

Showing Nobility: The English Aristocracy's Performance and Conceptions of Self in the 14th and 15th Centuries

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Thanks to the Paul Nyhus Large Travel Grant, I had the opportunity to spend the summer in Maine researching the English aristocracy during the 14th and 15th centuries, particularly focusing on how they used visual markers, including behavior and material goods, to define both self and group. This grant enabled me to spend six weeks at Bowdoin conducting my research through the library's extensive resources and meetings with professors from multiple departments. Having spent the previous semester in Bath, England studying English nobility, I was especially excited to continue my examination of the subject through an academic research fellowship in preparation for my honors project.

Through this grant, I studied how the English aristocracy created a framework for what it meant to be a member of the nobility during the Late Middle Ages. When I began the summer I was interested in ideas of identity. As I read numerous primary and secondary sources, I tailored this interest towards a focus on conceptions of self and the ways that elites performed roles in both courtly and everyday life. I found these ideas of presentation intricately connected to ideas of identity, because the aristocracy dressed, acted, and spoke in a way that aligned them with notions of what it meant to be a noble. During my time at Bowdoin this summer I read many manner books from the 14th and 15th centuries, which were etiquette guides for young aristocrats on how to act and present themselves in a proper way. In order to be a member of this exclusive group, an individual had to appear according to certain standards of behavior and dress.

Over the course of the summer I examined both primary and secondary sources in order to provide myself with a solid basis upon which I could build my research project. Along with the manner books, I read English nobles' letters, 14th and 15th century laws dictating dress codes for English men and women based on income and status, and, of course, Geoffrey Chaucer. Becoming familiar with these primary sources was crucial to narrowing my research topic and to allowing me to generate my own ideas and examinations of elite life during this time. Because my research dealt with ideas of how people portrayed and thought of themselves, I also read a great deal of theory on the self and the performance of self throughout different historical eras. The concept of people participating in the cultivation and display of a particular character based on societal norms seemed to me especially relevant to the Late Middle Ages, which was a highly elaborate and ostentatious culture. Consequently, I had to study the theories and arguments surrounding how people from various times conceived of the "self," before beginning to make my own claims and analysis. The research I conducted this summer provided me with a solid foundation for my honors project this coming year, and it would not have been possible without receiving the Large Nyhus Grant.

Faculty Mentor: Dallas Denery

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