



SAINT LOUIS  
UNIVERSITY

Marianne Hirsch, President  
Margaret Ferguson, First Vice President  
Modern Languages Association

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Dear Professors Hirsch and Ferguson

We write on behalf of the New Chaucer Society, a scholarly society that represents the interests of 1,035 teachers and scholars of Geoffrey Chaucer and his age worldwide. We strongly and unequivocally oppose your proposal to reduce the three Divisions in Medieval English literature (Old English Language and Literature, Chaucer, and Middle English Language and Literature Excluding Chaucer) to just one. Such a reduction and consolidation is not intellectually or historically or institutionally coherent, and will not serve anyone's interests – least of all, those of the MLA. The formation of more recent MLA divisions such as Postcolonial, Disability, and Media Studies constitute valuable expansions of MLA's territory. Expansion would be undermined if founding new divisions were to become a zero-sum game requiring that MLA shed existing divisions whenever new ones emerge.

Chaucer and Shakespeare are the only two named authors with separate Divisions amongst the 13 divisions of English literature represented by the MLA. For complex institutional reasons, Chaucer studies developed in the nineteenth century in parallel with, but separate from, Middle English studies. That was the past. But "Chaucer" emphatically continues to define a vitally important category within the discipline of English today. The field has its own scholarly organization, the New Chaucer Society, with a growing (and increasingly younger) membership that rivals that of the Shakespeare Association of America (1,035 and 1,250, respectively). The society has its own prestigious, peer-reviewed journal, *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* (with 7,119 downloads of its articles via Project Muse in 2012); there is also another major peer-reviewed journal in the field devoted solely to Chaucer: *The Chaucer Review*. NCS holds a biennial Congress that attracts up to 600 participants, and our members produce agenda-setting work within the field, work that has been a stimulus for scholarship done in later periods. For example, in sexuality studies and the "new new historicism," scholars as diverse as Heather Love, David Halperin, and Valerie Traub have responded vigorously to the work of leading Chaucerians such as Carolyn Dinshaw and Aranye Fradenburg; the Chaucerians Paul Strohm and Helen Cooper

are internationally known beyond the confines of medieval studies and contribute regular reviews to the *London Review of Books*; and the Chaucerian Seth Lerer teamed up with the book historian Leah Price to edit a special issue of *PMLA* on “The History of the Book and the Idea of Literature.”

For such reasons, it makes no sense to get rid of the Chaucer division and to fold up the interests of a highly distinctive group of scholars into the interests of two other groups that, to be sure, share some of our interests, but also represent very different institutional and intellectual approaches, different histories (pre- and post-Conquest), different agendas, different constituencies.

We believe that the consolidation of three separate fields that span over a thousand years of writing and performance in English and the other languages of the British Isles into a single division would severely distort the field of Anglophone literature, and would not in any way strengthen the MLA’s position as the chief advocate for, and defender of, modern – that is, post-classical – languages and literatures. Therefore we urge you to abandon this particular proposal.

Sincerely



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