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*The Elements of Chaucer's Troilus* by Chauncey Wood  
(review)

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students who because of language problems cannot or will not go back to the difficult and at times even forbidding originals. The anthology can particularly be recommended to students who do not specialize in the ever-widening world of Arthur but feel the need for a trustworthy guide to this important body of literature. Moreover, it will be a reliable source of information and inspiration for devotees and fans from particular genres and media such as Arthurian films, musicals, ballets, etc., who feel the need for a more comprehensive view of the whole matter of Britain.

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CHAUNCEY WOOD. *The Elements of Chaucer's Troilus*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1984. Pp. xii, 204. \$35.00.

Chaucer concludes *Troilus and Criseyde* with a request, addressed to “moral Gower” (and “philosophical Strode”): “ther nede is, to correcte” his work. Wood concludes his study by revealing that what he has “asked for—and sometimes attempted”—is a “Gowerian” reading of the poem (pp. 168–69). Gower had later produced his own exemplary versions of the story of Troilus in *Confessio Amantis* (notably at 5.7597–602); but Wood does not discuss that. The spirit that he summons up to “correcte” modern misreadings of Chaucer’s poem assumes the shape of the author of *Vox Clamantis*. Wood argues (pp. 31–37) that “what Chaucer Really Did to *Il Filostrato*” was reshape the story of the besotted Trojan prince so that it might act as a warning to the inhabitants of “New Troy” (i.e., London) in the spirit of *Vox clamantis*, and a scattering of writings by other fourteenth-century moralists, who saw the debilitating power of Venus as a major threat to the realm. So the pagan actors in this “tragedye,” set in the period of antiquity, are treated as if they were parishioners of Chaucer’s Parson, who declares that “fornicacioun, that is bitwixe man and womman that been nat married . . . is deedly synne, and agayns nature” (cf. p. 168). Consequently Criseyde is not so much to blame for her “infidelity” (*sic*) to Troilus, through her “carrying-on” with Diomedes, as for committing herself to an extramarital affair in the first place (p. 140).

Since Wood starts from such a set of assumptions, it would clearly be a waste of his time for him to observe how Chaucer carefully contrasts the behavior of the two men. This approach may also be responsible for his tendency to disregard the claims of narrative context. For example, a section headed “Criseyde and the Eyes of Prudence” continues for fourteen pages (129–43) without once considering the occasion for the speech in which she employs the commonplace about Prudence’s “eyen thre” (5.744). He does not mention the fact that she is here bitterly regretting her decision to reject Troilus’s plan for elopement, which she took during her long debate with him that concluded book 4. Indeed, Wood never discusses this crucial debate, nor does he appear to notice that dialectic is one of the poem’s most important “elements.” He does not attempt to consider why Criseyde now thinks that she is in a “snare” (5.748) and how this belief affects her subsequent behavior. Instead he argues knowingly that Criseyde had lacked Prudence (and Fortitude) from the moment when she allowed herself to become involved in an extramarital affair. En route he produces the remarkable suggestion (p. 139) that the author of Antigone’s song (2.827ff.) was Helen. Since Antigone herself says—in a line which Wood quotes—that the poetess was “the goodlieste *mayde* / Of gret estat in al the town of Troye” (italics added), this is a somewhat improbable conjecture.

In Chapter 2 (*passim*), Troilus is compared to Amant, in the *Roman de la Rose*, for foolishly following the God of Love and ignoring the advice of Reason. One wonders, therefore, why Criseyde tells him that she loved him because “youre resoun bridledde youre delit” (4.1678). Moreover, this is not merely her opinion of him. Whereas Wood reproves Troilus for standing “mute” (p. 91) during the “parlement,” in which the exchange of Criseyde for Antenor is mooted, Chaucer commends him (4.154) for keeping his mouth shut. His silence is the result of an interior debate between “Love” (who urges him to speak out) and “Resoun” (who advises restraint). It is only the first of several occasions when the prince allows Reason to conquer Love. In every instance it is because he subordinates his own desires to respect for his lady’s feelings. Wood ought to have found some way of disposing of this inconvenient aspect of Troilus’s conduct—but he does not even mention it.

It is hardly surprising that Troilus is denounced (along with that other “carnally inspired soldier,” the Squire in *The General Prologue*) for performing feats of arms “in hope to stonden in his lady grace” (p. 86). But Wood is so intent upon showing that the youth is not “ennobled” by love

that he even disparages his outdoor sporting activities. When Chaucer observes (3.1780–81) that Troilus spared the smaller animals in his pursuit of big game (a traditional way of distinguishing between a genuine knight and a sham like Sir Thopas—cf. *B*<sup>2</sup> 736, 754–56), Wood denies him even this modicum of praise by skipping aside into a covert allegorical gloss about the debilitating effects of carnal desire (p. 87).

Wood rightly observes the sinister character of Cupid and the shifty behavior of his mother, “Seint Venus” (chapter 4). He is also right to observe that Troilus’s “service” of these dieties leads him into some unadmirable, and even discreditable, actions—though not nearly as often as Wood would have us believe. What is so distressing about this study is its almost complete lack of sympathy for the fallible human actors in this “tragedye.” One cannot imagine Wood shedding “a quarter of a tere” for the hapless lover who, apostrophizing his faithless lady, exclaims that he cannot find it in his heart “To unloven yow a quarter of a day” (5.1698). But that is hardly to be expected from a critic who seems to think that all genuine medieval art aspires to the condition of *The Parson’s Tale* or *The Tale of Melibee*.

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