Late medieval literary theory validated secular texts alongside the sacred, both of which worked towards a collective, fluid perception of a medieval “Bible” outside of the Latin Vulgate. Prior to the conservative conditions of the 1408 Oxford Constitutions by Archbishop Arundel, a relatively liberal religious culture allowed for paraphrasers and the distribution of vernacular, “apocryphal” writings in the form of poetry, prose, and illustrations. These texts were often adaptations of biblical stories, acting in an exegetical manner for lay people without access to the Bible or knowledge of Latin, but they also created new literature. My research focused on the apocryphal Lives of Adam and Eve, a literary tradition with its first traceable appearance in ancient Greek texts, and its last in the late medieval period. The Latin tradition known as the Vita Adae et Eva is believed to be the source text for many medieval vernacular versions, including the Middle English and Latin variations that I had the chance to study. While most scholarship to date has aimed to draw relationships between surviving variations and establish a source text, I was interested in the changes made to Eve’s character, accompanying texts of each manuscript, and what these decisions in authorship and collation might say about femininity in medieval society.

I worked with four manuscripts at the British Library and four at the Oxford Bodleian Library. Access to manuscripts allowed for insights that would not be found in critical editions of the texts. Uniformity of certain manuscripts, for example, suggested that the contained texts were or were not originally intended to be bound together; and taking note of a scribe’s underlining, marginal notes, punctuation, or extravagant decoration of a certain passage also largely influences the impression of texts. The choice to include the “Lyfe of Adam” in the richly decorated Bodleian 596 manuscript, alongside illustrated narratives of Mary and Joseph’s marriage and the annunciation, for example, suggested a relationship between the Genesis and nativity stories, specifically in terms of salvation and sin, female chastity, and the mercy of God.
Before beginning this research project, I hoped that time in the archives would lead to new directions for my English honors thesis, and the manuscript finds have certainly created a new focus. In addition to gaining new material for my thesis, the research trip also showed me a small part of life as a humanities scholar and has encouraged me to continue with graduate school.