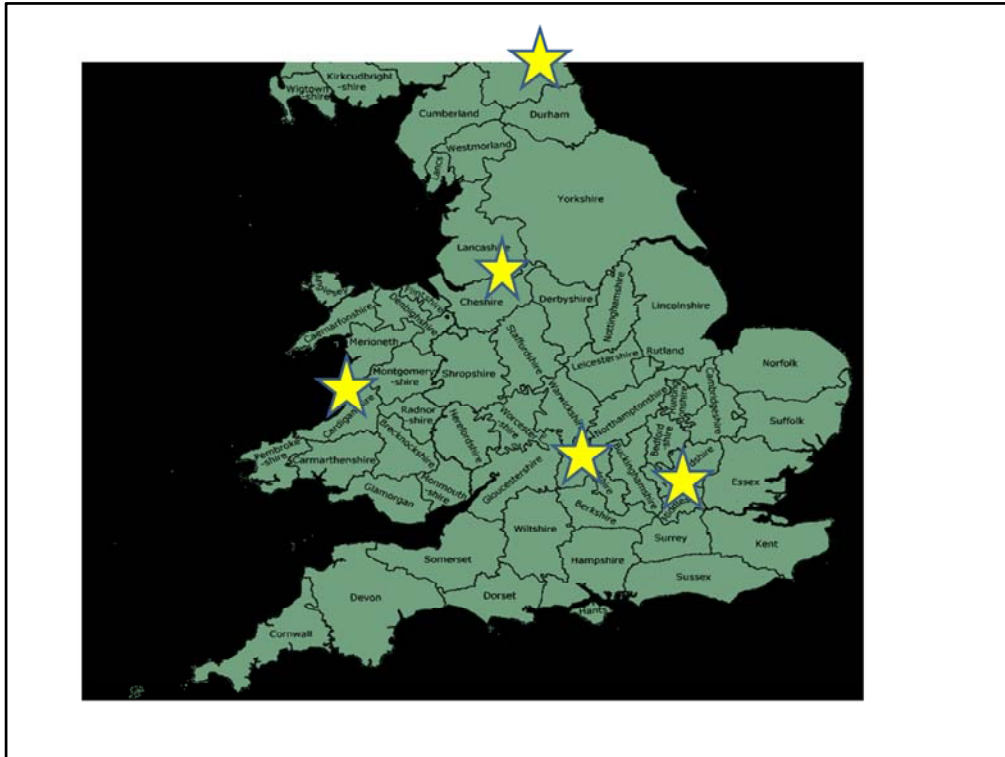
Compilatores generosi is the title of the book I am currently writing. The title refers to the two main concepts I am bringing together. First, a *compiler* (*compilatores* is the plural in Latin) is a technical term taken from St Bonaventure’s commentary on Peter Lombard’s *Sentences*. A *compiler* is one who makes a book by bringing together the words of others into new and unique combinations. The argument of my book is that the gentry (the mass of minor landowners, part of the lower rungs of the aristocracy) in late medieval England compiled romances into unique combinations that provided fantasy resolutions to the socio-economic dilemmas they faced. The second term, *generosi*, is the plural of *generosus*, a Latin term which came, in the period 1350–1500, to refer specifically to those who owned land and commanded the “worship” of their inferiors, but who did not bear titles of nobility (i.e. the gentry). I offer the dates on this slide merely for contextualization.



This is an image of one such romance manuscript. The text here is *Sir Degrevant*, a romance that narrates how a landowning knight (i.e., a member of the gentry) defends his property rights against the incursions of a neighboring earl. This knight also wins the love of the earl's daughter and, finally, becomes the earl's heir. The manuscript here is known as the Findern Anthology (Cambridge, University Library MS Ff.1.6), compiled by various members of the Findern family and some of their associates in Derbyshire and Staffordshire in the last half of the fifteenth century.



This is an image of another romance manuscript. The text here is *Sir Amadace*, the story of a knight who has spent himself into penury, and manages to win back his social position through acts of generosity. The manuscript is called the Heege Manuscript (Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland MS Advocates 19.3.1), compiled by a landowning family in Derbyshire in the last quarter of the fifteenth century.



This map shows the archives and libraries where I did most of my research during the summer of 2009, thanks in large part to the funding from the Library Scholars' Grant. Starting from the north and working southward, these are:

- Edinburgh (National Library of Scotland)
- Manchester (Chetham's Library)
- Aberystwyth (National Library of Wales)
- Oxford (The Bodleian Library)
- London (Lincoln's Inn, the British Library, Institute for Historical Research, the National Archives)



This is a picture of Duke Humphrey's Library, the reading room for manuscripts at the Bodleian Library in Oxford.



This is a picture of the British Library, which houses the most important collection of medieval English manuscripts in the world.



This is a picture of the National Archives, which houses the original documents of the English government.