

“Forward,” Backward, or Somewhere In Between: Carrying Chaucer in Wisconsin

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I’m going to do two things in my remarks today. First, I am going to give you a brief tour of the attacks upon higher education in Wisconsin under Governor Scott Walker. Many if not all of you are of course aware that “bad things” have happened to the university (and the state) in which I teach, but I think the details are worthy of note, not only because Wisconsin holds the dubious honor of being the proverbial canary in the public university coal mine, but also because the attacks have been rhetorical as well as legal and financial. Thus perhaps they provide us, language people that we are, with some ground upon which to stand as we try to fight back. So, second, I will try to connect the rhetoric of my state legislators—and possibly yours—to ways of reframing discussion in the Chaucer classroom.

The University of Wisconsin-Madison and its twelve fellow schools in the UW System **are still reeling from the after-effects of the so-called [“Budget Repair Bill” \(Wisconsin Act 10\)](#) passed by the Republican state legislature in the spring of 2011—a law that my local news [just reported is now being examined with admiration in a few other states](#). Most notoriously, the bill stripped all state workers—including university faculty and staff—of collective bargaining rights. **Despite [weeks of protests](#) by thousands who descended on the state Capitol** in the middle of winter, an [attempted recall](#) of the governor in the summer of 2012, and a number of legal appeals, the law remains in place. Its passage was followed by more direct attacks on public higher education in Wisconsin. One of these attacks has come in the form of three consecutive biennial budgets [slashing state funding](#) to the UW System. As of our current budget, state funding for the university [makes up only 15% of its revenue](#), the lowest point in 40 years. We are**

waiting with bated breath for the next budget, which our governor claims will restore some funding based on as-yet-unspecified “performance” benchmarks, or, as his spokesperson put it, [“performance metrics to help ensure students are receiving the greatest value for their money.”](#)

But it is not hard to guess what such benchmarks might be, given Walker’s fortunately so-far- [failed attempt to change the historic mission statement of the UW system](#). **As you can see here, statement proudly declares that** “Basic to every purpose of the system is the search for truth.” Walker and his aides—who falsely claimed the changes were merely a “drafting error”—deleted those words about truth, along with others about “educat[ing] people and improv[ing] the human condition.” **In their place, they inserted an opening phrase** claiming that the primary work of the system was to produce human resources “to meet the state’s workforce needs.” [All the additions and strikeouts here are changes ordered by Walker].

All of these attacks, and others besides—including [the undermining of faculty tenure and shared governance](#), both of which were also once enshrined in state statute, and the almost certain passing in the next legislative session of [a “campus carry” bill](#)—have placed front and center the question of just what the “work” of (and at) a public university might be. Alongside the distress that all of this has understandably produced, what has been of particular interest to me is the form the obvious disdain for our work has taken in the language used by state legislators and university representatives alike. There are three important examples to note. **In the fall of 2014, a legislator named [Robin Vos declared](#)** that, quote, “I want to have research done in a way that focuses on growing our economy not on ancient mating habits of whatever,” a statement that [received some significant pushback from humanists and scientists alike](#). Then, last spring, our system’s president, Ray Cross, made two analogies that drew from the world of transportation and manufacturing to justify the changes being made to faculty tenure (in short, to

allow dismissal of faculty for reasons other than just cause or financial exigency).¹ **First, [Cross compared upset faculty to railway brakemen](#) of the 1960s who, he claimed,** demanded “jobs for life” when their positions were eliminated following increased automation.² **Less than two weeks later, Cross moved backwards in time,** now comparing resistant faculty to nineteenth-century buggy whip makers—or, more accurately, [teachers of “buggy whip production”](#)—who refused to alter their outmoded product as the automobile became the preferred mode of transportation.

As I pointed out in [my own public response to Cross](#), this was a deeply problematic analogy, reducing the work of teaching and learning—or, **as an earlier iteration of our Board of Regents put it in 1894, the labor of “[fearless sifting and winnowing](#) by which alone the truth can be found”**—to something having to do with the making of goods on the factory floor, the shaping of our students into little more than bots willing to stand in assembly lines and “meet the state’s workforce needs.” As someone whose work focuses on the historical representation of work, workers, and the technology and texts that inform that work, the tenor of the ongoing discussion in Wisconsin—especially the disregard for historical research—has made me feel that I have a responsibility to speak up. Unlike others on this panel today, I’m not teaching Chaucer this year; but when I return to the classroom, I want to be prepared to talk seriously with my students about Chaucer’s own view of the place and value of labor, academic and otherwise.

One way of doing so might be to return to the idea with which our panel title plays: “campus carry.” This is shorthand, of course, for the push to pass bills in support of wearing a concealed firearm in the classroom. **But what does it mean to “carry” anything on campus, and from there into the classroom?** What does it mean to “carry” Chaucer—often, still, for many of us, in the extraordinary bulk of the Riverside edition? How does Chaucer himself

present the act of carrying—objects, ideas, even persons—forward into particular places and times? And how is that carrying related (whether for Chaucer or ourselves) to the production of knowledge? I can envision a whole Chaucer course centered on the idea of “carrying” and labor. **And perhaps nowhere more appropriately so than in Wisconsin**, whose state motto, [“Forward,”](#) lurks somewhere behind the people- and goods-carrying trains and buggies of Ray Cross’s pernicious analogies, and whose state coat of arms celebrates the achievements of Wisconsin’s workers in agriculture, mining, manufacture, and navigation.³

A course that considered “carrying” Chaucer by way of scenes of “carrying *in*” Chaucer could take up any number of moments in his corpus, so I’ll remind you of just a few. Examples in the dream poetry would include Morpheus’ taking up of Ceyx’s body in order to deliver Juno’s message to Alceste in the *Book of the Duchess* (195-96); Geoffrey’s own carriage-by-eagle in the *House of Fame* (II.541-604), and the narrator’s Macrobian experiences at the start of the *Parliament of Fowls* (43-121)—these two celestial trips of course recalled again in Troilus’ transport to the eighth sphere at the end of his tragic romance (V.1809). *The Canterbury Tales* bring us a seemingly endless catalog of carrying: the objects and clothing ported by the pilgrims of the General Prologue; the “tubs” that are to carry the carpenter John and his wife Alison to safety; the horses that bear those students-cum-rapists Aleyn and John to Simkin’s mill; the boat that carries Constance from shore to shore; Griselda’s desire to wear home her smock on her back when cast from Walter’s house; the puzzling technological wonders brought to Cambuskyan’s court on the back of another wonder, the brass horse; the fateful carrying of concealed daggers and poisoned wine in the Pardoner’s tale; the snatching of Chanticleer in the fox’s mouth; the list of alchemical tools and chemicals the Canon’s Yeoman seems to embody in his very person; **and finally, the bow and arrow that Phebus Apollo carries, to his wife’s**

deadly peril. In fact, the more I contemplate Chaucer’s work in light of the idea of “carrying,” the more it seems to me that it *never* appears as a neutral act or event, and very rarely as a positive one: whether one carries something or is carried *by* something, there is almost always some kind of danger involved. There are, of course, few more dangerous things to carry than a gun, though in fact it would be quite hard to use Chaucer explicitly to make that point: as Kelly DeVries has noted, the poet’s several references to gunpowder weaponry are casually accepting of the technology (though in each case Chaucer is imagining cannons on the battlefield, not pistols in the purse).⁴

I’ll be frank: despite my opening bravado, I don’t fully know how to use what Chaucer gives us to speak truth back to the powers that seek to place guns in my classrooms. I’d like to imagine **that I could ask every potentially-gun-toting student to think about packing a brass astrolabe instead.** For that is the object, after all, that Chaucer imagined being carried in the hands of a child, the object that would teach the putative “little Lewis” about his place in the cosmos. In a pinch, I suppose, it too could be used as a weapon—or a shield, **just as a book about John Wyclif stopped a bullet two years ago.** But an astrolabe’s fundamental purpose, as Chaucer’s treatise upon it makes very clear, is to open up the world, not to shut it down. That is also, I continue to hope, the purpose of the *Riverside Chaucer*...which I hope I won’t have to use as my own shield someday soon.

¹ (These changes, and Cross’ failure to prevent them, led no fewer than [seven UW campuses](#)—[of which Madison was the first](#)—to pass resolutions of “no confidence” in both Cross and the system’s Board of Regents).

² A statement that earned [a sharp retort](#) in an op-ed by my former colleague, labor historian Will Jones.

³ The shield is decorated with “a plow, a crossed shovel and pick, an arm and held hammer, and an anchor, with “the base of [the] shield resting upon a horn of plenty and pyramid of pig lead.” Ironically, given recent history, the motto is itself said to be [the result of a change](#) made by a state governor—Wisconsin’s first, Nelson Dewey—who objected to the highfalutin Latin phrase “Civilitas Successit Barbaruin” [Civilization Succeeds Barbarism] that had been suggested by then-UW Chancellor John Lathrop. Dewey and a lawyer friend of his decided they needed to dumb it down.

⁴ See *Romance of the Rose* (4176, 4191), the *Legend of Good Women* (I.637) and the *House of Fame* (1641-44, 1933-34). Kelly DeVries, “French and English Acceptance of Medieval Gunpowder Weaponry,” in Clifford J. Rogers, et al., eds., *Journal of Medieval Military History* 11 (Boydell & Brewer, 2013): 263-64 [259-70].