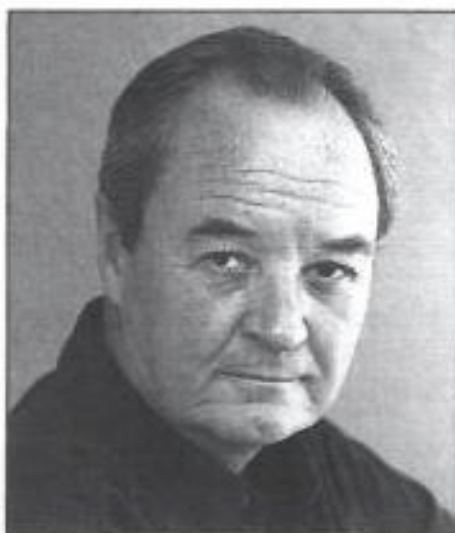


DISTINGUISHED MEDIEVALIST RECOUNTS HIS SCHOLARLY QUESTS AND THEIR SOURCES OF INSPIRATION

VV: Professor Kolve, your contributions as an outstanding lecturer, dissertation director, and interpreter of medieval literature are well known both on campus and in the wider scholarly community. Perhaps now you would like to share with our readers how you became a medievalist.

Kolve: It took me by surprise. I had won a Rhodes scholarship to Oxford with the intention of working on W.B. Yeats, but I'd become an English major so late in my undergraduate years my Oxford tutors suggested that I first do an Honors BA in English literature. It was a very conservative program, heavily weighted towards the Anglo-Saxon and medieval periods. The teaching in those periods was almost exclusively philological, with little attention paid to the things I was finding most interesting in the texts. This silence struck me as strange. Ultimately I thought I might have more to



UCLA Foundation Professor Emeritus V.A. Kolve

bring to the early period than to the modern.

VV: Do you think that, because you are an American, you didn't take medieval English authors for granted, and so you noticed different elements in their writings?

Kolve: It had more to do with the way I had been taught to read literature. During the years that I was an undergraduate in this country—1951 to 1955—the form of literary analysis most in vogue was called “The New Criticism.” It emphasized reading texts very closely to tease out their structures, themes, and images, and had proved especially well suited to the 17th-century metaphysical poets. Without any deliberate intention on

my part, I found myself reading medieval authors in some of those same ways.

VV: You did your doctorate at Oxford as well, which is somewhat unusual for a student from the United States.

Kolve: I had expected to come home, do military service, and eventually work for a PhD at Princeton, but at the end of my third year, I won a four-year research fellowship at Oxford, with half-time teaching. This enabled me to complete a DPhil, and allowed me the opportunity to work with some noted scholars. Neville Coghill, for one, remains well known as the author of standard modern verse versions of *The Canterbury Tales* and *Troilus and Criseyde*; J.R.R. Tolkien, more famous now for his own literary creations, was better known then as an Oxford medievalist.

VV: How did it happen that you wrote your dissertation on medieval religious English drama?

Kolve: Several factors contributed to that decision. Though great books on the subject, by E. K. Chambers and Karl Young, had been written early in the 20th century, by the '50s the traditional approach—a history of theater—had played itself out. A consensus account had been agreed upon, and there seemed no questions left to ask, except perhaps to examine what

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these plays were about and what it had meant to experience them in performance. I had some insight into the second question partly because when I was at Oxford I did some acting for the first time in my life. The Oxford Theater Group, of which I was a member, played at the 1956 Edinburgh Fringe Festival on a thrust stage, and there, free of the proscenium arch, I learned about playing with—not just to—an audience. It was a thrilling, visceral experience. The next summer I saw the whole York cycle performed memorably in that city. The young Judi Dench, still in drama school, was cast as the Virgin Mary, and one of the plays was mounted authentically on a medieval-style pageant wagon.

VV: So it was real life rather than the world of scholarship that inspired you to focus on the religious dramas as theatrical events, as a particular kind of playing, rather than simply as texts?

Kolve: To a large extent, but I was also influenced by the great Dutch cultural historian Johann Huizinga who had written a very important and unclassifiable book called *Homo Ludens*. He argued for the central importance of play and game in human culture in a way that no other writer had done, and in doing so gave me authority and language for that emphasis in my approach to the plays.

VV: But your study of the drama cycles isn't concerned only with the question of the plays as games, or scenes in which people are clearly at play; it also stresses, among other things, the importance of the parts of the cycle which come from the Hebrew Bible, and probes why the authors of the Christian mystery plays chose those particular stories from their Old Testament.

Kolve: Another major influence on me at that time was an essay by the famous German scholar Eric Auer-

bach. It showed how the classical Latin term *figura* was adopted by early Christian Biblical exegetes to argue that the people and events in the Hebrew Bible were not only real in themselves, but prefigurations of the Christian story as well. Auerbach's study pointed me in the direction I needed to investigate how these kinds of relationships were established in the plays. But I tried never to forget I was dealing with works that were performed. I read more than a hundred volumes of vernacular devotional writing to see how they differed from the drama texts, which served medieval devotional and civic needs in different ways.

VV: Do you mean because, in contrast to the private reading of devotional texts, the experience of performing in and watching the plays was a communal one?

Kolve: For sure; but also because the drama provided a non-verbal language of spectacle and action—two further languages, if you like—working together with dialogue to provide a version of all human history from the moment of Creation to Doomsday. The great cycles could last twelve to fourteen hours, or even several days.

VV: Our readers should know that the book which came out of that dissertation is still in print after 36 years, which is certainly a testament to its soundness and importance.

Kolve: There's much in it that needs emending and revising; our understanding of medieval English drama has grown enormously in those same years. But it is still, I think, a useful introduction to some ways of thinking

about the genre. It pleases me that my department colleague Gordon Kipling, himself an authority on early drama and civic ritual, still assigns it to his classes on medieval theater.

VV: After your intense immersion in the world of medieval drama, what drew you to Chaucer?

Kolve: In my second year at Stanford, while teaching two other courses and working to finish *The Play Called Corpus Christi*, I was called on to teach a required Chaucer course for the first time. It involved lecturing to 130 students, graduate and undergraduate, four mornings a week at 8 AM! The experience was terrifying and exhilarating in equal measure. I felt as though I was reading Chaucer for the



The Cook, from the Ellesmere Chaucer, EL 26.C9., fol. 47r, by kind permission of the Huntington Library

first time, and since I had learned a fair amount about medieval visual art for my drama book, I was often struck with thematic and modal correspondences I wasn't finding in the published criticism. It suggested to me a new way of talking about his narrative poems.

VV: It is somewhat ironic that in your book on the plays, which, as you just said, are in part visual spectacle, you don't talk about imagery, either in the texts of the plays, or in the way they were presented, nearly as much as you do in your subsequent Chaucer studies.

Kolve: That isn't directly reflected in the *Corpus Christi* book, though I had been getting more and more interested in medieval visual representations of the Biblical stories staged by the plays. What really started me thinking about imagery was a series of unforgettable lectures by the art historian Edgar Wind, who visited Oxford from the Warburg Institute for just a few months during my student days. He was not a medievalist; his special interest was in Renaissance Platonism and the arts. But his lectures were the first to show me how paintings carried symbolic meaning, and to demonstrate that, if you knew how to read the code, it could open up the work and the culture in really exciting ways. Also, Wind was a fabulous presenter, and his style became a model for how I wanted to lecture.

VV: Well, since you are known for your teaching, as well as for your focus on images, Wind was evidently a very effective role inspiration in both arenas. But to return to the question of Chaucer and imagery, you propose at the beginning of *Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative* that, in order to understand Chaucer's visual imagination, the reader needs to take two steps. The first one is to become familiar with the material objects that Chaucer and his readers might have seen; obviously the way to do this is to study the images in manuscripts, and also the wooden carvings, stone sculptures, and stained glass windows that were part of the artistic program of medieval churches. But what are the limits on the allowable sources? In the absence of a plethora of later 14th-

century manuscripts, you defend the use of 15th-century manuscripts by explaining that the appearance of things wouldn't have changed much since Chaucer wrote. And many of these are French manuscripts. Do you think that they circulated in England?



Pagans and Christians point to their different temples, French ca. 1400, Philadelphia Museum of Art, MS. 45-65-1, fol. 64, by kind permission of the museum. This image is used by Professor Kolve, *Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative*, chapter III, *The Knight's Tale and its Settings*.

Kolve: There is a degree of slippage there, but one has to work with what survives. My interest is in broadly based iconographic traditions and their use, not in saying "this specific picture inspired this poem." As you know, medieval high culture was remarkably international, and England and France had been deeply involved in each other's politics and history since the Norman conquest. Indeed, French remained the dominant language in the English court until the last quarter of the fourteenth century; Chaucer's dream-vision poems, for instance, are mostly translations and adaptations from the French. Besides, the English nobility owned many manuscripts produced in France—illuminated Books of Hours

being especially favored—and prized them for the elegance of their pictures and decorated margins as well as for their literary or liturgical content. Through English ownership those books became part of English culture. And finally, there is good reason for the comparative paucity of English material from that period; the English Reformation dispersed monastic libraries, putting manuscripts at risk, while systematically destroying monasteries and their ecclesiastical art. The iconographic traditions I call on in the book were widely known in England, as I demonstrate from its early literature as well as the visual arts.

VV: Your second step sounds very challenging; you prescribe that someone wanting to understand Chaucer should learn the symbolic language current in both the visual arts and the literature of the author's time. This seems to entail a study of all of medieval high culture!

Kolve: Yes and no. As T.S. Eliot said, "For us there is only the trying." One can never know it all, nor perhaps ever even enough. But the shape of the whole, the essential traditions and the range of their variations, can be recovered. The texts themselves often fully explain their symbolism, since medieval iconography is almost always rooted in text, or they point the reader, by suggestive likeness, to those traditions that might be most appropriately remembered.

VV: Fortunately for students and scholars of Chaucer, you don't simply leave them on their own with this formidable task; the book is full of pictures, integrated with literary analysis.

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Besides, the first chapter of your book is a very helpful summary of medieval views of the psychology of image making.

Kolve: Medieval psychological theory believed that words and pictures alike create mental images—pictures in the mind—which then pass into the memory, available for later retrieval. Medieval devotional theory assumed that both sorts of images could be brought into a lively relation, fostering thought, deepening feeling, facilitating meditation. I argue that the more sophisticated sort of medieval poetry, secular as well as religious, worked in much the same way.

VV: Your application of this argument to the first five stories in the *Canterbury Tales* has led scholars to describe this book as the best single introduction to Chaucer for students, and the volume was appropriately awarded several prizes. But now it is time to ask why you think that Chaucer intended that the first five stories, along with their prologues, should form a distinct introductory group to the rest of the work. After all, the first story is a knightly romance that appears to valorize pre-Christian classical culture, and the next three tales gleefully dissect foibles and sins of Chaucer's contemporaries which their belief in Christianity has evidently not been able to root out. Only the sober narrative of the fifth story works against the others, but its pious and long-suffering protagonist is rather colorless in comparison to the ones in the previous four. Do you think of these five as a group because you believe the author is moving from unbelief through nominal belief to true belief?

Kolve: I would place less emphasis now on authorial intent, especially since the manuscript is full of breaks and incompleteness. But the person who assembled the Ellesmere manu-

script, our best for the Tales, almost certainly knew Chaucer the man, and he put this fifth story next, even though it is very different in tone. This order is still favored in all modern editions of the poems. I see the *Canterbury Tales* as a sequence of voiced narratives, presenting transgressive



material of many kinds, which the poet—through a pilgrim—from time to time calls back to order. In such a reading, the first five tales become a paradigm for the shape of the whole collection. By the way, I don't see the first story, the Knight's Tale, as one that valorizes pre-Christian culture in any simple way. I see it as deeply aware of the limitations of paganism, and especially of the limited capacity of human beings to create order in the face of human willfulness and death.

VV: Haven't you also interpreted *Troilus and Criseyde* in the same way?

Kolve: Yes, I think that, in both cases, Chaucer, with clear sight but also great sympathy, thought of the pre-Christian classical world as essentially tragic in kind.

VV: At least he shows sympathy for those non-Christians, whereas the depiction of the Jews in the Prioress's Tale is very hostile. Admittedly, the Prioress's story is not quite as polemical as the true blood libel stories, because it doesn't depict the murder of the boy as a part of Jewish religious ritual, but for our modern sensibilities it is nevertheless pretty dreadful.

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Since it's not one of the first five tales, you don't address it in the book on Chaucer and imagery, but you did put it in your Norton Critical edition of *Nine Canterbury Tales*. Why did you decide to include such an unpleasant side of Chaucer?

Kolve: There are many ways of learning from the past, and this one, with its murderous anti-Semitism voiced in the character of a courtly Prioress, gives us much to think about. It exposes the plight of the "other" in medieval culture, and does so in uncomfortable ways. I think most people teach it because it can raise consciousness, and can show how the beautiful—for the tale is beautifully, lyrically written—is not necessarily the same as the good, or even the truly Christian, which notably prizes a virtue called compassion. When I teach the tale, I very much put in the foreground the myth of Jewish ritual child murder, the general anti-Semitism of the period, and the fact that medieval Christianity in some truly terrible ways became a "persecuting society."

VV: Still, some would argue that a writer who had as much breadth of imagination as Chaucer should have been able to see further than those who were less subtle and sophisticated in their understanding of the human condition.

Kolve: I don't necessarily assume that Chaucer stood at a critical distance from the tale, however much I'd like to believe in his moral superiority on this issue. It was an anti-Semitic age, and few Christian voices were raised in defense of the Jews. But I also don't presume to know how he himself viewed the tale. He gives his pilgrim tellers personalities of their own, which their stories reveal, and through which their stories are filtered. In terms of the larger fiction, it isn't Chaucer who's telling the story, it's the Prioress, and she thinks she's telling a miraculous tale in honor of the Virgin and her infant son. Her performance brilliantly demonstrates how tender

sentimentality can co-exist with unexamined cruelty and violence within a human heart. The Prioress cannot bear to see a mouse caught in a trap, or a dog beaten, but, in her story, the Jews who have conspired to murder a Christian boy can be killed and drawn and quartered as though that posed no challenge to human feeling, as though Christian justice required no less. There are other reasons, too, to think Chaucer may stand at some remove from the Prioress as a teller, conscious of her spiritual contradictions, and critical of her excess. But the question will always remain uncomfortably open.

VV: This discussion of the Prioress's Tale and your earlier use of terms such as "transgressive" and a "persecuting society" prompt another question. Although you have continued to publish on Chaucer since the big book, you also started writing in the 90's on totally different kinds of topics: an article on the first consciously feminist author, Christine de Pizan, a long essay on a twelfth-century monastic play from France which portrays same-sex desire, and another study on the depiction of people who today might be called atheists, but who were categorized in psalter art as "God-denying Fools." Is this all part of some growing personal revulsion at the misogyny, homophobia, and religious intolerance of the Later Middle Ages?

Kolve: That's a very astute observation. The answer, I guess, must be yes. Some 30 years ago I started looking at illustrations to Psalm 52 (in the Vulgate numbering) "The fool hath said in his heart: There is no God"—a proposition official ecclesiastical culture preferred to think unthinkable. Those pictures interested me partly for scholarly reasons—their version of a god-denying fool is so odd and puzzling that one searches for an explanation. But they spoke to me personally as well, for they are very powerful in their disdain and I am not a believer. During this time, on and off, I've been working at a book on the subject, now

within a year of completion. The process has often been painful. In a sense, I am that "fool," if that is the right name for a non-believer, and the images medieval art invented to ward him off are so full of alienation and abjection, loss and suffering, that it was a constant struggle to resist their gloom. I found I could identify with the fool's abjection well enough—his seems to me an eerily modern condition, living in a world without God—but I had to struggle against the opprobrium attached to it there, even as I was explicating it with as much learning as I could muster. Writing from "within" the intention behind these images came more and more to seem an act of bad faith, of false consciousness, and caused what I recognize now to have been a fairly serious mid-life crisis. I wanted a more authentic relation to my work than the preaching, as it were, of sermons in a church that does not compel my belief. I finally broke through that barrier by discovering medieval as well as modern ways of showing compassion for the fool, though that's a long story, not to be attempted here. Let me just say that your question is right on the mark—and in another way as well, which we might talk about briefly.



The Miller, from the Ellesmere Chaucer, EL 26.C9., fol. 34v, by kind permission of the Huntington Library

VV: Please tell us about it.

Kolve: The Fathers of the Church preferred to believe *non est deus* was a thought no one of sound mind could think—it could only be the thought of a fool, of someone born idiot or someone gone mad. They allowed for irreligion, of course, for people behaving as though God were not there.

VV: Like Chaucer's willing sinners?

Kolve: Exactly. But *non est deus* makes a stronger denial than that. And so, to find a deeper meaning, more useful for their purposes, they reconstrued the Latin, taking it to mean "he is not God" rather than "there is no God." This exegetical swerve, at once anxious and vindictive, had appalling historical consequence. In this second interpretation, the fool who denies God's existence becomes someone more familiar, the Jew who would say of the incarnate Christ, "He is not God," and would conspire in his death. Biblical commentary declared that King David, presumed author of the psalms, knew in his prophetic soul that when God would walk the earth as a man, "a foolish people," the Jews, would deny his divinity. Though it has received no attention that I know of in the history of anti-Semitism, this interpretation of the psalm underwrote centuries of caricature and hatred of Jewish disbelief as "irrational" and "mad." If God has called his own chosen people "fools," then anything is allowed. That is the sad subject of the second half of my book, and bringing it to light is helping me balance another part of the personal cost of trying to understand medieval literature and art "from the inside."

VV: Although this is clearly a deeply felt moral enterprise on your part, this attention to the anti-Semitic aspect of the portrayal of the God-denying fool appears at first to be less "internal" than the issue of unbelief itself.

Kolve: That's true, of course, but it nevertheless affects me deeply. And as a gay man, I identify with that numerous category the Middle Ages called

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"other," and judged harshly. I've had to ask myself a similar question about medieval homophobia: What am I doing, spending my life seeking sympathetic insight into a medieval past that persecuted and killed people like

"My goal...has been to write authentically about the Middle Ages without suppressing my own selfhood in the process."

me? The larger answer, of course, is that the period is so rich, so interesting, so historically consequential, that one doesn't judge it on such terms alone. But I've looked for my predecessors there, and in a late 12th-century monastic play concerning a miracle of St. Nicholas, the *Filius Getronis*, found unusually interesting remains. If my reading of that play is correct, it testifies in a most unexpected and rather moving way to the power of same-sex love—its power to civilize, to pacify, to be transformable into something a medieval monastery could acknowledge as a source of communal strength.

VV: Speaking of same-sex communities, Christine de Pizan also imagined a very empowering one.

Kolve: Misogyny, as you well know, is likewise central to medieval culture. There too I refuse membership in the club. I began offering graduate seminars in "Medieval Women Writers" some dozen years ago, because I needed to know about them, and I knew my students needed to know about them. We read them in the context of the classical and Christian misogynist texts they defied. Those seminars became the seed bed of three doctoral dissertations devoted to aspects of medieval feminism, along with chapters in several others. But again, they freed me within my own calling, and led to an essay on Chris-

tine's self-authorization in *The Book of the City of Ladies*, exploring the way she stages the inspiration to write that book as a reenactment of the Annunciation to the Virgin Mary. It is a special pleasure to discover examples of resistance from within. Until you asked the general question, I had never thought of these scholarly initiatives together in quite this way. But they do relate. My goal, I guess, has been to write authentically about the Middle Ages without suppressing my own selfhood in the process.



VV: So far this discussion has barely touched on the other equally important and successful part of your professional life—your career and achievements as a teacher. You mentioned earlier that you were teaching at Stanford while you were finishing your first book, but didn't you go to the University of Virginia shortly after it was published?

Kolve: My first job after Oxford was at Stanford; the Department there was kind to me and promoted me to tenure in my fifth year, but, to my vast surprise, the next year I was offered a full Professorship in the University of Virginia. It was an offer too good to turn down, and I taught there for 17 very rewarding years, meeting Larry Luchtel, my life partner, four years after I arrived. It was his need for a larger city to grow properly in his career that first led us to think well of

an offer from UCLA. But we both rejoice in that decision. It has been a happy place for us, and we've not had a moment of regret. I retired last June, not from exhaustion in the classroom, but from the need to finish four books—all of them close to completion and in need of priority, at the risk of never being completed at all. I also wanted to discover, after forty-three years of university teaching, what "retirement" might mean. I make no promise I will be working every minute of the day.

VV: At last spring's conference in your honor, there were a great number of your former doctoral students from Stanford, the University of Virginia, and UCLA taking part—as well as medievalists who studied with you as undergraduates at the University of Oxford. They all give you a lot of credit for their success. What do you think is your secret?

Kolve: Their success remains their secret, not mine. It has far more to do with what they brought than with what I could give them. All I can say is I've tried not to stand in their way, as though my goal were to produce replicas of myself. I wouldn't want to, even if I knew how. My task has been to help them find their voices, help them become whoever they were meant to be. If I am sometimes overly generous and allowing in seminar discussion, as I suspect is the case, I am also, my students will tell you, ferocious in the demands I make on the cogency and clarity of their scholarly writing. But it is finally a mystery to me, though immensely gratifying, to contemplate how numerous, various, and gifted a group of medievalists they are. The *Festschrift* I was presented on my retirement, with its 26 essays and more than 700 pages, astonishes me. Without special merit on my part, I have led a very fortunate life. And I am very grateful.

Note: *Speaking Images: Essays in Honor of V.A. Kolve*, comprised of essays presented at a CMRS conference last spring, can be ordered from the Pegasus Press: <pegpress@mindspring.com>.