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978-0-521-19144-9 - *Troilus and Criseyde*: A Reader's Guide

Jenni Nuttal

Excerpt

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## *Introduction*

Geoffrey Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* tells the story of the twin sorrows of Troilus, son of King Priam of Troy. First we are told of the lovesickness (and also great joy) he experienced after falling in love with Criseyde, a Trojan noblewoman, and later we see his despair following her forced departure from Troy and subsequent betrayal of him. Chaucer completed the poem in the early to middle part of the 1380s, when he was about forty years old. By this point in his literary career, he had composed three works in the dream-vision genre, namely the *Book of the Duchess*, the *House of Fame* and the *Parliament of Fowls*. He had also written several of the narratives which he would later incorporate into the *Canterbury Tales* framework. In the early part of the decade, Chaucer translated Boethius's *De consolacione philosophiae* ('the consolation of philosophy') into English prose (for the influence of Boethius's work on *Troilus and Criseyde*, see the textboxes at pp. 87, 98, 112 and 133 below). During this period, he was also experimenting with verse which drew on, translated and adapted works of the Italian scholar and poet Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–75). Whilst *Anelida and Arcite* and the story of Palamon and Arcite (which would later become the *Knight's Tale*) are indebted to Boccaccio's *Teseida* (see textbox at p. 193 below), *Troilus and Criseyde* is an adaptation of his *Il filostrato* ('the one prostrated by love').

### SOURCES AND BACKGROUND

The events narrated in *Troilus and Criseyde* are set against the backdrop of the Trojan War. A Greek army besieged the city of Troy for ten years after the abduction of Helen, wife of King Menelaus of Sparta (one of the Greek city-states), by Paris, another of Priam's sons. Following many battles and the deaths of many famous warriors, the city of Troy was destroyed, its citizens killed and its temples desecrated by the avenging Greek army. Whilst Chaucer did not have direct access to the ultimate

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source for these mythological events of prehistory, Homer's Greek epic, the *Iliad*, he knew the story (and assumed his readers did too) from other subsequent versions of the story of Troy written in Latin and French. Alongside Homer, Chaucer names two other writers as authorities for the story of Troy's fall, Dares the Phrygian and Dictys of Crete, both supposed eyewitnesses of the events of the war (see *TC* 1.146). The texts attributed to these authors in the Middle Ages were Latin translations and adaptations of by then lost Greek originals. The *De excidio Troiae historia* ('a history of the fall of Troy'), purportedly a translation of the account of Dares the Phrygian, dates to the sixth century, whilst the *Ephemeris Belli Troiani* ('a journal of the Trojan War'), supposedly a translation of the account of Dictys of Crete, dates to the fourth century.<sup>1</sup> Chaucer had probably read neither work, but he did consult the *Daretis Phrygii Ilias* ('the *Iliad* of Dares the Phrygian'), a Latin epic poem in six books by the English poet and scholar Joseph of Exeter, completed in the middle of the 1180s.<sup>2</sup> It is based in large part on *De excidio Troiae historia*, though it also draws on the *Ephemeris Belli Troiani*.

These versions of the fall of Troy name most of the characters of Chaucer's poem and give details of their part in the events of the war between the Greeks and Trojans, but they do not narrate Troilus's love affair. The first account of Troilus's love for the daughter of Calchas (here called Briseida), and the subsequent transfer of her affections from Troilus to the Greek Diomedes, appears in *Le Roman de Troie* ('the tale of Troy'), a French verse romance written in the late 1150s by the French poet Benoît of Sainte-Maure.<sup>3</sup> Benoît's poem was translated and adapted by Guido of Colonna, an Italian judge and author, into a Latin prose work, the *Historia destructionis Troiae* ('the history of the destruction of Troy'), completed by November 1287.<sup>4</sup> Both works narrate the history of the siege and fall

<sup>1</sup> For translations of the *De excidio Troiae historia* and the *Ephemeris Belli Troiani*, see *The Trojan War: The Chronicles of Dictys of Crete and Dares the Phrygian*, trans. R. M. Frazer (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966).

<sup>2</sup> For a translation, see Joseph of Exeter, *The Iliad of Dares Phrygius*, trans. G. Roberts (Cape Town: Balkema, 1970).

<sup>3</sup> Appendix B of *Chaucer's Boccaccio: Sources for 'Troilus' and the 'Knight's' and 'Franklin's Tales'*, ed. and trans. N. R. Havelly, *Chaucer Studies* 3 (Cambridge: Brewer, 1980), pp. 167–83, offers a translation of most of the relevant excerpts from the *Roman de Troie*. Extracts are also translated in *The Story of Troilus: As Told by Benoît de Sainte-Maure, Giovanni Boccaccio, Geoffrey Chaucer, Robert Henryson*, trans. R. K. Gordon, paperback edn (New York: Dutton, 1964) but several relevant passages are omitted. For the text of Gordon's omissions, see G. Mieszkowski, 'R. K. Gordon and the *Troilus and Criseyde* Story', *Chaucer Review*, 15 (1980), 127–37.

<sup>4</sup> For a translation, see Guido of Colonna, *Historia destructionis Troiae: Guido delle Colonne*, trans. M. E. Meek (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1974).

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of Troy, with the story of Troilus, Briseida and Diomedes appearing as interwoven episodes within the larger narrative. Chaucer had read both of these works and uses some details from each of these sources. Yet the main (though unacknowledged) source for *Troilus and Criseyde* is Boccaccio's *Il filostrato*, an Italian poem written around 1335. Boccaccio based his version of the story of Troilus's love and loss on Benoît's *Roman de Troie*, supplementing his reading with a prose redaction of the *Roman de Troie* and other earlier Italian accounts of the history of Troy. He made the love affair between Troilo and Criseida (as these characters are known in the Italian) the focus of his poem, transforming Benoît's interwoven episodes into a unified narrative. While Benoît and Guido concentrated on details of Briseida's betrayal of Troilus after her departure from Troy, Boccaccio added to these earlier versions the details of Troilo's courtship of Criseida and the consummation of their love affair, introducing the character of Pandaro (the equivalent of Chaucer's Pandarus) as a go-between. Chaucer (possibly with the help of a French translation of Boccaccio's poem) freely adapted and altered his Italian source, at times translating closely yet at other times transforming the story radically as the nine books of the *Filostrato* became the five books of his *Troilus*. More than half of the lines of *Troilus and Criseyde* are independent of Boccaccio's work.

## HOW TO USE THIS READER'S GUIDE

This reader's guide divides up each book of Chaucer's poem into many shorter sections, providing paraphrase, explanation and commentary on each section in turn. Some of these subdivisions correspond to divisions in the manuscripts, in which for discrete sections of the poem scribes provide the labels *canticus Troili* ('Troilus's song') in Books I, III and V, *proem* or *prohemium* (indicating a separate introductory preface) at the beginning of Books II, III and IV, and *litera Troili* ('Troilus's letter') and *litera Criseydis* ('Criseyde's letter') in Book V. The majority of the subdivisions, however, are my own fragmentation of Chaucer's continuous narrative within each book. Such short sections are intended to allow students and beginning readers of the poem to work through the text in sequence. In order to prevent unnecessary duplication, more general topics which might be touched upon at many different points in the commentary are briefly introduced and discussed separately from the main text in the form of independent textboxes. Two textboxes provide the text in translation of the sources of two of Chaucer's minor borrowings from works other than those dealing with elements of the narrative of Troy's fall. Topics which

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are discussed in the various textboxes are printed in bold in the main text of the reader's guide.

This reader's guide signals the major changes which Chaucer makes as he translates his main source, *Il filostrato*, and indicates some of the points at which he supplements this source with information from other versions of the story at his disposal. However, a guide of this length cannot fully discuss the similarities and differences which are revealed when *Troilus and Criseyde* is compared to *Il filostrato*. The Norton Critical Edition of *Troilus and Criseyde* edited by Professor Stephen A. Barney provides a translation of Boccaccio's *Filostrato* on facing pages, by means of which student readers can compare Chaucer's poem with its major source in every detail. All quotations from both *Troilus and Criseyde* and the *Filostrato* in this reader's guide are taken from Barney's edition, referenced by book and line number in the case of *Troilus* and book and stanza number in the case of the *Filostrato*. The extensive editorial apparatus of B. A. Windeatt's 1984 edition of *Troilus and Criseyde* (with a facing-page text of Boccaccio's poem in its original Italian) offers a wealth of detailed commentary on the relationship between *Troilus* and the *Filostrato*, as well as evidence of the variant readings of the surviving manuscripts of Chaucer's poem. Windeatt's edition also annotates and comments upon the multitude of direct and indirect borrowings and allusions to other writings which Chaucer adds to his translation of the *Filostrato*, many of which, for reasons of brevity, this reader's guide does not record or comment upon.

As befits its ambition, complexity and sophistication, Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* has been the subject of considerable scholarship and criticism. Each generation of scholars has brought to bear different contexts, approaches and critical theories upon their readings and interpretations of the poem. Chaucer's text itself seems designed to provoke debate, disagreement and questioning. It prompts its readers to examine and re-examine, amongst many other things, received notions of literary authority, the conventions of the art of love and of writings about love, gender identities, roles and relationships, the nature of happiness and virtue, matters of philosophy (especially those of causality, our understanding of the interactions of individual choice, fate, Fortune and chance) and even patterns and processes of human history itself. Student readers of the poem are, in my experience, only too well aware of the importance of such themes. Yet under the weight and pressure of thematic interpretation, the text itself, its literal meanings, local details, likely inferences and implications, its interior logic and particularity, can often get left behind, passed over, trivialized or ignored. The commentary offered here

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is thus largely self-contained, intended to return students' attention to the first principles of what is thought, said, meant and done in the poem, and the motivations, constraints and circumstances which might plausibly explain those things. By seeing what can be explicated, I hope that student readers will be able to recognize what is genuinely opaque, puzzling, peculiar and paradoxical. In doing so, I am conscious that this is a predominantly literal *explication de texte*, not indicating the full extent of Chaucer's punning, his ambiguities and equivocations of meaning, syntax and tone. Moreover, this reader's guide does not seek to show how the poem might be interpreted as a product of its particular historical moment of composition. It likewise does not attempt to catalogue and reference the extensive history of critical interpretation of this work. The select student bibliography at the end of this volume offers starting points for further such reading. Nevertheless, I have endeavoured throughout to indicate the key points in the narrative at which interpretive choices might be made and where wider thematic or self-reflexive questions are raised. Often such indications take the form of speculations rather than answers, alternatives rather than decisions, paradoxical extremes rather than resolved solutions. By such equivocation, I hope that student readers will be prompted to make their own decisions and construct their own interpretations of this poem.

Student readers of *Troilus and Criseyde* are already well served by Professor Barry Windeatt's magisterial guide to the poem in the Oxford Guides to Chaucer series. It is an unparalleled reference manual, providing students with concise yet detailed introductions to the poem's date, textual tradition, sources, genre affiliations, structure, themes and style. I must here acknowledge my deep indebtedness to Professor Windeatt's scholarship, not only in his guide to *Troilus* and his edition of the poem, but also in his translation of *Troilus and Criseyde* in the Oxford World's Classics series. I have also benefited greatly from the detailed scrutiny of the poem's lexis and intertextual allusion presented in Gerald Morgan's two-volume study, *The Tragic Argument of 'Troilus and Criseyde'*. However, by dint of its very structure and purpose, Windeatt's guide does not navigate the poem in sequence but rather divides up its wealth of relevant information into the categories listed above. This volume, in contrast with Windeatt's guide, is intended primarily to help readers clarify *in situ* matters of meaning and inference, plot development and structure, the purpose and implication of each speech and dialogue, and the role of first-person narratorial interventions in influencing how each episode is interpreted, amongst many other challenges.

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Users of this reader's guide should be aware of several important caveats. This commentary subscribes to A. C. Spearing's argument that the narrating 'I' in *Troilus* should not be thought of as a unified, coherent and fully characterized narrator (one who is often described as fallible, biased or only partially competent), a puppet mouthpiece controlled by a more sophisticated poet. Rather what is encoded by Chaucer in the narrative is a 'sequence of narratorial first-persons', at times a self-consciously poetical voice, at times a compiler, translator and organizer of historical and literary sources, at times a commenter on and respondent to his own narrative, at times a voice which addresses an audience or reader in order to engage (and perhaps direct) their attention and reactions – a variety of effects which personalize and subjectivize the narrative in different ways.<sup>5</sup> Hence this commentary refers to a narrating first-person or narrating voice rather than to a Narrator – circumlocutions, however inefficient, which are intended to resist any tendency to synthesize all of these first-person interventions into the putative personality and psyche of a fictionalized individual.

Users of this reader's guide should also be aware that, for reasons of space, it cannot paraphrase and comment upon every line of Chaucer's poem, and hence my commentary on the poem is itself a form of abridgement. Whilst the narrating first-person recounts the events of this story almost entirely in the past tense (though many of his interjections and observations are in the present tense), I here paraphrase the action in the present tense, just as students and tutors alike tend to do when discussing literary texts. The bibliographical policy of this reader's guide has been dictated by a desire to demystify and render accessible the process of learning about the poem. Quotations from and references to Chaucer's borrowings are thus provided *in situ* using, where possible, widely accessible translations. The titles of potentially unfamiliar works in other languages have been translated in parentheses when they are first mentioned in the text (such first mentions can be located via the index). Relevant literary terminology and elements of classical mythology which might not be known to all are explained in brief at the first instance of their use. The names of the main characters in Chaucer's version (Troilus, Criseyde, Pandarus and Diomedes) are given as per the main form in which they appear in *Troilus and Criseyde*. Similarly, the names of their equivalent characters (and that of Deiphobus, Troilus's brother) in the earlier versions

<sup>5</sup> A. C. Spearing, *Textual Subjectivity: The Encoding of Subjectivity in Medieval Narratives and Lyrics* (Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 76.

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by Benoît of Sainte-Maure, Guido of Colonna and Giovanni Boccaccio are given according to the main forms of their respective texts. The names of other Trojan and Greek figures and the names of figures and places of classical mythology are given in their usual modern spellings. Where the Middle English spelling of such a name is potentially unfamiliar enough to cause confusion, I have indicated the Middle English version of the name in parentheses at the first mention.

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[More information](#)*Book I*LINES 1 TO 56: THE POEM'S SUBJECT  
AND PURPOSE, AND PRAYERS

Though they are not formally labelled as a proem (a separate introductory preface), the poem's opening lines establish its subject, purpose and implied audience before the narrating first-person turns to the initial events of the story. He addresses his audience in the second-person plural, ostensibly speaking to a group of lovers who are listening to him recite his poem (5, 30 and 54). He tells them that he will recount the twin sorrows suffered by Troilus, son of King Priam (these being the sorrow experienced after falling in love with Criseyde and the sorrow of being first separated from and then betrayed by her). This will be the story of how Troilus's fortunes changed from sorrow to happiness, before returning once again to sorrow. The narrating voice, who weeps as he composes these lines, prays for help in composing such sorrowful poetry not from a Muse but rather from Tisiphone, one of the Furies, both tormentor and herself tormented. In classical mythology, the three Furies were predominantly agents of vengeance, sent from the underworld to punish wrongdoers, but in some depictions they themselves were also endlessly suffering. Protagonist, narrating voice and presiding deity are united by their shared sorrow.

The narrating first-person prays to Tisiphone because he does not dare appeal directly to **the God of Love** (who might more obviously aid the writing of a love story, though perhaps not one which ends in sorrow) for success in his literary venture. This is because of his own 'unlikynesse' (16), his unworthiness or unsuitability to be either a lover himself or even a writer about love. He identifies himself humbly as someone whose role is secondary and inferior, serving those who themselves serve **the God of Love**. The narrator of Boccaccio's *Il filostrato*, by contrast, begins his story by praying to his own lady, who has become a kind of muse and



deity to him. The narrator and his lady are apart and it is the sorrow caused by her absence which provokes Boccaccio's narrator to retell the story of Troilus's sorrows. Whereas Boccaccio's narrator uses the story to give expression to his own troubles, Chaucer's narrating first-person sees himself as the means by which other lovers can lament their own unhappinesses through hearing about Troilus's double sorrows.

Because he dare not address **the God of Love** directly, he now asks those lovers who currently bask in happiness (and are hence in Love's favour) to make various prayers on his behalf. He first evokes their compassion by instructing them to remember their own sorrows and setbacks in love as well as the misfortunes of others. His sequence of imperatives (29, 32, 36, 40, 43) imitates the form of bidding or intercessory prayers in which a priest tells his congregation for whom or what to pray. Just as he has asked lovers to be charitable, so the narrating first-person says that he hopes to best improve the state of his own soul by acting charitably towards lovers. He sees his literary endeavour as something akin to one of the spiritual works of mercy which medieval Christians were expected to perform in their daily lives. Comforting the sorrowful and praying for the living and the dead were two such works.

The final line of this section baldly acknowledges the fact of Criseyde's betrayal of Troilus, reminding readers that this is a story whose conclusion is known in advance. There can be no other outcome, though we may at times forget the inevitability of this ending as we read on.

### The God of Love

The God of Love has a number of related identities in *Troilus and Criseyde*. He appears equipped with the arrows which he fires at those he wishes to make fall in love (I.206–10) and is named by Troilus as 'blisful lord Cupide' (v.582). Yet he is more than Venus's 'blynde and wynged sone' (as he is called at III.1808). The God of Love is also a powerful enslaver, taking his revenge on those who mock love by making them lovers in turn. He embodies the natural law of sexual attraction which cannot be easily resisted. Those who fall in love become bound to him, pledged to serve him as serfs do their feudal lord. They become his followers, his subjects and servants. He is also the divinity of **the religion of love**, intervening in human affairs with grace and mercy, converting former sceptics to his faith and granting lovers success or misfortune as he chooses. When the

God of Love is invoked both by the narrating first-person and by individual characters within the narrative, the terms of address used are often applicable both to Cupid (the classical god of love) and to the Christian deity. In his omnipotence, omniscience and providential overview, the God of Love in *Troilus* resembles and perhaps invites association with the Christian deity. Moreover, the God of Love is equated by Troilus with a version of divine love itself. In his praise of love in the consummation scene in Book III, Troilus's address first to 'Love' and 'Charite' (III.1254) who is the son of Venus, and then to 'Benigne Love' (III.1261) associates Cupid, god of love, both with **the holy bond of things** which orders and unites the universe and with the virtue of charity, whether we take that to mean simply reciprocated human affection or a pagan equivalent of the Christian virtue of charity, the love, mercy and benevolence shown by God to mankind and by one Christian to another. Similarly, whilst Troilus's song at the end of Book III is largely a translation of one of the verse sections of **Boethius's *De consolazione philosophiae*** celebrating love abstractly as **the holy bond of things**, Chaucer nevertheless personifies this more abstract love as a masculine figure through the third-person pronouns *he*, *his* and *him*, identifying such sacred love with the God of Love referred to elsewhere in the narrative.

LINES 57 TO 154: CALCHAS, CRISEYDE  
AND THE FATE OF TROY

The narrating first-person now provides a summary of the historical frame which surrounds his chosen subject. In order to avenge the abduction of Helen (here *Eleyne*), wife of King Menelaus of Sparta, by Paris, Troilus's brother, a Greek army has laid siege to the city of Troy for nearly ten years. Calchas, a famous Trojan prophet, correctly foretells that the Greek siege will succeed and that Troy will fall. The inevitability of this future destruction seems guaranteed by an ominous echo ('Troie sholde destroyed be', 68, repeated in lines 76–7). Calchas secretly defects to the Greek army and is therefore condemned as a traitor by the citizens of Troy, who desire vengeance on him and his family.

We are told about Calchas's defection to the Greek camp in order to establish the consequences for his daughter Criseyde. She is introduced as vulnerable and fearful, a widow who does not have any confidant.