Terry Jones is coming to Saskatchewan!

... Or at least, he’s arriving via Skype.

The Departments of English, CMRS, and Drama are hosting the launch of the University of Saskatchewan’s digital application of Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* on April 9th. In the South Studio of the Greystone Theatre, the culmination of several months’ work will be revealed to the university community. One of the exciting things about this digital edition is the visual representation of the text by Chaucer, the audio readings by Colin Gibbings, and a translation by Terry Jones of Monty Python fame. I’ve seen the “app” in its infancy, and the process of putting the text together in all of its forms and then working through bugs, interface, and design, was an interesting process, even in those early stages. I would highly recommend going to the launch, just to see the project.

In the meantime, however, some of you may be wondering what a Python has to do with the *Canterbury Tales*. As a kid, I loved watching *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (probably much to the distress of my friends’ parents), and I knew that the troupe were highly educated and highly intelligent, but I did not know that Terry Jones was a scholar of pre-modern history until recently.

For anyone who wants to know what brings Terry Jones to Saskatoon in his capacity as a scholar of Chaucer, here is some information straight from the Ministry of Silly Walks:

- His first book was *Chaucer’s Knight: The Portrait of a Medieval Mercenary* (1980), a controversial critique of the current reading of The Knight’s Tale, which suggests that the eponymous character is less than a “parfit gentle knight,” and more of a bloodthirsty mercenary.
- In 2003, he wrote *Who Killed Chaucer?* in which he argues that Chaucer’s proximity to King Richard the Second left the poet in dire straits when the king was deposed. In his review of Jones’ book for *The Guardian*, Jonathan Myerson describes the person of Thomas Arundel, and his importance in the latter part of Chaucer’s life:

The central plank of Jones’s theory is the 1399 coup which put Henry IV on the throne and Thomas Arundel back behind it. In fact, from the moment he enters the narrative, it’s clear that Arundel’s the one wearing the black cloak and riding the black horse … Arundel had grown fat, rich and powerful by holding a succession of bishoprics. Needing now...
to consolidate a usurper king, the last thing he could stomach was people saying the church was full of fat, rich and power-hungry hypocrites … So the last thing Arundel wanted, Jones argues, was more descriptions of rip-off churchmen. And yet here’s Chaucer, using his final masterwork to make everyone laugh at the pardoner who sells fake indulgences to poor congregations; at the summoner (a church court policeman, who probably is the pardoner’s significant other) demanding bribes from defendants or will-be-defendants-if-they-don’t-cough-up; at the monk spending all his time hunting; and at the friar, who should be penniless but is clearly a pampered, harp-strumming social climber. In fact, it’s arguable that the entirety of the Tales – with their gentle mockery of the fake piety of pilgrimages – is an assault on the “church commercial” which relied so heavily on income from pilgrims. ([http://www.theguardian.com/books/2003/nov/15/classics.highereducation](http://www.theguardian.com/books/2003/nov/15/classics.highereducation)

- Jones received an Emmy nomination in 2004 for “Outstanding Writing for Nonfiction Programming” for his television series *Terry Jones’ Medieval Lives.* (It was followed up by book by the same name in 2007 published by BBC).
- Check out Episode 1 here: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yg3YDN5gTX0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yg3YDN5gTX0)
- In the aptly named *Terry Jones’ Barbarians* (2006), Jones presented the cultural achievements of peoples conquered by the Roman Empire in a more positive light than Roman historians typically have, while criticising the Romans as the true “barbarians” who exploited and destroyed higher civilisations. Episode 1 of this series from BBC can be found here: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iKGVqXznqNU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iKGVqXznqNU)

And of course, most recently, Jones has provided a translation of *The Canterbury Tales* for our homegrown mobile application. The launch on April 9th will likely include more information on Colin’s voice-work in creating an audio accompaniment, Dr Peter Robinson’s direction in the project, as well as all the rest of the people who have been involved in putting it together. Come to the South Studio of the Greystone Theatre at 4pm! Find out more here: [http://artsandscience.usask.ca/english/news/event.php?newsid=4875](http://artsandscience.usask.ca/english/news/event.php?newsid=4875)

- Elyn Achtymichuk

Works Cited


“*The Wife of Bath Meets Brian’s Mum: World Premiere! New Work by Geoffrey Chaucer, with the assistance of Terry Jones.*” Departments of English, CMRS, & Drama. University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon. 9 April 2015. Address.

Globalizing History: A new book from Dr. Michael Scott in 2016!
Dr. Michael Scott is an Associate Professor in Classics and Ancient History at the University of Warwick, and he recently announced that he will be releasing a new book in Spring 2016.

He takes a new approach to history, as he describes here:

“This new book will give a truly connected perspective of the beginnings of the world we know today, taking readers on a journey around the ancient world as we look at civilization, politics, religion and war, from Greece to Italy, South America to China.

We live in a global and connected world. But that is not how we study history. Instead, we look at events situated in a particular time and place, isolated from their global contexts, leaving us with a disconnected sense of our past. This book, in contrast, seeks to crash through the disciplinary boundaries that have shackled the study of history, enabling the reader to connect up different strands of our human story and thereby to develop a more sophisticated sense of how our world has developed, and why it now exists as it does.”

I think this is a great idea, but I also wonder about how anachronistic the idea of globalization is … How connected are the economies and ideologies in the classical period(s)? I am definitely looking forward to it!

See Michael Scott @: http://michaelscottweb.com/index.php/profile/

And check out his awesome online presence on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=srrlVsJ47Kl

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I recently read a review of Writing on the wall: Social Media – the first 2000 years by Tom Standage, which is about the concept of a social circle of friends and colleagues that gathers to share information. His premise is that the social media we know of today has its origins in ancient times. Maria Popova writes in "Cicero’s Web: How Social Media Was Born in Ancient Rome" that the predecessor of our current understanding of social media obviously looked different, but was "analogous to anything we see on Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, and platforms we’re yet to imagine." (Check out Popova’s review at: http://wwwbrainpickings.org/2013/10/25/writing-on-the-wall-social-media-first-2000-years/). In Cicero’s time, the medium was "papyrus scrolls passed around by hand," and it was very much human-powered, which is the essence of how social media works. What struck me most about Standage, however, was what I discovered when I looked up the text in my university library: I discovered that Standage is no stranger to providing a historical context to current concerns and thought processes. Several of his books are accounts of items of daily significance, and their evolution in history. As a result, his books are deeply engaging to a non-scholarly audience, but equally of interest to any scholar who is interested in pre-modern history.

In 2006, Standage released a book called A History of the World in Six Glasses, which outlines the way certain common and well-known beverages have both influenced and been influenced by the passage of time. He begins with the discussion of beer in Mesopotamia and Egypt (9) and then goes on to the place of wine in Greece and Rome (43). He discusses spirits and colonization (93), as well as the British Empire’s relationship with tea (175). According to
Standage, coffee has two time periods of note: during the age of reason (133) and slightly later, in internet coffeehouses (151). Finally, he describes Coke as “globalization in a bottle” (250). Our correlations of beverages and historical periods are more than just vague inclinations: beverages have a unique relevance to the history of western civilization.

*Six Glasses* is engaging because it uses recognizable, common objects to connect his audience to history. The remoteness of Mesopotamia is perceived to be less distant because this early civilization consumed this similar product. Similarly, we can understand the superficiality of colonization in a new light with the discussion of both coffee and tea. Even young children are aware of the ubiquity of Coke; in fact, the general populace may very well be “hooked” by the initial list: what do Coke commercials in Japan have to do with beer in Ancient Egypt? Well, it turns out that they have everything to do with each other, and the non-academic audience is inexorably pulled into the framing of history which is both relevant and relatable.

In *An Edible History of Humanity* (2009), Standage takes a very similar approach; his chapters discuss food as it passes through different periods in western civilization. In chronological order, he lays out the beginnings of farming (3) – the movement from a hunter-gatherer society – and the relationship between food and power (31). Most reasonably well-read university students can discuss the relationship between industrialization (107) and colonization (85), but across two chapters of the text, Standage outlines how this relationship between supply and demand creates certain needs for food production. His final chapters are about the current problems in distribution and the developing world.

In contrast with the earlier text, *An Edible History* begins with a focus on western civilization in order to capture the reader’s attention, but ends by changing the perspective. Whereas Coke at the end of Standage’s text is still a recognizably American product (and this knowledge is appealing to a western-centred audience), the problem of distribution of food is not a western concern. This shift in focus places more imperative on the audience to call for social change. The audience who reads *An Edible History* likely picks up this book for the entertainment value of learning history through a commonly-known object, but they end up putting it down with a greater sense of the world as it is now, and not just as they know it.

This idea of taking the object – whether it be food or beverage – is carried on into Standage’s recent text, *Writing on the Wall*. Most people have a vague understanding of social media, and at the very least how social media is changing their lives in regards to information and social structures. Like the Coke example in the earlier text, social media is the hook that brings this audience to the book. While I have no academically- supported psychological understanding of what draws people to want to know about their personal histories, it is self-evident (to me, at least) that people want to know the history of the items, materials, and ideas that affect them the most.

With that in mind, I would propose a formula to engaging the modern audience in pre-modern history:

1. Find an object or idea that has its roots in a pre-modern civilization.
2. Trace the original object to the one in the present.
   1. Suggest how the object was both created by the people of its time period, but also influenced those people.
   2. Hypothesize ways that the historic world may have been different without that object.
   3. Demonstrate a trajectory between the historic time and the present time; the trick is to create a cognitive relationship between the past and the present through the person’s relationship to the object.
3. Make suggestions for the future of that object: How will it affect the lives of the people using it?

For further reading, please read Popova’s article at brainpickings.com, check out Tom Standage’s texts at your local library. Other texts that focus on particular items: Mark Kurlansky’s *Salt: A World History* or Iain Gately’s *Drink: A Cultural History of Alcohol*.

**Works Cited:**


The popularity of *Game of Thrones* – both the novels themselves as well as the HBO television series – is hard to deny. Millions of people watch the show, and some of them even heard about the books first.

One of the remarkable things about *Game of Thrones* is that, despite its supernatural elements, certain parts of the setting hearken to the popular conception of a medieval period: familial and monarchal rule, alliances based on marriage (and alliances broken just as easily), as well as other details related to technology and dress which indicate to an average audience that this series seems very similar to what they conceptualize as the history of western civilization.

I know I’ve already upset every Medieval scholar within range, so I’ll hasten to add that obviously there are huge problems with comparing an obviously fictional and fantastical series to real life. There are enough historical inaccuracies in the popular conception without tossing in the additional complications of fantasy.

The same could be said of Tolkien; an entire breed of fantasy novels has been and continues to be inspired by Tolkien, re-using the characteristics of a “sword and sorcery” genre, containing elements that never have never actually existed: knights did not exist in reality as they do in the common imagination; castles, kingdoms, and structures of government were far less epic and / or romantic; even very simple concepts of social and class mobility, gender equity, and the role of justice, which are such ingrained ideas in a modern audience, are complete anachronisms for the medieval time period. Tolkien and his successors in the genre have contributed enormously to the misconceptions rampant in the common imagination.

So *Game of Thrones* is bad, right?

Insofar as any fictional text – even historically based – is never going to be completely accurate, even taking massive liberties with the time period in order to a) tell a story and b) conform to the misinformation that already exists in the mind of the audience, we should not, of course, be using *Game of Thrones* as a textbook.

However, can we use *Game of Thrones* in our teaching to introduce students to true and accurate concepts in medieval study?
I'm thinking specifically in regards to death. Death happens so frequently in Game of Thrones as to have become an internet meme.

When asked about it, George R.R. Martin refers to the frequency of death in his writing as necessary for the character construction, “when my characters are in danger, I want you to be afraid to turn the page, (so) you need to show right from the beginning that you’re playing for keeps.” Death becomes his greatest tool in creating character, but it's also his greatest tool in differentiating himself from other authors who are set their stories in a similar time period: he say that Tolkien and his ilk write “Disneyland Middle Ages,” a jibe the correctly identifies Tolkien’s fantasy as being unrealistically PG rated. (See, Martin agrees with all you medieval scholars, too!). Martin says, “we look at real history and it’s not that simple … Just having good intentions doesn’t make you a wise king.”

So what can learn about death in Martin’s text that we can apply to Medieval studies?

Paradoxically, death in the medieval period is a way of life.

We might ask our students, how does death in Martin’s text change how we think of death in literature?

We might then go on to say, how does death in the medieval period inform the way people live their lives? How does the prevalence of death and destruction govern the rules of society?

When death is a major concern, how does that change how governing officials are chosen? How relationships are made? How families are constructed? Even further, how property is divided and how land titles are created?

In effect, Martin teaches the new scholar of Medieval study that Death changes everything. They don’t have to believe what Martin says about dress, technology, or even social arrangements (in fact, they should use what they learn to question Martin’s descriptions). But Game of Thrones gives new students a way into the conversation, and it gives burgeoning academics in the field a way to test their knowledge: it may not be Shakespeare, but the pedagogical potential of Game of Thrones has interesting implications for CMRS studies, and I would argue, humanities study as a whole.

-Elyn Achtymichuk

Works Cited

Scholars are responding to a social imperative to make their research accessible to a wider audience outside the university campus. Universities are increasingly including public engagement among their strategic priorities, and in recent years funding agencies have placed particular importance on engagement with the wider community. In 2011, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council released its knowledge mobilization strategy based on “the need for prompt action to implement measures designed to strengthen the practice of knowledge mobilization leading to intellectual, social and economic impact.” As recently as January of 2015, the National Endowment for the Humanities introduced *The Common Good: The Humanities in the Public Square*, which is “an agency-wide initiative of the [NEH] designed to demonstrate the critical role humanities scholarship can play in our public life.” Their “hope is to encourage humanities scholars and organizations to turn their attention toward public life … the initiative invites humanists to engage in illuminating the grand challenges that we now face as a nation.” There is widespread recognition of the ethical and sociopolitical imperative of creating meaningful relationships between scholars and their respective communities. How do we create “knowledge mobilization” when modern public life may seem remote from classical, medieval, and renaissance studies? How do we make the imperative of community engagement more relevant to our scholars?

How to move from imperative to implementation is not so clear. Many questions remain. What constitutes public engagement? Service and outreach are typically conceived as one-way approaches to delivering knowledge and service to the public, whereas engagement emphasizes a two-way approach in which institutions and community partners collaborate to develop and apply knowledge to address societal needs (Boyer, 1996; Kellogg Commission, 1999) (quoted in Weerts and Sandmann 632). The possibilities for new, digital modes of dissemination add to our imperative as we feel pressed to assert the continuing relevance of the humanities (Kee 2014). Discussion of knowledge mobilization is bound up with questions of impact, assessment, and our understanding of what constitutes scholarly output at key career points (Lamont 2009, Fitzpatrick 2011). Once we have created plans and programs for engaging audiences outside the academy, how do we measure the impact of these initiatives? In the use of social media especially, we need to determine what forms of public engagement are meaningful, worthwhile, or even appropriate. Are the number of likes, followers, and shares really a determiner of success, or are there are other methods of determining impact? Is it possible to quantify impact, or do we seek other indicators of success in knowledge mobilization?

– Elyn Achtymichuk

Works Cited:


Tag Archive. Below you'll find a list of all posts that have been tagged as “Public engagement”. The Gary Null Show – 05.01.17. CONVERSATIONS WITH REMARKABLE MIND The Great Derangement — facing climate change and its unspeakable consequences in literary, historical and political discourse Dr Amitav Ghosh is an international renowned novelist His recent book who has received numerous awards, including the Arthur C Clark Award, the International Book Award, the Booker Prize, the India Gold Quill Award and others. Among is more … Read More. Weathers and Kendall study US reportage of climate change in a public health frame; a more powerful presentation for motivating public engagement … Read More. Tag Archives: public engagement. Transit of Venus light curve: exoplanet detection demo. Posted on 2014-03-20 by James Gilbert. More recently, during a public talk on exoplanets, I saw a video someone had made to demonstrate the transit method used to detect planets around other stars. The video looked a bit like my time-lapse, except that it was a simulation. I thought, “why not try to get a real light curve from my transit footage?” Tag Archives: research and public engagement. Defining value: without expensive research, there’s no ‘higher’ to higher education. Posted by Will Pooley | December 8, 2017 | 0 responses.