

I came to Columbia as a prospective English major, but with no experience of or special interest in the literature of the medieval period. That changed during my freshman year, when I enrolled in a class on *The Canterbury Tales*. I was struck at the time by the evident parallels between the American experience of the COVID-19 pandemic and the European experience of the Black Death epidemics of the mid fourteenth century. In both cases, the vilification of racial and ethnic minorities and the rehearsal of deeply ingrained societal prejudices shaped cultural attempts to understand contagious disease as a foreign threat. I discovered that analysis of plague literature, especially as it involves metaphors of disease and images of race, can provide tangible insight into our own twenty-first-century pandemic response.

In the summer of 2021, I pursued a research project focused on medieval metaphors of plague. I wanted to understand the ways in which existential anxiety surrounding periods of disease can catalyze the latent prejudices – the racism and xenophobia – in a society. I also wanted to think about the way that disease can inform our notions of self and other.

My research centered around a critically neglected text from the late fourteenth century, an epic poem called *The Siege of Jerusalem*. Many scholars dismiss *The Siege of Jerusalem* as no more than a straightforward expression of violent antisemitism. Upon closer inspection, however, I found the text to be largely organized around images of sickness, infection, and quarantine. The poem even contains descriptions of a mysterious malady characterized by lumps and sores, reminiscent of the swollen lymph nodes, called buboes, which appeared on the bodies of plague victims.

My research last summer provided me with the beginnings of an essay on this topic, in which I argued that *The Siege of Jerusalem* represents a particularly complex example of how European xenophobia intersected with anxiety surrounding the Black Death and its aftermath, and in fact can be interpreted as a coded plague narrative. The central event of the poem – the siege of the city itself – functions as an ambiguously deployed metaphor for medical quarantine; one that throws into question the simple binaries of medieval society. My investigation into the topic of plague and pandemic metaphor is only just beginning, however; last summer's research confirmed my commitment to pursue a senior essay on this subject.

This summer, I propose to take what seems to me the logical next step in this research project, and turn my attention towards the existent manuscript copies of *The Siege of Jerusalem*. Only nine manuscript copies of the poem survive, and of these only six are complete or nearly complete. Two important manuscripts (A and C) and one sizable manuscript fragment of the poem are housed at the British Library in London. A third complete version, Manuscript D, also makes its home in London at the Lambeth Palace Library.

Even from the first line of the poem, these manuscripts present markedly different versions of *The Siege of Jerusalem*. The comparison of these textual differences, especially in places where plague imagery and metaphor are particularly rich, could shape my argument about the poem's encrypted plague narrative. Does the composition of the poem vary from manuscript to manuscript? How was the poem received by its audience, or at least its scribal readership? These manuscripts also contain illuminated initials, marginal art, and marginalia, including annotations, marked passages, and even fingerprints; dirtier pages show greater use. All these physical clues, in conjunction with the manuscripts' temporal and geographical relationships to one another, could help me form a clearer picture of the poem's changing reception and interpretation.

Although my research last summer led me to limit my focus to a single text, *The Siege of Jerusalem*, I feel that my project would benefit from a slightly broader exploration of plague metaphor in

the English literature of the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. The Morgan Library in New York contains a fifteenth century manuscript copy of William Langland’s *Piers Plowman*, one of the few English texts to deal directly with the social and emotional impact of the plague years. The surprising dearth of English literature on the plague epidemic of the mid fourteenth century makes any original edition of the few works which actually allude to this topic invaluable. The New York Public Library also houses an extensive collection of medieval manuscripts, including the poetry of John Lydgate, an English poet whose work, like that of Chaucer and Langland, touches on the aftermath of the plague pandemic. At the New York Public Library, I would be able to read “Fall of Princes,” “Life of Our Lady; The Privy of the Passion,” and “Siege of Thebes” in their original copies, transcribed in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

The Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Columbia contains a wide array of digital resources pertaining to the late fourteenth century, including many fragmented copies of Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*. One such copy in particular, dated from between 1450 and 1475, contains “The Pardoner’s Tale,” the Canterbury tale most pertinent to the bubonic plague pandemic. The Rare Book and Manuscript Library also contains a copy of “Prayer for King, Queen and People,” by John Lydgate, another text of interest for my project.

A closer analysis of all these texts in their original manuscript forms would allow me to expand my exploration of plague metaphor, especially as it relates to ideas of racial or ethnic prejudice, in the period. Recent events have shown us how the rhetoric of disease and the rhetoric of xenophobia intersect. Examining this relationship in an earlier period, however, provides a more historically grounded account of how these tensions are at the basis of Western consciousness. It can also offer unexpected insights. I’ve already seen that *The Siege of Jerusalem* is a much stranger, and more ambiguous text than we’ve been led to expect.

Budget

Activity	Cost per day	Total cost (two weeks in London, one week in New York)
Housing (London)	\$150/night	\$2100
Food (London)	\$20/day	\$280
Airfare (NY to London round trip)	\$1000	\$1000
Metro pass (London)	\$7/day	\$98
Uber/taxi cost (London)	\$80	\$80
Housing (New York)	\$150	\$1,050
Food (New York)	\$20/day	\$140
Bus ticket (New Hampshire to New York roundtrip)	\$160	\$160
Subway tickets (New York)	\$6/day	\$42
Books	\$60	\$60
Total Cost:		\$5,010