

CHAUCER'S TRAGIC ROMANCE: IMAGINING VOICES IN
TROILUS & CRISEYDE

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Geoffrey Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* may well be the greatest unread classic of the Middle Ages. At least it is hard to get at it within the educational system because it is hard to fit into most Chaucer courses, especially if the school only has one term to teach Chaucer. Even those students who do read it, including those who love it, will be the first to point out, here adapting Dr. Johnson on Milton's *Paradise Lost*, that "no man wished it longer." It doesn't turn out well if it is condensed or extracted, either. People have called it the first novel, which it isn't, though it is as long as many novels. But it is a very long poem, Chaucer's longest—8,239 lines in all. Wonderfully, it is also a complete poem, even though many of his other works are fragmented or incomplete.

People who think they know how to read poetry are usually most familiar with short poems, lyric poems, rather than with really long poems. How do you read a long poem? In the case of *Troilus and Criseyde*, it is a matter of committing to a world in which one only gradually becomes acclimated to the coherent system of a society and its speech. The *Troilus* is a love story, but it also a huge project of talking. The talking is dazzling. It all takes place within curious little vehicles called stanzas, seven-line units with a rigid rime-scheme. Tightly constricted though this all might seem, its world spreads from the gutters of Troy to the stars. Its expanse is immense, even though most of its situations are intimate, within-doors, in bedrooms, in beds.

I want to argue that it may even be better and easier to read the *Troilus* outside of any class, so long as you have not outlived your chance to do so! Thus I come before you selling a book. Everyone who

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loves the Middle Ages should read *Troilus and Criseyde*. And those who have already read it once might now read it again, using a technique of enrichment I call “imagining voices.”

To define my terms, to illustrate what I mean by “imagining voices,” and to explain why I think it is important to do so, I will now plunge into the first scene of *Troilus and Criseyde*, where Chaucer introduces himself and his story. This will be selection #1.

(Let me just add as I begin, that I am not about to give you a synopsis of the whole poem or an accelerated survey of its greatest moments. By the time I finish you will have a general idea where the action is going; more important for my argument, you should have a usable introduction to the tool kit of what I call “prosodic criticism.” You will have sampled a few treats, and yet be hungry for many more. The ears of your imagination should tingle.)

Book I

#1]

The double sorwe of Troilus to tellen,
That was the kyng Priamus sone of Troye,
In lovynghe how his aventures fellen
Fro wo to wele, and after out of joie,
5 My purpos is, er that I parte fro ye.
Thesiphone, thow help me for t'endite
Thise woful vers that wepen as I write!

To the clepe I, thow goddessse of torment,
Thow cruwel furie, sorwynghe evere in peyne,
10 Help me that am the sorwful instrument
That helpeth loveres, as I kan, to pleyne;
For wel sit it, the sothe for to seyne,
A woful wight to han a drery feere,
And to a sorwful tale a sory chere.

15 For I, that god of loves servantz serve,
Ne dar to Love, for myn unliklynesse,
Preyen for speed, al sholde I therfore sterve,

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20 So fer am I from his help in derknesse;
 But natheles, if this may don gladnesse
 To any love and his cause availle,
 Have he my thonk, and myn be this travaille.

There are many things to be imagined here that are not specified: What space are we in? Is this a courtly occasion? The audience appears to be “lovers” whose woes Chaucer hopes to express and whose causes, assist. (Implicitly, the lovers seem to be male, as with “*his cause*,” yet there is room to imagine that this is for all those who are servants of the God of Love, male and female.) We are to imagine that hearing this story, under the ghastly visage of Thesiphone (who was really one of the Furies, not a Muse), will bring “gladness” to lovers, in spite of (or because of?) its dreariness, its teariness. We are to imagine that as Chaucer tells his story his verses are weeping—not easy to picture. And if he is writing his poem how can he at the same time be reciting it? This Chaucer purports to be starting a story he will not finish until he gets to the end—yet, can we imagine such a sitting? Literally, it would take at least ten hours to recite, without breaks. (I tried that once with a class, but it took three separate evenings and much liquid refreshment.)

There is no way to find a definite answer to these questions; they are locked under the surface of the narrative and we have no key to open and solve them. What I am proposing today, then, and this is the first point of my argument, is that the “imagining” called for by the poem is framed by what I will call a “construction of literary orality.” Some have said in the past that Chaucer’s works were not truly realized until they were read out loud in public. I take exactly the opposite tack. While not denying that much literature had always been read aloud in Chaucer’s day, and that the tradition would continue for many years more, I wish to argue that Chaucer now purposefully intends his poem as a “book,” and as a book to be read by a single reader—and that the work imagines an audience whose image of social company will be one of the continuing imaginations by that same solitary turner of pages. And within this construction, one finds moments where things are quite purposefully left *not* perfectly clear. (See further, Gaylord, “What’s Allowed,” etc.)

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But, after all, one is to *imagine* “orality” as vividly as possible, perhaps reading it out loud to one’s self, but certainly in some way “hearing” it. For one of the continuing delights of the *Troilus* is its panoply of speech acts, of social speaking, of internal monologue, and of created idiolects—that is, from speakers who have a signature way of speaking, even at several levels of intensity or formality. And this leads me to the question of why Chaucer readers need, literally, to read Chaucer out loud. The answer is, to vivify and enliven their imagination of speech that they must translate from page to brain.

- More than ever, reading out loud is to train the imagination of the reader so that the poetic events of the story are imagined as “poetically heard”; that is, with a heartbeat (the “pulse” or *tactus* of the meter), and with the current of breath and the impulses of intonation (expressive rises and falls, meaningful pauses [“junctures”—both little and long], and emphases [“marked” stresses].) These are the bundles of phonemic supplements, interfusing the vowels and consonants with what some linguists have called the “suprasegmentals,” which, taken together, allow the hearer to determine the sense of the utterance, both stated and implied, conscious or unconscious. Please notice that it is no more possible to establish these features absolutely than it is to determine exactly how a speech from Shakespeare is to be delivered. But in both cases there is quite a bit of comfortable space between “Absolutely not,” and “Perhaps this way.”

- Reading out loud is to educate the imagination to identify the mixture of music and argument in the poem; i.e., to find and take pleasure in the patterns of sound that intrinsically please the ear one way or another, while attending to the logical (or illogical!) aspects of the rhetoric of the various discourses put into play, which is to say, the kinds of persuasion that move the verse and attempt to move the listener (both those inside and outside the poem). About this, there will be much more to say. (For a full introduction to the problems of prosodic analysis, see my essay, “Scanning the Prosodists.”)

Coming back to this opening passage, we can now consider what problems one meets in delivering, or performing, this Chaucerian speech. Actually, as I will illustrate, the category of the performative is not central to my idea of imagining voices, precisely because it is not centered on a single reader with a book, and because it must choose a

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“solution” for every ambiguity. When I prepared for reading these extracts I knew I would in some sense attempt to reproduce the Chaucerian moment—I would have an audience who looked to be edified and hoped to be entertained; I would be a surrogate for the speaker, performing my interpretation of “Chaucer.” Indeed, some have argued that only in this situation could one provide the body language and make the necessary faces to take care of the nudge-nudge wink-wink factor—that is, to intimate what I was really after behind what I was saying. But I absolutely disagree with that theory. If you will, the imagining I conceive for the reader would be the equivalent of listening to a recording or a radio broadcast, or even better, reading the script—no external images to accompany, illustrate, or distort the meanings. Just the grain of the voice. Imagine it: the Chaucerian text as a script to be played out in one’s head, in the mind’s ear.

Take the matter of tone and pitch. Clearly, the poet speaks from a position of epic elevation—his first lines echo Virgil’s *Aeneid*, his Fury/Muse is adapted from Statius’s *Thebaid*, and his high theme of woe and tragedy is clearly presented. But how loud should the performer be, how largely “martial”? Because we move so quickly from tragedy to romance, even though our largest frame is the Trojan wars, our focus is on a single man who is centrally defined by his loving. Thesiphone seems more a weeper than a slayer. For that matter, how much weeping should the performer introduce, if only in a gestural lachrymosity? It seems likely that most performers would damp back some of these extreme effusions lest they slide immediately into bathos. One recalls how Shakespeare could create such a slide by having Bottom and the mechanicks in their *Pyramus and Thisbe* play erupt in fustian bombast. Any performer is at liberty to take this approach...but what will the rest of the poem sound like? The mind reels.

Besides, even these three stanzas do not maintain the same tone. I sense a shift, a slight easing of intensity around line twelve, as the final two couplets in the stanza rather too patly sum up what has been said. They are not even versions of proverbs—and proverbs will play a huge part in the discourses of the poem—but “conclusions” so vacuous as to make the careful reader wince just a bit. And with the third stanza, Chaucer has put on his Pandarus-like robes of the hapless helper of lovers, himself unlucky in love.

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Thus from the very start an imaginative reading of the Prologue and Invocation suggests a more complex tissue of narration than the flow of statements might suggest. Is a tragedy to be defined as a story that turns us into helpless weepers? How is it comprised in what Chaucer finally sums up as he turns to his next task?

#2]

For now wil I gon streght to my matere,
In which ye may the double sorwes here
55 Of Troilus in lovyng of Criseyde,
And how that she forsook hym er she deyde.

Is that it? is this to be a very sad story about a lover who is jilted by his lady? We would seem abruptly to have left the epic for the romance. Of course, that would be just fine for most readers—they would continue reading blithely forward to find out how it happened. Whereas other readers would take the time to feel the varied pace of the lines, the resonances at certain places that withhold certain understanding of the point being made, and note the signs of careful and intriguing work. Towards an adequate imagining of such things, I try then to emphasize the oral contours of the poem, beginning with the seven-line stanza itself and articulating the clashes and modulations of sound, the metrical pattern and variations, and the surprises and satisfactions of the rimes.

I will illustrate more particularly what I have just said by moving now to a fresh passage, #3.

This is still at the beginning of the poem, at a crucial point in the history of the Trojan war, when the Trojan priest and seer, Calkas, has just fled from the city after learning from his divinations and directly from Appollo [Chaucer's spelling], that "Troie sholde destroyed be." The Trojans have no idea why he left them and curse him as a traitor; he and all his kin, they say, should be burned to death. At which point we meet his daughter:

#3]

Criseyde was this lady name al right –
100 As to my doom in al Troies cite
Nas non so fair, for passynge every wight

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So aungelik was hir natif beaute
That lik a thing inmortal semed she,
As doth an hevenyssh perfit creature
105 That down were sent in scornynge of nature.

This lady which that alday herd at ere
Hire fadres shame, his falsnesse and tresoun,
Wel neigh out of hir wit for sorwe and fere,
In widewes habit large of samyt broun,
110 On knees she fil biforn Ector adown
With pitous vois, and tendrely wepynge,
His mercy bad, hir selven excusyng.

Now was this Ector pitous of nature,
And saugh that she was sorwfully bigon,
115 And that she was so faire a creature;
Of his goodnesse he gladede hire anon,
And seyde, "lat youre fadres treson gon
Forth with meschaunce, and ye youre self in joie
Dwelleth with us, whil yow good list, in Troie.

120 "And al th'onour that men may don yow have,
As ferforth as youre fader dwelled here,
Ye shul have, and youre body shal men save,
As fer as I may ought enquere or here."
And she hym thonked with ful humble chere,
125 And offer wolde, and it hadde ben his wille,
And took hire leve, and hom, and held hir stille.

And in hire hous she abood with swich meyne
As til hire honour nede was to holde;
And whil she was dwellynge in that cite
130 Kepte hir estat, and both of yonge and olde
Ful wel biloved, and wel men of hir tolde—
But wheither that she children hadde or noon,
I rede it naught, therefore I late it goon.

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Let me say at the start that every mark of punctuation you see comes from modern editors; medieval manuscripts were normally not punctuated. I now print here that last stanza (as #4) here as it might be literally transcribed from the medieval manuscript:

#4]

And in hire hous she abood with swich meyne
As til hire honour nede was to holde
And whil she was dwellynge in that cite
Kepte hir estat and both of yonge and olde
Ful wel biloued and wel men of hir tolde
But wheither that she children hadde or noon
I rede it naught therfore I late it goon

There would have been no periods or commas, certainly no semi-colons, and no dashes. Imagining how this should be read, then, starts with a careful notice of the syntax and where the major sense units begin and end, and how the clauses and phrases are grouped.

Chaucer is still in the process of beginning his story and is summarizing a crucial moment in the life of the central female character of his poem. Prosodically, the result is seen in the fluency and pace of the stanzas. I doubt that if these were printed together continuously as a paragraph many readers would notice their rime scheme or their stanza-nature. Lines 100-05 read as a single utterance, with some twists and turns but no full stop. It demonstrates how the narrator's voice is far from neutral: he places before us hyperbolically one who has angelic beauty, serving to reassure us that here is no traitor kin to be punished, but rather an instance of such beauty and virtue that she deserves to be protected as a community treasure. Notice the momentum of the stanza describing her presentation before Hector, starting at line 106: once again, the standard mechanics of the stanza, especially its rime scheme, is made very little of, especially as it glides past the rimes at "broun" and "adown." A major effect is with the final couplet, however, where the meter shows us that "wepyng" and "excusynge" are to be pronounced in a non-colloquial way, so that the multi-syllabic riming acts as a spotlight focused on this paragon of beauty now kneeling before the lord of Troy.

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Note also the stanza beginning at line 120, especially the clauses beginning with “and.” Here we have an ancient device of storytelling called parataxis, a linear kind of telling that moves quickly from point to point. The stanza beginning at line 127 comes closer as a fit with its basic structure in its first five lines, where there are two lines and then two more lines, each with a thought, summarized in line the fifth; but the next couplet is a bit strange—it is not the conclusion of a piece of thought, and though its conjunction of “but” suggests a modifying relation to what has preceded it, it is more like a random point tacked on suddenly. What is to be imagined here? There is literally nothing to be explored at the performative level because there is nothing to go on. Either Criseyde does have children or she does not, but the narrator hasn’t found the answer in his reading of sources. Informationally, the effect is not quite the same as if those two lines had not been written at all. For their absence would not have foregrounded the question in our minds; and anyone who asked the question would be labeled TAN, since there is no evidence in the rest of the poem. Tantalizingly, the declaration of *not* knowing whether she has children or not, especially at that point in the stanza—its last two lines where moral weight is most keenly felt—creates another item to be filed under “imagining voices: special problems.”

The thoughtful reader, whom I call the “backwards reader,” won’t know yet if this question is important or not. Standing at this point, it seems to add nuance to Criseyde’s fragile if elegant position, the “estat” she keeps with honor—for here might be imagined an independent beauty, with neither husband or children, whose social life could continue to accommodate the ethos of the aristocracy, but who could be neither a mistress nor a wife without complication, mainly stemming from the pollution of her kin through her father’s treachery. Incidentally, if that thoughtful reader just happened to have available Boccaccio’s *Il Filostrato*, the source-romance that underlies all of Chaucer’s poem, there might be provided some perplexity in discovering (to quote Windeatt) that Boccaccio “says plainly that Criseida did not need to concern herself over son or daughter, as she was somebody who had never been able to have any” (93). The sexual implications of that are clear in Boccaccio, but much less so in Chaucer’s revised version. To summarize: here is a place where a

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“voice” cannot be imagined orally because of ambiguity or inadequate context. It is an utterance needing thought; one could imagine it said in a variety of ways, even with mischievous intent, though I think this example will remain unresolvable in speech.

It is because a certain imagining leads to the imperative of thought, of reflection, that I speak of two reading experiences, that of the forwards or of the backwards reader. (In truth, many readers blend both kinds.) By itself, the notion seems uncomplicated to me, but my definition is closely connected to that cultural distinction in the annals of literacy between a hearer-viewer at a performance and a reader with a book. The forwards hearer can, indeed, have a book, but he/she imagines in that case what she/he is reading as if it were a script for an oral performance. That kind of reader does not expect to study the book any more than one studies a performance; that is, will not turn leaves back and forth, or re-read passages (the equivalent of interruptions). Each is a reader trying to be a listener, and concentrating on what is being said as the story advances. Whereas the backwards reader takes pleasure in the bookishness of the experience and develops new assumptions about what a “text” is. Formal qualities of the written text are now regularly noticed and analyzed, especially with regard to meter and rime schemes, i.e., to prosody. The backwards reader may still read the book aloud, for oneself or for others, but a bookish approach gives a different exercise for memory, and a sharper awareness of configurations—speeches and themes—that need special attention.

Having begun a special discussion of the shape and possibilities of the Troilus-stanza, looking at a successful passage that effectively ignores the usual traffic signs within the form, I want to move to another place, where the form is used quite strictly and yet with great imagination. And this will introduce us to two other major speakers in the poem—Prince Troilus, first, and then his dear friend and, incidentally, Criseyde’s uncle, Pandarus (both character-names are found in the *Iliad* though not attached to similar characters).

The situation is this. Troilus has been to a community festival and had his first focused sight of Criseyde, which has stricken him to the heart. He has retired to his chamber now, lamenting his bad luck in having fallen in love for a lady who has no idea of his feelings, and no

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reason to be receptive to his possible advances. While he is lyrically wailing, Pandarus bursts in with a gale of good cheer and very practical, even cynical, advice. He of course thinks Troilus is too pessimistic and perhaps too timorous. They argue, and Pandarus sums up his views:

#5]

 "And for to speke of hire in specyal,
 Hire beaute to bithynken and hire youthe,
 It sit hire naught to ben celestial
 As yet, though that hire liste bothe and kowthe;
985 But trewely, it sate hire wel right nowthe
 A worthi knyght to loven and cherice—
 And but she do, I holde it for a vice."

Notice how comfortably Pandarus adapts the logical structure of the stanza: the first two lines indicate the subject for analysis, the next two lines advance the reason she should be receptive to earthly love—and also notice the cunning run-over, "as yet," at line 984, which does not totally deny the possibility of eventual asceticism. The fifth line in this version of the stanza is a pivot or transition line, not a summary of the previous quatrain, but one that opens up the indicated conclusion to her youth and beauty; and the seventh line is something of a *coup*, offering a neat close to the couplet but also reattaching the discourse of virtue by somewhat turning it upside down. If she doesn't love Troilus she will not show virtue!

As a young man, Troilus is a seasoned warrior and a great hero on the battlefield; as a lover he appears to be a child barely out of nursery. This contrast is a quiet joke carried throughout the poem: he is aggressive against the Greeks, he is fearful and hesitant towards Criseyde. Pandarus is the one who has the most fun with this joke. First, Troilus dithers a little in response to Pandarus's hearty optimism:

#6]

 "But deere frende, how shal my wo be lesse
 Til this be doon? and, good, ek telle me this:
 How wiltow seyn of me and my destresse,

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1020 Lest she be wroth — this drede I moost, ywys—
Or nyl nat here or trowen how it is?

Al this drede I, and ek for the manere
Of thee, hire Em, she nyl no swich thyng here.”

For all of its vigorous colloquialism, the speech still settles into the standard mold of the stanza: the first two lines introduce a worry about his immediate future and point to the second two lines where he indicates a fear that Pandarus’s manner will harm his cause and anger Criseyde, or, as the fifth line adds, she won’t understand or believe what Pandarus tells her; and the final couplet concludes his logic, such as it is, by reiterating his fear that Pandarus’s “manere” may spoil all—and all this neatly nailed in place with the rimes and the rime-scheme.

But Pandarus overwhelms him with rough familiarity and persuasive confidence:

#7]

Quod Pandarus, “thow hast a ful gret care
Lest that the Cheri may falle out of the moone!
1025 Whi, lord, I hate of the thi nyce fare.
Whi, entremete of that thow hast to doone!
For goddes love, I bidde the a boone:
So lat m’alone, and it shal be thi beste.”
“Whi, frende,” quod he, “now do right as the leste.”

This follows the natural divisions of the stanza with a few variations. The first two lines tease him with a folk image of foolish worrying: the Man in the Moon is no more likely to fall out of the moon than Criseyde is to spurn him. Then follow another two lines, which divide an idea in two parts: (a) your way of thinking is foolish, so (b) meddle only with things you understand. The fifth line is transition to the closing: leave it to me, he concludes in the sixth line. And then, still in the stanza, there is a conclusion to the conclusion: Troilus’s chastened acceptance of Pandarus’s office as a go-between. This is how vigorous dialogue gets fitted into what at first can seem like a stiff and constraining form.

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The primary pleasure for the forwards reader in these exchanges might seem to be the deftness and sure hand of the storyteller-versifier. Everything fits neatly together, flows smoothly, has human interest and humor. Who could object to that? Yet one kind of backwards thought, also appropriate, might re-consider the opening of the poem: we seem to be here in the movements of a romantic comedy, where Troilus's effusions and love-complaints are likely to be taken as slightly humorous, though pretty. That's a very long distance from the elevated sense of huge griefs, personal betrayal, and epic battles with which we started. How is this going to be resolved or brought together? There is of course no answer to this until a good deal more happens. But the thoughtful reader will hear a large number of reasons for loving, some of which will seem facile, others foolish, others appealing. How will these add up, and to what extent are they beginning to define a moral landscape? As we imagine these voices, we will more and more need to evaluate their intellectual or moral pith, even as we appreciate their touches of humanity. The forwards reader, of course, seldom thinks on these things and does not contemplate a moral until handed one, whereas the backwards reader is aware of the development of themes he or she tries to keep track of, particularly some that recur and seem to be of particular importance—as for example, questions about the nature of destiny and Fortune.

To elaborate the matter of love's reasons and reasoning about love, I follow Pandarus now to his work of persuasion (seduction, some might say). For Pandarus is the great persuader of the poem, at first buoying up Troilus so he will persist in his approaches to Criseyde, but even more spectacularly, talking his niece into a dangerous affair and putting her comfortable Trojan life (leaving aside the threat of the Greeks outside the gates) at risk.

At the beginning of book 2 of the poem we have a change of scene, as Pandarus travels from his meetings with Troilus to "his neeces palays," a large and luxuriously furnished mansion, with extensive gardens. He is welcomed and brought to a "paved parlour"—a tiled kind of den—and joins the company of Criseyde, her ladies, and some other friends, as they sit listening to a maiden read to them from the twelfth-century *Roman de Thèbes* (in French, of course—the anachronism is startling in a quiet way). But with his interruption the

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reading is stopped and general conversation ensues with Pandarus at the center, apparently in his usual familiar, genial, and jokey mood. He makes a secret of something he says he knows and teases Criseyde's curiosity. I must quote how this begins, since it one of the more charming passages in the poem. He urges her to put away the book:

Book II

#8]

110 But lat be this and telle me how ye fare;
 Do wey youre barbe and shew youre face bare;
 Do wey youre book, rys up, and lat us daunce,
 And lat us don to May som observaunce!"

The company must have been fairly used to such entertaining improprieties, and no one makes a move towards pushing the furniture back; except—can she really?—Criseyde seems to take him seriously. All of this takes a great deal of imagining and thought. In the medieval period, pious widows were supposed to wear a sober costume not unlike a nun's habit. Does line 110 suggest that she had a veiled wimple, an extreme version of such a costume, and that she was wearing it in her home, at a private occasion during a poetry reading? Or was Pandarus just exaggerating? And how does Criseyde reprove him?—

115 "I, God forbede!" quod she, "be ye madde?
 Is that a widewes lif, so God yow save?
 By God, ye maken me ryght soore adradde,
 Ye ben so wylde, it semeth as ye rave!
 It satte me wel bet ay in a cave
 To bidde and rede on holy seyntes lyves;
 Lat maydens gon to daunce and yonge wyves."

If only as in colloquial interjections, the word, *God*, appears in her speech three times—a sign of increasing intensity, not necessarily of piety; and then she goes on to match his hyperbole with her own. The backwards reader is very interested in which gods are appealed to and by which character. We note she wasn't reading saints lives when he

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came in. Still the rime on *rave/cave* is very witty, and she can stretch the logic-structure of the stanza as well as Pandarus. What is going on here?

There is a subtle game of wit, to be sure. They are fencing, and Criseyde is on her guard, although she can turn a point of his into a score for the defense. She must be used to his moods and his japeries, but she doesn't know yet where this is all going. In a sense she has won the first exchanges, because he now switches his tack.

- 120 "As evere thrive I, quod this Pandarus,
 "Yet koude I telle a thyng to doon yow pleye."
 "Now Uncle deere," quod she, "telle it us
 For goddes love: is than th'assege aweye?
 I am of Grekes so fered that I deye."
125 "Nay, nay," quod he, "as evere mote I thryve,
 "It is a thing wel bet than swyche fyve."

- "Ye, holy god," quod she, "what thyng is that?
 What, bet than swyche fyve? I! nay, ywys.
 For al this world ne kan I reden what
130 It sholde ben; som jape I trowe is this;
 And but youre selven telle us what it is,
 My wit is for t'arede it al to leene;
 As help me god, I not nat what ye meene."

So there is the secret declared, the almost impossibly wonderful secret, five times better than any news about the Greeks having lifted their siege! The backwards reader notes another oblique touching upon the almost hidden facts of daily life, with its wartime dreads and anxieties. But is Criseyde responding to Pandarus's inflated language with some supple irony of her own? Is she overdoing her amazement and her fear? Who can tell? The game is a contest whose rules she does not know—or is it possible with her experience of her uncle that she sees the general topic he is dragging her towards? (The backwards reader will have more and more occasion to wonder how much, how often, and how soon Criseyde sees what Pandarus has in mind.) But Pandarus now strikes a low blow by threatening to withhold the secret

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from her because of her inordinate pride—a new idea to us, but a frightening claim to her since it was the kind of thing that, spread in rumors, could ruin her reputation.

135 “And I youre borugh, ne nevere shal, for me,
 This thyng be told to yow, as mote I thryve.”
 “And whi so, uncle myn, whi so?” quod she.
 “By god,” quod he, “that wol I telle as blyve;
 For proudder womman is ther noon on lyve,
140 And ye it wist, in al the town of Troye;
 I jape nought, as evere have I joye.”

 Tho gan she wondren moore than biforn
 A thousand fold, and down hire eyghen caste;
 For nevere sith the tyme that she was born
 To knowe thyng desired she so faste;
145 And with a syk, she seyde hym atte laste,
 “Now, Uncle myn, I nyl yow nought displese,
 Nor axen more that may do yow disese.”

As the old actor is supposed to have told the young: “The most important thing in acting is *sincerity*—once you learn to fake that, everything else falls in place.” And so it is with Pandarus; note his “sincerity topos” in lines 135 and 140, medieval observations like “I kid you not,” and “So help me!” Notice also that Pandarus’s playing has a streak of bullying, so that Criseyde reverts to little-girlness, although she still wants to know the secret. She gives up the battle of wits, or at least seems to. She may well know that this “feminine” proffering of submission has great appeal. At any rate, there is a pause and then they turn to chat “as friends do when they meet together,” says Chaucer. Naturally their talk deepens a little as the topic turns to the war, the siege, their dangers, and the role of Hector as their protector. And here comes Pandarus again—can Criseyde really not see what he is up to?

He extols Hector but adds equal praise for his brother, Troilus. And Criseyde agrees, emphasizing her approval of their regal blend of “great power and moral virtue.” When Pandarus prattles on to heap

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more praise particularly on Troilus, Criseyde enthusiastically joins in.
Now follow their game as Pandarus pushes obliquely closer to his goal:

#9]

190 "Ye sey right sooth, ywys," quod Pandarus;
For yesterday whoso hadde with hym ben,
He myghte han wondred upon Troilus;
For nevere yet so thikke a swarm of been
Ne fleigh as Grekes fro hym gonne fleen;
195 And thorough the feld in everi wightes eere
Ther nas no cry but 'Troilus is there!'

"Now here, now ther, he hunted hem so faste,
Ther nas but Grekes blood and Troilus.
Now hym he hurte and hym al down he caste;
200 Ay wher he wente it was arayed thus:
He was hire deth, and sheld and lif for us,
That, as that day, ther dorste non withstonde,
Whil that he held his bloody swerd in honde.

"Therto he is the frendlieste man
205 Of gret estat that evere I saugh my lyve,
And wher hym lest, best felawshipe kan
To swich as hym thynketh able forto thryve."—
And with that word tho Pandarus as blyve
He took his leve and seyde, "I wol gon henne."
210 "Nay, blame have I, myn Uncle," quod she thenne:

"What aileth yow to be thus wery soone,
And namelich of wommen? wol ye so?
Nay, sitteth down; by god, I have to doone
With yow to speke of wisdom er ye go."
215 And everi wight that was aboute hem tho,
That herde that, gan fer away to stonde,
Whil they two hadde al that hem liste in honde.

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A full understanding of what is happening at lines 215–17 is necessary in order to imagine how the conversation now proceeds.

They are given “privacy,” but in a very medieval way. Having heard all the conversation up to now, and hearing the cue-word, “wisdom,” everyone present understands that Uncle Pandarus will now offer personal counsel for Criseyde’s ears alone. Those present do not leave the room; they simply *go as far away as they can*. (They may well keep talking with each other, in lowered voices.) Imagine Criseyde and Pandarus, then, not whispering, but speaking as quietly as they can. The occasion we can tell is normal enough since everyone moves with such dispatch once they hear the cue-words. But what follows is going to tax Pandarus’s skill in breaking the big secret to her and drawing her into new realms of amorous possibility.

Here is how he gets to the point of identifying Troilus as one who loves her—and think of this happening, too, while everyone else sits nearby, studiously not eavesdropping:

#10]

310 “Now, my good Em, for goddes love I preye,”
Quod she, “come of and telle me what it is;
For both I am agast what ye wol seye,
And ek me longeth it to wite, ywis;
For whethir it be wel or be amys,
Say on, lat me nat in this feere dwelle.”
315 “So wol I doon; now herkeneth, I shall telle.

“Now, Nece myn, the kynges deere sone,
The goode, wise, worthi, fresshe and free,
Which alwey for to don wel is his wone,
The noble Troilus, so loveth thee,
320 That, but ye helpe, it wol his bane be.
Lo, here is al—what sholde I moore sey?
Do what yow lest to make hym lyve or dey.

“But if ye late hym deyen, I wol sterve—
Have here my trouthe, Nece, I nyl nat lyen—
325 Al sholde I with this knyf my throte kerve.”

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With that the teris breste out of his eyen,
And seyde, "if that ye don us bothe dyen,
Thus gilteles, than haue ye fished fayre;
What mende ye, though that we booth appaire?"

I drew attention to the use of the second-person singular personal pronoun, used commonly between intimates, family members, and masters to their servants. You see that Pandarus almost immediately returns to the so-called "polite" second-person plural, *ye*. (It is always useful to note which pronouns are used by whom, and when and where, in medieval conversations. Here he may not even have been conscious of his attempt to get one inch closer to his relative.) As he rushes to his revelation and his proposal he attaches the news to the theme of death: Troilus will die if she does not love him in return, and Pandarus will die, too. And it will be her fault—and upon this most violent characterization of this event, Pandarus bursts into tears.

I admit it is very hard to imagine this happening in the physical and social space I have described. In fact, it is probably impossible to do so and stay serious. But the imagining must pay less attention to whether this could be a true dramatic incident (for this is not a drama we are seeing), and more to the images and effects within this language of persuasion. In effect, Pandarus has in his extreme way offered Criseyde a way out of her moral dilemma (the virtue of compassion), and we'll see how that works in a moment; but first the dynamics of this melodramatic discourse must be played out. Criseyde does not immediately respond, and Pandarus keeps talking (or orating) for eight more stanzas. We may wonder how she looks as she sits and responds, but Chaucer does not tell us. Then Criseyde thinks to herself that she will try to find out the specifics of what he is proposing: "Just what are you advising me to do?" she asks.

He responds with two stanzas of quite lovely gather-ye-rosebuds poetry, after which she bursts into tears and speaks in apparent despair of the kind of counsel he has given. Imagine this, now, in the parlour—first *he* bursts into tears and then, shortly after, *she* does. Presumably their sessions of advice don't usually end this way, but we are offered no description of what the company is feeling.

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#11]

With this he stynte and caste adown the hede,
And she began to breste awepe anoon,
And seyde, "allas, for wo why nere I deede?
410 For of this world the feyth is al agoon.
Allas, what sholden straunge to me doon,
Whan he that for my beste frende I wende
Ret me to loue, and sholde it me defende?

"Allas, I wolde han trusted, douteles,
415 That if that I thorough my disaventure
Hadde loved outhur hym or Achilles,
Ector, or any mannes creature,
Ye nolde han had no mercy ne mesure
On me, but alwey had me in repreve.
420 This false worlde, allas, who may it leve?

"What! is this al the joye and al the feste?
Is this youre reed? is this my blisful cas?
Is this the verray mede of youre byheeste?
Is al this paynted proces seyde, allas,
425 Right for this fyn? O lady myn, Pallas,
Thow in this dredful cas for me purveye,
For so astoned am I that I deye!"

Wyth that she gan ful sorwfully to syke.

If both parties were being completely serious, Criseyde's crushing response would have been the end of the conversation and perhaps of the friendship. (Note that no one else notices her distress and rushes to see if she needs help.) Her appeal to Pallas Athena (Minerva) threatens to convict Pandarus of offering something less than Olympian wisdom. But his response is in the same perfervid register of grief and anger that she had used. He now rants in his own way, ending with the following—note the brilliant final rime and how it shows us that Criseyde will turn towards the way out Pandarus has offered:

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#12]

“But sith it liketh yow that I be dede,
By Neptunus, that god is of the see,
Fro this forth shal I nevere eten brede,
445 Til I myn owen herte blood may see;
For certeyn I wol deye as soone as he.”
And up he sterte and on his wey he raughte,
Tyl she agayn hym by the lappe kaughte.

She dare not risk being the cause of two deaths, at least one a suicide, and a bloody scandalous business; talking to herself she says:

#13]

“What men wolde of it deme I kan nat seye;
462 It nedeth me ful sleighly for to pleie.”

And again, one has to imagine how to take this inner response. Is she a self-possessed schemer, or an innocent fighting to stay safe? Is she emotionally deeply affected, or rather cool?

At any rate, an accommodation is now reached, as she promises, not to love Troilus, but to be kind to him. She will not love a man against her will. This of course is all Pandarus needs, and he makes his way home to bear the good news to Troilus.

The rest of book 2, and most of book 3, are an account of how Pandarus shortens the distance between them and softens Criseyde's heart, until—not without some deception—he has brought the two lovers naked into bed in his house. But about that deceiving: Criseyde had been invited with her company to visit Pandarus and then been persuaded to spend the night (a terrific rain storm had come up). Along the way, Pandarus promised Troilus would not be there.

But once Criseyde has gone to bed, Pandarus comes to her with a cocked-up story of Troilus's mental anguish at hearing she loved someone else. She agrees to see the supposedly distraught Troilus, he is led to her bed, and when she protests her innocence he is so upset over her grief and his own duplicity that he faints from high emotion. Pandarus chucks him into bed, and they bend to resuscitate him. Next we know, Criseyde is in Troilus's arms, and Pandarus has retired to the

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other end of the room “to go to sleep.” Now listen to these two amazing stanzas:

Book III

#14]

- Criseyde, which that felte hire thus i-take—
As writen clerkes in hire bokes olde—
1200 Right as an aspes leef she gan to quake,
Whan she hym felte hire in his armes folde.
But Troilus, all hool of cares colde,
Gan thanken tho the blisful goddes sevene:
Thus sondry peynes bryngen folk to hevene!
- 1205 This Troilus in armes gan hire streyne,
And seyde, "O swete, as evere mot I gon,
Now be ye kaught, now is ther but we tweyne,
Now yeldeth yow, for other bote is non."
To that Criseyde answerde thus anon,
1210 "Ne hadde I er now, my swete herte deere,
Ben yolde, iwis, I were now nought heere."

Which is to say, "If I hadn't already given in (or surrendered), I wouldn't be here." Needless to say, Troilus does not stop to ponder the meaning of this "er now," but it marks one of the high points of the task of imagining voices. There surely would not be too much debate about the soft and loving tone in which it would be delivered, but what does it give the backwards reader to contemplate? What does it say about Criseyde's previous resistance, about what and when she knew what was happening, even about some deep collusion in the affair? Does it confirm her "slyness," or just humanize her as having a will of her own, which, in her own way, she has fulfilled to her satisfaction?

* * * *

Now with this scene and this person I have reached my destination, which is no destination at all in terms of the poem; for we have not

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looked a single moment at the much darker books 4 and 5, in which Criseyde is exchanged against her will and sent to the Greeks for Antenor, to the lovers' consternation and Troilus's near-death from grief—not to mention the ultimate fall of Troy. We have given Troilus short shrift in this discussion, and it is in these last two books that his voice shows us how romance is carried into tragedy. Chaucer told us at the very beginning that Criseyde would betray him, and we see and hear how that happens, as the elegant if oily Diomedes reminds her that the Greeks will be the winners once Troy's destiny of destruction is accomplished and promises to take just as good care of her as Troilus might.

I leave you not so much with questions, as with questions about questions. There is a kind of reading I have been trying to illustrate that is at once phonologically articulated and intellectually assimilated. It calls for a work of the aural imagination, which then presents the thoughtful reader, the backwards reader, with a series of intense and three-dimensional encounters: encounters with the characters who meet and make each other's fates; who inquire into motives and causes for that making; and who transform the great thesaurus of love into an erotic and philosophical adventure. The more vividly these encounters are imagined, the clearer it will be that delightful questions, perplexing questions, questions perhaps insoluble or inexplicable resonate as part of what is heard. They are all about reading, they are all about hearing; they are all about the mystery and vitality of the speech and the speakers so artfully presented to us.

I have said that the poem should be read by all who love the Middle Ages. I hope you will do so, and I wish you good reading. It should really be something to hear!

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Includes “Appendix I, Suggestions for using ‘reading Chaucer out loud’ in the teaching of Chaucer’s poetry.” The chapter’s preliminary demonstration of “Prosodic Criticism” will be laid out in full in these next two volumes:

- I. *Out Loud with Chaucer’s Shorter Poems: Adventures in Prosodic Criticism* with 2 CDs included; and
- II. *Out Loud with Troilus and Criseyde and the Legend of Good Women: Adventures in Prosodic Criticism*” with 2 CDs included. The Chaucer Studio, 2005/-6.