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Answerable Style

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Published by The Ohio State University Press

Grady, Frank and Andrew Galloway.

Answerable Style: The Idea of the Literary in Medieval England.

The Ohio State University Press, 2013.

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Troilus and Criseyde^{*}

Genre and Source

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AT THE END of *Troilus and Criseyde*, as everybody knows, Chaucer addresses his poem as “litel myn tragedie” (5.1786). And as virtually everybody also knows—or at least thinks they know—Chaucer derived this generic term from a sentence in Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy* and its attendant gloss.¹

What other thyng bywaylen the crynges of tragedyes but oonly the dedes of Fortune, that with an unwar strook overturneth the realmes of greet nobleye? (*Glose. Tragedye is to seyn a dite of a prosperite for a tyme, that endeth in wrecchidnesse.*)²

* This essay appeared in Lee Patterson, *Acts of Recognition: Essays on Medieval Culture* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009).

1. Henry Ansgar Kelly, *Ideas and Forms of Tragedy from Aristotle to the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), shows the range of meanings that were attached to the word *tragedy* in the Middle Ages. Nonetheless, he is confident that “Chaucer’s primary source for his understanding of tragedy was Fortune’s rhetorical question in Boethius’ *Consolation of Philosophy*” (Kelly, *Chaucerian Tragedy* [Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1997], 50).

2. *Boece*, Book 2, *prosa* 2, lines 67–72; all citations from Chaucer, except those from *Troilus and Criseyde*, are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, gen. ed. Larry Benson, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987). Citations from *Troilus and Criseyde* are from *Troilus & Criseyde: A New Edition of “The Book of Troilus,”* ed. B. A. Windeatt (London: Longman, 1984). The gloss derives from the *Commentary* on the

Most scholars have assumed that the challenge for the reader of the *Troilus* is to accommodate its complex narrative to this simplistic generic model.³ One problem with this strategy is that Boethius makes it clear that tragedy as thus defined is a debased form that should be avoided by the philosophically sophisticated. Lady Philosophy's pedagogy aims to raise the prisoner's intellectual capacity from *imaginatio* to *ratio*. In the first two books of the *Consolation* Philosophy operates at the level of imagination, most pointedly by the *prosopopeia* by which Philosophy speaks as if she were Fortune, "usyng the woordes of Fortune" (2, pr. 2, 2). Before she begins, Philosophy makes it clear that this account of the workings of Fortune is preliminary and philosophically facile. Here Philosophy is instructing her "nory" with "softe and delitable thynges," using "the suasyoun of swetnesse rethorien" (2, pr. 1, 37, 40–41). At the end of "Fortune's" self-description, the prisoner says: "thise ben faire thynges and enoyted with hony swetnesse of Rethorik and Musike; and oonly whil thei ben herd thei ben delycious, but to wrecches it is a deppere felynge of harm" (2, pr. 3, 8–12). Lady Philosophy agrees with him: "For thise ne ben yet none remedies of thy maladye, but they ben a maner norisschynges of thi sorwe, yit rebel ayen thi curacioun" (2, pr. 3, 19–20). The point for our purposes is that among these preliminary and philosophically inadequate teachings are tragedies. They are part of the dangerous poetry purveyed by the Muses rather than the healing wisdom purveyed by Lady Philosophy (see 1, pr. 1, 44–77). They do not instruct the reason but, through the imagination, move the emotions. That is why they are described as "crynges" that can only "bywaylen" Fortune, as if her workings were by definition harmful, while later the prisoner will earn that *all* Fortune is good, especially that which the unenlightened think is bad—i.e., that which deprives its "victim" of a good that he thinks is valuable, although the only truly valuable possession is a wisdom that once learned can never be lost. In sum, then, for Boethius tragedy is suspect because by appealing to the imagination rather than reason, it arouses emotions rather than imparting knowledge, and the information it does provide is philosophically wrong.

Consolation by Nicholas Trevet: "Tragedia est carmen de magnis iniquitatibus a prosperitate incipiens et in adversitate terminens."

3. The most egregious example of Procrustean torture is D. W. Robertson's influential "Chaucerian Tragedy," *ELH* 19 (1952): 1–37, but there are literally dozens of interpretations that take as given that the Boethian definition of tragedy is central to the meaning of the poem. A brief listing of some of them can be found in Karla Taylor, *Chaucer Reads the "Divine Comedy"* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1989), 214 n. 6. To that list one can add Derek Brewer, "Comedy and Tragedy in *Troilus*," in *The European Tragedy of Troilus*, ed. Piero Boitani (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 95–109; Kelly, *Chaucerian Tragedy*; and Christine Herold, *Chaucer's Tragic Muse: The Paganization of Christian Tragedy* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2003).

The Monk's Tale shows that Chaucer was entirely aware of Boethius's condemnation of tragedy. As almost every reader has pointed out, his tragedies are philosophically incoherent.⁴ More to my point, they appeal to the emotions through what the Monk evidently thinks are powerful images rather than to the reason through rational instruction: hence he begins his *Tale* by saying that he "wol *biwaille* in manere of tragedie / The harm of hem that stode in heigh degree" (1991–92); later he expresses Lady Philosophy's argument about the limitations of tragedy as philosophically useful more exactly:

Tragedies in noon oother maner thyng,
 Ne kan in syngyng crye *ne biwaille*,
 But for that Fortune alwey wole assaille
 With unwar strook the regnes that been proude. (2760–63)

The best example of tragedy's incapacity to move beyond emotionalism is the story of Ugolino with which the modern instances (and in all likelihood the *Tale* itself) closes.⁵ Dante presented Ugolino in the *Inferno* as the final demonstration of the way the sinner can manipulate language to misrepresent the most violent sins, and the Monk surpasses Dante's exculpation with exactly the version of his story, larded with scriptural allusions, that Ugolino would have wished.⁶ That Chaucer does not want us to miss the fact that the *Tale* is directed against the Monk's gross misreading of Boethius is accomplished by having him refer to the dismissive definition of tragedy given by Lady Philosophy not once but three times (VII.1973–79, 1991–98, 2760–65)—a sign of his pride in a learning that is all too shallow.

So if we are to dismiss the definition of tragedy that Philosophy gives in the *Consolation* as defining a form that Chaucer would have taken seriously, what else could he have meant by calling his poem a tragedy? There is another definition of tragedy available to Chaucer, which we may call, in shorthand, the Dantean. Not that Dante invented this definition, but in having Virgil call his *Aeneid* "alta mia tragedia" (20, 113) he was referring to a long medieval tradition that defined classical epic as tragedy. The connection in fact goes back to Aristotle's *Poetics*, who describes the differences

4. An early analysis along these lines is R. E. Kaskie, "The Knight's Interruption of the Monk's Tale," *ELH* 24 (1957): 249–68.

5. I agree with Ralph Hanna that Hengwrt's location of these instances at the end of the tale is more likely to represent Chaucer's intention than the order in Ellesmere, where they are located midtale: Ralph Hanna, *Pursuing History: Middle English Manuscripts and Their Texts* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), 151.

6. Piero Boitani, "The 'Monk's Tale': Dante and Boccaccio," *Medium Ævum* 45 (1976): 50–69.

of form and mode between drama and narrative, but who notes a similarity of content: "Epic poetry agrees with tragedy in so far as it is an imitation in verse of characters of a higher type."⁷ While the Middle Ages soon lost any sense of the what the classical theater was, the connection between elevated characters and tragedy remained. For Isidore of Seville, tragedies are not dramas but poems (*carmina*) that treat "public matters and the history of kingdoms" (*tragici vero res publicas et regum historias [praedicant]*) or, in a later discussion "the ancient deeds and sorrowful crimes of wicked kings" (*antiqua gesta atque facinora sceleratorum regum luctuosa*).⁸ In a culture which lacked any clear generic category in which to locate what in antiquity was known as an *epos* or *carmen heroicum*, the works that we now call epics were instead designated as tragedies. This shift in nomenclature was complete by the end of the twelfth century. In an *accessus* to Ovid's *Amores*, the student is told that "tragedy is . . . poetry about the deeds of nobles and kings," and by the early fourteenth century Albertino Mussato defined a tragedy as a poem written in heroic meter—hexameters—and dealing with the "open wars in the field waged by sublime kings and dukes." For Albertino, tragedians include Ennius, Lucan, Virgil and Statius.¹⁰

The point, then, is that our epic equals the medievals' tragedy. Moreover, and equally important, is the fact that for them tragedy is an account of historical deeds. Medieval writers understood the *Aeneid*, the *Thebaid* and the *Pharsalia* as accounts of things that really happened, as histories. After recounting the plot of the *Aeneid*, Conrad of Hirsau says that "Virgil has taken both the subject-matter and his intention from this history." And speaking of the *Thebaid*, he says that "Statius . . . took the subject-matter of his work from the beginning or the end of the actual war."¹¹ Indeed, Servius—followed by Isidore—complained that "Lucan did not deserve to be reckoned among the poets, for he seems to have written a history, not a poem" and Arnulf of Orléans said bluntly that Lucan's "intention is to deal

7. S. H. Butcher, trans., *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art*, 4th ed. (New York: Dover, 1955), sec. 5.

8. *Etymologiae* 8.7.6 (PL 82.308) and 18.45.1 (PL 82.658). Isidore does add, in a gesture toward the drama, that tragedies were sung "while the people looked on" (*spectante populo concinebant*).

9. A. J. Minnis and A. B. Scott, eds., *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism c. 1100–c. 1375: The Commentary Tradition*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 23.

10. Kelly, *Ideas and Forms of Tragedy*, 138. For other examples of medieval writers who define tragedy as describing historical events, see 131 (Nicholas Trevet), 151 (Jacopo Alighieri), 153 (Pietro Alighieri), 155 (Benvenuto da Imola), 161 (an anonymous French translation of the *Consolation*, made in the early fourteenth century, which illustrates Boethius's comment about tragedies by reference to the *chansons de geste*), and 162 (Renaut de Louhans, who also gives as examples of tragedies *chansons de geste*).

11. Minnis and Scott, *Medieval Literary Theory*, 63, 61.

with the *historia*” of the civil war between Caesar and Pompey.¹² Bernard Silvestris included Virgil among the *historici* and Alexander Neckham told his students to read the “historians” (*ystoriographi*) Virgil, Statius and Lucan.¹³ And of course when Petrarch came to write his own *carmen heroicum*, the *Africa*, he chose as his topic the deeds of Scipio Africanus.¹⁴ Indeed, even the Monk seems to know that his miserable little narratives are in fact histories: as he says in the first line of his definition: “Tragedie is to seyn, a certeyn *storie*” (1973)—that is, a history.

Chaucer could have derived this non-Boethian and much more capacious understanding of tragedy from many sources, but he almost certainly learned it from Dante. In Canto 20 of the *Inferno*, we remember, Virgil refers to *l’alta mia tragedia* (20.113). Virgil calls his poem a *high* tragedy because it is written in an elevated style (in the *De vulgari eloquentiae* [2.6.5] Dante says that tragedy is written in a *stilus superior*) and because it deals with important matters. As the commentary known as the *Anonimo Fiorentino* (c. 1400) says, tragedy treats “the magnificent deeds and the crimes of powerful men, as did Virgil, Lucan and Statius.”¹⁵ Shortly after this identification of the *Aeneid* as a tragedy, Virgil and Dante meet the Malebranche, a squadron of devils with vulgar names and the manners of Neapolitan street urchins. Taunting each other and Virgil, they are nonetheless unable to shake the ancient poet’s severe and even haughty demeanor. But Dante is also unable to persuade him that the devils do in fact represent a real threat. Hence the travelers soon discover that Virgil has been tricked by them into thinking that there is a bridge over the sixth *bolgia* (whereas in fact it had been destroyed by the earthquake that occurred at the moment of Christ’s death), and they are forced to escape the pursuing devils by a hasty and undignified slide down the side of the sixth *bolgia*. There they are met by the hypocrites, one of whom replies to Virgil’s complaint that the devils lied to him with a laconic comment:

12. For Servius and Isidore, see Kelly, *Ideas and Forms of Tragedy*, 83 and 115; for Arnulf, see Minnis and Scott, *Medieval Literary Theory*, 155. For a full account of Servius’ understanding of *historia*, see David B. Dietz, “*Historia* in the Commentary of Servius,” *Transactions of the American Philosophical Association* 125 (1995): 61–97.

13. For Bernard Silvestris, see Maura K. Lafferty, *Walter of Châtillon’s Alexandreis: Epic and the Problem of Historical Understanding* ([Turnhout]: Brepols, 1998), 45; for Alexander Neckham, see David Anderson, *Before the Knight’s Tale: Imitation of Classical Epic in Boccaccio’s “Teseida”* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988), 148.

14. See *Seniles* 18.1, in *Letters of Old Age X–XVIII*, trans. Aldo S. Bernardo, Saul Levin, and Reta A Bernardo (New York: Italica Press, 2005), 672–79.

15. Almost all the early commentaries and many later ones can be accessed on the Internet at the Dartmouth Dante Project. For this specific citation, see http://dante.dartmouth.edu/search_view.php?doc'140051010000&cmd'gotoresult&arg1'11.

Once in Bologna, I heard discussed
 the devil's many vices; one of them is
 That he tells lies and is the father of lies. (23.142–44)

The most important point for my argument here is that it is also within these cantos—just a few lines after Virgil's identification of the *Aeneid* as a *tragedia*—that Dante first designates the genre of the very poem he is writing: *la mia comedia* (21.2). Dante thus indicates the way in which his *Commedia* can include elements that a *tragedia* cannot, specifically the cheerfully vulgar devils who take such pleasure in mocking Virgil. To be sure, the curve of the action from “wo to wele” (as Egeus says in *The Knight's Tale*) is central to Dante's definition, but so too is the stylistic variation that characterizes comedy. As Pietro Alighieri says in his commentary, comedy is written “in a style that is, in the main, lowly . . . [yet also] in the high and elevated style.”¹⁶ The mixed style of comedy can accommodate elements that the uniformly high style of tragedy cannot. But equally important as these two criteria—the shape of the action, the level of the style—is subject matter. Tragedy deals with the world of public events, of history: according to Donatus, “tragedy aspires to historical truth.”¹⁷ But comedy describes not events but, as one medieval description of Terence puts it, “the habits of men, both young and old”—*mores hominum, iuvenumque senumque*.¹⁸ According to the schoolbook definitions, it concerns itself with *privatae personae, privati homines, res privatorum et humilium personarum*.¹⁹ The subject matter of comedy is what we would call the character: it represents men and women not in terms of their social existence but as individuals, as the unique and individualized personalities—or souls—whom we meet throughout the *Commedia*. Two lines after designating the *Troilus* a “tragedye,” and just before telling it to kiss the footprints of the great classical tragedians—“Virgile, Ovide, Omer, Lucan and Stace” (an invocation itself taken from the end of the *Thebaid*)—Chaucer prays God for the “myght to make in some comedy” (5.1788). In other words, just as Dante contrasts Virgil's *tragedia* with his own *comedia* so does Chaucer contrast the tragedy of *Troilus* with an unnamed future work. That this “comedy” is indeed the *Canterbury Tales* seems to me not merely plausible but virtually self-evident.²⁰

16. Minnis and Scott, *Medieval Literary Theory*, 481.

17. Cited by Wilhelm Cloetta, *Beiträge zur Literaturgeschichte des Mittelalters and der Renaissance, vol. 1: Komödie and Tragödie im Mittelalter* (Halle: Niemeyer, 1890), 28.

18. Cited by Cloetta, *Beiträge zur Literaturgeschichte*, 34.

19. These definitions come, respectively, from Donatus, Isidore, and Lactantius Placidus; all are cited from Cloetta, *Beiträge zur Literaturgeschichte*, 28, 19, and 21.

20. For the ways in which the *Canterbury Tales* fit medieval definitions of comedy, see Patterson,

If we grant, then, that Chaucer called *Troilus and Criseyde* a tragedy because he thought of it as analogous to the great classical epics, what are the consequences for interpretation?²¹ An obvious one is that we should stop trying to fit the *Troilus* into the Boethian definition of tragedy—a futile task, as criticism has persistently if inadvertently demonstrated—and realize that Chaucer thought of his poem as a history, as (to quote Isidore of Seville again) a *narratio rerum gestae*, an account of things done. Whatever else it may be, *Troilus and Criseyde* is a poem about Troy, the founding moment of European secular history. In 1355, the Northumbrian knight Sir Thomas Gray began his history, the *Scalacronica* with a vision of the ladder of history resting upon two books, the Bible and “la gest de Troy.”²² Virtually every European kingdom ascribed its founding to a Trojan exile, Brutus for Britain, Francus for France, and so on. Furthermore, Trojan history was a topic of significant concern in the English cultural and political world of the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. More or less contemporaneous with Chaucer are two Middle English versions of Guido, the alliterative *Destruction of Troy* and the so-called *Laud Troy Book*, and an abridgement of Benoît, the *Seege of Troye*. Also relevant to this body of writing is the vernacular chronicle, the *Brut*, which promoted London’s Trojan origins and its unofficial name of Troynovaunt. Then in the early fifteenth century Lydgate produced his massive *Troy Book* at the behest of Henry V, a very brief prose *Sege of Troy* was composed at the same time, and about 1475 Caxton printed as his first book an English translation of Raoul Lefevre’s French translation of Guido delle Colonne’s *Historia destructionis Troiae*, itself a translation into the sober Latin prose of the historian of Benoît de Saint-Maure’s verse *Roman de Troie*.

A second consequence of recognizing the *Troilus* as a history, despite the narrator’s disingenuous dismissal of Dares and Dictys, is to avoid designating the poem, as so many modern readers have done, a romance. Seventy-five years ago Karl Young entitled an article “Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde* as Romance”; fifty-five years ago Charles Muscatine saw elements of both

Chaucer and the Subject of History (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 242–43.

21. Inevitably, after working out this interpretation of Chaucer’s “tragedye” I discovered that I was not the first to make such a suggestion: see Richard Neuse, *Chaucer’s Dante: Allegory and Epic Theater in the “Canterbury Tales”* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 25; and Vincent Gillespie, “From the Twelfth Century to c. 1450,” in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, vol. 2: *The Middle Ages*, ed. Alastair Minnis and Ian Johnson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 207. This definition of tragedy as epic as applied to the *Troilus* is consistent with the reading of the poem given by Winthrop Wetherbee, *Chaucer and the Poets: An Essay on “Troilus and Criseyde”* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984).

22. Sir Thomas Gray, *Scalacronica*, ed. Joseph Stevenson (Edinburgh: Maitland Club, 1836), 2.

romance and the psychological novel in the poem, but admitted that it was "a genre unto itself"; twenty years ago, Barry Windeatt applied the terms epic, history, tragedy, drama, lyric, fabliau, allegory and (of course) romance to the poem, and ended by saying that "through its very inclusiveness of genres it becomes distinctively and essentially *sui generis*"; and ten years ago Roy Percy described the poem under the rubric of tragedy and romance while Corinne Saunders coined the term "epic romance" to try to capture its generic lability.²³ The problem with using the term *romance* to describe the poem is not only that it ignores Chaucer's own generic identification of "tragedye" but that *romance* was one of the few generic terms that had a distinctive meaning for medieval readers. Although the term covered a broad lexical field, and never (so far as I know) received any sustained theoretical attention, most readers and writers had a pretty clear idea of what it meant. In England it originally signified French as opposed to Latin: in his *Story of England* (completed in 1338), Robert Mannyng of Brunne wrote that "Frankysche speche ys cald Romaunce," and he described one of his main sources, Pierre Langtoft's *Le regne d'Edouard Ier*, as written "in romance."²⁴ But the primary medieval meaning—romance as a narrative—had already developed in the twelfth-century, when Chrétien de Troyes used the term *roman* to designate his work. "Cest romanz fist Crestiens" he says in the Prologue to *Cligés*.²⁵ Occasionally, to be sure, the term was applied to works that we would hardly consider romances. The English translation of Robert Grosseteste's *Chateau d'amour*, a personification allegory about the battle between the vices and virtues, opens with a firm generic marker: "Here begynnes a romance of Engliche of the beginning of the world." Other works that call themselves romances include the *Myroure of Lewed Men*, the *Trental of St. Gregory* and *Meditations on the Life and Passion of Christ*.²⁶ But on the whole the term was restricted to the narratives that fit the primary definition now offered by the Middle English Dictionary: "A written narrative of the adventures of a knight, nobleman, king, or an important ecclesiastic, a chivalric romance." Two presuppositions are important here: the focus on an

23. Karl Young, "Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* as Romance," *PMLA* 53 (1938): 38–63; Charles Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957), 132; Barry Windeatt, *Oxford Guides to Chaucer: Troilus and Criseyde* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 138–79; Corinne Saunders, "Troilus and Criseyde: An Overview," in *Chaucer*, ed. Corinne Saunders, Blackwell Guides to Criticism (Oxford and Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001), 129.

24. See the *MED*, s.v., 3.

25. See Rita Copeland, "Between Romans and Romantics," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 33 (1991): 215–24.

26. Paul Strohm, "Storie, Spelle, Geste, Romaunce, Tragedie: Generic Distinctions in the Middle English Troy Narratives," *Speculum* 46 (1971): 348–59.

individual hero²⁷ and the absence of any requirement that the adventures be amorous.²⁸ Indeed, the contemporary meaning of romance as a love affair, or as designating specifically the erotic rather than the fanciful or exotic, did not emerge at all—surprisingly—until the second half of the nineteenth century.²⁹ Yet this is certainly the dominant meaning of the word now: if you Google *romance* the first website that pops up is “Lovingyou.com: Love, Romance and Relationship Resources” and all of the ads on the Google webpage are of a similar nature, ranging from “Find Romance Online” to “In Home Sex Toy Parties.”

Yet if Chaucer thought of himself as writing a poem about history, why then is his poem dominated by a love affair? Or to put the question in another and more useful way, given the vast amount of Trojan material available to him, why did Chaucer choose as his source Boccaccio’s *Il Filostrato*? Boccaccio’s poem is after all not a history (or “tragedy”) at all but a *cantare*, a genre that deals almost entirely with the amorous doings of the courtly world.³⁰ The changes Chaucer made to his source have spawned an academic cottage industry, one to which I shall myself make a small contribution here. But the prior question—why this source rather than some other?—seems

27. Strohm shows that medieval discussions of romances bear witness to the assumption that they “deal with the deeds of a notable hero” (“*Storie, Spelle, Geste*,” 355).

28. As Jennifer Fellowes points out, “The modern connotations of the term ‘romantic’ might lead us to expect that love between the sexes is the primary focus of these narratives, but this is not normally the case. . . . This is not to say that love and marriage do not play an important part in most romances, but usually they subserve other themes such as the hero’s growth to maturity . . . or are seen in relation to knightly prowess, honour . . . and loyalty” (introduction to *Of Love and Chivalry: An Anthology of Middle English Romance*, ed. Jennifer Fellowes [London: J. M. Dent, 1993], vi).

29. The first use of romance as signifying either an erotic event or—as an adjective—an erotic emotion that I have found occurs in George Meredith’s *Diana of the Crossways* (1885), where Diana rather unkindly compares Thomas Redworth, the good man who has always loved her, to Lord Danisburgh, the wicked but oh-so-exciting man who has nearly ruined her:

her hope of some last romance in life was going; for in him [Redpath] shone not a glimpse. He appeared to Diana as a fatal power, attracting her without sympathy, benevolently overcoming: one of those good men, strong men, who subdue and do not kindle. The enthralment revolted a nature capable of accepting subjection only by burning. . . . She could not now say she had never been loved; and a flood of tenderness rose in her bosom, swelling from springs that she had previously repressed with a desperate severity: the unhappy, unsatisfied yearning to be more than loved, to love.

In the *OED*, the first mention of *romance* as erotic is from George Bernard Shaw’s 1909 play *Overruled*. My survey of nineteenth-century novels would have been impossible without the remarkable website <http://victorian.lang.nagoya-u.ac.jp/concordance.html>, where one can search concordances for a huge number of English-language literary works, including a number of medieval ones.

30. An excellent account of the *cantare* and Boccaccio’s transformation of this popular form into a culturally more ambitious poem is provided by David Wallace, *Chaucer and the Early Writings of Boccaccio* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1985), 76–95. Wallace usefully compares the Italian *cantare* to the English metrical romance as a mediator of courtly values to a nonaristocratic audience.

not to have been asked. C. S. Lewis said that in revising the *Filostrato* Chaucer "approached his work as an 'Historial' poet contributing to the story of Troy."³¹ This is certainly true, but to a degree that Lewis did not fully appreciate. Boccaccio has virtually no interest in the historical context of his narrative. As David Wallace has pointed out, when in a letter written contemporaneously he refers to the presumed Trojan source of the noble families of Italy he does so with ill-concealed disdain.³² Chaucer, on the other hand, for all his disclaimers about his erasure of history is in fact extraordinarily diligent in both maintaining the consistency of his classical context and in reminding us of the historical significance of his narrative. The poem contains well over a hundred classical allusions, almost all of them additions to Boccaccio's poem and with the vast majority showing both an impressive range of classical learning and unusual precision. For instance, after their first night of love Boccaccio has the lovers lament the coming of day in the general terms typical of the medieval *aubade*: "But the unfriendly day drew near, as was clearly perceived by signs, which each of them cursed angrily, for it seemed to them that it came much sooner than it usually came, which for a certainty grieved each of them."³³ But Chaucer has Troilus lament in terms specific to his cultural moment:

Quod Troilus: "Allas, now am I war
 That Pirous and tho swifte steedes thre,
 Which that drawn forth the sonnes char,
 Han gone som bipath in dispit of me;
 Thus maketh it so soone day to be;
 And for the sonne hym hasteth to rise,
 Ne shal I nevere don hym sacrificse. (3.1702–8)

Troilus not only invokes the name of one of the four horses that pull the chariot of the sun—almost every scribe stumbled over *Pirous*, the Englished version of Pyrois—but he also refers, here as throughout the poem, to the pagan rites, and especially Troilus's devotion to Apollo, that the Christian narrator will later reject with righteous indignation.³⁴

31. C. S. Lewis, "What Chaucer Really Did to *Il Filostrato*," *Essays and Studies* 17 (1932): 56–75; repr. in *Chaucer Criticism, vol. 2: Troilus and Criseyde and the Minor Poems*, ed. Richard J. Schoeck and Jerome Taylor (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1961), 19.

32. Wallace, *Chaucer and the Early Works of Boccaccio*, 176 n. 59.

33. *Il Filostrato*, ed. Vincenzo Pernicone, trans. Robert P. Roberts and Anna Bruni Seldis (New York: Garland Publishing, 1986), 168.

34. In his edition Windeatt points out that this description is found in *Metamorphoses* 2.153–54; for scribal stumbles, see the list of variants Windeatt provides.

Another, even more pointed instance, is when Chaucer inserts an entire, elaborate episode at Deiphoebus's house to allow Troilus and Criseyde to meet for the first time. The fictitious pretext for this meeting is that a man named Poliphete is, according to Pandarus, threatening Criseyde with some kind of legal action, and Pandarus is enlisting Deiphoebus and Troilus to come to her aid. When Pandarus informs Criseyde of Poliphete's threat, she replies that she would not care about him except that he is friends with Aeneas and Antenor. These two are, as we know, the Trojans who will betray the city to the Greeks; and the name Poliphete derives not from medieval versions of the Troy story but from Virgil's "Polyphoetes [or Polyboetes] sacred to Ceres" in *Aeneid* 6, where he is one of the fallen Trojans whom Aeneas sees in the underworld. There Polyphoetes is linked with a group Virgil calls "tris Antenoridae"—the three Antenorians—Glaucus, Medon and Thersilochus. In short, Chaucer had good reason to think that the "false Poliphete," as Pandarus calls him, was an associate of Antenor, and that the conspiracy Pandarus fabricates against Criseyde is later to be enacted in a darker, less fictive form.³⁵

This kind of historical siting is characteristic of *Troilus and Criseyde*. And throughout the poem the world of Troy presses in on the local enclave that the lovers try to construct from their passion until it finally collapses. But the question remains: does the little disaster of the love affair (romance) explain the larger disaster of the destruction of the city (history)? At first sight, the answer appears straightforward. The word *trouthe*—which means in the first instance fidelity to a commitment or principle, a value modern English characterizes by the words "loyalty" and "integrity"—appears in the poem, in its various grammatical forms, over a hundred times, and almost always as an addition to the *Filostrato*. Occasionally it is used as a conventional, almost unthinking oath—Pandarus is especially fond of swearing "by my trouthe"—yet as the poem proceeds even these casual usages come to bear a weightier significance. "To trusten som wight is a preve / Of trouthe" (1.690–91), Pandarus says early in the poem to Troilus, and then later tells Criseyde that she will be saved from Poliphete's machinations "bi thi feyth in trouthe" (2.1503).³⁶ A bit later Pandarus reminds Criseyde that she has her "trouthe y-plaint" (3.782) to Troilus, and she later confirms her commitment to Troilus himself:

35. Servius' gloss to this passage says that "multi supra dictos accipiunt quod fals[os] esse Homerus docet, qui eos commemorat."

36. As Windeatt points out, "Pandarus's words echo Christ's in Luke 8.48 and 18.42" (*Troilus & Criseyde: A New Edition*, 233 *ad loc.*). The anachronism of this allusion makes the echo all the more relevant to Chaucer's audience.

And I emforth my connyng and my might
 Have, and ay shal, how sore that me smerte,
 Ben to yow trewe and hool with al myn herte;
 And dredeles that shal be founde at preve. (3.999–1002)

"Have here my trouthe" (3.1111), she later says to Troilus, and he later replies, "Beth to me trewe, or ellis were it routhe, / For I am thyn, by god and by my trouthe" (3.1511–12). After the Trojans have decided to exchange Criseyde for Antenor, when Pandarus suggests to Troilus that he seek out a new lady, he replies angrily, "syn I have trouthe hire hight, / I wol nat ben untrewre for no wight" (4.445–46). And as Criseyde prepares to leave Troy, after promising to return, Troilus begs her to have "vertue of youre trouthe" (4.1491). Criseyde promises in turn not to be "untrewre" (4.1617)—a promise that is all the more poignant when she tells Troilus—in a radical revision of what Chaucer found in the *Filostrato*—that she fell in love with him because she saw in him "moral vertue grounded upon trouthe" (4.1672).

Of course Criseyde *is* untrue, despite Troilus's epistolary pleas "that she wol come ageyn and holde hire trouthe" (5.1585). The significance of this failure is made explicit in a line that Chaucer not only adds to his source but has Troilus say twice: "Who shal now trowe on any othes mo?" (5.1263, 5.1681). That this lament can be applied both to the love affair and the fall of the city is clear—and there is no reason to doubt that Chaucer meant his audience to respond to this rather straightforward moral lesson. If Laomedon had paid Neptune and Apollo; if Jason and Hercules had been granted the hospitality they had a right to expect; if Jason had been true to Medea; if vengeance had not been taken on Troy by the treacherous abduction of Hesion; if the next act of revenge had not been the seduction of the unfaithful wife Helen; if Achilles had not tricked Hector into an ambush; if Paris had not used Achilles' love for Polyxena to render him vulnerable; if Aeneas and Antenor had not broken faith with their countrymen; if Ulysses had not betrayed Penelope with Circe, bearing the son Telegonus who would ultimately kill him; and so on and so on. All of these actions—including those of the self-destructive Thebans whose history preceded the Trojan War, and whom Chaucer never lets us forget through some of his most extensive additions to Boccaccio—can be understood as failures of *trouthe*.³⁷

Moreover, as Richard Green has shown, in the fourteenth century *trouthe* came to include the meaning "reality," as in "the truth of things."³⁸ And in

37. I have stressed the degree to which Chaucer saturates his poem with allusions to the story of Thebes, and the meaning of such allusions, in *Chaucer and the Subject of History*, 129–36 and *passim*.

38. Richard Firth Green, *A Crisis of Truth: Literature and Law in Ricardian England* (Philadelphia:

Troilus and Criseyde we are encouraged throughout to see the narrator as being *true* to the history he is recounting, however much he might wish to avoid its ultimate unhappiness. He invokes Clio, the muse of history, at the beginning of Book 2 (and in Book 3, Calliope, the muse of heroic poetry³⁹); reminds us that if we don't understand someone's behavior that the story took place long ago, and "eech contree hath hise lawes" (2.42); and assures us no less than six times that "myn auctour shal I folwen as I konne" (2.49; see also 3.90–91, 3.575–81, 3.1196, 3.1325; 3.1817). Then, in the final book, when Criseyde admits that "now is clene ago / My name of trouthe in love for evere mo" (5.1054–55), the narrator insists not once but three times that he is following "the storie," i.e., the historical record, "trewely" (5.1037–57). And he goes on to say that "trewly . . . non auctour" (5.1086–88) tells how much time passed between Criseyde's arrival in the Greek camp and her acceptance of Diomedes as her lover.

Ne me ne list this sely womman chyde
 Ferther than *the storye* wol devyse.
 Hire name, allas, is publissed so wyde,
 That for hir gilt it oughte ynough suffyse;
 And if I mighte excuse hir any wyse,
 For she so sory was for hir *untrouthe*,
 Y-wis, I wolde excuse hir yet for routhe. (5.1093–99)

In this single stanza Chaucer presents us with his rueful, rather awkward narrator, who will not "falsen" the history he is recounting, set against the charming heroine who does, alas, "falsen" Troilus. George Kane has said that the moral value of *trouthe* is "the principal formative concern of Chaucer's mature writing."⁴⁰ In the *Franklin's Tale* we are told that "Trouthe is the hyste thyng that man may kepe;" the refrain of the "Balade de Bon Conseyll" is "And trouthe thee shal delivere, it is no drede." To deny the centrality of *trouthe* to *Troilus and Criseyde*, despite the rather moralistic and old-fashioned quality of such an interpretation, would be willfully perverse. And this moral seriousness, along with its historiographical interest, is what perhaps most distinguishes it from Boccaccio's poem, with what C. S.

University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 24–31.

39. Calliope is invoked, for instance, by Virgil (*Aeneid* 9.525) and by Statius (*Thebaid* 4.35 and 8.374), and in one of his *Sylvae* (almost certainly not known by Chaucer) Statius has Calliope predict a career that will reach its apotheosis in an epic (2.7).

40. George Kane, *The Liberating Truth: The Concept of Integrity in Chaucer's Writings*, The John Coffin Memorial Lecture, 1979 (London: Athlone Press, 1980), 12; see Green, *A Crisis of Truth*, 4.

Lewis called—rather ungenerously but not inaccurately—its “cynical Latin gallantries.”⁴¹

Yet this reading in an odd way not only does not account for Chaucer's choice of the *Filostrato* as the vehicle for his own version of the Troy story, but actually makes the problem more difficult. If Chaucer wanted simply to explain the fall of Troy in terms of a failure of *trouthe*, why turn to a version that so assiduously avoids both historical context and moral import? For an answer I must return to my earlier comments about the vexed issue of beginnings. In this poem Chaucer wants not merely to assign a judgment to the collapse of both a love affair and a society, but to understand the meaning of that judgment. If we can say that at the start of secular history lies a great and terrible failure of *trouthe*, what is the cause of *that*? Are we just to say that humans are fallen creatures who often behave disgracefully? Or can we understand moral frailty in more precise terms? What exactly *is* the source of people's inability to behave as they know they should? And I should add here that Chaucer chooses to ask this question in a poem set in classical times precisely in order to avoid the foreclosure of the Pauline answer. In his Epistle to the Romans Paul laments that “I do not that good which I will; but the evil which I hate, that I do,” explaining this self-division by invoking original sin: “Now then it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me.”⁴² But this solution to the problem of wrongdoing—inevitable to the medieval Christian audience—Chaucer is careful to make unavailable to the classical world of *Troilus and Criseyde*.

Chaucer's alternative is to explore the way the love affair begins in order to explain its disastrous ending. In this he is following the lead of Benoît, whose poem is filled with the language of beginnings and endings.⁴³ And his account of the initiation of the love affair in Books I through III is where Chaucer makes the most extensive changes to Boccaccio's poem. In the first three books Chaucer expands the *Filostrato* by over three thousand lines, in the last two by less than a thousand.⁴⁴ What Chaucer adds to Boccaccio is a beginning to the love affair that is dauntingly complex. To be sure, Pandarus focuses only on what the narrator calls “the fyn of his entente” (3.553), and he seeks to foreclose the process by which that conclusion is to be achieved as of no interest. As he himself says to Criseyde,

41. Lewis, “What Chaucer Really Did to *Il Filostrato*,” 75.

42. Romans 7:15–17.

43. See *Chaucer and the Subject of History*, 115–26.

44. In Book V Chaucer actually leaves out a substantial amount of Boccaccio's poem, especially Troilo's laments for the absent Criseida, whereas in the earlier books he excludes very little of the *Filostrato*, preferring to rewrite what he finds inappropriate to his purposes.

Nece, alwey—lo!—to the laste,
 How so it be that som men hem delite
 With subtyl art hire tales to endite,
 Yet for al that, in hire entencioun,
 Hire tale is al for som conclusioun. (2.255–59)

For him this conclusion is to bring Troilus and Criseyde to bed, after which “Pandarus hath fully his entente” (3.1582). But are the elaborate means by which that *entente* is brought to fulfillment (which occupies the first half of a very long poem) simply a form of erotic deferral, an elaborately extended foreplay?

To grant Pandarus’s view interpretive authority is to reduce *Troilus and Criseyde* to the *Filostrato*. In Boccaccio’s poem gestures toward a lofty idealism—compounded largely of Boethian and Dantean allusions—are undercut by a deeply misogynist cynicism. As we would expect, this cynicism is most explicitly voiced by Boccaccio’s Pandaro:

I certainly believe that every woman lives in amorous desire, and the only thing that restrains her is the fear of shame; and if for such a yearning a full remedy can properly be given, he is foolish who does not ravish her, for in my opinion the distress vexes her little. My cousin is a widow, she desires, and should she deny it I would not believe her.⁴⁵

When Criseida shortly does deny it, Pandaro repeats his opinion with exasperation (2.112), and Criseida instantly drops the pretense: she smiles in assent (113), and in her subsequent interior monologue admits to herself and to us her desire for a consummation: “would that I were now in his sweet embrace, pressed face to face!” (117). According to the logic of Boccaccio’s poem, this desire finds its inevitable moral extension in her later infidelity, motivated as it is by the “lies, deceits and betrayals” (8.18) that lurk within her. The *Filostrato* must, therefore, end with a misogynist outburst (“Giovane donna e mobile” [8.30]) qualified only by the claim that there does exist, somewhere, a “perfetta donna” (8.32) who is at once amorous and faithful. Nor are these values absent from the dramatic frame in which

45. The translation of this passage is not easy, but I have tried to capture as literally as possible the sense of Boccaccio’s original. In this I have been helped by the translations of Robert P. Roberts; Nicholas Havely, *Chaucer’s Boccaccio* (Cambridge: Boydell and Brewer, 1980); and N. E. Griffin and A. B. Myrick, eds. and trans., *Il Filostrato di Boccaccio* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1929).

Boccaccio's poem is set. Written to persuade the poet's own "donna gentil" of the intensity of his passive suffering, the poem demonstrates at the same time the poet's active power as moral arbiter and propagandist. The lady is disingenuously advised to apply to herself only those "praiseworthy things" written about Criseida and to regard the "other things" as there just for the sake of the story—a selective reading that is not only impossible but meant to be so. Should she not return to her adoring poet, runs the clear implication, "la donna gentil" is in danger of becoming known as another "Criseida villana" (8.28) through the agency of the now vengeful poet. His poem is, he tells us at the beginning, the "forma alla mia intenzione" (Proemio), and it accurately embodies the dangerous mix of emotions that women elicit from men who feel themselves to be at once amorous victims and textual masters.

I offer here only the briefest of summaries of the elaborately delicate process by which Chaucer has Criseyde come to accept Troilus. The purpose of his detailed account is to show not only that desire is experienced by Criseyde as an external force that comes upon her, but that even when it has become a part of her—when it has become *her* desire—she is unable to represent it to herself as her own. Aroused first by Pandarus's words, her feelings are intensified by the sight of Troilus returning from battle to the point where she can understand what is happening to her only as a form of almost chemical change: "Who yaf me drynke?" she says. She then retreats to a small private room, and then retreats yet further into her own mind. She debates the question of love in order, we assume, to make a deliberated decision. But the debate remains unresolved, so that what follows is a series of events (all of them of Chaucer's invention) that present desire as at once a part of and apart from the female subject who experiences it. First Criseyde overhears her lady-in-waiting Antigone sing a song that presents love as a benign mutuality. But the song alienates Criseyde's desire from itself by a double vicariousness: the song is not even Antigone's—much less Criseyde's—but that of an unnamed "goodlieste mayde / Of gret estat in al the town of Troye" (880–81). What then follows is a "lay / Of love" (921–22) sung by a nightingale in the cedar tree, a wordless song that by its allusion to Philomela images passion as a function only of the rapacious male. And finally Criseyde dreams that a bone-white eagle with his "longe clawes" (927) rends from her heart from her breast and replaces it with his own, fulfilling the promise of mutuality offered in Antigone's song but also staging the violence implicit in the nightingale's lay of love. By this point, Criseyde has, as she will later, passively say, "ben yold" (3.1210), but her accession to that yielding remains unspoken and unacknowledged. She knows and doesn't

know that she desires: she has felt it, heard it, dreamt it—but has she done it or had it done to her?

Chaucer's point in having love come upon Criseyde in this unreflective, subterranean way is to suggest, I think, that the question of morality, of consciously willing and choosing, is here largely irrelevant. We cannot say Criseyde is a victim—she knows what is happening to her and allows it to happen—but neither can we say that she makes a deliberate decision. So too, Criseyde's betrayal is described so that actions again unfold with such imperceptible gradualism, and are so compounded of motives and circumstances, that the search for an explanation—"the cause whi"—is inevitably thwarted. At the conclusion of Diomedes's first interview with Criseyde in her tent, "he roos and tok his leve." The passage continues:

The brighte Venus folwede and ay taughte
 The wey ther brode Phebus down alighte;
 And Cynthea hire char-hors overraughte
 To whirle out of the Leoun, if she myghte;
 And Signifer his candels sheweth bright
 Whan that Criseyde unto hire bedde wente
 Inwith hire faders faire brighte tente,

Retornyng in hire soule ay up and down
 The wordes of this sodeyn Diomede,
 His grete estat, and perel of the town,
 And that she was allone and hadde nede
 Of frendes help; and thus bygan to brede
 The cause whi, the sothe for to telle,
 That she took fully purpos for to dwelle. (5.1016–29)

The astronomical machinery represents not only the relentless passage of time—Criseyde had earlier promised Troilus she would return "Er Phebus suster, Lucina the sheene, / The Leoun passe out of this Ariete" (4.1591–92)—but also the workings of forces that operate in ways unavailable to self-reflection. As the moon leaves Leo so does Criseyde leave the lover who has just been described as "Yong, fressh, strong, and hardy as lyoun" (5.830). Venus is somehow in Diomedes's train here, and she in turn dominates Phoebus Apollo: to say that love overcomes wisdom is a possible translation of the astronomical symbolism, but it is hardly adequate as an account of Criseyde's behavior. The Zodiac bears signs, but their meaning is unclear to her, an

ignorance that is both the condition of her very existence and a key constitutive of her actions. Lying in bed, Criseyde "returns" Diomedes's words in her mind as the heavens turn, a scene that itself returns to the night some three years before when "lay she stille and thoughte" (2.915) of Troilus' words, of Pandarus', and of Antigone's. Then she had heard the "lay / Of love" sung by the nightingale, had dreamed the dream of the eagle, and had awakened (we were prepared to believe) in love.

In staying with Diomedes, Criseyde not only repeats her earlier behavior but reveals her life to be a continuous process that cannot be endowed with a precisely demarcated beginning and ending, in the sense of either a single motive or an intended goal. If it were true, as Pandarus had said, that "th'ende is every tales strengthe" (2.260), when we reach the conclusion we should be able retrospectively to evaluate the meaning of the events that have occurred: "But natheles men seyen that at the laste, / For any thyng, men shal the soothe se" (5.1639–40). Criseyde's liaison with Diomedes ought to tell us what her liaison with Troilus meant: the end of her career in the poem should make clear the meaning of its beginning. But in fact, far from clarifying the enigma of her character and motivation, much less of human actions in general, Criseyde's behavior serves to compound the difficulty: her end does not gloss but replicates her beginning.

The narrator himself finds this inconclusiveness painful—or so we might judge from his last-minute attempt to suppress it. In the midst of Diomedes's second and successful assault on Criseyde, he suddenly introduces into the poem portraits of the three protagonists. The presence of these portraits is sanctioned by the historiographical tradition: Dares, Benoît, and Joseph of Exeter all include similar passages in their histories, and Chaucer's version may owe some details specifically to Joseph. But the point about their late appearance in *this* version of the story is that they evade the very problem of interpretation on which Chaucer has hitherto insisted. By substituting for the detailed representation of subjectivity woodenly externalized *efficiencies* ornamented with brief judgments—Diomedes has the reputation of being "of tonge large" (804), Criseyde is "slydvng of corage" (825), Troilus "trewe as stiel" (831)—the narrator suddenly implies that the relation of character to action has become self-evident. But nothing could be further from the truth: the narrative these portraits are meant to gloss mocks their oversimplifications.

We are left, then, with two choices. We can either read the poem as teaching us that historical disasters are caused by the violation of *trouthe*, or that both human actions themselves and their relation to historical events

are unfathomable. Given that the poem ends in what Talbot Donaldson has called “a kind of nervous breakdown in poetry,”⁴⁶ we are entitled, I think, to conclude with the poet that no conclusion is possible. The relation of the individual to public events, of romance to history, remains enigmatic to the end.

46. E. Talbot Donaldson, *Speaking of Chaucer* (London: Athlone Press, 1970), 91.