

**Provost's Undergraduate Fellowship (PUF)**  
**COVER PAGE**  
*(PLEASE TYPE INFORMATION)*

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_ EXPECTED GRADUATION DATE: Winter 2014  
*Last First Middle*

STUDENT ID NUMBER: \_\_\_\_\_ Email ADDRESS: \_\_\_\_\_

LOCAL ADDRESS: \_\_\_\_\_

MAJOR: English CUMULATIVE UC GPA: \_\_\_\_\_ CUMULATIVE UNITS: \_\_\_\_\_  
 QTR. OF PROJECT: Summer/Fall SPONSORING DEPARTMENT: English

SPONSORING PROFESSOR: Seeta Chaganti Email ADDRESS: schaganti@ucdavis.edu

TITLE OF PROJECT: The Role of Chess in Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*

**DESCRIPTIVE SENTENCE OF PROPOSED PROJECT (25 words or less):**

I will research medieval and early modern chess to understand why the knight uses chess to describe loss in Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*.

SUMMARY OF PROPOSED BUDGET	Requested	Minimum
TOTAL	\$ <u>1800</u>	\$ <u>1235</u>

Have you previously applied for a PUF? No When? N/A Awarded? Yes/No N/A

**As sponsoring professor, I have reviewed this application. If applicable, I certify that approvals have been obtained for the use of human subjects, vertebrate animals, radioactivity, and toxic chemicals. Copies of those approvals are available upon request.**

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Sponsoring Professor's Signature Title Printed Name Date*

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Sponsoring Department Chairperson's Signature Printed Name Date*

**I have read and understand the student status requirements for applying for and receiving a fellowship. As a recipient of the Provost's Undergraduate Fellowship, I agree to permit release of my name and photo in connection with publicity for the program.**

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Applicant's Signature Date*

In Geoffrey Chaucer's fourteenth century poem, *Book of the Duchess*, an insomniac narrator falls asleep and dreams of meeting a knight dressed in black. The knight uses a long metaphor about playing chess with Fortune to tell the narrator about losing his "queen" and the narrator replies that no man would make such a fuss over a lost chess queen, even if he "had lost the feres twelve" [had lost twelve queens] (l. 723). For decades, this ambiguous reply has been the topic of debate among medieval scholars. Does the narrator misunderstand the metaphor?

In my project, I will examine the different rules and social importance of chess in the 12<sup>th</sup>, 13<sup>th</sup>, and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries to understand why the knight uses chess specifically to describe his loss in *Duchess*. In Fall Quarter 2013, I will use my research to write an essay on *Duchess* and I hope, with the help of Professor Chaganti, to turn this essay into a publishable article.

In Professor Chaganti's class on Chaucer's dream visions (Fall Quarter 2012), I examined *Duchess* in the context of medieval and early modern chess. I discovered that the pieces, colors, rules, and status of chess from the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries are far different from how we play chess today – which suggests that the narrator's comments about chess are not simply evidence of his misunderstanding the metaphor. On the contrary, the knight's obscure chess metaphor reflects how the game of chess was often a site of confusion for medieval and early modern class and gender boundaries. William Poole believes that medieval and early modern "chess is not a closed symbol for certain hierarchical assumptions but an open site for discussion of those very assumptions" (53). For medieval and early modern players, chess was a private game that allowed a woman to play equally against a man as well as a public practice that aided kings and soldiers in strategies for war (Poole 53-4). From this perspective, it is easy to see how chess *Duchess* gives new meanings to the social classes of the narrator and the knight, and also the binary of true and false in the knight's game with Fortune.

Because I will be studying abroad in Edinburgh, Scotland through the UC Davis summer abroad program, I plan to do a large part of my research overseas, examining medieval and early modern manuscripts and chess sets at museums and libraries. I will examine pieces from the Lewis Chessman set, one of the oldest European chess sets from the late 12<sup>th</sup> century that was, scholars believe, originally carved in Norway. The chess set is on display in The National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh (11 pieces) and The British Museum (82 pieces). I also hope to examine five medieval chess pieces on display in The Museum of National Antiquities in Stockholm, Sweden. From these chess sets, I hope to learn more about how medieval and early modern chess was played. I will also analyze how the pieces were made (materials, carving details, etc.) and what this can tell me about the status of chess in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries (i.e. who could afford chess pieces, were the pieces used for gifts, were they traded, etc.). This research, I hope, will shed light on the social statuses of the knight and narrator in Chaucer's poem. It may also indicate why the knight uses chess specifically, and not some other popular game, to describe his loss.

The chess metaphor can also help us understand how Chaucer's work addresses the question of legitimizing English vernacular in the medieval literary world. Just as chess pieces were traded throughout the continent of Europe, so Chaucer's work serves as a site for the intersection of literary works from different European countries. In *Duchess*, Chaucer retells old traditional stories like Ovid's tale of Ceyx and Alcyone and Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*. Because Chaucer's poem engages with works from different European countries (Ovid and Boethius were both Roman), it is important that the chess pieces I wish to examine are also from different European countries, which is why I plan to go to several museums. Moreover, I believe that the differences that I find in my examination of the different chess pieces may play

an important role for not only my interpretation of the chess metaphor, but also the metaphor's comments on how Chaucer engages with other literary works.

Three original manuscripts of *Duchess* survive today and all three can be found in the Bodleian Library in Oxford, England. While I am in Europe, I plan to visit the Bodleian to examine the three different manuscripts. I believe that it is crucial for me to examine the three different manuscripts because my research depends heavily on the language Chaucer uses in the chess metaphor – especially the narrator's remark about the “ferses twelve” (twelve queens), which still continues to be problematic among literary scholars. I will also examine the passages that allude to Ovid and Boethius to uncover how Chaucer uses specific language to “rewrite” these stories into *Duchess*. I believe that by rewriting older stories Chaucer continued to engage the chess motif in a literal sense– moving around different versions of stories almost as if he were playing a chess game with older works to obscure and confuse the original meaning.

My research will contribute to ongoing literary debates about Chaucer and chess. Since the 1940s, critics have debated the meaning behind the knight's complicated chess metaphor. Some, such as Margaret Connolly, argue that the confusion of colors, pieces, and rules suggests that Chaucer lacked sufficient knowledge of the game to make the metaphor successful (43). Others, like Guillemette Bolens and Paul Beekman Taylor, believe that Chaucer did have sufficient knowledge of the game and used this knowledge to purposefully obscure his chess metaphor to later reestablish order. Like Bolens and Taylor, I believe that the confusion in Chaucer's chess metaphor is intentional; however, I believe that the confusion is situated within a specific historical context. My reading will present a new understanding of the knight's metaphor based on how *Duchess* is influenced by and engages with medieval and early modern chess.

Works Cited:

Bolens, Guillemette, and Paul Beekman Taylor. "The Game of Chess in Chaucer's 'Book of the

Duchess'" *The Chaucer Review* 32.4 (1998): 325-34. Print.

----- "Chess, Clocks, and Counsellors in Chaucer's 'Book of the Duchess'" *The Chaucer*

*Review* 35.3 (2001): 281-93. Print.

Connolly, Margaret. "Chaucer and Chess." *The Chaucer Review* 29.1 (1994): 40-44. Print.

Poole, William. "False Play: Shakespeare and Chess." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 55.1 (2004): 50-

70. Print.

This project will allow me to expand my knowledge of medieval literature and how this literature was influenced by popular games like chess. More importantly, as I interpret Chaucer's poem through a historical and theoretical approach, I will also develop skills for my future educational and career goals. After I graduate, I will apply to graduate school to pursue a PhD in English Literature. The PUF grant will allow me to work alongside faculty to familiarize myself with the world of scholarly research and publishing. As a result, I will learn invaluable skills for my future in academia.

Maximum Budget		Minimum Budget	
Cab (roundtrip) to National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh	\$15	Cab (roundtrip) to National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh	\$15
Train (Edinburgh to Kings Cross Station, London)	\$220	Train (Edinburgh to Kings Cross Station, London)	\$220
Travel card for tube (From Kings Cross to The British Museum)	\$30	Travel card for tube (From Kings Cross to The British Museum)	\$30
Lodging in London (1 night)	\$200	Lodging in London	\$200
Train from Paddington Station to Oxford (to visit Bodleian Library)	\$50	Train from Paddington Station to Oxford (to visit Bodleian Library)	\$50
Lodging near Bodleian Library (5 nights)	\$1000	Lodging near Bodleian Library (3 nights)	\$600
Train from Oxford to Heathrow airport (to fly to Sweden)	\$50	Train from Oxford to Heathrow airport (to fly to Sweden)	\$50
Bus fare (from Gothenburg to Stockholm, Sweden)	\$60	Bus fare (from Gothenburg to Stockholm, Sweden)	\$60
The Museum of National Antiquities in Stockholm entry fee	\$10	The Museum of National Antiquities in Stockholm entry fee	\$10
Fees to reprint images from Bodleian Library manuscripts in a published article	\$165		
TOTAL	\$1800	TOTAL	\$1235

In my maximum budget, I asked for 5 nights in Oxford because I believe it will take me that long to effectively study the *Book of the Duchess* manuscript. In my meetings with Professor Chaganti, we discussed that paleographic work is extremely difficult and time consuming. While Professor Chaganti has given me a bibliography to help me practice reading manuscripts, I believe that I will need a minimum of three nights (minimum budget) in Oxford to study the *Duchess* manuscript. However, because I have little training and practice reading medieval manuscripts, five nights (maximum budget) will allow me to examine the manuscript with more caution and scrutiny. I also requested funds in my maximum budget to cover fees for reprinting images from the manuscripts in what I hope will be my end product: a published scholarly article. I did not include these fees in the minimum budget.