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Medieval Go-Betweens and Chaucer's Pandarus (review)

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shaped the image of Chaucer, an image that still finds resonances even for those of us who have since “corrected” the misattribution. The historical shifts in Chaucer’s reputation remains a fruitful site of study, and these essays contribute substantially toward refining our understanding of the reception of his works—and their (and his) characterization—in the centuries that intervene between his city of London and ours.

Reading all the essays in this collection produces the cumulative effect of at once defamiliarizing the London we know and familiarizing us with features of Chaucer’s city. They also substantially inform our appreciation of his poetry, especially the *Canterbury Tales* and *Troilus*. We may have much still to learn about the implications of Chaucer’s urban context for our fuller understanding of his poems, and of his audiences, medieval and modern. This book will remain a useful set of signposts for such journeys.

The book is well produced, with few noticeable errors in the text: aside from the Lefebvre/LeFebvre discrepancy mentioned above, I spotted “L’écriture” and “L’Écriture” on p. 8; “statue” for “statute” (p. 50); and an extra (?) “as” on p. 88.

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MEDIEVAL GO-BETWEENS AND CHAUCER’S PANDARUS. By Gretchen Mieszkowski. The New Middle Ages. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. Pp. xi + 218. \$69.95.

In the Fall 2007 issue of the *Medieval Academy News*, President Bernard McGinn reflected on how essential comparative inquiry is and will be to the future of Medieval Studies. Even though McGinn’s comments may be meant even more globally, I would argue that Gretchen Mieszkowski’s incisive book on Chaucer’s Pandarus and medieval go-between traditions proves that the future is already here, offering a rich and effective mix of source study, cultural context, and feminist as well as close readings. Her monograph focuses on “ethical issues raised by the actions of characters who bring people together for sex or love, as Chaucer’s Pandarus does” (p. 5). Drawing on three centuries of Latin comedies, fabliaux, romances, allegories, exempla, the *Roman de la rose*, *El Libro de buen amor*, and others, the work aims to “establish the ideas about go-betweens and their roles that Chaucer would have expected his audience to bring to *Troilus and Criseyde*, and the conceptions of going between within which Chaucer himself worked” without offering a “comprehensive reading” of the poem (pp. 5, 8). To that effect, the book is organized into an introduction and three parts: Part I, Choreographing Lust: Go-Betweens for Sexual Conquest; Part II, Choreographing Love: Idealized Go-Betweens; and Part III, Choreographing Lust and Love: Chaucer’s Pandarus, demonstrating that Pandarus is Chaucer’s unique amalgam of two distinct traditions.

In the section on choreographing lust, go-betweens “coax, inveigle, trick, or force” (p. 9) young women into having non-consensual sex. Gender concerns abound, as not only the victims but also the intermediaries are female: almost always predatory, old, poor, crone-like women—often peddlers or prostitutes—who feign piety while selling their insidious services to the highest bidder. The earliest medieval examples occur in five highly misogynistic eleventh- and twelfth-century Latin comedies—written in France like many of the other cases in the book—showing Ovidian influence and voyeristic tendencies. Since these works were often used in classroom settings, for their audience of young boys they reinforced and perpetuated both the ingrained medieval stereotype of women as insatiable be-

ings and violence against women. One of those, *Pamphilus*, was very widely read in the Middle Ages and influenced *Troilus and Criseyde* as well as the *Roman de la rose*. Mieszkowski suggests that this tale of "heiress rape" (p. 26) was so popular because of the reprehensible figure of the Old Woman, who provides a "socially acceptable target for misogyny" (p. 26); thus the anonymous author essentially absolves Pamphilus of guilt in the rape and solidifies the notion that these comedies were "important expressions of patriarchy's enjoyment of and anxiety concerning its power over women" (p. 38). In her book *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985), Eve Sedgwick maintains that certain acts, such as rapes, are homosocial, essentially between men, despite the woman being the victim. The case of Pamphilus above seems to illustrate the opposite, that go-between situations of lust and sexual conquest are painted as gynosomal, between women, with the male the incidental and blameless perpetrator of the sex act.

Mieszkowski highlights similar concerns in Old French and Middle English fabliaux, such as *Auberee* and *Dame Sirith*, where women are tricked into sex and gullible or jealous husbands cuckolded. In one fabliau, *Constant du Hamel*, the husband—with the help of his wife's servant as a witty and clever go-between who protects her mistress—gets revenge on the three men who try to trick his wife into sexual encounters by raping their wives, again a homosocial exchange: cold comfort to the wives who suffer for their philandering husbands, however. In the last fabliau example, *Le Prestre et Alison*, the go-between Hercelot breaks out of the pattern of sinister go-betweens, saves the virginal girl, and sets the amorous village priest up for his well-deserved fall. Another more unusual subset of go-between stories emanates from Arthurian literature where with the help of magic, deception, and both male and female go-betweens, Igraine, Bohort, and Lancelot are tricked into maternity and paternity to conceive the Arthurian heroes King Arthur, Helain le Blanc, and Galahad. I do question Mieszkowski's characterization of Merlin as a go-between in Arthur's conception; while it is true that he changes the appearance of Uther Pendragon so that Igraine thinks he is her husband Gorlois, Merlin never interacts with Igraine before the fateful night to cajole or convince her, which a go-between would have to in order to fulfill this role. The go-betweens deceiving Bohort and Lancelot do interact with them at least briefly. The chapter closes with four more go-between stories that have twists, the most important being *La Vieille* from the *Roman de la rose*, whose commodification of sex Mieszkowski interprets as a satiric take on the rising bourgeois merchant class. Furthermore, Mieszkowski rehabilitates Berthe, a figure in a story called *La Vieille*, from critical maligning, as the character actually refuses to go between but has been condemned as such by some modern critics.

In Part II, *Choreographing Love*, Mieszkowski examines fourteen mostly French courtly romances featuring go-betweens in the form of best friends, comrades-in-arms, ladies-in-waiting, nurses, governesses, tutors, and even a queen to bring about "mutually idealizing romantic love" (p. 79) that typically ends in the marriage of the noble lovers. None is coerced here. Conventional go-betweens include Queen Guinevere in *Cligés*, Alexandrine in *William of Palerne*, Galehot in *The Prose Lancelot*, and Blancheflor's governess in *Tristan*, among others. Normally, romance go-betweens perform their services due to loyalty or friendship, but Herland in the *Romance of Horn* has to be bribed. Five additional romances present go-betweens that significantly interfere in the couples' relationship; one of them, Protheseläus, serves only himself, which leads Mieszkowski to conclude that by 1185–90 the go-between tradition has been so conventionalized that it could now be parodied even in romances. In the last story, *Eracle*, the Old Woman figure facilitating sex

crosses into this romance, but not to trick a virginal woman, rather to help the lovers reach their desired union against hostile outside forces.

In the synthesizing Part III, Mieszkowski proposes that Chaucer created Pandarus by drawing on both these dichotomous go-between traditions, a hybrid construct that carries over into other cruxes of the poem, such as its genre. At first Pandarus appears as the loyal friend from courtly romances wishing to help out his comrade, but his presence and manipulation eventually overpower both lovers. Chaucer outfits Pandarus with “homoerotic, heterosexual, and incestuous” (p. 142) penchants, Mieszkowski asserts, in order to explore illicit love affairs. The Pandarus in *Troilus and Criseyde* is much more Chaucer’s creation than any other character; Chaucer expands his lines from almost 800 in Boccaccio’s *Il Filostrato* to over 1,800. Unlike in Boccaccio, Chaucer adds most of the questionable and sexually charged scenes involving Pandarus, to the effect that no other romance go-between is as emotionally involved with the couple and as intrusive into their privacy (even Boccaccio’s Pandare never hangs around the couple’s intimate encounters). The pervasive sexual banter dished out by Pandarus, especially toward Criseyde, puts him in the camp with go-betweens for lust and sexual conquest, as does his trafficking in women. Non-romance go-betweens work for men seeking to possess women, as does Pandarus for Troilus. And Troilus repays him in kind, by offering one of his sisters or his sister-in-law, Helen, in return. Mieszkowski’s re-examination of Pandarus vis-à-vis these go-between traditions takes issue with the broad brush strokes of previous critics, puts a finer point on the problem through comparative study, and thus sharpens the outline of Pandarus’s character. Mieszkowski assumes that Chaucer’s audience would associate the two go-between traditions with the heavy Pandarus scenes in Books II and III.

Mieszkowski convincingly teases out new and further contextualized meanings, but has to wade into some of the more contested critical waters of the poem, such as the issue of Troilus’s sexual prowess in the consummation scene, the fainting incident, and whether Pandarus had sex with Criseyde the morning after. This “double go-between tradition” pits Troilus and Criseyde’s rendezvous against “opposing conceptions of desire” (p. 162). Mieszkowski proposes that as a go-between for lust, Pandarus gets his reward—in this case satisfaction of homoerotic desire during the consummation scene and heterosexual desire the morning after with Criseyde—events unprecedented in idealized romances. Mieszkowski points out that in the two self-conscious scenes where going between is discussed, the activity is considered reprehensible. Pandarus shows his true colors again when, after Criseyde is traded to the Greeks, he immediately offers to procure another woman for Troilus. Finally, the author also ties the problematic question of *Troilus and Criseyde*’s protean genre to the Janus-faced go-between tradition. Chaucer builds a double point of view and his legendary ambiguity into most of the poem, and I cannot help but wonder whether this conflation was encouraged because he was also the master of English fabliaux. Pandarus is one of Chaucer’s more complex and vexing characters. Mieszkowski’s study, along with the chapters on *Troilus and Criseyde* in Richard Zeikowitz’s book on *Homoeroticism and Chivalry: Discourses of Male Same-Sex Desire in the Fourteenth Century* (2003), is the most cogent and impressive explanation of Pandarus of recent years. This highly readable book closes some critical gaps and is a welcome addition to both comparative literature studies and Chaucer criticism.

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