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Review Essay: David Wallace. *Chaucerian Polity: Absolutist Lineages and Associational Forms in England and Italy*

Stanley Benfell
Brigham Young University

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rity, offers ample proof of Hagedorn's comments on the role of nationalism in Anglo-Saxon studies. J. R. Hall's piece on Anglo-Saxon studies in nineteenth-century America also provides a case study of that process and reveals two contradictory views of Anglo-Saxons, each exaggerated: on the one hand, a noble people whose institutions and laws prefigured liberal democracy, and on the other, "a mere handfull of hardy and desperate Barbarian banditti, without letters, arts, property, moral or social institutions, or any other possession to make their own homes worth living at" (143). Gregory VanHoosier-Carey argues that postbellum Southerners identified with the post-Norman Conquest English as the defenders of a democratic society robbed of their political freedoms by an invading force, who preserved their language and eventually reclaimed their distinctive culture. Velma Bourgeois Richards shows how Edwardian historical novels, especially juvenile literature, enshrined "Anglo-Saxon" values that, she claims, "should be recognized as one key factor in the emergence of attitudes that produced, among many glorious achievements, a war of unparalleled proportions" (195).

The volume concludes with John D. Niles's sometimes playful reflections on culture as appropriation. After outlining five "laws" governing this process, Niles notes that "people appropriate what they will, from wherever they can get it, as part of an effort—whether conscious or unconscious, implicit or explicit, successful or unsuccessful—to shape the ground on which the historical present lies" (220). This claim is undoubtedly true. As we know from recent and painful experience, however, not all appropriations are intellectually or morally equal. (The introductory essay mentions, but the volume does not treat, the Nazi appropriation of Anglo-Saxon literature.) This book successfully depicts the persistence and plasticity of our desire for origins, but it also suggests how pernicious that desire can be if left unchecked by a critical historical imagination.

Peter Richardson
University of North Texas

David Wallace. *Chaucerian Polity: Absolutist Lineages and Associational Forms in England and Italy*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997. xix + 555 pp.

In this massive and densely argued book, David Wallace proposes to study Chaucer through the great Italian writers of the fourteenth century (Boccaccio and Petrarch in particular). Wallace does not, however, attempt another source and influence study; he sees the influence of Tre-

cento Italy as being far more pervasive than one of providing serviceable plots. Indeed, he begins with the contention that “Chaucer’s encounters with the great Trecento authors offer extraordinary opportunities for the reading, testing, and dismantling of time-honored terms such as ‘medieval,’ ‘Renaissance,’ and ‘humanism’” (1). Chaucer’s travels to Florence and Milan gave him direct experience not only of Petrarch’s nascent humanism but also of the crucial political and ideological conflict of fourteenth-century Italy, that between the liberty of the Florentine republic and the despotic rule of the Visconti in Milan. Wallace uses this fundamental split as a way of exploring the politics of Chaucer’s texts (that is, their “specific envisioning of possible social relations” [3]), and of challenging our general notion that “Renaissance” Italy of the fourteenth century has little to do with the “medieval” England of the same time.

Wallace begins with a detailed examination of the Florence and Milan that Chaucer knew. Through the methods of what he calls a “literary-historiographical criticism” (xvii), he explores the associational forms of the Florentine republic and their competition with the despotism of the Visconti regime in Milan and, paradoxically, with the nascent individualism that such despotism allowed to flourish, most notably in the case of Petrarch. Wallace finds a similar bifurcation of political possibilities in Chaucer’s England, exemplified by the pervasiveness of guilds on the one hand and of the increasingly despotic behavior of Richard II (especially following the death of Queen Anne in 1394) on the other, and he argues that Chaucer would have interpreted Boccaccio and Petrarch in terms of the political contexts in which the two writers flourished.

The rest of the book examines the ways in which Chaucer, primarily in the *Canterbury Tales* but also in some of his other works, particularly *The Legend of Good Women*, imagines and portrays social relations, veering between the associational polity exemplified by the *General Prologue*—a *felaweshipe* that brings together individuals from virtually every conceivable class and occupation, both male and female, and portrays their associating together as a voluntary act, without any external authority or sanction—to the despotic states portrayed in *The Knight’s Tale* and in the tales set in Lombardy. In each of these chapters he notes Boccaccian and Petrarchan subtexts and explores Chaucer’s relation to them as one way of understanding the political force of his poetry.

Due to space constraints and the density and richness of Wallace’s arguments, I will concentrate my attention on only one chapter, the tenth, in which Wallace reads the *Clerk’s Tale* against both Boccaccio’s original version of the tale in the *Decameron* and Petrarch’s Latin rewriting of it. The *Clerk’s Tale* belongs to the fourth fragment of the *Tales*, a group situated in “Lumbardye” and devoted to an exploration of tyrannical statecraft. Petrarch’s humanism and poetics, which Chaucer experienced as

part of Lombard political discourse, must be located within this political context. The chapter thus begins with Wallace's determined attempt to "rehistoricize Petrarch," a valuable effort (if an unfortunate way of phrasing it) given the common propensity to treat him as the first "Renaissance" or "modern" man, so essential to the development of the modern world that he seems to exist outside of his own historical moment in a timeless realm of his own making. And indeed, Petrarch repeatedly expressed the desire to escape from history, and this very desire allowed Petrarch to accept Visconti patronage and to serve the Visconti politically, to permit his fame to be employed in their project of tyrannical self-legitimation, a fact not lost on Petrarch's friends and admirers, Boccaccio in particular, who was outraged by Petrarch's place in the Milanese state.

The political differences between the two authors can be illustrated through their two versions of the Griselda story. Boccaccio's version is located as the final tale on the final day of storytelling in the *Decameron*, and presents a Walter who perverts "magnificence," the subject of the final day's tales. As Walter's faithful Christian subject and spouse, Griselda must absorb her lord and husband's tyrannical behavior until—through her steadfastness—she induces a change and his tyranny ends, to be replaced by a more equal and conjugal notion of marriage (and political rule), an ending that coincides with the return of Boccaccio's *brigata* to Florence, where the plague is finally coming to an end and republican order can be restored. Petrarch's translation of the tale into Latin seeks to remove the story from its original context and transform it into a timeless allegory of God's trying of human souls. But his elevation of Walter to Godlike status can also be read as a justification of the despotic rulers Petrarch served; we must all become Griseldas not only before God but before the Godlike rulers of the absolutist state. Indeed, Walter's behavior toward Griselda is analogous to Petrarch's humanist behavior to Boccaccio's tale, and Petrarch's humanism seems all too well suited to the service of political absolutism.

Chaucer's translation of the Griselda story into his own vernacular forms a critique of Petrarch by restoring "Griselda to the movement of history" (283) and by emphasizing once again the tyrannical nature of Walter's behavior. His tearing away of Griselda's children reminds the reader of Nero's violation of his mother's womb (discussed in the *Monk's Tale* at 7.2483–85) and associates Walter with that archetypal tyrant. Ultimately, Walter's tyranny excludes him from any human community, a situation that only changes when he restores his children to their mother. The mention of the Wife of Bath in the concluding frame of the tale points to another tale of female forbearance and eloquence that absorbs and eventually reverses male tyranny. Thus, whereas Petrarch views marriage as an absolutist institution with the husband dominating over his wife, Chau-

cer here and throughout the *Tales* imagines marriage—an illustration of Chaucerian polity—as an associational union, where dialogue is essential. Wallace ends the chapter by suggesting that the *Clerk's Tale* and the *Merchant's Tale* (also set in Lombardy) form a narrative pair analogous to the *Knight's Tale* and the *Miller's Tale*, in which the second tale parodistically recapitulates and humorously critiques the first. Thus, the “somber, claustrophobic, courtly societies of Theseus and Walter yield to the cheerful, mobile market economies of Alisoun and May” (294). These Chaucerian meditations on marriage and the political state, Wallace ultimately suggests, speak to the increasingly despotic behavior of Richard II in the 1390s.

I have tried to summarize Wallace's lengthy argument in this chapter as fairly as possible, and one aspect of it that may surprise the readers of this review is the space allocated to the Italian authors, a proportion that is generally characteristic of the entire book. *Chaucerian Polity* is a genuinely comparatist work, which treats Trecento Italian authors and history seriously on their own terms before moving on to examine Chaucer's use of them, and it should thus interest Italianists as well as comparatists and English scholars. His treatment of Chaucer is also most often compelling and perceptive, and one in which he treats many of the less commonly discussed tales (such as the *Monk's Tale*, the *Tale of Melibee*, and the *Cook's Tale*). At times, however, Wallace's desire to make an overarching argument regarding “Chaucerian polity” leads him into difficulty, especially when he tries to bring tales into his analysis that do not form the primary focus of a chapter, and he is thus forced to treat them briefly, as he does with the *Merchant's Tale* in chapter 10. I am intrigued by the notion that we should consider this tale against the *Clerk's*, but I cannot see how we can read it as an illustration of a “cheerful, mobile market” economy. His brief treatment of the tale mentions neither its pervasively bitter and caustic tone nor the crudity of Damyan's “wooing” of May and of the consummation scene, features that should undermine any sense we have of May as a positive heroine on the order of the wyf in the *Wife of Bath's Tale* or even analogous to Alisoun of the *Miller's Tale*.

Another questionable reading that Wallace makes toward the beginning of his study (in the second chapter), but which forms a centerpiece of his argument, concerns the Wife of Bath. Recalling that at the end of *Troilus and Criseyde*, Chaucer had claimed that he could now take his place as the sixth of six great poets, the first five being classical *auctores*, Wallace links this “sixth of six *topos*” to Chaucer's mention of himself in the *General Prologue* (see l. 542–44), where Chaucer names himself as the sixth of six outsiders. Wallace then ties these two uses of the *topos* to the Wife of Bath, who has, of course, been married five times and is now waiting for her sixth husband. He contends that Chaucer intends to identify himself

as this sixth: “Within the broad parameters of a literary tradition that genders literary text as feminine and the operations done to texts—inventing, glossing, compiling—as masculine, the meeting of Chaucer and the Wife represent that union out of which the *Canterbury Tales* will come to fruition” (82). And while Wallace makes a convincing case for Chaucer’s positive portrayal of female eloquence, and wifely eloquence in particular, it seems to me that this piling up of sixes represents far too tenuous a textual link on which to build a theory of sexual poetic production.

On the whole, however, the strengths of this book far outweigh its weaknesses. It takes the political dimensions of Chaucer’s work seriously while avoiding the oversimplification of both history and literary text that all too often characterizes the work of the so-called “new historicists.” His work opens up new ways of looking at both Chaucer and the Italian Trecento, and makes a compelling argument for Wallace’s brand of “literary-historiographical criticism” as well as his broader claims for the artificiality and arbitrariness of our traditional terms and concepts of medieval and Renaissance.

Stanley Benfell
Brigham Young University