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DECONSTRUCTING CHAUCER'S IRONY: COURTLY LOVE IN *TROILUS AND CRISEYDE*

It is widely accepted that *Troilus and Criseyde* is Chaucer's great poem of courtly love. Descending directly from the conception of love expressed in *The Romance of the Rose*, it is «the consummation, not the abandonment, of his labor as a poet of courtly love», as C. S. Lewis has argued¹. This view has proven influential for the notion that in *Troilus and Criseyde* Chaucer has treated courtly love with «profound seriousness» continues to shape the thought of more recent criticism: «But what Chaucer honors in *Troilus and Criseyde* he does not necessarily honor in the *Canterbury Tales*»².

I believe that such a perception has functioned negatively in the well known critical controversy about the poem's «problematic» ending, leading to a serious questioning its philosophic and artistic integrity³. In fact if one accepts that this is a work steeped in the philosophy of courtly love or takes Chaucer's use of the courtly conventions at face value, it is difficult to account for an ending where the poet-narrator explicitly rejects earthly love for the love of God: for what he actually rejects is the power and beauty of that which Troilus, and his critics, have established at length as the central value in the story. One has either to assume that Chaucer was a bad story-teller—which is obviously presumptuous—or to account for this «incogruity» in some other way. The problem has already received so much critical attention

1. C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love*, London, Oxford University Press 1936, p. 176, 178.

2. Jerome Mandel, «Courtly Love in the *Canterbury Tales*», *Chaucer Review* 19 (1985), pp. 279, 287.

3. For a collection of recent criticism on the problem of the poem's ending see Alice R. Kaminsky, *Chaucer's «Troilus and Criseyde» and the Critics*, Athens, Ohio University Press 1980.

that it would be redundant to rehearse it in more details, or to attempt yet another analysis.

It would be more useful to examine instead the issue which bears directly upon the problem of the ending, and which, I believe, should come prior to any consideration of it —Chaucer's treatment of courtly love. The clarification of this issue could undoubtedly minimize a number of difficulties created by the ambiguities of the ending. It could illuminate, for example, the reasons for the final rejection of love, or bring into relief the exact nature of that which is being rejected; more importantly, it could help us decide whether the ending is actually «incogrouous», or of a piece with the ideas and style of the rest of the poem. After all, to agree that the poem is governed by the conventions of the courtly-love code could be of little or no significance at all without knowing the use to which Chaucer put these conventions.

To examine Chaucer's treatment of courtly love in *Troilus and Criseyde* is not an easy task. The work is notorious for its «double vision» inherent in a complex pattern of structural, philosophical, and linguistic ambiguities that determine the work's ironic perspective with the help of an unreliable narrator. Placed within this double perspective the «seriousness» of Chaucer's treatment of courtly love, is only skin-deep. When nothing is as it appears to be is it possible to read in a «straight» manner the homage that the work pays to the courtly tradition at the surface level of meaning? I suggest that throughout the poem Chaucer —regardless of what his narrator does or says— manipulates the conventions of courtly love in the context of irony: In fact he employs a variety of ironic techniques through which he begins— covertly at first and in an increasingly overt manner later— to undermine gradually, even denigrate, the values implicit in the semiology of the courtly code: and by doing so he solves the artistic problem of having to deal with a well established formal tradition of love poetry in a poem ultimately aiming in a different direction— the rejection of the idealization which this love celebrates. Chaucer's treatment of

4. For the ironic vision of the poem see Peter Elbow, *Oppositions in Chaucer*, Middletown, Conn., Wesleyan University Press 1973; Peter Christmas, «*Troilus and Criseyde*: The Problem of Love and Necessity», *Chaucer Review* 9 (1975), pp. 285-96; Donald W. Rowe, «*O Love, O Charity!*» *Contraries Harmonized in Chaucer's «Troilus and Criseyde»*, London, Southern Illinois University Press 1976; Lee W. Patterson, «Ambiguity and Interpretation: A Fifteenth-Century Reading of *Troilus and Criseyde*», *Speculum* 54 (1979), pp. 297-330.

courtly love constitutes an important segment in the larger framework of the work's ironies. If there is any «seriousness» it is found in the implicit critique of a system of love which he felt it was far from expressing the true nature of love.

Chaucer had already ironized some fundamental features of the courtly tradition in his earlier poems. Besides the high idealization of the beloved, the poetry of courtly love demanded the direct involvement of a narrator who speaks as the devotee and servant of love. In *The Book of Duchess*, *The Parliament of Fowls*, *The House of Fame*, and later in the Prologue to *The Legend of Good Women* the narrator, although speaking in the first person, is far from embodying the idea of the perfect lover of Machaut or Froissart. He is either too naive and inexperienced, or he pretends that his authority comes from the «olde bookes». As Dorothy Bethurum observes, «the narrator of all these poems trembles at the thought of experience. It is his way of casting the shadow of doubtiety upon the glittering idealizations of love that were the current fashion at the court»⁵.

In the *Canterbury Tales* courtly love is present along with four other kinds of love, as Norman Eliason has shown: Christian, philosophical, allegorical, and ordinary⁶. But with the exception of two tales, the Franklin's and the Knight's, at no other point is courtly love central or seriously treated: «Though Chaucer ranks among the great poets of love in the English language», notes Jerome Mandel, «by the time he came to write the *Canterbury Tales* he no longer looked upon the language, tenets, or characteristics of courtly love as a viable way of expressing what occurs in the human heart»⁷. If the dating of *Troilus and Criseyde* as an earlier work is correct, then we may assume that this is the place where Chaucer attempts a systematic critique of the courtly tradition, exposing its inadequacies through irony till he explicitly rejects it.

In *Troilus and Criseyde* Chaucer utilizes all the courtly poses established in his earlier love poems, and much more—this is a work designed to reproduce all the outward trappings of the courtly love ritual: the

5. Dorothy Bethurum, «Chaucer's Point of View as Narrator in the Love Poems», *PMLA* (1959), p. 517.

6. Norman Eliason, «Chaucer the Love Poet», in *Chaucer the Love Poet*, ed. Jerome Mitchell and William Provost, Athens, Ga., University of Georgia Press 1973, pp. 9-26.

7. Jerome Mandel, p. 288.

pinning lover, the idealized beloved, the «go-between», and a seemingly inexperienced narrator who claims that his education in matters of love comes from books⁸. If irony is primarily characterized by a duality of an obvious and an inferred level of meaning, then the whole poem may be approached from a perspective which ironically juxtaposes our normal expectations from the medieval conventions of courtly love and what Chaucer is actually doing with them⁹. We will soon discover that nothing in the poem is as straightforward as it might appear at first sight: a strong comic strain undercuts, undermines, and controls situations which Boccaccio and Petrarch had treated with the utmost seriousness.

Troilus, for example, as the ideal courtly lover becomes a ready target for Chaucer's irony. Throughout the five books of the poem he weeps a sea of tears, is torn between hope and despair, writes tear-soiled letters, and his speech is charged with apostrophes, oaths, and Petrarchan conceits. Yet despite the narrator's sympathy for his undeserved suffering Troilus succeeds in appearing foolish in his role as the desperate lover. This is mainly achieved through the ironic inversion of traditional motifs.

In Book I, for example, the commonplace of Cupid shooting an arrow at the hero is ridiculed with the comment that «He kidde anon his bowe nasnahght broken» (208)¹⁰. Immediately after that we see Troilus undergoing what in the vocabulary of irony is known as «assimilation to the worse»: He is compared to a peacock with plucked feathers (210), and to a horse tamed by his master's whip (220). To top «it all the narrator comments: «Blissed be love, that kan thus folk convertel!» (308). Elsewhere the earthly paradise of courtly lovers, the May garden, is substituted by the domesticity of a bedroom, to which the lover is conveyed through a «privy» (III.787)!

In fact one's image of Troilus as the perfect courtly lover begins to blur if we read the narrator's voice and implications carefully. For his presentation actually minimizes Troilus' heroic stance (III.

8. For a history of courtly love criticism see Roger Boase, *The Origin and Meaning of Courtly Love*, Manchester, Manchester University Press 1977.

9. The terminology and theoretical assumptions about irony are derived from Wayne C. Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press 1974, and D. C. Muecke, *The Compass of Irony*. Critical Idiom Series, London, Methuen & Co. 1970.

10. I am using *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. F. N. Robinson, Boston, Houghton Mifflin Company 1961.

1098, IV.149-124, V.1576-82), while it foregrounds, through the use of exaggerations and ambiguous similes, the mental paralysis resulting from his extreme idealism in love (III.1065, IV.218-59, 365-67, V. 200-91).

As for Troilus himself, after he dies and ascends to the eighth sphere, he looks down on earth and evaluates his former behavior with a «laugh». It is a bitter ironic laugh directed at the human folly that insists on basing happiness on an impossibility: the realization of the ideal through earthly love. The pessimistic end leaves one with the impression that Troilus' sad story is an *exemplum* on the fate of the perfect courtly lover, in actuality a tragic victim of self-delusion. «Swich fyn hath, lo, this Troilus for love!» (V.1828), writes Chaucer, and it is as if the determinism which permeates the story is causally linked with this kind of love.

Chaucer's Criseyde, a far more complex figure than her namesake in Boccaccio's *Filostrato*, has been the source of a great output of criticism. The beloved is usually an idealized form in the courtly romances, and practically a phantom in the sonnets and love visions. But Criseyde is certainly no Beatrice: she stands for warm living flesh with all its frailties and desires. Indeed she is the fairest thing created with a blemish of a joined pair of eyebrows (V.806-826)! Capable to love but only while it lasts, we see her fluctuating between the desire to believe in the romantic optimism of Antigone's song (II.827-875), and the pragmatism of her own realistic evaluation of love's perils (II.743-805). Therefore, she does not swear everlasting fidelity to Troilus without a full understanding that in this sublunary world, which is ruled by chance and mutability, circumstances may change. This duality in her character corresponds to the different perceptions we get of her in the two halves of the poem¹¹.

When circumstances change, she does not hesitate to betray Troilus, avoiding thus to become a victim of love's idealization. Any trace of the ideal left collapses at the moment of her symbolic mock-death swoon in Book V. The new woman that emerges is only a survivor, and Troilus' betrayal becomes as inevitable as the fall of Troy. Her

11. About the difference in our perception of Criseyde in the two halves of the poem Marjorie Curry Woods offers an interesting explanation: she finds that the contrast has a rhetorical basis — «the contrasting attitudes towards character which arose from the opposing interpretations of a defendant's character generated in the Roman courts of law». In «Chaucer the Rhetorician: Criseyde and Her Family», *Chaucer Review* 20 (1985), p. 34.



own prediction that she will be placed on the black list of history as a woman who betrayed her true love came true in the literary tradition after Chaucer. It must have been because with her pragmatism she thwarts all the expectations one has from a love heroine expectations that have been incurably conditioned by the image of ideality built up by the courtly love tradition. Chaucer chose to be a realist instead.

Pandarus next in his role as the mediator is the apotheosis of verbal ironies. A «strange combination of impulses and styles, at once the liveliest and the dullest speaker in the poem»¹². He is the one who sets the love story in motion by his manipulation of the characters, and in this respect his functions is comparable to the narrator's. It is through his skillful rhetoric, his rationalizations and proverbial wisdom, as well as his lies that Criseyde is talked into loving Troilus. His performance in Books I through III is a marvel of manipulation; his abilities, however, start declining as tragedy begins to emerge in the last two books.

The various stages in his career as procurer make a good study of irony of manners: he starts as an *alazon* boasting that he can control Troilus and Criseyde's love life successfully; then his inability to alter the sorrowful course of events unmasks him as a victim of situational irony; yet he manages to end up as an *iron*, namely as someone who, like Socrates, understates himself pretending ignorance¹³.

Any attempt to deconstruct Chaucer's irony in *Troilus and Criseyde* would first of all recognize the seminal role that the narrator plays in it. As in the case of his other works, the narrator is not so much a mouth-piece of the author's moral views as he is «an instrument for Chaucer's ironic strategy»¹⁴. The author created a persona that can be evaluated in its own right as any other character in the poem; and by having distanced himself from the narrator, he could control his poem freely from within.

The function of the narrator as an ironic device in this case is demonstrated through various ways: he professes that he knows nothing

12. Gretchen Mieszkowski, «Chaucer's Pandarus and Jean Brasdefer's Houdee», *Chaucer Review*, 20 (1985), p. 40.

13. For a discussion of the terms *alazon*, and *iron* see Muecke, 14-15, and Northrop Frye, *The Anatomy of Criticism*, Princeton, N. Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1957, pp. 172-75, 226-28.

14. See Charles Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1969, p. 154.

about love, yet he generalizes freely on the subject; he minimizes the sublimity of love by juxtaposing idealistic speeches in realistic contexts; his commentary provides a telescopic effect of involvement and distancing, of objectivity and subjectivity, which Charles Owen has compared to the perspective of depth in painting¹⁵. He often uses ironic language when referring to love or the lovers (puns, oxymora, antithesis, paradoxes, hyperboles); and he reminds the reader in self-referential manner that this love story is a fiction, not real life. In short, the tensions and ambiguities stemming from the narrator's stance continually raise questions and direct the reader to another level of meaning, where he is asked to evaluate events and characters in the story, as well as the narrator's statements about them.

This unreliable narrator is part of a huge mechanism of manipulation that branches out in many directions: Troilus manipulates Criseyde, Pandarus manipulates both lovers, the narrator manipulates his alleged sources, Chaucer manipulates the narrator, and through him, the reader. This intricate net of manipulation does more than distance the reader from the story—it seriously undermines the sublimity of love that a romance story, as this one supposedly is, foregrounds. In this affair nothing is ideal as the story professes on the surface. Irony pulls the narrative movement downward from innocence to *hamartia*, and hence to catastrophe. This is a tragic movement—to use Frye's terminology—from the idealization of romance to the world of experience¹⁶.

As suggested earlier, the persona of an ironic narrator is Chaucer's claim to objectivity in the telling of his story. But how detached Chaucer really is from Troilus' «double sorrow», the substance of the story? For it seems that underneath the ironic surface he is «more deeply involved than in any other of his works and that he is «actually crying out in pain as the story moves to its sad end.»¹⁷ I think that in an ironic text such as this it is only natural to seek Chaucer's own attitude at the subtext of intended meaning.

First of all, the deconstruction of his ironies points undoubtedly to a critical stance toward the idealization of courtly love, which is seen as a major force working out Troilus' final destruction. Yet there are passages in the poem that further clarify the authorial intentions

15. Charles Owen, «The Significance of Chaucer's Revisions of *Troilus and Criseyde*», *Modern Philology* 55, pp. 1-5.

16. Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, pp. 153-54.

17. Bethurum, p. 517.

regarding the theme of love. In these the narrotor's voice vibrates with such sincerity and earnestness that any suspicion of ironic play would be out of place. For example, there are two passages in which the power of love is seen as an indisputable law of the universe: «that love is he that alle thing may bynde;/For may no man fordo the lawe of kynde» (I.236-38), and «in this world no lyves creature./ Withouen love is worth, or may endure» (III. 13-4). Elsewhere we find references to the enobling power of love and its «grete worthynesse», culminating in the famous hymn to Love in the third book, which apraises it as an extension of God's love (1737-1771). Obviously all this points towards Chaucer's Neoplatonism, formed by his readings of Bernard and Alain; love in this sense is a cosmic force, an aspect of the goddess Natura, the source of creation and the celebration of life's continuity¹⁸.

On the basis of the above it is difficult to accept that the superiority of divine love over earthly love, which the poem advocates in the palinode, suggests a straightforward rejection of earthly love at the same time. Whether in Chaucer's own voice or in his narrator's, the ending of *Troilus and Criseyde* should be read as part of the complex pattern of ironies one finds throughout the poem: there are the same rhetorical devices at work, and the same pretense in the narrator's stance resulting in the distancing of the reader from the narrative. Being an integral part of the poem the ending concludes Chaucer's continuous argument on love, resorting to the play of all the ironies that kept dissolving meaning in the work so far. The argument that emerges out of the ambiguities and the uncertainties of the ending may be reconstructed in a completed form as follows:

1. The high idealization of courtly love—which had been ironized throughout the poem—is an attitude incompatible with the imperfections of the human condition. Ignorance, insufficient will power, and the vicissitudes of Fortune are some of the grim realities in the story.

2. Love can be the greatest blessing on earth if it is recognized for what it actually is: a universal law of Nature which is subject to mutability. Criseyde accepts this truth, therefore, she survives; Troilus' moral universe collapses because his expectations from love transcend the human limitations.

18. The same ideas are embodied in the description of the Garden of Love in *The Parliament of Fowls*.

3. Only the love of God can provide the stability of peace and fulfillment denied by earthly existence. It is this knowledge that redeems the tragic dimension of life, and it is offered by Chaucer for its redeeming value rather than as a total rejection of earthly love.

Unfortunately, Troilus acquires this knowledge too late: only when he ascends to the eighth sphere does he earn the awareness of an *eirow* who has access to the upper hidden level of truth and can laugh at the blindness of the victims below. Through the irony of the whole poem, not just the palinode, Chaucer had been suggesting that the greatest irony of all is to think that earth could be heaven by the power of love, when it is only a market-fair «that passeth soone as floures faite» (V. 1841). In his poem, capturing a fleeting moment of life, he explored three aspects of love: the idealizing courtly love, love as a law of Nature, and divine love; and being the lover of both heaven and earth he evaluated each in the light of the two others, in order to arrive at a perspective which would reconcile the ephemeral with eternity.