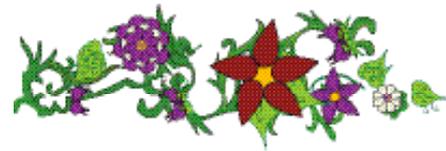


Chaucer Re-Embodied

“I WANT TO ENCOURAGE PEOPLE TO ENCOUNTER CULTURES THAT THEY THINK ARE ALIEN AND STRANGE AND HAVE NOTHING TO DO WITH THEM – AND IN THAT DISCOVER A COMMON HUMANITY.”



THE TIMELESS VISION AND

BY LAURA BEITMAN • Photo by Lisa Godfrey

Ask David Wallace who a modern-day Chaucer is, and he'll fold his hands in his lap, exhale lightly and explain. It's not someone in the United States, whose words and ideas follow familiar English patterns established long ago. And it's not someone in the European-influenced city of Philadelphia or in the sharp and at times street-savvy student body of the University of the Pennsylvania. A new Geoffrey Chaucer would be lurking in an emerging country that is still fighting for its modern identity, its voice. "If there is one, she's probably in Africa," Wallace said recently.

Wallace, the Judith Rodin Professor of English, says there is much to learn from the 14th-century poet, whose revolutionary choice to write in the English language paved the way for many to come. "Generosity of spirit, a sense of humor, acceptance of human follies and limitations, a voice to all social classes" is the list of virtues he attributes to Chaucer. *The Canterbury Tales'* "The Wife of Bath Prologue," an 800-line monologue by a medieval woman talking about her five husbands, is one of Wallace's favorites. "It's like a wall of sound that threatens to overwhelm you. There's nothing quite like it really."

This summer, Wallace will work with dozens of high-school teachers at the meeting of the 300-member New Chaucer Society to help them

THE SHEER ENJOYMENT OF A MEDIEVAL POET

understand, teach and fluently perform Chaucer. It's not just for the future of medieval studies. Wallace's drive stems from a deeper passion. "I want to encourage people to encounter cultures that they think are alien and strange and have nothing to do with them – and in that discover a common humanity."

Clad in a purple sweater and black-rimmed glasses on a recent morning in his office, Wallace says studying the Middle Ages is just one way to explore differences. Unlike the Renaissance, which usually conjures up something positive, medieval times are often vilified for primitive superstition and darkness, he explains. But neither typifies the period. "The assumption is that witch burning is a medieval activity. It's not. It's a Renaissance activity. The assumption is that judicial torture, that burning people for their political beliefs is a medieval activity. Nobody in Chaucer's lifetime was burned for their religious beliefs or any beliefs in England."

With a hint of a mischievous smile, Wallace admits he enjoys the challenge of dispelling those myths and inspiring students, in whatever way he can, to get out of their comfort zones. "You bring them up against ways of thinking and behaving and worshipping that are alien to them, supposedly. Engaging in the culture, they come to like it. They come to understand it."

That said, he is not snobby about how people get interested in the Middle Ages, even if it's through

the Gothic representations of Dungeons and Dragons or roadside Renaissance fairs. "Everything helps to stimulate interest really, even the sort of cheesy, medieval evenings when you get a bit of jousting and wenches in uniform," he says.

Wallace felt a sense of the bigger world early on. Despite the "monochromatic" atmosphere of his brick-making town north of London, he was surrounded by centuries-old churches and books. Wallace, who first read Chaucer at 15, fell in love with books. "I disappointed my father, who wanted me to be interested in motorcycles. He kept his motorcycle license up until I was 16 and realized it was hopeless."

His parents went to work at 14. His father served as a fighter pilot during World War II and later became an engineer while his mother served in the Women's Land Army and later worked in factories. Without a preconceived academic path to follow, Wallace says he was free to discover his love of education by himself. "I think I was the first member of my family to start ninth grade," he says.

He received a full grant for his undergraduate work in English and Italian at the University of York and graduate studies at St. Edmund's College, Cambridge. He was also attracted to medieval studies' internationalism, which has provided a sure foundation for historical development. "Communities evolved over centuries, leading to

European, North African and Arab cultures, which are finely calibrated with many intersecting traditions and relations. It's so important to understand the delicacy of those relationships."

He didn't stay put for long but set off on what would be the first of many travel adventures to teach English to teenage typists in Italy. He'd later go behind the Iron Curtain in East Germany and to the great medieval city of Prague. Like Chaucer, Wallace toured Eastern Europe in his early 20s, earning an accelerated education.

On that recent morning in his office, he reads one of his favorite passages from *The Canterbury Tales*. With his tongue twisting furiously and voice lowering, Wallace holds a thick book in his hands and rattles off lines from "The Pardoner's Tale," a story of "a morally questionable character" and his edict on "a lecherous thing is drink."

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The beauty of Chaucer and the medieval period is that they are not just a view into the insular lives of kings. “There is tremendous social variety in Chaucer,” Wallace says, describing the series of pilgrims’ tales that range from tragic war

stories to rude comedy, often told by peasants, a forbidden move for Shakespeare. “I think the Middle Ages respects human persons for where they are and what they are – and not in an idealized way.”

For Wallace, who won the Modern Language Association’s James Russell Lowell Prize in 1998 for *Chaucerian Polity: Absolutist Lineages and Associational Forms in England and Italy*, the challenge is to keep interest in Chaucer going. Medieval studies is healthy, he says, but it must fight for its market share of the curriculum.

“People ask, ‘Why should I study something 600 years old? It’s not about me.’ We have to convince them it is about them.” He illustrates:

A parallel can be drawn between today’s anxieties about the threat of Asian bird flu and disease “coming from the East,” and the plague of 1347-1349, which killed one-third of the European population. Also, he observes, “If you study the history of medieval women, a lot of the issues that come up are struggles that women are still going through today.”

Medieval author Margery Kempe, whose book is the first autobiography in the English language, went on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem in her 20s and then at 60 left Poland to travel Europe and visit her daughter. The pilgrimage structure allowed her to travel safely, something that hasn’t been fully recovered for women today, Wallace says.

He spent a year, on and off, following in her footsteps for a recent radio documentary for BBC. “We just tried to recreate what it would have been like for a medieval woman of her age to do that traveling, talking to lots of local experts,” he says. “We hiked some but also cheated and took planes.”

Wallace, whose most recent book explores premodern places, says travel is just another way to teach students to experience diversity, never mind feed his own curiosity. “It’s one of my weaknesses,” he says. “I’m interested in everything.”

As for Chaucer, the key will be teaching others, including high-school teachers, how to read him fluently and confidently, focusing on the performance of the works, which were written to be read aloud. Wallace did just that in 2000, taking part in a four-hour marathon on the 600th anniversary of Chaucer’s death for BBC Radio 3. “We drank a lot of BBC wine toward the end,” he confesses.

In *Premodern Places: Calais to Surinam, Chaucer to Aphra Behn*, Wallace writes, “From ancient times, it has been the dearest and simplest wish of poets that, through their writings, their voices might endure; that in some sense, they will be re-embodied, re-remembered by being heard again.”

If there were a new Chaucer, he’d be in a developing country, writing to keep up with the changes. It could come in poetry or perhaps even in avant-garde rock music, Wallace speculates. “What does it mean to be alive now? What does it mean to be contemporary? Who can give that artistic form and expression?” These “new” questions are the same ones Chaucer asked himself 600 years ago.

Through 10 books, some 30 articles and 13 TV/radio productions – not to mention his sense of humor – Wallace’s work has certainly contributed to keeping Chaucer alive. He wouldn’t call it a mission. “It’s more like sharing enjoyment,” he comments, “or reminding people that this is their culture as well as it is mine.” ■

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Roads Well Traveled

There are signs of medieval culture, which laid the foundations for universities, courtly love, table manners and the modern-day jury system, all over Philadelphia, Wallace says. “There’s an element of architectural style you can see all over the place.”

One example is Einar Johnsson’s statue of the Viking Jorfinn Karlsefni near the Sedgley Club on Fairmount Park’s Boat House Row. The Iclander is believed to come to America in 1004. “We know now they never wore those horns on their helmets,” Wallace said.

On Penn’s campus, the Anne and Jerome Fisher Fine Arts Library, formerly named the Furness Building after its architect, is a mix of medieval towers, chimneys, halls and stained-glass windows with hints of gargoyles.

Then of course, there’s Chaucer’s Tabard Inn, a pub at Lombard and 20th streets in center city. A former owner was an English teacher and changed the name from The Graduate, after nearby Graduate Hospital, about 30 years ago, a bar manager said. The bar still sports a copy of English engraver William Hole’s 1889 pen and ink drawing of the characters from *The Canterbury Tales*. But Wallace prefers Fado’s pub at 15th and Locust streets, at least for watching rugby internationals each spring. “Chaucer’s never gives me a discount,” he says.

—LAURA BEITMAN