FLORILEGIUM 10, 1988–91

A NOTE ON *TROILUS AND CRISEYDE* V. 1786–92

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The first envoy of *Troilus and Criseyde* is an important locus for Chaucer's view of his great poem and of his own status as a poet. Various scholars have felt it is here that Chaucer makes the highest claim ever for his poetry. Thus this stanza has often been cited; yet it is astonishing how little it has been analyzed. Its elegance has repeatedly been mentioned en passant, but, pursuing broader questions, Chaucerians have largely forgotten to scrutinize how this elegance is effected or how Chaucer actually makes his claim and what may be implied by this.

Basically, the artistry of the stanza, as in classical poetry, rests on its clear and clever structure. Four of its seven lines begin with a conjunction — most of them[1] adversative conjunctions, which due to their rational character usually work towards clarity. Moreover, the two sentences, which make up the stanza (1786–88 and 1789–92), are antithetical on two levels: each is antithetical within itself and sentence 2 also forms an antithesis to sentence 1. At the same time, both levels conform to the rhetorical principle of growing emphasis (*modus per incrementa*): in both sentences, the thesis consists of one line, whereas the antithesis comprises two lines in the first sentence and three in the second, and, on the next higher level, the antithesis (sentence 2) is again longer than the thesis (sentence 1).

As in classical poetry, this distinguished structure is much embellished with further "colours of rethorike," "figures of poetrie," and choice vocabulary, which may have impressed contemporary audiences as "subtil" and close to the "termes of philosophie." To mention only the most striking ornaments: diverse repetitions, particularly of the initial address, "Go, litel boke," anaphorically, in parts and with variations; the unusual, Italianizing (plus classicizing) *hyperbaton* of "litel myn tragedye"; the uncommonly long *adnominatio* with *mak-*, which produces a kind of internal rhyme, delicately diversified;[2] the tour-de-force rhyme over five lines; the contrast between the lively rhythm of the same five lines and the measured procession of the last two, underlined in 1791 by a striking, partly alliterating accumulation of *s*'s.

All this means: while bowing low to the greatest poets of antiquity, Chaucer has already produced a superb, classical stanza. In his very bow, he renders with admirable congeniality two lines from the poet whose name he slyly accentuates by the rhyme, *s*-accumulation, and position as the final word of the stanza.[3] As Statius made his reverence to Virgil, Chaucer is making his reverence to Statius and joining him to the select company — not without trying Statius's trick of modesty for himself. Even the most humble following implies some succession.

Although Chaucer does not mention the names of the three great Italian poets who are the immediate models for his ambition, they are nevertheless present in this polished stanza, which parades terms central to the new classicizing: tragedye — comedye — Poyesie.[4] Moreover, since the topos of succession epitomized their endeavours, they had appropriated it before Chaucer, and his presentation more or less resounds against these appropriations, too.

In his great "comedye," as is well known, Dante also assumed Statius's role of disciple to Virgil and even elaborated it into the fiction sustaining most of the poem. At their meeting, he actually made Statius stoop to embrace Virgil's feet (*Purg.* XXI, 130–31). On the other hand, Dante did not hesitate to make himself be accepted into Virgil's "bella scola" as "sesto tra cotanto senno" (*Inf.* IV, 94–102). Boccaccio, for his part, in the envoy to the *Filocolo*, presented his claim again more indirectly, in closer adherence to Statius: mentioning his great master in connection with Virgil, Ovid, Lucan, and Statius, he bade his little book 'to follow' ("seguire") Dante "molte reverente" — yet not without some self-confidence about his work's separate, special purpose.

It seems mostly by means of his emphatic and perhaps — as several scholars have felt — endearing addresses to his poem that Chaucer evokes these appropriations of the topos by his Italian forerunners. The striking *hyperbaton* of "litel myn tragedye" appears to echo Dante, who first made Virgil speak of his tragedy ("l'alta mia tragedìa") and very soon set his own comedy ("la mia comedìa") against it (*Inf.* XX, 113 and XXI, 2). It also evokes Boccaccio (who in his turn echoed the classics plus Dante), since he apparently was the first post-classical poet to call long works with polished modesty 'small' and in the *Filocolo* provides a particularly close parallel, as he introduces the final chapter containing the succession topos by the address, "O piccolo mio libretto."

The elegance of Chaucer's claim rests not only on its indirectness and rich allusiveness[5] but also very much — as in classical poetry — on the smoothing of the sharp edges of the structure and the distinctions. Not only does the logic of the structure tip over in its intensification[6] and is his "tragedye," together with his future "comedye," presented in one line with the venerable "Poyesye" (and with much emphasis, at that), but it is his very use of "mak-" that undermines the fundamental opposition of "makyng" and "Poyesye."

Chaucer repeats the modest *mak-* derivatives with an insistence that draws attention to them and subliminally imparts weight. Moreover, he uses them in ways that frustrate easy anticipations and create brief — or a little longer — uncertainties. In lines 1786–88, as Anne Middleton has pointed out, the audience may at first understand "thi makere" as an appposition to the preceding word, "god,"[7] and the more so, since Chaucer mostly applies the term "maker" to God and "(al)myght" was formulaically linked to God as well. The "make in," which has caused Chaucerians many a headache, seems to be part of the same strategy of startling the audience. For the unusual construction attracts the attention and brings a variety of associations into play by making the audience wonder which of the many senses of this basic verb or of a possible derivation from the homonymous noun meaning 'mate' might precisely be intended.[8] Even though the idea of God as the creator of the little tragedy is soon discarded, some sublime association of Chaucer and his work with God lingers on and may subliminally be reinforced by theological senses of "to make in."[9] Very indirectly, Chaucer thus seems to play on the analogy between divine and poetic creation, with which the early humanists tried to elevate classical poetry and their own.

An important effect of the *mak-adnominatio* is to accentuate the basic meaning, which, together with the root, is common to all these words. It

is this basic meaning, however, which "makyng" has also in common with the noble-sounding "Poyesýe," whose etymology had through the centuries been kept alive by the authority of Church Fathers and other Christian opponents to classical poetry and secular poetry in general. Consequently, it had been primarily in order to forestall the prosaic and negative explanation of *poesis* (from *ποιεῖν* / Latinized *poire* — 'to make' and 'to make up' / 'to lie') that Petrarch and Boccaccio endorsed Isidore's derivation from *poiotes* (*poetes* in Petrarch's codex of the *Etymologiae*). Yet finding acceptance for the derivation from the "vetustissimum Grecorum vocabulum" *poetes*, for which Boccaccio claimed the noble meaning "exquisita oratio,"[10] was no easy task when the simple explanation lay so near and could relie on so much authority, both classical and Christian.[11] In fact, the *poire* etymology must have appeared almost as self-evident as Chaucer's punning "makere — myght — make — makyng," i.e. agent — energy — action — result, whereas Boccaccio had to marshal much persuasion to establish the learned sequence "poetes / poesis — poeta — poema."[12]

As has repeatedly been pointed out, the concern of Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio with the etymology of *poesis* was intimately related to the maturing of their new ideas about their art.[13] At the same time, their high claims for poetry shifted the use of other terms as well and considerably destabilized the whole semantic field until the new meanings and demarcations were finally accepted more widely. Their etymologizing, which helped to substantiate their argument, and its repercussions in late 14th c. literary discussion may, therefore, well have been in Chaucer's mind, when he this one time, not only as far as *Troilus and Criseyde* but the whole of his oeuvre is concerned, employed the word "Poyesye" and counterbalanced it with his etymological play on "makere" / "makyng," which to him certainly resounded also against the Latin-derived *auctour* and the French and Italian parallels *faire* and *faiseur*, *fare* and *fattore* in their various literary and non-literary uses and similarly rich associations (e.g. with *faiteur* 'Creator' and *faindre* / *feindre* 'to make up').[14] Chaucer's interest in the limits and ambiguities of the various terms for his art is clear from his use of them throughout his work,[15] and soon, after adopting various Christian perspectives, he would end *Troilus and Criseyde* with a sublime writing metaphor, which belonged to a complex of thought about writing fundamental to mediaeval Christian belief and culture. The pious and highly polished Dantean submission to the Holy Trinity, who, "uncircumscript" itself, may "circumscrive al," reaffirms God as the Word, the supreme *artifex*, the true "auctour and makere."[16]

Thus, it seems that the pivotal stanza of the first envoy, which is one of Chaucer's most classical passages, also contains *in nuce* his conflicting attitudes towards the new classicizing and its high claims for poetry: his mixture of admiration and reserve, his playful, critical, and self-critical experimenting. Although such ambivalence was, to varying degrees, also characteristic of his Italian masters, the very cleverness and artistry of the stanza suggests for Chaucer much more confidence and reliance on his own experience and judgment than he has usually been accorded by scholars viewing him against the three great Trecentisti, in particular Dante.[17]

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NOTES

[1] In accordance with the usual form of the topos, the "ther" of line 1787 may be understood as adversative: underlining the contrast between the book which is sent into the world and its author who is left behind. All quotations from *Troilus and Criseyde* are taken from B.A. Windeatt's edition (London, 1984); all other Chaucer citations are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd edn., Larry Benson ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).

[2] Including "myght," which through various Middle English formulae was closely associated with the *mak-* stem, the *mak-adnominatio* extends over a full three lines, occurring under the same ictus, with a graceful variation: namely under the second ictus in lines 1787 and 1788 and under the third in lines 1788 and 1789. Though different in meaning, the "make in" of 1788 and "makyng" of 1789 sound almost identical or even identical, if the *g* is dropped, as seems to have happened quite frequently.

[3] *Thebaid* XII, 816–17. Parallel to Greek προσκυνεῖν, *adorare* denoted the highest degree of reverence in religious worship and comprised the most lowly gestures such as prostrating oneself and kissing the seam of the purple of an emperor when transferred to the cult of the Caesars. Together with the rhythm, the rare verb "space" suggests the dignity of the stride, which also implies some distance between the procession and the humble worshipper ("longe sequere").

[4] If the contemporary literary context, especially in Italy, is taken into account, Chaucer's reference to tragedy does not constitute the paradox Windeatt has recently seen in it. It goes far beyond a "generic label" and certainly does more than "diminish" *Troilus*. Barry Windeatt, "Classical and Mediaeval Elements in Chaucer's *Troilus*," in *The European Tragedy of Troilus*, ed. Piero Boitani (Oxford, 1989), 122. For the revived interest in tragedy see my article, "Chaucer's Monk's Tale: An Ingenious Criticism of Early Humanist Conceptions of Tragedy," *Humanistica Lovaniensia*, 36 (1987), 44–70.

[5] For resonances against Jean de Meun's use of the topos "sixth of six," see David Wallace, *Chaucer and the Early Writings of Boccaccio* (Woodbridge, 1985), 51–54.

[6] When heard or just read, not scrutinized, the quick succession of the two "but"s in lines 1789 and 1790 rather works toward blurring the distinctions than toward clarity.

[7] "Chaucer's 'New Men' and the Good of Literature in the *Canterbury Tales*," in *Literature and Society*, ed. Edward Said (Baltimore, 1980), 55.

[8] Perhaps "to make" may be considered to be used intransitively in the meaning 'to write,' while "in some comedye" forms a nonchalant parallel to "make in this manere"

(*Legend of Good Women* F 573) or similar constructions with "enditen" ("enditen in prose / in verse / in English"). This could be facilitated by traditional understandings of comedy and tragedy as specific styles. Perhaps "to make in" can also mean quite simply 'to bring in' (a sense documented in the *OED* for the late 15th c.), 'to put in', 'to build in' or 'to prepare' (a sense surviving in certain dialects). Then Chaucer would announce obliquely what he is about to do next: namely to change the tragedy of *Troilus and Criseyde* into a comedy.

[9] Joseph Grennen sees the phrase related to philosophical and theological concepts of creation, which had also been transferred to artistic creation. Thus, "to make in" could be an allusion to the notion — advanced by Augustine and quoted in Chaucer's century by Bradwardine — of the presence of the divine Creator in his creation, i.e. the divine "Maker making" within his world rather than shaping it from some external position. "*Making* in Comedy: *Troilus and Criseyde*, V, 1788," *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, 86 (1985), 488–93.

[10] The above formulations are from *Genealogia Deorum Gentilium* XIV, vii. For Petrarch's and Boccaccio's further etymological comments and a succinct discussion of them see the *Enciclopedia Dantesca*, s.v. "poesia."

[11] In his comedies, Plautus preserved the ante-classical general and negative meanings of *poeta*: 'maker' and 'contriver' / 'trickster'. See Latin dictionaries, e.g. Lewis and Short. In English, too, *poet* still retained its more general sense of 'author' / 'writer', so that Langland could call Plato and Aristotle "poets" (*OED*).

[12] Boccaccio repeated the triad (which was, with modifications, inherited from Alexandrinian criticism) with considerable insistence in several works and even within one and the same work, which was not by chance *Genealogia Deorum Gentilium* XIV. It helped him to fight the scholastic enemies of poetry with their own arguments; for by claiming poetry as a "scientia", i.e. as having content, he could refute their denigration of it as a mere "facultas" (with no content).

[13] See, e.g., the *Enciclopedia Dantesca*, s.v. "poesia."

[14] Cf. the examples in Glending Olson, "Making and Poetry in the Age of Chaucer," *Comparative Literature*, 31 (1979), 272–90. How much word play, also in its erudition and etymologizing, was part of the classical tradition has been brought back to Chaucerians by Frederick Ahl. It was no sheer coincidence either that most of Ahl's Chaucer examples in his paper "How Latin Wordplay may have shaped Chaucer's" at the 6th Congress of the New Chaucer Society, 1988, were from *Troilus*. As several scholars have suggested, the exceptional use of "Poyesýe" may perhaps allude primarily to Dante who employs the word "poesi" only once in his *Comedia* and as a (near-)personification, at that. In *De vulgari eloquentia* II, iv, 2, Dante availed himself of the *poire* etymology in order to defend the possibility of a vernacular "poeta." He recommended assiduous imitation of the "magni poete" and, first of all, the tragic style.

[15] See, e.g., his handling of *auctour* and its derivative *auctoritee*. Basically, *auctour*, too, meant someone who brings about the existence of something and this broad, neutral meaning is still to be found in Chaucer. Parallel to "maker," he also uses the noun more specifically and positively with reference to the divine Creator and to writers, esp. those of authority. *Auctoritee* can lapse into sheer subjectivity.

[16] Chaucer's translation of Latin *auctor* in *Boece* III, pr. v, 10 and m. vi, 11.

[17] E.g. Winthrop Wetherbee, *Chaucer and the Poets: An Essay on Troilus and Criseyde* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1984). A recent exception was Jeremy Tambling's paper "Dante's Virgil, Chaucer's Dante: Problems of Tragedy, Comedy and Translation" at the 7th Congress of the New Chaucer Society, 1990.