Kenyon Summer Scholars Proposal

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The Social and Literary Prestige of Boccaccio in Fifteenth-Century Iberian Court Culture
Background

Boccaccio’s works and importance in the Iberian Late Middle Ages have been studied many times, but few scholars have attempted to address the social importance of owning, copying, glossing, translating, illuminating, lending, borrowing, or producing luxury manuscript copies of his works in the poetry-obsessed court culture of fifteenth-century Iberia. In fact, some basic information required to address this matter remain unresolved for the scholars who have studied this community: Who owned these manuscripts? How many were there? How were they distributed across the kingdoms of the Iberian Peninsula? Which Boccaccio texts were the most prevalent? What access to Boccaccio’s words could readers of different stations expect? These are some of the central questions of this project.

The beginning of the fifteenth century saw the rise of two powerful monarchs who maintained literary courts at which poetry was always present: John II of Castile and Alphonse I of Aragon. Since literature proved to be an effective way to draw the kings’ attention, courtiers quickly found that poetic prowess came to be an invaluable political and social tool and production of court poetry exploded. In an effort to outdo their competitors, courtiers sought out new verse forms and styles to distinguish their work and Iberian eyes turned to the Italian Peninsula for inspiration. Daniel Hartnett argues that the work of Dante Alighieri was particularly prestigious in Iberian courts in his 2009 dissertation (Ph.D., University of Virginia) and he shows the power exerted by the Marquis of Santillana through his management of Dante manuscripts within the court community in a forthcoming book chapter (favorably reviewed and in revisions). Though Dante’s role among the political and social elite in fifteenth-century Iberia continues to be taken up by Hartnett and others, Giovanni Boccaccio’s role in fashioning social prestige has been under-researched in Iberian medieval studies. Important poetic texts from
fifteenth-century Iberia make explicit reference to Boccaccio as a crucial figure in fashionable new tastes at court, but critics have yet to link patterns of manuscript ownership to literary creation and social distinction. These are the issues that this Summer Scholar project will take up. By determining patterns of Boccaccio manuscript ownership, this project will seek to connect collecting habits, literary production, and social prestige in the fifteenth-century courts of Castile, Aragon, and Portugal.

Description

This project will be multifaceted. Various research components will contribute to the final product, a written study synthesizing our findings in the Boccaccio manuscript record, historical sources, and literature from Iberian writers in the fifteenth century.

The first goal of this summer research is to assemble a catalog of Boccaccio manuscripts that were known to exist in Iberia before 1500. This catalog will include as much information as possible about ownership and manuscript features, and upon completion will provide a useful resource to this field of study. Once assembled, I will analyze the data collected in the catalog with respect to who owned the manuscripts, how many there were, where they were on the Iberian Peninsula, and who had access to texts by Boccaccio. This analysis will be the basis of the written study.

Assembling the catalog will be a time- and effort-intensive process that will require a significant amount of waiting for interlibrary loans and other resources. During the downtime involved in acquiring interlibrary loans, I will research various topics relating to the subject at hand, which will help me to analyze the information we gather in the catalog. In particular, I will read:
• Background historical information on the period (pre-1500 Iberia, especially with respect to literature and the court).

• Entries in contemporary historical accounts that describe how prestige was constructed and understood in this culture.

• Previous researchers’ approaches to similar questions.

• Original works by the aforementioned Marquis of Santillana, to gauge how this important writer of the Iberian court used Boccaccio’s name and reputation as a basis for his own literary authority.

• Recent critical work on Boccaccio’s influence in Iberia during this period.

**Qualifications**

The nature of this project will require the ability to speak a multitude of languages to interpret how Iberian courtiers perceived Boccaccio’s words. While my knowledge of Italian is only basic, I am proficient at Spanish and speak three other languages (English, German, and French), all of which will be invaluable tools for the project at hand.

It is also important to note that the languages I will encounter are not modern. There will be drastic differences between the orthography, syntax, and vocabulary of these texts and the conventions of modern Spanish and Italian. Though I am currently unfamiliar with fifteenth-century Spanish and Italian, I have taken numerous classes with Professor Hartnett in which we have read works in historical Spanish from the two centuries following the period that this Summer Scholar project intends to study. Those classes have made me adept at adjusting to more antiquated linguistic practices and have given me literary analytical skills that will be necessary to evaluate how Iberian writers were using Boccaccio as a watchword. (Spanish literature classes
I have taken with Professor Hartnett include SPAN 361 – Spanish Literature of the Golden Age; SPAN 345 – Baroque Short Fiction; and SPAN 343 – Don Quijote). Finally, while I am new to this kind of research project, I do have experience with research in other disciplines that demanded the same levels of initiative and independent motivation that this project will require. During my freshman year at Kenyon, for example, I completed a successful independent research project as part of the Biology 109-110 introductory lab series. The following summer (2013), I worked in a microbiology lab at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and participated in a research project under Dr. Ian Carroll. The setup of that project was similar to what I’ll be doing with Professor Hartnett this summer: most days I worked independently in the lab to gather data, and then approximately once per week I consulted with Dr. Carroll for data analysis and determining the significance of my findings. I also did the high-school equivalent of an independent study in the tenth grade, during which I taught myself rudimentary French under the guidance of one of the French teachers at my school. I do not foresee myself having any problems with planning, self-motivation, or independent work during this Summer Scholars project.

**Timeline**

This project will take between 10 weeks. We propose a tentative ten-week schedule starting on Monday, May 19 and ending on Friday, July 25.

**Budget**

I am requesting that a research budget of $500 be made available for this project. Though we will not know what the needs of the project will be until the catalog compilation is underway,
it is likely that some of the rare books and manuscripts I will need to consult will not be available via interlibrary loans. In that case, the research budget would be used for travel expenses to relatively nearby research institutions such as the Ohio State University or wherever those bibliographic resources are available.