

Erica Machulak

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Nanovic Travel Grant Report

MLA 2017 Annual Convention, Philadelphia

January 5-8, 2017

My participation in the Modern Language Association 2017 Convention in Philadelphia, PA was a professionally and intellectually stimulating experience. The panel on which I spoke was titled "Arabic in Europe in the Middle Ages." I presented on the way that the *Secret of Secrets* (*Kitāb Sirr al-Asrār*), a text written in tenth-century Baghdad, influenced the works of Geoffrey Chaucer. The two other panelists discussed intersections between other Arabic texts and literature in medieval Spain and Italy. While the three papers covered different regions, they evoked issues of authorship, circulation, and reception that helped construct a broader framework for conceptualizing the dynamics between the Arab world and European countries such as Italy and Spain. The question-and-answer session was particularly useful for me, not only because I was able to speak with the other scholars on my panel, but also because the panel attracted a very interdisciplinary audience who asked about aspects of my research that I had not considered. Literary scholars of other languages drew my attention to vernacular texts that I might incorporate into my analysis, and one scholar asked questions about the Latin manuscripts of the text I was discussing that led me to re-frame part of my discussion in the related chapter in my dissertation. My paper stimulated several questions from scholars who were not directly in my field of study, and that interest made me optimistic that my research will make a difference in fields beyond English literature.

In addition to my presentation itself, the MLA convention was very professionally useful to me. First, there were several panels of medievalists that spoke about topics related to my own interests. One panel in particular included three scholars from very different institutions who discussed their approaches to teaching Chaucer within our present social, intellectual, and political climate. I was especially interested in the presenter who discussed how the increased number of students taking advantage of 'conceal and carry' laws at her institution has changed the way that she teaches about violence in the *Canterbury Tales*. Second, I attended several panels that helped me understand the theoretical trends in more contemporary fields of English literature, such as a panel that discussed attitudes toward historical context and 'post-historicism.' When I have interviews with hiring committees composed of a broad spectrum of literary scholars specializing in different time periods and theoretical models, it will be quite useful to have charted a more concrete sense of contemporary thought in the field outside of medieval literature.

Third, I set up a one-on-one meeting with a representative from the Advanced Council of Learned Societies at the MLA job center, where we discussed my career more broadly and also specific strategies for my application to the ACLS/Mellon Public Fellows postdoc, to which I will be applying later this month. I also attended panels geared at helping graduate students market themselves on resumes, CV's, and professional social media such as Academia.edu and LinkedIn. Finally, I attended a reception thrown jointly by the Chaucer and Boccaccio societies at the home of the first professor who taught me a medieval literature course when I was a college student at the University of Pennsylvania. It was wonderful to have my faculty mentors

from those years all in one place, and to be able to interact with them on a more personal level and strengthen my network.