Thomas Hahn is a Professor of English at the University of Rochester.

jur: Did you do any research as an undergraduate and did that help you in graduate school?

Hahn: Although I took some graduate courses while I was an undergraduate, I don’t think that I did any research; I didn’t work with a faculty member on a research project. This contrasts with what is often the case here at the University of Rochester.

jur: What about during graduate school? When did you really start doing research?

Hahn: As a first-year graduate student, I began with a “methods” course, which itself requires some research. I also wound up being a research assistant in several different capacities for different faculty members while I was a graduate student, so I participated in their research as I also began to do my own.

jur: You focus on medieval literature and pop culture; how did you first get interested in these fields?

Hahn: I had an education that oriented me toward the ancient world and the Middle Ages; I studied Latin and Greek when I was in high school, and I think that carried over to some degree in terms of what I became entranced with in college. When we think about the Middle Ages, we have this tiny, elite segment of the population, maybe one or two percent of people, who were literate and who produced books, and who sponsored and read the books. But in fact, vast numbers of people heard all kinds of stories, so my interest in popular culture is, to some degree, an interest in the origins of modern popular culture in the Middle Ages in stories like that of Robin Hood, for example, as well as the ways in which those medieval stories have continued to be popular in the centuries since the Middle Ages.

jur: In what ways has the influence of medieval literature manifested itself into popular culture? You mentioned Robin Hood...

Hahn: My main interest is in Robin Hood, but the Arthurian materials, which are pretty much everywhere in our culture, would be another instance of this. But any set of stories about knighthood, chivalry, and so on would certainly draw upon medieval origins in some distanced way. So for example, our sense of what it means to be a lady—and of things like chivalry and so on—is traceable back to the Middle Ages, even though they are somewhat mutated in modern times.

jur: Now in the humanities, or more specifically in the UR English Department, what sort of research is being produced by undergraduates?

Hahn: I’m actually teaching a research seminar this fall. It’s a course that will actually have a lab—a humanities lab—attached to it. It’s a course about Robin Hood, and what it will ask students to do is a variety of research tasks that involve looking at not only the earliest surviving texts about Robin Hood, but also the audiences and the publishers who made these things popular and who consumed them in the first place. In addition, students will actually work on post-medieval, more recent material, including popular books on Robin Hood in the 19th century—children’s books, novels, etc. And then, they will work on children’s books and other kinds of popular formats for Robin Hood in the 20th century, including, of course, film. All students in the class will actually take on a series of research projects in which they will work with some authors’ published books on Robin Hood, most of whom are not very well known; it requires a certain amount of archival work just to dig out who this person was, what else he or she wrote, who the illustrators were for this material, whether they did other work, etc. Eventually, all this material will actually be contributed to a digital archive on Robin Hood materials that we will be producing. So this will essentially take the material that individual undergraduate researchers have found and deliver it to a much wider public once the Robin Hood digital archive is actually online.

jur: Do you have any advice for anyone who is pursuing research?

Hahn: It seems to me that one of the things that is valuable
about a notion of a humanities lab or humanities research is that it confirms for undergraduates the pragmatic value of the skills that they learn in the classroom. I think that we tend to perhaps regard things that are learned in the classroom as appropriate only to the classroom, when in fact they have real-world value. That real-world value comes out very clearly with research and writing and editing and working with digitization. When all of those things come together, it seems to me that what undergraduates gain is not just some nugget of knowledge—as in particular for some research project of which they only have control because they are the ones who have done the work—but also a validation of the skills that they have developed over their course of time as undergraduates. And of course, these projects draw on skills that are inert and static, and they help change and hone those skills as one continues to do research.

jur: What is it about the English Department here at the University of Rochester that makes it unique?

Hahn: We are one of the smallest English Departments in the country that offers a Ph.D. program. This means that we are very much in contact with undergraduate students on a daily basis in both traditional classroom situations and in terms of research. As a Ph.D.-granting research institution, we as a faculty are actively engaged in research. Additionally, as a department that mirrors what a small liberal arts college department might look like, we have this connection to the undergraduates, and I think that there is an inevitable carry-over of the research interest of a faculty like this to the undergraduates, both inside the classroom and through individual projects.