Chaucer and the Poets

Wetherbee, Winthrop

Published by Cornell University Press

Wetherbee, Winthrop.
Chaucer and the Poets: An Essay on Troilus and Criseyde.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/47554
At first sight there would seem to be no question about the importance of Statius for the *Troilus*. References to Thebes and its ill-fated rulers are strewn through the poem, culminating in the summary of the *Thebaid* itself, which is the centerpiece of Cassandre’s speech to Troilus in Book 5. From the outset, as we have seen, the challenge facing Chaucer’s narrator is defined in terms that recall Statius’s narrative stance in the *Thebaid*: in the face of a full awareness of history—Criseyde’s infidelity, Troilus’s death at the hands of Achilles, the certainty of Troy’s impending doom—the narrator must somehow withstand the pressure to despair symbolized by Tisiphone and let the full story of Troilus’s love and loss unfold itself.

But it is also in connection with Thebes and its history that Chaucer makes his fullest use of what I have called the tradition of Lollius, referring directly and indirectly to several postclassical Latin and vernacular versions of the story of Thebes, and in the process raising the question of how this story can be made to constitute meaningful history. Pandarus, Troilus, and Criseyde recall the Theban past with frequency and familiarity, and the point of Cassandre’s long response to Troilus’s dream seems to be to stress the bearing of this past on the Trojan present. But the connection remains obscure. The cumulative effect of Chaucer’s Theban allusions is to make clear that if there is a true and meaningful correspondence between
the histories of the two cities, it is inaccessible to the inhabitants of the world of the Troilus. But for Chaucer the possibility of making such connections is finally less important than the continuity of feeling that links him to Statius, the human sympathy that helps both poets carry through their poetic tasks. Statius, as I will try to show, is of all the poetae the one whose poetry deals in the most radical way with the opposition between the claim of individual experience to an intrinsic value and the view that individual achievement is insignificant apart from its subservience to the larger inevitabilities of history. In the end, by effectively withdrawing Troilus from the world of history and affirming the unique significance of his love, Chaucer reveals himself as a profoundly Statian poet. But through most of the poem we can sense the possibility of this larger perspective only to the extent that we see Chaucer’s Theban allusions simultaneously in relation to their Statian context and as they are perceived by the characters in the poem, for whom this context is obscured by their limited, pseudo-classical perspective.

Since the Thebaid is so little known, and since some of its most suggestive qualities have been neglected even by Statius’s few commentators, I will devote the first part of this chapter to reviewing those aspects of the poem I see as bearing most closely on the Troilus. C. S. Lewis remains the one critic who has sought to explain Statius’s potential importance for the Christian poet on the basis of a careful reading of the Thebaid, and his brief essay, while extremely useful, is basically an inventory of selected passages.¹ We must still begin by asking in broader terms what this peculiarly violent poem had to offer the medieval poet and why Statius’s often despairing view of life should have lent itself to revision from a Christian perspective.

At first glance the world of the Thebaid seems wholly dominated and obsessed by its own grim history. The poet presents himself in the opening lines as disconcerted by the many incidents of violence, impiety, and divine hostility which would have to be considered if he were to trace the conflict of the sons of Oedipus to its origins, and again and again in the poem the course of Theban history is reviewed by those who have come to

see in it the predetermining pattern of their own misfortunes. Repeatedly the story of the campaign against Thebes is interrupted by extended historical digressions that show the present powerless to free itself from the clutches of the past. Nothing in the course of events runs counter to the emphasis established at the outset by the curse that Oedipus invokes on his two sons. Elaborate rituals in which the dead are invoked to guide the living, and laments and ceremonies for the newly fallen occupy a large portion of the poem, and the sense of loss pervades the final lines.

But Statius incorporates a remarkable number of assertions of the meaning and value of virtue and piety, which in their cumulative effect provide a counterforce to the prevailing emphasis of the history he is bound to relate. He seems to derive a kind of solace from identifying himself with youth, innocence, and purity and from bearing witness to the importance of their loss. It is chiefly through the deaths of the young that the curse of Thebes expresses itself: Adrastus, old and infirm, is the sole surviving Argive leader, and Creon and Oedipus outlive their sons. Youth, for Statius, is the chief repository of virtue, and in his response to these losses, his need to proclaim that “justice rewards the deserving,” a sense of the value of human life is pitted against a frustrating awareness of the burden of fate and the moral indifference of the gods. The same concern with purity and innocence appears in his treatment of the sexual timidity of Argia, Deipyle, and Ismene, for whom there appears something inherently shameful in the necessary sacrifice of virgin purity demanded by sexual union. Their capacity for such scruples seems to be associated in his mind with what amounts to a prelapsarian state, superior to strife and passion, but obviously incapable of survival in the world of the Thebaid. In the same spirit he presents an image of Juno in her maidenhood, timid in the presence of Jove, “not yet made angry by his adulteries” (10. 61–64). Though our view of this state of innocence is inevitably conditioned by our knowledge of intervening history, the impulse to recall it is very strong in Statius’s poetry. A similar desire to make contact with a purer, more nearly primordial nature

2. See Lewis, “Dante’s Statius,” p. 139; Dante, Convivio 4. 25. 6–10.
informs the beautiful passage in which the pious seer Amphiaraus speculates on the meaning of augury:

mirum unde, sed olim
hic honor alitibus, superae seu conditor aulae
sic dedit effusum chaos in nova semina texens,
seu quia mutatae nostraque ab origine versis
corporibus subiere notos, seu purior axis
amotumque nefas et rarum insistere terris
vera docent. . . .

Though the cause is mysterious, this dignity has long been granted to birds, whether the creator of heaven so decreed while working vast chaos into the seeds of new life; or because they have come to soar upon the wind through a transformation, their bodies altered from an original condition like our own; or because the purer air of heaven, and the remoteness of evil, and the rarity of their descents to the earth enable them to know truth. . . . [3. 482–88]

Such attempts to attain at least an intuitive or imaginative liberation from the entrapment of the history-ridden world of the poem take their most striking form in Statius's hints that a happier afterlife rewards the virtue of at least some of his heroes.3 The augur Maeon challenges Eteocles, condemning his impious motives for pursuing war. He then commits suicide, forestalling the king's wrath, and Statius envisions him enjoying a new life in Elysian regions from which the guilt of Thebes is excluded (3. 108–11). Amphiaraus, who is drawn down bodily to the underworld without having undergone death in the usual sense, is apparently conceded an exemption from the pains of the underworld as a reward for his piety, and his companions look forward to a day when he will be worshipped as a god (8. 206–7).4 We are told explicitly that the spirit of the Theban hero

3. On this aspect of the poem see P. M. Kean, Chaucer and the Making of English Poetry (London, 1972), 1:172–74. Kean, however, misinterprets the fate of Capaneus, who can hardly be said to die "for the commonweal" (p. 173) and who certainly is not "received in Elysium with universal praise" (p. 172).

4. This exemption is implied in the simile that compares Pluto to a lion who is fierce while his opponent is strong, but who, once he has gained a decisive advantage, is content to let his victim live (8. 124–26).
Menoeceus, whose expiatory suicide is held to have saved Thebes from defeat, ascends to the seat of Jove (10. 780–82).

There is probably no way to strike a precise balance between the optimism implied by Statius’s spiritual intuitions and the prevailing gloom of the Theban world, and Statius seems not to have sought one. At a number of points we see him weighing alternate interpretations of religious institutions, and the conclusion of the Thebaid seems deliberately to withhold any judgment on the action of the poem. Throughout he makes an effort to affirm the value of the lives of his virtuous characters, but shows a deep desire to retreat from the grim realities of war and suffering into a celebration of the beauties of youth and innocence and nostalgia for a simpler, less history-ridden world.

From the outset Chaucer’s allusions to Thebes show him concerned with the precarious situations of individuals in the grip of events. The first clear invitation to the reader to compare the stories of Thebes and Troy occurs at the beginning of Book 2, when Pandarus comes upon Criseyde and her ladies listening to the story of Thebes, and she summarizes for him the portion already told:

“And we han herd how that king Layus deyde, Thorugh Edippus his sone, and al that dede; And here we stynten at thise lettres rede, How the bishopp, as the book kan telle, Amphiorax, fil thorugh the ground to helle.”

[2. 100–105]

The reading begins with the unwitting action of Oedipus and breaks off at the point of dealing with the fate of Amphiaraurus, the noble priest of Apollo who had joined the campaign against Thebes despite his clear foreknowledge that he and his companions were doomed. The chain of events and circumstances which links the two men at the crossroads to the disastrous war in which Amphiaraurus meets his fate is as complex as the working of the love of Troilus and Criseyde into the pattern of the fate of

5. On the thematic implications of this interruption, which occurs in the Thebaid at the end of the sixth book, the mid-point of that work, see John Norton-Smith, Geoffrey Chaucer (London, 1974), pp. 90–91.
It involves the same long history of confused dealings among humans and between humans and gods, conscious and unconscious breaches of trust and piety, and blindness or willful ignorance in the face of prophecy. Though capable of moments of vision, Troilus is, for the purposes of this comparison, the Oedipus of the Trojan version of the story, moving blindly along the preordained path of his double sorrow in pursuit of a personal goal that is a symptom and a symbol of the fatal blindness of the doomed city of Troy. Pandarus, who sets Troilus on the path that leads to his betrayal, is the very agent of blindness. When we see him at the beginning of Book 2, he is already at work on a master plan that will collaborate with the fortunes of war to visit pain and loss on Troilus and Troy. And it is utterly in keeping with Pandarus’s plan that he should immediately distract Criseyde and her women from a story likely to give rise to disturbing reflections with a brisk “do wey youre book” (2. 111). Criseyde is already acutely conscious of living in a precarious situation within a city under siege, and it would not suit Pandarus’s purposes to allow her to draw the obvious comparison between Thebes and Troy or to brood on the contrast between Amphaiaraus’s futile act of heroic loyalty and the more opportunistic conduct of her own father Calchas, who has lately abandoned Troy in response to the warning of “Apollo Delphicus.”

More broadly, Pandarus’s dispelling of such larger concerns as the fall of cities and the will of the gods prepares the way for a major extension of his own grand design. His interruption of the story of Amphaiaraus becomes a symbol for his role as the subverter of all spiritual tendencies in the lives of those with whom he deals. Troilus, like Statius’s priest, is a pious votary of Apollo. His piety gains him a momentary glimpse of the divine source of the forces that govern the life of the universe, and he is

6. This scene is the first of several tantalizing but inconclusive hints that there is a Theban link in Criseyde’s own past. See David Anderson, “Theban History in Chaucer’s Troilus,” Studies in the Age of Chaucer 4 (1982): 125–28, who suggests that Criseyde’s mother “Argyve” (4. 762) was Argia, wife of Polynices. But the evidence would seem to be limited to the coincidence of names (Cas-sandre refers to Argia as “Argyve” at 5. 1509), and there is certainly no basis here for his further suggestion that the brooch Criseyde presents to Troilus (3. 1970–71) is the famous and fatal necklace of Vulcan worn successively by Calmus’s wife Harmonia, Semele, Jocasta, and Argia, who in the Thebaid presents it to Eriphyle, the wife of Amphaiaraus (Theb. 2. 265–305, 4. 187–213).
intuitively aware of the ominous bearing of these forces on his own life. The betrayal of his idealism will come about as a direct consequence of his submission to Pandarus, who goads him into abandoning contemplation in favor of an active pursuit of love. And at a broader level still, the fate of the virtuous seer suggests the plight of the poet narrator, at once privileged and burdened by his ability to see beyond the end of the love story; his vision is capable of encompassing “drede and sikernesse,” tragedy and the possibility of spiritual redemption, yet he shrinks from the responsibility of his role and threatens to render his vision and *pietas* inoperative by his obsessive involvement with the tide of events.

Despite Pandarus’s reference to a work on the siege of Thebes which contains “bookes twelve,” and so is presumably that of Statius (2. 108), Criseyde calls her book a “romaunce,” and her description suggests that she and her ladies have been listening to the story in a medieval version. It is important that a romance version would omit the Statian aftermath of Amphiaras’s disappearance from the battlefield and the powerful eloquence with which he prevails against the anger of Pluto, vindicating his innocence and piety and avoiding the torments of Dis. Such a version would set off the spiritual shortsightedness of Chaucer’s characters, who seem powerless either to read a meaning into the literal history of events or to follow out the potential significance of individual embodiments of virtue or piety. It is also highly appropriate that the story of Thebes should be conveyed by the elaborate device of a romance within a romance. Whereas Statius’s Thebans are burdened by an almost paralyzing awareness of the bearing of past events on their own lives, the historical perceptions of Chaucer’s characters are mediated by courtly poetry, a form of civilized entertainment. They are effectively insulated by their own high culture from

7. The story of Oedipus and Laius is told in the *Roman de Thebes* but not in Statius, and the medieval poem refers to Amphiaras as a “bishop.” See Root, *ad loc.*, and Anderson, “Theban History in Chaucer’s *Troilus*,” p. 120, n. 22.

8. *Thebaid* 8. 1–126. In the *Roman de Thebes*, which wholly omits Amphiaras’s posthumous fortunes, his death is called “orrible et fiere” (Guy Raynaud de Lage, ed. [Paris, 1969], line 5070). An alternate version describes him as slain by Pluto himself; see Root, *ad loc.* In his *Siege of Thebes* (ed. Axel Erdmann [London, 1911], lines 4039–58), Lydgate treats Amphiaras as a sorcerer, justly punished with an eternity of “sorowe and meschaunce.”
any functional awareness of the potential significance of the Theban archetypes to whom they compare themselves and their situation. Thus when Pandarus later in Book 2 expresses the wish that he may be struck by a thunderbolt if he intends any harm toward Criseyde in taking the role of Troilus’s messenger (2. 1145–48), neither he nor we are likely to think at once of the most obvious precedent for such a fate, Jove’s destruction of Capaneus upon the walls of Thebes. And yet there is a curious similarity between the role of the blaspheming giant, who shouts down Amphiaraus’s dire prophecies about the outcome of the Theban war (Theb. 3. 598–669), and Pandarus’s coercive and occasionally bullying treatment of the reverence and misgivings of Troilus. Pandarus’s modus operandi is, of course, less deliberately sacrilegious than Capaneus’s reckless defiance of the gods, but the singlemindedness with which he pursues his campaign against Criseyde’s honor in the face of all doubts and portents is a Trojan counterpart to Capaneus’s insane bravery. An excessive preoccupation with love is the folly at the heart of the Troilus as the mad desire for royal power is the core of the action of the Thebaid, and the ultimate downfall of Troy is foreshadowed by the intensity of this preoccupation, the importance assumed by the “siege of Criseyde” in the midst of the larger war. Like the Argive champions, the besiegers of Criseyde fall prey to their own willful blindness, and this failure of perspective, Pandarus’s relentless and shortsighted pragmatism and the blind idealism and fidelity of Troilus, become part of the larger process by which Troy betrays itself to the Greeks.

Amid this prevailing atmosphere, Chaucer’s treatment of Antigone, the niece of Criseyde, is quietly telling. Chaucer certainly borrowed this figure from the Thebaid, and he preserves the vitality and idealism of the classical heroine in his Trojan maiden. Statius’s Antigone, like all the young women of the Thebaid, is distinguished by her sexual purity as well as by the nobility of character which appears in her pietas toward the body of Polynices. We see her first just before the initial joining of battle, looking out from a tower at the gathering of the Theban

9. Pandarus seems to hint at the similarity when he declares that he would not deceive Criseyde “for the citee which that stondeth yondre” (2. 1146), presumably indicating the ramparts of Troy.
armies, and we view her through the eyes of the aged retainer Phorbas, for whom she represents the hope of the future, the one thing still worth living for in the guilty world of Thebes:

“o mihi sollicitum decus ac suprema voluptas,
Antigone! seras tibi demoror improbus umbras,
fors eadem scelera et caedes visurus avitas,
donec te thalamis habilem integramque resignem:
hoc satis . . . .”

“O my care, glory, and greatest pleasure, Antigone! For you I shamelessly postpone my descent to the shades, even though I will perhaps behold again the crimes and slaughter of your ancestors. So long as I may give you over inviolate and prepared for marriage, this is enough. . .” [7. 363–67]

Chaucer's Antigone preserves the purity to which Phorbas responds so strongly. She is Antigone “the shene,” “the white,” and it is this quality that makes it fitting that she should appear at a crucial stage in Chaucer’s poem to speak for love at its most idealistic and provide a complement to the idealism of Troilus.

But Chaucer has taken pains to distinguish the outlook of his Trojan Antigone from that of her Theban original. Like everyone around her she is preoccupied with love and takes a naive delight in reassuring her aunt about its pleasures (2. 887–96). Though we assume she knows no more of sexual love than what she has learned from the “goodly maid” who composed the song she sings (880), she is not only “white” but “fresshe” (887), a term that, while it implies health and purity, hints also at eagerness, readiness, incipient desire.10 As Troilus's emotional education has been overseen by Pandarus, so Antigone has spent her adolescent years in the house of Criseyde, and the idealism of both has been influenced by their environment. Like the virtue of Troilus, the innocence of an Antigone is compromised and liable to manipulation in the Trojan milieu. In the central scene of Book 2, where she makes her one significant appearance, her passionately idealistic love song helps to fix the image of Troilus in Criseyde’s mind. Thus by a paradox wholly characteristic of

the *Troilus* the noblest qualities of this courtly embodiment of female purity are made to collaborate, with no prompting from Pandarus, in bringing the lovers together.

Chaucer’s appropriation of Antigone epitomizes his use of Theban material throughout most of the *Troilus*, a mode of allusion that is ironic, always on the edge of parody, and highly conscious of incongruity. There is something inescapably comic about the preoccupation of Chaucer’s Trojans with love; it is hard at times to remember that this folly and the code that legitimizes it are Chaucer’s equivalent for the Theban madness, and they are all the more insidious for being so central to Trojan life. The same ironic awareness of love’s power which enlists the virtues of Troilus and Antigone in the seduction of Criseyde is lurking just behind the coziness of Chaucer’s treatment of the Trojan aristocracy, who are solicitous and busy about one another’s lives and only too willing to take up the cause of a beautiful widow, each convinced that he is acting only “of his owen curtesie.” The combination of innocence and pride, true and false idealism in their chivalry is as different from the madness of the house of Oedipus as Pandarus from Capaneus, but we must finally take its contradictions and its potentially subversive influence equally seriously.

The fullest perspective on this aspect of Chaucer’s use of the story of Thebes is provided by two related passages late in the poem which show Criseyde and Troilus viewing their situation against the backdrop of Theban history. Though brief in themselves and separated by several hundred lines, they are both dense in allusive content and intricately bound together by the events and literary contexts they evoke. In both, as so often in the poem, an allusion to Statian Thebes is set within an allusion to Dante, but both refer also to Ovid and less directly to Vergil. Together they constitute a summarial illustration of the problems of interpretation posed by the Theban references in the *Troilus*, and the broader problem of discerning historical continuity in the poem’s world view.

The first passage is part of an elaborate oath of fidelity in which Criseyde declares that if ever she prove false to Troilus,

Saturnes daughter, Juno, thorugh hire myght,
As wood as Athamante do me dwelle
Eternalich in Stix, the put of helle.

[4. 1538–40]

In the second passage Troilus, already fearing that Criseyde has abandoned him, prays to Cupid, and compares the loss he fears with the punishment inflicted by Juno upon Thebes:

Now blisful lord, so cruel thow ne be
Unto the blood of Troie, I preye the,
As Juno was unto the blood Thebane,
For which the folk of Thebes caughte hire bane.

[5. 599–602]

Though the madness of Athamas was only one striking manifestation of Juno's wrath against Thebes, it is directly related to the origins of that wrath, and we may take these two passages as referring to the same story. The story begins with Jupiter's love for Semele, daughter of Cadmus and mother of Bacchus. Though Juno avenged Jupiter's infidelity by destroying Semele, her continuing anger against the pride and prosperity of Thebes led her to afflict Athamas, husband of Semele's sister Ino, with a madness that led him to seek the destruction of his wife and sons.

Chaucer's references to the two stories are further connected by their common source. Both may ultimately derive from the opening lines of the Thebaid, in which Athamas's madness and Juno's scheming are evoked together, but they also recall more immediately the opening of Canto 30 of the Inferno, the canto of the falsifiers, which begins

Nel tempo che Iunone era crucciata
per Semelè contra 'l sangue tebano,
come mostrò una e altra fiata,
Atamante divenne tanto insano. . . .
In the time when Juno was wroth for Semele against the Theban blood, as she showed more than once, Athamas became insane. . . .

[Inf. 30. 1–4]

Dante proceeds to recall Ovid’s vivid account of Athamas’s savage pursuit of his wife and children and then, as if anticipating Troilus’s forebodings, juxtaposes with this scene a reminiscence of Ovid’s depiction of the mad grief of Hecuba at the deaths of Polyxena and Polydorus, the last act in the destruction of Troy:

E quando la fortuna volse in basso
l’altezza de’ Troian che tutto ardiva,
si che ’nsieme col regno il re fu casso,
Ecuba trista, misera e cattiva, . . .
forsennata latrò si come cane;
tanto il dolor le fé la mente torta.

And when Fortune brought low the all-daring pride of the Trojans, so that the king together with the kingdom was blotted out, Hecuba, sad, wretched and captive, . . . driven mad, barked like a dog, so had the sorrow wrung her soul. [Inf. 30. 13–16, 20–21]

In both Dante’s summaries and the Ovidian narratives on which they are based, these two emblems of the fate of nations bear quite different relations to the disasters visited on their cities. Athamas is essentially a vehicle through which Juno’s wrath against Thebes expresses itself, and he disappears from the story of the city after killing his son Learchus.12 But Hecuba, left alone to lament the obliteration of Troy and its royal house, is the very image of the city’s former glory and its fate. Once “the image of flourishing Asia,” she is now of all humankind the one “for whom alone there remains a Troy.”13

The significance of these two figures to their stories is enough to suggest a complementarity between their roles and those of

12. The story of Athamas and Ino is told in Metamorphoses 4. 416–542. Midway in line 519, with the destruction of Learchus, the story abruptly stops being that of Athamas and becomes wholly that of Ino and Palaemon.

Troilus and Criseyde. Viewed strictly in historical terms, in relation to the larger story of Troy, Criseyde, like Athamas, is largely a vehicle. Her infidelity to Troilus is important chiefly as a symptom and symbol of the fortunes of Troy, and it is appropriate that she disappear from the story of Troilus and his city once she has abandoned them to their fate. Troilus, though, is the very embodiment of Troy, the child of Hecuba, hailed as “Ector the secounde,” an image of the city and its nobility as they see themselves—loyal, brave, deeply chivalrous, and high-principled. When he is betrayed by Criseyde, Troy is betrayed in his person.

But while Hecuba is a monument to the past greatness of Troy, Troilus is inescapably identified with a Troy that is in the process of betraying itself, and the noble qualities embodied in him are fundamentally compromised. For this Troy harbors Paris, Helen, and Pandarbus as well as Troilus, Antigone, and Hector, and all are involved in spite of themselves in a common cause. Hector can argue nobly against the proposal to exchange Criseyde for Antenor, declaring that “we usen here no wommen for to selle” (4. 182) even while engaged in a war to defend the honor of Helen. In the background, Pandarbus and Criseyde play for high stakes against the faction of “False Poliphete” (2. 1467–78), Pandarbus procures his niece for a prince of the realm, and Helen is or is not up to something with Deiphobus.

The ability of the Trojans to believe in their chivalrous integrity in the midst of all this, which is evident in Hector’s lofty tone in the Trojan parliament and Deiphobus’s eagerness to be Criseyde’s champion “with spore and yerde” (2. 1427), is Chaucer’s version of what Dante in the passage quoted above calls the “loftiness” (altezza) of the Trojans. In the Troilus this haughtiness or idealized pride is represented as a blindness of the courtly chivalric ethic to its own limitations. It is this same blindness that enables Troilus to think of Pandarbus’s services on his behalf as an act of “compassioun, and felawship and trist” rather than “bauderye” (3. 395–403) and to defend Criseyde’s good name to the last in the face of overwhelming evidence. Chaucer seems to have taken the flaws of chivalry and courtoisie very seriously, and it is the gravity of this concern that has led many critics to sense that the Troilus was in some measure conceived as a tract for the times.
of Richard II. It is clear that the fall of Chaucer’s Troy consists in
the negation of this flawed idealism and that Criseyde’s betrayal
of Troilus is a central image for this process. When her false light
is finally “queynt” in his mind, his fate merges with that of the
city: he becomes the “unhappy boy” whose death Aeneas will see
inscribed on the doors of Dido’s temple. As in Dante’s panorama,
where “insieme col regno il re fu casso,” where kingdom and king
are “blotted out” together, Troilus and Chaucer’s Troy are oblate-
rated with the extinction of the ideal that had in a sense con-
stituted the essential identity of both.

As so often when Thebes is conjured up in the Troilus, the
incongruity between the actions and sufferings of Troilus and
Criseyde and those of Athamas and Hecuba is as much to the
point as the common identification of all four with national di-
sasters. Just as Chaucer’s Troy is not the tragic ruin that Ovid
and Dante evoke through the figure of Hecuba, so Troilus and
Criseyde fall short of tragic stature both in the role they play in
the downfall of Troy and in their own fate as lovers. This dispar-
ity takes on added meaning when viewed in relation to Inferno
30, for there is a very similar incongruity in Dante’s presenta-
tion. Having set up his Theban and Trojan scenes as a standard,
Dante proceeds to complete the comparison as follows:

Ma né di Tebe furie né troiane
si vider mai in alcun tanto crude,
non punger bestie, nonché membra umane,
quant’ io vidi in due ombre smorte e nude,
che mordendo correvan di quel modo
che ’l porco quando del porcil si schiude.

But no fury of Thebes or of Troy was ever seen so cruel
against any, in rending beasts, much less human limbs, as were
two pallid shades that I saw biting and running like the pig
when it is let out of the sty. [Inf. 30. 22–27]

As Dante well knew, the poems of Statius and Ovid on which he
based his accounts of the “furies of Thebes and Troy” offer
horrors far worse than those he associates with his two naked
shades, and this knowledge, together with the comparison to
runaway pigs, makes the movement of the introductory passage
as a whole unmistakably anticlimactic. It is further puzzling to
learn that the bestial shades are those of Myrrha and Gianni
Schicchi, one the largely innocent victim of a passion she tried
hard to deny, the other a Florentine remembered for a single
rather comic act of mimicry and petty fraud. The standard of
judgment implied by Dante’s choice of examples is one by which
Troilus, Criseyde, and Pandarus would stand equally con-
demned, but it is hard to understand why any of these figures
should be relegated to this, the very “put of helle.”

The answer to this question lies in the fact that Canto 30 deals
with the tenth and lowest bolgia of the circle of the fraudulent
and completes an analysis of fraud which had begun with the
panders and seducers of Canto 18. Myrrha and Gianni Schicchi
introduce this final stage, not because of the heinousness of their
“crimes,” but because these crimes provide vivid summarial im-
ages for the betrayal of self and of truth which all fraud in-
volves.14 Chaucer’s allusions to Inferno 30 ask us to recognize
that a version of this same sin is at work in the world of the
Troilus. As the Dantean context makes plain, it is a sin born of a
deep confusion about goals and motives, and insofar as allusion
to Dante provides a setting for Chaucer’s Trojan lovers, it points
up their haplessness as much as their guilt. If they are falsifiers,
it is because they themselves have first been deceived.

Further parallels might be drawn, but it is not clear how far we
should press the comparison. We have already seen Chaucer
making use of the figure of Myrrha to explore the lovers’ situ-
tion, but it is impossible to know how well informed he would
have been about a relatively obscure figure like Gianni Schicchi.
Gianni’s great achievement was to impersonate the newly dead
Buoso Donati at the request of the dead man’s nephew, dictating
from the deathbed a will in Buoso’s name, and contriving to gain
for himself Buoso’s prize possession, “the lady of the herd,” a
particularly fine mule (Inf. 30. 42–45). For Dante he represents
worldly ingenuity, distracted by its own fictive power from a
recognition that truth is at stake in human relations. To Chaucer

14. On the larger theological implications of this treatment of fraud see Roger
Dragonetti, “Dante et Narcisse, ou les faux-monnayeurs de l’image,” Revue des
études italiennes 11 (1965):85–146; R. Allen Shoaf, “Dante’s Commedia and Chau-
cer’s Theory of Mediation: A Preliminary Sketch,” in New Perspectives in Chaucer
he might well seem a kind of Pandarus, acting in another’s behalf to create and pursue false images and achieving ends from which he himself derives an obscure gratification. Certainly there is an obvious complementarity between the role played by Gianni, the Pandarus-like enabler, and that of the innocent Myrrha, whose plight, as we saw in the preceding chapter, has much in common with that of Troilus. Though Myrrha lets herself be drawn by the ingenuity of her nurse to collaborate in a chain of deceptions that violate pietas at the deepest level, falsifying and so betraying the truth of her own nature and that of the nature of love, she is hardly more an arch sinner than Troilus. The horror of the guilt of both derives from its coexistence with innocence.

Precise moral discriminations are beside the point here in any case, for what we see illustrated in Myrrha and Gianni, as in the lives of Chaucer’s lovers, is the process of fraud, rather than the moral gravity of the crime of fraud. From this point of view the youthful vulnerability of the one and the overreaching ingenuity of the other are as much to the point as their sinfulness. We are invited to view them as involved in a process of which they are unaware, at once collaborators and victims; it is necessary both that we see them as individuals in their not very menacing frailty and that we reflect on the nature of the process that has shaped their lives.

It is a version of this same process, at work in love paramours and in the subversion of nations and their institutions, that both implicates and victimizes Troilus and Criseyde. The catalyst for this process, we should recall, is that Boethian love whose role in the Troilus is treated so ambiguously, which “binds” the elements of cosmic life and submits human beings to the bondage of unhappy passion. The power and menace of this love are implied by the terms in which Chaucer invokes it in the Proem to Book 3:

Ye Joves first to thilke effectes glade,
Thorugh which that thynges lyven alle and be,
Comeveden, and amoreux hem made
On mortal thyng. . . .

[3. 15–18]

15. See chapter 1, pp. 49–52.
Statius and Dante’s Statius

Such “effectes glade” include Jove’s love of Semele, which Dante points to as having first kindled the wrath of Juno against Thebes (Inf. 30. 2). Like Semele, tricked by Juno and totally destroyed as a result of her love affair with Jove, Chaucer’s lovers and Dante’s symbolic sinners have trafficked with a power they can neither withstand nor comprehend. It is a power all the more treacherous for being a part of their daily lives:

Ye knowe al thilke covered qualitee
Of thynges, which that folk on wondren so,
When they kan nought construe how it may jo,
She loveth hym, or whi he loveth here,—
As whi this fissh, and naught that, cometh to were.

[3. 31–35]

The “covered qualitee” of love is a mystery in Boccaccio’s version of these lines, a source of “marvel” (Fil. 3. 78. 5–8). Chaucer is more analytical and traces the process of love’s diffusion into the world, gradually narrowing his focus from its cosmic to its social aspect and so holding the small world of Trojan joy in the same purview as the larger “glad effects” of love. As “wonder” diminishes to mere curiosity, we descend into the world of Pandarus, who commends “love of frendes” as a “mantle” behind which Criseyde may conceal her relations with Troilus. It is this climate of intrigue that enables Troilus and Troy to persist in their idealization of their life by concealing the flaws in their chivalric practice beneath a veil of courtoisie. The force that originates as a manifestation of God’s love for his creation has descended into the world and become a stimulus to secrecy, deception, and self-deception.

The message of these Theban-Trojan exempla, then, is largely about the complexity of history and the importance of keeping individual character and circumstance in mind as one attempts to trace historical patterns. But we should note that in the complexity of perspective which Chaucer’s allusions to Inferno 30 provide there also lurks the danger of another kind of “fraud,” one that threatens the reader of the Troilus who goes too far in identifying with the lovers and accepts the love story too simply on its own terms. We too collaborate in the working of fraud to the extent that we let ourselves be distracted from an
awareness of what is fundamentally at stake in human relations by the comic ingenuity of a confidence man or the pathos of love betrayed. To that extent we too become “Trojans,” beguiled like Hector and Deiphobus by the plight of Criseyde and cajoled by Pandarurus’s stratagems on her behalf to the point at which we fail to see the implications of their behavior. At the center of Canto 30 Dante places a symbol of this danger, the figure of Sinon, the false Greek whose tears induced the Trojans to admit the wooden horse within the walls of their city. In doing so he is recalling the moral of Aeneas’s account of how Sinon’s “perjured art” had prevailed on the Trojans’ compassion and magnanimity, allowing history to take them unawares. This moral can be applied to the impending downfall of Chaucer’s Troy as well:

credita res, captique dolis lacrimisque coactis
quos neque Tydides nec Larisaeus Achilles,
non anni domuere decem, non mille carinae.

The story was believed, and we were taken by guile and by forced tears, we whom not the son of Tydeus, nor Larissean Achilles, nor ten years had overcome, nor a thousand ships. [Aen. 2. 196–98]

History, as the Theban references considered thus far present it, is compounded out of the weakness and short-sightedness of individuals. The allusions to Thebes by Chaucer’s characters amount to a running gloss on their own enactment of a Trojan version of the downfall of the older city. A more controlled perspective seems to emerge in Cassandre’s review of the events that have issued in Troilus’s betrayal at the hands of Diomede. Her survey, which includes a summary of the narrative of Statius’s version of the story of Thebes, gives the effect of an ordered composition, attentive to causation and recurrent patterns, and may well seem to provide the appropriate historical frame, the long view that has been so plainly absent in the other characters’ tentative reflections on their historical situation. 16

16. Norton-Smith, Geoffrey Chaucer, pp. 90–91, points to the importance of the recapitulation of Statius in “gathering together the destructive pagan past and its literary record, synchronizing its inevitability and its epical status with the declining Trojan present.” But as I will suggest below, this seems to me to imply more continuity than Chaucer actually shows us: what ought to happen in Cassandre’s speech rather than what does.
She first tells Troilus the story of the Calydonian boar and its slaying by Meleager. Next she passes to the role of Meleager’s descendant Tydeus in the siege of Thebes, which leads her to the summary of Statius. Finally she “descends” to Diomede, the boar of the dream, bringing her discourse to bear, suddenly and unambiguously, on Troilus:

“And thy lady, wher she be, ywis,  
This Diomede hire herte hath, and she his.  
Wepe if thow wolt, or lef; for, out of doute,  
This Diomede is inne, and thow art oute.”

[5. 1516–19]

Before considering Chaucer’s purpose in making Statius’s narrative the centerpiece of this dismal prophecy, it is important to note certain features of the speech as a whole. Cassandre’s “historical” reading of Troilus’s dream leads to an accurate gloss on the figure of the boar, but it is not therefore a valid interpretation of his situation. If Troilus is blind to any connection between his love and the larger world of events, Cassandre tends toward the opposite extreme, treating a mere sequence of events as if it constituted history.17 Her world view is Ovidian in its delineation of a sequence of events with hints of recurring historical patterns and the working out of an underlying purpose. But it is an imbalanced Ovidian world she presents, dominated by the bare facts of historical change and utterly devoid of the irony and pathos with which Ovid himself, intervening at will, gives a human significance to the action of the Metamorphoses. Cassandre is wholly absent from the story she tells, and this seeming indifference is reinforced by the weaknesses in her narrative itself, which is marked by disjunction and the omission of traditional lore that might offset the effect of her fatalistic view of history. Meleager was the half-brother, rather than the ancestor, of Tydeus, a fact that robs Cassandre’s genealogical emphasis of much of its force.18 Moreover, the continuity implied by the

17. See Monica E. McAlpine, The Genre of Troilus and Criseyde (Ithaca, N.Y., 1978), pp. 170–72. Her discussion of Cassandre’s role is the most thoughtful I have seen, though it is misleading as to the accuracy of Cassandre’s interpretation of Troilus’s dream and exaggerates the ambiguity of the dream itself.

18. Cassandre’s assertion that Tydeus was descended “by ligne” from Meleager (1480–81) is probably due to Filostrato 7. 27. 2, in which Diomede’s
emphasis on kinship is not developed. Diomede is associated with the boar because of his putative descent from Meleager "that made the boar to blede" (1515), but Cassandre offers nothing to suggest a meaning for this association and makes no attempt to link Thebes with Troy. Indeed one of the most striking things about her discourse is the discontinuity between its three sections. Having sketched the events surrounding the original boar slaying, she shifts abruptly, and with only the bare fact of kinship as an excuse, to talk about Tydeus and Thebes. Then her discourse takes another sudden leap, wholly omitting any reference to Troy or the background of the war and instead moving directly to Diomede and Troilus.

The sweep of Cassandre's historical survey, and its disjointedness, recall the headlong sequence of images at the opening of *Inferno* 30. The treatment of the "figure" of the boar, which is so powerful and enigmatic an image for Troilus, is an anticlimax very close to that effected by Dante's introduction of Myrrha and Gianni as wild pigs. But the difference between the two passages is far more important than these similarities; for Dante's use of mythic exempla raises intricate and searching questions about the involvement of the individual with his society and with history, while Cassandre's reduces the individuals she names to pawns, less important than the sequence of events in which they appear.

This contrast is particularly striking in Cassandre's summary of the *Thebaid*, which seems designed to produce the most starkly depressing effect. Not only does she obscure the origins of the war, making it seem a mere extension of the career of Tydeus, but the skeletal version she gives of the story reduces the bulk of the action to a mere listing of the deaths of the Argive heroes, and at times the narrative disappears altogether. For the princi-

---

grandfather is said to have slain the boar. Root, ad loc., notes that Chaucer could have found the proper genealogy in Boccaccio's *Genealogiae deorum gentilium* 9. 21. But the testimony of the mythographers is confusing. Meleager is said to be the ancestor of Tydeus in Lactantius Placidus's commentary on Statius, *Thebaid* 1. 463 (ed. Richard Jahnke, [Teubner, Leipzig, 1898], p. 52); cf. Lactantius's comments on 2. 727, 8. 706 (Jahnke, pp. 135, 404). In the compendium of the first Vatican Mythographer, c. 198 (G. H. Bode, ed., *Scriptores rerum mythicarum* [Celle, 1834], 1:60), Meleager is said to have been killed by his brother Tydeus, perhaps on the basis of *Thebaid* 1. 402–3.
Statius and Dante’s Statius

pal source of Cassandre’s summary is not the poem itself but the twelve-line Latin Argumentum commonly found in manuscripts of the Thebaid, a plot summary that devotes a terse hexameter to the main episodes of each of the twelve books of Statius’s poem. Nearly all the manuscripts of the Troilus contain the Argumentum as well, inserted after line 1498, the midpoint of Cassandre’s summary of the Thebaid, and it is reasonable to assume that the addition is Chaucer’s own.

The Argumentum is a difficult text, dense with information and cluttered with cumbersome proper names, and all the versions found in the Troilus manuscripts contain obvious corruptions. Moreover, even a text from which these flaws have been conjecturally removed gives a misleading impression of the action of the Thebaid at a number of points, and these find their way into Cassandre’s version as well. Thus Cassandre’s summary of Thebaid 5,

And of the holy serpent and the welle,
And of the Furies, al she gan hym telle,

[5. 1497–98]

is based on the following line in the Argumentum:

Mox furie Lenne quinto narratur et anguis.

The “furies” in question are the collective rage of the women of Lemnos whose slaughter of their husbands is recounted to the Argive host by the Lemnian exile Hypsipyle in the course of an episode that is itself an interlude in the story of the siege of Thebes. The “holy serpent and the welle” also figure briefly in this episode in connection with the death of the infant Archemorus. But in the Argumentum, and still more in Cassandre’s speech, these large images have outgrown their original context, and they provide a backdrop for her account of the war which, though portentous, is dehumanized and effectively meaningless, its symbolic potential vast but finally incalculable.

More important than its specific inaccuracies is the bleak and

impersonal character that Cassandre's reliance on the *Argumentum* gives to her version of Statius's narrative, particularly in her account of the later books:

Of Archymoris burying and the pleyes,
   And how Amphiorax fil thorugh the grounde;
How Tideus was slayn, lord of Argeyes,
   And how Ypomedon in litel stounde
   Was dreynt, and ded Parthenope of wounde;
And also how Cappaneus, the proude,
   With thonder dynt was slayn, that cride loude.

She gan ek telle hym how that eyther brother,
   Ethiocles and Polymyte also,
At a scarmuche ech of hem slough oother,
   And of Argyves wepynge and hire wo;
And how the town was brent, she tolde ek tho....

[5. 1499–1510]

In this account of the action of the *Thebaid*, the sense of inevitable doom has become dominant to the point of eliminating any hint of an alternative perspective. Impassively, Cassandre shows a succession of heroes who are destroyed, one after another, and that destruction is the end of it all. The burning of Thebes is her own gloomily prophetic embellishment of the story, once again on the basis of a misleading detail in the *Argumentum*, and she has nothing to say about the intervention of Theseus, with its hint of redemption. Offering her version of the *Thebaid* as evidence of Troilus's betrayal by Diomede, Cassandre bids her brother “weep if thou wilt, or laugh” (1518), but she herself does neither: her view of the events with which she deals is neither comic nor tragic, and the effect of her detachment is to enhance the impression of inevitability which her summary conveys. Her prophecy is in effect dead poetry—a

20. Magoun, “Chaucer's Summary,” p. 420, states that the burning of the city is mentioned in the twelfth line of the *Argumentum*. But in fact *ignem* or *ignes* refers to the funeral pyres of the Argives (the *busta* of *Theb.* 12. 798). Chaucer would certainly have known this, and indeed was clearly fascinated by the ending of Statius's poem; see *Knight's Tale* 994–97, which recall *Theb.* 12. 797ff., and esp. 2919–66, the long *occupatio* in which Chaucer lingers over Arcite's funeral as Statius does over that of Parthenopaeus.
prophecy of doom like the inhuman *scritta morta* over the gateway of Dante’s Inferno, a seeming confirmation of that fear to which the narrator of the *Thebaid* himself threatens to succumb at certain moments: that humanity is at the mercy of alien gods, that there is no higher controlling purpose, that all life ends in pointless destruction. By setting Statius’s bleak narrative in an Ovidian frame and exploiting the suggestions of continuity and purpose which this framing device lends to the panorama of events, Chaucer achieves the chilling final effect of a complex and potentially heroic action which seems to come to nothing, effects no significant historical change, and issues in no metamorphosis or distinctive human gesture that might redeem the story in some small degree. History has been robbed of all meaning.

The point is not that Cassandre is wrong or that she is guilty of any malignant intention in offering Troilus this grim perspective on his betrayal. Cut off from authentic poetic sources, she is cut off as well from the humanity of the *poetae* and from their ability to locate the essential quality, what Statius calls the *virtus* of noble human actions. Thus she seems to suppress the most striking portions of the Ovidian story of Meleager, noting only that his presentation of the slain boar’s head to Atalanta led to “a contek and a gret envye” (1479) before moving abruptly, and by way of a false genealogy, to Statius’s story of Tydeus at Thebes. Yet the story of the boar is only a portion of the larger story of Meleager himself, a story whose potential significance as an image of Troilus’s situation is far richer than the meanings Cassandre draws from her wealth of incident. A hero driven more by passionate love of Atalanta than by duty in his slaying of the boar, Meleager is goaded to a fundamental violation of *pietas* by a need to vindicate his love, slaying the brothers of his mother Althea when they question his right to present the boar’s head to Atalanta. Althea casts into the fire the log to which Meleager’s life has been linked by the Fates, and as it burns, he too is wholly consumed by a fire within himself. His death is both the punishment of his own folly and part of a larger scheme of divine

---

vengeance. Like Troilus, and Troy in the person of Troilus, he pays a terrible price for his love, and his death is in effect the climax of the national tragedy of Calydon. It leaves a lingering sense of unfulfillment, offset only by Ovid’s treatment of the similar death of Hercules in the following book of the *Metamorphoses*, an episode that ends not with utter loss, but with a powerful account of the hero’s apotheosis (*Met. 9. 239–71*).

The neglect and near denial of individual heroism which are the most notable results of Cassandre’s suppression of the human and potentially spiritual implications of her material appear even more sharply when her summary of the *Thebaid* is set against the original poem. Statius is deeply concerned with the quality of heroic action, and the most memorable moments in the *Thebaid* are those at which he focuses on individual heroes at moments of crisis. No reader of the poem can forget the last cannibalistic rage of Tydeus, the spectacular electrocution of Capaneus on the walls of Thebes, or the raw hatred in the final encounter of Polynices and Eteocles. But more distinctively Statian, and much more significant for our purposes in assessing Chaucer’s debt to Statius, are his presentations of two young heroes, Parthenopaeus and Menoeceus, who exist to a great extent apart from the main action of the poem, and whose special qualities anticipate in many ways Chaucer’s treatment of Troilus.

Of all the seven Argive heroes, the young Arcadian warrior Parthenopaeus contributes least to the action of the *Thebaid*, but his origins, his physical appearance, and his few heroic deeds are given special prominence. He is a uniquely privileged figure: from his primitive Arcadian background he derives an innocence that serves as a sort of insulation against the horrors of war. For him alone battle is a sport; Diana protects him and guides his arrows. His youthful beauty, reminding the Theban

22. When Meleager dies (*Met. 8. 522–25*), Ovid declares, “lofty Calydon is laid low [iacet]” (526); and while “iacet” is probably in large part metaphorical, Meleager’s death leads directly to the dissolution of the royal house (526–45). Atalanta quietly disappears from Ovid’s poem after the initial “contek” (425–36), but resurfaces, safe and sound, two books later. In an episode that Chaucer probably recalled in developing the role of Cassandre, Venus tells Adonis the story of Atalanta and Hippomenes in a vain attempt to dissuade him from hunting all beasts that meet the hunter head on (*Met. 10. 560–707*).
warriors of their own sons, makes them reluctant to attack him, and when he finally falls, both armies lament his death.

It would be hard to say with any precision what we are to see as embodied in Parthenopaeus or why his presence and fate should be so strongly emphasized. Very tentatively I would suggest that his embryonic heroism, and the elaborate means by which Statius dramatizes his beauty and innocence, are an adumbration of the fulfillment of something intrinsically noble, the ritual assumption of a kind of ideal natural manhood uncontaminated by any debasing passion and untroubled by a mature, worldly awareness of fate and responsibility. This ideal can hardly be elaborated, for it exists only as a promise, and the promise is inevitably aborted by circumstance. The summons to war, though it finds Parthenopaeus already restless in Arcadia and eager for battle, is untimely, and in his final speech he acknowledges that recklessness has brought about his premature death. His role inevitably recalls the figures of Pallas and Camilla in the Aeneid, and we are probably to see in his brief intrusion into the world, as in Vergil’s depiction of the obliteration of Saturnian Italy at the hands of the Trojans, a suggestion of the inevitably destructive effect of history on nature.

Whatever Statius’s reasons for celebrating Parthenopaeus as he does, his motives may well seem to reduce themselves to mere nostalgia when this pastoral figure is set against the austere heroism of Menoeceus, the son of Creon, whose ritual suicide, undertaken in response to the prophecy of Tiresias that this alone can avert a Theban defeat, marks the spiritual high point of the poem. It is essential to Parthenopaeus’s role that he exist as nearly as possible outside of history, while Menoeceus, as the last of the Theban royal house, is deeply involved in the world of events. The opposition of the two heroes and the contrast in Statius’s treatment of them is thus a particularly effective illustration of Statius’s deeply ambivalent attitude toward the action of his poem.

But while Menoeceus is at least believed to have affected the course of history through his expiatory death, Statius gives less

---

23. As Parthenopaeus appears at the marshalling of the Argive host, the narrator expresses the hope that he may live until his strength becomes equal to his courage (4.253).
attention to the consequences of the act on this level than to the transcendent character of the *virtus* that inspires his action. The most significant contrast between the two young heroes is that whereas Parthenopaeus functions chiefly as an unconscious reflection of the nostalgia and idealism of others, Menoeceus undergoes an inner, spiritual experience that is inaccessible to others. Before Menoeceus is introduced, we are shown the goddess *Virtus* joyfully descending from the seat of Jove to make one of her rare incursions into human life. Whereas the other heroes in the poem are impelled in their final moments of valor by a *furor* that intensifies their valor as death approaches, Virtus finds Menoeceus already fighting at the height of his powers. Her function is not to goad him to a heroic madness but to imbue him with a sense of his spiritual mission. Assuming the form of the priestess Manto, she compels him to forsake “mean battles” and raise his mind to the contemplation of a higher destiny:

... non haec tibi debita virtus:
Astra vocant, caeloque animam, plus concipe, mittes.

... This sort of virtue is not meant for you: the stars summon you; only set your mind on higher things and you will send your soul to heaven. [10. 664–65]

His death, despite its importance for Thebes, releases a soul that has long been disdainful of bodily existence (774–75) and has already entered into the presence of Jove even as *pietas* and *virtus* bear his body to the ground (780–82).

Statius makes plain that Menoeceus’s act has little or no effect, either on the spiritual climate of the poem or on the course of events. For a time it suspends the action of the war, as the Argives withdraw in reverence to allow the rejoicing Thebans to stage an elaborate funeral and establish Menoeceus as a patron of the city. But the interlude is brief, and the poet himself seems to hint that its importance is overshadowed by that of the final madness and destruction of Capaneus, as the war quickly resumes its bloody course. Creon’s speech before Menoeceus’s funeral pyre reaffirms his son’s divine destiny, but it is also out of grief for his loss that Creon is driven to prohibit the burial of the Argive dead, a perversión of the meaning of Menoeceus’s sacrif-
fice which, together with the fact that Statius offers no final comment on his heroism, leaves his importance for the meaning of the poem as a whole uncertain.

The *Thebaid* ends on a similar note of uncertainty, all the more striking in that it represents a retreat from all that Menoeceus and his sacrifice seemed to represent. The Argive widows summon Theseus to the final campaign, which frees the city from domination by the house of Oedipus. Theseus’s intervention has been seen as transforming the entire poem, making it finally “an epic not of sin but of redemption, a chronicle not of evil but of triumphant good.” But the poet himself offers no clear final assessment. With the release of tension following the death of Creon, all are drawn toward the dead—“vidui ducunt ad corpora luctus” (12. 796)—and the final lines of the narrative proper take the suspended form of a paralipsis, in which the poet, while denying his will or power to do justice to them, alludes briefly to the mourning over the Argive heroes and ends by hesitating for one final moment over the figure of Parthenopaeus:

Arcada, quo planctu genetrix Erymanthia clamet,
Arcada, consumpto servantem sanguine vultus,
Arcada, quem geminae pariter flevere cohortes.

The Arcadian, and how his mother cried out in her mourning;
the Arcadian, his face still beautiful despite his loss of blood;
the Arcadian, for whom the two armies felt equal grief. [12. 805–7]

In this lingering note of pity there is a hint of deep pessimism: it is as though *pietas* toward the dead were the one surely meaningful form of religious expression. Certainly there is no Statian equivalent to the remorseless *pietas* of the *Aeneid*, which assumes that the great achievement of the founding of Rome is worth its price in loss and slaughter. Perhaps we are to see Statius’s curious attachment to Parthenopaeus as symbolic of a purely


personal attitude, a dissent from the harsh world of epic values for which no explicit justification could be given.

In the end, I think, we must see the *Thebaid* as dramatizing a conflict of values that Statius cannot resolve and of which the contrast in his treatment of Parthenopaeus and Menoeceus may be seen as symptomatic. Without attempting to suggest historical causes for his dilemma, we may see his poetry as suspended between what I will call traditional religion on the one hand, and, on the other, a dim perception of something very different, something genuinely transformative, which he can express only tentatively. The former, as manifested in the *Thebaid*, is largely the religion of cult and practice, devoted to the propitiation of the traditional gods and to the search for guidance through augury, necromancy, and the imputation of a symbolic value to good and bad fortune. In many ways it is a religion of culture, and its most strongly affirmative gestures involve a collaboration of *pietas* with artistic imagination: Amphiaras’s intuitive probing of the meaning of augury is the act of a poet of metamorphosis, seeking a symbolic pattern in the movement of the changing world. But this culture-religion is inevitably bound to the past and seems at times, as in the purely imaginative idealization of Parthenopaeus, to be reducible to mere nostalgia.

Against this half-poetic piety we may set those moments when Statius seems concerned with vindicating human life in the face of the hostility of the traditional gods and with affirming the meaning of virtue and suffering with no regard to their efficacy on the level of history. Menoeceus’s experience of divine virtue and the immortality he gains through his suicide are clearly far more important in themselves than the temporary reprieve he earns for the city of Thebes. At such a moment, or again when he shows Coroebus and Amphiaras gaining exemption from the cruelty of the gods by their eloquent affirmation of private virtue (1. 643–66, 8. 90–126), Statius suspends the power and authority of the traditional order, and by his increasing emphasis on the divinity of Pietas and Virtus themselves, implicitly rejects it.

From the vantage point of the Christian poet, Statius’s treatment of such a figure as Menoeceus is of crucial importance in illuminating his spiritual advancement relative to Vergil and
Statius and Dante’s Statius

Ovid. As Lewis notes, Statius’s affirmation of the heavenly provenance of the virtue that inspires Menoeceus answers directly a question left open by Vergil, who makes Nisus question whether his desire to do “something great” is divinely inspired or born of dangerous impulse. Though Statius’s conviction seems to waver somewhat when he is forced to descend from the theme of Menoeceus’s transformation to deal with the “lofty virtue” of Capaneus, a virtue that “exceeds measure,” the goddess who inspires Menoeceus is clearly of a different order, a sort of grace.

Certainly Dante saw in Menoeceus the potential resolution of the conflict of doubt, nostalgia, and religious intuition which the *Thebaid* leaves unresolved. The conversion of Statius as Dante presents it might be characterized as a full acceptance of the spiritual challenge represented by Menoeceus’s fate, and it is appropriate the the confirmation of this conversion, Statius’s major contribution to the spiritual theme of the *Commedia*, should be his discourse on the creation of the human soul (Purg. 25. 34–107). For the heart of this discourse, the account of the informing of the embryonic soul by divine virtù and of the soul’s death and afterlife (68–87), is largely modeled on Menoeceus’s experience of the inspiration of the goddess Virtus in *Thebaid* 10. In both cases the infusion is a glad bestowal of the divine on a creature that has attained a state of natural perfection sufficient to make it a worthy receptacle, and the effect in both cases is the absorption and reordering of the natural powers by the divine. This total transformation is conveyed in the *Purgatorio* by the wonderful analogy of the sun’s heat, which unites with the juice of the grape to create wine (25. 76–78), and in the *Thebaid* by the more violent image of a tree struck by lightning, which “drinks” the fire and becomes consumed by its power (10. 674–77). As Menoeceus’s soul, immediately smitten with the love of death,

27. *Thebaid* 10. 827–36, 845–47. Capaneus states explicitly that his attempt to destroy Thebes single-handedly is also an attempt to deny the meaning of Menoeceus’s sacrifice (845–47).
28. The suggestive phrase “raised up his spirit” (erexit sensus) (*Theb.* 10. 677) may perhaps be seen as corresponding to the lines in which the “new spirit” reconstitutes the active power of the embryonic human nature it informs (Purg. 25. 71–75).
moves unfalteringly toward the destiny that will translate it to heaven, so in the *Purgatorio* the soul, once perfected, lives only to die, and then, “without resting,” goes forward to learn its destination in the afterlife.\(^{29}\)

The liberation of Statius from the hellish world of Thebes to the point at which he becomes our authority for the freedom of the purified soul is one of the most important symbolic events in Dante’s *Commedia*. And as I have already suggested, Dante’s elaborate fiction, which becomes the prototype for his own assimilation and transcendence of the literary past in the *Purgatorio*, is highly significant for Chaucer as well. Indeed the experience of Dante’s Statius is in certain respects closer to that of Chaucer’s narrator than to Dante’s own, and in the final stanzas of the *Troilus* Chaucer, too, will show himself deeply aware of having entered that area of poetic experience which the Statius cantos define.

In the *Thebaid* itself we can see in Statius’s wavering between identification with Menoeceus and with Parthenopaeus doubts very much like those of Chaucer’s narrator as he contemplates the story of Troilus. And though we cannot point to precise correspondences between the *Troilus* and the *Thebaid* comparable to those that illuminate Dante’s appropriation of Statius, it is possible to see Troilus’s role and the evolution of his heroism in Statian terms. In a broad sense Troilus is at once the Parthenopaeus and the Menoeceus of Chaucer’s poem. Like Parthenopaeus he is a privileged figure, whose experience must fulfill the yearnings and fantasies of others, whose innocence must be preserved at all costs, and who exists on his own plane of reality, unaffected by the long war and the worldly stratagems of Pandarus. His imaginative world, his equivalent to the idyllic

\[^{29}\text{The abrupt shift from the moment at which human nature is consummated by virtù to the moment of death (Purg. 25. 79–81) corresponds to the abrupt separation of spiritual from earthly when Menoeceus dies, and}

\[\text{Pietas virtusque ferebant}\\ \quad \quad \text{leniter ad terras corpus; nam spiritus olim}\\ \quad \quad \quad \text{ante Iovem et summis apicem sibi poscit in astris.}\\\]

\[\text{Piety and Virtue bear his body gently to the ground; for his spirit}
\]

\[\text{has long since come before Jove, to demand for itself a place of}
\]

\[\text{honor among the highest stars. [Theb. 10. 780–82]}\]
Arcadian atmosphere in which Parthenopaeus moves, is the lyric world of the religion of love, and he can have no ongoing existence outside that world. But he is also, like Menoeceus, the vessel of an inchoate spirituality, a virtue that withstands and finally overcomes the prevailing emphasis of the poem’s action. Though we may see him as blind and pathetic in his adherence to an empty faith in the fidelity of Criseyde, we must also recognize something admirable in his own unflinching commitment to love in the face of powerful temptations to despair.

Troilus will eventually become, like Menoeceus for Dante’s Statius, a catalyst to the narrator's discovery of spiritual meaning beneath the surface of his poetic conception, but he must first undergo what amounts to an evolution from the status of a Parthenopaeus to that of a Menoeceus. In this respect Cassandre’s Theban prophecy and her potentially devastating account of his dream may be seen as a crucial test, the shattering of his Parthenopaean idyll. His response to her speech clearly exposes the inadequacy of her view of human life and gives us a new and significant insight into his own.

Troilus answers Cassandre’s claim that Criseyde has given her heart to Diomede not with a direct denial, but with the charge that Cassandre has slandered women in general, reinforced by the counter-example of the heroic virtue of Alcestis, who gave her life for her husband:

“For whan hire housbonde was in jupartye
To dye hym self, but if she wolde dye,
She ches for hym to dye and gon to helle,
And starf anon, as us the bokes telle.”

There is a special aptness in the citation of the example of Alcestis. Though it does nothing to vindicate Criseyde, it raises questions about the value of private virtue which point up Cassandre’s indifference to the quality of human actions. The Alcestis reference also provides a valuable index to the combination of genuine virtues and severe limitations that Troilus will exhibit in the final stages of his story. It is significant that Alcestis’s legend was unknown to the Middle Ages in any classical
literary version. It survived only in the compendia of the mythographers, so that its meaning was largely determined by the moralizations conventionally associated with it in mythographic tradition. To this extent Troilus’s vision shares the limitations of Cassandre’s: he is as much at the mercy of the pseudo-classical tradition as she is in his dependence on mythographical exempla that lack the reinforcement of authentic poetry. But unlike Cassandre’s fatalistic view, which diminishes the significance of the individual, the example of Alcestis illustrates a triumph of pietas, a submission to fate which is at the same time a willed, virtuous act.

In the bare-bones version transmitted by Fulgentius and the Vatican mythographers, the story of Alcestis is as follows: she was the wife of the Greek king Admetus, who had won her, with the aid of Apollo and Hercules, on terms proposed by her father, by successfully harnessing to his chariot a lion and a boar. Alcestis’s self-sacrifice was undertaken in response to the prophecy of Apollo that only thus could Admetus be saved from a fatal illness. After her death Hercules brought her back from the underworld and restored her to Admetus. For the mythographers, Admetus is the human mind or spirit, subject to fear (“quasi quem ad-ire poterit metus”), and Alcestis is the spiritual courage (animositas or praesumptio) to which he aspires. In pursuit of her he yokes the lion (“mental virtue”) and the boar (“bodily virtue”) and it is this integrated virtue, symbolized by Hercules, which affirms the spiritual destiny of man by meeting the challenge of death.30

The limitations of Troilus’s view of Alcestis are clear: in recalling her story he makes no mention of its final and crowning event, her liberation by Hercules and her restoration to Admetus; indeed he seems unaware of this event, declaring instead that after descending into hell she “starf anon” (1533). Here we may see the fatalism that strictly limits Troilus’s sense of his own destiny as a lover, reducing Alcestis to the role of a virtuous

suicide and causing him to ignore altogether the implications of Hercules' act of redemption, just as Cassandre ignored the sacrifice of Menoeceus and the redemptive role of Theseus in the *Thebaid*. Troilus, moreover, has utterly failed to harness the lion and the boar in his own life; they are represented in the opposition between himself and Diomede, the boar-figure of his dream whose intervention in his life he is for the moment psychologically incapable of recognizing.\footnote{Troilus is compared to a lion at 5. 890, in the course of a portrait that is balanced against that of Diomede.}

But there is nobility as well as futility in Troilus's position at this point in the story, and there is much in the comparison of Alcestis to remind us of his positive qualities. When he points to her fidelity and her noble exercise of free choice, he is unwittingly pointing to the presence of similar qualities in himself, a fidelity that values love more highly than his own life and survives uncompromised when his love is betrayed. Though he is mistaken in his insistence on believing that Criseyde has remained loyal, his refusal to abandon that conviction in the face of Cassandre's revelations is admirable. The spark of virtue that enables him to assert the claims of fidelity at the very moment when his own faith in love is most strongly threatened by despair is itself an example of the sort of spiritual capacity that her view of human existence wholly ignores. If his love remains centered on Criseyde and never attains the full dignity of the patriotic and religious virtue of Menoeceus, it is nonetheless the essential force that enables him to survive and transcend the potentially overwhelming implications of his story.

In the end this latent spirituality will emerge more decisively. After the emotional intensity of Troilus's love has been converted for an interval into heroic wrath, he will be granted a moment of transcendent awareness. But Chaucer, like Statius, leaves certain aspects of his hero's role unresolved and assigns no final value to his spiritual evolution. Troilus's virtue is left in suspension, in a spiritual void, and there is no category of genuine religious experience to which we can refer the Boethian perspective on life and love which he attains immediately after his death in battle. In the end, hero and narrator part company.
once and for all. Leaving Troilus to the care of Mercury, the narrator steps outside the poem's pagan world and his vision shifts, as in the *Thebaid*, from the affirmation of heroism to a sense of the pathos of human loss. In the final stanzas of the poem we look back at Troilus from another world, as Statius looks back at the funeral pyre of Parthenopaeus, or as Dante's Vergil recalls the lost, half-pastoral Italy where Turnus, Camilla, Nisus, and Euryalus met their deaths (*Inf.* 1. 106–8). But there are hints of future promise in this vision of the loss of innocence and the long history of the sacrifice of youthful heroism. As Dante and Statius discern new meanings in the ancient ideals of *virtus* and *pietas*, so Chaucer's narrator is finally compelled to respond to Troilus's spiritual yearnings by giving expression to intuitions of his own. In the end, as for Dante's Statius, these intuitions become the means to the narrator's full psychological and spiritual liberation from the world of his poem.