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Criseyde Wholly Read

Despite the complexity of the *Troilus*, as well as the many ambiguities that define the character of Criseyde, scholars ultimately occupy one of two positions: either they defend Criseyde as a tragic heroine and victim of both man and circumstance, or they condemn her as an unfaithful, even conniving woman. Donaldson views the poem as a “pattern of human instability” and Criseyde as its “chief exponent in terms of human character” (1140). Robertson comments, “her conception of honor is pitifully inadequate, as is her understanding of virtue and truth” (499). Only those scholars who read Criseyde wholly throughout the poem can hope to argue her debatable legacy; and, even then, as many of the articles in this chapter prove, they still find it difficult either to completely condemn or completely exonerate her.

In the chapter, “Chaucer’s Criseyde,” from his 1980 book, *Chaucer, Langland and the Creative Imagination*,¹ David Aers suggests the *Troilus* examines the individual, whose actions exist within a specific social system, or more simply, the private self versus the public self. Aers continues this examination in his more recent chapter “Masculine Identity in the Courtly Community: Self Love in *Troilus and Criseyde*,” arguing that Criseyde’s role in this system is feminine object to the male courtly lover, and, while Troilus is somewhat exonerated by his passivity, “For Pandarus, just like Diomedes, Criseyde is an object whose existence is solely to gratify the desires of his friend, and so his own” (128). This is further articulated in Criseyde’s exchange for Antenor in which “the Parliament turns Criseyde into a commodity, perceiving women as mere objects in a system of exchange to be operated in what they take to be their own interest” (132).

Much discussed in scholarship is the scene, after both Troilus and Criseyde have learned of the impending exchange, in which Pandarus desires for Criseyde to comfort Troilus' sadness, with no concern for her own (4.925). Criseyde, here, becomes healer, or physician, to the male, a role she, through her concern, shows she is ready to undertake:

...her form of loving is such that even while grieving in this calamity she fully acknowledges the man's subjective reality. As she has done before, she cares for him, loves him in an existence she unanxiously acknowledges as the *other*. Unlike the male she sustains the mutuality achieved in Book III even in this crisis. One explanation of this sharp difference lies in the social making of "masculine" and "feminine" roles, ones that she, as much as Troilus, has internalized: her identity is bound up with being "needed" by a male as his "healer", with being a nurturer of men, one who accommodates to the male-governed world even when such an accommodation seems against her own interests. (Aers 133-134)

Criseyde's importance is heightened by Troilus' self-questioning of his manhood. He must possess this object— Criseyde— in order to be a man, and his failure to do so results in his devastation. Furthermore, the idea of woman as physician, as Aers says, "carries implications that are equally prominent in the poem: since the woman has infinite life-giving powers, it must be her fault, her malevolent withholding of vital resources, if the male feels discomforted, vulnerable, and 'sick'" (137).

Sheila Fisher, in her article "Women and Men in Late Medieval English Romance," calls Criseyde "the most fully realized representation of a woman's consciousness and self-consciousness in the Middle English romance tradition" (155). However, as Aers also suggests,

Criseyde is not her own woman, but, rather, an object on which male characters, and, truly, the rest of her surroundings, act. This is made most clear in the consummation scene in Book III. Troilus is literally thrown into bed with her by Pandarus, who here, as well as throughout the poem, according to Fisher, “genders the two lovers” (156). The reader is clearly the heterosexual male because we are given a detailed description of Criseyde’s naked body. Thus, she is trapped in a room, and poem, of men, surrounded by male readers. Criseyde is literally treated as a prisoner in the exchange for Antenor. Now, Criseyde, “fully feminized” as Fisher says, in the Greek camp with Diomedes, “is represented as the embodiment of change itself” (157).

Alastair Minnis and Eric J. Johnson, in their chapter “Chaucer’s Criseyde and Feminine Fear,” remember C.S. Lewis’ famous Criseydan equation. Criseyde is, as Lewis says:

neither very good nor execrably wicked.....But there is a flaw in her, and Chaucer has told us what it is; ‘she is the ferfulleste wight that mighte be’. If fate had willed, men would have known this flaw only as a pardonable, perhaps an endearing, weakness; but fate threw her upon difficulties which convert it into a tragic fault, and Criseyde is ruined.²

While many noted scholars agree with Lewis on the importance of fear in Criseyde’s actions, little has been done to connect Criseyde’s persona to the medieval psychology and ethics of fear, or to its influence in late medieval cultural constructions of the nature of women (Minnis and Johnson 200). Feminine fear is nearly absent in Chaucer’s sources, most notably in the staunch misogyny of Benoit and Guido. Chaucer’s Criseyde is unique to earlier versions of her character because of her slow and contemplative arrival at love. Minnis and Johnson quote John Lawlor, from his 1968 book *Chaucer*, who remarks that Criseyde’s fear exists “in its least obvious and

most insidious form...the fear of dispossession or dislocation, the mere terror of change over the wish to be left alone.”³ However, while Lawlor argues that such a depiction limits Criseyde’s character in the readers’ eyes, Minnis and Johnson offer that such fear, in fact, “enriches it by adroitly drawing on certain medieval intellectual traditions concerning dread” (203).

Fear was often seen in three distinct categories: natural, culpable, and laudable.⁴ Culpable fear came from a self-love and love for personal possessions at all costs. Laudable fear came from the desired exchange of selfless love between God and his people. But Criseyde’s fear is natural and instinctive, a concern for the safety of one’s self in the midst of trials and tribulations. Natural fear is morally neutral; it is neither praising nor diminishing toward one’s character. Chaucer’s depictions of Criseyde’s fear comply with the definitions of *timor naturalis*, which Peter Lombard defined as a fear “which is in everyone, in which death is feared and punishment dreaded,” and, further, in the anonymous *Speculum Morale*, as a fear in which “someone naturally fears whatever is contrary to nature or unpleasing...it is not the subject of free will.”⁵

Criseyde also carries the additional fear of shame, resulting from her father’s traitorous actions. *Timor erubescenciae* (embarrassment) and *timor verecundiae* (shame) are considered part of the greater *timor naturalis*. These fears of embarrassment and shame from her father’s treachery translate into similar fears of her own actions later in the poem. Criseyde’s fear grows in Book II though it is no more culpable than in Book I because it is a fear of the unknown. She is unsure of both Troilus’ and Pandarus’ roles in her future: fearful of what the people of Troy would think of a relationship involving both her and Troilus; fearful of the impending deaths of Troilus and Pandarus should she refuse; and, finally, fearful of the shame which would ensue should Pandarus or Troilus die on her account.

Minnis and Johnson argue, in Criseyde's defense:

If Criseyde's fear is judged to be culpable because it eventually prompts her to accept Diomedes as a lover, then it should also be regarded as culpable when it impels her to seek Hector's protection and when it encourages her to return Troilus' love. In each and every case her dread has one and the same motivation: it depends upon her natural fears of death, shame and privation, and although it may indirectly lead her to betray Troilus it can hardly be identified as some 'fundamental flaw' in her character. In Criseyde fear arises, exists, and functions reflexively, and strictly according to the dictates of nature. (208)

Thus, Chaucer's accentuation of Criseyde's fear may not have been intended to condemn her, but rather exculpate her in the poem.

Opposing the argument that Criseyde merely reacts to her situations, Jill Mann, in her chapter "Shakespeare and Chaucer: What is Criseyde Worth?," looks at Criseyde's "stage directions" in Book I, arguing, "The features of this description are not, that is, to be interpreted as a simple reflex of her character or her temperament; they are, rather, the result of what we may call 'arranged behavior'" (220). By interpreting the semiotics of this behavior, we may gain insight into Criseyde's inner self. For example, in Boccaccio, when Troilo gazes on Criseida at the temple, his look is returned with a look suggesting contempt. However, Chaucer further adds to this scene, "And after that hir lokyng gan she light" (1.293), a gesture with great implications because Criseyde's aggressive "look a lite asside" (1.291) is made passive by her own choice. Mann suggests, "This interaction between the inner and the outer, between private reaction and social behavior, interests Chaucer as much or more than Criseyde's individual character" (222).

Mann also points out the scene in Book II, often discussed by scholars,⁶ in which Pandarus first arrives at Criseyde's house. Pandarus' over-acting in attempting to convey a seriousness to his message is easily spotted by Criseyde, who herself cleverly jokes with her uncle, "youre maistresse is nat here" (2.99): "Skilled in the 'language of looks', she is also adept in the art of civilized discourse, in the ability to use speech not as a transparent register of feeling but as an instrument which can be made to create relations of ease and frankness" (Mann 223). This is not incriminating to Criseyde, for her intentions, unlike Pandarus', are not secretive; she, because of her contemplative nature, always responds by drawing from, what Mann calls, her "vast reservoir of thoughts and feelings that lie behind these surface manifestations" (223). More involuntary, and therefore sincere, is Criseyde's blush in response to Troilus' own blush as he rides by in battle parade. This blush indicates an awareness by each character of how he or she is perceived by the audience watching and, too, in Criseyde's case, an awareness of her own intimate feelings towards Troilus. Mann asserts that "Chaucer is more Shakespearean than Shakespeare" in characterizing his players (219), but she further compares the two poets by suggesting, "What is fundamental for him [Shakespeare] as for Chaucer is the conception that her [Criseyde's] shift from Troilus to Diomedes is a change, rather than the dropping of a mask" (240).

Virginia Walker Valentine's article, "Apologia pro Criseyde: 'Of harmes two, the lesse is for to chese,'" asserts the "blurred lines" involved in labeling the poem a courtly love narrative, since "any affair of the hearts encompasses some feature of the tradition" (25). While both the characters and elements of the poem qualify in many ways for the courtly love tradition, many key aspects of both characters and elements do not, including the exchange of Criseyde to the

Greeks for Antenor. This genre, as Valentine points out, “cannot operate in the milieu of legal decisions and wartime stringencies” (26). Even more, the option of marriage for Troilus and Criseyde, for Troilus perhaps the path of least resistance, again violates the statutes of courtly love. In defending Criseyde, Valentine argues against reading Criseyde as a courtly love heroine who becomes treacherous and unfaithful, for once the Trojan parliament agrees to trade her they wrest the actions of the love affair from the lovers themselves.

Valentine suggests that feminist readings of Criseyde, a product of late twentieth-century scholarship, are useless because they only reveal her to be “the matrix of the manipulated, weaker sex” (27). Such assertions that Criseyde should take control of her own situation do not acknowledge the social structure of fourteenth-century England much less classical Troy: “Scorning her for her passivity rather than for fickleness is merely trading one opprobrium for another” (Valentine 27).

Chaucer seems to find her blameworthy, as indicated in both his initial “And how that she forsook hym er she deyde” (1.56) and his final “That for hire gilt it oughte ynough suffise./ And if I myghte excuse hire any wise,/ For she so sory was for hire untrouthe” (5.1097-99). But many actions throughout the poem between these condemnations testify otherwise. Of course, her father abandons her, leaving her in an angry city without any friends, from which point she exists almost solely in fear, the greatest influence on each of her arguably bad decisions as has been argued by many scholars. Troilus is the victim of love, in revenge for his scorning of love, but Criseyde serves merely as love’s “instrument” for this revenge (Valentine 28). Criseyde’s choices, if one can call them “her choices,” are often completely non-desirable; and she, therefore, must choose the “lesser evil,” as Valentine says (31). By accepting Troilus’ love,

Criseyde accepts Fortune's fate cheerfully, similar to her acceptance of her trade to the Greeks, which she accepts dutifully.⁷ Troilus' love of Criseyde is self-love, as Aers and other scholars often suggest. This brings to mind, as already discussed, Pandarus' demand that Criseyde react lightly to the news of her trade so as not to upset but rather to console the distraught Troilus. Thus, once again, Criseyde is an instrument to ease Troilus' sufferings, rather than a definable self.

Priscilla Martin tracks Criseyde's movements over the course of the poem in her book, *Chaucer's Women*, providing a thorough synopsis of the generally accepted functions of Chaucer's heroine in the poem. Although, Criseyde is passed off in the poem's introduction as merely the cause of the hero's suffering, shortly thereafter, the narrator is lured into his own tale as a character due to Criseyde's "hevenyssh" and celestial nature. This otherworldly representation of Criseyde is ambiguous in that she can be read as subordinate to the mortal women of Troy, or, much more, an immortal figure far above their own. The narrator's descriptions are ones of admiration despite his empathy for Troilus. However, Criseyde's position quickly diminishes as she seeks protection through Hector. Now, Criseyde is neither subhuman nor superhuman, but simply an ordinary woman. As she stands at the Palladium, her picture is, as Martin suggests, "double-edged...exciting affection and compassion but also drawing attention to her" (160).

In moving into Book II, we also move into Criseyde's once distant inner life. Here we begin to see that Criseyde, like Pandarus, "simultaneously conceals and reveals" (Martin 169). Echoing Jill Mann's argument, as well as numerous other scholars, Martin agrees, "One of Criseyde's characteristic thoughts is 'What will people say?'" (169). Mann refers to Criseyde as

“skilled in the ‘language of looks’” (223), and Martin continues by referring to Criseyde as “a virtuoso of the double negative” (170). Criseyde, while confident in her own will, continues to be isolated; and, finally, night, darkness, sleep, and dreaming, as Martin says, “release the mind from the conscious restraints of the daytime world freeing it to express the hidden and the intuitive” (174). Her dream of the eagle seems to connect with the male pursuit of her by day and, specifically, with Pandarus’ “emprise” of wooing Criseyde by all means necessary. Her consummation with Troilus is both self-delusion, concerning her own will, and capitulation to her pursuer. But when Criseyde goes to the Greek camp and finally gives her heart to Diomedes, her innocence seems lost. Her culpability is made worse by a narrator who attempts “lame excuses” in “defending the indefensible” (Martin 183). However, in sympathizing with Criseyde’s circumstances, Martin says, “Criseyde is the victim of one of the most elaborate seduction plots in English literature” (176), and, further, “Someone who is always reflected in distorting mirrors is not likely to have much sense of her own integrity” (188).

Certainly, Criseyde does not participate in the chaste life of a nun, as is symbolized by her widow’s garments, but neither does she resemble the “sexually sophisticated and predatory” widow stereotype such as the Wife of Bath (Martin 162). She never marries again, which might have saved her from the exchange to the Greeks. As Martin suggests, “It is as if here Chaucer discards all the stereotypes of femininity which he so brilliantly redeploys, animates and criticizes in the Prioress and the Wife of Bath” (163).

Jharna Sanyal’s (“Criseyde Through the Boethian Glass”) follows the descriptions of Criseyde throughout the poem in supporting her thesis, “The poet of *Troilus and Criseyde*, perhaps more than Chretien, had succeeded in combining both matter and meaning into a

comprehensive pattern which could assimilate any philosophy within the narrative compass of the tale” (72). Because the audience knows the story of Criseyde, if from nothing else the opening lines of the *Troilus*, Chaucer must rely on subconscious directions, gestures and maneuvers. One such gesture is found throughout the poem in Chaucer’s descriptions of Criseyde, which gradually reveal, as Sanyal says, “a particular image of an universal situation developed along the Boethian idea of the nature of ‘human felicity’ or ‘worldly goods’” (73):

Her descriptions, as her author chooses to arrange them, evince that uncertain and doubtful quality which Dame Philosophy identifies as characteristic of earthly happiness. But such a suggestion, far from reducing Criseyde to an appropriate object for a medieval exemplum, re-affirms her individuality in the most impressive manner. (73)

Criseyde’s complexity requires many descriptions, the first of which is set against a background of familial tension and betrayal. Chaucer begins by framing Criseyde’s first description between two stanzas which heighten her desperate situation; her father’s fleeing—“Now hadde Calkas left in this meschaunce” (1.92)—and her pleas to Hector in her widow’s garments, in which “On knees she fil biforn Ector adown” (1.110). In the stanza between, Criseyde is first compared to the ladies of Troy, all of whom she surpasses in fairness. Second, she seems to be, as many scholars have found, a celestial being, “aungelik,” “immortal,” and “hevenyssh.” But this is two-edged, especially in the use of “semed”—“That lik a thing immortal semed she” (1.103)—because while Criseyde seems as a thing “immortal,” we know she is not all too human. Thus, we are made aware of Chaucer’s fascination with appearance and reality. Sanyal, in contrasting Donaldson’s past arguments that Chaucer’s audience would not

have known Criseyde so well as Shakespeare's later audience,⁸ proposes that Chaucer's "slydyng" language in using "semed," for example, indicates a consciousness of his audience's presupposed knowledge of Criseyde and her impending treachery and, therefore, his restrictions concerning the manner in which he represents her. Sanyal reminds us that Chaucer's representations of Criseyde both accept and reject Criseyde in a single instance, acknowledging the old Criseyde while fashioning a new Criseyde.

In Chapter 2 of this work, I discussed the many articles that examine Criseyde's entrance at the temple (1.169-182); and Sanyal looks, also, to this second description of Criseyde, which, as she says, "marks a descent from the first in being more localized, specific and down to earth" (77). This scene displays her widowhood, but more importantly shows us Criseyde's self-awareness of her situation both as a beautiful widow—"And yet she stood fol lowe and stille allone,/ Bhynden other folk" (1.179)—and as daughter of a traitor who stands "ay under shames drede" (1.180). The third description of Criseyde sees her celestial nature vanish amidst a very stagnant portrait:

She has nat with the leste of hire stature,
But alle hire lymes so wel answerynge
Weren to wommanhod, that creature
Was nevere lasse mannyssh in semynge. (1.281-284)

Criseyde is fully human here in her "wommanhode" which is "lasse mannyssh in semynge." Each description, Sanyal claims, is relevant to the situation in which it is made. Such is the case of the fourth description of Criseyde during the scene of consummation:

Hire armes smale, hire streghte bak and softe,

Hire sydes longe, fleshly, smother, and white
He gan to stroke, and good thrift bad ful ofte
Hire snowisse throte, hire brestes rounde and lite.

Thus in this hevene hym to delite. (3.1247-51)

Criseyde is brought closer to us here, paralleling the relationship of Troilus and Criseyde themselves. In Book I, we witness Criseyde, as described from afar, and we certainly see no description of Criseyde's inner self. In Book II, we have no true description of Criseyde at all, but rather watch her act and react to situations. However, in Book III, the relationship is far along, and, like Troilus, who is brought closer to Criseyde both physically and emotionally, so, too, we are drawn nearer to her. What is ironic, here, is that while Criseyde, once celestial, is brought to Earth, Troilus now attains "hevene."

Book IV marks a departure in many facets of the story and, of course, in descriptions of Criseyde. We are thus provided with only fragmentary pieces of her character throughout the rest of the poem. These fragmentary pieces, while seemingly appropriate for the more "aungelik" descriptions of Criseyde early in the poem, now highlight her treachery:

Hire ownded heer, that sonnyssh was of hewe,
She rente, and ek hire fyngeres longe and smale
She wrong ful ofte, and bad god on hire rewe,
And with the deth to doon boote on hire bale,
Hire hewe, whilom bright, that tho was pale,
Bar wnesse of hire wo and hire constreyente. (4.736-41)

Further, Criseyde's beauty is openly defaced:

She was right to seen in hire visage
As is that wight that men on beere bynde;
Hire face, lik of Paradys the ymage,
Was al ychanged to another kynde. (4.862-65)

These passages, when read with reference to Criseyde—“Remembryng hir, fro heven into which helle/ She fallen was (4.712-13)—solidify her change. Criseyde’s final description occupies three stanzas in Book V (5.806-826). As Sanyal points out, these three stanzas have the properties of an introductory description, such as that found in some of the *Canterbury Tales*:

All such introductory portraits are directed towards an affirmation of the beauty and virtue which make the lady worthy of the attention and love she receives. Chaucer by choosing to hold back this portrait to Book V divests it of such functional *raison d’être*. (82)

This last description is reminiscent of our first introductions to Criseyde in Book I, and, therefore, repetitious. It further indicates the narrator’s apparent loss of composure, unwilling to go forth with Criseyde’s condemnation as he delves back into his sources and repeats former descriptions of his heroine before her fall.

Chaucer, however, subtly slips in negative aspects to her character. First, he explains her joined eyebrows, not as a mark of beauty, but as an exception to her beauty: “save hire browes joyneden yfeere,/ Ther was no lakke, in aught I kan espian” (5.813-14). Also, the final lines of these three stanzas—“But, trewely, I kan nat telle hire age” (5.826)—are, as Sanyal says, “intended to draw all attention to this deficiency of detail and thus it allows the more important one to be ensconsed unperceived” (83). The most famous characterization of Criseyde, “Tendre-herted,

slydyng of corage” (5.825), provides an interesting etymological study of Chaucer’s art. He employs his native “heart,” but modifies it with the French “tender” from the Latin “tener.” He also employs the French “corage,” which coincides with the Latin “animus,” and modifies it with the Old English word “slidan.” What this does for Chaucer’s audience is to accentuate the differences between a seemingly virtuous “tendre heart,” or a heart easily moved by “pitee,” and one that is easily sliding and shifting (Sanyal 84). Sanyal argues, despite the negative culmination of Criseyde’s character, which Chaucer seems to be “calculatingly presenting in a series of portraits which are intended to move dramatically from the heavenly perfect one to the terrestrially imperfect” (85), and the tragedy of the situation, the quality and the joys of this earthly love are not denied.

Quendriith Johnson examines medieval psychology within the poem in the article, “The Medieval Worldview of Psychological Containment Examined with Reference to Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*.” Johnson studies the symbolism of containment concerning each character including Criseyde:

A container has two properties: within and without. On the poetic level of *Troilus and Criseyde*, one facet of container is an extended metaphor for chastity and purity versus penetration and corruption. Whereas Troy is destroyed by a model of itself, the clandestine Greek fortress contained in the Trojan Horse; Troilus and Criseyde become corrupted penetration of various texts, which in effect are models of themselves in that they are characters of a fiction. (63)

Many examples exist of Criseyde’s containment, both voluntary and involuntary. She shuts herself and her entourage within the walls of a secluded garden in order to read a book about a

siege. Troilus' letters to Criseyde are double containers in which an inner letter is contained, a letter which itself contains Troilus' inner emotions. The same is true of Criseyde's replies. Although Pandarus is wholly contained within the text, Criseyde attempts to emerge from it, early in Book II, by becoming a narrator, a figure, at least in theory, outside of the contained text. Criseyde's attempt only further masks her internal workings, but these emerge as well when she weighs the gravity of her situation:

And, Lord! So she gan in hire thought argue
In this matere of which I have yow told,
And what to doone best were, and what eschue,
That plited she ful ofte in many fold. (2.694-97)

Further, in Book III, Troilus is symbolically contained as he "gan in hir herte shette." Criseyde is not fooled into acting out Pandarus' intentions, but rather does so understanding her role within the plot. Because Criseyde is one who is contained within the text, she is unaware of the implications of her choices. As Johnson says, "Criseyde thinks always too precisely, precisely because she is a manifestation of individual judgement, and as such, is subject to the unreliability of decision without control of circumstances" (68).

Mary Joan Cook discusses an "inner and outer" Criseyde in her article, "The Double Role of Criseyde in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*." Cook asserts that Chaucer deliberately makes Criseyde an enigma:

By developing an inner and outer Criseyde, by occasionally indicating a disparity between the two, by raising questions about her behavior and usually acknowledging that he, the narrator, does not have the answers, he convinces the

reader that Criseyde is somehow inscrutable. (187-88)

Several examples testify to the fact that there is more to Criseyde than we might first believe. For example, while she shows ambivalence in chatter with Deiphebus and Helen, in Book II, inwardly “with sobre cheere hire herte lough” (2.1590-92). In Book III, when Pandarus requests Criseyde’s presence for dinner at his house, Criseyde laughs, “and gan hire faste excuse” (3.561), but later, she quietly asks if Troilus will attend. Why, though, does Chaucer portray Criseyde as inscrutable? Chaucer, in fact, seems to be associating Criseyde with the fickle goddess Fortune.

Cook refers to many scholars in their studies on Criseyde’s personification of Fortune. Charles Berryman calls Criseyde “the personification of Fortune, symbolically equal in exchange with Antenor, who also becomes known for betrayal.”⁹ Martin Stevens suggests that “as his [Troilus’] despair increases, his loyalty to Fortune wanes, until finally she is entirely displaced in his mind by her human counterpart, Criseyde.”¹⁰ Joseph Salemi concludes, “while it would be difficult to maintain that Criseyde is— even only figuratively— a representative of Fortuna, she is the instrument by which an external, determining force (that is, love) overwhelms Troilus.”¹¹ However, Cook sees these critics, and others, as only alluding to Criseyde’s associations with Fortune in the *Troilus* with no attempt to prove, as she does, that Criseyde actually portrays Fortune in the poem. But Criseyde is not only Fortune; rather, she plays the double role of Fortune and the lover of Troilus.

Cook points out many passages in the *Troilus* which allude to Criseyde’s role as Fortune. Most significant is Pandarus’ probing of Troilus to divulge the cause of his suffering in Book I. Troilus responds, “For wel fynde I that Fortune is my fo” (1.837). Pandarus then muses on the characteristics of the goddess Fortune before finally learning the name of Troilus’ pain: “Allas!

of all my wo the welle,/ Thanne is my swete fo called Criseyde!" (1.873-74). The closeness of these lines (only 37 lines separate them) indicates Chaucer's awareness of the comparison he makes. This passage is not found in Boccaccio. Furthermore, this discussion on Fortune by Pandarus and Troilus echoes the descriptions of Fortune found in Chaucer's *Boece* (II, Pr.1, 52-115). Chaucer further expands on Boccaccio's rendering of Criseida's exchange to the Greeks. Boccaccio passes quickly over the terms of Criseida's exchange: Calchas requests his daughter's trade and the Trojans agree. However, Chaucer, in translating the same story, reminds the reader of the consequences of Criseyde's exchange for Antenor: "This folk desiren now deliveraunce/ Of Antenor, that brought hem to meschaunce" (4.202-3). What this subtle change does, as Cook argues, is equate Criseyde with the city's good fortune and the coming of Antenor with bad fortune.

Anna Torti examines the impact of Troilus' making "a mirour of his mynde/ In which he saugh al holly" Criseyde's figure in her chapter "Troilus' Good Aventure: Man's Trouthe as a Veiled Mirror of God's Truth." Torti asserts, "Troilus embodies the ideal of the perfect knight, and for him the Neoplatonic language referring to the mind's mirror with its reflection of Criseyde— and to the heart as arbiter of the rightness of love— is appropriate within the context of a typical courtly love story" (37). This ambiguous mirror imagery is more significant, as Torti points out, when considering a corresponding metaphor in the *Boece*:

thilke Stoycienis wenden that the sowle
had ben nakid of itself, as a mirour or a clene
parchemyn, so that alle figures most first
comen fro thinges fro withoute into soules,

and ben emprientid into soules. (V pr.4.11-15)

Troilus' imagining "holly hire figure" in Book I is contrasted by Criseyde's two-fold reaction to Troilus as a romantic interest. She briefly swoons– "Who yaf me drynke?" (2.651)– but then systematically evaluates Troilus' character:

And gan to caste and rollen up and down

Withinne hire thought his excellent prowesse,

And his estat, and also his renown,

His wit, his-shap, and ek his gentillesse. (2.659-62)

Criseyde's pragmatism is displayed throughout the poem whether in her request for protection to Hector after her father deserts her, or her reminder to Troilus to leave after their night of consummation, before day breaks.

Criseyde's ultimate change in the poem is only the result of pressures from "public circumstances": her exchange for Antenor stems from war, and not from "the state of flux in Nature and the fickleness of womankind" (Torti 52). Though the narrator coldly condemns her in the beginning of Book IV– "For how Criseyde Troilus forsook" (4.15)– he quickly softens his tone in the next line, "Or at the leeste, how that she was unkynde" (4.16). The weak adjective "unkynde," as Torti says, "attenuates Criseyde's guilt, for which he [narrator] had already adduced several excuses" (53). Nonetheless, Criseyde does change, even physically: "Hire face, lik of Paradys the ymage,/ Was al ychaunged in another kynde" (4.864-65). This decline from heavenly "Paradys" to "another kynde" indicates a parallel decline in her character and, furthermore, the love story itself. The narrator, however, briefly reprises Criseyde's seeming celestial beauty, which, as Torti says, he cannot help admiring, by illustrating Criseyde once

more in Book V with the statement “Paradis stood formed in hire yen” (5.817). The closeness of this passage to her moment of betrayal, however, seems to accentuate the fallibility of beauty, of which Criseyde’s can only be earthly.

Torti cleverly compares the stanza containing the mirror metaphor in Book I with a stanza in Book V which seems to answer it: “mirour of his mynde” (1.365) and “out of youre mynde” (5.1695); “he saugh al holly hire figure” (1.366) and “I se that clene out of youre mynde/ Ye han me cast” (5.1695-96); “he wel koude in his herte fynde” (1.367) and “I ne kan nor may,/ For al this world, withinne myn herte fynde” (5.1696-97); “To love swich oon” (1.3369) and “To unloven yow” (5.1698). The similar lines are positive in the Book I stanza and negative in the Book V stanza. Torti suggests:

This change in Criseyde is made clear in terms of choice of words by her favorite refrain *trouthe/routhe* being repeated. The *trouthe* she was so proud of in Book IV— for which she was ready to die— is *now* revealed in Troilus’ eyes as a mere ‘name of trouthe’ (5.1686), and Criseyde’s *routhe* for Troilus is transformed into Troilus’ inconsolable complaint: ‘and that is al my routhe’ (5.1687). (61)

Criseyde, thus, betrays Troilus on both the “natural and ideal plane,” signified in her giving of the broach to Diomedes, both an earthly gift of affection and an symbolic transfer of love (Torti 61).

Despite these apparent condemnations, Torti defends Criseyde in the end, suggesting that Chaucer, the translator, betrays Criseyde. With his translation, Chaucer not only accentuates Criseyde’s actions by solely including the love story and not any of the war which surrounds it, but also in the broader act of handing down this incriminating story to future generations in a new language, English.

Rebecca Haywood (“Between the Living and the Dead: Widows and Heroines of Medieval Romances”) examines Criseyde’s role as a widow throughout the poem. Chaucer’s narrator initially resists categorizing Criseyde, who is “slydyng” in her desire to please those around her. Although her widow’s weeds testify to her desire to remain within social conventions, her interest in reading about the siege of Thebes, noted by many scholars as a masculine text, instead of “seyntes lyves” indicates her stronger desires to free herself from these conventions. Also, unlike Boccaccio’s *Creseida*, Criseyde’s doubts are not resolved instantly by passion. As Haywood points out, “The devices of Antigone’s song and Criseyde’s dream of the eagle who takes out her heart and exchanges it for his own, neither of which exists in Boccaccio’s text, make the process of change more subtle and interiorized” (237). When she is traded to the Greeks, Criseyde reprises her role as widow, following what she perceives as Troilus’ desires for her while she is away.

Because of Criseyde’s pragmatic nature throughout *Troilus and Criseyde*, the narrator knows he cannot rely on misogynistic interpretations, which is the reason, Haywood asserts, he omits two “blatant instances of misogyny in the *Filostrato*, Pandaro’s comment on the nature of vidual sexuality and the narrator’s conclusion that a young woman is likely to be fickle” (234). Haywood suggests, “The narrator employs romance convention to protect Criseyde’s representation from facile misogyny as long as her actions contribute to the fulfillment of the hero’s desire” (230). However, when Criseyde abandons Troilus, the narrator cannot complete Criseyde’s story without relying on the very same misogynistic stereotypes he at first avoided.

Reading Criseyde in the *Troilus* is difficult for any scholar, but, as Victoria Warren argues in her article “(Mis)Reading the ‘Text’ of Criseyde: Context and Identity in Chaucer’s

Troilus and Criseyde,” the poem’s characters find it equally challenging. Troilus even says to Criseyde, “Though ther be mercy written in youre cheere,/ God woot, the text ful hard is, soth, to fynde!” (3.1356-57). The problem lies not in Troilus’ inability to read Criseyde as a text, but rather his inability to escape his own text. Warren relies on Foucault’s definition of the mode for understanding a text:

It is time to study discourses not only in terms of their expressive value or formal transformations, but according to their modes of existence...social relationships...In undertaking the internal and architectonic analysis of a work..., it is a matter of depriving the subject (or its substitute) of its role as originator, and of analyzing the subject as a variable and complex function of discourse.¹²

Warren then applies this argument by suggesting that “Troilus’ mistake, in attempting to understand Criseyde, is that he studies her ‘text’ only in terms of its ‘expressive value’ without looking at her ‘mode of existence’ and ‘social relationship’” (2). Furthermore, Troilus sees Criseyde as author of her own text, which she is clearly not.

Troilus’ failures are largely due to his self-absorbed actions. He never realizes Criseyde’s vulnerability, investing her with more power than she actually has. Troilus does not witness the interactions between Pandarus and Criseyde, thus he is unable to understand her situation or her reactions to Pandarus’ inquiries, which often take the form of threats. In Book III, upon witnessing Criseyde’s crying following Pandarus’ prodding, Troilus seems moved, but quickly reverts to distress, afraid that Pandarus has not accomplished his task:

And al that labour he hath don byforn,
He wende it lost; he thoughte he nas but lorn.

‘O Pandarus,’ thoughte he, ‘allas, thi wile

Serveth of nought, so welaway the while!’ (3.1075-78)

Warren also points out, as do many scholars, that when Criseyde grieves over her trade to the Greeks, it is Pandarus who views her suffering, not Troilus, and who, even more, asks her to calm herself so as not to upset the equally distraught Troilus any more. Warren even compares Troilus’ self-absorption to Narcissus, whose myth is employed in de Lorriss’ *Roman de la Rose*, which, as Warren says, “suggests that self-love was seen as part of the courtly tradition.”¹³ Troilus’ self-absorption will not allow him to accept Criseyde as an individual; therefore, she remains dehumanized as the “other.”

Two scenes in the poem significantly damage Criseyde’s reputation. In the first, Criseyde debates whether to accept the affection of Diomedes, which she later does seemingly by her own choice. This scene, however, is better explained when paired with a second, though earlier scene. In Book II, Criseyde debates whether to accept and return the offer of love from Troilus (2.708-14, 2.772-77, 2.782-84). Criseyde’s question, “Allas! Syn I am free,/ Sholde I now love” (2.771-72), displays her emerging individuality, but, as Warren points out, in the courtly love tradition the woman is master to her male lover who sacrifices his freedom. Therefore, this seeming scene of independence for Criseyde is simply inverting courtly love conventions and only firmly establishing her in a submissive role. Criseyde struggles against this role, which is clear the first time Troilus looks upon her. As the object, or “other,” to Troilus’ assertive gaze, Criseyde returns “Hire look a lite aside in swich manere,/ Ascaunces, ‘What, may I nat stonden here?’” (1.291-92). She is not content to be objectified, and Chaucer provides her a voice. But, ultimately, Troilus’ failure to escape his own self-absorbed text not only dooms him but also Criseyde.

Rebecca Haywood, in her article, cites Gayle Margherita (“Historicity, Femininity, and Chaucer’s *Troilus*”), who does not refer to Troilus’ text but rather the romance which Pandarus himself writes. In analyzing Troilus’ gaze in Book I, Margherita claims that Troilus’ look cannot penetrate Criseyde, whose own look, in turn, however, does penetrate Troilus causing “his hornes in to shrink” (256). Both Troilus and Pandarus fail to “reduce Criseyde to the passivity of spectacle” and, further, to “textualize” her (Margherita 257). Margherita reads Pandarus’ suggestion to Criseyde– “...cast youre widewes habit to mischaunce!/ What list you thus youreself to disfigure” (2.222-23)– as a warning that her refusal to submit to the male gaze “disfigures” her as a woman (258).

While gender roles are reversed in Book I, they are quickly put back in social order in Book II as Criseyde is penetrated herself by Troilus’ triumphant parade through Troy: “she hath now kaught a thorn” (2.1272). Margherita views Pandarus’ vision of Procne in Book II, a vision of sexual violence, as an attempt by both Pandarus and the narrator to correct the poem’s unstable sexual identities. This is further supported by David Aers’ suggestion, which Margherita cites, that Troilus prepares for the scene of consummation with “fantasies of rape.”¹⁴ These private fantasies are supplemented by public fantasies as the poem shifts to the exterior in Book IV. Criseyde becomes a public object of exchange, but she has already been a private object of exchange for Pandarus and Troilus. Troilus acknowledges the necessity of this public objectification saying “she is chaunged for the townes good” (4.553). Margherita continues:

What is also clear is that, for Troilus, these poetic fantasies are structured in opposition to the historical and communal ‘reality’ of the extra-Trojan world. His belief in love, even in the face of Criseyde’s faithlessness, is also a repudiation of

a historical world that is seen to be violent and privative...The distinction between fantasy and reality, romance and history that subtends Troilus' poetic subjectivity is inaccessible to her [Criseyde]; she is always on the inside, never on the outside, of both social and poetic constructs. (261)

However, while Troilus is most easily seen as the victim in the poem, Criseyde, too, is victimized by these public and private male fantasies. While the poem portrays Criseyde and Pandarus as sexually experienced, young Troilus projects a kind of sexual innocence. Therefore, Margherita says, "The triangle thus takes on the characteristics of the family romance, with Troilus rather than Criseyde in the role of seduced innocent."¹⁵ Because Criseyde knows more than her generic position will allow, she is condemned.

George Sanderlin ("In Defense of Criseyde: A Modern Scientific Heroine") argues against scholars such as R.K. Root and A.C. Spearing, who describe Criseyde as weak, passive, and easily swayed, in suggesting that Criseyde represents the new scientific culture which was beginning to challenge the traditional or archaic culture in the fourteenth-century.¹⁶ Criseyde does acknowledge the chivalric practices of archaic Troilus, but she is more influenced by the "scientific" emphasis on relative values and individual consciousness" (Sanderlin 47). Sanderlin calls Criseyde a sister to the Wife of Bath while Troilus and, for example, *Gawain's* Lady Bercilak are "upholders of the archaic culture" (47).

Sanderlin points out three distinct situations in which Criseyde must make a decision that will determine her future. In each case, she assesses the situation, ponders the practical nature of each possible solution, and then makes her choice. First, she chooses, after careful deliberation, to acknowledge Troilus' advances. Second, she makes the difficult decision not to run away with

Troilus, but rather to go quietly to the Greek camp in the exchange for Antenor. Finally, she accepts Diomedes as a new lover. Each choice is made after careful scientific analysis of her situation. Rejecting Troilus' love would mean rejecting a worthy, gentle, and royal lover in the face of her father's traitorous actions. Running away with Troilus would expose their affair, damaging her reputation in light of archaic customs, and also prove an act of treachery against the wishes of her fellow citizens and government. Criseyde follows a dutiful path in going to the Greek camp. The impossibility of escaping the Greek camp, the possibility of Troilus' waning love, and the need to secure her safety necessitate her coupling with Diomedes.

Sanderlin cites Aldous Huxley, who like many readers, questions why Chaucer does not provide more details concerning Criseyde's betrayal of Troilus.¹⁷ In his representation of Criseyde, Chaucer illustrates the conflict between the new scientific point of view and the "archaic culture of absolutes" (Sanderlin 48). In withholding true resolution in the earthly love story, Chaucer subordinates human love with the need for commitment to God in the poem's final stanzas.

Sanderlin's suggestions are strongly opposed in Gretchen Mieszkowski's article, "Chaucer's Much Loved Criseyde." There is little ambiguous language in Mieszkowski's characterizations of Criseyde as a "a weak, inconsistent, ineffective reflection of the men in her story" and one who "has no strength, courage, determination, or selfhood" (109). Unlike Sanderlin's scientific Criseyde, Mieszkowski argues that Criseyde "agrees instead of deciding, submits instead of controlling, and is so insubstantial that at times she seems to be more nearly a mirage than a person" (109). Still, Chaucer's Criseyde has been and continues to be praised as a literary figure of femininity and a romance heroine. Criseyde's siren-like qualities are Chaucer's

deliberate creation.

Mieszkowski points out that Chaucer systematically removes any traces of selfhood in Boccaccio's *Creseida* when he writes his *Criseyde*. The more *Criseyde*'s self is diminished, the more her attractiveness is enhanced. *Criseyde* ultimately falls into the classification of de Beauvoir's female "Other" against man's "One."¹⁸ *Criseyde*, following the pattern discussed by de Beauvoir, does not attempt to become the One, but rather what Mieszkowski calls "the beautiful and cheerful setting for the activity of others."¹⁹ For example, in *Il Filostrato*, when Pandaro offers *Criseida Troiolo*'s letter, after some protestation, she accepts it and tucks it between her breasts (2.109-13). Following *Criseyde*'s own protestations, Pandarus seizes *Criseyde* and shoves it into her bosom (2.1155).

Mieszkowski offers numerous other examples of Chaucer's changes to Boccaccio. Most significantly, she argues that Chaucer's *Troilus* never explains why he loves *Criseyde*:

Criseyde praises *Troilus* perceptively and extensively in a number of wonderful speeches, but *Troilus*, unlike Boccaccio's *Troiolo*, does not praise *Criseyde* at all. Wildly in love as he is, *Troilus* never once talks about the qualities that make him love *Criseyde*. He speaks magnificently about love itself, as in his Boethian song, 'Love, that of erthe and se hath governaunce' (3.1744-71), but while *Criseyde*'s beauty and womanliness obviously attract him, and he once praises her 'bounte' to Pandarus (3.1663), he has nothing more to say about the virtues of his lady. (120)

Criseyde's character is not consistent with Romance conventions. Romance heroines are not typically passive, as is *Criseyde*. She is only relatable to de Lorris' *Rose* by her inaction.

Criseyde's betrayal of *Troilus* is not the action of a confident self, but rather the continued sway

of a character who mirrors whoever is in front of her, whether Troilus, Pandarus, or Diomedes.

Catherine Cox, in the second chapter of her book *Gender and Language in Chaucer*, argues that much of what we know of Criseyde is provided by men in the poem. Even Criseyde's words are given by the suspiciously biased narrator. When she pleads for Hector's help, he responds, "youre body shal men save" (1.122). Hector's response confirms Criseyde's objectification as a body rather than an individual self, and, as Cox suggests, "foregrounds her identity as victim" (41). By analyzing the events which lead to a woman's betrayal of a man, the narrative of the poem desires to shed light on the act itself. However, this narrative sets Criseyde up to fail. She is a widow, and essentially an orphan. As Cox says, Criseyde "thus finds herself occupying the awkward social position of having no male protector in a culture known to victimize unprotected women" (42). The narrator presents a confident woman—"With ful assured lokyng and manere" (1.182)—while at the same time informing his readers that she feels shame in the presence of others—"Byhynden other folk, in litel brede,/ And neigh the dore, ay undre shames drede" (1.179-80)—which is not fully explained. Does she have her own secret demons which cause her shame, or is she simply assuming the humble mantle of a traitor's daughter?

These ambiguities are applied by the narrator to the text as a whole. He sometimes claims to follow his sources, yet other times acknowledges his own deviations. As scholarship on Book III shows, for example, we are not always confident in our interpretations of interactions between characters, nor are we always convinced by declarations of intention or professions of truth by any character, including the narrator himself. In seeing the text this way, Cox argues that Criseyde, as a character within the poem, "embodies the 'slydyng' text. She is in effect the translated text of each reading, bearing the language that each imposes on her as each reader

appropriates her as his or her own” (43). Like Mary Joan Cook, Cox points to both similarities in the figure of Criseyde and Lady Fortune and the language used to berate them in the poem. These are all, however, manipulations of the male. The narrator, Troilus, and Pandarus form what Cox terms a “masculine triumvirate...determined to shape the romance to fit the literary paradigm” (45). Each male both desires and attempts to manipulate Criseyde to fit the textual figure of a Romance heroine, a role her circumstances will not allow. Only Criseyde understands this. Criseyde’s blame lies expressly in her inability to fit the genre in which her narrator, her uncle, and her lover desire her to fit. Cox argues, “To blame Criseyde without accounting for her dire circumstances is to legitimize misogynistic convention, to blame her for being both a woman and a victim” (48).

Maria Greenwood, in her chapter, “Women in Love, or Three Courtly Heroines in Chaucer and Malory: Elaine, Criseyde, and Guinevere,” calls the seemingly ambiguous Criseyde “the epitome of the young woman whose maturity consists of self-interest” (169). Criseyde’s experience as a lover both emotionally and physically affords her enough cleverness to keep appearances as a grieving widow and passive object of affection. However, this is contrasted by her playful demeanor with those close to her, which Greenwood argues “suggests that she is secretly desirous of renewed love relations” (169). Chaucer does not make condemnation so easy for his reader though. He allows readers to enter her private thoughts, thus encouraging them to relate with Criseyde in her dilemma. This is balanced by his descriptions of Criseyde, often negative as the poem nears completion, and through the eyes of other characters, which causes readers to distance themselves from her. Ultimately, Troilus’ love is greater than Criseyde’s, but Criseyde’s inadequacies are human. Greenwood says, “In the end, Criseyde’s fascination depends

on our uneasy feeling that she is a living contradiction that resembles ourselves in uncomfortable ways” (171).

Greenwood, though, ultimately finds Criseyde’s ambiguities resolved, pointing out that Chaucer introduces Criseyde as an abandoned daughter and widow only later to describe her as a celestial or “hevynyssh” figure descending in dark robes. The implications of this symbolism create in Criseyde what Greenwood refers to as a “‘dark angel’ which, in a Christian context, must intimate death, doom, and sin” (177). Furthermore, her solicitation of Hector’s protection appears as a woman using her beauty to appeal to a man’s base desires rather than his honor. Greenwood suggests, “Her kneeling and tears are so much a role-reversal of courtly love rules for male supplicant and gracious lady, that he must comply or appear uncouth” (177).

Chaucer’s Criseyde plays so much with Romance conventions, she completely eludes any categorizations that readers may attempt to place upon her. Her changeable character and the ambiguity with which most of her actions in the poem run, constitute a blurry picture of both demure femininity and calculated conniving. These articles, chapter, and books only further testify to the brilliant complexity of Chaucer’s art in creating his Criseyde. As she has for over six-hundred years, Criseyde will continue to embody a “hevenyssh perfit creature” who is “sydyng of corage.”

Notes

1. David Aers, “Chaucer’s Criseyde,” *Chaucer, Langland and the Creative Imagination*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980).

2. Qtd. in Minnis and Johnson 199. This quotation comes from C.S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936) 189-90.

- 3.203. This quotation originally comes from John Lawlor, *Chaucer* (London: Hutchinson, 1968) 76.
4. Minnis and Johnson here cite St. Bonaventure, "Commentaria in Quatuor Libros Sententiarum Magistri Petri Lombardi, Lib. 3, dist. 34, dub. 2, respon.," *Opera Omnia* (Quaracchi: ex typ. Collegii S. Bonaventure, 1882-1902) III.768.
5. Qtd. in Minnis and Johnson 204. Peter Lombard, *Libri sententiarum*, Lib. 3, dist. 34, ch. 9 (Grottaferrata: Editiones Collegii S. Bonaventure, 1971-81) II. 198, and *Speculum Morale*, Lib. 1, pars 1, dist. 26 (col. 78).
6. See chapter 6 pp. 95-96, 98 of this study for further discussion of Jill Mann's chapter.
7. See Chapter 5 pp. 78-81 for discussion of Slocum's "Criseyde Among the Greeks."
8. See Chapter 1 p. 17, Chapter 2 pp. 26-27 for further discussion of Sanyal's article.
9. Qtd. in Cook 189. Charles Berryman, "The Ironic Design of Fortune in *Troilus and Criseyde*," *Chaucer Review* 2 (1967): 2.
10. Qtd. in Cook 189. Martin Stevens, "The Winds of Fortune in the *Troilus*," *Chaucer Review* 13 (1979): 290.
11. Qtd. in Cook 189. Joseph S. Salemi, "Playful Fortune and Chaucer's Criseyde," *Chaucer Review* 15 (1981): 213.
12. Qtd. in Warren 1. Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author?" in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York, 1984): 117-18.
- 13.8. See lines 1345-2748 for Narcissus' myth in the *Roman del la Rose*. Guillaume de Lorris, *The Romance of the Rose*, ed. Harry W. Robbins (New York, 1962).
14. Cited in Margherita 260. Quote by Aers, *Community, Gender, and Individual Identity* 129.
15. 267. See also Aers 139ff.
16. Sanderlin cites A.C. Spearing, *Criticism and Medieval Poetry*, 2nd ed. (London, 1972) 145, and R.K. Root, xxxii.
17. "The only point in the poem when Chaucer's insight seems to fail him is in the very end; he has to account for Cressida's unfaithfulness and he is at a loss to know how she shall do it...Called upon to explain his heroine's fall, Chaucer is completely at a loss. He makes a few half-hearted attempts to solve the problem, and then gives it up, falling back on authority" (qtd. in Sanderlin n.5). Aldous Huxley, "Chaucer," *Essays New and Old* (Freeport, N.Y., 1927) 269-70.

18. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. and ed. H.M. Parshley (1953; New York, 1968) 70.

19.112. De Beauvoir 141.