Dantean Allusions in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*

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Geoffrey Chaucer specifies that his *Troilus and Criseyde* is a “tragedye” (V.1786). He avoided rewriting Dante’s *Commedia* (later designated *The Divine Comedy*), giving us instead a human tragedy, which he based on the plot of Boccaccio’s *Il Filostrato* and on the structure and imagery of the Dantean masterpiece. As Winthrop Weatherbee points out, “Chaucer has appropriated the resources of the greatest Christian poet [Dante] to show us through Troilus’ experience what love is in itself, as well as what, being merely human, it cannot be . . .” (145). By contrasting Troilus’ story with that of Dante’s Pilgrim in the *Commedia*, Chaucer questions the condemnation of sexual love within a Christian universe.

Allusions to the *Commedia* abound throughout the *Troilus*; however, an examination of the characters in each work reveals how they affect technically the structure of Chaucer’s poem. Troilus’ experience in loving Criseyde parallels in many ways Dante’s Pilgrim’s love for Beatrice. In the *Commedia*, Dante’s Pilgrim is guided through Hell and Purgatory by Virgil, and later through Paradise by Beatrice. Pandarus corresponds to Virgil in that he guides Troilus through an earthly Hell and Purgatory. As the object of Troilus’ love, Criseyde is parallel to Beatrice, but with the essential difference that Criseyde proves to be the embodiment of earthly love (*cupiditas*), while Beatrice symbolizes disembodied, heavenly love (*caritas*). In Boccaccio’s interpretation of the legend, Criseyde existed entirely as a symbol of infidelity. However, without changing the course of events, Chaucer adds complexity to her character, purposefully (we assume) making it difficult to condemn her. Donald Howard states flatly: “It is folly to talk about Criseyde’s ‘treachery’” (454).

Just as Dante first descends into Hell to begin his spiritual journey, Troilus plunges into his own emotional hell when he first falls in love with Criseyde.
Troilus’ conversion to love occurs suddenly, changing his life forever; his every action henceforth is motivated in some way by his love. A major source of ambiguity in Chaucer’s story is this: from his first sight of her, Troilus sees something transcendent (eternal) in Criseyde. Donald Rowe points out that for Troilus, Criseyde is “the one incarnation of the Good, the Beautiful and the True—she is Beatrice” (71). As readers, we know, however, that Criseyde is not Beatrice, but the significant point is that Troilus “demonstrates an ability to love which is equal to Dante’s” (Helterman 16). Pandarus instructs Troilus in the ways of courtly love and Troilus displays gentilesse as a lover, exhibiting a “fidelity that values love more highly than his own life and survives uncompromised when his love is betrayed” (Wetherbee 143).

Though the Troilus, in its fashion, retraces Dante’s spiritual journey, at least through Book III, the story is also structured by the turn of Fortune’s Wheel. Before seeing Criseyde, Troilus is self-centered, filled with what D. W. Robertson would refer to as cupiditas. His disdainful attitude toward lovers and earthly love, and his unwillingness to participate in it, indicate a form of despair not unlike that of the uncommitted in the vestibule of Dante’s Hell. Ironically, Troilus is also on the threshold of hell, Dante’s Circle 2, as he enters the temple, and is plummeted into a love which he cannot fathom from the moment he sets eyes upon Criseyde. When Criseyde looks at him he feels as if he is dying, not realizing “that Love hadde his dwellinge/Withinne the subtle stremes of hire yen” (Benson 1.304-05). Troilus is transformed with that look, just as Dante is transformed in the Paradiso by fixing his eyes upon Beatrice’s eyes (Sinclair I.66-70). Though transformed by love, Troilus is lost in despair at the hopelessness of his love until Pandarus offers himself as an advisor. Pandarus is not the Voice of Reason for Troilus which Virgil is for Dante, but without the intervention of Pandarus and his worldly advice, Troilus’ love would have remained unrealized. It would not have been consummated because Troilus is a passive lover, worshipping Criseyde from afar.

At the beginning of his poem, Chaucer invokes the Fury Thesiphone as his Muse in telling this tale of the “double sorwe” of Troilus. It is Thesiphone, with her two sisters, who guards the gates of Dante’s city of Dis in Hell. Troilus’ double sorrow is possibly that which is referred to by Francesca in Circle 2 in Dante’s Inferno: “there is no greater pain than to recall the happy time in misery” (V.121-23). Both of these allusions reinforce the idea that Troilus is at the bottom of Fortune’s Wheel, in despair and sorrow. Like Dante, Troilus must experience Hell before he can ascend to Paradise. Chaucer further emphasizes the Dantean connection of Hell in Book I of the Troilus, describing love as
as a raging fever with Troilus burning with love for Criseyde.

It is through the assistance of Pandarus that Troilus is guided from despair to hope. Pandarus assures Troilus that “nevere man or woman yet bigete / That was unapt to suffren loves hete, / Celestial, or elles love of kynde” (I.977-79). This speech parallels Virgil’s to Dante in Purgatorio XVII 91-93, but unlike Virgil, Pandarus is the voice of practicality rather than of reason, assisting Troilus in the physical sphere of love. Though Pandarus speaks of Troilus’ love as natural or “kyndely,” Chaucer otherwise uses Christian religious terms to describe Troilus and his love, adding a religious dimension to this love from the beginning. Book II places Troilus in Purgatory, Dante’s book of hope. Chaucer begins with an allusion to Canto 1.1-3, where, like Troilus, Dante’s Pilgrim also leaves behind the cruel sense of despair. In this book, Pandarus also leads Criseyde into Purgatory, planting in her the seeds of physical love and desire. Though first displaying fear at the prospect of love and the possible sorrow which it can entail for a woman, Criseyde overcomes her fear and decides to accept Troilus’ attentions after first reasoning that she need not fall in love with him in return. Hers is a practical decision. However, when Criseyde sees Troilus in a procession passing her window, love overcomes her logic and fears and she also falls in love. However, Criseyde’s love never includes the religious dimension of Troilus’ love. The language Chaucer uses to describe Criseyde’s love is taken from the world of nature rather than that of Christianity. When Criseyde is again filled with fear, considering the risks she takes in loving Troilus, Antigone’s song of love seems to answer all of Criseyde’s concerns, equating love with security. The dream of a white eagle which painlessly exchanges her heart for another’s is a further indication to Criseyde that love means security and that her love for Troilus will not be painful (Lambert 106).

After leaving Criseyde, Pandarus returns to Troilus and begins instructing him in ways to win Criseyde. He delivers Troilus’ letter to Criseyde, persuading her to answer the letter and manipulating her into a position to see Troilus as he passes by in parade. Pandarus further arranges events when he contrives the lie to Deiphebus regarding Criseyde’s need of protection, as a ploy leading to the first meeting between Criseyde and Troilus at Deiphebus’ house.

In Book III of the Troilus, Pandarus guides Troilus and Criseyde from the hopefulness of Purgatory to the bliss of a Paradise on earth, just as Virgil guided Dante to the Earthly Paradise. Chaucer relies on Dantean structure and allusions to exalt Boccaccio’s love story, changing their love into something considerably more elevated than it was in Il Filostrato. Book III of the Troilus is replete with images of sight and sound, as is Dante’s Paradise. However,
Pandarus' actions sound a discordant note in Chaucer's blissful Book III. Not only does Pandarus himself use deceit to advance the love affair, at Deiphebus' house he also leads Criseyde and Troilus into deception as they hide their feelings for each other from Helen and Deiphebus. Indeed, it is Pandarus who takes the action which will lead them to the physical consummation of their love.

Troilus and Criseyde both carry on their affair in the tradition of courtly lovers, discreetly, with letters and stolen moments until Pandarus contrives a climactic rapprochement at his house. Pandarus must lie in order to entice Criseyde to his dwelling, assuring her that Troilus will not be there, but Troilus, in fact, is hiding in the closet. The innocence of Chaucer's lovers is emphasized by a naïve hesitancy in both Troilus and Criseyde which is not found in the rendezvous of Boccaccio's lovers (Howard 446). Troilus' swoon, the result of his distressing speechlessness, and Criseyde's surprise at Pandarus' deceiving her, become part of a rite of passage through which he awakens in her bed. Troilus' swoon can be compared to Dante's fall into unconsciousness in Purgatorio XXXI.88-90, from which he revives to see Matelda beyond the waters of Lethe (Wetherbee 170). Again, it is Pandarus who has taken action by physically throwing Troilus into Criseyde's bed.

At the moment of physical consummation, Troilus cries out "O love, O Charite" (Ill.1254), joining pagan, or earthly love, and Christian, or heavenly love—or, in Robertson's interpretation, joining cupiditas with caritas. Has Troilus reached a heaven on earth? In his moment of ecstasy with Criseyde, Troilus echoes St. Bernard's prayer to the Virgin Mary in Canto XXXIII of The Paradiso, seeing in Criseyde something of what St. Bernard saw in the Virgin Mary (Rowe 108).

Criseyde's vow to Troilus the morning after their lovemaking is full of nature images, for Criseyde is of nature and their love is a natural love. Her vow to remain steadfast to her love for Troilus, though made in good faith, is rooted in the ever-changing natural world.

As Troilus returns to his chamber to face a new day, physical gratification has now become a part of his love. In Pandarus' conversation with Troilus he appropriately echoes Francesca's speech to Dante:

For of fortunes sharpe adversitee  
The worste kynde of infortune is this,  
A man to han ben in prosperitee,  
And it remembren when it passed is.  

(III.1625-28)
This again defines Troilus’ "double sorwe," the contrasting of beginnings and endings, of Hell and Paradise.

In his joy here at the end of Book III, Troilus sings the Canticus Troili, a song of natural love, but there is a distinctly religious quality to it (Rowe 77-78). Love ennobles Troilus, making him a better knight, fiercer in war and more courteous in the city. He speaks of love and wants others to share in the bliss he has found. The ennobling power of love, be it earthly or divine, is evident since "Pride, Envye, Ire and Avarice / He gan to fle, and everich other vice" (III.1805-06). It is significant that Chaucer mentions twice that Troilus overcomes his pride since that was also the sin which Dante was most concerned with overcoming in himself. Chaucer's narrator addresses Venus at the end of Book III, "Thou lady bryght, the dother to Dyone, / Thy blynde and wynged sone ek, daun Cupide" (III.1807-08), recalling Dante's Canto VIII when Dante is in the sphere of Venus, the realm of the amorous whose passion has been converted from physical love to spiritual caritas. Chaucer again underlines the parallels between Troilus and Dante's Pilgrim through his allusions.

Dante began a spiritual ascent after his reunion with Beatrice, but Troilus is drawn toward an emotional descent after his physical union with Criseyde. In Book IV both Troilus and Criseyde begin their "fall" (casus) on Fortune's Wheel, drawing them from the bliss of their earthly Paradise to the fear and despair of Troilus' earthly Hell. In this downward turn of Fortune's Wheel, which of course Dante's journey does not include, a metaphysical element continues to be operative: Troilus' love, as will be shown, transcends his loss.

Upon hearing the order to exchange Criseyde for Antenor, Troilus does not dare speak against it for fear of revealing their secret love. Chaucer compares Troilus to a tree, a nature image possibly referring to Inferno XIII and the punishment of those who are violent against themselves, and goes on to describe Troilus' self-abuse in his despair. When Troilus addresses Fortune and asks, among other questions, "Is ther no grace, and shal I thus be spilt?" (IV.263), we hear the cry of a pagan using Christian terms. For Dante, of course, this represents no paradox; in Paradiso XX we see Ripheus, who died in 1200 B.C., saved by God's grace.

The spiritual dimension of Troilus' love is again evident when he realizes Criseyde will be lost:

O verrey lord, O Love! O god, allass! . . .
Syn ye Criseyde and me han fully brought
This is another pagan prayer embellished with Christian motifs. Though he has experienced the natural, earthly consummation of his love, Troilus still maintains a worshipful, courtly attitude toward Criseyde as is evident when he cries out, “O my Criseyde, O lady sovereign” (IV.316). That he is again in Hell is affirmed by his “thousand sikes, hotter than the gleede” (IV.337).

Troilus tells Pandarus that he is torn between desire and reason (IV.572), the desire to keep Criseyde with him at any cost, and reason which acknowledges his knightly duty both to protect Criseyde’s honor and to give up his personal desire in exchange for the welfare of the city. Unlike Dante, Troilus must eventually find the path of reason on his own because Pandarus, in contrast to Virgil, is only a practical guide.

That Criseyde is also near the bottom of Fortune’s Wheel is implied when the narrator states that “she brenneth both in love and drede” (IV.678) and that “fro heven into which helle / She fallen was” (IV.712-13). In Criseyde’s speech (IV.742-98), she despairingly cries, “What is Criseyde worth, from Troilus” (IV.765) amid several images from nature. This speech is new in Chaucer’s rendition of the story, giving Criseyde an awareness that Troilus possesses a higher virtue than she does, even though she is a “signale of martire / Of deth, which that hire herte gan desire” (IV.818-19). Chaucer further emphasizes that she is bound to the natural world since her face, formerly the image of Paradise as was Beatrice’s for Dante, “Was al ychaunged in another kynde” (IV.864-65), with “kynde” connoting the natural world.

With Criseyde’s departure in Book V, Troilus’s love again becomes spiritual and ideal. It is obvious that Troilus still worships Criseyde with a higher love when he says of her house, “And farwel shryne, of which the seynt is oute” (V.553); however, it is also in Book V that Criseyde, unlike Troilus, accepts a new companion, climbing back on Fortune’s Wheel. In his description of Criseyde, Chaucer’s narrator states, “They writen thaat hire syen / That Parradis stood formed in hire yen” (V.816-17), as indeed it had for Troilus. This echoes Dante’s Paradiso when Beatrice tells Dante’s Pilgrim, “Turn and listen, for not only in my eyes is Paradise” (XVIII.20-21), perhaps with an ironic implication that Criseyde is certainly no heavenly Beatrice.

Troilus comes to realize finally that Criseyde “Nas nat so kynde as that hire oughte to be” (V.1643), although “kynde” in the sense of natural (earthly) is
exactly what she is. Though Troilus is in misery over her faithlessness, he says of Criseyde, “Yet love I best of any creature” (V.1701), giving her his uncondition­al love at the same time that he calls her a creature, an integral part of the physical world.

The Prayer to the Trinity in the final stanza of the Troilus is from Paradiso XIV.28-30. It completes the tragedy of Troilus by giving it a divine (transcen­dent) ending. In Troilus’ rise to the eighth sphere, love, death, and heavenly reward unite. His place in heaven is won through love. While watching others on earth weep for his tragic death, he can laugh because his perspective has changed. It was from the eighth sphere of Heaven that Dante also turned around and looked back at the earth with a new perspective. Troilus’ flight parallels Dante’s in the understanding he gains from his vantage point in the spheres (Taylor 190-91). He, like Dante, has reached a transcendent viewpoint.

Troilus’ rise to the eighth sphere is an indication of Chaucer’s questioning. In Troilus’ death, we have the human tragedy which Chaucer promised, but in this flight to the eighth sphere we have hope that Troilus’ “lighte goost” might not remain forever lost. It was also in the eighth sphere that Dante was exam­ined as to faith, hope, and love. It is Troilus’ love which “enables him to survive and transcend the potentially overwhelming implications of his story,” implica­tions which other critics see as damning him (Wetherbee 143). Though Criseyde is not Beatrice, Troilus’ love parallels Dante’s. The purity of Troilus’ love, even though it is an earthly love, prepares him to understand love celestial so that “his loving becomes an aesthetic, if not a moral, ladder toward heaven” (Helterman 17).

As Criseyde reascends with Diomede on Dame Fortune’s Wheel, she follows an exemplified cyclical pattern which characterizes nature and its seasons. Criseyde is of nature and reality. Therefore her truth is eternal change, as is Fortune’s. She is a realist and does not seek transcendence in the world, so she is not transformed by her love. Chaucer pictures Criseyde recapitulating her love of Troilus with Diomede, reminding the reader once again of Paolo and Francesca assigned to Dante’s Hell to repeat the tragedy of their lustful, earth­ly love.

Steve Ellis sees Troilus’ ascent at least as a “demi-salvation.” He notes the strong inclination among critics to reward the “trouthe” of Troilus, this virtuous pagan, which is frustrated by the complex theological problems involved in car­rying this through (292). However, in Paradiso XX Dante allows for two pagans in the heaven of Justice, Trajan, who was resurrected from Limbo to be baptized centuries after his death, and Riphaeus, mentioned above, about whom Dante
wrote, "therefore from grace, to grace God opened his eyes to our coming redemption, so that he believed in it and from that time endured no longer the stench of paganism" (122-125).

Chaucer uses Dantesian structure to challenge the negative Augustinian view of earthly love ("cupiditas") by questioning whether through his "fortunate" fall in loving Criseyde, Troilus becomes capable of ascent to his transcendental perspective in the eighth sphere. Chaucer incorporates the Thomist view that earthly love is not to be condemned, but instead is to be seen as a vehicle of caritas. Troilus staked his emotional equilibrium on an earthly love, which, like the other gifts of Fortune, could be given and rescinded. Love of "kynde" is the mirror image of celestial love, but it can never be more than an imperfect mirroring—that is, human. Chaucer's Troilus is essentially an affirmation of the unique value and irreplaceable nature of the human, earthly experience. To approach heresy to a degree, "what Christ reveals to all Christians is revealed to Troilus through Criseyde and their love" (Rowe 108).

In typically Chaucerian irony, this poem treating a mortal woman whose love failed to last ends with a Dantesian allusion to the "one mortal woman whose power to love is everlasting" (Donaldson 100-01). Chaucer's prayer,

\[
\text{Thow oon and two, and thre, eterne on lyve,} \\
\text{That regnest ay in thre, and two, and oon,} \\
\text{Uncircumscript, and al maist circumscrive} \\
\text{(V.1863-65)}
\]

echoes Dante in Paradiso,

\[
\text{That One and Two and Three who ever lives and ever reigns} \\
\text{in Three and in Two and in One and uncircumscribed} \\
\text{circumscribes all.} \\
\text{(XIV.28-30)}
\]

Chaucer's translation of Dante's prayer, although addressed to Jesus Christ, refers to Mary, "for love of mayde and moder thyn benigne," in the last line of the poem (V.1869).

In Troilus and Criseyde, Dante's work functions throughout as an echo or reminder of "the higher love that glimmers through the 'feynede love' which Troilus follows" (Ellis 290). It allows Chaucer to underline the ambiguity of the earthly experience of love and to celebrate that experience, the only one we are allowed as humans, for the potential it holds.
NOTES

1 Wetherbee devotes a chapter of his book to "Dante and the Troilus." Here he makes the comparison of Troilus, Criseyde, and Pandarus with Dante, Beatrice, and Virgil.


3 Donald Rowe discusses the Christian imagery Chaucer uses in descriptions of Troilus as well as the nature images used in describing Criseyde throughout his book.

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