

## 2

### *Book I: The Look of Criseyde and Looks at Criseyde*

Two significant readings occur when scholars look critically at the first book of *Troilus and Criseyde*. As we will see in this chapter, scholars are drawn to the descriptions of Criseyde, which are abundant in Book I. Criseyde's paradoxical position as a wealthy woman abandoned by her father, and thus the daughter of a traitor, contrasts with her "assured manner" at the temple when Troilus first sees her. The narrator provides us with physical descriptions of her body and, perhaps most significantly, her clothes, through both his sources and Troilus' eyes. This leads to the second common conversation among scholars: the discussion of gazes, initiated in Book I's glances between the lovers. With all of Criseyde's descriptions in Book I, however, we are never introduced to Criseyde through her own thoughts, nor do we get a glimpse of Criseyde's inner self.

Laura Hodges' recent article, "Sartorial Signs in *Troilus and Criseyde*," examines the costumes of Chaucer's characters:

Chaucer gives his most complete descriptions of Criseyde's signature costume, gleaming widow's weeds, just prior to Troilus' first sight of her so that readers comprehend the vision that causes his subsequent surrender to love; similarly, the initial description of a costumed Troilus in armor, as Criseyde sees him for the first time from her window, depicts the sight which Criseyde recognizes, the vision of the man she loves and acknowledges in her "who yaf me drink" exclamation. (223)

The first image of Criseyde in her widow's clothes is accented by the fact that Chaucer places it

within a passage discussing the Trojan War, a reference to the war's effect on Criseyde: she is a citizen of the besieged city, a widow of a soldier, and the daughter of a traitor. There are two expectations concerning, what Hodges calls, the "costume rhetoric" of the romance heroine. She will wear "colorful and expensive, sometimes even exotic costumes" (Hodges 224), or she will wear simple, solemn, and even ragged costumes. However, Chaucer's Criseyde satisfies neither expectation.

Hodges discusses the anachronistic nature of Criseyde's garments. The line, "widewes habit large of samyt broun" (1.109) hints at the silk fabric, samite, an imported Asian or Mediterranean silk in fourteenth-century England associated generally with the wealthy and specifically with diplomatic gifts.<sup>1</sup> This signifies Criseyde's high economic status and social standing. Therefore, she wears expensive, even exotic, clothes, but also clothes which, in their dark and solemn manner, indicate her status as a Trojan widow (225). Furthermore, this "widewes habit," mentioned also in Boccaccio, as Hodges suggests, "evokes both the idea of Criseyde's vulnerability and the visual sign of her personal loss as expressed in the socially acceptable contemporary dress for widows in England" (225).

Her shimmering garment contributes to the beginning of her description eight lines before:

in al Troies cite

Nas non so fair, forpassynge every wight,

So aungelik was hir natif beaute.

That lik a thing immortal semed she,

As doth an hevenyssh perfit creature,

That down were sent in scornynge of nature. (1.101-5)

Although her widow's garments testify to her earthly nature, these same garments, shining on an "aungelik.....thing immortal," elevate Criseyde to a celestial being. Chaucer adds further to this idea at the celebration of Pallas Athena, when his narrator again says of Criseyde, "Nas nevere yet seyn thyng to ben preysed derre,/ Nor under cloude blak so bright a sterre" (1.174-75).

Robert Levine's article, "Restraining Ambiguities in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*," focuses on two specific scenes relating to the poem's doubleness, one of which, the scene in Book III involving Pandarus and Criseyde in oft-alleged incestuous circumstances, will be discussed later. For the purpose of this chapter, Levine specifically looks at Criseyde's description by the narrator in Book I:

And in hire hous abood with swich meyne  
As til hire honour nede was to holde;  
And whil she was dwellynge in that cite,  
Kepte hir estat, and both of yonge and olde  
Ful wel biloved, and wel men of hir tolde;  
But wheither that she children hadde or non,  
I rede it naught, therefore I late it goon. (1.127-133)

Levine suggests of this passage as a whole, which is not found in the *Filostrato* as Chaucer writes it here, that it modifies the reader's vision of Criseyde but does not clarify it; and, further, the passage seems written to increase anxiety in the reader about Criseyde's nature (561). Most significant is, of course, the lack of certainty about whether or not Criseyde has children, which Boccaccio, in the negative, makes clear. Levine says, "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" (562). Levine refers to Robert Durling's *The Figure of the Poet in the Renaissance*,<sup>2</sup> which labels Chaucer's descriptions of Criseyde throughout the poem as "gradual revelation" (Levine 562). Durling states, "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" (qtd. in Levine 562). This idea is quite comparable to a similar study of the same year by Jharna Sanyal, which details each of Criseyde's descriptions in arguing Chaucer's depiction of her gradual fall from celestial being to base woman.<sup>3</sup>

Craig Berry ("The King's Business: Negotiating Chivalry in *Troilus and Criseyde*") looks at the danger of Criseyde's abandonment by her father:

Gret rumour gan, whan it was first aspied  
Thorough al the town, and generaly was spoken  
That Calkas traitour fled was and allied  
With hem of Grece, and casten to be wroken  
On hym that falsly hadde his feith so broken,  
And seyden he and al his kyn at-ones  
Ben worthi for to brennen, fel and bones. (1.85-91)

Criseyde is thus prompted to seek the protection of Hector, who, Berry argues, is the poem's true "unproblematic exemplar of knightly virtue" (249). This setting of Criseyde's uncontrollable, political situation is immediately offset by her description, as highlighted in articles and chapters

mentioned above by Levine, Sanyal, and Hodges, as an "otherworldly, "celestial being. However, Berry expands on the other discussions by suggesting the religious implications of Criseyde's near apotheosis. With the narrator's assertion that "I, that God of Loves servantz serve" (1.15), his "hevenyssh" description of Criseyde, as Berry says, "clinches the fact that love is the religion here" (250). Boccaccio added to his similar description practical qualities of wisdom, modesty, and the assurance that Criseida is well-born, but these are excluded by Chaucer, who knows Criseyde will already be brought back to earth, so to speak, when she asks for Hector's protection.

While Hodges focuses on Criseyde's "habit large of samyt broun" as a semiotic enigma, fitting neither of the two expectations for the romance heroine, but whose shining fabric asserts her status as a celestial being, Berry suggests that Criseyde's fine habit indicates her knowledge of the "ecclesiastical rules of knighthood" in wearing these garments to see Hector (250). Hector's treatment of Criseyde is an act of chivalrous leadership for Chaucer, which, as Berry's article proposes, is an example of what Chaucer saw exhibited in his England by friends such as John of Gaunt.<sup>4</sup> Troilus lacks an understanding of chivalry, and is only spurred to good service by Pandarus' descriptions of Criseyde's "opinion of knighthood" (Berry 253).

David Aers' chapter, "Masculine Identity in the Courtly Community: The Self-Loving in Troilus and Criseyde," in his landmark book, *Community, Gender, and Individual Identity*, examines these first scenes of the poem in terms of the social expectations of the knight. Troilus' casing of the temple with other young knights is representative of, as Aers declares, "part of the confirmation of gender relations and power in his culture, part of the daily making of 'masculine' identity as active, free, predatory subject, an identity on the simultaneous construction of

‘feminine’ identity as passive, powerless object” (120). This seems to contrast with the views of other scholars, like Hodges and Levine, whose opinions concerning Criseyde in these early scenes equate her to an “otherworldly” object. Aers, however, further comments that the poem does not contribute to a stereotypical reading of the feminine object; rather “it implies that while the females are indeed simply objects in the field formed by the male gaze, these objects are actually subjects having to negotiate these threatening situations within the limited strategies available to ‘respectable’, ‘womanly’ women, ones who do not wish to be classified like the Wife of Bath, or worse” (120-21). Levine, using for the sake of comparison the Wife of Bath, suggests that Criseyde’s ambiguous maternity allows her to elude classification as a childless figure of “sterile love,” and Aers, too, again using the Wife of Bath as comparison, says that Criseyde’s actions follow certain patterns but do not allow her to fall into any one category.

This idea is expressed in her gaze, which answers Troilus’: “...she let falle/ Hire look a lite aside in swich manere, / Ascaunces, ‘What! May I nat stonden here?’” (1.290-92). Here Criseyde, the subject, reacts to Troilus. Troilus’ response, though, subordinates Criseyde’s glances by converting them to the satisfaction of his own desires. Of Troilus’ mocking of love, just before his conversion, Aers says, “At some level the worthy knight has grasped that to fulfill the demands of the ego-ideal intrinsic to his class and gender identity, he needs to participate in what he calls the ‘observaunces’ of love” ( 121). Criseyde, then, becomes for Troilus the support of his “own subjectivity and worth as an adult knight” (Aers 121).

C. David Benson’s article, “The Opaque Text of Chaucer’s Criseyde,” continues the discussion of the visual in Book I.<sup>5</sup> He insists, “Book I of Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde* shows us how we must read its heroine by portraying her at a distance through the eyes of a series of

male spectators, who create their own individual Criseydes” (18). Aside from her acknowledged fear, Criseyde’s mind remains unseen amidst the numerous physical and “hevenyssh” descriptions of her person, which allows multiple interpretations of her by participants in the poem, characters and readers alike. Benson also mentions, as has been discussed above in reference to other works, the celestial being in the narrator’s eyes, the courtly widow of Hector’s eyes, and the desirable woman of Troilus’ eyes. Benson considers the inconsistency in these points of view highlighted by the rhetoric of Chaucer’s characters, who use weak words such as “semynge,” “shewed,” and “gesse” to hint at their lack of true clarity in viewing Criseyde (19). Many scholars are resolved to concentrate on one or two of Criseyde’s characterizations in Book I, but it is the variety and quantity of descriptions which make her character a challenge to comprehend. Much scholarship is devoted to providing interpretations of Criseyde’s intentions in order to understand her thoughts and actions; but, as Benson argues, we must first and foremost look at what exactly she thinks and does.

Karla Taylor’s article, “Inferno 5 and *Troilus and Criseyde* Revisited,” agrees with Benson in acknowledging that although Criseyde’s figure dominates Book I in many ways, we receive very little from Criseyde herself. Instead, the images we find are created through the eyes of the poem’s men: the narrator, Troilus, and Pandarus. Taylor says, “Troilus creates a Criseyde that derives rather more from literature than from the woman herself—who, since she is unaware of his feelings, could scarcely have chosen to disregard them” (247). Troilus’ Criseyde possesses the power we find in Troilus’ complaint:

But, O thow woful Troilus, God wolde,  
Sith thow most loven thurgh this destine,

That thow beset were on swich oon that sholde  
Know al this wo, al lakked hir pitee!  
But also cold in love towardses the  
This lady is, as frost in wynter moone,  
And thow fordon, as snow in fire is soone. (1.519-25).

Criseyde is only alluded to in the third person here, however, while Troilus focuses on his own emotions, displaying the narcissism which many scholars, including Aers propose. Even more, death, rather than Criseyde, is the port Troilus seemingly seeks—"Stonde faste, for to good port hastow rowed" (1.969). Finally, Troilus seems to fall in love with falling in love, after he is shot with Love's arrow, before he actually falls in love with Criseyde, which serves as merely another "doubled representation" by Chaucer of similar events (Taylor 246).

Aers suggests that critics rarely comment on the "violent, even sadistic language" used by the narrator in describing Troilus' first gaze at Criseyde (120): "His eye percede, and so depe it wente/ Til Criseyde it smot, and ther it stente" (1.272-73). Sarah Stanbury, in two articles, "The Lover's Gaze in *Troilus and Criseyde*" and "The Voyeur and the Private Life" (the former presenting a substantial discussion of scenes in Book I, the latter supplying a brief review of the former's contents before discussing extensively scenes from Books II and III) provides an interesting, detailed analysis of this scene through the science of medieval optics. Using the same passages analyzed by Aers, she examines the narrator's assertion that Troilus "felte dyen," or rather, these "subtile stremes" (1.305) from Criseyde's eyes, slay him (Stanbury "Lover's Gaze" 227). The gaze invades the private self, but the gaze is reciprocal, and Criseyde's gaze makes Troilus a victim as well. Stanbury finds in this initial gaze, and the proceeding ones in Book II, "a

system of gestural codes and a contextualized sign revealing something to us about Troilus and Criseyde's sense of self—the shaping of their desire, their relationship to public opinion, their active or passive will” (“*Lover's Gaze*” 228).

Craig Berry's article above discusses the scene in which Troilus is shot by Love's arrow, but this stanza will be shown entirely here:

And with that word he gan caste up the browe,  
Ascaunces, “Loo! Is this naught wisely spoken?”  
At which the God of Love gan loken rowe  
Right for despit, and shop for to ben wroken.  
He kidde anon his bowe nas naught broken,  
For sodeynly he hitte hym atte fulle. (1.204-09)

Troilus, who before this scene is portrayed as a masculine, virile knight, is made victim here by the God of Love. Penetrated first by an arrow, he later looks upon Criseyde, whose reciprocal gaze further penetrates him. Criseyde then exhibits gestures, her “mevyng and hire chere” and her glance “a lite aside,” which Stanbury suggests “communicate her isolation and her self-possession” (“*Lover's Gaze*” 229-230). Later, Troilus is again penetrated by Criseyde's gaze:

And of hire look in him ther gan to quyken  
So gret desir and such affeccioun,  
That in his herte botme gan to stiken  
Of hir his fixe and depe impressioun. (1.295-98)

Troilus displays gestures of submissiveness as “his hornes in to shrinke” (1.300). Thus Troilus is “acted upon rather than acting” (“*Lover's Gaze*” 230), but he is the instigator of this act upon

himself.

Criseyde furthers this “pleye” of gestures by making herself more noticeable, in a passage discussed also by Aers:

For she let falle  
Hire look a lite aside in swich manner,  
Ascaunces, “What? May I nat standen here”?  
And after that hir lokynge gan she lighte,  
That nevere thoughte hym seen so good a syghte. (1.290-94)

This stanza encapsulates Criseyde’s figure for the reader early in the poem. Her isolation, self-assurance, and sense of humor are indicated in her description, but Stanbury questions whether Criseyde is an active participant who returns Troilus’ gaze, or whether this is an often misread passage in which Criseyde’s look “look a lite asside” is a gesture to show her submissive position. If we read her glance as assertive, then it parallels Troilus’ own attempt of the “predatory” gaze and leaves us to question who is the subject and who is the object here.

Jeremy Downes’ article, “‘Streght to My Matere’: Rereading Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*,” continues the discussion of these scenes, looking at various lines in Book I, beginning with Criseyde’s first appearance:

Among thise othere folk was Criseyda,  
In widewes habit blak; but natheless,  
Right as oure firste lettre is now an A,  
In beaute firste so stood she, makeles. (1.169-172)

Like Laura Hodges, Downes sees here semiotic representation, specifically in Criseyde’s

garments but also in her overall description. She is life, in her “beaute firste,” a beginning, and also death, in her “widewes habit blak,” an end.<sup>6</sup> Later, Criseyde visits the temple festival where she stands “ful lowe and stille allone” (1.178), but with “ful assured lokyng and manere” (1.182).<sup>7</sup> These descriptions constitute an early doubleness by Criseyde, which turns more treacherous in the later books. Downes says, “The doubleness of Criseyde as origin and end, however, and hence her status as herself that ‘double sorwe’ seems to question the precise centrality of Troilus” (162).

Levine discusses Chaucer’s ambiguity with respect to Criseyde’s childlessness as a purposeful omission to prevent the reader from seeing Criseyde as “iconographical,” as a mother-figure, or, as he notes, as a Wife of Bath-type-of-sterile-love figure. But, as Downes proposes, using psychoanalytic theory, the narrator’s quick assertion of fidelity to his source, and his passing of the question—“I rede it naught, therefore I late it goon” (1.132)—are phrases of abandonment. The question becomes whether the narrator, here, abandons his sources, or whether his sources abandon him, concerning Criseyde’s maternity. But, as readers, we too are aware already, from the poem’s beginning, of Criseyde and “how she forsook hym” (1.56); and this question seems relevant for the lovers of the poem as well.

Downes highlights a passage from Freud’s “Sexual Theories of Children:”

The set of views which are bound up with being “good”, but also with a cessation of reflection, become the dominant and conscious views; while the other set, for which the child’s work of research has meanwhile gained fresh evidence, but which are not supposed to count, become the suppressed and “unconscious” ones.<sup>8</sup>

Freud based his Oedipal complex, the nucleus of which exists in this quotation, on “a collision of

texts: a text received from the parents and a text, detectable largely through its questioning stance, that is to be suppressed” (Downes 166). In such a reading of *Troilus*, the narrator’s first created gap, concerning whether Criseyde is herself a mother or not, is significant. Troilus indicates the sexual nature of his researches—“I have herd told, pardieux, of youre lyvynges,/ Ye loveres, and youre lewed observaunces” (1.197-98)— and finds a source in the vision of Criseyde: “...thorough a route/ His eye percede, and so depe it wente,/ Til on Criseyde it smot, and ther it stent” (1.271-73). This discovery of the second sex by Troilus is further accentuated by Criseyde’s description as “so bright a sterre” (1.175). These celestial references are viewed by scholars, as discussed above, as equating Criseyde to a heavenly body or religious figure, but Downes seems to suggest they readily distinguish Criseyde as the female object opposed to the child-like male, Troilus.

The rather narrow focus of scholarship on Book I provides an interesting view of the state of contemporary *Troilus* scholarship as a whole. Such detailed focus hints at the importance of these passages to the overall poem, as well as the desire, whether conscious or unconscious, by Chaucerians, to converse in their works on the various aspects of these scenes. Criseyde’s descriptions in Book I illustrate her through the eyes of others, but readers have no sense of Criseyde’s true self. Is she passively reacting to her circumstances, or actively controlling her seemingly dire situation? Readers must look to Book II to attempt an understanding of the Criseyde inner workings.

### *Notes*

#### 1. Hodges notes:

Elisabeth Crowfoot, Frances Pritchard, and Kay Staniland discuss samite production in *Textiles and Clothing c.1150-1450, Medieval Finds from Excavations in London 4*

(London, 1996) 85-86; on 88-89 they also mention Spain and Italy as sources for silks. Marjorie Rowling, in *Everyday Life in Medieval Times* (London, 1968), 109-10, states that at least by the eleventh century “silk weavers from Constantinople had been established in Cyprus and Greece and were producing exquisite textiles, mainly silk,” and that Sicily was known to have joined into his production by the twelfth century. (n.7, 249)

2. Robert Durling, *The Figure of the Poet in Renaissance Epic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965) 45-46.

3. See Chapter 6 pp.99-104 of this study for a detailed discussion of Sanyal’s article, “Criseyde Through the Boethian Glass.”

4. Berry says:

The attractiveness of such leadership to Chaucer and his contemporaries becomes clear if we remember Walsingham’s concern that strife between Richard II and John of Gaunt could return England to the condition of a pre-civilized time ‘when the common people had no rulers, but raged out of control’...Chaucer lost associates such as Nicholas Brembre to the executioner’s ax in various personally-motivated political shake-ups— so Hector’s ability at this point in the poem to resolve all of the potential conflicts in Criseyde’s situation with one simple act of chivalry would have had immense appeal to a contemporary audience.

Such acts of chivalry were still being attempted in Chaucer’s day. John of Gaunt’s Castilian crusade of 138, for example, assumed the rhetoric of a knight defending the rights of his lady, in this case the lands rightfully belonging to the Duchess Costanza. (251)

5. This article is cited from R.A. Shoaf Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde: subgit to alle poesye*. It originally appears in *Chaucer’s Troilus and Criseyde* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1990), Chapters 5 and 6, in a slightly different form.

6. Downes compares the idea to Revelation 1:8, “I am the Alpha and the Omega” (158).

7. See J.J. Anderson’s brief article, “Criseyde’s Assured Manner” discussed in Chapter 1 pp.17-19.

8. Qtd. in Downes 166; Sigmund Freud, *On Sexuality Vol. 7*, ed. A. Richards, trans. J. Strachey (London: Penguin, 1977) 171-204.