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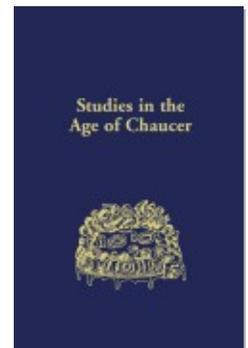
Chaucer and the Poets: An Essay on Troilus and Criseyde by
Winthrop Wetherbee (review)

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Winchester text must have appealed to people like Plouden because of its practical and logical structure, indicating which veins to open for what sorts of illnesses. Thus the shift from an Oxford or Cambridge to a London milieu is not as startling as might at first appear.

There are a few misprints, inaccuracies, and omissions in this monograph. For example, "1d" in n. 1 should read "id," "is is" in n. 62 should read "it is," and one wonders whether the Middle English word *scorte* on p. 15 should read *schorte*. One does not "ligature" a limb but rather ligates it. The Milan facsimile of John Ketham's *Fasciculus Medicinæ* was edited by Sudhoff and translated by Singer. M. R. James's edition of the York Austins' library catalogue occurs in a work called *Fasciculus . . . dicatus*, and is now being reedited by K. W. Humphreys. Volumes of the Early English Text Society would be easier to find if the letters indicating Extra or Ordinary Series were consistently added before the volume numbers, cf. nn. 54 and 95. It would be less confusing to indicate that Constantine Africanus translated Isaac Israeli or Judaeus, instead of separating "Constantine's *Pantechni*" in the paragraph on p. 24 from the "medical authorit[y]" Isaac Israeli. Moreover, though it does not contain material on blood letting, the edition of book 1 of the *Pantechni* by M. T. Malato and U. de Martini (1961) is the only modern one and should probably be cited. Also, Charles C. Clark, "The Zodiac Man in Medieval Medical Astrology" (Ph.D. diss., University of Colorado, 1979), makes a recent companion study to Harry Bober's work on these drawings. Aside from these minor points, Voigts and McVaugh have given us a valuable study of medieval phlebotomy and one which will be very useful to Chaucerians as well as to a variety of medievalists.

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WINTHROP WETHERBEE. *Chaucer and the Poets: An Essay on Troilus and Criseyde*. Ithaca, N.Y., and London: Cornell University Press, 1984. Pp. 249. \$22.50.

The modest subtitle to Wetherbee's new book masks its importance, its ambition, and its significant originality. We have here not a mere "essay"

but a learned, lucid, and entirely serious attempt to relocate the center of Chaucer's poetics. If readers can accept the author's first footnote "'Making' seems to have meant to Chaucer the production of literary work that meets the demand of one's own society to be edified, pleased, and refreshed . . . 'Poetry' meant the work of *poetae*, the classical poets and Dante," p. 18), they are likely to accept most of all of the book's elegant argument, which, in necessarily crude summary, is as follows.

Chaucer's narrator, a "courtly" maker, set off without realizing it to write a book for which the actual sources were not making but poetry. By the end of the third book his ambitions as a lovmaker are pretty well spent, and he is demoralized before the task of coping with Troilus's increasingly morose situation. Only at the very end does the work shift gears into the overdrive of poetry, so to speak, the status to which Chaucer aspires but of which his narrator is innocent. The catalytic agency is the *Commedia* of Dante, the powerful presence of which in the *Troilus* Wetherbee demonstrates with exhilarating authority. Furthermore, for Chaucer, Dante reaches back through history to claim Statius, rather as he had in the *Purgatorio*, so that the materials incorporated in the *Troilus* from the *Thebaid* likewise have a special "poetic" character. Virgil and Ovid, too—the first the inspirer of Statius and the guide of Dante, the latter the great anthologist of classical myth—claim their distinctive roles as "poets." Even this spare rehearsal of a few of Wetherbee's principal topics will suggest something of the wide-ranging ambition of his book, though it cannot suggest its graceful learning, its ingenuity of argument, or its detailed command of the texts central to its inquiry. Its pages on Virgil, Ovid, and Statius are clearly among the most informed studies yet published on "Chaucer and the classics," and its important chapter on the *Roman de la Rose* makes a significant advance in coming to terms with Chaucer's apprenticeship to a great poem that still must be regarded as largely misunderstood and neglected.

The achievements of the book are many, but its principal achievement is the powerful demonstration of Chaucer's close study of the *Commedia*. I have to add that Wetherbee's preoccupation with Dante carries its price: the systematic neglect of Boccaccio, whether as maker or as poet-aspirant. In common with many other critics, Wetherbee writes about the *Filostrato* as though it were not a poem but a junkyard where Chaucer occasionally picked up spare parts. I think he may lose sight of the fact that Boccaccio was one of the brightest readers of Dante who ever lived and that in the *Troilus* Chaucer is responding not merely to Dante but to Boccaccio's

Dante. It really is rather odd to write a chapter on “The Ending of the Troilus” without so much as mentioning the title of the *Teseida*.

Inevitably, of course, the question does arise whether or not the book’s critical argument, as opposed to the multiple discoveries which inform it, is actually convincing. In Chaucer’s broad bosom there is surely room for all, or nearly all, and readers of *Troilus* benignly disposed to its various “courtly” interpretations will find here a rich anthology of critical arguments, some old and some new, in favor of their position. Wetherbee is generally upbeat about the characters in the poem. Troilus consistently exhibits the innocence and virtues of “courtly” idealism; the narrator pursues his story with an “innocent idolatry”; and even Pandarus, in his penchant for fabricating fictions, recalls the operations of the divine artificer. Inevitably readers less concerned with saving the romantic appearances will be less convinced, and for all that I have learned from this learned book, I cannot say that I accept its critical argument, an argument which at times seems to me strangely orthogonal to the textual and intertextual relationships demonstrated by the author.

I suppose I was not born to believe that *Troilus and Criseyde* is a poem principally about poetry, and, indeed, my problems begin with the first footnote. Wetherbee simply fails to present the philological evidence necessary to prove his distinction between “making” and “poetry” — nor does either of the two splendidly suggestive essays he cites by way of amplification do his job for him. “Making,” a word of Germanic root, appropriately applies especially to vernacular composition, and “poetry,” a Latin Grecism, to classical; but both words mean the same thing, namely “creation” or “artistry.” In their solitary collocation in Chaucer, a passage crucial to Wetherbee’s argument (5.1789–90):

But litel bok, no makyng thow n’envye,
But subgit be to alle poesye

I find not dramatic distinction but synonymity. Dante uses the idea of “poetry” with minute precision, but I cannot see that Chaucer does. I further must agree with Howard and others who see in the odd phrase “make yn som comedye” in that same stanza a gesture toward a future project rather than an expressed wish to squeeze a little (more) Dante into the last two pages of the poem before the author (narrator?) dies.

In my view this excellent book is engaging less for its ingenious central theory than for its multiplicity of specific close readings that challenge old

ways of reading the poem and promise new possibilities. But the reader must be on guard against a certain amount of *douce parler* requiring close collation with the poem that it purports to represent. Wetherbee is a true believer in Troilus's innocence and virtue, and he vigorously shields the hero against the language, the tone, and the penumbral associations of the text. As a defense attorney his implicit strategy is the insanity plea—by which I mean that he presents us with a Troilus who evades moral culpability only at the expense of apparently terminal naïveté. For example, by early in the third book Troilus has a good deal to thank Pandarus for: he is doing a great job of pimping (3.253–54). Don't call it that, says Troilus. Procuring women for profit is pimping; procuring them for the sake of friendship is, er, "gentillesse" (3.402–408):

"And that thou knowe I thynke nat, ne wene,
That this servise a shame be or jape,
I have my faire suster, Polixene,
Cassandre, Eleyne, or any of the frape;
Be she nevere so faire or wel yshape,
Tel me which thou wilt of everychone,
To han for thyn, and lat me thanne allone."

Now all this might seem pretty incriminating to a morally conventional critic like Robertson, but Wetherbee pleads with the jury not to leap to conclusions. As far as Troilus is concerned, he says with a straight face, sex is not even in the ballpark. Troilus honestly thinks Pandarus is simply trying to introduce him to a soul mate with whom he can discuss common interests, such as stamp collecting. Naturally he reciprocates with an offer of the best-stacked broad in the palace—I think I honor the Chaucerian tone here—so that Pandarus too can enjoy some neo-platonic friendship. "It seems clear that he does not see even the married state of Helen as an obstacle to her entering into such an arrangement; hence he must see this arrangement in terms of a real 'love of frendes' of the sort that Pandarus himself describes as common in Troy (2.369–79) and that Helen appears to enjoy with his brother Deiphobus. All in all, the scene shows Troilus and Pandarus talking at cross purposes (pp. 72–73). Come to think of it, of course, Paris saw in Helen's married state no obstacle to his "arrangement," either. Perhaps the whole Trojan War is simply talking at cross purposes, but I must say I doubt it. If a thousand ships are no obstacle, what's a wedding ring? And Pandarus—no stamp collector, he—has already said

that it's OK with him if Troilus takes up with her himself (1.676–77). This “love of frendes” is a grand old Trojan institution, just like rape (4.533). Throughout the poem language and tone repeatedly betray hollow moral protestations.

Wetherbee's preconceptions about Troilus lead to some odd theoretical conclusions, such as that there is “a hierarchy of complexity among the Ovidian references of the three principals in the story”: Troilus sincerely believes the Ovidian myths; Pandarus alludes to them only as they enter the practical world; and Criseyde mentions them “mainly to affirm her good character and sincerity.” In partial demonstration of this theory Wetherbee mentions Pandarus's Ovidian sententiousness at 1.652–53. The reference to Niobe is “mere hyperbole.” “Classical allusion is real for Pandarus only as it enters the world of the here and now: you can visit and see for yourself the marble tears of Niobe, and the Ovidian letter written to Paris by the abandoned nymph Oenone has evidently been circulating lately among the Trojan nobility.” I do not understand what the sentence “Classical allusion is real. . .” can mean, but I fear that Wetherbee has forgotten that Troy *is* the world of the here and now. What is worse, he seems to have missed the point of one of Chaucer's more brilliant inventions. Pandarus's “version” of the fifth heroid is not innocent paraphrase but a cunning distortion made credible only by the fact that Troilus has not read the relevant primary text (1.657). Here Wetherbee cites Fyler but not Arn (*ChauR*, 15:1), who amends Fyler's misreading. Careful readers of Ovid will be aware that the crucial lines in Pandarus's “paraphrase” do not come from the *Heroides* at all but from the *Metamorphoses* (1.521–22) and that they relate not to Oenone but to Apollo, like Troilus a proud scorner of Cupid and therefore the appropriate target for his arrow. Niobe in turn is another proud victim of divine archery, a concept also present by contextual implication in the “Cantus Troili” (Cf. Petrarch *Canz.* 133.1 and *Thren.* 3.12), and thus a major recurrent theme of the first book. To be sure, Troilus doesn't “get” any of this either, not because he is “innocent,” however, but because he is aggressively ignorant (1.757–58) of the literary wisdom, whether Ovidian or biblical (1.694–95), that might address his moral situation. The criticisms of this paragraph may serve as well to suggest Wetherbee's still insufficient appreciation of the role of the *Roman de la Rose* in the *Troilus*, for Chaucer has modeled both these episodes after Jean de Meun, who created a lover devoted equally to lechery and sexual euphemism and equally arrogant in his contempt for the wisdom of Socrates and the metaphors of the poets alike.

Given the daunting scholia to the *Troilus*, it is not to be expected that Wetherbee will break new ground with every cut of his spade. Even so, the ratio of truly new ideas to elegant rehash is very high, especially when compared with some other recent studies of the poem. Still, one might wish that more of Wetherbee's opinions were true as well as tried. For instance, he tells us (in a footnote on p. 94) that "the most likely source" of Criseyde's odd allusion to the Elysian fields as the "feld of pite" is *Met.* 11.62. That is what Robinson repeated from Root, who probably repeated it from Kittredge, but the most likely source is actually the *Ovide moralisé* (Witlieb, *N&Q* 16.250), a text nowhere mentioned by Wetherbee despite its demonstrable presence in Chaucer and its prominent presence in Guillaume de Machaut. This minor point illustrates a more major reservation: it seems to me that Wetherbee systematically neglects a large body of pre-Chaucerian adaptations of Ovid and of Latin Ovidiana (especially the *Pamphilus*) that might lend a very different moral implication to the adjective "Ovidian" from the one that seems to be present in his analysis.

The author's attitude toward other scholars and critics is courteous, though he typically prefers benign neglect to any sort of intellectual engagement with other points of view, often giving the impression that if they exist, he knows little of them. Among the names missing from his index are Clogan, Comparetti, Fansler, Hanning, Hoffman, Hollander, Munari, Ruggiers, Shannon, Vance, Wenzel, Wilkinson, Wise, and Wood.

The richness of the book inevitably brings with it many opportunities to pick quarrels, but I could do so only at the expense of misrepresenting both the book and my own final attitude toward it, an attitude that must be one of respect and gratitude. Any student of Chaucer must applaud this strenuous effort by a distinguished medievalist to expand our awareness of the nature and implications of the poet's literary education and to deepen and inform our appreciation of his marvellous uses of the past.

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JAMES J. WILHELM and LAILA ZAMUELIS GROSS, eds. *The Romance of Arthur*. New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1984. Pp. vii, 314. \$19.95.

The field of Arthurian literature is well endowed with publications of primary sources — let alone secondary literature. And yet this anthology of