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Troilus and Criseyde

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Troilus and Criseyde, Chaucer's greatest single achievement, is one of the finest narrative poems in the English language. Set during the siege of Troy, it tells how Troilus, son of King Priam, falls in love for the first time with a beautiful widow, Criseyde. Assisted by her uncle, Pandarus, Troilus becomes Criseyde's lover but, after Criseyde is sent to the Greek camp as part of a prisoner exchange, she eventually accepts the advances of Diomedes, a Greek leader. Despairing, Troilus seeks death in battle and is slain by Achilles. After death, Troilus's spirit ascends from the earth, looking back on this world from the prospect of eternity.

For its first readers, *Troilus and Criseyde* was simultaneously old and new. The tale of Criseyde's infidelity was already well known in England from Benoît de Sainte-Maure's *Roman de Troie* (c.1155-60) and its Latin prose re-working as *Historia destructionis Troiae* (1287) by Guido de Columnis. But these sources lie behind only the last fifth of Chaucer's *Troilus*, in which the familiar story of the love-affair's end is prefaced with a longer account of how love began and came to fulfilment. Chaucer's insight into human character, his flair for dialogue and comedy, and his exploration of the philosophical and spiritual dimensions of his narrative, make his version profoundly original in both form and content. Formally perfect, the poem's 8,239 lines, versified in seven-line 'rhyme royal' stanzas – rhyming flawlessly ababbcc throughout – display a dazzling technical accomplishment unparalleled in English before Chaucer. *Troilus* stands unsurpassed in the middle years of Chaucer's poetic career, by far his longest completed single poem, achieving things he had not attempted before and would not feel driven to do again.

Troilus was probably composed during the early and mid-1380s and finished by early in 1387. Ralph Strode – the London lawyer to whom *Troilus* is co-dedicated, and submitted with a request for correction (5.1857) – died in 1387, while Thomas Usk, a minor civil servant executed for treason on 4 March 1388, already shows familiarity with *Troilus* in his prose *Testament of Love*. Here, the allegorical figure of Love refers to Chaucer as 'the noble philosophical poet in English,' because of the 'treatise that he made of my servant Troilus'. *Troilus* was evidently composed after Chaucer's translation into English prose of *De consolacione philosophiae* by the late Roman writer, Boethius, because Boethian ideas,

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images, and language suffuse the poem. Troilus is also the supreme expression of Chaucer's encounters in the 1370s with works by Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio. From them, Chaucer could derive an exalted sense of what it meant to be a poet, a confidence in writing in the vernacular, and a fascination with the pagan past of antiquity. When Chaucer bids Troilus follow and kiss the footsteps of Virgil, Ovid, Homer, Lucan, and Statius (5.1791-2), there is in that humility a proud claim that could be made for no contemporary English poem.

It demonstrates Chaucer's sense of innovation and experiment that in Troilus Chaucer is among the first to use the terms 'tragedy' and 'comedy' in English. Treatments of the Troilus story before Chaucer fall into particular generic categories – romance, history, epic – whereas Chaucer's poem achieves a distinctive conjoining of genres by drawing upon diverse sources. Energizing everything else is a comic sense, in what develops into a tragicomic variation on a romance theme. Troilus is often termed a 'romance' (although Chaucer never refers to it as such). There are no quests, magic, or enchantments, yet the all-possessing nature of Troilus's love makes that experience for him the inward equivalent of adventure, just as the new strangeness of love, and that force of idealization that Troilus brings to his experience, give it the momentum of a quest and the quality of a marvel. Troilus develops a kind of referential relation to romance, less through use of plot motifs than idiom, convention, and stylization of behaviour, as also through utilizing material from different phases in the development of romance. Its main narrative source in Boccaccio's early poem *Il Filostrato* ('The One Overwhelmed by Love'; c. 1335) is already a post-romance, with the single undigressive narrative of a novella. This is a tale of the sexually-experienced hero's affair with a not-unwilling widow, occurring within an urban, domestic setting, with no place for quests or marvels or idealization. Chaucer accepts Boccaccio's singularly co-ordinated structure but not its exclusions of romance subject and mood. Yet *Filostrato's* powerful drive away from romance still stirs beneath Troilus, which thus develops in an uneasy relation to traditional romance, not least by following the hero until and beyond death, and hence beyond the normal boundaries of romance. Troilus works through a process of disillusionment with the idealization of romance, although the disillusionment is dependent upon – and so in a sense lesser than – the idealization.

The unsustainable nature of the idealisation intrinsic to romance experience leads Chaucer's poem to end in an intensity of disappointment untypical of romance, and inviting comparisons with tragedy. Yet the characters of Troilus and Criseyde do not demonstrate Aristotle's tragic flaws, and the paradoxes and strains that prompt a sense of tragedy in

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Chaucer's poem lie more in the nature of earthly experience itself. The pathos of the poem's last two books embodies a Boethian understanding of tragedy as an art of complaint and lamentation. To show the spirit of the slain hero not only looking back on life from the other side of death, but contemning the world and even laughing at those he sees mourning his death, invokes tragedy only to redefine the concept by relating it to a perspective which is that of divine 'comedy', as Troilus's ascent succeeds and supplants tragedy in the hero's experience (and in the poet's, as he looks forward to following Troilus by writing 'some comedy', which will be *The Canterbury Tales*).

Nowhere else in his poems does Chaucer expose his reader so fully to the flow of his characters' speeches and thoughts, in a sustained exploration of private life and inward feeling that, in the sheer amplitude of Troilus, challenges comparisons with the novel. Framing and mediating this is Chaucer's development of a highly self-conscious narration that re-educates its readers' assumptions. Troilus refers to itself as both the written pages of a book, which the poet is still in the midst of composing at his desk (4.13-14, 5.270-3), and also as the script of a performance which is in the act of being presented to an audience (2.43-4, 3.498-9), in a distinctive stylization into permanent form of the ephemeral mobility of actual delivery. This double sense of the text as product of both a scholar and an entertainer lends the narrative its combination of pondered, bookish form with a conversational immediacy. In Troilus the customary authority of the author is abdicated – or a game is made of abdicating – so that the narrator presents himself as writing without any personal experience of his subject. Troilus repeatedly fictionalizes its dependence on a supposed source, so as to foreground the question of authority. It is an audience of lovers that the poem ostensibly addresses, as if those lovers are present in the same space where the poet is reciting. Their knowledgeable is flattered by a narrator who, professedly inexperienced in love himself, writes with fond partiality about his hero's first experience of love. This allows for much talking and thinking about how Troilus feels and how he is to act, and through this discursive dimension the poem becomes so much more of a consideration of love than simply the story of its hero and heroine. The very conventions by which love is idealized are used to question the love they express. The secret life of the lovers' affair is carried on through the medium of the traditional 'game of love', and while such language of humble service and quasi-religious devotion remains a fiction and play of the lovers' private life and imagination – Prince Troilus does not really relinquish his royal rank (1.432-4) – it can articulate the striving and commitment he pours into his emotional life. The age-old parallels between love and illness provide a potent metaphor for the suspense and disturbance of the lover's state, waiting to be

'cured'. The notion that Troilus might actually die for love is one means by which Pandarus puts pressure on Criseyde to make concessions, but what Troilus takes solemnly and literally can be for Pandarus a manner of speaking and a means to an end (although he too has his romantic side, his moments of faith). In this game of love Criseyde is a player responding to the gambits of others, not unversed herself in the rules and conventions, and it is these differences between the characters that fuel the poem's analysis of the ways that love is conceptualized and valued.

It is the 'double sorrow' of Troilus in love which the poem announces as its subject, and Troilus is the figure whose emotional life raises the poem's central questions. At the close of each of the poem's five books the focus settles squarely on him. His end is the end of the narrative, which ignores the subsequent lives of other characters, even Criseyde. Troilus is a hero by virtue of being in love. An ancient pagan of moral worth, although not wise in the ways of the world, Troilus sees his experience of love in metaphysical dimensions, while demonstrating an exceptional capacity to feel. He expresses himself characteristically in apostrophe, song, complaint or prayer. For Troilus, his adopted role as petitioner and supplicant in love lends ritual form to a naturally passive disposition, albeit taken to eccentric extremes, and this prepares for his role in the received story of the lovers' separation, where he does not intervene to prevent Criseyde's departure. In what seems a natural extension of his character all along, he submits to what he sees as the exchange's inevitability. Such behaviour – shunning conventionally masculine assertiveness – interrogates the values of sexual stereotypes. Troilus's public identity as a successful warrior is not in doubt, but this poem's focus on his private world shows Troilus acted upon by his feelings in ways that do not conform to conventional masculinity, as both Pandarus and Criseyde point out (3.1098, 1126). This poem's exceptional sympathy with Criseyde's identity as a woman is complemented by the way that her lover is understood to be a better man by being untypically sentient. Yet Troilus may still seem – by comparison with Criseyde or Pandarus – a relatively simple character, for there is little withheld or unknowable about him. Importantly, Troilus is very young, a teenager: in classical tradition, if Troilus had survived beyond twenty, Troy would not have fallen. Recurrently praised as second only to Hector (2.158, 740, 3.1775, 5.1804), such praise is inseparable from an implicit qualification. He is given the lyrical artistry to invest a value in human love which experience will test, and in this he may seem heroic or misguided, or both.

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What Chaucer entitles his 'Book of Troilus' (CT, X.1086) becomes the story of Criseyde as well, and the two stories modify each other. Boccaccio made her a young, childless widow, not the young girl of Benoit's *Roman*, with implications for her sexual experience. Pandarus and Criseyde both refer to her youth (1.982, 2.752), but the narrator denies knowing her age or whether she had children (1.132, 5.826). During most of Troilus Criseyde's historic infidelity is still to happen, but that unchangeable end to the traditional story poses questions about consistency of character. Was Criseyde's change of heart part of her character all along? Is this the narrative of a seduction or of a woman's pretence of being seduced? Is there innocence or calculation in Criseyde's character, or an ambiguous mixture of both? To pose alternatives about Criseyde is usually to see that the text allows no exclusive interpretation either way. A narrative, which at points takes us so close to Criseyde's consciousness, moves us outside her at critical moments. By leaving some mystery about what Criseyde knows, Chaucer preserves for her an autonomy, an independence both from other characters in the poem and the reader. She shows quick intelligence and shrewd prudence, yet self-possession coexists intriguingly with symptoms of a nature both easily frightened and easily soothed. Her outward appearance signals quintessentially female attributes, and this focus on womanly nature is thematically central, for just as Chaucer adds to his source almost all interrogation of masculinity, so too he adds most references to women's qualities and nature. Is fear the key to understanding Criseyde? She is frightened by her father's defection, Pandarus's threats and his news of an admirer, the dangerous predicament of Troy and her own isolation (played upon by Diomedes), because she is a woman without power in a world she cannot control and can only propitiate. As Criseyde remarks – reflecting medieval opinion – pagan religion was founded on fear (4.1408), yet she demonstrates scepticism and confidence. Her pivotal decision – her plan to comply with her exchange and then return (4.1275-1414) – stems from an unrealistic self-confidence in her power to deceive her soothsayer father. Chaucer inherited Criseyde's precarious position as the daughter of a traitor, but he gives her much higher social status than her prototypes. From this derives Criseyde's keen concern for society's opinion, for her honour and good name. Criseyde is a chameleon: her inner self is never independent of her environment, although, by trying to please everyone, she eventually loses everything. Narrating her infidelity, Chaucer gives Criseyde belated self-knowledge: she acknowledges her self-delusion in coming to the Greek camp, but the narrative fractures normal chronology as if in denial at Criseyde's betrayal, disparaging as hearsay her reported infidelity, which it then proceeds to report Criseyde regretting and lamenting, albeit at some unspecified future time (5.1050, 1069-71). This matchlessly beautiful and accomplished woman (1.101-5, 171-2; 4.866; 5.565-80), who

once seemed so near to us, slips ever further out of focus, known only through a disingenuous letter which we see Troilus reading but not Criseyde writing, and which in its empty flourishes, evasions, and insinuations of bad faith against Troilus painfully suggests a disintegrating personality (5.1590-1631). What has happened to Criseyde? The reader's baffled sense of losing touch with Criseyde in the narrative shares in the bafflement and pain of Troilus himself.

In his Pandarus Chaucer catches the essence of his nature as a friend: he is superb company, a man of inexhaustible wit and vivacity, the poem's most talkative character, affably ready to help and sympathize. Such is his exuberance that the whole pulse of action quickens whenever he makes his entrance. The intelligence of Pandarus is of a different order from that of the other characters. He is the essence of initiative and resourcefulness, with exceptional power to extemporize; he generates action and shapes it. His inventiveness in making things happen parallels (even rivals) the inventive power of the narrative that presents him. But what does he look like? The poem includes no description of his appearance, while providing pen-portraits of Troilus, Criseyde and Diomedes (5.799-840). He is Criseyde's uncle (rather than her cousin, as in *Filostrato*), possibly implying that he is in a different generation from Troilus, although without effect on his extraordinary vitality, or his own interest in love. Pandarus becomes stage-manager for others of a love-affair which, granted the personalities of both lovers, could not begin or proceed without him. His role requires him to be both a practical fixer and a theoretician about love – as about life in general – and his colloquial talk reflects his view that all human experience repeats itself and so confirms those formulaic patterns that his proverbs express. Not that Pandarus is predictable: his inventive speech always retains the potential to surprise. Yet while full of arguments for doing things, he is not shown in any kind of reflection; he has no lyrics, monologues, or introspective debates. An opportunist, he always tries to seize the time, and in seizing it he serves it too, but why he does this – beyond a ready sympathy for his friend – is never explained. If lifemanship is play and game, Pandarus's cunning moves keep him far ahead of others, and his own feelings and motives can barely be separated from his zest for the game. The unnecessary brinkmanship by which Pandarus brings the lovers together – first at the house of Deiphebus (2.1394ff.) and then at his own home (3.547ff.) – is a virtuoso performance in the art of manipulating appearances, and all to gain his niece as the sexual partner of his closest friend. Pandarus and Troilus often call each other 'brother', and inevitably modern anglophone criticism has queried Pandarus's sexuality. Is there something unsavoury, something suspect, in such manipulation of the intimate lives of others, however much it is necessitated by the

inexperience of Chaucer's lovers? Pandarus knows what he is doing could be called procuring (3.253-6, 395-406) and looks forward to three people rather than two being made happy by his activities (1.994). It is unclear whether he ever leaves the lovers' bedroom on their first night together, and his visit to his niece next morning is full of innuendo (3.1555-82). Yet Chaucer's narrative leaves it to the reader to identify an ulterior motive for Pandarus, just as it leaves us to decide why, if Pandarus is a voyeur, we are not equally so ourselves. Once Fortune's wheel turns, Pandarus's characterizing speech and bustle lose their relevance, no longer initiating and shaping actions but responding to events. It is the aptest end to his role as talker and fixer that Pandarus's last words in the poem are an admission of speechlessness (5.1743).

So much talking and thinking is included on the nature and value of loving that Troilus constitutes a debate about love. The delegation of all arrangements to Pandarus means that Troilus and Criseyde reach the verge of physical union, having made no direct sexual initiative to each other. The outcome of this separation of means from ends is that, when sexual fulfilment arrives, it is a physical experience that seems miraculous and transcendent. Love unfolds as a discovery for the lovers, and as an exploration for the reader of the questions posed by their experience of love. Chaucer's characters have the fatalistic beliefs that (in medieval understanding) were typical of pagans. These differed from the Christian orthodoxy that the agency of fortune functioned within the larger frame of providence, where God's omniscience – divinely unconstrained by our humanly linear conception of time – did not predetermine our free actions. That Troilus considers whatever happens to him as predestined, and makes fatalistic speeches, does not mean that the poem itself offers a predestinarian reading of its story. It is Troilus's dilemma over whether to intervene to prevent Criseyde's departure which proves the moral pivot of the poem in its exploration of the lovers' freedom. Chaucer shows Troilus declining to exercise choices available to him, declining to veto Criseyde's exchange, respecting a parliamentary vote, and submitting to his lady a decision on whether to abduct her. The courtly 'observance' of this is stressed, so that a chosen inaction becomes the expression of the hero's devotion to the ideal of service in love, but Chaucer nevertheless shows Troilus giving up choice and freedom (rather than never possessing it). The characters' tendency to imagine themselves acted upon by Fortune is framed by the way in which the narrative exemplifies the question of freedom and predestination. The narrator claims to be subject to his sources, and his narrative dramatizes the debate in Troilus's soliloquy as to whether knowing a thing to be true necessitates its happening. The lovers' future in the end of the old story is foreknown and, as it were,

predestined. That the reader knows (as past) what to the characters is future (and therefore unknown) effectively allows the reader God's perspective.

If 'th'ende is every tales strengthe' (2.260), the strength of the ending of *Troilus* lies in its continuing capacity to prompt questions. Although much foreshadowed, when this ending arrives it retains a power to surprise. However conventional its materials and sentiments, it makes, in context, no conventional effect. Chaucer's problem was to furnish a conclusion not only to a story that fades out into anticlimax, but also to all that abundance of implication with which Chaucer invests his narrative. If the story had no climax, could there be a climax to the poem, a climax of interpretation? Through the performative quality of his conclusion, Chaucer dramatizes the problematic artificiality of making an ending. It becomes a series of closures, both an attempt at comprehensiveness and an accumulation of alternatives, addressed to various audiences. Here ends the *Book of Criseyde*, with apologies to women, but warning them too against men's betrayal. Here ends the *Book of Troilus*, with its hero in the heavens, and all he loved in ruins. A promise of lasting happiness in human life and love was never part of the old tale of *Troilus and Criseyde*, and the wisdom of Chaucer's vision of their story lies in realizing both its climax and the ensuing anticlimax with such intensity of joy and pain that any reader still feels challenged to make sense of relating them.

FURTHER READING

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