

Institution: University of Westminster		
Unit of Assessment: 27 English Language and Literature		
Title of case study: Strengthening practices for public education and engagement with medieval language and literature at the Chaucer Heritage Trust and the National Archives		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 09/2007 - 2019		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s): Louise Sylvester; Charles Farris	Role(s) (e.g. job title): Professor of English Language; Research Fellow	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI: 09/2007-ongoing; 12/2015-12/2016
Period when the claimed impact occurred: Aug 2013 – December 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)		
<p>Professor Louise Sylvester's research has significantly impacted on the activities of two key institutional beneficiaries in their mission to engage young people, their families and the wider public with the language and literature of the medieval period:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Chaucer Heritage Trust has been revitalised and met its remit as a charity to promote the work of Chaucer to a wide public audience, via engagement activities devised by Sylvester as one its Trustees. • The National Archives have innovated their public engagement and educational practices around their Medieval collections, and developed longer term strategies in this area, on the basis of their collaborations with Sylvester's team, enabling them to meet their strategic aim of expanding their audience base, particularly among young people. <p>The realisation of these two institutional impacts has also resulted in the pedagogical impact of enhancing the understanding of medieval language and literature for more than two thousand school pupils, particularly across Key Stages 2, 3 and 5, through the various educational activities designed by Sylvester and through the creation of an accessible website on the medieval vocabulary of cloth and clothing designed specifically to engage young learners.</p>		
2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)		
<p>Professor Sylvester's research over the last thirteen years has established her as a leading international expert on the lexicon and semantics of Middle English and on the medieval language of cloth and clothing. Her studies of semantic change in the medieval period, including her analyses of vocabulary in Chaucer's writings (e.g. output [1]), led to her co-editing of the book <i>Teaching Chaucer</i> in Palgrave's 'Teaching the New English' series [2]. The book explored different ways of engaging students with Chaucer in the classroom, researching pedagogical approaches to his works and recommending best practice pedagogical methods. <i>The Medieval Review</i> praised its "approach [to] the challenges of teaching Chaucer (and his Middle English) from a myriad of stimulating perspectives". Sylvester wrote the chapter on the language of Chaucer which looks at his literary works through the lens of the author's linguistic choices and delineates a historical-stylistic approach to the literature. In this way, Sylvester highlighted how the study of Chaucer's work can still be of much relevance to contemporary students.</p> <p>Furthering her research on the lexicon and semantics of Medieval English, Sylvester was also Co-Investigator on a large 5-year project grant from the AHRC to explore the lexis of textiles and dress in Medieval Britain, with Professor Gale Owen-Crocker at the University of Manchester. The major output of <i>The Lexis of Cloth and Clothing c. 700-1450</i> project was a ground-breaking multilingual dictionary of terms that was officially launched in 2012 and is freely available online [3]. The website takes the form of a comprehensive and searchable open access database that includes definitions, citations, etymologies, and semantic cognates. It is the first historical multilingual lexical resource of its kind, collecting together terminology for textiles, garments, armour and accessories in all the languages used in Medieval Britain (including Anglo-Norman, Cornish, Flemish, Irish, Manx, Medieval Latin, Middle English, Norn, Norse, Old English, Old Scots, Scots Gaelic and Welsh). The site also includes descriptions of the place of these instances of textiles in medieval British society, as well as a gallery of images of archaeological finds and tomb art showing the dress and textiles of the period. Across the duration of the project (up to December 2012) the site received 634,358 hits (an average of approximately 8,800 per month),</p>		

and 65,276 unique visitors to the site. The project was identified by [The History of Parliament project](#) (funded by the two Houses of Parliament) as one of two “shining examples” of “ground-breaking digital humanities projects covering the middle ages”.

Coinciding with this web-based project, Sylvester was Principal Investigator for a three-year Leverhulme Trust-funded project, *Medieval Dress and Textile Vocabulary in Unpublished Sources*, which ran from 2009 to 2012. The project involved examining archived medieval manuscripts and nineteenth-century printed materials, from epic and romance texts to petitions to Parliament, extracts from wills, satirical works, and the expenses accounts of households – including that of the Royal family – in order to draw a new picture of the range of clothing that was worn in the period (encompassing everything from wedding dresses to cooks’ uniforms) and of the terminology used to describe it. Many of these texts were transcribed, edited and translated – from Middle English, Anglo-French and Latin (or a mixture of these languages) – for the very first time in the project’s major output, *Medieval Dress and Textiles in Britain: A Multilingual Sourcebook*, published in 2014 [4]. With scanned images of the source texts, accompanying translations and commentary, as well as a glossary, the text provides readers and researchers from across various disciplinary fields (including literature, history, archaeology and sociology) with unprecedented access and insight into the lived culture of medieval Britain.

Subsequently, Sylvester has made additional use of the research base assembled for this project in further research into how different medieval text types employ technical terminology in the establishment of the conventions of their genres [5,6], as well as in an AHRC-funded project, ‘Medieval English (ca600-1500) in a Multilingual Context’ (£33,855), for which she is Co-I, and which has informed recent collaborations with the National Archives detailed below.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

- [1] Sylvester (2012) ‘Middle English: Semantics and the Lexicon’, in Brinton and Bergs, eds., *Historical Linguistics of English: An International Handbook*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 450-66.
- [2] Ashton and Sylvester, eds. (2007) *Teaching Chaucer*. London: Palgrave Macmillan (including chapter by Sylvester ‘Teaching the Language of Chaucer’). Submitted to RAE 2008.
- [3] Owen-Crocker, Sylvester and Warr (2012) *The Lexis of Cloth and Clothing in Britain c. 700-1450: Origins, Identification, Contexts and Change*. <http://lexisproject.arts.manchester.ac.uk/> Output of the AHRC-funded (£765,576) project ‘The lexis of cloth and clothing in Britain c. 700-1450: origins, identification, contexts and change’, 2006–2011. Submitted to REF 2014.
- [4] Sylvester, Chambers and Owen-Crocker, eds. (2014) *Medieval Dress and Textiles in Britain: A Multilingual Sourcebook*. Woodbridge: Boydell. Reviewed favourably in e.g. [The Medieval Review, Medium Aevum](#).
- [5] Sylvester (2016) ‘Technical Vocabulary and Medieval Text Types: A Semantic Field Approach’, *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, 117, 155-176. Peer-reviewed article. Submitted to REF 2021.
- [6] Sylvester (2019) ‘The Role of Technical Vocabulary in the Construction of the Medieval Romance Text Type’, *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 118, 73-99. Peer-reviewed article. Output of the Leverhulme Trust-funded (£158,560) project: ‘Medieval Dress and Textile Vocabulary in Unpublished Sources’, 2009-2012.

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Innovating the public engagement practices of the Chaucer Heritage Trust

As a result of her research expertise as “an English specialist with profound knowledge of Chaucer and Middle English”, Sylvester was appointed in 2013 as a Trustee of the Chaucer Heritage Trust (CHT) [a-i]. She has since helped both to **revive the institution of the CHT and to fulfil its Charity mandate of promoting awareness of Chaucer’s work**.

The CHT was established in 1992 but underwent several years of decline, during which it lost its Charity status. It received a significant endowment in 2010, allowing it to resume its activities and appoint new trustees. The “objectives of the trust are furthering general public interest, understanding and appreciation of the works of Geoffrey Chaucer, his life and times and influence, and his position in English and world literature” [a-i].

A key activity that Sylvester devised as a Trustee to **extend the CHT’s reach and profile**, and so fulfil its mandate and thus maintain its Charity status, is “The Canterbury Tales Writing

Competition". Designed by Sylvester, who also reviewed the large number of entries, the competition invited children in three different age groups to write a poem about a journey, a beast fable, or an account of a new pilgrim in prose or verse. This approach is based on Sylvester's research on best practice pedagogy that developed out of her *Teaching Chaucer* volume (output [2]) and encourages understanding of Chaucer's writings in a creative fashion. Along with individual prize money for winning entrants, the prize-winning schools also receive funding for their school libraries from the competition each year, amounting to a total of £15,750 to date.

In its first year (2017-18), Sylvester and colleagues managed to attract three especially high-profile judges for the competition, Stephen Fry (a popular actor, comedian and writer), Patience Agbabi (author of the acclaimed *Telling Tales*, a modern reinvention of *The Canterbury Tales* for children) and Gail Ashton (a poet and biographer of Chaucer), thus significantly raising the profile of the CHT itself. The competition subsequently received over 500 entries submitted via the CHT [website](#). The following years' competitions attracted circa 800 and 600 entries in 2019 and 2020, respectively, and more than 750 entries by the beginning of 2021 for the most recent competition [a-ii]. This range of more than 2,500 poems and stories received, as well as the promotion of the competition by schools themselves and their encouragement of students' entries, clearly demonstrates the ways in which the competition has **succeeded in engaging young people with medieval literature in creative and innovative ways** [a-iii]. As another of the CHT Trustees (a Charity Lawyer) confirms:

"None of this would have got off the ground or been the success it has without your [Sylvester's] efforts and input. **The charity is now well established again and active in carrying out its objectives, which I must attribute to you.** [...] I believe we have already had a considerable impact, for which you deserve most of the credit" [a-i].

Among other initiatives, Sylvester has also taken the lead in devising a Schools Visits [programme](#), whereby the CHT has provided dedicated one-hour workshops on Chaucer's writings, often for several groups in a day. 26 schools have participated in the visits to date (with 2 further online sessions since the start of the pandemic), many over several successive years, with a total reach of more than 2,000 children since 2017. Sessions were specifically offered to Key Stage 2 and 3 (7-14 year old) students at schools that do not have Chaucer on their syllabus, thus **raising awareness of Chaucer among children who had not had a chance to study medieval literature before**, as well as Key Stage 5 (16-19 year old) students, to provide **enhanced understanding of Chaucer relevant to A Level exams**. In all such cases, schools were invited to get in touch to discuss the workshops so that they would be tailored to their specific needs. Example feedback from teachers attesting to the beneficial pedagogical impact of the sessions on students' understanding across the various Key Stages, include: "The information was very useful for [the] A Level exam" (KS5), "Fantastic introduction to Chaucer and highly engaging!" (KS2), and "Students are excited about Chaucer, language, storytelling, and the competition" (KS5) [a-iv].

As a teacher of English at one state school in Norwich testified:

"Four years ago, our school started teaching Chaucer to our Year 7 students. ... [CHT have] worked with us to schedule workshops for the whole of our Y7 cohort ... we have found that they often spark a deeper interest in Chaucer's colourful characters. **The students have benefited hugely from the workshops**, especially as it has enabled them to engage with the *Canterbury Tales* outside of their usual classroom experience" [a-v].

Strengthening public engagement practice and strategy at The National Archives

In 2015, Sylvester was awarded a one-year follow up grant of £78,925 from the AHRC to develop the public engagement and impact opportunities generated by the *Lexis of Cloth and Clothing in Britain* project (output [3] above) through collaboration with The National Archives. Sylvester was Principal Investigator leading a team including Dr Mark Chambers (Durham University), Research Associate Dr Charles Farris (then at the University of Westminster and now Public Historian at Historic Royal Palaces and administrator at the Chaucer Heritage Trust), and Dr Laura Tompkins of The National Archives as Project Advisor. As a result of the collaboration, Sylvester and colleagues have had the **institutional impact of enhancing public engagement practices and strategies at The National Archives around their medieval collections**.

The National Archives [TNA] is a non-ministerial government department and is "the official archive of the UK government and for England and Wales", and "guardian of some of the nation's most iconic documents, dating back more than 1,000 years" [b-i]. Paul Dryburgh, Principal Record

Specialist at TNA, confirms that the collaboration with Sylvester and Farris “has **encouraged The National Archives to innovate in its presentation of collections to children and their parents** and given it the freedom to rethink how we engage different audiences with medieval collections in new ways” [b-ii].

As Dryburgh states, the significance of this intervention is that, of the many collections in their care, “medieval and early modern records have unique linguistic, palaeographical and conceptual challenges that means our engagement strategies have to be particularly innovative and supported, often, by external partners” [b-ii]. It is in this connection that Sylvester and Farris were engaged by Tompkins and Dryburgh: “both to test out new ideas and spaces and to broaden the audiences that visit the archives” [b-ii]. In particular, Dryburgh notes, TNA were keen to meet “the needs of one of our identified audiences, *Family for Me*” [b-ii], an audience segment focused on “children or grandchildren” who, according to TNA’s own audience research, “cite learning as their motivation and high expectation that we will deliver a family learning experience” [b-iii].

As Dryburgh makes clear, each of the project team’s activities has thus had the institutional impact of **contributing directly to the fulfilment of goals identified by TNA itself to bring the cultural and linguistic heritage embodied in their archives to a wider public audience**.

To realise such impact, the project team maintained a collaborative relationship with TNA over several years. Outcomes of the collaboration have included, for example, two large-scale events devised specifically to fulfil the particular public engagement requirements of TNA: the Tudor Takeover Day, a family fun day that attracted over 300 visitors in 2016, and Medieval Murmurings, a [Time Travel Club](#) event targeted at Key Stage 1 and 2 pupils (5-11 year olds), which attracted over 100 families in 2019. These, as Dryburgh attests, “owed their greatest inspiration to the LEXIS and [AHRC] Multilingualism projects” [b-ii]. For example, as Dryburgh notes, the “financial and intellectual support of the LEXIS project enabled the Education team to develop a lesson focussing on the imagery of majesty under Henry VIII”, “added rigour to the discussion of the king’s robes and tournament finery” and engaged “participants [with] the origins of certain concepts in royal fashion” [b-ii]. Other events included inventive suites of activities for children and adults, as well as taught classroom sessions, storytelling, workshops and craft activities that increased awareness and understanding of the culture of the period for young people and a non-academic audience.

Designed by Sylvester and her team, such events, Dryburgh confirms, successfully “met the needs” of TNA’s target audience, “*Family for Me*” [b-ii], thus **helping TNA to fulfil its educational mission as a publicly-funded body** [b-iii]. The Education Manager at TNA states of the Tudor Takeover Day: “The workshops were brilliantly attended, with turn-out far exceeding expectations” [b-iv]. As Dryburgh attests: “Both could not have been planned or delivered without the intellectual and financial input of the LEXIS project team” [b-ii].

Dryburgh has further testified that: “The collaboration has maintained a **strong legacy in delivery of education events relating to pre-modern records**” [b-ii]. The approach of Sylvester’s team to “work[ing] with school children, was invaluable” and has been more broadly adopted, as Dryburgh confirms, in TNA’s public engagement strategies around its medieval collections due to its successful enhancement of the understanding of this audience segment, as evidenced by a range of attendee feedback [b-ii]. Of the Tudor Takeover Day, the Education Manager at TNA states, for example, that: “All of the feedback we received from the families taking part, rated the sessions as ‘excellent’” [b-iv]. Visitor feedback for Medieval Murmurings describes the event as “inspiring” and “enlightening”, with one respondent stating for example: “I came out with a lot of new knowledge ... Very glad and grateful I came here today” [b-iv].

Enhancing the accessibility of the National Archives to researchers

The collaboration with TNA has had further institutional impact in the devising of programmes aimed specifically at **securing long-term gains in archival training and practice** through their impact on students and researchers. For instance, Sylvester’s involvement in the AHRC-funded ‘Medieval English (ca600-1500) in a Multilingual Context’ project “has led to the organisation [in 2020] of a two-day conference and multi-disciplinary student training day” at TNA that was originally planned to be held in January 2021 on the use of Anglo-Norman in the Middle Ages [b-ii]. As “little formal training in the language is available in UK HE institutions”, such a programme, Dryburgh notes, “plays a crucial role in **helping to train future generations of historians, archivists and linguists** to access these documents, and students will be able to investigate and

discuss key issues by using original records” [b-ii]. As well as impacting upon the strategy of TNA in how they utilise their rich medieval archives for diverse audiences, Sylvester’s research collaboration is thus also helping to maintain accessibility for students and others at both the institution itself and across the sector.

Enhancing understanding of medieval language and culture among school children

Sylvester’s AHRC follow-up funding for the *Lexis of Cloth and Clothing in Britain* project (output [3]) in 2015-16 was further used to create a new [website](#) – Lexis of Cloth and Clothing in Medieval Royal Wardrobe Accounts – specifically aimed at **making the existing Lexis database more engaging and accessible to younger users** [c-i]. This site features user-friendly text for a younger audience – often connected to contemporary events of the day (like the State opening of Parliament) – alongside photographic images of manuscripts and commissioned illustrations by the children’s book author and artist Maggie Kneen.

A key part of the site is its dedicated section [For Schools](#) [c-i], which features lesson plans and activities for Key Stage 3 students (11-14 year olds), created on the basis of best practice developed across workshops undertaken by the project team (Sylvester and Farris) at 15 schools in London, Worcestershire, Shropshire and County Durham with a reach of c.350 students. Such sessions were tailored to complement KS3 syllabuses in English, History, Citizenship and Geography, and included sessions in which the pupils also used the more complex *Lexis* project database to discover medieval names for fabrics and garments. These activities thus **provided students with KS3 syllabus-relevant knowledge for their education in a range of subjects and enhanced their wider understanding of medieval language and culture**, as well as web-based skills through their directed usage of the archive.

Of the 148 individual feedback forms received, 74% rated their session “Very Good” or “Excellent” [c-ii]. Just as importantly, teaching staff praised the beneficial pedagogical impact of the sessions. For instance, one teacher wrote: “The girls and boys loved it. Your materials were just perfectly tailored to Year 7 age group and really got them motivated and keen to participate in all the activities” [c-ii]. As one teacher noted in their feedback on the sessions: “I will be using the database!” [c-ii].

The workshops also further **assisted in realising The National Archives’ institutional objective of “inspiring the public with new ways of using and experiencing our collection”** through the display of art made by children at these workshops as part of a three-month exhibition of TNA’s Royal Wardrobe collection at the Keeper’s Gallery [c-iii]. This art was on display from December 2016 through to March 2017, alongside 10 manuscripts and the project team’s edited and translated extracts from the Royal Wardrobe accounts of Edward I, II and III. The exhibition had, according to the Gallery’s own figures, around 200 regular visitors per month plus around 400 further students who visited the gallery as part of their sessions with the Education team, bringing in an audience of circa 1,800 mostly young people for TNA’s medieval holdings [c-iv].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

- a) i. Testimony from Robert Craig, charity lawyer and Trustee of Chaucer Heritage Trust, 22/6/2020; ii. Chaucer Heritage Trust competition results; iii. Portfolio of sample coverage of CHT competition on school websites and in local media; iv. Portfolio of feedback from school pupils and teachers for the Chaucer workshops; v. Testimony from a teacher at Jane Austen College, Norwich, 20/12/2020.
- b) i. The National Archives, gov.uk [\[link\]](#); ii. Testimony from Paul Dryburgh, Principal Record Specialist at the National Archives, 18/5/2020; iii. National Archives’ audience profile [\[link\]](#); iv. Testimony from the Education Manager at the National Archives, 3/10/2016.
- c) i. *Lexis of Cloth and Clothing in Medieval Royal Wardrobe Accounts* website [\[link\]](#); ii. Portfolio of feedback from school pupils and teachers for the Lexis workshops; iii. Dryburgh, P., and Roger, E. ‘Opus Anglicanum: medieval embroidery and fashion’, The National Archives blog, 16/12/2016 [\[link\]](#); iv. Email from the National Archives Events and Exhibitions team, 13/3/2017.