

## Reading about Lancelot in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*

Brother Anthony of Taizé

This storie is also trewe, I undertake,  
As is the book of Launcelot de Lake,  
That wommen holde in ful greet reverence.     *The Nun's Priest's Tale* (3211-3)

Just what Chaucer was expecting readers to understand when he penned those lines is only one of the many unanswerable questions that arise while reading his works. Commentators often seem to suggest that the point being made is that women are foolish, undiscerning readers, mistaking mere romances for significant literature and giving reverence where none is due. But just how dangerous is it to hold the book of Lancelot 'in reverence', we might wonder? And why?

The topic of this paper, however, is not *The Nun's Priest's Tale* but *Troilus and Criseyde* and the obvious question is how one can "read about Lancelot" in a text that not only never mentions his name, but describes events supposed to be happening many centuries before he would have lived. Yet I shall argue that Book 3 of *Troilus and Criseyde* contains significant covert references to the act of reading (and indeed of writing) about Lancelot. That is only possible, though, if it is agreed that, after Boccaccio, the most important literary influence on *Troilus and Criseyde* is that of Dante, despite the way many commentators prefer to stress the role of Boethius. A number of recent studies, particularly those by Karla Taylor and Winthrop Weatherbee, have drawn attention to the particular significance and complexity of what Chaucer seems to be doing in his literary dialogue with Dante in *Troilus and Criseyde*, especially in Book 3.

This book is the central one of *Troilus and Criseyde*'s five books, with the sexual union of Troilus with Criseyde forming the climax and turning-point of the entire plot-structure, condensed at the start of the work by Chaucer in the words "fro woe to wele and after out of joie." At the climax of the poem's love tale and at the very centre of Book 3, as Troilus finds himself in bed with a willing Criseyde, he bursts into a hymn of praise to Love: "O Loue, O Charite" (3.1254) that continues with a stanza meditating on Love's generosity:

Benigne Love, thou holy bond of thinges . . .

Now, after opening with a strongly Boethian notion this stanza includes a series of echoes from the highest spiritual climax of Dante's *Commedia*, the prayer addressed to the Virgin Mary by St. Bernard in *Paradiso* 33.13-21:

Donna, se' tanto grande e tanto vali . . .

To take words spoken in highest Heaven by a Christian saint of notoriously strict sexual morality, describing the spiritual love manifested in the Virgin Mary, and put them in the mouth of the pagan Troilus at the moment he achieves sexual union with Criseyde, might be considered a shocking breach of literary decorum. However, we might rather want to suggest, with Winthrop Weatherbee, that these lines form part of a deliberate but hidden strategy on Chaucer's part, that culminates in the final lines of the poem, by which Troilus's

trajectory is systematically contrasted with Dante's.

Winthrop Wetherbee writes of the transfer of St. Bernard's hymn to the sexually triumphant Troilus (*Dante Encyclopedia* 162): "The barrier separating human from divine love is for a moment virtually translucent, but the context makes plain that Troilus is self-deceived and is destined in the end to be betrayed by the 'grace' that seems to inform his experience." It is impossible to think that Chaucer was unaware of the ironic patterning he was introducing into his poem by these intertextual moments, although they are never highlighted as such. He knew he was using words from Dante; he knew where the words came from; we should not doubt that he knew exactly why he was using them as he did. Yet he clearly does not believe that his readers need to know, for he never indicates his Dantean source.

The hymn of joy that Troilus utters as he lies in bed with Criseyde (3.1254-74) begins with the double exclamation "O Love! O Charite!" Now these are regular Christian names for God but the very next line shows that Troilus is blessing Eros, not the Christian God of whom he can of course (as a pre-Christian pagan) know nothing, for he includes "Thi moder ek, Citheria the swete" in his praises. For him, erotic, physical love is the highest bliss; if for him "God is love" that can only mean Eros and Venus, since he is living before the coming of Christ. A few hundred lines later, no longer in bed but still in sexual ecstasy, he will tell Pandarus, "Thow hast in hevene ybrought my soule at reste" (III, 1599). From a Christian viewpoint, and even from a wise pagan one, Troilus is blinded by folly; he believes that he has reached "rest" and permanence when he has in fact only reached the midpoint of a life marked inevitably by constant mutability. Wise readers may realize better than the Narrator that what follows is certain to be the movement "out of joie," (I, 4) announced in the very first stanza of the poem. This identification of momentary, human, physical happiness with heavenly bliss is not limited to the characters in the story; the Narrator too expresses it in his excited comments at the very moment of their union, both at its start: "Thus in this heuene he gan hym to delite" (3.1251) and again at the climax: "And lat hem in this heuene blisse dwelle, / That is so heigh that al ne kan I telle" (3.1322-3). The narrator's attitude is ambiguous, making no distinction between sexual, human love and spiritual, heavenly love, the romantic and the anti-romantic.

There is a strange moment very near the centre of Book 3, after Pandarus brings Troilus to Criseyde and encourages her to be kind to him. He moves away to the fireside "And took a light and fond his countenance / as forto looke vpon an old romaunce" (III.979-80). The lines are odd in not clearly saying that Pandarus was really reading at all; he is said to be 'pretending' to read a book, while he is in fact watching the romance writing itself in the same room. Yet Chaucer surely specifies 'an old romaunce' for a reason. In a note to these lines, Windeatt (1984) quotes A. C. Spearing: "The contrast between love as really experienced and love as read about in books is underlined." Karla Taylor remarks, "It is in the conjunction of romance and reading that Chaucer follows Dante here. Like *Inferno* v, the *Troilus* combines both romantic and antiromantic threads in its treatment of love. And like *Inferno* v, it interweaves bookishness and love into an extraordinary analysis of literature's role in mediating between lovers" (54-5).

The second half of Canto v of the *Inferno* relates Dante's meeting with Paolo and Francesca in the Second Circle, when Francesca gives two accounts of why they are there—the first idealized and romantic, the second more realistic. It is in her second version that she tells how they first kissed as they were reading "Di Lancialotto come amor lo strinse" (about

Lancelot, how love constrained him) and had reached the point at which Lancelot first kissed Guinevere. The passion evoked in the fiction awakens passion in the readers; they stop reading and start kissing, and have no words for what followed. She comments “Galeotto fu il libro e chi lo scrisse” (Gallehault was the book and whoever wrote it) and Dante expects the reader to recognize (1) that Gallehault was the go-between who facilitated and encouraged the kiss between Lancelot and Guinevere in the French Prose Lancelot, (2) that the form of his name in Italian is identical with the word for the “ferryman” Plegyas who carries the souls of the damned across the Styx (and the angel fulfilling the same function between Purgatory and Paradise). So Gallehault is the go-between in the romance’s tale of Lancelot’s adultery with his feudal lord’s wife; the book containing the romance of Lancelot is the go-between in Francesca’s tale of her adultery with her husband’s brother; Pandarus is seemingly reading a romance while serving as the go-between for his friend and his niece. And Chaucer is (re)writing a tale about love in which he never mentions the names of Lancelot, Dante, or Boccaccio but which he ingenuously claims to have read in a Latin version by Lollius; then he himself, by translating the story written by another, hopes to be “the sorrowful instrument / That helpeth loveres, as I kan, to pleyne (I. 10-11)—another kind of go-between.

Taylor quotes a comment by Howard H. Schless to the effect that “the fact that Chaucer never made use of the Francesca story from *Inferno* v is one of the most striking problems of the Chaucer-Dante relationship.” (54). Schless, we might think, has simply failed to distinguish between ‘making use’ and ‘indicating that he is making use,’ for Chaucer’s use of unmarked echoes from Dante, including the contents of *Inferno* v, is hardly open to doubt. The most explicit sign of Chaucer’s awareness of the Francesca and Paolo story comes after Criseyde has left Troilus and he too has gone home. Troilus tells Pandarus how happy he is and Pandarus utters words of uncharacteristic, philosophical depth, words effectively marking the thematic turning of Fortune’s wheel from “wele .(to).. out of joie” as he warns him to be careful now he is so happy, “For of Fortune’s sharpe adversitee / The worst kynde of infortune is this, / A man to han been in prosperitee, / And it remembreth whan it passed is.” (III. 1625-8) Windeatt’s note quotes Whiting to designate this as “proverbial” but he also refers to a number of specific parallels, including one from *Inferno* v. Yet no commentator seems ever to have pointed out that what Pandarus says here is a direct echo of Francesca’s words: ‘Nessun maggior dolore / che ricordarsi del tempo felice / nella miseria’ (*Inferno* v. 121-3 ‘No greater sorrow than to recall happy times in misery’). Only what she is calling ‘miseria’ is nothing less than the unending torment of her damnation.

Chaucer was surely making this parallel deliberately, for three lines later in Dante’s text, Francesca says she “diro come colui che piange e dice” (V, 126 ‘will tell as one who weeps and tells’) which is assumed to underlie the last line of Chaucer’s poem’s opening stanza: “for t’endite / These woful vers, that wepen as I write.” Chaucer’s narrator weeps, surely, out of pity for the human condition in which love can be at the same time the highest bliss and utter vanity, indeed (in Dante’s fiction at least) a cause of damnation..

Both Chaucer and Dante are conscious of the problems faced by writers writing about love. The Book of Lancelot stands, in Dante’s eyes, for all the tales of people who have surrendered to human, passionate love—he names a series of literary figures who figure in ultimately sorrowful love fiction: Semiramis, Dido, Cleopatra, Helen, Achilles, Paris and Tristan before inviting Francesca to tell her tale of the effect of another book. “Galeotto fu il libro e chi lo scrisse” she says, evoking the moral responsibility of the author of the book for their sin by writing in such a way that they felt encouraged to follow their carnal desires,

rather than discouraged.

Did Chaucer understand the question Dante was raising? It seems likely that he did, since he adopts an ambiguous authorial strategy, seemingly in response to it. Karla Taylor, at the end of a lengthy discussion, concludes:

The bookishness of the *Troilus*, like that of the *Commedia*, embodies a concern for the moral effects of literature on its readers. (76)

In parallel and in contrast to this reading, Winthrop Weatherbee writes:

The story adumbrated in the opening stanzas of the *Troilus*—the story, ultimately, of Troilus' double sorrow for love of a Criseyde who "forsook hym er she deyde" (1. 56)—conforms in its prevailing emphases to the representation of human love in canto 5 of Dante's *Inferno*, the canto of Dido, Francesca and all the "donne antiche e' cavalieri" whose love proved stronger than reason.

The sexual union of Troilus and Criseyde may seem less morally problematic than that of Lancelot and Guinevere, or Paolo and Francesca, because no betrayal is involved, no adultery, but in all three cases the writers and readers of the stories cannot deny the unhappiness that will come in the end, an unhappiness in flagrant contradiction with the assumed bliss of love's physical fulfilment.

Chaucer's Narrator and the readers have a similar difficulty. Nothing in Chaucer's *Troilus* troubles and surprises modern readers as much as what is said in the stanzas following Troilus's death, ascent and vision at the end of the poem; the first is a series of reductive, dismissive exclamations: "Swich fyn hath, lo, this Troilus for love;" the second addresses a group of potential contemporary readers in moralizing tones: "O yonge fresshe folkes, he or she, / In which that love up groweth with your age, / Repeyeth hoom from worldly vanitee;" the third continues the exhortation to live sincerely Christian lives that began in the previous stanza; the fourth returns with greater explicitness to the rejection of the pagan world implied in the first:

Lo here, of Payens corsed olde rytes . . .

One reason for the modern surprise, must be the way it seems that the Chaucer who has been responsible for the narrative up to this point has done an abrupt about-turn in order to end on an irreconcilably different, orthodox Christian, even puritan key. These stanzas are sometimes seen as an aesthetic blemish, a failure to preserve the unity of the work to the end.

In the light of what has been seen in the preceding pages, another, quite different reading of the lines might be proposed, one which sees these concluding stanzas as integral to a right reading of the poem. Essentially, we are sent back by the ending to reexamine our response to the poem as a whole, and particularly its moral status as a love story. The Christian author / Narrator is at last freed from confusion caused by excessive sympathy with Troilus's identification of bliss with human happiness.

The insight attained by Troilus after his death is the highest that a non-Christian can have, and it is damning. Looking down from the highest point a non-Christian can reach, he admits his moral failure as a too physical lover: "And dampned al our werk that folweth so /

The blinde lust, the which that may not laste, / And sholden al our herte on hevene caste" (V, 1823-5). But these glimpses of Christian and moral truth can have no redemptive effect on him now, for what is represented in these lines is not some kind of apotheosis or special grace, but Troilus's "Particular Judgement". All he can do is go where all his contemporaries go, wherever that is.

Returning finally to the Nun's Priest's mention of women's liking for the Book of Lancelot, we should remember that it is Francesca, not Paolo, who relates the tale of their brief happiness, in words reminiscent of a romance. She seems to have been the dominant figure throughout and Paolo's tears, which he sheds while she speaks, may have been in Chaucer's mind when he made his Nun's Priest remark ironically on the Book of Lancelot "That wommen holde in ful greet reverence." Only look, he seems to say, what became of Paolo because of Francesca; and while he weeps eternal tears of sorrow, she still can't stop talking about it . . .