Regarding Boccaccio's repeated engagements with Dante--two of Geoffrey Chaucer's key poetic models and interlocutors--David Wallace avers, "Copying is of course the best way to soak up a text" (56). If I seem to over-quote from Wallace in this long review of a slim volume, I hope it will be seen less as a flaw and more as an attempt to "soak up" this swift-flowing "new" introduction.

The book consists of seven chapters that range thematically across biography, literary form, historical context, and Chaucerian reception and adaptation. Interspersed throughout are sixteen black and white images as well as several diagrams and maps. These sometimes illustrate a particular historical or literary point directly, as in figure three, a T-O map from BL MS Royal F IV, fol. 135v. At other times an image will illuminate a conceptual angle taken in the text, as with figure 13, a photograph of a stile near Hadrian's wall, which ties in with a discussion of liminality. The volume's back matter includes a compact but effective index, a biographical timeline based off of the 495 currently known life records of Chaucer, as well as a "Further Reading" section. That final section folds together referenced works with suggested further readings and includes subsections on "Original Sources Cited," "Film, Video, Audio, Opera," as well as "Useful Websites and Web-Based Resources."

It is not insignificant that the first chapter is titled "Beginnings" rather than "Introduction." The chapter jumps right in the driving question of the entire book: "Why do poets, translators, and audiences from so many cultures, from the mountains of Iran to the islands of Japan, find Chaucer so inspiring?" (1). Rather than providing an outline of the rest of the text or an explication of critical or theoretical assumptions, "Beginnings" sets in motion several thematic strands which Wallace traces throughout the text (a method Wallace does not explicitly acknowledge). Key to these various strands is Wallace's early declaration that we must distinguish...the poet who begins [The Canterbury Tales] as a virtuoso, with every line and rhyme inspiring confidence, from the pilgrim 'I' Chaucer who his not (we soon discover) the sharpest knife in the medieval pantry. And to wonder how both these Chaucers relate to the historical G. Chaucer, Esquire, is to wade still deeper into complications. (3)

Weaving together the strands of poet, poetry, and history is the highly recognizable form of literary history. And while such a methodology may strike scholars as hardly "new," Wallace's motivation seems less to do something new with Chaucer than to think seriously and densely about how the medieval poet seems still capable of freshness in a globalized twenty-first century world.

The second chapter, "Schoolrooms, Science, Female Intuition," discusses medieval education, the fourfold interpretive schema, and the gendered power dynamics of late medieval learned interpretation and poetic making. The chapter not only allights on the "litel clergeon" of the Prioress's Tale and Nicholas the "poure scolar" of the Miller's Tale, but also on the discourse on the nature of sound in the House of Fame and the Treatise on the Astrolabe, the first technical manual in English.
Science is political—something Chaucer acknowledges “with remarkable prescience,” claims Wallace; “in effect [he gives] us the very first conception of ‘the king’s English’: ‘And preie God save the king, that is lord of this langage” (32). Foregrounding the political dimensions of Chaucer’s technical treatise is of a piece with the chapter’s attention to the titular “Female Intuition.” “Most women,” writes Wallace, “were forced to depend upon men to author and translate texts for them,” (36) a situation famously lamented by Chaucer’s Wife of Bath:

By God, if wommen hadde written stories,
As clerkes han withinne hire oratories,
They wolde han writen of men moore wickendesse
Than al the mark of Adam may redresse (3.693-6).

For a female author’s articulation of such matters the chapter turns to Chaucer’s contemporary, Christine de Pizan. Christine’s statement that authorship is achieved only via a “road of long study” opens the chapter, framing Wallace’s discussion of the trivium and quadrivium. Christine’s despair at the ways men write women similarly frames a section titled, “Female Learning, Women’s Intuition.” Wallace wants the chapter to acknowledge the ways “women are different” and that “different simply suggests alternative ways of thinking, imagining, and being” (42, emphasis original). Despite Wallace’s desire to foreground difference in discussions of knowledge, the chapter could have gone further in addressing the historical and continued marginalization of women’s voices as well as in excavating the disruptive dimensions of “difference.” For instance, despite Wallace’s willingness to label the knight of the Wife of Bath’s Tale a “knight-rapist” (40), any mention of Cecily Chapain is relegated to the timeline in the book’s back matter timeline in an entry for 1380: “Released from raptus (rape or abduction) charges by Cecily Champaign; son Lewis born.” Finally, the chapter falls into a battle of the sexes narrative that could very productively be disrupted with ventures into now-established work in queer theory as well as new work in trans* theory.

The third chapter, “A Life in Poetry,” attends most closely to Chaucer’s translation of the Roman de la Rose as well as his Book of the Duchess and House of Fame. These texts present a Chaucer engaged with Continental literary and philosophical trends as witnessed especially in the work of Guillaume de Machaut and Dante Alighieri. Wallace argues that, ultimately, “Italian proved liberatory for Chaucer...because its metrics lie much closer to English” (57). Like a dizzyingly mobile House of Fame, Wallace’s argument zooms about, collecting poetic exempla (instead of news). By way of example: in a brief discussion on The Parliament of Fowls, Wallace gives a close reading of the opening seven lines, taking care to parenthetically note the ways “mene” in line four “fall[s] somewhere between the modern German meinen and the modern English mean” (58). By the middle of the very next paragraph, Wallace positions the close reading within Chaucer’s evolving poetic practice—“Chaucer...keeps faith with French poetics—even in absorbing new Italian materials” (59). He then also connects it to late fourteenth-century English social and political order, noting how “The Commons had begun separating from the House of Lords during the reign of Edward III, and Chaucer himself sat in the lower chamber in 1386” (59).

In chapter four, “Poetry at Last: Troilus and Criseyde,” Wallace continues to consider the ways in which Chaucer is working on a poetic career, one in which he “might worthily walk behind great, antique poets” (69). Wallace contemplates Troilus and Criseyde as the marker of Chaucer’s ambitions to bridge ancient glories, imported poetic innovations from Italian contemporaries, and the recent English political tumult. (By “recent” I mean 1381, not Brexit.) Though the term is left unmentioned, translatio imperii stands at the heart of the chapter. Wallace parses how T&C weaves Theban, Trojan, Boethian, Italian, and English literary and philosophical strands, arguing that “such dense allusiveness suggests that with T&C Chaucer is writing a poem to pondered over, many times, rather than listened to once” (65). Among such allusiveness, Chaucer “makes himself busy as persona” (66), a persona that declares itself hopeless in matters of love and one that, therefore, must embrace “deniability not just for his story’s outcome, but also for his newly-hatching reputation as a besmircher of women” (68).

In “Organizing, Disorganizing: The Canterbury Tales” Wallace’s interests lie in “untidiness,” fragments, and states of irresolution as productive sites for interpretation. In counterpoint to this postmodern Chaucer of the Canterbury Tales stands “neatnik, completionist” (72) Boccacio’s Decameron as well as Chaucer’s own Troilus and Criseyde. Wallace argues for a Canterbury Tales wherein “genre and literary form run wild” (72). The tales “typically defeat fixed notions of genre by performing themselves into existence, by finding out through narration what they are all about” (83). One approaches genre here, then, “as an open question” (81). Because the tales, Wallace argues, do not point us toward generic particularity, we should attend the tale tellers’ voicings and gestures, textual figurations that emerge out of yet push beyond commonplaces collected from French, Italian, or Latin source materials. Such textual performance of identity suggests productive engagements with gender rather than genre theory, Wallace argues, suggesting a possibly productive route for reconsidering the material on women in the second chapter.

“Something to Believe In,” the sixth chapter, centers on Wallace’s query: how do we “access” Chaucer’s religion? The issue of “access” is primarily (though not solely) one of historical distance for Wallace. He notes that the Chaucer who produced an elaborate, lauded, and much-copied ABC of Marian devotion, is separated from us “not just by the Reformation, but by the Counter-Reformation too: that process through which the Catholic church, no longer relaxedly confident in its universalist claims, lost its sense of humor” (88). Wallace sees in Chaucer an “exploratory freedom” in representation of belief and believing and believers. An Early Modern England “sharply divided between Protestant and Catholic, and between varieties of belief within Protestantism, showed little inclination to head down this exploratory road” (89). Wallace suggests that Chaucer’s
writing—and via an implied synecdoche, Chaucer himself—opens a space for the expression of ideas or anxieties that few would dare voice aloud themselves (91).

Chaucer's religious "exploratory freedom," of course, has limits—namely considering the humanity of Jews. Wallace does a lot with Tiburce's declaration in the Second Nun's Tale, "Whoso that troweth nat this, a beest he is" (6.288). This declaration echoes Peter the Venerable's account of Christian biblical understanding, and Wallace points up the inherent anti-Semitism of the declaration. The idea that Christian revelation was readily apparent—a comforting idea to believers—was mutually reinforced by a negative corollary—that those who did not believe were then incapable of belief and thus were barely human. "What might exhilarate and reassure some readers," says Wallace, "is for others a sign of danger" (102).

A section on Islam centers on Chaucer's representations of Islam as a neighboring, occult-associated "younger sibling" respected for its innovations in arts and sciences as well as a source for travel narratives. Wallace notes Chaucer's "respect" via his use of the phrase "sadde and trewe," or "steadfast and honest, two of Chaucer's most positive epithets" (110, italics original). Ultimately, the section suggests it is less the faith of Islam itself that served as an interlocutor to Chaucer than, despite Wallace's avowal otherwise, trappings of otherness via exotic locales and mysterious alchemists and necromancers. The names Rhazes, Saladin, Avicenna, and Averroes may have been "naturalized" in the West, but such Dantean virtuous pagans still resided in the liminal Limbo—worthy of recognition in their status as good others.

The chapter's rubric of "belief" is not restricted to the three monotheistic religions. An environmentalist section, "Our Planet, Our Home," nods toward our current location in the anthropocene (a term Wallace does not deploy), attempting to parse the divergences and commonalities between medieval and modern attachments to nature. While such divergent cultures may not share an alienation rooted in a belief about the origin of souls, "Medieval and moderns do," says Wallace, "share intensive concern with nature, or Nature" (112).

The chapter ends with a section on liminality, titled "Thresholds, Portals to Beyond." For Wallace, ultimately, the threshold demarcates a realm of possibility rather than strict orthodoxy, and the presence of the section suggests one should read the entire chapter in such a light. "The membrane thins," concludes Wallace, "between this world and some other" (121).

For the final chapter, "Performance and New Chaucers," Wallace suggests that one of the compelling aspects of the medieval poet is his relevance to a postmodern world, one in which "Chaucer's English shows the way to more flexible, inchoate, and spontaneous forms of expression where rules of genre have yet to harden" (123). Over and against a Dantean Latinity reproduced, for example, by T. S. Eliot's "counter-Chaucerianism," Wallace posits an international, global, adaptable Chaucer.

In a sense Wallace embraces a kind of neo-dramatist Chaucerianism, wherein we should attend to performative moments "when an off-script reaction is inferable from what is on the page" (124). Updating longstanding conceptions of the Canterbury Tales as "staging" moments between tale-tellers who provide dramatic personae, Wallace points to moments in which tale-tellers react to each other as well as moments within tales. Key to this shuttling back and forth is Wallace's sense that "dramatic effect in Chaucer demands choice of stress" (124, emphasis original).

Wallace argues for an "internationalization" of Chaucer that begins with James I's Kingis Quair, evolves with the "Scottish Chaucerians" of the 15th century, and moves to Kynaston's seventeenth century translation into Latin of Troilus and Criseyde. The Latinizing of Chaucer's "seeming rudenesse," is, Wallace states, "a posture...that true Englishness can only be recognized, internationally, through Latin" (130, emphasis original). The brief section on "internationalizing" Chaucer sets up a section on "globalizing" Chaucer, wherein Wallace considers the status of English both as having rapidly changed since Chaucer's time and as having replaced Latin as the world language. Detailing the breadth and depth of translations, adaptations, and performances of Chaucer's works across the world, the section avoids the suggestion that adaptations of Chaucer represent the adoption of some unitary, canonical "English" poetry by cultural "others" in a dynamic wherein the "other" lacks culture.

Wallace also highlights the diverse voices and experiences found in London, rendering the metropole polyglot via the work of poets David Dabydeen, Darcus Howe, and Jean Binta Breeze among others. It is this compelling poetic fertility that Wallace understands to be key to Chaucer's place in the twenty-first century: "The extraordinary growth of translations worldwide since 2000 suggests new esteem for Chaucer as the poet of an unfinished Englishness ripe for translation, adaptation, and local variation" (142).