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Chauncer 1: Visions of Love

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# "A Busshel Venym Al Excusen": Chaucer, Boccaccio, and Women's Vulnerability in Courtly Love Tradition

In his enchanting and rambling essay "On Fairy Stories," J. R. R. Tolkien takes issue with readers of stories who are fond of writing things like, "The Black Bull of Norroway is Beauty and the Beast."[1] Such equation, he argues, misses a profound truth, for "[i]t is precisely the colouring, the atmosphere, the unclassifiable individual details of a story, and above all the general purport that informs with life the undissected bones of the plot, that really count."[2] This holds true when we draw false equivalencies between stories that simply seem thematically similar. Yet what of stories retold, Tolkien asks: stories that claim a single point of origin? Surely it cannot be truly said that Perrault's Red Riding Hood story in which the wolf devours her is the same as retellings in which she (or some proxy) vanquishes the threat and lives happily ever after.

In considering Chaucer and Boccaccio's respective versions of the Troilus story, this certainly seems a fair point to uphold. The two writers hand their "Red Riding Hoods" quite different fates. The worlds they image forth for the doomed lovers in the Trojan tale could hardly be more disparate. It is, then, fascinating and instructive work to compare the choices these two men made with the same raw narrative materials: the Trojan war backdrop; the desire of a Trojan

[1] Tolkien, 6.

[2] Tolkien, 7.

prince for the daughter of a fled traitor; a friend's efforts to bring about a courtly love relationship between the pair; and their ultimate separation, followed by the woman's breaking of her vows to the man. Both Chaucer and Boccaccio retain each of these elements of the story. But through their markedly different handling of the elements, the stories they ultimately give us occupy nearly opposite ends of a spectrum: Boccaccio's, a tale of classic courtly love and misogyny; Chaucer's, a tale with nuance and humor that takes a winsomely critical stance against the love tradition of his day.

In *Il Filostrato*, we have the narrative frame of a self-focused courtly lover and his attempt to manipulate his beloved into requiting him. Against this backdrop, the Troilus story is made into a specimen of the worst misogyny the tradition so often houses. In *Troilus and Criseyde*, however, with the narrator's focus on empathy, inclusion, and universal perspective, we instead receive a far less simplistic story. Chaucer's work provides breathing room for its main female character, gives her a voice, and illuminates the ways the courtly love tradition can be a dangerous lord—especially for women. Its piercing critique, adeptly using the conventions of the very tradition it is problematizing, calls us as readers to critically examine what that tradition normalizes, and to ask ourselves, "[W]olde a busshel venym al excusen/ For that o greyn of love is on it shove?"[3]

Let us first take *Il Filostrato* in hand. Its narrator is primarily characterized by his focus on himself and his suffering,[4] and his drive to force a woman to take full responsibility for the alleviation of that suffering. Even Troilus' story is not about Troilus; to this young man, it is

[3] Taken from Chaucer in Benson, *Book III*, 1024-1025.

[4] "Ah, woe is me… poor wretch that I am," Gordon, 27.

merely "a cloak for the secret grief of my love."[5] When he addresses his readers, he begs them to "entreat Love for my sake."[6] And when he answers the *questio amoris* he is posed (whether it is best to see the beloved, to speak about her, or to fantasize about her), he unsurprisingly defaults to the latter, because "it is no small part of the lover's bliss to be able, according to the thinker's desire, to have mastery of the beloved person."[7] When he later repudiates this initial belief of his, calling it "far from the truth," "foolish," "ignorant," and "vain,"[8] his repudiation likewise stems from selfish care. Rather than resulting from a revelation about love itself—that love and mastery are immiscible—his change of mind simply resulted from his own loss of pleasure.[9]

The *Filostrato* narrator's obsessive focus on his own emotional state is, of course, a hallmark of the courtly love tradition and its codified methods: the courtly lover fixes his desire on a woman of his choosing, then unleashes a torrent of blandishments upon her, designed to elicit sex. The methods at his disposal—all of which the *Filostrato* narrator repeatedly employs—tend to involve different varieties of manipulation. He may, for example, accuse her of being cold, "cruel,"[10] and uncaring, as Troilus does: "she for whom thou weepest feels no more than a stone, and remains as cold as ice hardening under a clear sky."[11] Or he may assign her the

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[5] Gordon, 28.

[6] Gordon, 31.

[7] Gordon, 25.

[8] Gordon, 25.

[9] "…your absence has so saddened my soul beyond measure that I can clearly understand how great was the joy… which came to me from the sight of your gracious beauty," Gordon, 26.

[10] Gordon, 38.

[11] Gordon, 37.

blame for the struggle he is having with his own emotions, and likewise assign her the responsibility for their alleviation.

Abandoning responsibility for one's own emotional state seems particularly problematic within a tradition that often enshrines as highest love the unrequited feelings a man has for a woman he need never have actually met. And the *Filostrato* narrator, in good courtly love tradition, combines this particular manipulative technique with one even more potent and unfair: the threat of suicide. "I pray him who has put my life and death in your hands to kindle in your heart that desire which alone can bring about my salvation,"[12] he writes to this woman who, for all we know, has never spoken to him in her life. Yet the narrator insists that she ought to drop her own plans and move back at once to his city, because her decision to move "didst rob me of [my comfort]… And if thou wishest not to find me dead, come back quickly, for little is the life that thy departure has left me."[13] Pandarus, in like fashion, begs Criseida not to "allow such a man to perish because of his love for thee,"[14] a man who is "dying because of thee, so little concern hast thou for him."[15]

The tradition that codifies such extremities of manipulation unsurprisingly lends itself to blatant misogyny with great readiness; and here, too, *Il Filostrato* serves as a perfect example of the genre. *Filostrato*'s Troilus starts by claiming the inherent fickleness of women: "For even as the leaf flutters in the wind, so in one day, fully a thousand times, do [women's] hearts change."[16]

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[12] Gordon, 30.

[13] Gordon, 73.

[14] Gordon, 47.

[15] Gordon, 53.

[16] Gordon, 33.

This, of course, is a piece of delicious irony, given that Troilus' heart itself is a mere two stanzas away from dramatically changing from staunch refusal to love, to a sudden and all-consuming passion for a woman he has caught a glimpse of across the room.

And the narration and characters of *Il Filostrato* go on to tick nearly every box on the perennial list of misogynistic assertions: not only are women fickle by nature, "unsteady as a leaf in the wind,"[17] they also can't be trusted to know what they want.[18] Age, we are told, lessens women's worth,[19] and this fact may be used as a threat to get them to agree to sex, as Pandarus does when he tells Criseida to take Troilus as a lover because no one will want her when she is old. Women are vain,[20] and they are by nature untrustworthy, so young men are advised, "if you read with right feeling, you will not easily put your trust in all women. A young woman is inconstant and desirous of many lovers…"[21] They talk too much without enough substance ("much empty prating such as most women do,"[22] caring not for "reason"[23]). Their anger need not be taken seriously, and their fates are less important than the pleasure a man can get out of them, Pandarus assures Troilus: "That her good name should be lessened is, to tell the truth, of

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[17] Gordon, 124.

[18] Troilus claims, "nor do any of them know what they desire" (Gordon, 33), and Pandarus declares that "every lady leads an amorous life in her wishes… and if she were to deny it, I should not believe her" (Gordon, 42).

[19] "[N]ot all are worthy, because some, being no longer young, are less desirable" (Gordon, 125).

[20] "[S]he rates her beauty more highly than does the mirror, and has exulting pride in her youth" (Gordon, 124).

[21] Gordon, 124.

[22] Gordon, 80.

[23] Gordon, 124.

less account and less disturbing. Let her make shift without it as Helen does, as long as she fulfill all thy desire… even if this thing please her not, in short time thou wilt win peace again."[24]

Beneath all of these assertions is the general reigning rule of sexism: a bad act or quality in one woman proves the nature of all women, rather than simply showing one of many features of the humanity to which men and women both belong. Hence, Criseida's betrayal of Troilus is not simply her betrayal of Troilus; it is instead, in Boccaccio's hands, a revelation of what all women are truly like. "From this time forth," Troilus laments, "who will believe in any oath, in love, or in woman, seeing clearly thy false swearing?"[25]

In like fashion, actions which are easily explained by features of human nature—such as the instinct for survival, through assessment of and assimilation to social expectation—are made into proof of inherent female wrongness. Thus we have Pandarus telling us, "A wondrous thing this is to think of—that each woman, when others are by to see, should appear coy and angry about what is most desired by ladies,"[26] as though it were illogical that human beings whose sexuality was strictly and punitively policed by their society[27] would resort to other than straightforward means to engage in romance.

One cannot but wonder—as we will see Chaucer's version invites us to imagine—the acute challenge to relational navigation that such traditional courtly love treatment may often have posed for medieval women. Against the backdrop of a courtly code which "made use of

[24] Gordon, 79.

[25] Gordon, 122.

[26] Gordon, 53.

[27] For more on this subject, see Pistono.

romance to cover up the assumed inferiority of women" (Power 3), how can we measure what it may have been like to be a woman within the courtly love tradition?

This question is really a question of backdrop, of atmosphere. The courtly love affair is the drama taking place center stage; for women, what was its setting? The narrators, the main characters, and the writers of these affairs are male, and women are considered through their eyes as objects of affection and devotion. But what, Chaucer's Criseyde primes us to ask, would the whole thing look like if seen through the eyes of the adored object herself? What social realities would have guided—and limited—her actions and responses, so often evoking the male lover's anguish, confusion, anger, or elation?

We do know the reigning ideals for women's roles in marriage, recorded in ecclesiastical and aristocratic records, were primarily drawn along lines of subjugation: to the interests of the land, for high-born women, and to the person of the husband, for all women.[28] If courtly love offered women an apparent position of "superiority towards her lover as uncontested as the position of inferiority in which a wife stood toward husband,"[29] the wider context of women's standing in society may have rendered this position a nominal one. Even if women had final say in whether they accepted a courtly lover, their choice seems burdened with some rather nasty social arithmetic in which they risked far more of their well-being than men did. And though scholars debate the degree to which actual legal prosecution of adultery affected medieval

[28] "Implicit obedience was part of the ideal of marriage set out in the majority of didactic works addressed to women. Even such a loving and sensible bourgeois husband, as the Menagier de Paris, likens the wife's love of husband to fidelity of dog for master… Disobedient wives were liable to correction by force. Canon law specifically allowed wife-beating…" (Power, 8).

[29] Power, 16.

women versus medieval men,[30] other cultural data points that we have do paint the picture of a sexual double standard.

In perceiving this picture, we might look to the preponderance of virginity in hagiographic records of female saints, as opposed to male saints.[31] We might consider, too, the evidence internal to the courtly love tradition itself: the central tenet that the affair must be kept deadly secret, in order to protect the woman's honor specifically.[32] The tradition, too, was premised on male initiation and agency. Men could elect to pursue a woman of their choice; the woman's choice was always secondary, to accept or reject the one who thus approached her. We do not see women given quite the same license to fall in love with a man and proposition him, just as we do not have anything like a proportional number of female authors, narrators, and main characters within the tradition.

Add to these considerations the rather horrifying fact that the medieval definition of rape had nothing to do with women's agency over their own bodies but only sought to secure their father's fiscal interests, and we have a picture of a society in which a woman's sexuality was made a matter of public record, in a way that male sexuality was not.[33] Her body was not hers, quite; it was rather the credit score by which she stood or fell in the public sphere. Though indeed it is hard in many ways for us to definitively ascertain what women's standing was in medieval society because of the "difficulty of determining what in any age constitutes the

[30] This is covered in McDougall.

[31] See Elliott.

[32] Power, 16.

[33] Pistono, 36-43.

position of women… [which is] one thing in theory, another in legal position, yet another in everyday life,"[34] it seems clear that—sexually and socially—women grappled with greater vulnerability than men did.

Given all of this, it is easy to imagine that what might be an engrossing leisurely pursuit for the male courtly lover could very well be an exercise in exhaustion, risk, and fear, for a certain kind of woman. One aware of her more precarious standing within medieval sexual double standards, sensitive to others' pain, and yet unwilling to be sexually intimate where she does not love, might find herself driven to the type of anguish that Chaucer's Criseyde displays. The popularity of courtly love literature would suggest that this was not the case for all women (which, given the variation that exists among human beings, should not surprise us), but it requires very little imagination to presume that it yet may have been so for many, whose voices a patriarchal literary tradition never sought out or preserved. In any case, Criseyde takes us by the hand and invites us to stand in the place of such a woman, and to experience courtly love as it would be from her perspective.

She first comes to us within a frame narration acutely different from Boccaccio's. The Chaucer narrator is not writing the Troilus story as a vehicle for his own love bid; he seeks to tell not of his own sorrow, but of the "double sorwe of Troilus,"[35] for the additional purpose of being "the sorwful instrument, / That helpeth loveres, as I can, to pleyne."[36] His posture is not that of one defending his own cause, but as one who "that God of Loves servantz serve,"[37] not in the

[34] Power, 1.

[35] *Book I*, 1.

[36] *Book I*, 10-11.

[37] *Book I*, 15.

hopes that he will secure love for himself, but that "this may don gladnesse / Unto any lovere, and his cause availle."[38] Even more significantly, he makes a plea for pity and compassion in all his readers,[39] that they might consider others' plights, and "ek for hem that falsly ben apeired / Thorugh wikked tonges, be it he or she."[40]

Thus we are primed to orient ourselves toward compassion as we enter the story, and the "he or she" admonition opens the door for this compassion to encompass Criseyde, as well. When we meet her, we learn that she is wise, kind, gentle, generous, gracious, and that a "kynges herte semeth by hyrs a wrecche."[41] We also learn of her social vulnerability as the "unwist"[42] daughter of a traitor, "ful sore in drede"[43] for her very life, "allone / Of any frend to whom she dorste her mone."[44] As a grieving widow, she pleads her cause to the leaders of Troy, so that she is not punished for her father's defection. When Hector speaks for her and declares "youre body shal men save,"[45] his pronouncement echoes almost prophetically down the corridors of a story in which her uncle will employ complex machinations to deliver her body up to Troilus' passion; the king will trade her body to the Greeks at her father's wish; Diomede will "[lay] out hook and

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[38] *Book I*, 19-20.

[39] *Book I*, 22-26, 29-31.

[40] *Book I*, 36-39.

[41] *Book I*, 889.

[42] *Book I*, 93.

[43] *Book I*, 95.

[44] *Book I*, 97-98.

[45] *Book I*, 122.

lyne"[46] to catch her, ensnaring her body in his "net"[47]; and Pandarus will callously advise a horrified Troilus to simply replace her body with another, once she is no longer sexually available to him.

Chaucer calls attention to these realities by placing Criseyde in voiced opposition to the courtly love system of values, and by representing that system in the distasteful, entertaining, clueless, and troubling person of Pandarus, whose values and advice clash so conspicuously with those of the two lovers as events unfold. Where Pandarus embraces the emotionally manipulative tropes of the tradition, Troilus and Criseyde appear sincere.

Pandarus opens by using suicide threats to force Criseyde's hand, most notably in the knife scene.[48] He employs guilt trips, saying it would be "cruel"[49] not to sleep with Troilus, and declaring that her decision to wait until a seemly hour to set right the jealousy problem he himself fabricated is a decision that comes from "malice"[50] on her part. He threatens that age will make her worthless[51] and says refusing Troilus renders "the faire gemme vertulees"[52]; she might as well not be alive.[53] When advising Troilus, he assures him (through the analogies of axe-blows to an oak and wind breaking a reed) that a woman's refusal need not be taken seriously; it is

[46] *Book V*, 777.

[47] *Book V*, 775.

[48] *Book II*, 322-325.

[49] *Book II*, 337.

[50] *Book III*, 880.

[51] "Go love; for old, ther wol no wight of the," *Book II*, 396.

[52] *Book II*, 344.

[53] "Than is it harm ye lyven, by my trouthe!" *Book II*, 350.

merely part of this courtly love game in which "no" means "try harder," a game of predator and prey that is made more fun for the predator if the prey resists. In both analogies, of course—and in the fishing/trapping analogy assigned later to Diomede—the living thing thus besieged is felled, broken, snared, and dies.

Contrast this with the ethic Criseyde voices again and again throughout the poem, and with the guileless actions of Troilus himself. Criseyde, when Pandarus first accosts her, shrewdly ascertains the truth of the dishonorable proposition he has brought, and she mourns:

> Allas, for wo! Why nere I deed?
> For of this world the feyth is al agoon…
> Allas, what sholden straunge to me doon,
> Whan he that for my beste frend I wende
> Ret me to love, and sholde it me defende?...
> This false world—allas!—who may it leve?[54]

She draws our attention to this first breach of Hector's dictum, "youre body shal men save,"[55] as her kinsman who ought to have her interests at heart is instead turning traitor to her: willing—eager, even—to sacrifice her to the courtly love tradition. She later confronts Pandarus directly with this defection: "…and also, uncle deere, / To myn estat have more reward, I preye, / Than to his lust! What sholde I more seye?"[56]

Pandarus, of course, responds with misogyny and force, declaring that women never care at all about the men who "most desireth yow to serve"[57] as he "hente hir faste, / And in hire bosom the lettre down he thraste,"[58] despite her explicit refusal. Yet he displays a marked

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[54] *Book II,* 409-413, 420.

[55] *Book I,* 122.

[56] *Book II,* 1132-1134.

[57] *Book II,* 1150.

[58] *Book II,* 1154-1155.

duplicity in this. For though he chastises, manipulates, and deceives Criseyde to her face, when speaking with Troilus, he reveals that he thinks she is right in considering his behavior traitorous. In fact, Pandarus believes, this is a story about his treachery to her:

> But wo is me, that I, that cause al this,
> May thynken that she is my nece deere,
> And I hire em, and traitour ek yfeere!
>
> And were it wist that I, thorugh myn engyn,
> Hadde in my nece yput this fantasie,
> To doon thi lust and holly to ben thyn,
> Whi, al the world upon it wolde crie,
> And seyn that I the werste trecherie
> Dide in this cas, that evere was bigonne.[59]

Pandarus' fashion of love, indeed, is not put forth by this story as praiseworthy. Instead, we have Criseyde's view of it: that love ought be honest and unforced, and that the tradition passes off as love things that are, in truth, poisonous:

> Ek al my wo is this, that folk now usen
> To seyn right thus, 'Ye, jalousie is love!'
> And wolde a busshel venym al excusen,
> For that o greyn of love is on it shove.[60]

Where her uncle uses threats, manipulation, and dishonest euphemisms, Criseyde insists on her own ethic. With four thunderous negatives, she swears that she cannot and will not give her body to someone she does not love, and she will not play any games with a man's heart: "But that I nyl nat holden hym in honde, / Ne love a man ne kan I naught ne may / Ayeins my wyl…" [61] Despite the courtly love conflation of "mercy" with "the delivery of male sexual gratification,"

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[59] *Book III,* 271-279.

[60] *Book III,* 1023-1025.

[61] *Book II,* 477-479.

Criseyde refuses to swallow the guilt tactic inherent in such conflation, vowing, "Myn honour sauf, I wol wel trewely."[62] She swears further that she will not yield her integrity in this matter, even in the face of courtly love threats of suicide:

> And here I make a protestacioun
> That in this process if ye depper go,
> That certeynly, for no salvacioun
> Of yow, though that ye sterven bothe two,
> Though al the world on o day be my fo,
> Ne shal I nevere of hym han other routhe.[63]

When she and Troilus settle the terms of their affair, she establishes them along the lines of integrity and equality: "Bysechyng hym, for Goddes love, that he / Wolde, in honour of trouthe and gentilesse, / As I wel mene, ek menen wel to me."[64] And in his one moment of upholding a courtly love predator-prey trope, when Troilus "in armes gan hire streyne," saying that she is "kaught" and commanding that she yield,[65] Criseyde immediately counters. I am not your prey, she says; I have chosen to be here. Love is not entrapment, but free gift: "Ne hadde I er now, my swete herte deere,/ Ben yolde, ywis, I were now nought heere!"[66]

And so we see that, where Boccaccio merely dips a hand in the shallows to draw up the misogyny lying so close to the surface within the tale of Troilus, Chaucer dives deeper, lingering until the reader's eye adjusts to the depths. His empathic narrator creates a textual setting in which we are encouraged to consider the plight of others. Troilus and Criseyde, in his hands, act

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[62] *Book III*, 159.

[63] *Book II,* 484-490.

[64] *Book III,* 162-164.

[65] *Book III,* 1205-1208.

[66] *Book III*, 1209-1211.

as foil to the givens of the courtly love tradition—givens so unappealingly incarnated in the character of Pandarus, who fittingly concludes, "No wonder is, so God me sende hele, / Though wommen dreden with us men to dele."[67] Within a literary framework dominated by the voices and perspectives of men, Chaucer's text refreshingly makes room for women. We see in it the social realities and limitations that often dictated their choices, and we are invited to consider their vulnerability in society and in courtly love with care and compassion. Perhaps we even conclude our reading resolved to take up Hector's injunction as a personal one: women's bodies shall men save.

[67] *Book III*, 321-322.

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