

THE DOUBLE ROLE OF CRISEYDE IN CHAUCER'S *TROILUS AND CRISEYDE*

Mary Joan Cook, RSM

Critics of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* have over the years pondered the character of Criseyde. F.N. Robinson, whose comments and references throughout his edition indicate his familiarity with Chaucerian scholarship, wrote that Chaucer's Criseyde "is one of the most complex of his creations. This is made apparent by the very disagreements of the critics in their search for a key to her character."¹ More recently, Ida L. Gordon in 1970 spoke of the "teasing enigma of her behavior,"² and Robert apRoberts, in a preface to his essay on "Criseyde's Infidelity," noted: "Another essay on Chaucer's Criseyde might seem as redundant as another essay on Hamlet."³ Yet this Mona Lisa-like figure continues to provoke attempts (to paraphrase Hamlet) "to pluck out the heart of her mystery."

That this should be so is actually not surprising to the reader who examines Criseyde's characterization carefully. It soon becomes clear that Chaucer or, if you will, the narrator was deliberately making Criseyde an enigmatic figure. In line with this observation, Dieter Mehl, in discussing "The Audience of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*," comments on the baffling behaviour of Criseyde and the unsuccessful critical attempts to explain it: "What can be proved, however, with some cogency is that Chaucer, despite all his declarations of sympathy for Criseyde, altered the story in such a way as to make her betrayal much harder to explain."⁴

By developing an inner and outer Criseyde, by occasionally indicating a disparity between the two, by raising questions about her behaviour and

usually acknowledging that he, the narrator, does not have the answers, he convinces the reader that Criseyde is somehow inscrutable. A few illustrations will support this view. In Book II, when Pandarus refuses to tell her a certain thing which, he says, would make her the proudest woman in Troy, Criseyde's curiosity is aroused and, the narrator tells us, "nevere, sith the tyme that she was born, / To knowe thyng desired she so faste."⁵ She conceals this from Pandarus, however, and, in fact, changes the subject.

Again in Book II, Criseyde is seated with Troilus' relatives and friends in the house of Deiphebus as they discuss Troilus and his illness. With a glimpse into Criseyde, we readers are told "ther sat oon, al list hire nought to teche, / That thoughte, 'Best koud I yet ben his leche'" (II. 1581-82). A few lines later, the discussion continuing, the narrator lets us know:

Herde al this thyng Criseyde wel inough,
And every word gan for to notifie;
For which with sobre cheere hire herte lough. (II. 1590-92)

The picture here is of a straight-faced Criseyde inwardly laughing. Certainly, there is a disparity. Though Deiphebus and Helen see only the "sobre cheere," the reader, in this instance, knows that there is more to Criseyde than meets the eye. The fact of this inner and outer Criseyde is thus established. Further, in developing the enigmatic character, the narrator raises questions about her motives, her knowledge, and her actions. Thus, in Book II he suggests that the suddenness of her love for Troilus is questionable; actually this question originates with him. His asking it leads the reader to raise the question also. In Book III, when Pandarus, arranging the meeting of Criseyde and Troilus in his home, asks her to come to dinner, "she lough, and gan hire faste excuse" (III. 561). Later she whisperingly asks if Troilus will be there. Pandarus denies it, adding that even if Troilus were there she need have no fear that he would be seen. Again, the narrator raises the question of her inner thoughts on this reply, acknowledging that he does not know, and his source does not say, whether she believed Pandarus or not. Typically, too, the narrator cannot say, in Book III, why Criseyde allowed Troilus to kneel at her bedside (967-70) nor, in Book V, whether she gave Diomedes her heart (1050) nor even how old she is (V. 826).

It seems clear, then, that Chaucer's Criseyde is enigmatic; her appearance and behaviour can conceal, in fact belie, her thoughts; she is

puzzling even to the narrator himself. Studying this characterization, this deliberate development of the inscrutable aspect of Criseyde, one sees more clearly why generations of readers have been appropriately mystified by her behaviour. But why, one wonders, did Chaucer seek to emphasize her inscrutability, her quality of seeming other than she is?

A searching consideration of this characterization of Criseyde suggests ultimately that she is to be identified with a goddess or power frequently mentioned in the poem and traditionally described as "fickle, unstable, and irrational, in attributes and appearance composed of extremes of the favorable and the unfavorable."⁶ That describes the goddess Fortuna, whose presence so pervades the poem that, as Barbara Bartholomew notes, "Almost no scholar has written on the *Troilus* without considering Fortuna."⁷ And Criseyde, who becomes all-in-all to Troilus and then forsakes him, who leaves Troy to take up residence in the Greek camp, who hides her change of heart in deceitful messages, is easily identified with this same beguiling, changeable, faithless Fortuna.

In fact, although critics continue to seek with varying theories the key to Criseyde's character,⁸ her identification or association with Fortuna has occurred to several in recent years. For Charles Berryman, Criseyde is "the personification of changing Fortune, symbolically equal in exchange with Antenor, who also becomes known for betrayal."⁹ In 1979, Martin Stevens commented that "as his [Troilus'] despair increases, his loyalty to Fortuna wanes, until finally she is entirely displaced in his mind by her human counterpart, Criseyde."¹⁰ Most recently, Joseph Salemi in "Playful Fortune and Chaucer's Criseyde" has concluded that "while it would be difficult to maintain that Criseyde is -- even only figuratively -- a representative of the goddess Fortuna, she is the instrument by which an external, determining force (that is, love) overwhelms Troilus."¹¹ More than once in this article, however, Salemi associates Criseyde with Fortuna, noting for instance that "she comes to resemble the goddess Fortuna."¹²

Although the Fortuna role of Criseyde has been alluded to by these critics, none of them has tried to prove that Criseyde is a figure of Fortuna in Chaucer's work. Yet by pointing to certain passages in the text of the *Troilus*, by comparing several passages in Boccaccio's *Filostrato* with the *Troilus*, and by citing various passages in Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy* which are relevant to this Fortuna-thesis, one can build a strong argument that Criseyde portrays Fortuna in Chaucer's poem.

Such an argument does not lead to the conclusion that Criseyde is solely Fortuna. Rather, it is that she plays a double role; that of the woman whom Troilus loved and that of mysterious Fortuna. The quality of mystery is, in fact, in each human being. No one of us understands completely, really completely, another. In that sense, Criseyde is a humanly complex character. Chaucer found her lineaments already drawn in Benoit and Boccaccio, her radical, infamous shift of love from Troilus to Diomedes, the kind of shift that typifies Fortuna.¹³

To turn to the evidence that Chaucer developed in his Criseyde an identification with Fortuna. First, in selecting passages from *Troilus* which indicate that Chaucer saw Criseyde as Fortuna, at least six deserve mention. Probably the most significant occurs in Book I. When Pandarus approaches and questions his friend, the love-smitten Troilus, he is told "For wel fynde I that Fortune is my fo" (I. 837). Pandarus responds with a description of Fortuna's changeable nature, arguing that her very mutability should give Troilus cause to hope for an upward turn of her wheel. Ultimately Pandarus wrests from Troilus the name of his secret love, when he reveals:

"Allas! of all my wo the welle,
Thanne is my swete fo called Criseyde!" (I. 873-4)

Here, then, we have Troilus saying "Fortune is my fo," and only 37 lines later: "Thanne is my swete fo called Criseyde." The similarity between these suggests an A = C identity between Fortune and Criseyde. His foe is Fortune; his foe is called Criseyde. It is difficult to think that Chaucer was not mindful of this identity.

Another striking passage occurs at the opening of Book IV, immediately following Troilus' bliss-filled possession of Criseyde and her many expressions of love. There we read:

But al to litel, weylaway the whyle,
Lasteth swich joie, ythonked be Fortune,
That semeth trewest whan she wol bygyle,
And kan to fooles so hire song entune,
That she hem hent and blent, traitour commune!
And whan a wight is from hire whiel ythrowe,
Than laugheth she, and maketh hym the mowe.

From Troilus she gan hire brighte face
 Awey to writhe, and tok of hym non heede,
 But caste hym clene out of his lady grace,
 And on hire whiel she sette up Diomedé

For how Criseyde Troilus forsook,
 Or at the leeste, how that she was unkynde,
 Moot hennesforth ben matere of my book,
 As writen folk thorough which it is in mynde. (IV. 1-11, 15-18)

The first stanza delineates that picture of Fortune "That semeth trewest whan she wol bygyle" which lurks behind Chaucer's veiled Criseyde. This description of Fortune, following so closely the loving Criseyde of Book III (who, of course, we have already been warned will be faithless), leads us toward an identification. Then, the juxtaposition of the third stanza in which the subject is explicitly Criseyde's forsaking of Troilus, behaving just as Fortune behaves, strengthens the identification of Criseyde with the "seeming" Fortune. This same kind of juxtaposition occurs twice in Book V when the narrator, having described the hopeful Troilus awaiting the return of Criseyde, tells us that, in fact, Fortune intended to fool him (V. 469, 1134). Again, Fortune is personified in Criseyde's faithless behaviour.

To take just two more instances. The famous portrait of Criseyde in Book V contains the equally famous phrase "slydyng of corage." Although the *Ann Arbor Middle English Dictionary* can give us information on "corage," citing indeed this particular phrase as an illustration of "corage" meaning "heart" or "temperament," it has not yet advanced to the "slydyng" volume. Robinson, however, gives "unstable" as a synonym. If we accept "unstable of heart" as the meaning of this phrase, Chaucer has included here in his portrait of Criseyde the major characteristic of Fortune.

A final relevant passage, which we shall mention again in relation to Boccaccio, occurs in Book V. Here, after Troilus has learned with certainty of Criseyde's infidelity, the narrator says:

Gret was the sorwe and pleynte of Troilus;
 But forth hire cours Fortune ay gan to holde.
 Criseyde loveth the son of Tideüs,
 And Troilus moot wepe in cares colde. (V. 1744-47)

The same kind of juxtaposition noted in several previous instances is again

evident. Fortune's behaviour is Criseyde's behaviour, and the two are easily identified.

A second step in the analysis of Chaucer's development of Criseyde as Fortune is a comparison between Boccaccio's *Filostrato*¹⁴ and the *Troilus*. First of all, Fortune is explicitly referred to in Boccaccio's work. If we include his introductory letter giving the origin of his poem, Boccaccio mentions Fortune about 35 times. Fortune, too, is seen there as affecting lives; for instance, Cresseid says in Canto IV "since cruel fortune now stealeth both me from thee and thee from me" (stanza 88). There is, however, a greater casualness about the references to Fortune. One passage, of significance in *Troilus*, is missing from the *Filostrato*. We have mentioned already the Book I encounter between Pandarus and Troilus in which the nature of Fortune is discussed and in which Fortune and Criseyde are identified as the foe of Troilus. This passage is not to be found in Boccaccio. An interpreter of Chaucer's work has to ponder this difference.

A second divergence from Boccaccio, significant in the consideration of Criseyde as Fortune, occurs in Book IV of *Troilus*, when the Trojan parliament decides to yield up Criseyde for Antenor. In Canto IV, Boccaccio narrates Calchas' request for his daughter and the Trojans' readiness to comply. Chaucer includes the same story but adds a commentary on the blindness of the Trojans in exchanging Criseyde for Antenor:

This folk desiren now deliveraunce
Of Antenor," that brought hem to meschaunce.

For he was after traitour to the town
Of Troye. (IV. 202-5)

Chaucer chooses, thus, to make explicit that in exchanging Antenor for Criseyde the Trojans were opening the way for the fall of their city. In fact, he devotes four stanzas to this irony. If Antenor represents ill-fortune for the city, Criseyde can represent its good fortune. And Criseyde's departing from Troy can be seen as Fortune's departing. Close to this thought is Salemi's observation that Criseyde's "removal is simply a foreshadowing of more bitter disaster for Troilus and Troy as a whole -- the withdrawal of Fortune's favor."¹⁵

Once one sees that Criseyde's departure spells disaster for Troy, another element in the story, the Palladium, takes on new significance. It was, we remember, the feast of the Palladium, the sacred image of Pallas

Athene, when Troilus first saw Criseyde. Tradition tells us that, as long as this image remained within Troy, the city was secure. Chaucer, too, comments that this "relik" was "hire trist aboven everichon" (I. 154). That this image was, according to tradition, stolen out of the city by Diomedes and Ulysses suggests that Criseyde's departure at the hands of Diomedes can be compared to the removal of the Palladium, the loss of which meant disaster. Interestingly, Antenor's treason "consisted in contriving the removal of the Palladium."¹⁶ That Criseyde represents Fortune for Troy as well as for Troilus receives further support from a passage in Book V. Therein Criseyde, having concluded that she will return to Troy, is, within two months, far from that intention. The narrator comments:

For both Troilus and Troie town
Shal knotteles thoroughout hire herte slide. (V. 768-69)

(The occurrence of the term "slide" here should be noted.)

To return to Boccaccio's narrative, he makes no reference to the future betrayal of Antenor and the ironic choice of the Trojans. Chaucer, however, makes a point of these elements. In so doing, it can be argued that he further developed Criseyde's identity with Fortune.

To select one final passage for comparison with Boccaccio, we can return to that stanza in Chaucer's Book V in which Fortune and Criseyde are juxtaposed thus:

Gret was the sorwe and pleynte of Troilus;
But forth hire cours Fortune ay gan to holde.
Criseyde loveth the sone of Tideüs,
And Troilus moot wepe in cares colde. (V. 1744-47)

Boccaccio's version, however, is given in Myrick and Griffin's parallel-text edition as:

Great were the laments and bitterness but Fortune still ran
her course. She loved Diomedes with all her heart and Troilus
wept. (Canto VIII, stanza 25)

In Boccaccio, Fortune loved Diomedes with all her heart; in Chaucer it is Criseyde. Chaucer has taken Boccaccio's reference to Fortune and has changed it to Criseyde. Such a change supports the view that Chaucer saw Criseyde as Fortune and developed her accordingly.

As a third step in this investigation, Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy* yields supportive evidence. The role of Fortune in men's lives is of central importance in the discussion between Lady Philosophy and Boethius. Chaucer has told us that he translated this work, the influence of which in his molding of the *Troilus* story can hardly be doubted. One would expect, therefore, that if Chaucer's Criseyde is to be identified as Fortune, she would reflect the Boethian portrait of Fortune. With this in mind, it may prove profitable to scan the *Boece* text for key descriptions and discussions of Fortune in search of terms duplicated in *Troilus*.

Such a search strengthens the thesis that Chaucer has deliberately developed in Criseyde that dimension of her character which suggested the behaviour of Fortuna. To substantiate this view, a few passages from the *Boece* will be helpful. Remembering that the subject here is Fortuna, let us listen to Lady Philosophy counselling Boethius:

1. Sche hath rather kept, as to the-ward, hir propre
stableness in the chaungynge of hirself (II, Pr. 1, 52-54);
2. For syn she may nat ben withholden at a mannys wille,
sche maketh hym a wrecche whan sche departeth fro hym
(II, Pr. 1, 78-81);
3. Sche hath forsaken the, forsothe, the whiche that nevere
man mai ben siker that sche ne schal forsaken hym
(II, Pr. 1, 68-70);
4. Thou hast bytaken thiself to the governaunce of Fortune
and forthi it byhoveth the to ben obeisaunt to the
maneris of thi lady (II, Pr. 1, 108-11);
5. Yif Fortune bygan to duelle stable, she cessede thanne
to ben Fortune (II, Pr. 1, 114-15).

And in Boethius, Fortuna herself is pictured as saying: "Stidfastnesse is uncouth to my manneris" (II, Pr. 2, 49). The likeness of all this to Criseyde is too striking to think that Chaucer was blind to it. In fact, it is this section of Boethius which Chaucer has incorporated into the Pandarus-Troilus discussion of Book I, a discussion not found in Boccaccio's version.

In addition to these lines describing Fortune in what seem very recognizably Criseydean terms, certain words applied to Fortune in Boethius are also applied by Chaucer to Criseyde. Four of these can be used as illustrations. The first one, included already in a line describing

Fortuna, is "forsake":

Sche hath forsaken the, forsothe, the whiche that nevere
man mai ben siker that sche ne schal forsaken hym. (II, Pr. 1,
68-70)

At the very outset of his story, Chaucer tells the audience that they will
"the double sorwes here / Of Troilus in lovyng of Criseyde, / And how
that she forsook hym er she deyde" (I. 54-56).

A second term is "chaunge." In describing Fortuna, the Middle English
text uses the term repeatedly. Thus Lady Philosophy says to Boethius:

Thou wenest that Fortune be changed ayens the; but thou
wenest wrong, yif thou that wene: alway tho ben hir maneres.
Sche hath rather kept, as to the-ward, hir propre
stablensse in the chaungynge of hirself. (II, Pr. 1, 49-54)

In Book IV of *Troilus and Criseyde*, after Troilus realizes that Criseyde
must depart from Troy in "th'eschaunge" of prisoners, we read that he
becomes almost mad, "So sore hym sat the chaungynge of Criseyde" (IV. 231).
Although her change of abode to the Greek camp could be referred to here,
"the chaungynge of Criseyde" also suggests Criseyde's change of heart. The
phrase balances the "chaungynge of hirself" in *Boece*, and, in fact, the
Ann Arbor *Middle English Dictionary* cites "the chaungynge of Criseyde"
(IV. 231) as an example of "a change (of heart, attitude, etc.); also,
inconstancy."

Third, the term "debonayre" appears descriptively of Fortuna when
Lady Philosophy explains:

For I deme that contrarious Fortune profiteth more to men than
Fortune debonayre. For alway, whan Fortune semeth debonayre,
thanne sche lieth, falsly byhetyng the hope of welefulnesse.
(II, Pr. 8, 11-15)

Interestingly, Criseyde, too, is described as "debonaire" when Troilus first
beholds her at the feast: "Simple of atir and debonaire of chere, / With
ful assured lokyng and manere" (I. 181-82). Again, in the house of
Deiphobus, when Troilus is asking to be her servant, we are told:

With that she gan hire eyen on hym caste
Ful esily and ful debonairly. (III. 155-56)

A final term, selected for consideration, is "slydyng." The phrase "slydyng of corage," which Chaucer uses in describing Criseyde, has already been mentioned. The term "slydyng" also appears in *Boece*; there it is applied to Fortune. Thus, early in Book I, Boethius, addressing the governor of the universe, asks:

Why suffrestow that slydyng Fortune turneth so grete
 enterchaungynges of thynges; so that anyous peyne, that
 scholde duweliche punysche felons, punyssheth
 innocentz? (I, Metr. 5, 34-37)

The term, then, which is applied to Fortune here is applied characteristically to Criseyde.

Chaucer's Middle English text of Boethius provides both descriptive sentences and single terms which seem to link Fortuna with Criseyde, who is to be seen not only as the woman whom Troilus loved but also as Fortuna. In this way she is deliberately presented by Chaucer as an enigmatic figure, recognizable as Fortuna. Divergence from Boccaccio in specific passages and echoings of the Boethian concept of Fortuna support this reading, one which does not deny the humanity of Criseyde but which does maintain that the traditional mystery of Chaucer's Criseyde is paradoxically better grasped when she is seen as coveted, sliding, inscrutable Fortuna.

Saint Joseph College "

NOTES

¹ F.N. Robinson, ed., *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* (2nd ed., Boston 1957) 387.

² Ida L. Gordon, *The Double Sorrow of Troilus: A Study of Ambiguities in "Troilus and Criseyde"* (Oxford, 1970) 113.

³ Robert apRoberts, "Criseyde's Infidelity and the Moral of the *Troilus*," *Speculum* 44 (1969) 383-402.

⁴ Dieter Mehl, "The Audience of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*," in *Chaucer and Middle English Studies in Honour of Rossell Hope Robbins* ed. Beryl Rowland (Kent, Ohio 1974) 181.

⁵ *Troilus and Criseyde*, II. 143-44. All quotations from Chaucer will be taken from the Robinson edition (at n. 1).

⁶ Barbara Bartholomew, *Fortuna and Natura: A Reading of Three Chaucer Narratives* (The Hague 1966) 16.

⁷ *Ibid.* 31.

⁸ Peggy A. Knapp, for instance, in "The Nature of Nature: Criseyde's 'Slydyng Corage'," *ChauR* 13 (1978) 133-40, considers "the possibility that Criseyde's characterization and role in Chaucer's fiction define the way Nature Herself looks and functions in his world view" (133). To Alfred David, Criseyde "is a comic creation of such vitality that it challenges the idea of tragedy and the authority of the advice that bids us to repair 'hom fro worldly vanyte' (V. 1837)"; see "Chaucerian Comedy and Criseyde" in *Essays on "Troilus and Criseyde"*, ed. Mary Salu (Totowa, N.J. 1979) 103.

⁹ Charles Berryman, "The Ironic Design of Fortune in *Troilus and Criseyde*," *ChauR* 2 (1967) 2.

¹⁰ Martin Stevens, "The Winds of Fortune in the *Troilus*," *ChauR* 13 (1979) 290.

¹¹ Joseph S. Salemi, "Playful Fortune and Chaucer's Criseyde," *ChauR* 15 (1981) 213.

¹² *Ibid.* 219-30.

¹³ No space will be devoted in this paper to showing how Criseyde operates on the human level or to dealing in any detail with those places in the narrative where the dual role seems contradictory. As to the latter, admittedly such contradictions can occur. Concerning this, C.S. Lewis's discussion of Thomas Usk's *Testament of Love* is relevant. Lewis, commenting on the character of Usk's Margaryte, writes: "It is true that Margaryte sometimes ceases to be a woman and becomes a pearl; but this will confuse no reader who has understood the *Romance of the Rose*"; see *The Allegory of Love* (1936; rpt. New York 1958) 223-24. Continuing with the signification of Margaryte, Lewis explains: "Margaret does not cease to be a woman by becoming a symbol of grace. On the contrary, 'Margarite, a woman, betokeneth grace.' The conception is not, perhaps, entirely easy to the modern reader; but I do

not think any contemporary of Usk's would have found a moment's difficulty in it" (p. 225).

¹⁴ The Boccaccio text used for this comparison was the *Filostrato of Giovanni Boccaccio*, tr. with parallel text N.E. Griffin and A.B. Myrick (Philadelphia 1929).

¹⁵ Salemi (at n. 11) 218.

¹⁶ Ed. Robinson (at n. 1) 828, note to lines 202-6.