'All Manner of Dance and Play' in Thomas Chestre's *Sir Launfal*

Dissertation Project Summary

My dissertation brings together two popular pastimes of the late Middle Ages: dance and romance. I argue that dance inspires new and innovative poetic experience as I explore how late-fourteenth- and fifteenth-century poets use dance to experiment and play with descriptions of motion. I examine a group of Middle English poems that are influenced by the rich social life of late medieval England, c. 1385-1450: Osbern Bokenham's *Legend of Holy Women*, Thomas Chestre's *Sir Launfal*, John Lydgate's *Troy Book* and *Siege of Thebes*, Geoffrey Chaucer's *Anelida and Arcite*, and the anonymous *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

Dance was much discussed among medieval moralists, theologians, and rhetorical theorists. Even as moralists and theologians warned that dancing may lead revelers into sin, they inadvertently created a rhetoric for describing dance and revelry. Rhetorical theorists, for their part, encouraged poets to describe dance, along with other festive pastimes, in vivid detail. Middle English poets did exactly that—and more. In addition to deploying the rhetorical strategies found in moral, theological, and rhetorical treatises, they translated elements of dance into the poetic form as they described moving bodies and objects. In effect, these poets not only adopted but created an innovative rhetoric to choreograph descriptions of dance—a rhetoric that I call *choreographic description*.

Colloquium Focus | *Sir Launfal*

In today's colloquium, I discuss my chapter on Thomas Chestre's gamification of dance in *Sir Launfal*. Chestre's *Sir Launfal* is a Middle English reimagining of Marie de France's twelfth-century *Lanval*. Both narratives follow an Arthurian knight who betrays a promise to his fairy lover not to reveal her identity. This betrayal occurs during an unwanted advance from Arthur's queen. Chestre expands the episode to describe Launfal and the queen's confrontation occurring during a dance. The poem's dance simulates cultural game theory's concept of a *magic circle*—a playground where players' actions have consequences both within and beyond the game space. I demonstrate how Chestre's description of the dance follows a structural pattern established in his descriptions of earlier games. I argue that the gamification of the poem's dance realizes the serious implications and dangers imagined in late medieval social games.

Clint Morrison, Jr.
Ohio State University
morrison.679@osu.edu