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Chaucer's Pandarus: The Preserver of Innocence

Lee Rice

One reading Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* and Boccaccio's *Il Filostrato* immediately notices similarities and differences in the two poets' depiction of the tragedy of Troilus. The most evident changes Chaucer made in retelling the Trojan story are in the personalities of the major characters and the increased role in the love affair Chaucer accords Pandarus. This role is so increased from Boccaccio's version of the tragic love story that Pandarus' dialogue surpasses even that of Troilus. It is twice that of his alter-ego Pandaro in the *Filostrato* (Meech 9). The reader is left to ponder the reasons for Chaucer's alterations. This essay will describe the changes in the major characters, in particular those of Troilus and Pandarus, and attempt to demonstrate why these changes are essential to Chaucer's achieving his desired ending: Troilus reaching the Eighth Sphere. In the process, I hope also to demonstrate that Pandarus in effect becomes the preserver of Troilus' innocence.

According to Boccaccio's own acknowledgment, his Troilo is a reflection of his own love affair with Maria d'Aquino (Gordon xiii). Indeed, it is not hard to imagine Boccaccio speaking in Troilo's capable manner. Boccaccio's Troilo is a man of words, adept in their use in seduction and romance; he seems always to be armed with a proper courtly speech. Upon meeting with Criseida the first night of their tryst, Troilo says: "Fair lady, sole hope and bliss of my mind, ever before me has been the star of thy lovely face in its splendour and brightness, and this little place has been more dear to me in sooth than my palace" (61).

Troilo always speaks eloquently, whether he is celebrating his situation or bewailing it. Troilo demonstrates his verbal prowess when mourning the exchange of Criseida for Antenor: "O my Criseida, far more beloved than any other goddess and more to be honoured by me, who but now would have slain

myself supposing thee dead, what will my life be, thinkest thou, if thou returnest not soon?" (87).

Troilo's gift of speech, added to his chivalric behavior in combat, reveals Boccaccio's vision of him as a courtly knight. Troilo is a powerful character full of powerful and well articulated emotions. His power over Criseida is probably best demonstrated in the immediate prelude to their first lovemaking:

And they disrobed and went to bed; and there the lady, who had still kept her last garment, said to him playfully: "O mirror mine, the newly married are shamefaced on the first night."

And to her Troilo said: "My soul, I pray thee that I may have thee naked in my arms as my heart desires."

And then she: "See how I rid myself of it"; and, casting off her shift, she quickly threw herself into his arms.

(61-62)

This scene demonstrates the presence and personality that so overwhelms Criseida. It is consistent with the character who in Canto I is portrayed as one who believes that "happy is he who is not caught by [female] delights" (33). This is in stark contrast to the Troilus Chaucer chooses to present.

Although Chaucer elects to endow his Troilus with a similar initial philosophy regarding women and love, he does not portray Troilus as a man capable of holding his own in the speech of love. Throughout Chaucer's poem, Troilus is shown lacking in that courtly refinement. This is painfully, or humorously, portrayed in his meetings with Criseyde. A fine example of Troilus' lack of verbal skill can be found in the opening of Book III, when he is confronted with the opportunity to speak to Criseyde. The reader finds Troilus "Recordyng his lesson," trying to remember his lines as he waits for Pandarus to bring Criseyde to him (Benson III.51). Unfortunately, Troilus all too quickly forgets what Pandarus has taught him, and his first words (or sounds) are "Ha, a" (III.65). When Criseyde asks for his continued support, Chaucer says of his protagonist:

This Troilus, that herede his lady preye
Of Lordshipe hym, wax neither quyk ne ded
Ne myghte o word for shame to it seye,
Although men sholde smyten of his hed,
But Lord, so he wex sodeynliche red,
And sire, his lesson, that he wende konne
To preyen hire, is thourgh his wit ironne.

(III.78-84)

After this display of embarrassment at her words, and her apparent forgiveness, Troilus continues to be flustered:

In chaunged vois, right for his verray drede,
Which vois ek quook, and therto his manere
Goodly abaist, and now his hewes rede,
Now pale, unto Criseyde, his lady dere,
With look down cast and humble iyolden chere,
Lo, the alderfirst word that hym asterte
Was, twyes, "Mercy, mercy, swete herte!"

(III.92-98)

Troilus offers a few more words in the next two stanzas, but the words are ineffective and poorly chosen, eliciting a response from Pandarus and Criseyde that, in the words of Richard Green, seems "For all the world like two doctors discussing a helpless hospital patient" (214). A more accurate characterization might be two teachers trying to cope with an untutored student. Criseyde's words best reveal her disappointment in Troilus' lack of verbal prowess:

"Now than thus," quod she, "I wolde hym preye
To tell me the fyn of his entente.
Yet wist I nevere wel what that he mente."

(III. 124-126)

These few lines suggest what she is expecting, and what Pandarus has led her to expect: a man who is experienced in the ways of courtly romance and its literary speeches.¹ When Troilus eventually does begin his speech, finally inspired by Criseyde's admonishment, it seems rehearsed and stilted, so badly done, in fact, that Pandarus feels it necessary once again to take a hand in the conversation by singing the praises of Troilus as a man of honor who would serve and love her unfailingly:

Quod Pandarus, "Lo, here an hard requeste,
And resonable, a lady for to werne!
Now, nece myn, by natal Joves feste,
Were I a god, you sholden sterve as yerne,
that heren wel this man wol nothing yerne
But youre honour, and sen hym almost sterve,
And ben so loth to suffren hym yow serve.

(III.148-54)

It is after this final aid that Criseyde finally assents to the idea of love, and it is possible to conjecture that without Pandarus' assistance here, this agreement would not have been achieved.

Turning to Boccaccio's Pandaro and Chaucer's Pandarus, one finds many parallels in action. Both Pandaro and Pandarus find their friend agonizing over love. Boccaccio writes:

one day when Troilo was alone and heavythoughted in his chamber, there came unexpectedly upon him a Trojan youth of high lineage and very bold spirit. And he, seeing him lying stretched upon his bed and shedding tears, cried: "What is this, dear friend? Have these times of stress now vanguished thee thus?" (39)

This portion of the *Filostrato* is comparable to Pandarus' entrance in the *Troilus*:

Bywayling in his chambre thus allone,
A frend of his that called was Pandare
Com oones in unwar, and herde hym groone,
And say his frend in swich destresse and care:
"Allas," quod he, "who causeth al this fare?
O mercy, God! What unhap may this meene?
Han now thus soone Grekes maad yow leene."
(1.546-53)

Both Pandaro and Pandarus drag the truth of love from Troilo/Troilus. They both support his love; both conspire to help it to its fruition by introducing to Criseida/Criseyde the fact that Troilo/Troilus desires her and by arranging meetings between them. Pandaro, in fact, utters these lines:

And besides that, this city is full of beautiful and charming ladies; and, if my wish for thy happiness deserves to be trusted, there is none of them, the fairest thou wilt, who will not be pleased to show thee mercy, if thou wilt suffer pangs of love for her. Therefore, if we lose this lady, we shall find plenty of others. And, as I've often heard . . . new love always drives out the old. (75-76)

These lines are matched by Chaucer's:

Forthi be glad, my owen deere brother!
If she be lost, we shal recovere an other.

What! God forbede alwey that ech plesaunce
In o thyng were and in non other wight!

And ek, as writ Zanzis, that was ful wys,
"The newe love out chaceth ofte the olde"
And upon newe cas lith newe avys.

(IV.405-08, 414-16)

Clearly Boccaccio and Chaucer used the character of Pandarus in similar ways. However, just as Boccaccio expands this love story by the inclusion of Pandaro, Chaucer expands upon the character of Pandaro. When Chaucer retells the story of Troilus, he makes Pandarus much more important in establishing the communication between the would-be lovers, and also in the actual seduction of Criseyde. It is Pandarus who goes to the trouble of instructing Troilus upon writing letters of love, saying:

As make it with thise arguments tough;
Ne scryvenyssh or craftyly thow it write;
Biblotte it with thi teris ek a lite;
And if thow write a goodly word al softe,
Though it be good, reherce it nought to ofte.

(II.1025-29)

It is also Chaucer's Pandarus who arranges for Criseyde to witness the heroic entry of Troilus into the city, not once but twice. Pandarus is constantly manipulative and plies his talents with all involved—including Troilus, getting him out of bed by implying he is afraid of the Greeks. However, the ultimate difference between Boccaccio's Pandaro and Chaucer's Pandarus comes in the consummation scene between Troilus and Criseyde. It is here, after a typically inept speech by Troilus, that Pandarus finally gets frustrated at what he sees:

This was no litel sorwe to se;
But al was hust, and Pandare up as faste;
"O nece, pes, or we be lost!" quod he,
"Beth naught aghast!" But certeyn, at the laste,
For this or that, he into bed hym caste,
And seyde, "O thef, is this a mannes herte?"
And of he rente al to his bare sherte

(III.1093-99)

This scene is central to the whole plot, and instead of the two lovers that we

find in the scene of love in the *Filostrato*, we find in Chaucer three. This is a major alteration, and one not without purpose.

Put baldly, what Chaucer has done in his *Troilus* is to strip Troilo of his courtly tongue and give it to Pandarus, while at the same time giving Troilus a bit of the character of Pandaro, that which we may assume made him a failed lover. Chaucer's text is less clear on this latter point, but that Pandarus gains some of Troilo's traits is not certain. It is the voice and manipulations of Pandarus, not of Troilus, that in effect seduce Criseyde. Pandarus is the one who boasts so highly of Troilus; he is the one who tutors Troilus in the arts of romance, and it is he who is constantly jumping in to save Troilus from his own folly. It is plausible to say that the plot hinges upon Pandarus and his ability to make Criseyde fall in love with a creation, a false Troilus that appears more like the smooth talking Diomedes for whom Criseyde falls in the end.

The question remains: why did Chaucer make these changes? The answer lies in Book V of the *Troilus*. Here Troilus states:

But trewely, Criseyde, swete may,
Whom I have ay with al my myght yserved,
That ye thus doon, I have it nat deserved.

(V.1720-22)

Here we find Troilus claiming that he is innocent of any wrongs, that he had not deserved this fate. I believe Troilus is indeed innocent, just as Boethius is innocent in *De Consolatione Philosophiae*. Chaucer demonstrates Troilus' innocence in the following passage:

His lighte goost ful blisfully is went
Up to the holughnesse of the eighth sere,
In convers letyng everich element;
And ther he saugh with ful avysement . . .

And down from thennes faste he gan avyse
This litel spot of erthe that with se
Embraced is, and fully gan despise
This wrecched world, and held al vanite
To respect of the pleyn felicite
that is in the hevене above; and at the laste,
ther he was slayn his lokyng down he caste,

And in hymself he lough right at the wo

Of hem that wepten for his deth so faste,
And dampned al oure werk that foloweth so
The blynde lust, the which that may nat laste,
And sholden al oure herte on heven caste

(V.1808-11, 1814-25)

As Green puts it, "Troilus' laugh from the eighth sphere is, at least in part, the laugh of one who has learnt by long experience the ephemeral nature of the game of love" (218). There is no doubt that Troilus has finally learned from his experience, and the key word here is *learned*. By learning, Troilus has demonstrated that the inherent goodness found in humanity, as argued by Boethius, has dominated his spirit, else he would not be capable of learning. The *Boece*, Chaucer's translation of Boethius' *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, says that "alle fortune that semeth sharpe or aspre, yif it ne exercise not the good folk ne chastiseth the wikkide folk, it punysets" (IV, Prosa 7.103-06). What is being said here is that ill fortune has two basic purposes: the first to train or teach those that are innocent about the true good, the love of God; the second is for punishment. There is little doubt that Troilus did indeed suffer, and there is no doubt that in the end Troilus learns a higher truth, that heaven is more important than the trials of earthly life. The conclusion thus to be made is that he was indeed innocent in his love, or he would not have been able to learn.

If we can assume that Chaucer indeed intended this ending from the beginning, the reasoning behind all the changes he made in the characters of Troilus and Pandarus becomes clear. They were made for the purpose of keeping Troilus innocent so that he might learn from his experience and reach the eighth sphere. The changes made in Troilus are obvious, as the character of Troilo portrayed by Boccaccio is far from innocent. Troilo is the courtly lover, seducing Criseida, using his prowess to the highest and most effective degree. In the *Troilus*, on the other hand, Troilus becomes naïve, innocent in the game of love and life. Hence Chaucer also had to alter the role of Pandarus, making him the antithesis of Troilus. Pandarus becomes the seducer of Criseyde, the one who manipulates both her and Troilus into a love affair, literally throwing Troilus into her bed to perform the act. It is clear that in the *Troilus* Chaucer has laid all of the knowledge of deception latent within courtly romance upon the shoulders of Pandarus, allowing Troilus to rise "above the other players of the game . . . not [in] style but integrity" (Green 216). Chaucer has, therefore, put the onus of guilt upon Pandarus, and not Troilus, thereby making Pandarus the preserver of Troilus' innocence. All of the major changes

in these two characters were therefore necessary in order for Chaucer to reach his desired ending while allowing the plot to develop traditionally and while staying within the Boethian categories.

NOTE

¹ See Green for an excellent analysis of Pandarus' literary ideas of romance.

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