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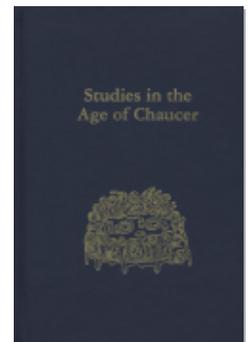
Ethics and Exemplary Narrative in Chaucer and Gower by J.
Allan Mitchell (review)

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which erotic tensions circulate so messily in most of these tales (save for her extensive analysis of *Troilus and Criseyde*). With so much desire slopping about in these triangulated affairs of man, woman, and pander, the analysis begs for a queer theoretical approach to map out the ways in which the heterosexual and the homosexual merge with the heterosocial and homosocial to the ultimate confusion of many gendered categories. Mieszkowski addresses these tensions in her analysis of Pandarus, but such an examination could be fruitfully expanded to virtually every other text addressed in *Medieval Go-Betweens and Chaucer's Pandarus*. Scholars interested in queer theory should mine through Mieszkowski's wonderful monograph; she has established a new territory of pandering scholarship that will benefit from additional investigations.

In sum, Mieszkowski has written a glorious book in *Medieval Go-Betweens and Chaucer's Pandarus*, one that illuminates a fascinating literary tradition and then shows its relevance to one of the masterworks of the English literary tradition. I am confident that her monograph will make a lasting contribution to medieval studies of gender, romance, and the messy cultural work of love.

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J. ALLAN MITCHELL. *Ethics and Exemplary Narrative in Chaucer and Gower*. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2004. Pp. viii, 157. \$75.00.

Scholars have long seen that the contingent voices of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* pose a sophisticated poetic challenge to readerly judgment, while Chaucer's moral tenor has often been taken as implicit rather than explicit. In Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, on the other hand, contingent morality has often been understood as a poetic liability. J. Allan Mitchell sets out to redress this imbalance by foregrounding the ways in which both poets reveal the circumstantial nature of ethical decision-making. By situating both poets in an ethical context that stretches from Aristotelian rhetoric to modern moral philosophy, Mitchell makes a learned and suggestive case for reading Gower and Chaucer as "exemplary genealogists of morals rather than just representative moralizers" (p. 7).

Chapter 1, "Reading for the Moral: Controversies and Trajectories,"

sets aside the awkward marriage between general and particular (moral and story) which commonly characterizes moral discourse, emphasizing instead the act of reception: drawing on exegetical terminology, Mitchell writes that readers reduce stories to individually applicable truths, engaging in “tropological” understanding of exemplary texts. He defends the value of reading for moral messages, insisting that in the Middle Ages, “reductive moralization represented an acceptable and in fact indispensable way of putting exemplary narrative to use” (p. 17). Narrative cases are essentially incomplete until applied in action: “Until it is realized in the conscience or conduct of a practitioner as a form of life, exemplary morality exists only *in potentia*” (p. 17). Chapter 2, “Rhetorical Reason: Cases, Conscience, and Circumstances,” charts the history of inductive judgment in moral casuistry, tracing connections from Aristotelian rhetoric to Cicero, through *ars predicandi* to Aquinas and Giles of Rome. This chapter foregrounds the way that exemplary rhetoric demands responsiveness to particular cases. The first two chapters, then, cogently set aside any notion of exemplary discourse as a stable code of sociopolitical norms. Mitchell’s emphasis on audience response is refreshing, less because he embraces the apparent naïveté of reading for moral nuggets (p. 142) than because his central argument raises important questions about the relation between narrative poems and lived lives.

In practice, Mitchell’s focus on reductiveness and pragmatic action provides grounds for celebrating the contradictions in Gower’s moral discourse. Chapters 3 and 4 focus on the *Confessio*, and chapters 5, 6, and 7 offer readings of the *Canterbury Tales*. The Gower chapters argue, first, that contradictory messages do not detract from moral clarity but prompt ethical decision-making; and, second, that Gower’s vocabulary of experiential proof provides a comprehensive, not coherent, array of instances to draw upon. The argument strongly resists any notion that readers simply accede to exemplary injunctions, asserting instead that Genius teaches contradictory lessons precisely because “life demands more than a system of neat and tidy normative distinctions” (p. 56). The survey of criticism in chapter 4, if belated, nevertheless effectively refutes recent accounts (by Copeland, Simpson, and Scanlon) that place insufficient value on the text’s incongruities. This chapter traces further the ways in which the reader’s activity consists of memorial reconstruction through awareness of “measure” in both perception and internal judgment (conscience).

Mitchell's contention that the real test of moral philosophy lies in the extratextual world of contingent action is irrefutable, and calls salutary attention to Gower's sense of urgency; yet his appeal to the extratextual begs the question of how we get from text to action, how the poem's narrative form shapes its audience's reflections—and how, therefore, reading itself might constitute a moral experience. For example, Mitchell cites the "Tale of Capaneus" as evidence of the vice of forgetfulness while the case of Nebuchadnezzar foregrounds forgetfulness as a step in the process of redemption (pp. 68–71). To what extent can we say that a narrative of change embraces the value of every step in the *process* of change? Isn't the figure of Nebuchadnezzar exemplary only when he becomes the humbled king? Moreover, isn't Nebuchadnezzar exceptional, precisely in his vaulting ambition, and inimitable, in his temporal dislocation from the present? Mitchell explicitly disavows an interest in viewing narrative as ideologically authoritative, but in practice, his readings could make more of the gap between narrative contingency and moral authority—a gap that leaves enormous space for reader response. Mitchell's reading of Nebuchadnezzar supports his general claim that "Gower is not always confident that good judgment will prevail" (p. 66) but could further specify the causes, or the plausible effects, of such authorial anxiety about his audience.

The chapters on Chaucer begin with a helpful if somewhat overdrawn insistence on the moral seriousness of Chaucer, for whom, according to Mitchell, overt failures of exemplary authority provoke reflection on exemplarity *per se*. Although Mitchell explicitly resists the usual hierarchy of value between the two poets, his argument in practice gives Chaucer more credit than Gower for meta-ethical reflection. Chapter 5 argues that the Wife of Bath demonstrates the adjustability of examples to various situations, and that her situation "literalizes" antifeminist exempla. Chapter 6 examines the "meta-homiletics" (p. 95) of the Friar, Summoner, and Pardoner, whose storytelling Chaucer uses to condemn the storytellers for treating exemplarity so cavalierly. By far the strongest analysis in the Chaucer section comes in the last chapter on the Clerk's Tale. Mitchell struggles with the "monstrosity" of Griselda's actions and argues, using Derrida and Levinas, not simply that she sacrifices motherly tenderness to a principle of obedience, but that *any* moral responsibility entails sacrifice because decision reduces the possibilities for action. Moreover, explanations are always insufficient to account for the resulting violence, calling attention to the gap between moral con-

templation and ethical action. Thus when readers are faced with the undecidability of the tale—marriage exemplum vs. spiritual exemplum—“no explanation is totally persuasive, no decision sufficiently justified, no response good enough . . . so that responsibility will have about it an air of irresponsibility” (p. 135). The problem Mitchell delineates in the Clerk’s Tale might productively be extended to the rest of the book, to enrich that difficult problem of how one gets from text to action. Perhaps Mitchell’s answer, like that of Gregory the Great in his homilies, is that examples work on the mysterious energy of inspiration—an answer that might lend strength and complexity to his argument about the circumstantial nature of exemplary discourse.

Gower is the governing presence in *Ethics and Exemplary Narrative*, even though Chaucer occupies more chapters. The book joins an ongoing critical exploration of contradiction in the *Confessio*: from systematic accounts in which particular tales resolve into moments of conversion (Olsson) or the conflict between reason and will brings about an integrated identity (Simpson), scholarship has moved toward an emphasis on Gower’s moral contingency (Bullón-Fernández, Watt, myself). Mitchell lays out a useful basis for this emphasis in philosophy and rhetoric, lends credibility to the medieval method of reducing stories to their moral nuggets, and makes a welcome contribution to the developing conversation about narrative and ethics in the Middle Ages.

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NIGEL MORTIMER. *John Lydgate’s “Fall of Princes”: Narrative Tragedy in Its Literary and Political Contexts*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. Pp. vx, 360. \$110.00.

A recent spate of critical productivity has placed Lydgate at the forefront of Middle English literary criticism and history, a position he has not occupied for almost six centuries, since his days as “Laureate Lydgate” (Derek Pearsall’s memorable label), when he wrote poetry for kings, princes, abbots, lords, and ladies. In part this flowering of interest reflects a recalibrated understanding of the relationship between medieval and Renaissance literary cultures, with Lydgate now recognized not