Chaucer and the Poets

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Despite Chaucer's close and many-sided relationship with Boccaccio, Guillaume, and Jean de Meun, the *Troilus* is clearly a very different poem from the *Filostrato* or the *Roman*. Chaucer accepts their view of the social and psychological realities of human life and human love, and much in the *Troilus* is a variation on their treatment of the interplay of idealist and materialist attitudes and values; but the *Troilus* attains a grandeur and a final breadth of vision that are absent in these familiar sources. The aspirations of Troilus and the machinations of Pandarus are not only freed from the courtly world of the *Roman*, but set in a context of allusion to the mythic and historical themes of classical poetry which, even without the transforming perspective provided by Chaucer's use of Dante, would make the *Troilus* a poem of a different order.

The world of the poem's narrative is a much smaller place than the universe implied by its allusive framework, and one function of the framework is simply to accentuate the contrast between them. Chaucer's pagan characters live in a closed world. The attitudes they share—their preoccupation with love, their repudiation of history, their courtly code in all its aspects—and the private concerns that compartmentalize their lives are contrived, like the ingeniously medievalized Trojan setting, to point up their unawareness of the background against which they act out their story. The borrowings from Boccaccio and Jean de
Meun, the humor, the psychological realism, and all the resources of Chaucer the proto-novelist are finally means to the same end. They fascinate us with the story's surface and thereby make it an effective foil to the allusive conveyal of the realities of the history and fate of Troy.

One obvious function of allusion to the classical poets is to locate the action of the *Troilus* historically. In this respect, as I have suggested, such allusion is Chaucer's deliberately chosen alternative to the Troy-book tradition, and we must take seriously the care with which he makes his story correspond to the histories of Troy and Thebes as presented in Vergil's *Aeneid* and Statius's *Thebaid* and to the paradigm of world history in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. But allusion to these texts has a double function in the *Troilus*. At the same time that it grounds the story in epic history, it also constitutes a foil to the development of the hero insofar as it isolates his experience, and endows it with a significance that is independent of his historical role and that finally seems to transcend it. The purpose of this chapter and the next is to show how Chaucer's perspective on Troilus is at once congruent with that of Vergil and significantly at odds with it; how allusion to figures from the *Metamorphoses* serves both to universalize and to isolate Troilus's experience amid the flow of events and to set off the private and spiritual nature of his love; and finally how the opposition of individual and history emerges as a major theme in the light of Chaucer's sustained and highly complex reference to the poetic history of Thebes.

Before attempting to justify my claim that the *poetae* are an important source of meaning in the *Troilus* by examining the sources of some of its classical allusions, I would like to establish some ground rules. When is a classical reference sufficiently pointed to justify our looking to a particular text for information? Probably the meaning of the *Troilus* will not be affected by our failure to discover a source for Criseyde's two walk-on nieces, Flexippe and Tarbe, or "oothre lasse folk, as Phebuseo"; but we may well want to know more about Myrrha or the daughter of Nisus than that one wept and the other sang. When, on the other hand, is a correspondence too broad to justify a search for specific linkages? To what extent do the *poetae* provide an
essential context for Chaucer’s poem, and to what extent are they just a repository of poetic “lore,” aids to amplification?

The question of the limits of allusion is, of course, a highly controversial one, even in regard to the work of modern poets whose meaning avowedly depends on the evocation of the themes and contexts of the poetry of the past. And no reader, however conditioned by and tolerant of the allusive freedom claimed by a T. S. Eliot, would approach the *Troilus* as he would “Prufrock” or “The Waste Land.” But the comparison is not wholly far-fetched, for Chaucer’s use of allusion in the *Troilus* does have certain affinities with Eliot’s. Like Eliot, and perhaps with clearer justification, Chaucer creates a poetic world set in an irrevocable past, a world whose moral and spiritual values are fixed and circumscribed by constraints which no amount of imaginative sympathy can alter and which it becomes the function of allusion to define. And like Eliot’s, Chaucer’s treatment of his poetic world reflects a deep appreciation of the precedent of Dante, who provides a larger perspective on the classical auctores as they in turn define the spiritual horizons of Troy.

Certain basic assumptions underlie my treatment of Chaucer’s allusions to classical poetry. First, I assume that Chaucer thought of the poems that are his privileged sources as structural wholes, that his use of the *Metamorphoses*, for example, implies a coherent reading of that work, both as a poem in its own right and in relation to the other works of his preferred authors. Second, I assume that his knowledge of the whole poem informs his use of it at a given moment, that he is deeply aware of broad affinities of theme and structure. Reference to a particular character, event, or image in another poem is often an invitation to the reader to set Chaucer’s text side by side with its source for a time and consider the thematic, structural, and imagistic similarities between entire episodes.¹ Finally, I would suggest that Chaucer saw his canon of major poetæ as forming a continuum, as presenting collectively a consistent and authoritative view of world history and human behavior. The precision and consistency with

which the presentation of the ancient world in the *Troilus* complements and develops the world view of the *poetae*—a presentation that involves far more than the elaboration of Boccaccio's narrative with “historiall” material—is one measure of the seriousness of Chaucer's response to their work.

This broad relationship to the *poetae* is at least as important as any specific allusion, I think, and at the risk of seeming to have patterned my argument on the model of *lucus a non lucendo*, I would like to offer a tentative illustration of its importance by considering the curiously oblique relationship between the *Troilus* and Vergil's *Aeneid*, a relationship in which complementarity is the only obvious link. Though Chaucer unquestionably knew the *Aeneid* very well, it is hard to see more than an occasional suggestive parallel in the *Troilus*: the heroes of both poems, for example, are caught between their common servitude to a large and irrevocable destiny on the one hand, and the machinations of lesser powers—Venus, Juno, Pandarus—on the other. In both poems the hero first appears only after an elaborate setting of the cosmic and historical stage. And more than one critic has sensed a correspondence between the “smoky reyn” that detains Criseyde at the house of Pandarus, making possible the first introduction of Troilus into her bed, and the storm that drives Dido and Aeneas to seek a common refuge in their cave. Such correspondences could be multiplied, but it would be hard to demonstrate the presence of deliberate allusion.

Vergil's Troy is hardly recalled by Chaucer's, and such correspondences as can be detected are problematic. When Chaucer, by a few deft strokes, hints at a possible affair between Helen and Deiphobus, are we to think forward to the Vergilian conclusion of this affair, Aeneas's underworld encounter with a horribly mutilated Deiphobus who tells of his betrayal by this same Helen?2 Certainly I cannot read the opening or the closing portion of the *Troilus* without recalling the panorama of the Trojan war which Vergil's Aeneas, newly arrived at Carthage, discovers inscribed on the portals of the temple of Juno. The panorama

shows us, among other scenes, the Trojan people thronging the Palladion, where the story of Chaucer’s Troilus begins, and it juxtaposes this scene with a picture of how that story ends:

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parte alia fugiens amissis Troilus armis,
infelix puer atque impar congressus Achilli,
fertur equis curruque haeret resupinus inani,
lora tenens tamen; huic ceruixque comaeque trahuntur
per terram, et uersa puluis inscribitur hasta.
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In another part Troilus, in flight, having lost his arms, a miserable boy and no match for Achilles, is drawn along on his back by his horses and empty chariot, still holding the reins. His neck and hair are dragged over the ground, and his inverted spear writes in the dust. [Aen. 1. 474–78]

This scene is hard to forget, but is it relevant to Chaucer’s poem? Chaucer, though he follows Boccaccio in making a brief reference to Troilus’s death at the hands of Achilles, gives us no such view of his hero. In the lines just quoted we are already as far removed from the life of “joie” in Chaucer’s Troy as we will be when Deiphobus in hell recalls for Aeneas the “false joys” of the city’s last night (Aen. 6. 513–14). And yet the contrast between Vergil’s perspective and Chaucer’s can tell us a good deal about Chaucer’s purpose in creating his own Troy as he did. Chaucer’s Troy is a monument to the pursuit of false joys, a world that can exist only by excluding the realities of time and war. The pathetic fate of Vergil’s Troilus, the boy warrior, is an appropriate extension of the role of Chaucer’s “sely” Troilus, whose devotion to love is only the purest form of his city’s fatal preoccupation with the pursuit of “joie.” Though he cannot be shown to have had the passage in mind as he wrote, it is, I would argue, a legitimate test of the authenticity of Chaucer’s vision of the world of ancient poetry that there is no essential inconsistency between his treatment of Troilus and Troy and that of Vergil. The story of Troilus leads into, and in a sense becomes, the story of Troy, and Chaucer has shown us part of the process of this identification.

I would suggest further that the Vergilian perspective on Troy and its fall is inevitably a portion of the burden of knowl-
edge which the narrator of Chaucer's poem must resist in order to concentrate his energies on the affirmation of love. His own perspective is comparable to that of Aeneas in the scene just mentioned, in which the hero "feeds" on the inanis pictura, the mere likeness of the fall of Troy, aware for the moment only of the sadness of what he sees, yet strangely able to find grounds for hope and a kind of redemption in the spectacle (Aen. 1. 450–65). The perils of this emotional vulnerability and the obliviousness to destiny that it implies are suggested by Vergil's juxtaposing of the image of his hero's fixation on the panorama of Troy with an elaborate, quasi-mystical description of Dido, who makes her first appearance at this point (1. 494–504). Chaucer's narrator, too, invests a vain and desperate hope in his lovers, and like Aeneas's it is a hope "at once founded on and nullified by picturae inanes." Like Aeneas acknowledging his destiny, the narrator will finally be forced to withdraw from the world of Troy with its short-lived loves and joys, after granting his wretched youth a brief and futile (and unclassical) interval of heroic wrath. But here the difference between Chaucer's perspective and Vergil's becomes critically important. For Aeneas, recollection of the fall of Troy is a find of self-therapy; though he allows himself to be entranced by this initial panorama, he will go on to tell Dido the whole story, and in the process define the larger purpose of his own exile and mission. But Chaucer, while he distances himself radically from the plane of his poem's action, never diverts his gaze from the figure of Troilus. His poem preserves an essential congruence with the Aeneid, and in this sense is truly "subject" to the authority of the classical tradition. But at the same time the Troilus deals with precisely what Vergil leaves unspoken, the story of the infelix puer that his spear, as it writes in the dust of the battlefield, cannot tell, but that gives his life a significance distinct from its historical meaning as an emblem of the vanity of Troy.

Very different from the significant but shadowy presence of Vergil is the role of Ovid in Chaucer's poem. Ovidian allusion

Vergil and Ovid in the *Troilus* informs the *Troilus* in several ways. The stance and attitude of both Pandarus and the narrator owe a great deal to the persona of the teacher-poet, the *magister amoris* of Ovid’s amatory poems. The action is punctuated by allusions to individual stories, drawn not only from the *Metamorphoses* but from the *Heroides* and other of Ovid’s works. The allusions to the love poetry, though they point up certain complexities of attitude in both Chaucer’s poem and Ovid’s love books which have not always been fully recognized,⁵ are relatively straightforward, and largely a matter of tone and erotic doctrine. But the references to the *Metamorphoses* require us to come to terms with a range of the problems of interpretation posed by allusion. Though a few of these allusions function as little more than emblems, most extend well beyond the immediate contexts that allusion brings together, and at their most complex they enable us to discover correspondences between Chaucer’s poem and fine details of Ovid’s language and imagery which only an attentive reading of both texts together can bring to light.

To the extent that Ovidian allusion opens a window onto the world of the *Metamorphoses*, we may see Chaucer as an Ovidian artist, using allusion as Ovid himself used the theme of transformation, to arrest the movement of his poem and allow us to reflect on the interplay of forces at work within it. It is clear, too, that Chaucer’s characters live their conscious lives in a largely Ovidian world in which the power of love, “that alle thing may bynde,” is pitted against the efforts of human beings to withstand, control, or at least define the influence it exerts over their earthly destinies. There is change in Chaucer’s Ovidian world, but no true metamorphosis. Troilus can identify himself with Daphne, whose transformation into a tree enabled her to escape the tyranny of love, or yearn, like Dante, for a metamorphosis of desire itself, but he cannot free himself from the reality of his situation. But here too the irony is Ovidian: for the metamorphosis that Ovid allows his characters and Chaucer withholds from his is recognized by both poets as all too often a symbol of vain hope, an expression of the human spirit’s refusal to accept the human condition.

⁵. See ch. 5, pp. 152–53.
Though Troilus is consistently and almost exclusively the focal point of the most complex of these references, allusion to the *Metamorphoses* and other Ovidiana sheds light on Pandarus and Criseyde as well, beginning on the level of allusions made by the characters themselves. It is possible, indeed, to establish a hierarchy of complexity among the Ovidian references of the three principals in the story, a hierarchy that corresponds to their spiritual capacities and the complexity of involvement they feel with the gods and powers to whom they allude. Troilus truly believes in the gods and in the legends of their dealings with humankind. Criseyde and Pandarus, though, are almost totally engaged with practical realities, and the allusions that they make or that involve them reflect this practicality. When Pandarus compares Troilus’s love pains to the sufferings of Niobe or Tityus, it is mere hyperbole; when he prays to be struck with lightning or afflicted with the torments of Tantalus if his intention toward Criseyde prove dishonorable (2. 1146, 3. 591–93), such punishments have no reality for him. Even the very obscure references to “corounes tweyne” and “Natal Joves feste” (2. 1725, 3. 150), which strike a vaguely religious note, seem finally to reflect only his abiding concern with the processes of generation.  

Classical allusion is real for Pandarus only as it enters the world of the here and now: you can visit and see for yourself the marble tears of Niobe, and the Ovidian letter written to Paris by the abandoned nymph Oenone has evidently been circulating lately among the Trojan nobility (1. 699–700, 652–56).

Criseyde uses allusions to myth and the gods mainly to affirm

6. In 3. 150, word order suggests that “natal” denotes the function of the god rather than his “natal feste” or birthday. Here at least Pandarus may suggest the old gentlemen joking about christenings at Victorian weddings to whom C. S. Lewis compares him (*The Allegory of Love* [Oxford, 1936], p. 193). Far more obscure is Pandarus’s appeal to Criseyde to exercise “the vertue ol’ corounes tweyne” for the supposedly ailing Troilus (2. 1735). I can only add one more possible interpretation to the pile. In *Metamorphoses* 13, the wandering Aeneas receives from the priest-king Anius a bowl inscribed with the story of how Thebes was saved from a plague by the suicide of the daughters of Orion. When their bodies burned, twin boys emerged from the fire “lest the race should perish”; they became known as the *Coronae*, or Crowns (Met. 13. 692–99). Bernardus Silvestris alludes to Ovid’s story in describing the twin *genii* whom he associates with the testicles, and who, like the *Coronae*, perpetuate the existence of the race (*Cosmographia* 2. 14. 157–62). Pandarus may be asking Criseyde to exercise a similarly revivifying function, though of course the sacrifice of her honor, which he eventually engineers, preserves neither Troilus nor Troy.
her good character and sincerity, most notably in a cluster of oaths to Troilus late in Book 4. Even these are disconcertingly juxtaposed with a glib account of how she will confound her priestly father's prophecies and undermine his devotion to Apollo with skeptical arguments and the promise of wealth (4. 1397–1400, 1408–14). When we hear a more genuine note, it is because her sense of security has been threatened: while Troilus can face an eternity of endless lamentation for the loss of Criseyde (4. 472–76), Criseyde needs to believe that they will somehow be reunited like Orpheus and Eurydice in a realm without pain, the “feld of pite,” Ovid’s “arva piorum” (4. 789–91).7

More poignant is a passage that provides a sort of coda to one of her strongest oaths. After invoking Juno’s wrath should she prove false to Troilus, she ratifies her oath by invoking every god and goddess, from the celestial powers down to the “halve goddes” of the woods and fields, concluding, as if in triumph, “Now trowe me, if yow leste!” (4. 1534–47). The force of the vow is somewhat offset by the fact that it echoes Ovid’s Jupiter, enumerating the semidei and other innocent nature spirits whose earthly peace is threatened by the treachery of Lycaon, in Ovidian history the first mortal to break faith with the gods (Met. 1. 192–98). But then Criseyde goes on:

\[
\text{And thow, Symois, that as an arwe clere} \\
\text{Thorugh Troie rennest ay downward to the se,} \\
\text{Ber witnesse of this word that seyd is here...} \\
\text{[4. 1548–50]}
\]

Criseyde’s purpose in these beautiful lines is, of course, to dramatize her declaration of fidelity and purity of motive, but they serve as well to contrast the order of nature with the practical and moral confusion of her own life.8 So Dante’s Francesca had


8. Criseyde’s lines recall Ovid’s epistle of Oenone to Paris (already recalled by Pandarus at 1. 652–65), in which the nymph recalls Paris carving the same declaration, naming Xanthos instead of Simois, in the bark of a tree (Heroides 5. 25–32). As Fyler notes (“The Fabrications of Pandarus,” pp. 116–18), the epistle goes on to forecast the fall of Troy.
prefaced her account of a life made chaotic by desire with a reference to her homeland, “where the Po descends to be at peace” (Inf. 5. 98–99).9 The shift of tone and the evocation of a familiar landscape express Criseyde’s instinctive resistance to the working of forces she can only partly understand, which are already beginning to undermine her sense of purpose. In the event, for all her assurances to Troilus, she will pass out of Troy as inevitably and finally as the river itself.

Criseyde’s involvement with the course of events is implied again at the one moment when the narrator himself uses an Ovidian reference to comment on her role, an unobtrusive but pointed allusion in the course of the brief description of sunrise on the tenth day of Criseyde’s absence from Troy—the day she is to return to the city. The lines set the continuity of a large and impersonal nature in contrast to Troilus’s terrible anxiety:

The laurer-crowned Phebus, with his heete,
Gan, in his cours ay upward as he wente,
To warmen of the est see the wawes weete;
And Nysus’ daughter song with fresh entente....

[5. 1107–10]

Outwardly cheerful and even optimistic, these lines veil a number of ironies. That Phoebus is “laurel-crowned” perhaps reflects the hopes of those who, like Troilus in earlier moments of need, appeal to his benevolence; but here that benevolence is shown diffusing itself with no respect to individuals. The very time scheme of Book 5 is a source of irony at this point, for we have already been shown the end of this same tenth day, when, after Criseyde’s fatal interview with Diomede, Phoebus will be ushered out of the world by Venus without having in any way altered the course of events leading to Troilus’s betrayal (1016–29).10

The allusion to Nisus’s daughter emphasizes the irony of the situation. It recalls Ovid’s tale of Scylla, daughter of Nisus, king

10. As Root points out in his note on 5. 842, Chaucer alters Boccaccio to achieve the ironic synchronization of events.
of Megara, who betrayed her father and his city by cutting off as he slept the lock of purple hair on which the safety of the city depended and presenting it to the city’s enemy, Minos, king of Crete, as a token of love (Met. 8. 1–151). The theme of betrayal and the importance of the love offering are enough to suggest a parallel with the behavior of Criseyde, who is about to give over to Diomede the substance and tokens of a love that is as important as life itself to Troilus. Like Scylla, she is responding to the powerful physical presence of the enemy at a time when the fall of her city seems certain (60), and both women recognize that in thus yielding to the inevitable, they are performing what amount to acts of treason.

There are obvious differences between the two situations: where Scylla had betrayed her father for love, Criseyde is in effect betraying her lover to her father and his new allies. And Minos, whose knightly grace and beauty are described at length as they appear to Scylla and who recoils in horror at Scylla’s offer to place in his hands the fate of her city and her father, seems far closer to Troilus than to the cynical Diomede.11 Troilus, the virtuous lover, is cast in the role played in Ovid’s story by the aged father, and this shift has the double effect of underlining the moral significance of Criseyde’s infidelity to him and pointing up the utter impotence of Troilus himself at this stage in the poem. In Ovid’s story Nisus is a wholly passive figure, whose only contribution to the plot is the lock of hair he surrenders while fast asleep.12 In the final lines of the episode, after his city has finally fallen, he appears transformed into a hawk and seeks to avenge himself on Scylla, who flees in the form of a seabird, but the story proper is wholly concerned with the behavior of Scylla and her fatal attraction to Minos. In Chaucer’s poem, then, the allusion to the story points up the situation of a Troilus who is the helpless victim of Criseyde’s betrayal.

11. Chaucer may have recalled Scylla’s fascination with Minos in describing Criseyde’s first view of Troilus. With Tr. 2. 624–51 cf. Met. 8. 32–36.
12. Ovid does not even make clear how directly Nisus himself is affected by the loss of his lock of hair. It is introduced only as embodying “the security of the realm” (Met. 8. 10), and when Scylla tells Minos that in offering it to him she is in effect offering her father’s head (93–94), she may mean either that Nisus is dead or just that Minos now has him at his mercy. In pre-Ovidian versions of the story the loss of the lock was fatal in itself.
whose relation to the events that adumbrate his city’s fate is negative and unwitting. Much later, when Criseyde’s betrayal of him has been made clear by unmistakable evidence, the confirmation of his worst fears will have a catalytic, almost a transforming influence on him, but for the moment, as Phoebus and the fortunes of Troy pursue their course, he is incapable of any initiative.

While the Nisus-Scylla allusion points up Troilus’s utter insignificance on the level of history, the more typical function of the allusions that center on him is to draw us into the more private world within the poem where his experience is the sole concern and to call attention to the intrinsic quality of this experience. Victimization is a recurrent theme, and Chaucer, unlike Ovid, allows his lover-hero no release into the wish-world of metamorphosis. But the allusions to metamorphosis stories have the important effect of isolating Troilus’s love and suggesting its inherent value, which external circumstance cannot affect and which gradually assumes a transcendent significance.

In Book 4, after the lovers have learned that Criseyde is to be sent away, they weep in one another’s arms, and the narrator devotes a stanza to their tears, bitter as gall:

So bittre teeris weep nat, as I fynde,
The woful Mirra thorugh the bark and rynde;
That in this world ther nys so hard an herte
That nolde han rewed on hire peynes smerte.

[4. 1138–41]

The sudden reference to Myrrha is bound to come as something of a shock. Though the narrator presumably intends us to recall her metamorphosis rather than her crime, it is hard to avoid reflecting on the possible implication for Chaucer of her disastrous love.

In one aspect Myrrha may be seen as an emblem of the victimization of the lovers: she came to grief through a passion for her father Cinyras which was brought to fulfillment by the contrivance of her nurse, and there are clear correspondences between the two situations. Troilus, longing for death and calling on the absent Criseyde, is discovered by Pandarus (1. 540–43), as Myr-
Vergil and Ovid in the Troilus [99]

Myrrha, saying her words of farewell to Cinyras, is overheard by her nurse, who rushes in to prevent her suicide (Met. 10. 378–88). In each case a long interrogation ensues, followed by the confession of love, the confidant’s promise to arrange the affair, and finally the moment when the virgin lover is unwillingly led to the darkened chamber where the love is consummated. Myrrha’s ingenuous sense of shame and horror is comparable to the moral-chivalric scruples and the powerful sense of danger, dread, and vague guilt that encroach on Troilus’s feelings as he approaches the moment of union with Criseyde.

Thus far the parallels are clear enough, and the allusion seems clearly designed to invite an extended comparison. But it seems equally clear that any such comparison must allow for the most striking feature of Myrrha’s story, the incestuous character of her love. To the extent that we see Myrrha as the victim of a desire she resists until the connivance of the nurse more or less forces her to give in to it, her situation may be compared with that of Troilus, whose love in its sexual aspect is virtually the creation of Pandaros, an exploitation more than an indulgence of his feelings. Myrrha’s story, moreover, is one of several in this portion of the Metamorphoses which deal with youthful victims beset by passions that seem to contradict the purity of their natures. She is unique among these figures in that she is allowed, and finally forced, to put her desire into act, and its realization is not redeemed by any miracle like the transformation of Iphys or the animation of Pygmalion’s statue. It is the manipulation of her feelings as much as the feelings themselves that accounts for her tragedy. In this respect the “unnatural” element in her love is comparable to the exploitation of the adolescent emotions of Troilus, whose dimly felt desires are realized chiefly because they coincide with the vicarious needs of Pandaros, and who in his own right would hardly have been capable of the course of action Pandaros pursues on his behalf.

Criseyde, of course, is also a victim in this situation: it is the

13. The nurse’s office, like that of Pandaros, extends almost to the point of physically uniting the lovers (she is indeed said to “join their bodies,” Met. 10. 464), though Pandaros’s machinations are broader in scope. With the image of the falling tree which describes Myrrha’s inner feelings, Met. 10. 372–74, cf. Pandaros’s pragmatic use of the same image at 2. 1380–83.
lovers together who are compared to Myrrha as they share their sense of betrayal by a design that has left them at the mercy of circumstances. Criseyde too has been exploited by Pandarus, and the continual emphasis on the natural bond of uncle and niece, like Ovid’s various reminders of the parental link between Cinyras and Myrrha, emphasizes the ambiguous element in their relations which is implied so strongly by the scene between them on the morning following the lovers’ first night together. 14

But it is Troilus whose experience the comparison touches most closely, for he is finally, like Myrrha, the least able of all those involved to control the bent of his confused desires. The horror of Myrrha’s situation is in the ease with which her father, who has already heard and unwittingly sanctioned her desire to give herself to “a man like you,” is drawn into active collaboration with the scheming of the nurse. 15 Though Troilus’s desire is more simply virtuous, the betrayal of his innocence involves a similar collaboration between the other persons involved. In this respect the Myrrha allusion is Chaucer’s means of pointing to that disturbing element in Troilus’s experience which makes his defloweration at the hands of experienced adults so strikingly like the gratification of a child’s sexual fantasy by incredibly permissive parents. 16

As Chaucer’s reference to Myrrha’s perpetual weeping should remind us, both she and Troilus, in their very different ways, survive their betrayal. In one sense what both preserve is a sort of negative existence: Myrrha transformed into a myrrh-tree becomes a monument to her own remorse, 17 and Troilus lives on in inviolate fidelity to a love that even he finally recognizes as empty. But their very constancy in the face of betrayal argues the integrity of feeling they have in common. Chaucer makes this point indirectly by comparing the bitterness of the tears of Troilus and Criseyde to that of gall or lignaloes (1137). Both of

17. Her metamorphosis is a response to her prayer for a neutral condition in which her sin may pollute neither the realm of the living nor that of the dead Met. 10. 485–87).
these are purgatives, and the effect of the lovers’ weeping, too, is to purge their painful feelings and “unswell” their hearts “by lengthe of pleyne” (1144–46). The effect is finally to draw them back into the world of their ongoing misfortune. But the working of time and physical process on the lovers’ transient emotions has the further effect of setting off by contrast the constant element in Troilus’s love which nature, time and circumstance, so decisive in the life of Criseyde, leave wholly unaltered.

But the most significant Ovidian moments for Troilus are the ones he himself recalls in the early stages of Book 3. These give us a particularly vivid insight into the instinctively religious element in his feelings, the special quality of belief that sets him apart. Their characteristic emphasis is anticipated in a remarkable passage that, though not clearly referable to any context in Ovid, prepares us for the cluster of Ovidian figures who fill Troilus’s imagination as he approaches his first secret meeting with Criseyde. This passage details the strange and elaborate alibi that is his sole contribution to Pandarus’s preparations for this night:

That if that he was missed, nyght or day,
Ther while he was abouten this servyse,
That he was gon to don his sacrifise,

And moste at swich a temple allone wake,
Answered of Apollo for to be;
And first to sen the holy laurer quake,
Or that Apollo spake out of the tree,
To telle hym whan the Grekes sholden flee,
And forthy lette hym no man, god forbede,
But preye Apollo that he wolde hym spede.

[3: 537–46]

The detail necessary to the alibi is contained in the first three lines of the passage, and the loosely appended stanza following is a seemingly gratuitous embellishment. Though we may take it as Troilus’s rehearsal of a prepared speech, the awkward ordering of its details suggests spontaneity, and the final couplet sounds a note of urgency. Once his thoughts have touched on prayer, the spiritual tendency of Troilus’s feelings takes over:
the god is suddenly present to his mind, and he projects real awe and anxiety into the imagined setting.

When we see Troilus again, he has become wholly involved in the world of Ovidian mythology, a world in which his imagining of the quaking laurel becomes an identification with it, and his acute awareness of the imminent visitation of a divine and terrifying experience is ratified by a host of Ovidian archetypes. Troilus’s evocation of these figures involves a strange mixture of religious submission and unwitting prophecy. Far off at the end of the poem, when his love idyll has been broken off by the departure of Criseyde and finally destroyed by the boar figure Diomede, Troilus’s plight will be close to that of Adonis, killed by a boar at the moment of his emergence from the idyllic world in which Venus had sought to preserve his youthful beauty for herself. And it is to Adonis that Troilus, with unconscious irony but unerring instinct, compares himself in the first of a series of Ovidian prayers to the planetary deities:

“And if ich hadde, O Venus ful of myrthe,
Aspectes badde of Mars or of Saturne,
Or thow combust or let were in my birthe,
Thy fader prey al thilke harm disturne
Of grace, and that I glad ayein may turne,
For love of hym thow lovedest in the shawe,
I meene Adon, that with the boor was slawe.

“O Jove ek, for the love of faire Europe,
The which in forme of bole awye thow fette,
Now help; O Mars, thow with thi blody cope,
For love of Cipres, thow me nought ne lette;
O Phebus, thykn whan Dane hire selven shette
Under the bark, and laurer wax for drede,
Yit for hire love, O help now at this nede.

“Mercurie, for the love of Hierse eke,
For which Pallas was with Aglauros wroth,
Now help; and ek Diane, I the biseke,
That this viage be nat to the looth.
O fatal sustren, which or any cloth
Me shapen was, my destine me sponne,
So helpeth to this werk that is bygonne.”
As happens invariably when Troilus is allowed to reflect on his situation, this prayer shows him suspended, powerless, and afraid, at the center of a universe pervaded by love, but at the same time menacing, a projection of his own doubts. Beginning with an appeal to the power of love itself, the bounty and “mirth” of Venus, he descends in imagination through the spheres, calling on each planetary divinity in the name of love, yet dwelling irresistibly on the legends of more or less hapless mortals subjected to the consequences of more or less violent divine passion. The tales recalled form a perceptible sequence: after the harsh fate of Adonis, the emphasis on necessity, as reflected in the plight of the human victim of divine love, is steadily reduced. Europa’s fate is left uncertain in Ovid’s account; the story of Venus and Mars ends with a momentary suspension of the force of violent desire; Daphne’s transformation may be seen as a successful evasion of the force of Apollo’s passion; and Herse is apparently unaffected by the love of Mercury, who ends by exercising his divine power only on her sister Aglauros. Thus, while the references bear on Troilus’s situation with growing immediacy, revealing his deep sense of dread in the face of love’s power, they show him also insulating himself against the reality of his plight by fantasies of escape. The sequence concludes on what seems to be a note of capitulation: the reluctance to offend Diana may express a vague wish that his innocence and purity not be violated in the course of a “viage” which, as the concluding invocation of the Fates acknowledges, he accepts as inevitable.

While there are various ways in which the individual Ovidian stories may be seen as bearing on Troilus’s situation, their collective function as a means of externalizing the basic tension between his inner fears and his sense of being at the mercy of higher forces is clear enough. But the presence of Ovid’s little-known story of Mercury, Herse, and Aglauros is puzzling in several respects, and I would like to explore its possible relevance at somewhat greater length. As Chaucer’s brief reference makes plain, the story begins as the story of Mercury’s love for the Athenian princess Herse, but comes to center on the fate of Herse’s sister Aglauros at the hands of Pallas-Minerva. Having refused to grant Mercury access to Herse except in return for a great sum of gold, Aglauros is punished by Minerva, who afflicts
her with a consuming envy of her sister. Aglauros is finally turned to stone by Mercury himself when she tries again to deny him entrance to the palace.

The relation of this story to Troilus’s situation is problematic. Is Troilus to be identified with the mortal object of the god’s desire or with the god himself? In the Ovidian context, moreover, Mercury’s love functions almost wholly as the occasion for the story of Aglauros, whose transformation is really the central event of the tale. For this reason, although a number of suggestive correspondences seem to invite us to compare Ovid’s story with Chaucer’s, it is difficult to find a focal point for such a comparison. Both stories deal with the would-be lovers’ difficulties in gaining access to their ladies, but Mercury in his divine assurance is a very different lover from the passive and timorous Troilus, and he seems, moreover, to incorporate into his own role much of the function of Chaucer’s Pandarus. Moreover, there is in the Troilus no obvious equivalent to the role played by Aglauros. Though the story can finally be seen to bear precisely and searchingly on the moment in Troilus’s experience at which Chaucer’s allusion occurs, the reading for which I will argue requires a detailed review of Ovid’s narrative and a broad leeway in considering the possible scope of Chaucer’s reference to it.

As in so many episodes of the Metamorphoses, there is a minimum of communication among the principals of the story. Herse is wholly absent after Mercury’s initial glimpse of her, and the only interaction is in the confrontation of Mercury and Aglauros. The remoteness of the characters from one another is suggested by the simile that describes Mercury’s initial reaction to the sight of Herse: he circles over Athens

\[ \text{Vt uolucris uisis rapidissima miluus extis,} \]
\[ \text{Dum timet et densi circumstant sacra ministri,} \]

18. Aside from the correspondences noted below, we are given in each story a careful blueprint of the house where the beloved sleeps. Herse’s chamber is in the \textit{pars secreta} of Cecrops’s palace, with the chambers of her sisters Pandrosos (who plays no part in the story) and the watchful Aglauros on either side (Met. 2. 737–39). Criseyde, too, is placed in the innermost chamber of Pandarus’s house, which opens onto the hall where her ladies sleep, and to which Pandarus admits Troilus through a secret “trappe.” See also Michael Olment, “Troilus and a Classical Pandar: TC 3. 729–30,” \textit{Chaucer Newsletter} 1.1 (Winter 1979): 18–19.
Flectitur in gyrum nec longius audet abire
Spemque suam motis auidus circumuolat alis. . . .

as the kite, swiftest of birds, when it has spied the remains [of a sacrificed animal], but is fearful of the priests clustered around the altar, flies in circles, not daring to withdraw, and hovers about the object of its hope on beating wings. . . . [Met. 2. 716–19]

The attendant priests, whose concern with the rite of sacrifice makes them an unwitting obstacle to the bird’s predatory design, anticipate in a neutral way the role to be played by Aglauros. She does not at first oppose Mercury’s desire to possess Herse, and it is a peculiarity of her attitude that her opposition to the union becomes more intense in proportion to her sense of its “divine” meaning. She is at first willing to assist Mercury for a price, but is later goaded to her fatal obstinacy by the very vividness with which she imagines the splendor of the divine marriage her sister is to enjoy:

Germanam ante oculos fortunatumque sororis
Coniugium pulchraque deum sub imagine ponit
Cunctaque magna facit. . . .

(Envy) sets her sister before her eyes, and her sister’s fortunate marriage, and the beautiful form of the god; and all these things she magnifies. . . . [Met. 2. 803–5]

In the end it is a direct manifestation of divine power, Mercury’s opening of the doors of the palace (or of Herse’s chamber?) with his divine wand, that arouses Aglauros to the final effort of resistance that ends in her petrification.

What underlies this paradoxical effect, the corrosion of Aglauros’s emotions by the mere imagining of her sister’s divine marriage, is her essentially materialistic conception of Mercury’s divinity, perhaps inspired in part by his golden-hemmed robe and his promise to enoble her with divine nephews and nieces (734. 745–46). Hence her demand for a material share in the divine bounty, “a great weight of gold”: when she sees the god, she sees gold, and it is in return for gold that she is prepared to
procure her sister. Her attitude is not only a human but also a spiritual failure. In an earlier episode she had disobeyed the command of Pallas and opened the chest that concealed the earth-born child Erichthonius (*Met.* 2. 552–61). Here again she shows herself incapable of appreciating either the divine power of Mercury or the implications of mystery in a god’s love for a mortal. Her attempt to exploit the situation both repels the god and alienates Aglauros from human sympathy. Her final state is one of sheer hostility, but a hostility whose effect is turned inward, powerless against anyone but herself.

Aglauros’s impiety and its grim effects help bring into focus certain complexities in the attitude of the narrator of the *Troilus*, whose mistaken identification of sexual fulfillment with the attainment of heavenly bliss reflects a similar materialism. The narrator differs from Aglauros insofar as he wants to see the lovers attain fulfillment rather than to thwart them, but he is obsessed by the same idolatrous conception of what their love represents, and his attitude toward them, though it falls short of Aglauros’s hostility, shows its own symptoms of alienation. Thus he attacks with desperate energy those materialists and cynics who cannot recognize the ineffable wonder of love as Troilus and Criseyde experience it (3. 1359–79). Beneath the surface the narrator is vaguely aware that his intense commitment to love is only an attempt to evade his private frustration, his idealism a way of disguising a covetous design on the lovers which he cannot help, but which makes him deeply uneasy. Though he begins as a would-be “priest,” seeking to use the story as a means of invoking the god of love on behalf of all lovers, he has in fact made the bliss the lovers are to attain through love into the vicarious object of his own deepest longing, an investment of feeling which, like Aglauros’s, inevitably comes to express itself as a desire to share the wealth. Hence his initial reaction in considering the lovers’ first night together is to ask

> Why ne hadde I swich oon with my soule ybought,  
> Ye, or the leeste joie that was there?  
> [3. 1319–20]

Reflecting on the meaning of their experience he is haunted by
thoughts of “daunger” and fear, the voices of a host of imagined detractors, and the images of Midas and Crassus, archetypes of self-betraying greed.¹⁹

The conclusion of the Aglauros episode provides a final oblique comment on the narrator’s situation. Mercury reappears, is ordered away by Aglauros, and responds by causing the doors to open with a touch of his wand. Aglauros, seeking to resist his entrance, finds herself powerless to move and is transformed to a stone. Nothing further is said of Herse or the result of Mercury’s love for her; having punished Aglauros’s impiety, the god simply returns to heaven (Met. 2. 814–35). The story thus shows what can result from self-abandonment to vicarious desire. Chaucer’s narrator, as he contemplates the fulfillment of that desire, is wholly cut off from any authentic and fulfilling relation with the lovers. As the final confrontation in Ovid’s story ends in silence, with Mercury returning to heaven and Aglauros reduced to a monument of materialized desire, so there remains an emptiness at the heart of the Troilus. Nothing is altered by the consummation of love: Troilus is left immersed in the delusive glow of his own unrewarded idealism, and the narrator reacts to the physical realization of his desire in baffled vehemence.

Like Aglauros’s experience of the “divine” love of Herse, then, the narrator’s experience of the love of Troilus for Criseyde has a life of its own. And as in the story of Aglauros, his private drama of vicarious desire and its disappointment threatens to draw all of the poem’s meaning into itself by reducing the love story to a secondary function as the backdrop to this drama. But of course the Troilus and its narrator do not proceed to this profoundly Ovidian final term. What redeems them both is something invincible in the love of Troilus himself, a virtue that seeks to break out of the Ovidian world within which his love of Criseyde is realized and transcend the closure this world imposes on his experience.

This divergence would seem to be good reason for dropping the comparison with the story of Aglauros at this point, particularly as I am aware that I may be stretching to its limit my

¹⁹. See chapter 6 for a fuller account of the narrator’s role in this scene.
readers' tolerance for allusions. But I would like to suggest that even the transcendent impulse of Troilus's love is implied by the allusive interplay between Chaucer and Ovid. My argument here depends on a passage that Chaucer does not explicitly recall in alluding to the Herse-Aglauros story, and my only justifications for singling it out are its strikingly emblematic role as an introduction to the Ovidian episode and its congruence with the theme and imagery of Book 3 of the *Troilus*. The passage I have in mind is the simile, already quoted, that describes Mercury's response to what is perhaps his only sight of Herse:

... nec longius audet abire
Spemque suam motis auidus circumuolat aliso...

[Met. 2. 718–19]

The image of the hovering bird, waiting suspended until the priests shall have completed their ritual task, links the roles of Troilus and Mercury and at the same time points to the vast difference between them. In its Ovidian context the simile dramatizes the passion that leads to the god's descent and also undercuts its magnificence. The reduction of Mercury to a bird of prey and Herse to a piece of sacrificial flesh prepares us for the cynicism with which Mercury will exploit his own divinity in announcing himself to Aglauros. If Aglauros's materialism is a fatal error, it is also true that the god himself, preparing to prey on the leavings of a religious rite, collaborates with her greed to create a travesty of divine descent.

As to the bearing of this passage on Troilus's situation, we may begin by considering the implications of the priests whose presence, in Ovid's simile, keeps the circling bird hovering at a distance. Unlike the free-ranging Mercury, whose love of Herse is a thing of the moment, Troilus's love involves his deepest feelings, and his devotion must be mediated by Pandarus and the poem's narrator, priests whose rites involve the appropriation of his love and its object to the service of their own needs and longings. They bring this love to fulfillment in a sacrament that is the realization not of Troilus's ideal, but of their own idolatry. De-
Vergil and Ovid in the *Troilus*

spite the religious awe of Troilus himself and his deep fear of profaning the mystery of love, he is being drawn steadily forward into the depths of the house of Pandarus.

In himself, however, Troilus is suspended like the hovering bird. On the one hand, he is drawn toward physical union with Criseyde; on the other, he yearns instinctively to transcend carnal involvement and realize his love in religious terms. Both tendencies are expressed through bird imagery. As Book 3 builds toward its climax and Troilus's sexual desire begins to surface, his first possessive gestures toward Criseyde suggest to the narrator the action of a bird of prey:

What myghte or may the sely larke seye,  
Whan that the sperhauk hath it in his foot?  

[3. 1191–92]

But despite the seeming decisiveness of the sparrowhawk's action, the rhetorical question “hovers” in relation to the action it seems to describe. It expresses the narrator's sense of awe and tension, but does not clearly reflect the attitude of Troilus himself, whose next act is to pray to “the bryghte goddes sevne” (3. 1204). Troilus, too, is hovering, fascinated but hesitant, and able to move forward only in response to clear encouragement from Criseyde.

A few stanzas later this picture of tentative aggression is balanced by the Dantean imagery of flight with which Troilus, suspended in contemplation of the beauty of Criseyde, expresses his sense of the working in him of divine love, the “holy bond of thynges”:

Whoso wol grace, and list the nought honouren,  
Lo, his desir wol fle withouten wynges.  

[3. 1262–63]

Drawn from St. Bernard's prayer to the Virgin in the final canto of the *Paradiso* (33. 14–15), the lines develop an image of spiritual desire which Bernard had used in admonishing the Pilgrim a few lines earlier:
Veramente, ne forse tu t’arretri
movendo l’ali tue, credendo oltrarti,
orando grazia conven che s’impetri
grazia da quella che puote aiutarti. . . .

But lest perchance you fall back, moving your wings and thinking to advance, grace must be obtained by prayer, grace from her who has power to aid you. . . . [Par. 32. 145-48]

Dante himself feels the impulse to fly on realizing, at the summit of Purgatory, that the day has come when he is to be reunited with Beatrice ("I felt my feathers growing for the flight," Purg. 27. 123). That Troilus experiences such a sense of elevation is one of the most extraordinary features of the Troilus, and Chaucer’s appropriation of the language of the Paradiso seems intended to authenticate it as decisively as possible. But Troilus, in the end, can only "beat his wings": he must inevitably descend from the intensity of his preconception of Criseyde’s "grace," and the ecstasy to which he has aspired serves only to make the actual consummation of his love, by contrast, something of an anticlimax. To the extent that allusion to Ovid’s story identifies Troilus with Mercury, it shows him to have followed a false god who betrays his divinity to the pursuit of physical love and whose descent into the world effects no divine event. Ovidian imagery can take us to the center of Troilus's imaginative and spiritual world, but the true meaning of his experience remains inaccessible to him and to the reader whose only guide is Ovid. It is only when the same experience is reviewed from the transforming perspective of Dante that Troilus's abortive spiritual flight assumes its full significance.