Ovidian Allusion and Imagery in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*

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Geoffrey Chaucer’s use of material found in the works of the Roman poet Ovid has long been a popular subject for critics of medieval literature. Most of the recent criticism concerning Chaucer’s use of Ovidian materials focuses, not surprisingly, on *Troilus and Criseyde* and the material drawn from Ovid’s *Des Amores* and *Heroides*.¹ Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, however, has been overlooked. This neglect of such a well-known pre-medieval text has left a wide arena open for criticism.

Set in a time when gods and goddesses were said to have consorted among humans, *Troilus and Criseyde* is rife with references to characters from Roman mythology, and many of these references come from stories told in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. Apart from the many examples of Ovidian allusion and imagery found throughout the book is an interesting concentration of allusions to the *Metamorphoses* in Book III. This concentration occurs when Troilus invokes the aid of the planetary/celestial deities, and it contains several allusions to Ovid used earlier in the work (i.e., the images of Mars, the war-god). This Mars imagery, in turn, combines with imagery of Venus to establish a parallel between the deities of warfare and love and the characters of Troilus and Criseyde. Ultimately, the concept of metamorphosis itself plays an important role in the third book as Troilus turns from warrior to lover and Chaucer begins to move Troilus toward a balanced state, reconciling these two halves of knighthood.

**THE INVOCATION OF THE PLANETARY/CELESTIAL DEITIES**

Ovidian allusion and imagery in Chaucer’s *Troilus* is most effective in Book III. The allusions here clearly fall into a thematic unit illustrating the joy and pas-
sion of Troilus and Criseyde's love. From the very beginning of the third book, it is clear that Chaucer is creating a *de amore* as he invokes the aid of Venus in telling the tale:

O blisful light of which the bemes clere  
Adorneth al the thridde heven faire!  
O sonnes lief, O Joves doughter deer,  
Plesance of love, O goodly debonair,  
In gentil hertes ay redy to repaire!  
O veray cause of heele and of gladnesse,  
Iheryed be thy myght and thi goodnesse,

(III.1-7)

The “thridde heven faire” is, of course, the sphere of Venus (in the Ptolemaic universe), Jove’s “doughter deer.” This invocation of the goddess is especially significant as Venus is the first deity upon whom the narrator calls for help in telling his story. (Book I invokes Tisiphone, one of the Furies, and Book II invokes Clio, the muse of history.) The only other deity invoked by the narrator is Mars, the god of war (Book IV). By calling upon Venus to help him tell his tale, Chaucer's narrator opens the gate, so to speak, allowing a flood of love allusion and imagery. With Venus as his guide, the narrator illuminates the consummation of Troilus and Criseyde’s love with images of pleasure and passion.

The narrator is not the only one looking for assistance from the deities, however. As Troilus and Pandarus prepare to enter Criseyde’s room through a secret door, Troilus also turns to the goddess of love for help in the affair. Asking Venus to send him grace and inspiration, Troilus calls upon her to remove any “Aspectes badde of Mars or of Saturne” that may have been cast upon him at his birth (III.716). This is not enough for Troilus, however, and he calls upon several other deities for assistance. Chaucer, following the astrological belief in the influence of the planets’ relative positions at the time of a person’s birth, chooses to include the major planetary/celestial deities in Troilus’ prayers: Venus, Mars, Saturn (though not called upon for aid), Jove (Jupiter), Apollo (the sun-god), Mercury, and Diana (the moon-goddess). In calling upon these deities, Troilus recalls familiar Ovidian images and reminds the reader of these deities’ own quests for love, all found within Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*.

The abduction of “faire Europe” (III.722), from the end of the second book of the *Metamorphoses*, is but one of the many accounts of the father-god’s (Jove’s) escapades as a metamorphosed creature. Later in Book III, Criseyde mentions another of Jove’s affairs as she wishes that her evening with Troilus...
could be “As longe as whan Almena lay by Jove” (III.1428). This refers to the Ovidian story in which Jove, disguised as Amphitryon, lay down with Almena and extended the night so that he might be with her longer.\(^2\) Both stories (Europa’s and Almena’s) are recalled in Book Six of the *Metamorphoses* when Arachne challenges Pallas Athena to a weaving contest and creates a tapestry showing the treachery of the deities (particularly Jove) in their deceitful love affairs.\(^3\)

Troilus’ reference to Mars’ “love of Cipris” (III.725) recalls the infamous affair of Mars and Venus which is recounted by Leucothoe early in Book Four of the *Metamorphoses* as she tells of the trick played upon the lovers by Vulcan. Phoebus Apollo saw Mars and Venus’ adultery and told Vulcan, Venus’ husband. Vulcan, in turn, being the worker of metals, forged a net so fine that it could not be seen and spread it above the pair’s bed:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{A touch, a breath, would move it: this he spread} \\
\text{And draped with apt adjustment round the bed;} \\
\text{And soon the two, when next embracing there,} \\
\text{Lay helpless, netted in the novel snare.}
\end{align*}
\]

(*Metamorphoses* 76)

When the lovers were caught, Vulcan led all the deities of Olympus into their room to laugh at the pair, caught *in delecto flagrante*.\(^4\)

Phoebus Apollo, however, is not guiltless in matters of love. Chaucer’s allusion reminds the reader of Phoebus’ pursuit of Daphne found in Book One of the *Metamorphoses*. This, like many of the deity-mortal trysts, ends with the mortal woman transformed, in this case into a laurel tree which Phoebus takes as his sacred tree:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{“Since then,” he said, “my wife you may not be,} \\
\text{I take you, lovely Daphne, for my tree;} \\
\text{Upon my lyre the laurel will I wear} \\
\text{For ever, and the laurel on my hair,} \\
\text{And on my quiver . . .”}
\end{align*}
\]

(*Metamorphoses* 16)

Although Apollo is referred to often in *Troilus and Criseyde*—twenty-two times in all, according to Tatlock and Kennedy—the laurel, his sacred branch, is only mentioned three times, twice in Book III (associated explicitly with the love story of Apollo and Daphne) and once in Book V.\(^5\) This is especially significant as the laurel branch was also a symbol of victory and, being on the Trojan side
Trojan side in the war, Troilus is not destined for victory and laurel-wearing. The story of Mercury and Herse, like that of Apollo and Daphne, ends with the transformation of a mortal. In this case, however, it is Aglauros, the sister of the pursued Herse, who is transformed. Taken from the second book of the *Metamorphoses* (just before the story of Jove and Europa), the story tells how Mercury first saw Herse at the Palladium, paying homage to Pallas Athena. This image can be found in the first book of *Troilus and Criseyde* as Troilus sees Criseyde for the first time at the Trojan Palladium:

And upon cas bifel that thorugh a route  
His eye percede, and so depe it wente,  
Til on Criseyde it smot, and ther it stente.

And sodeynly he wax therwith astoned,  
And gan hir bet biholde in thrifty wise.  
"O mercy, God," thoughte he, "wher hastow woned,  
That art so feyr and goodly to devise?"  
Therwith his herte gan to sprede and rise,  
And softe sighed, lest men myghte hym here,  
and caught ayeyn his firste pleyinge chere.  

(1.271-80)

The story of Mercury and Herse comes forth again in the description of Criseyde’s sleeping chamber. Like Herse, Criseyde occupies the “myddel chaumbre” of the household, as Pandarus points out in Book III (666). There is no Aglauros to interfere in Troilus’ love affair, however, and the similarity ends there. Mercury is only mentioned three times in the entire story of Troilus and Criseyde (the instance in Book III being the first actual mention of him by name), but it is he, as the deity assigned to transport the dead to the underworld, who meets Troilus in the eighth sphere in Book V.

Troilus’ final invocation, directed to the goddess Diana, seems somewhat misplaced. The *casta diva* of Roman mythology, Diana is the least likely to help Troilus in his quest for Criseyde’s love. As the goddess of the moon, however, Diana fits into Chaucer’s scheme of celestial deities governing the affairs of men, particularly Troilus.

**The Love Story of Mars and Venus**

As stated earlier, Book III of *Troilus and Criseyde* begins with the strongest of all possible love images taken from Ovid, an invocation to the goddess of love, Venus. Not surprisingly, the only references to Venus in the first and second
books deal directly with Troilus’ efforts to win Criseyde. Mars, the god of war, is alluded to in the second Ovidian reference encountered in Book III. In the invocation of Venus, the narrator reminds the reader of the Goddess’ ability to tame the war god with her love (“Ye fierse Mars apaisen of his ire” [III.22]). Later, the narrator describes Troilus as spending his days “in Martes heigh servyse” (III.437), recalling an image first seen in Book II. There, Troilus is also the character associated with the war god, as the narrator depicts his return from battle:

But swich a knightly sighte trewely  
As was on hym, was nought, withouten faille,  
To loke on Mars, the god is of bataille.  

(II.628-30)

With Troilus strongly linked to the god of war, Chaucer uses Ovidian lore to foreshadow coming events. Like Mars, Troilus the warrior is capable of being tamed by love (Venus).

The union of Mars and Venus (war and love) is a major focus of Chaucer’s Ovidian references. His careful placement of allusions to the Mars/Venus legend strengthens the rising action of his love story which culminates in the union of Troilus (warrior) and Criseyde (lover). For example, when Troilus first falls in love with Criseyde, it is the dart of Cupid, the child of Mars and Venus, which strikes him down:

... the God of Love [Cupid] gan loken rowe  
Right for despit, and shop for to ben wroken.  
He kidde anon his bowe nas naught broken;  
For sodeynly he hitte hym atte fulle—  
And yet as proud a pekok kan he pulle.  

(I.206-10)

Once the love affair has been consummated, it is another Ovidian image from the Mars/Venus story that describes Troilus’ devotion to Criseyde:

The goodlihede or beaute which that kynde  
In any other lady hadde yset  
Kan noght the montance of a knotte unbynde  
Aboute his herte of al Criseydes net.  

(III.1730-33)
Troilus, like Mars and Venus, is caught in an unbreakable snare, forged, not by Vulcan, but by his own love. All thoughts of chivalry and knighthood are gone, replaced by love's all-consuming power.

**THE METAMORPHOSES OF TROILUS**

Despite the many images which link them, Chaucer's Troilus is not a copy of Ovid's Mars. It is clear from accounts in the *Metamorphoses* that Ovid's Mars has aspects of both *chivalrie* and *courtoisie*. His chivalric side is obvious in that he is the god of war. Mars' courteous side, however, is also well presented in the story of his affair with Venus. Conversely, at the outset of *Troilus and Criseyde*, Troilus' character seems completely to lack the emotional *courtoisie* found in Mars. This being the case, Troilus can in no way be considered a perfect knight in that, traditionally, the perfect knight was a careful balance of *chivalrie* and *courtoisie*, warrier and lover.

In the first two books of *Troilus and Criseyde*, Chaucer portrays Troilus as a strong and able warrior. The son of Priam (King of Troy) and brother of the legendary Trojan hero, Hector, Troilus is a chivalrous warrior and leader in the Trojan army. As the story begins, Troilus is in command of a company of knights with whom he rides through the town, surveying the women of Troy as they visit the Palladium. Unlike the knights of his company, Troilus is not interested in the follies of love. He pays little attention to the lovely maidens of the town, ridiculing his knights in their states of love-sickness:

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And in his walk ful faste he gan to wayten
If knyght or squyer of his compaignie
Gan for to syke, or lete his eighen baiten
On any womman that he koude espye.
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(I.190-93)

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... And seye [Troilus] thus ...

"I have herd told, pardieux, ofyoure lyvynge,
Ye loveres, and youre lewed observaunces,
And which a labour folk han in wynnynge
Of love, and in the kepyng which doutaunces;
And whan youre prey is lost, woo and penaunces.
O veray fooles, nyce and blynde be ye!
Ther nys nat oon kan war by other be."
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(I.195, 197-203)

No sooner has he spoken these words, however, than Troilus is struck by
Cupid’s arrow. In an interesting intermingling of imagery, Cupid uses his weapon of chivalry to instill emotion and courtesy into the warrior’s heart.

Wounded by Cupid’s dart, Troilus finds himself subject to the very emotions he found ridiculous in his knights. Seeing Criseyde, he finds that his chivalric world is knocked askew, and he offers a lover’s plaint of his own:

“O mercy, God,” thought he, “wher hastow woned, That art so feyr and goodly to devise?” Therwith his herte gan to sprede and rise, And softe sighed, lest men myghte hym here, And caught ayeyn his firste pleyinge chere.

(1.276-80)

From this point on, Troilus’ thoughts turn from those of a warrior to those of a lover. The quality of courtoisie has been introduced into his character, and he has been placed on the track to becoming the “perfect knight.”

As Troilus trods the path of the forlorn lover, Chaucer continues to use Ovidian allusion to underline the metamorphosis that is taking place. A reference made by Pandarus to “Phebus, that first fond art of medicyne” (I.659) makes a strong connection between Troilus’ inability to rid himself of his lovesickness and Phoebus Apollo’s complaint as he pursued the elusive Daphne:

“The world’s first healer, help of every land, I hold the power of herbs at my command: Alas, no herb can mend love’s malady: My skill, that helps all others, helps not me.”

( Metamorphoses 15 )

The end of this encounter, of course, saw the transformation of Daphne into the laurel tree. However, this is but an implied transformation allusion, and it is clear that, in much of the first two books of Troilus and Criseyde, Chaucer uses imagery found in the Metamorphoses but does not directly deal with transformations. At various points the characters invoke the assistance of the deities, but there are few references to actual metamorphosis before Book III.

It is in Book III that the metamorphosis of Troilus commences in earnest as he begins to take the role of perfect knight fully upon his shoulders. Criseyde is an integral part of this change as, finding Troilus on his “sick bed,” she says:

Sire, comen am I to yow for causes tweye: First, yow to thonke, and of youre lordshipe eke
Troilus founders at this request, surprised and blushing, and forgets the “les-
son” he had prepared to speak to Criseyde. He does, however, manage to
answer her request, and pledges “In trouthe alwey to don yow [Criseyde] my
servise” (III.133).

From this point on, Chaucer illustrates and underscores the love between
Troilus and Criseyde by interweaving allusions associated with some of the most
famous lovers found in the Metamorphoses. Ovidian allusions and imagery
abound in this, the central book of the story. From various exclamations and
invocations of the names of the deities to recollections of the story of Apollo
and Daphne (III.541-42), the allusions progress as Troilus comes nearer and
nearer the beauties and hazards of love.

Having invoked the aid of the deities (Book III), Troilus continues to fall
deeper and deeper under the spell of courtoisie until it, surpassing all other qual-
ities, takes control of his character. Here Chaucer shifts his use of Ovidian
references from images of lovers and transformations to images of overindul-
gence and gluttony. From the romances of deities and mortals, the allusions
turn to two mortals, Midas and Crassus, who suffered for their indulgent ways
(III.1387-93). Chaucer’s use of these images indicates that Troilus has gone
overboard in the attempt to reconcile his previously neglected courteous
dimension. He has completely abandoned chivalry and, in doing so, has cre-
ated a fatal imbalance in himself.

By Book IV, Troilus has so indulged himself in the woes of a lover who has
forgotten chivalry that he founders about helplessly. Saddened by the news that
Criseyde’s father, Calkas, wishes to have her join him, Troilus is so lost in his
own self-pity that he forgets his promise to Criseyde (“In trouthe alwey to don
yow my servise”) and does not stand up in her defense before the council of
Troy. Instead, it is Hector, Troilus’ knightly brother, who chivalrously stands
before the council on Criseyde’s behalf. By having Hector perform the duties
of Criseyde’s protector rather than Troilus, Chaucer clearly underlines the
imbalance in Troilus’ character. He has turned from pure warrior to pure lover
and cannot call upon chivalrie to protect his beloved.

In a less obvious manner, Chaucer points out Troilus’ lack of chivalrie through
absence of Ovidian reference to Mars. The only point at which Mars is men-
tioned in Book IV is in the prologue in which he is referred to as “cruel Mars”
(V.25). Other than that, the god with whom the warrior Troilus was so strong-
ly associated in Books I through III is entirely absent. Venus, the goddess of love so strongly invoked in Book III, is similarly absent in the fourth book. Only twice in Book IV is she mentioned, and then only in exclamations by Troilus and Criseyde. Troilus is ruled by his own emotions, not those of love, and is helpless in his state of despair.

To further illustrate the hopelessness of Troilus and Criseyde’s love, Chaucer draws upon the *Metamorphoses* for allusions to lost and ruined lovers. Upon learning that Criseyde is to be given over to her father and the Greeks, Troilus complains:

*The deth may wel out of my brest departe*
*The lif, so longe may this sorwe myne,*
*but fro my soule shal Criseydes darte*
*Out nevere mo; but down with Proserpyne,*
*Whan I am ded, I wol go wone in pyne,*
*And ther I wol eternaly compleyne*
*My wo, and how that twynned be we tewyne.*

(IV.470-76)

The legend of Proserpine (Persephone) is found in Book Five of the *Metamorphoses*: she is the unfortunate maid stolen by Pluto and taken to Hades to rule as Pluto’s queen (106-12).

The underworld allusions continue as Criseyde brings forth the story of Orpheus and Eurydice in her speech of farewell to Troilus:

*Myn herte and ek the woeful goost therinne*
*Byquethe I with youre spirit to compleyne*
*Eternaly, for they shal nevere twynne;*
*For though in erthe ytwynned be we twyne,*
*Yet in the feld of pite, out of peyne,*
*That highte Elisos, shal we ben yfeer,*
*As Orpheus and Erudice, his fere.*

(IV.787-91)

In the *Metamorphoses*, Orpheus and Eurydice’s love for one another was so strong that Orpheus was able to persuade Pluto and Proserpine to allow him to search for his dead love (X.217-19). Once he found her, however, he was to lead her out of Hades without looking back, or she would be lost forever. Orpheus’ fear caused him to look back as they reached the threshold of the underworld and Eurydice was carried back across the Styx to rejoin the world.
of the dead. Unable to reach his one true love, Orpheus "shunned the love of womankind" (*Metamorphoses* 219).

An allusion to Myrrha completes Book IV’s picture of desolate lovers. As Troilus and Criseyde prepare to part, they weep tears more bitter than those of "Mirra" (IV. 1139), the girl whose illicit affair with her own father caused her such shame that she was turned into a myrrh tree, weeping immortal tears forever. By employing these allusions, Chaucer creates a sense of hopelessness which can only be found in one ruled entirely by *courtoisie* and emotion. Troilus is powerless (i.e., lacking *chivalrie*) as Criseyde is taken away from him and placed into the hands of his enemies.

It is only after Criseyde is out of reach that Troilus begins to show characteristics of a chivalric knight once again. Troilus realizes that he has lost himself to love’s folly, and he turns against the deities he once invoked, gradually ridding himself of his overabundant emotion. "He corseth Jove, Appollo, and ek Cupide;/He corseth Ceres, Bacus, and Cipride," says Chaucer (V.207-08), illustrating Troilus’ anger at the deities that pleased him so in Book III.

Recognizing the imbalance in himself and his own overwhelming self-pity, Troilus is finally able to trade his cloak of sorrow for that of a true knight. To illustrate this change in Troilus’ condition, Chaucer again uses allusions to Ovidian gods and goddesses and has Troilus turn to the deities that he so honored in Book I: Mars and Pallas Athena (the goddess of war and the one honored at the Palladium in Book I). As Troilus prepares to fight his enemy in both war and love (Diomede), Troilus instructs Pandarus:

```
But of the fir and flaumbe funeral
In which my body brennen shal to glede,
And of the feste and pleyes palestral
At my vigile, I prey the, tak good hede
That that be wel; and offre Mars my steede,
My swerd, myn helm; and, leve brother, deere,
My sheld to Pallas yef, that shyneth cleere.
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(V.302-08)

Paying homage to the deities of battle, Troilus at last achieves a state of balance: he has the injured *courtoisie* of a knight missing his true love and the *chivalrie* of a warrior. He is thus able to fight bravely against his enemies, his lover’s "captors." This reconciliation of the two halves of Troilus makes him the perfect knight. The metamorphosis is complete.

Having turned from warrior to lover to knight, Troilus is finally able, at the
end of Book V, to fight and die valiantly. He fights for love of country and woman and dies with honor, as a true knight should. As his spirit ascends through the heavens, he passes by the various spheres of the deities, ascending above those upon whom he so desperately depended during his transformation. Reaching the eighth sphere, he can turn back and laugh at his own death and mourners, for he knows that he has been beyond reach of the Roman gods all along:

His lighte goost ful blissfully is went  
Up to the holughnesse of the eighthe spere,  
. . . and at the last,  
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  

(V:1808-09, 1819, 1821-22)

Chaucer’s narrator furthers Troilus’ realization of the gods’ impotence by shunning “payens corsed olde rites” (V:1849) and calling the Ovidian deities (Jove, Apollo, and Mars) “swich rascaille [worthless mob]” (V:1853). Troilus’ metamorphosis, although illuminated by allusion to and imagery of gods and goddesses, has been entirely his own. The ineffectual deities of Ovid are cast aside and Troilus’ story, which began as a “double sorwe” (I.1), can end in Paradise.

NOTES

1 The obvious connections between the love poetry (Des Amores) and the love story in Troilus and Criseyde and the Heroides and the Trojan War material in Troilus and Criseyde have made them favorite sources from which critics are able to draw much material.

2 The result of Almena and Jove’s love affair was the birth of Hercules, recounted by Almena in Book Nine of the Metamorphoses (200-01).

3 Arachne also depicts Jove’s wooing of Asterie, Leda, Antiope, Danae, Aegina, Mnemosyne, and Proserpine as well as many of Neptune’s romantic encounters (Metamorphoses II9-20).

4 The affair of Mars and Venus becomes an integral part of the Ovidian imagery in Troilus and Criseyde and will be discussed further in the succeeding paragraphs.
In Book V, the sun is described as “laurel-crowned Phebus” (V.1107). This may be significant as the gods are, unlike mortal men and women, all-victorious (even after Troilus has cursed them earlier in Book V).

The similarity in names between Criseyde’s uncle, Pandarus, and Herse’s sister, Pandrosos is interesting (although most likely entirely coincidental as Chaucer’s Pandarus is commonly accepted as having come from Boccaccio’s character Pandare).

The moon also represents the border of the world in which Fortune has effect (according to the Ptolmeic system of the universe). Troilus’ prayer to her may actually be a call for her to turn the tide of Fortune in his favor.

Venus is mentioned in the following lines preceding Book III: I.1014; II.234, 680, 972, 1524. All instances except one deal directly with Troilus’ thoughts on winning Criseyde. The exception is Pandarus’ reference to himself as the servant of Venus (II.234).

Midas, out of greed, asked that he be given the gift of the “golden touch” and suffered greatly as everything he touched turned to gold. Crassus’ appetite for gold, however, caused him to have his mouth filled with the molten metal.

Both points at which Venus is mentioned are times of distress for the two lovers. First, Troilus, thinking that Criseyde is dead, is about to kill himself when she awakes and stops him. He exclaims “Ye, herte myn, that thonked be Cipride!” (IV.1216). The other instance occurs as Criseyde prepares to leave Troilus, saying “And blisful Venus lat me nevere sterve” (IV.1661).
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