Chaucer and the Poets

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Published by Cornell University Press

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Chaucer and the Poets: An Essay on Troilus and Criseyde.

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Introduction

As the narrator of Chaucer’s *Troilus* seeks to conclude his poem, he is anxious to preserve the decorum of his courtly love story yet increasingly aware that there is more to be said than its conventional limits will allow him to express. The question what human love is and means arises with a new urgency as the moment for separating from Troilus draws nearer, and the final portions of the poem are largely concerned with finding the appropriate mode for dealing with this question. It is a problem with which Chaucer wrestled a good deal in the course of his poetic career. The richest of his early poems, the *Parliament of Fowls*, is largely about how traditional allegorical forms engage and fail to engage the question of the place of human love in the order of the universe. The unfinished *Anelida and Arcite* and the *Complaint of Mars* are early symptoms of a lifelong concern with expressing in poetry the relationship between love and history. But the poem that comes closest to the *Troilus* in addressing the problematic relations of love and poetry is the *House of Fame*, which deals not only with the problem of finding a form but with the nature of literary tradition.

The *House of Fame* dramatizes the delusions and uncertainties that hinder a courtly love poet’s attempt to reconcile his commitment to love with a desire to write poetry of a higher order—more philosophical, more Dantean, more classical. The poem thus raises precisely the problem that the narrator of the *Troilus* confronts when he seeks to place his love story in its proper
relation to the achievement of earlier poets, a status higher than that attained by his previous exercises in courtly "making" yet deferentially "subject" to the authority of the great poets of antiquity. More than any other of Chaucer’s works the *House of Fame* is a poem about poetic tradition. A brief review of its complex and cerebral allegory can help us understand what was at stake for Chaucer when he sought to come to terms with the great poetry of the past—a task inseparable from that of finding an adequately serious way of talking about love and one that becomes the central concern of the final stanzas of the *Troilus*.

In the *House of Fame*, too, the task of engaging with tradition is central, but it is left wholly unaccomplished, and indeed most of the poem is devoted to illustrating the necessity for undertaking it. Despite the elaborate framework of the traditional celestial journey, the narrator’s strenuous touting of his vision in the Proem, and the Dantean invocations to the several books, the quest undertaken in the *House of Fame* is radically disoriented. From beginning to end of his threefold vision, the dreamer-narrator does not know what he wants to learn or what he should expect to learn at the House of Fame. He is presented as having concerned himself with love in theory and with the courtly ritual of literary service to the god of love, to the point of losing touch with the world around him. The eagle who carries him to the House of Fame promises him “tydynges / Of Loves folk yf they be glade,” which we may presumably understand to mean enlightenment as to the larger implications of his preoccupation with love, but he never receives the tidings themselves or any further information as to their nature.

The dreamer’s problem is illustrated in the first book of the
poem, in which he reports and responds to the story of the *Aeneid* as set forth on the walls of Venus’s temple of glass. The centerpiece of the story is an account of Aeneas’s relations with Dido, and at the point of his abandonment of her, the Vergilian narrative comes to a standstill while we are given an Ovidian view of the heroine’s wrath and sorrow, punctuated with references to other abandoned heroines. The dreamer is overcome with “pity” again and again as Dido acts out her tragedy and is noticeably distracted as he sums up the remaining eight books of Vergil’s epic in thirty-odd lines.

The pity that Dido’s Ovidian passion inspires in the dreamer, hindering and then dissipating his ability to apprehend the larger framework of destiny and renunciation which the Vergilian narrative expresses, is the index to a kind of alienation, a lack of moral orientation, which, though treated with a good deal of humor in the ensuing books of the poem, constitutes its serious theme. It is the poem’s counterpart to the passionate involvement with the lovers which makes it impossible for the narrator of the *Troilus* to achieve a perspective on his love story through most of the poem, and its implications for the dreamer of the *House of Fame* are forcefully illustrated by the ensuing action. The dreamer emerges from Venus’s temple to find himself in a desert inhabited by no natural thing. He is shocked into prayer, but his prayer is answered only with the bizarre visions of Books 2 and 3, his journey through the heavens and his tour of the House of Fame itself.

In one aspect the celestial journey is a dramatization of the dreamer’s sense of his capacity for serious poetry. There are energy and exuberance in his recognition that he too has joined Macrobius, Martianus Capella, and Alain de Lille in recording the wonders of the spheres, and a sureness in his recognition of the rank and achievements of the major and minor poets who have adorned Fame’s palace. What he cannot do, however, is reconcile his own ostensible purpose, the pursuit of love-tidings, with the emulation of any of these great models. He can find no adequate vehicle for the inspiration he feels, no way of ordering what he sees, and thus he is borne along from one spectacle to another, seemingly subject to forces beyond his control. At the climax of his journey he is on the point of receiving the long-
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sought tidings and simultaneously aware of the approach of a figure of “gret auctorite” who will presumably comment on them, but the poem breaks off before either of these elements can be incorporated into his vision.

Though the chronological relation of the House of Fame and the Troilus is uncertain, I think we may see them as reflecting two stages in the poet’s progress. The narrator of the House of Fame, after a long service to Cupid and the French courtly tradition, has become vaguely aware of the limitations of this tradition and has decided to explore the possibility of a larger poetic undertaking, though he cannot free himself from his courtly preoccupations to the point of being able to see the new enterprise clearly. But in the Troilus we can trace the evolution of a poet who begins as a courtly maker, a servant of love’s servants, enters into a sustained engagement with the classical tradition, and emerges at last as a Christian poet with a voice and perspective of his own. In the last hundred lines of the Troilus the abortive enterprise of the House of Fame is finally accomplished. The narrator who had begun his poem by willfully insisting on the gladness of love is forced at last to come to terms with Troilus’s unhappy end. His development has proceeded by fits and starts, and he experiences its final stages as a series of crises, but he emerges with a newfound sense of purpose that enables him to resolve the story and establish its relation to poetic tradition, consider its moral significance sub specie aeternitatis, and, in a final half-dozen stanzas, give expression to those spiritual implications of his theme which his earlier overinvolvement with the love story had concealed from him. In this last stage he achieves a perspective on poetry itself. He sees the perilously attractive rituals and values of both courtly romance and classical epic for what they are, and though the violence of his exorcizing of their delusive power hints at the survival of unresolved tensions in his attitude, he knows what he is doing in a way that the narrator of the House of Fame never does.

There is one further link to be noted between the two poems

before we go on to consider further the role of tradition in the *Troilus*. Chaucer is the first major poet outside Italy whose work reflects an appreciation of the importance of Dante, and in both the *Troilus* and the *House of Fame* the catalyst of the poetic enterprise, what inspires the poet-narrator to seek to reconcile his courtly allegiances with larger ambitions, is the example of Dante's *Commedia*. The *House of Fame*, with its tripartite structure, its elaborate use of dreams and invocations, and its self-scrutinizing artist-hero, seems to reflect the excitement of an initial encounter with the *Commedia*. For Chaucer Dante is not only a model but a standard by which the quality and seriousness of his own future work may be measured, and we will see him testing his finest work by this standard in the *Troilus*. But the Dantesque borrowings in the *House of Fame* are at once audacious and self-mocking. When the narrator compares his journey to the visionary pilgrimages of biblical and classical figures and begins each book with a clear echo of the opening of the *Paradiso*, we are asked to recognize the incongruity of such grand gestures with the poem's prevailing tone and the indecisiveness of the dreamer's quest. In the *Troilus* Dante has become an informing and sustaining presence, and the perspective he provides is one the poet-narrator finally comes to share. Though many of the *Troilus*'s borrowings are parodic, recalling Dantesque moments of enlightenment to comment on the confused or unworthy motives of the narrator and his characters, the effect is not to reduce Chaucer's poetic world to a caricature, but to confirm the psychological depth of his rendering of the universe of paganism. The *Commedia* has become part of the classical tradition as the Chaucer of the *Troilus* has grown to understand it, and in the concluding stanzas of the poem Chaucer proclaims the continuity of purpose in the two poets' engagement with the forms and themes of ancient poetry.

One of the most remarkable features of Chaucer's response to Dante was his recognition of the profound level at which Dante had engaged the Latin epic poets. He shares with Dante a strong sense of the differences in outlook that separate the Christian poet from pagan models, but like Dante he also views these models as *poetae* in a special sense, possessed of an authority and power that he saw medieval poetry as having attained only in the
work of Dante himself. Like Dante, Chaucer seeks to give full expression to the pagan character of his classical material, and he allows his narrator to share to a surprising degree the limited historical and spiritual perspective of his pagan characters. The *Troilus* is finally a Christian poem, but it is a Christian poem on a pagan subject in a special sense for which Dante provides the only real precedent. The story it tells is viewed sometimes as a rapturous celebration of human love ending with a reluctant palinode, sometimes as a demonstration of the inevitable disappointment of blind earthly desire. And no doubt it is both of these, but it is also something more. For the narrator, who chooses to retell a story set in the pagan past, and whose response to it is grounded from the outset in a close identification with the lovers and their pagan values, the story is an experience he also lives through. The *Troilus* includes its pagan world largely as the *Commedia* includes the *Inferno*, and its Christian perspective dawns only after the narrator has lived through the full range of his characters’ fortunes and shared the constraints of their world view. As with Dante’s encounters in the *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* or the earthly phase of his love for Beatrice, it is through a sympathetic sharing of the errors and aspirations of his characters that Chaucer’s narrator gains the knowledge that enables him, finally and at great emotional cost, to withdraw himself from the world of the poem and view the love of Troilus from a Christian perspective. Only then can his poetry realize its full expressive power, as Dante’s *poesìa* becomes a vehicle for recording his own spiritual progress only after he has emerged from the “dead air” of the underworld.

But the *Troilus* inevitably has a good deal in common with the poetry of its own place and time, and its distinctive, Dantean

qualities emerge more clearly when its debt to the medieval traditions of romance and courtly love are acknowledged. Like the *Commedia* itself, the *Troilus* is in many respects a thoroughly medieval poem, a making new of the *Roman de la Rose*. Chaucer's sense of the continuing vitality of the courtly tradition is clear when we see him following the Boccaccio of the *Filocolo* and *Filostrato* in appropriating Dante's rhetoric and imagery to a new, "realistic" treatment of courtly love. And while Chaucer follows Dante at his most significantly innovative in the depth of his engagement with classical poetry, there is much in the *Troilus* to remind us that he was also heir to the tradition of medieval romance, which presented the ancient themes in a significantly altered form. In the twelfth-century *romans d'antiquité* and their many offspring, the stories of Troy and Thebes and the heroes associated with them are vested with the trappings of chivalry and retold in a way that tends to blur cultural and historical contrasts. There is a marked tendency to soften oppositions between pagan and Christian values, to evade the purely tragic, and above all to give a new prominence to the theme of love.\(^4\) The acknowledged obligation to adhere to the broad outlines of classical legendary history in these *romans* is balanced by the interpolation of love stories involving virtually all the major characters and a strong emphasis on the complex relationship between love and heroism.

The naiveté of the best of these works is finely calculated, but a tendency to sentimentalize and distort the classical stories in the process of adapting them is an ever-present danger and one to which Chaucer may well seem to have succumbed. Most of what is un-epic in the *Troilus* could be explained as a concession to the romance tradition of remaking the classical past, and it is clear that Chaucer's whole enterprise is largely dependent on it. His Troilus owes his good character, his beauty, his comparability with Hector, and the heroism of his last battles not to Homeric tradition as transmitted by the Latin poets, but to

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Dares Phrygius. Troilus’s love of Criseyde is the invention of Benoit de Sainte-Maure.

It is also important to remember that these medieval versions of classical legend were accorded the status of history in Chaucer’s time. To the extent that the *Troilus* is a product of this tradition it can be seen as possessing the practical political value of other medieval retellings of the story of Troy, works through which noble houses sought to legitimize their own status in terms of “descent from an omnipotent past.” Chaucer’s use of medieval material about Troy to transform Boccaccio’s version of his Trojan love story, from which historical detail has been largely eliminated, might be seen as intended precisely to restore the story of Troilus to a place within this medieval historical tradition.

Chaucer was, of course, seriously interested in history and its exemplary bearing, and the *Troilus* in its own way speaks powerfully to the concerns of a court audience. But the historical significance of its exemplary narrative derives from an authenticating relation to the classical poetic tradition—from literary history rather than from historicity in the Troy-book sense. When the narrator of the *Troilus*, commending his book to the world, declares it “subject” to the standard of the great poets—Homer, Vergil, and the rest—he is at the same time implicitly setting himself apart from the historiographic tradition of Benoit and Guido, who had undertaken to correct the Homeric-Vergilian version of the story of Troy, and is tipping the balance back again, toward poetic rather than “historical” truth. The real source of continuity in the *Troilus* is the continuity of theme and vision that Chaucer recognized among the works of the great *poetae*, a complementarity of poetic worlds that he respects scrupulously in “subecting” his own work to theirs. He makes no such daring gesture as Dante does in including himself with

7. See the conclusion of Guido’s *Historia Destructionis Troiae*, ed. Nathaniel E. Griffin (Cambridge, Mass., 1996), p. 276, in which he declares that he has written because of his concern over the “deficiencies” of Vergil, Ovid, and Homer in expressing “the truth of the fate of Troy.”
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Vergil and Ovid among the *bella scola* of Homer (Inferno 4, 94–102), instead defining for himself a humbler relation to these models. But the standard they provide is rigorous, and as for Dante, they provide him with a perspective that enables him to adapt the attenuated classicism of the romances to his own larger purpose.

In effect Chaucer uses allusion to the classical *poetae* to comment on the effects of the “medievalizing” of classical story. His consistent use of the *poetae* as a standard of authenticity is complemented by his use of material from the romance tradition, with its more limited historical validity, to express the more limited world view of the pagan characters in the *Troilus*. He makes clear at a number of points that the knowledge of classical myth and legend displayed by his Trojans has been mediated by the romance tradition, with its blurrings of outline and shifts of emphasis. At critical junctures he compounds their confusion by providing them with classical lore derived from neither classical authors nor the medieval romances, but from the mythographical compendia, marginal glosses, and summaries that accompanied the classical texts in the medieval schools and often served as substitutes for them. Like the romances, these ancillary writings often provide incomplete or ambiguous versions of the classical material they transmit. Chaucer’s alleged “auctour,” Lollius, born of an artful misreading of Horace, may be seen as an emblem for his use of such compendia.

The effect of Chaucer’s imposition of what amounts to a medievalized perspective on his characters is largely to sentimentalize their view of their world and its past, and the intrusion of what we may call the tradition of Lollius tends to fragment it. It is often only the tragic or destructive aspects of mythic history that they recall, rather than those that might suggest continuity or give some grounds for optimism about human life. Again and again their recollection of a myth or legend will break off before recalling the crucial feature, the transformation or heroic act that gives the story its fullest meaning. They know of the chaos wrought by an Oedipus or Meleager, but show no awareness of the redemptive function of such heroes as Theseus or Hercules. They know of stories in which metamorphosis is used as punishment or provides a partial release from guilt or grief or fear, but
they seem never to have heard those in which transformation is the reward of heroism or pietas. They can see the beginnings of continuity and meaning. For example, they make tentative connections between their situation and the story of Thebes; Troilus discerns the shape of an old story in his sufferings at the hands of Cupid; and he later suspects that the boar of his dream has been “shewed hym in figure” (5. 583–85, 1448). But they cannot read these materials clearly or interpret them accurately. Their view of the past is confused and deceptive, and to the extent that their vision of history possesses any coherence at all, it is bleak and fatalistic.

The ambiguity and inconsistency of the characters’ view of history is strikingly summed up in Cassandre’s long gloss on Troilus’s boar dream. Their confusion is shared to a great extent by the narrator, whose sense of the historical aspect of his task is extremely uncertain during most of the poem. His few direct references to the Troy-book tradition are curiously offhand, alluding only to aspects of the “Troian gestes,” the war itself and the city’s fall, with which his own poem is not concerned (1. 141–47, 5. 1770–71). He is frequently unsure what perspective to adopt toward the love story proper, vacillating between a naive sense of intimacy with his characters and a strikingly modern awareness of the potentially distorting effect of distance in time, custom, and language on his perceptions and ours.

Even when unquestionably major events are directly engaged, there is apt to be a puzzling lack of emphasis on their historical significance. Thus in a passage that follows closely on Cassandre’s enigmatic historical commentary on Troilus’s dream, the narrator draws on Dante for a sonorous account of how Fortune oversees the transferal of dominion “fro folk in folk” (5. 1541–45) and then proceeds to illustrate the declining fortunes of Troy by recording the death of Hector. Reflections on the inevitability of fate and the specific circumstances of Hector’s death (as reported by Benoit) are interspersed with a conventional appeal to “every manner wight / That haunteth armes” to lament the death of this noble knight (1555–57) and a brief reference to the “wo” occasioned by his death, a woe to which Benoit and Guido had devoted hundreds of lines. Beyond the juxtaposition of the hero and the city in successive stanzas, the
narrator offers no reflections on what Hector meant to Troy or on the implications of his death. Instead we are shown the grief of Troilus:

That next hym was of worthynesse welle.
And in this wo gan Troilus to dwelle,
That, what for sorwe and love, and for unreste,
Ful ofte a day he bad his herte bresteo.

[5. 1565–68]

As love and unrest displace mourning in Troilus’s heart, Hector, and with him all thought of the fate of Troy, disappear from the poem. The window that had opened for a moment onto the plane of history is closed again, and the narrator returns to the narrative line of the Filostrato.

But while the medieval romance tradition is sufficiently present in the Troilus to reduce the dead Hector to a mere object of conventional chivalric piety, Chaucer’s treatment of Troilus himself presents a striking contrast. It is clear that one of the things he valued most highly in the poetae was their ability to link the enactment of historical change with the most complex kinds of human experience. He found in them a warrant for endowing his hero with a human and spiritual identity that is always to some extent at odds with his exemplary role as an embodiment of the fate of Troy. To some extent this is no doubt a matter of Chaucer’s “novelistic” power: Criseyde, too, is individualized enough to resist the sort of conventional moral categorizing that “the story wol devyse.” But Troilus’s development involves something far more complex. He seems almost to outgrow the world of the poem, and the virtue that reveals itself in his response to love somehow survives his death, coming to a posthumous fulfillment in the experience of the narrator. Troilus evolves through love to become a virtual pagan counterpart to the lover-pilgrim of Dante’s Commedia, and his progress is marked by allusions to a range of figures whose experiences, as described by Vergil, Ovid, and Statius, inform and enhance his own. As the narrator comes at last to sense the full meaning of Troilus’s example and invites the young lovers in his audience to bring the capacity for love they share with Troilus to a fuller
spiritual realization in their own lives, it becomes clear that Chaucer saw his poem as a genuine extension of the classical tradition, a vehicle for new insight into the human experience rendered with such richness and depth in ancient poetry.

Dante, as I have suggested, provides the one real precedent for this assimilation of the pagan past into Christian poetry, and even Dante offers no equivalent to Chaucer’s emphasis on the continuity of experience which links his pagan hero with the medieval reader. But the experience of the narrator of the *Troilus*, whose intuitive sympathy draws old poets into collaboration in the generation of new meanings, is remarkably close to the role Dante creates for Statius in his *Purgatorio*, in which the poet who had sung of Thebes in the reign of Domitian appears reborn as a Christian. Both Dante’s Statius and Chaucer’s narrator begin in darkness, Statius amid the shadows of paganism and the narrator in the dark depths of his preoccupation with the pains of love, and for both the development of a religious perspective on their poetic undertakings is inseparable from their activity as poets. The growth of the Statius who dates his baptism by a reference to his progress in the writing of the *Thebaid* (*Purgatorio* 22. 88–89) and who describes the stages of his spiritual advancement in terms of a progressively clearer understanding of Vergil parallels the evolution of Chaucer’s narrator, who is from the outset both deeply involved and perceptibly ill at ease with conflicting poetic roles, but who comes at last to a sense of the spiritual meaning of his poem that is inseparable from a recognition of his debt to the great poets of the past.

In the following chapter I will show how the literary program of the *Troilus* is implied by a pattern of allusion to the *poetae* which first appears in the poem’s opening lines and how the narrator’s developing perspective on love is linked to that of Troilus by an allusive use of earlier medieval love poetry. Chapter 2 argues that Troilus’s experience conforms to the classic pattern of human love delineated in the *Roman de la Rose* and finally transcends that pattern. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 survey the ways in which the distinctive features of Troilus’s role as lover-hero are pointed up by allusion to Vergil, Ovid, Statius, and Dante. Chapters 6 and 7 show how the broader implications to
which allusion calls attention are reflected in peculiarities of the poem’s narrative and in certain consistent features of the behavior of Criseyde, the narrator, and Troilus. The final chapter concentrates on the convergence of allusion and narrative in the final stages of Troilus’s career and traces the gradual subordination of his role to that of the narrator, who emerges from the world of the poem to become capable at last of seeing his story in a perspective that enables him to set his own work side by side with that of Dante.