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Chaucer's Use of Statius' *Thebaid* in the *Troilus*

Cory Naughton

When the Roman Empire fell, civilization was nearly ruined. Literature and the arts became refugees, hiding in outlying areas or under the protection of the Church. Few Europeans could read during the Dark Ages. Fewer still could write. But those who could read and write did so with the help of the international Latin language, by blending Christian material with Greek and Roman thoughts. (Highet vii)

The blending of Christian material with Greek and Roman thought is exactly what I wish to examine. I believe that Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* provides a signal illustration of this blending. Chaucer uses excerpts from the Roman poet Publius Papinius Statius' *Thebaid* to establish a pagan-based, pessimistic, fatalistic vision of human fate for his poem. From this background emerges the character of Troilus who struggles with the Christian concepts of destiny (or predestination) and free will.

Central to Greek and Roman (pagan) thought was the belief that human beings are not in control of the events of their lives. Human destiny already has been decided by the gods and the Fates. C. David Benson writes: "the Fates continually set hidden snares that are beyond men's [and women's] abilities to unravel: They are not able to protect themselves no matter how hard they try" (25). Statius' *Thebaid*, dating from the first century A.C.E., illustrates this concept. Even Kittredge admits that the narrator of the *Thebaid* threatens to succumb to the belief that humanity is at the mercy of alien gods, that there is no higher controlling purpose, and that all life ends in pointless destruction (133). In the *Thebaid*, it is plain that whole nations are mere "playthings" to the gods. In point of fact, the very war central to Statius' story results from Zeus' wish to punish the people of Thebes (Statius 359).

Chaucer was also aware of the belief that the gods controlled human fate. In his translation of Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*, we read: "Lernedest nat thow in Greek whan thow were yonge, that in the entre in the seler of Jupiter

ther ben coweded two tonnes, the toon is full of good and the tother is full of harm" (Benson 410). This non-Boethian, pagan view implies that human destiny involves a distribution of punishments or rewards which are determined by the will of Jove. Chaucer captures this black and white world of pagan Greece and Rome, carefully infiltrating these ideas with the Christian view of free will (a gray area between the black and white), as seen in the philosophical and emotional struggles of Troilus.

Chaucer establishes this black and white pagan framework in his repeated use of *Thebaid* materials. In the *Troilus*, Chaucer has Criseyde and other women of the court discuss the Theban war. It is with this Statian material that Chaucer begins to interlace the pessimistic, pagan view of history with a more optimistic, Christian view. Criseyde recalls that the bishop Amphiorax fell through the ground into hell (Benson II.100-05). In the *Thebaid*, Amphiorax (Amphiarus) is a soothsayer who knows the outcome of the Theban war. Amphiorax refuses to go to war because he realizes that he will die in this ill-fated struggle.

Betrayed by his wife, Amphiorax moves ever closer toward his destiny. Even the god Apollo tries to forestall the inevitable event of Amphiorax's departure from the world of the living. However, even Amphiorax's death is not his to control. Apollo creates a rift in the earth and Amphiorax rides his chariot straight to hell, untouched. Arriving in front of the dismal god of the underworld, Amphiorax finds that he has displeased Pluto by not dying first. Pluto desires to punish this puny mortal for not following the fundamental prerequisite for entering hell, namely dying. Amphiorax is able to talk Pluto out of punishment and winds up entering Elysium, the better of the two places of hell.

The story of Amphiorax is a classic example of how the ancient Greeks and Romans viewed themselves as the toys of the gods. Amphiorax does not die in battle (which was considered honorable); he is taken by Apollo into Hades. Even in death Amphiorax's fate is decided ultimately by Pluto, who, instead of punishing him for his transgression, allows him to enter Elysium for eternity.

The next image of pagan pessimism Chaucer introduces into his structure is the image of the boar, found in Statius. The *Thebaid* employs the boar in obvious reference to the battle-hungry Tydeus. Tydeus was one of seven captains who died in the assault on Thebes. This is not where the bad luck starts, however. In Chaucer's poem, Troilus has a dream about a boar and seeks an interpretation from Cassandra, the prophetess. Cassandra develops the allusion even further by noting that Tydeus is the son of Meleager, making Criseyde's later lover, Diomedes (Tydeus's son), also a descendant of Meleager.

The significance of this genealogy is that all three men are associated with

the boar image and all three suffer dire consequences at the hands of the gods. Meleager's story begins when the Fates appear to his mother and decree his life will last no longer than it will take a certain piece of wood to be consumed by the flames of a fire. The mother hides the wood, but later, after hearing that Meleager has killed her two brothers over the skin of a boar, she tosses the wood into a fire where it is consumed, bringing Meleager's life to an end. The fateful boar skin passes into the hands of Meleager's son, Tydeus, who dies during the war that began as a result of Jove's wish to punish Thebes. The skin then falls into the hands of Tydeus' son, Diomedes.

Another allusion to pagan fatalism is also made by Cassandra. It, too, is borrowed from Statius. Cassandra speaks of the holy serpent, the well, and the Furies. The second volume of the *Thebaid* contains an account of the women on the Island of Lemnos who slaughter their husbands as if they were the avenging Furies themselves (Statius II.3-503). Hypsiple tells this sordid tale to the Argive captains. The importance of this story of Lemnian massacre is that its instigator is the goddess Venus, a key figure in Troilus' own (Trojan) war. Venus was angered because there was no shrine dedicated to her in Thaos, a port city in Lemnos. At first, Venus causes marital dissension; men will no longer "visit the beds of their wives." Venus then incites the women to crazed slaughter of the men and of all male children. Once again both men and women are subjected to the whim of the gods and goddesses.

The structure of pessimism in Chaucer's *Troilus* becomes even more evident with Cassandra's mention of the serpent and the well. Straight out of Statius, this scene further illuminates the relationship between the gods and humankind. While Hypsiple is telling the Argives about the Lemnian tragedy, the child in her care is killed by a serpent sacred to the gods. Capaneus, seeking revenge, kills the snake and arouses the anger of Zeus who determines to punish him (Statius V.585-613). Capaneus is mentioned by Cassandra in the *Troilus* apart from the incident regarding the serpent and the well; however, his ultimate fate underscores the theme of pagan fatalism. Capaneus does not return from the war. He is punished as he climbs the Theban walls, defying both man and gods. Already angry about the serpent, Zeus annihilates Capaneus with a deadly bolt of lightning. One reading Statius' account is overcome by a feeling of human impotence: "Now the earthly battles grow mean in the hero's eyes, he is tired of the endless slaughter" (381). Capaneus will not play the gods' game and makes his suicidal charge on Thebes, knowing full well the outcome of his act. Although of lesser magnitude, other references also support the structure of pessimism in Chaucer's work. The first is to Parthenope,

an innocent boy who is blinded by the glories of war and does not heed his mother's forebodings. No Theban will stand against him, however, because of his innocence and beauty. It is not until Mars incites Dryas to do the deed that the boy is killed (Statius 317).

Another Chaucerian reference is to the death of Hippomedon, who kills a descendant of the river god Ismenos. In return, Ismenos wishes to drown Hippomedon between his sandy banks. Juno, however, intercedes for the luckless hero who, by the decision of Zeus, is killed instead by Phoenician darts (Statius 269). Happy intercession. Even though death by the darts of a foe was considered a more honorable death than drowning, the fact remains that once again it is Zeus who has the final say.

Another victim of fate, and yet another interesting link in Chaucer's chain of pagan pessimism, is the character Maeon. Called Hemonydes by Chaucer, this Statian character is one of three individuals who are actually rewarded by the gods—the other being Amphiorax (noted earlier) and Menoecus. Why, we wonder, is Maeon allowed to enter Elysium (as was Amphiorax), especially after Eteocles ordered that his body be denied burial. (Greek and Roman thought held that unburied bodies must wander the shores of the River Styx for one hundred years or until they were buried.) Nevertheless, the gods allowed Maeon to enter Elysium, a place where no Theban is supposed to be admitted.

Looking at the relationships between the gods and human beings, the only possible explanation is that Maeon follows his destiny as the gods have ordained and does not anger them in the process. Maeon knows that he will be killed when he learns that Tydeus has survived the ambush and has killed fifty of Eteocles' best men. Rather than be killed by Eteocles, Maeon takes his own life. Statius portrays this as a most honorable way to die because Maeon would no longer be subject to Eteocles' power (457). Maeon goes to meet the gods freely and is rewarded.

Maeon's submissive act is reinforced by Chaucer's reference to Menoecus. This Theban prince is compensated for his death by being carried to the throne of Zeus by Piety and Virtue. Once before Zeus, Menoecus demands a crown among the highest stars (Statius II.377). Considering the fates of Tydeus and Capaneus, what gives this character a right to demand anything? The answer follows the same lines as Maeon's story. Menoecus also takes his life, here to fulfil an oracle which stated that if a person of royal Theban blood is sacrificed on the wall of Thebes, the city will stand against the Argive assault (Statius 375). Menoecus fulfills the prophecy and is taken into the heavens for his reward. Oracles and prophecy have always been the primary ways that gods have com-

municated with humankind. Menoecus plays the game of the gods and now demands his prize from the major player in this Theban game, Zeus, the same Zeus who, in Chaucer's translation of *The Consolation of Philosophy*, is the keeper of rewards and punishments.

All these occurrences in the Theban war, not to mention the allusions to Eteocles and Polynices, are found in Chaucer's *Troilus*. Through these references, an atmosphere of sober pessimism (or fatalism) is created around this story of the Trojan War. Where does Troilus fit into this scheme of things? It is through Chaucer's effort to connect Troilus with the characters mentioned above that one sees his genius.

Simply put, Troilus breaks free from the structure of fatalism and pessimism built into the *Troilus* through a parallel structure, derived from Christian thought, which allows some exercise of free will. In Chaucer's poem, Troilus is allowed the free will to make the decision to love Criseyde. The decision to make Pandarus his counsellor is also his own, as well as the judgment to follow the advice given to him. It is by his own free will that Troilus suffers when Criseyde turns her back on him for the Greek, Diomedes. Troilus chooses to remain faithful. It is also by choice that he continues to be pained by the memory of Criseyde.

Although these choices may suggest weakness in Troilus' character to some readers, his real strength is discovered in his death scene in which his spirit takes flight. In this scene, Troilus' spirit glides upward to the eighth sphere and it is there that he turns around to look at what he has left behind. Troilus laughs at the state of humankind and all the woes that the living inflict on themselves (Benson 584).

I stress the words "on themselves." Troilus, in this dramatic scene, discovers that it is not the gods who cause the misery and wretchedness, as well as the happiness and mirth, on earth. It is very much a person's own actions (free will) which determine whether he or she is rewarded or punished. Fate is not completely ordained by the gods. It is in this way that Chaucer tempers Statius' pagan pessimism with a note of Christian optimism.

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