RESTRAINING AMBIGUITIES IN CHAUCER'S *TROILUS AND CRISEYDE*

Pagan demons imported to enrich texts composed by medieval Christians can generate uncanny resonances, and, in the case of *Thesiphone,* the Fury invoked by Chaucer in the opening of *Troilus and Criseyde,* at least momentary befuddlement for an informed reader. Since Boccaccio's *Filostrato,* a probable major source for the Middle English poem, contains no such Fury, Chaucer's insertion of a "cruwel Furie, sorwynge ever yn peyne," seems part of a deliberate attempt, as D. W. Robertson and others have demonstrated, to change the tone, and perhaps the theme as well, of the story of Troilus.[1] In addition, Chaucer's use of *Thesiphone* is part of the strategy, pursued consistently throughout the poem, of gradual revelation.

John McCall expresses part of *Thesiphone*'s tonal and thematic function when he describes her as the "tragic muse of the poem."[2] Certainly she is part of the elaborate rhetorical apparatus with which Chaucer attempts, at the beginning of the poem, to establish a tone simultaneously tragic and epic:

> The double sorwe of Troilus to tellen,
> That was the kyng Priamus sone of Troye,
> In lovynge how his aventures fellen
> Fro wo to wele, and after out of joie,
> My purpos is, or that I parte fro ye.
> Thesiphone, thow help me for t'endite
> Thise woful vers, that wepen as I write.
>
> To the clepe I, thow goddesse of torment,
> Thow cruel furie sorwynge ever yn peyne,
> Help me that am the sorwful instrument
> That helpeth loveres, as I kan, to pleyne;
> For wel sit it, the sothe for to seyne,
> A woful wight to han a drery feere,
> And to a sorwful tale a sory chere. (1—14)[3]

Decorum, then, is the justification offered by the narrator for involving *vox irarum,* as Boccaccio and others gloss her;[4] a *figura* for perpetual sorrow is appropriate for a sorrowful tale. Her evocative power, however, goes beyond what the narrator claims for her in this passage, partly because Chaucer, deliberately composing a text that

[1] See D. W. Robertson, *Preface to Chaucer,* Princeton, 1962, p. 475, and his "Chaucerian Tragedy," *ELH* XIX (1952), pp. 1—37.

[2] *Chaucer Among the Gods,* University park, 1979, pp. 16, 29; McCall's work on Tisiphone represents a siginificant advance beyond E. F. Shannon's dismissal of the problem: "As this scrap of classical mythology was so well known, it is perhaps useless to try to identify its source." (*Chaucer and the Roman Poets,* Cambridge, 1929).

[3] All quotations from *Troilus and Criseyde* are taken from Root's edition, Princeton, 1926.

[4] Giovanni Boccaccio, *Genealogie Deorum etc.*, ed. V. Romano, Bari, 1951, vol. I, p. 130. Boccaccio cites Statius and Ovid as his sources.

only gradually becomes scrutable, gives specific signals in the passage, and partly because the Fury brings with her resonances accumulated from her long tenure in the storehouse of common images regularly ransacked by medieval poets. Specifically, Thesiphone generates, in addition to the natural and moral interpretations preferred by McCall, images of vengeance, sexual disorder, a sterile rather than a procreative Venus, and the devil himself.

In the very first phrase of the poem — *the double sorwe of Troilus* — Chaucer may be recalling a passage, as F. N. Robinson suggests,[5] from Dante's *Purgatorio,* in which Vergil expresses his surprising at finding Statius, a singer of pagan songs, on his way to Christian salvation:

> Or quando tu cantasti le crude armi
> de la doppia trestizia di Giocasta,"
> disse 'l cantor de' buccolici carmi,
> "per quello che Clio teco li tasta,
> non par che ti facesse ancor fedele
> la fede, senza qual ben far non basta . . . (XXII. 55—60)[6]

Jocasta's *doppia trestizia,* "double sorwe," was, of course, occasioned by the sins of patricide and incest, ultimate profanations of the gifts of Mars and Venus. Statius himself seems to be Dante's example of one who worshipped pagan gods, who finally, just in time, achieved a superior vision, as Troilus seems to do at the end of Chaucer's poem.

Statius himself, in the *Thebaid,* produced an elaborate, intense portrait of Tisiphone sowing discord between Eteocles and Polyneices, the incestuously generated progeny of Jocasta and Oedipus. The Fury's purpose, as Statius represents it in a darkly ironic simile, is to produce strerile havoc:

> sic ubi delectos per torva armenta iuvencos
> agricola imposito sociare adfectat aratro,
> illi indignantes, quis nondum vomere multo
> ardua nodosos cervix descendit in armos,
> in diversa trahunt atque aequis vincula laxant
> viribus et vario condundunt limite sulcos:
> haud secus indomitos praeceps discordia fratres
> asperat.
>
> (Even so would a farmer feign unite under the plough-yoke two picked bullocks of the savage herd, but they indignant — for not yet has the frequent coulter bowed those arching necks to the sinewy shoulders — pull contrariwise and with strength well-matched break harness and confound the furrow with divers tracks: no otherwise does furious discord enrage the proud brothers). I. 131—138[7]

The image of the two brothers as yoked opposites not only reinforces the major

[5] *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer,* Cambridge, 1957, p. 813.

[6] *Tutte le opere di Dante Alighieri,* ed. E. Moore, Oxford, 1894, p. 84.

[7] *Statius,* ed. J. H. Mozley, Cambridge, 1955, pp. 150—151.

theme of civil discord in the *Thebaid* — introduced immediately in the bitter paradoxes of the opening line: *Fraternas acies alternaque regna etc.* — but is also symptomatic of a pattern that regularly appeals to Chaucer, recurring frequently, evenly relentlessly, as Peter Elbow has demonstrated, in the *Troilus.*[8]

Statius' description of Tisiphone as a sower of discord may also have helped generate a passage in a work by Boccaccio that has not been associated with Chaucer's *Troilus,* although, like the *Troilus,* it is modelled after Boethius' *Consolation.* In Boccaccio's *Comedia delle ninfe fiorentine,* a band of hostile gods, including *Tesifone,* attacks Fiesole:

> E avegna che Vulcano con ispanventevoli fiamme e Tetide con onde multiplicate e il non reverito Marte con furibunde armi *e Tesifone con seminate zizzanie* e Giuno con turbamenti contrarii piu volte si sieno gravemente oppositi all sua salute . . .[9]

Depicting the Fury as a sower of weeds seems a possible implication of Statius' description of her as a perverse plowman; a passage from the New Testament, however, provides a close verbal parallel that may very well have occured to Boccaccio as he attempted to harmonize pagan matter and Christian doctrine. In one of the parables Christ tells, an enemy sows weeds:

> Cum autem dormirent homines, venit inimicus eius, ut superseminavit zizania in medio tritici et abiit. (*Mathew* xiii. 25)

According to the patristic tradition, the enemy who sows weeds is the devil; Jerome, for instance, tells us briefly and directly: *Inimicus autem qui seminavit ea, est diabolus* (*PL* XXVI, col. 67):

> Haec quidem sententia cautos nos esse admonet, ne dum torpemus inertia, diabolus foeditatem vitiorum super semen bonae voluntatis spargat. (*PL* XCII, col. 67)

By applying the phrase, *con seminate zizzanie* to Tesifone, then, Boccaccio associates a Graeco-Roman demon with the Judaeo-Christian devil, presumably expecting at least some of his more learned and attentive readers to recognize the association, since he provides no gloss in the passage itself. Such an association fits the movement of the poem as a whole, since the *Comedia delle ninfe fiorentine* modulates, like the Troilus, but unlike the *Filostrato,* from a secular erotic exercise, into a Boethian, Christian vision.

In two other poems, Boccaccio puts *Tesifone* to figurative use; in the *Fiametta,* for example, he associates the Fury with sterile, self-destructive sexuality. Disguised as Venus, Tesifone provokes Fiametta to what turns out happily to be an unsuccessful

[8] *Oppositions in Chaucer,* Middletown, 1975, *passim.*

[9] *Comedia delle ninfe fiorentine,* ed. Enzo Quaglio, in *Tutte le Opere di Giovanni Boccaccio,* ed. V Branca, 1964, p. 818; see p. 667 for Quaglio's remarks on the Boethian model.

attempt at suicide.[10] However, the reference to Tesifone with which Chaucer is mo likely to have been familiar occurs in the model for his *Knight's Tale,* Boccaccio *Teseida.*[11] Trapped in prison, filled with love for Emilia and hatred for his cousin a rival in love Arcita, Palemone's soul fills with a poison that reminds Boccaccio of t concoction devised by Tesifone, at the request of Oedipus, for Eteocles a Polyneices:

> e si come Tesifone, chiamata
> dal cieco Edippo nella oscura parte
> dov'elli lunga notte avea menata,
> a' due fratei del regno con su' arte
> mise l'arsura, cosi a lui 'ntrata
> con quel velen che 'l suo valor comparte
> d'Emilia aver . . . .[12]

When Chaucer invokes Thesiphone, then, he sets in motion resonances of discordant, perverse, sterile, potentially demonic sexuality, that will effect the visi of his major character both on earth and in heaven.

Among the passags in *Troilus and Criseyde* that pick up, magnify, dramatize, a refocus these uncanny resonances, two have remained particularly invulnerable definitive interpretation. In the first passage, the narrator tells us that he does know whether Criseyde had any children (I. 132—133); in the second passage, narrator describes an exchange between Pandarus and Criseyde that has incited so readers to imagine a literally incestuous transaction between uncle and niece. B passages rely at least partly for their ambiguities on the use of a rhetorical trope classifiable as *occultatio, paralipsis, praeteritio,* or *reticentia* — not to be found in corresponding passage in Boccaccio's *Il Filostrato.* Both passages modify, altho they do not clarify the reader's vision of Criseyde; in fact, they seem deliberat composed to increase our anxiety about her nature, and perhaps also about fallible nature of human vision.

During the panegyric of Criseyde that follows her succesful meeting with Hec Chaucer claims that his sources do not indicate whether the widow had any proge

> And in hire hous he abood with swich meyne
> As til hire honour nede was to holde;
> And whil she was dwellynge in that cite,,
> Kepte hir estat, and bothe of yonge and olde
> Ful wel biloved, and wel men of hir tolde;
> But wheither that she children hadde or non,
> I rede it nat, therefore I late it goon. (I. 127—133)

[10] See Robert Hollander, *Boccaccio's Two Venuses,* New York, 1977, pp. 21—22, 45, 47. Walter P connects Fiametta's inability to distinguish Venus from Tesiphone with the problem of Fate, in *Venu Heilige und Furie in Boccaccio's Fiametta-Dichtung,* Kreteld, 1958, p. 160.

[11] For Chaucer's "addiction" to this tale, see Piero Boitani, *Chaucer and Boccaccio,* Oxford, 1977, p

[12] *Teseida* V.xiii (p. 131 of Mondadori edition).

As Robinson, Root, Baugh, and others have noticed, Boccaccio leaves no doubt about her childlessness, in a passage which Chaucer, in other respects, follows closely:

> Quivi si stette con quella famiglia
> Ch'al suo onor convenia di tenere,
> Mentre fu in Troia, onesta e maraviglia
> In abito ed in vita, ne calere
> Le bisognava di figlio o di figlia,
> Come a colei che mai nessuno avere
> N'avea potuto;[14]

Why Chaucer chose to generate more ambiguity about Criseyde's fertility than Boccaccio had done is not patently clear. Charles Muscatine's comment on the passage — "Chaucer's narrator is purposely obscure" — is probably correct, although Muscatine does not indicate what Chaucer's purpose may have been.[15]

The ambiguity seems to fit an over-all strategy attributed to Chaucer in this poem by several critics. Robert M. Durling, for example, describes the technique as one of gradual revelation:

> The action of the poem — and the commentary of the poet — leads us through a sympathetic participation in Troilus' joy and woe to an intellectual and emotional grasp of the point made in the epilogue ... The strategy of the poem thus requires the poet to adopt a perspective which at the beginning is not very much wider than that of the characters themselves... Even if we have already learned the lesson the poem will teach, to read the poem effectively we must adopt the stance of one who has not.[16]

Chaucer, then, deliberately keeps the reader's perspective narrow, so that, as Robert Payne has suggested, "The permanent truths against which the ironies of this poem's action work themselves out are visible only through the structures of character and event, and through the associations struck off by the occasional lyric inserts."[17]

Since Criseyde will reveal herself in the course of the poem to be less than Troilus imagines her to be at first sight, Chaucer may very well have refrained from making a categorical assertion of her childlessness early in the first book, to prevent a medieval reader from recognizing her immediately as an iconographical figure, like the Wife of Bath, of sterile love.[18] However, already alerted by the ambiguous erotic

[13] See Quintilian, 9.3.98, Cicero, *De Oratore* III, lii, 200, 205, *et alibi.*

[14] N. E. Griffin and A. B. Myrick, *Il Filostrato di Boccaccio,* Philadelphia, 1929, p. 140.

[15] *Chaucer and the French Tradition,* Berkeley, 1957, p. 154.

[16] *The Figure of the Poet in Renaissance Epic,* Campridge, 1965, pp. 45—46.

[17] *Key of Remembrance,* New Haven, 1963, p. 220. See laso Robert P. Ap Roberts, "Criseyde's Infidelity and the Moral of the *Troilus,*" *Speculum* XLIV (1969), pp. 383—402, in which he speaks of, "an inscrutable pattern, which only becomes clear to those involved in it after it has been unrolled." (p. 392)

A sensible, non-dogmatic approach to the general problem of Chaucerian ambiguity in the *Troilus* is to be found in Ida L. Gordon, *The Double Sorrow of Troilus,* Oxford 1970. See particularly her three chapters, "Ambiguity and Boethius," "Ambiguity and the Narrator," adn "Ambiguity and the Narrative." Also of some use in this area is J. M. Steadman, *Disembodied Laughter,* Berkeley 1972, p. 164.

[18] See Robertson, *Preface,* pp. 322, 330—331, 381—382.

resonances generated by the invocation to Thesiphone, a reasonably acute medieval reader might begin to feel that his perception of the exact nature of Criseyde was gradually improving.

Although Criseyde is not what Troilus believes her to be early in the poem, she is not quite the atrocious slut some readers have argued her to be, on the basis of a later passage in the poem. At the end of their first night of love-making, Troilus leaves, and Pandarus literally and abruptly takes his place:

> And ner he com, and seyde: "how stant it now,
> This brighte morwe, nece, how kan ye fare?"
> Criseyde answerede: "nevere the bet for yow,
> Fox that ye ben, god yeve your herte care!
> God Help me so, ye caused al this fare,
> Trowe I," quod she; "for al youre wordes white,
> O! whoso seth yow knoweth yow ful lite."
>
> With that she gan hire face for to wrye
> With the shete, and wax for shame al reed;
> And Pandarus gan under for to prie,
> And seyde: "nece, if that I shal be ded,
> have here a swerd, and smyteth of myn heed."
> With that his arm al sodeynly he thriste
> Under hire nekke, and at the laste hire kyste.
>
> I passe al that which needeth nought to seye,
> What! god foryaf his deth, and she also
> Foryaf, and with hire uncle gan to pleye,
> For oother cause was ther non than so.
> But of this thing right to the effect to go,
> Whan tyme was, hom to hire hous she wente,
> And Pandarus hath hooly his entente. (III. 1562—1582)

In a recent comment on this passage, Evan Carton rightly reminds us that, "criticism has widely ignored or failed to appreciate the suggestiveness of this scene," although he, like a number of other readers of this passage, argues that the amiguity *is* the meaning of the passage: "Here, more inexorably than anywhere else in the poem, the reader is responsible for the meaning he produces; and that, I believe, is the meaning of the scene."[19] Dieter Mehl reaches approximately the same conclusion when he argues for what seems to be utter subjectivity in interpreting both the passage and the poem as a whole:

> ...the audience is not given a piece of precise information, but an incomplete and therefore ambiguous statement that demands an active effort of imagination and judgement... Chaucer leaves many of the crucial questions raised by his story for the audience to decide... It is not our business to discover what Chaucer 'really meant', how he himself judges his characters or what he thought about courtly love, but to respond to his appeal and participate in the dialogue his poetry wants to provoke.[20]

[19] "Complexity and Responsibility in Pandarus' Bed and Chaucer's Art," *PMLA* 94 (1979), p. 57.

[20] "The Audience of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde,*" in *Chaucer and Middle English Studies in honor of R. H. Robbins,* ed. B. Rowland, London, 1975, pp. 178, 187.

Certainly we should heed the exhortations of Professors Carton and Mehl to perceive the complexity of the text, but we need not necessarily assume that Chaucer was devoid of purpose, opinion, point of view, or, in his own sense of the term, "sadnesse."

On the other hand, attempts to assign specific meanings and purposes to the post-coital embrace of Criseyde and Pandarus have led to some ruthlessly reductive, vividly bizarre readings. Beryl Rowland, for example, asserts that Pandarus is a bisexual pimp, in love both with Troilus and with Criseyde, who literally copulates with Criseyde in ll. 1574—1582, having watched with increasing excitement her Priapic grapplings with Troilus throughout the previous night.[21] Along the same lines, Haldeen Braddy argues that *deth* (l. 1577) is a folk euphemism (as it is aliterary one also) for orgasm, and that an accurate translation of ll. 1577—1588 is: "What! God forgave Pandarus' coition and she also forgave it."[22] Clearly, the passage has generated antithetical responses among its readers, as it probably was designed by its author to do, in keeping with classical rhetorical strategy. As the anonymous author of the *Ad Herrenium* teaches, in commenting on *occulatatio, parlipsis,* and *praeteritio*: "It is of greater advantage to create a suspicion by *paralipsis* than to insist directly on a statement that is refutable."[23] Chaucer, however, probably expected that antithetical responses would be generated in the *same* reader.

The proposal, then, to treat the passage as a perpetual exercise in hermeneutics, and the proposal to treat it as a pornographic exercise are based on impulses Chaucer intended to provoke, although he did not imagine the absurd lengths to which some twentieth-century imaginations might carry those impulses. Instead, his rhetorical refusal to devote attention to "al that which needeth nought to seye" is an attempt to extend the ambiguities initiated by the invocation to Thesiphone, and propelled by the rhetorical refusal to label Criseyde as a *figura* for sterile sexuality. As a result, Chaucer's *reticentia* successfully generates a confusing image of Criseyde in bed with another man after Troilus; Pandarus then becomes an absurd pre-figuring of Diomede. Readers who insist on a literal copulation between Pandarus and Criseyde are reading the poem proleptically, permitting their knowledge of later events not merely to influence, but to overcome their reading of ll. 1562—1582. Such readers are overlooking one of the principles of medieval romance: "The conclusion makes explicit an entente that was at the beginning only a latent possibility."[24]

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[21] "Pandarus and the Fate of Tantalus," *Orbis Litterarum* 24 (1969), pp. 11, 15.

[22] "Chaucer's Playful Pandarus," *Southern Folklore Quarterly* 34 (1970), p. 80. See also Thomas A Van, *Explicator* xxxiv, no. 3 (November, 1975), and Donald Howard, "Literature and Sexuality," *Massachussetts Review* 8 (1967), pp. 442—456.

[23] ed. H. Caplan (Loeb), Cambridge, 1954, pp. 320—321.

[24] Lee W. Patterson, "Ambiguity and Interpretation etc.," *Speculum* LIV (1979), p. 323.