

# ‘O brotel wele of mannes joie unstable!’: Gender and Philosophy in *Troilus and Criseyde*

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Chaucer transformed Boccaccio’s *Criseida* to create a female character imbued with agency: his *Criseyde* mobilises Boethian philosophy in order to negotiate the pressures upon her. Not only is she characterised as vital to the poem’s Boethian frame, but her agency and philosophical acuity provide an explanation for her ‘betrayal’ of Troilus. Yet ultimately, the incompatibility of Boethian philosophy with the romance genre results in *Criseyde*’s exclusion from the poem’s ending, as *Troilus* rejects the romantic love it has hitherto represented and privileges a Boethian perspective on the futility of earthly cares. *Criseyde*’s absence from this problematic conclusion has tended to obscure her Boethian pragmatism and the significance of her agency.

‘O, rolled shal I ben on many a tonge!  
Thoroughout the world my belle shal be ronge!’  
(V.1061–62)<sup>1</sup>

These oft-cited lines from Book V of *Troilus and Criseyde* are more than a self-reflexive acknowledgement of the text’s ‘literary status’,<sup>2</sup> for they gesture toward *Criseyde*’s complex subjectivity and the failure of the text to justify her actions fully. The inclusion of these lines in her final monologue draws attention to the fact that *Criseyde*’s complex characterization has been undermined by a conclusion from which she is absent, and within which *Troilus* achieves heavenly transcendence; her apparent awareness of this fact simultaneously emphasizes the social constraints under which she labours, and the subjectivity that enables her to negotiate ‘romance’ and an oppressive society pragmatically. Yet these lines are performative as well, and they set in motion *Criseyde*’s literary afterlife as the quintessential faithless woman. This raises the question of why Chaucer

<sup>1</sup> All references to *Troilus and Criseyde* will be taken from *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 473–585.

<sup>2</sup> See Corinne Saunders, ‘Love and the Making of the Self: *Troilus and Criseyde*’, in *A Concise Companion to Chaucer*, ed. C. Saunders (Malden, Oxford, Melbourne: Blackwell Publishing, 2000), pp. 134–55 (p. 144).

so carefully constructs a layered female character, imbued with an agency that facilitates the justification of her ‘betrayal’ of Troilus, only to foreground her faithlessness and exclude her from the narrative in its final stages. I will argue that Criseyde’s Boethian pragmatism is a foundational element of Chaucer’s version of the story, and it invites the reader to consider the effect of social constraints upon actions which had been attributed by Boccaccio to a (stereo)typically feminine faithlessness. Importantly, I will also ask why Criseyde’s philosophical acuity is undermined by the text’s conclusion. *Troilus and Criseyde* is carefully framed to emphasize Criseyde’s philosophical understanding and agency and ameliorate her guilt; yet ultimately the poem’s generic complexity is subsumed by the dictates of the romance genre, while its Boethian elements are unexpectedly resolved by Troilus’s divine ascent.

Criseyde’s characterization invites the reader to believe in her independent interior life: her agency is carefully constructed by a subtle and complex negotiation of literary convention and social relationships. Although Troilus’s perspective is ultimately privileged by the text, Criseyde’s agency is often more apparent than Troilus’s, a distinction that is most striking as they fall in love. Criseyde decides to pursue the romance following a reasoned argument which appears to point to an internal conflict, while Troilus falls in love against his will, powerless against the force of Cupid’s arrow. Following Troilus’s scornful dismissal of romantic love,

... the God of Love gan loken rowe  
 Right for despit, and shop for to ben wroken.  
 He kidde anon his bowe nas naught broken;  
 For sodeynly he hitte hym atte fulle ...

(I.206–09)

Having been struck by the arrow, Troilus’s immediate and unequivocal reaction to his first sight of Criseyde is completely involuntary. He ‘sodeynly ... wax ... astoned’ (I.274) at the sight of her; a ‘depe impressioun’ (I.298) of her is made in his ‘herte botme’ (I.297); and he is pronounced a convert to love:

Lo, he that leet hymselfen so konnyng,  
 And scorned hem that Loves peynes dryen,  
 Was ful unwar that Love hadde his dwellyng  
 Withinne the subtile stremes of hire yen;

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That sodeynly hym thoughte he felte dyen,  
Right with hire look, the spirit in his herte;  
Blissed be Love, that kan thus folk converte!

(I.302–08)

The speed at which his conversion takes place is demonstrated by the narrator's repeated use of the word 'sodeynly', while the description of Troilus as 'ful unwar', and the contrast between his scorn and his sudden conversion, emphasize his lack of agency at this moment.

Criseyde, on the other hand, is prepared to consider love by the time she sees Troilus, having already been subject to Pandarus's machinations. Already burdened with the knowledge that 'The noble Troilus, so loveth the, / That, but ye helpe, it wol his bane be' (II.319–20), she begins her ruminations having had no thought of love or contact with her lover. Here Chaucer foregrounds the constraints of Criseyde's position, and by implication, the position of all women who are at the mercy of men, and gestures toward the incompatibility of the romance genre and the 'real' lives of women. Thus, Criseyde asks Pandarus whether Troilus can 'wel speke of love' (II.503), even though she is reluctant to pursue an affair when her 'estat lith in a jupartie' (II.465). Unlike Troilus, when she looks at her future lover for the first time she knows who she is looking for, and that he already loves her. And although she does experience an involuntary response to the sight of Troilus ('to hireself she seyde, "Who yaf me drynke?"'; II.651) she continues to weigh up her options:

...So she gan in hire thought argue  
In this matere of which I have yow told,  
And what to doone best were, and what eschue,  
That plited she ful ofte in many fold.  
Now was hire herte warm, now was it colde.

(II.694–98)

Criseyde's internal debate lasts for sixteen stanzas before Antigone's song (II.827–75) convinces her to be less frightened of love. Yet because Criseyde's love for Troilus is the result of a negotiation of the practical and the romantic, it is never as incapacitating as Troilus's love for her. Criseyde is subject to far greater social constraint than Troilus, and must therefore demonstrate agency and

reason where he cannot.

Criseyde is a medieval male-authored female character, and in spite of her resemblance to a 'real' person, and the temptation to treat her as one, it is important to explicate more carefully any conception of her agency and subjectivity. A useful starting point is Elizabeth Fowler's *Literary Character*, in which she mobilizes the concept of the 'social person' to explain the process by which a fictional, specifically medieval, character comes to resemble a human being. Fowler argues that 'social persons' are 'models of the person, familiar concepts of social being that attain currency through common use',<sup>3</sup> and they are best understood as the personification of social bonds'.<sup>4</sup> According to Fowler's formulation, these 'social bonds' are primarily constituted by agency, which is 'central to the circulation and practice of power among individual human beings and society'.<sup>5</sup> In the case of *Piers Plowman's* Mede, for example, specifically female subjectivity comes to be manifested according to its recognizable resemblance to those power relations that govern the agency of the married medieval woman, guaranteeing that it is always mediated by the organizing intention of her husband. Fowler contends that Mede's subjectivity can be explained in terms of the medieval understanding of marriage as an expression of 'unity of persons', whereby the husband is the 'head of the body that is the married couple', and the feminine is relegated to an 'expression of "pure" agency, agency without intentionality'.<sup>6</sup>

The fact that a subject's agency could be legally divorced from her intention (where agency would appear to require some kind of intentionality in order to exist) dramatically locates agency in historically specific discourses. Criseyde's agency can thus be understood as the 'personification' of 'bonds' governing the agency of the vulnerable widow and romance heroine who is forced to negotiate a range of social roles according to a particular version of Boethian philosophy. Yet if Criseyde's apparent agency is attributable to circulating discourses, as a fictional character she is also subject to Chaucer's agency, and *Troilus and Criseyde* invites us to determine his motivations in constructing a Criseyde who exhibits a complex subjectivity. Chaucer engages with Boccaccio's Criseida in order to draw attention to her vulnerability: he mediates his representation of Criseyde with a narrator who appears intent upon excusing or at least explaining her actions

<sup>3</sup> Fowler, *Literary Character: The Human Figure in Early English Writing* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2003), p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> Fowler, *Literary Character*, p. 95.

<sup>5</sup> Fowler, *Literary Character*, p. 99.

<sup>6</sup> Fowler, *Literary Character*, p. 111.

(‘Ye may hire gilt in *other* bokes se’; V.1776, my emphasis), and he provides her with a philosophical pragmatism that enables her to ‘voice’ the tenuousness of her position.

Thus, where Criseyde’s ambivalence is central to her characterization, any hesitation on the part of Boccaccio’s Criseida is ultimately attributed to feminine wiles. When Criseida asks Pandaro to consider whether asking her to read Troilo’s first love letter is proper (II.110–11),<sup>7</sup> for example, he argues that she is just pretending as all women do, and that there is no need to be bashful with him (II.112).<sup>8</sup> Criseida acknowledges that her resistance is purely conventional when she smiles and takes Troilo’s letter (II.113).<sup>9</sup> This marks a contrast with the urgency of Criseyde’s circumspection as she considers her response to Troilus’s advances, in those passages discussed above, while her interrogation of Pandarus’s manipulations is presented as far more genuine than those of her Boccaccian counterpart. When Pandarus attempts to hand her Troilus’s letter, Criseyde undergoes a dramatic transformation:

Ful dredfully tho gan she stonden styлле,  
 And took it naught, but al hire humble chere  
 Gan for to change, and seyde, ‘Scrit ne bille,  
 For love of God, that toucheth swich matere,  
 Ne brynge me noon; and also, uncle deere,  
 To myn estat have more rewarde, I preye,  
 Than to his lust! What sholde I more seye?’

(II.1.128–34)

Not only does this plea critique Pandarus’s methods, it also emphasizes Criseyde’s vulnerability, and subjection to the will of others. Chaucer’s rewriting of Criseida/Criseyde foregrounds her pragmatism and the nature of the pressures that determine her behaviour, while those elements of his intention that the reader is equipped to perceive quite obviously contribute to Criseyde’s characterization. Yet the

<sup>7</sup> All references to *Il Filostrato* are taken from the edition by Vincenzo Pernicone, trans. Robert P. apRoberts and Anna Bruni Seldis (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1986).

<sup>8</sup> ‘Deh, Pandaro mio ... / ... abbi rispetto / alquanto a me, non pure al giovinetto’ (II.110). ‘Guarda se quel che vuogli or si conviene ...’ (II.111). ‘[I]o t’ho parlato / tanto di questo, ch’omai vergognosa / non dovresti esser meco ...’ (II.112).

<sup>9</sup> ‘Criseida sorrise lui udendo, / e quelle prese, e miselesi in seno’ (II.113).

interpretive potential of this line of enquiry is limited, for it is impossible to demarcate the boundary between Chaucer's intention and the range of meanings we find in the text. It is this gap, between the intention of one who 'does' language, and the effects of that language, that is the concern of Judith Butler's *Excitable Speech*, and her theoretical account of the power of language provides us with another tool for locating agency within a fictional text.

With reference to Toni Morrison's 1993 Nobel Lecture in Literature, and the role of the writer, Butler contends that,

[w]e do things with language, produce effects with language, and we do things to language, but language is also the thing that we do. Language is a name for our doing; both 'what' we do ... and that which we effect, the act and its consequences.<sup>10</sup>

She goes on to add that 'language is thought of "mostly as agency," distinguished from forms of mastery or control, on the one hand, and by the closure of the system on the other'. According to this formulation, the author manipulates language to produce particular effects, but this is not the same as determining (or 'controlling') meaning. Thus, it is possible to locate the moments at which Chaucer's manipulations of Boccaccio's text create the impression of Criseyde's agency, but this is not where interpretation ends; rather, it is vitally important that Criseyde's agency is situated both as that which is constructed by the author, and as the 'effect' of that construction, where the latter is grounded in the knowledge brought to bear upon the text by the reader.

Stephanie Trigg argues that the distinctions we draw between 'medieval fictions and medieval histories' can foreclose the possibility of recognizing the agency of fictional female characters, for they rely upon a predetermined formulation of gender that leaves little room for the identification of any transgression.<sup>11</sup> She complicates Fowler's reading of Medea, arguing that although Langland privileges this character's allegorical status, he also allows her to transgress traditional gender roles, albeit briefly. Trigg questions the efficacy of privileging the 'real' medieval woman over the fictional one, asking:

<sup>10</sup> Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), p. 8.

<sup>11</sup> Stephanie Trigg, 'The Traffic in Medieval Women: Alice Perrers, Feminist Criticism and *Piers Plowman*', *The Yearbook of Langland Studies*, 12 (1998), 5–29 (pp. 25–27).

what is the epistemological or ontological difference between our knowledge of, on the one hand, a woman produced by the imagination of one male poet, and on the other, of a woman ‘produced’ by a patriarchal juridico-legal system?<sup>12</sup>

To interpret a text with reference only to our heavily mediated knowledge of ‘real’ medieval women or those medieval discourses on gender relations for which evidence survives, may blind us to the transgression contained in the subjectivity of a fictional character. To approach the text with an interpretive framework grounded in a predetermined idea of medieval social relationships or of Chaucer’s intentions is thus to delimit the possibility that a fictional text may transform, or at least alter, our perception of the period, or, in this case, our conceptualization of female subjectivity within it.

Criseyde’s agency is established by a range of competing discourses within the text, by a particular representation of generic and social pressures, and by Chaucer’s complication of Boccaccio’s *Criseida*. Her engagement with Boethian philosophy facilitates the representation of her pragmatism and her desperate attempts to overcome the social constraints that prevent her from embodying the role of the ideal romance heroine. Criseyde knows that happiness is transitory, so she constantly weighs up her options. Thus when she is deciding whether to give her love to Troilus she first examines the potential social consequences of such a relationship: ‘these wikked tonges ben so prest / To speke [wommen] harm’ (II.785–86); and then the instability of love itself: ‘though these men for love hem first torende / Ful sharp bygynnyng breketh ofte at ende’ (II.790–91). The poem’s Boethian frame is frequently revealed to be incompatible with the romance genre, not least when Troilus transcends earthly cares to reveal love’s triviality. And Criseyde’s absence from the poem’s conclusion cannot be fully explained by social pressures to which she finally succumbs, for the narrative privileges Troilus’s perspective with a manoeuvre that problematizes all that has come before it. Troilus, who represented the romance genre and the idealized romantic hero throughout the poem, achieves a transcendent Boethian vision that reveals the futility of the earthly love that he has heretofore exemplified: laughing, he ‘dampned al oure werk that foloweth so / The blynde lust, the which that may nat laste’ (V.1823–24). This revelation is not mere reward for his faith, for throughout

<sup>12</sup> Trigg, ‘The Traffic in Medieval Women’, p. 25.

the poem his lack of understanding of Boethian principles is emphasized, along with a lack of preparedness to reject earthly cares (indeed, he can barely get out of bed, so incapacitating is his earthly love<sup>13</sup>). And he is largely ignorant of the dangers to which he is exposing Criseyde, identifying him as another factor against which she must struggle in order to survive.<sup>14</sup>

Criseyde makes it clear from the outset that a woman in love is far more vulnerable than a man, as she berates Pandarus for his entreaties:

‘Allas! I wolde han trusted, douteles,  
That if that I, thorough my dysaventure,  
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.  
This false world – allas! – who may it leve?’

(II.414–20)

Criseyde draws attention to the double standard that would see her condemned for pursuing love where Troilus is encouraged by Pandarus, whose affection for his niece does not extend to a genuine concern for her safety. Troilus may lose Criseyde, then, but he attains the ultimate reward, while Criseyde’s fear that ‘femaleness’ and ‘romance’ are incompatible is played out in her decision to stay with Diomedes, rather than risk falling into the ‘hondes of som wrecche’ (V.705) while returning to Troilus. Yet if the poem goes some way towards justifying her decision, it also elides her significance to its Boethian frame.

<sup>13</sup> Troilus’s first discussion with Pandarus of his love for Criseyde (I.547–1064) contains many references to his impending death if a cure for his love-sickness is not found, including ‘longe he ley as styll as he ded were’ (I.723); “[t]hanne is my swete fo called Criseyde!” / And wel neigh with the word for feere he deide’ (I.873–74); and ‘[m]y lif, my deth, hol in thyn hond I leye’ (I.1053).

<sup>14</sup> That Troilus is positioned as a danger for Criseyde is perhaps most apparent following her first feelings of love, as she dreams that ‘an egle, fethered whit as bon, / Under hire brest his longe clawes sette, / And out hire herte he rente’ (II.926–28).



With some notable exceptions, Boethian readings of *Troilus and Criseyde* tend to ignore Criseyde altogether,<sup>15</sup> while recent critical analyses of Criseyde alone have tended to focus upon the social constraints that dictate her actions, exhibiting little interest in the Boethian elements of her characterization.<sup>16</sup> That an engagement with her subjective agency is potentially productive for readings of the poem and its philosophical elements, and of gender relations in medieval literature, is perhaps obscured by the curtailment of that agency at the poem's conclusion, a conclusion that is itself explained according to a predetermined idea

<sup>15</sup> See for example Thomas Martin, 'Time and Eternity in *Troilus and Criseyde*', *Renascence*, 51.3 (1999), 167–79; Willene Taylor, 'Supposed Antifeminism in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* and its Retraction in the *Legend of Good Women*', *Xavier University Studies* (1970), 1–18; Jennifer Goodman, 'Nature as Destiny in *Troilus and Criseyde*', *Style*, 31.3 (1997), 413–27; John Fleming, 'Smoky Reyn: From Jean de Meun to Geoffrey Chaucer', in *Chaucer and the Craft of Fiction*, ed. L. A. Arathoon (Rochester: Solais, 1986), pp. 1–21; and Larry Scanlon, 'Sweet Persuasion: The Subject of Fortune in *Troilus and Criseyde*', in *Chaucer's Troilus and Criseyde: subgit to alle poesye*, ed. R. A. Shoaf (Binghamton, N.Y.: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1992), pp. 211–23.

<sup>16</sup> For studies that have complicated Criseyde from socio-political, historical and literary perspectives, with little interest in the Boethian elements of the poem, see Carolyn Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989); Elaine Hansen, *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); David Aers, *Chaucer* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1986) and *Chaucer, Langland and the Creative Imagination* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980); Stephen Knight, *Geoffrey Chaucer* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1986); Arlyn Diamond, 'Troilus and Criseyde: the Politics of Love', in *Chaucer in the Eighties*, ed. J. Wasserman and R. Blanch (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1986), pp. 93–103; Christopher Cannon, 'The Rights of Medieval Women: Crime and the Issue of Representation', in *Medieval Crime and Social Control*, ed. B. Hanawalt and D. Wallace (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), pp. 156–85; Catherine Sanok, 'Criseyde, Cassandre, and the *Thebaid*: Women and the Theban Subtext of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*', *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 20 (1998), 41–71; Diane Steinberg, "'We do usen here no wommen for to selle": Embodiment of Social Practices in *Troilus and Criseyde*', *Chaucer Review*, 29.3 (1995), 259–73; Rebecca Hayward, 'Between the Living and the Dead: Widows as Heroines of Medieval Romances', in *Constructions of Widowhood and Virginity in the Middle Ages*, ed. C. Carlson and A. Weisl (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), pp. 221–43; Alastair Minnis and Eric Johnson, 'Chaucer's Criseyde and Feminine Fear', in *Medieval Women: Texts and Contexts in Late Medieval Britain*, ed. J. Wogan-Brown, R. Voaden, A. Diamond, A. Hutchison, C. M. Meale and L. Johnson (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2000), pp. 199–216.

of typically medieval misogyny.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, the Boethian underpinnings of Criseyde's agency are easily overlooked in readings of the poem's philosophical elements, and in feminist or socialist readings of Criseyde, because it is Troilus who achieves transcendence, or because traditionally, a male character is more likely to possess the power of philosophical reasoning than a female one.<sup>18</sup> Yet the complexity of Criseyde's characterization, the strength of her agency, and the Boethian resonance of that agency are carefully constructed, and should not be viewed through the lens of the poem's conclusion; rather, we need to ask why and how such a powerful, and in many ways transgressive, female character is constructed, and why and how she is systematically deconstructed by the poem's conclusion.

Corinne Saunders argues that 'Troilus's experience of love ... shapes and structures the narrative', and as the 'embodiment of extreme passion',<sup>19</sup> he 'never discovers Boethius's answer to the problem of reconciling free will and

<sup>17</sup> For readings of the poem's conclusion that rely upon historical understandings of medieval misogyny, see Maureen Fries, "'Slydyng of Corage": Chaucer's Criseyde as Feminist and Victim', in *The Authority of Experience*, ed. A. Diamond and L. Edwards (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1977), pp. 45–59; Hayward, 'Between the Living and the Dead', p. 230; Aers, *Chaucer*, p. 100; Gayle Margherita, 'Criseyde's Remains: Romance and the Question of Justice', *Exemplaria*, 12 (2000), 283–84; Priscilla Martin, *Chaucer's Women: Nuns, Wives and Amazons* (London: Macmillan, 1990); Cannon, 'Rights of Medieval Women', pp. 177–78; and Sanok, 'Criseyde, Cassandre and the *Thebaid*', pp. 58–59. As I will demonstrate, some of these readings provide useful insight into the inconsistencies that characterize the poem's conclusion, but because they are concerned with the social factors that contribute to Criseyde's ultimate demise, they tend not to acknowledge the full complexity of her subjectivity and agency.

<sup>18</sup> Thus, Thomas Martin concludes that the poem 'unfolds an earthly attempt to possess an earthly substitute for the eternal good': according to this formulation, Criseyde facilitates Troilus's spiritual journey, but is not a spiritual figure in her own right ('Time and Eternity in *Troilus and Criseyde*', p. 167). Willene Taylor argued in 1970 that the narrator is unable to deal with Criseyde's faithlessness, so he dismisses her, before Chaucer 'emerges' at the end to give 'Christian conclusion' to the poem ('Supposed Antifeminism in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*', p. 2). Criseyde in this analysis is not ignored, but she is deemed more relevant for her faithlessness than for her contribution to the poem's spiritual trajectory. More recently, Jennifer Goodman suggested that 'natural motion' is a central concern of the poem where Troilus's 'natural ... destiny' is to be drawn to the eighth sphere (Goodman, 'Nature as Destiny in *Troilus and Criseyde*', p. 423). See also the feminist and socialist readings cited above, for approaches to Criseyde.

<sup>19</sup> Saunders, 'Love and the Making of the Self', p. 139.

predestination'.<sup>20</sup> Criseyde, on the other hand, is 'optimistic regarding her free will, but constrained by social expectations and the fear of public shame'.<sup>21</sup> Saunders goes on to explain that 'Chaucer leaves us finally uncertain regarding the motivation of his Criseyde',<sup>22</sup> even as his emphasis upon her 'uneasy social status' emphasizes her status as both 'victim' and 'willing participant'.<sup>23</sup> Saunders's formulation provides further evidence that Criseyde's pragmatic negotiation of the romance genre and 'social expectations' contributes to a characterization that is less conventional than Troilus's, and with this gesture towards Criseyde's particular brand of agency, she draws attention to Chaucer's interest in explicating his heroine's motivations. Yet Saunders does not explain why characters so carefully constructed according to what she deems to be issues of social and literary interest to Chaucer are comprehensively *deconstructed* by the poem's conclusion. And this omission foregrounds the central problem of the conclusion of *Troilus and Criseyde*: that is, that it trivializes the romance genre embodied by Troilus for much of the poem, and undermines Criseyde's nuanced subjectivity.

Criseyde inhabits a story which is always anticipating her infidelity, yet until that infidelity occurs, her characterization is grounded in her capacity to engage Boethian philosophy in order to voice both the tenuousness of her position, and her negotiation of a range of pressures and expectations. She is not simply an imperfect romance heroine; rather, she creates the impression that if she is to resemble a 'real' woman, her approach to romance cannot be anything other than ambivalent. Of love, she declares that nobody knows 'wher bycometh it, whan that it is ago' (II.795), and if she is never as committed to romance as Troilus, it is because her desire is always tempered by fear for her physical safety or reputation. Their first night together is thus marked by Troilus's insistence that she 'yeldeth ... for other bote is non!' (III.1208), and by the contrast between Criseyde's bliss and the 'drede and tene' that came before it (III.1226); and she is compared to the 'larke' caught by the 'sperhawk' (III.1191–92). Rather than failing the romance genre, then, Criseyde reveals the discontinuities between it and her social reality.

Christine de Pisan wrote of the propriety of the courtly lady's fear, and in this sense, Criseyde's fear could be *attributed* to the romance genre. Indeed, Minnis and Johnson argue that the involuntary nature of Criseyde's fear could, in Christian

<sup>20</sup> Saunders, 'Love and the Making of the Self', p. 143.

<sup>21</sup> Saunders, 'Love and the Making of the Self', p. 143.

<sup>22</sup> Saunders, 'Love and the Making of the Self', p. 145.

<sup>23</sup> Saunders, 'Love and the Making of the Self', p. 147.

terms, reduce the seriousness of her ‘sin’.<sup>24</sup> Yet Criseyde’s ambivalent approach throughout the poem to the very concept of love, and Troilus’s resounding dismissal of earthly love at the poem’s conclusion, raises the question of whether *Troilus and Criseyde* marks a *critical* engagement with the romance genre as well as with female characterization. The Boethian frame of the poem and its pragmatic heroine prefigure a conclusion that will be characterized by spiritual transcendence and Criseyde’s decision to privilege her safety over her love. Less clear is why it is Troilus who absorbs the poem’s generic indeterminacy, rewarded for his romantic devotion with a divine revelation that calls such devotion into question, in a move that compromises the characterization of a heroine who had the potential to transform representations of both female agency and courtly love.

In the time after Criseyde has been traded to the Greek camp, neither she nor Troilus appears close to achieving spiritual enlightenment. Criseyde, who has considerably fewer options available to her, seeks to circumvent her physical vulnerability, while Troilus cannot turn his thoughts from Criseyde and has little interest in his larger social and spiritual responsibilities. Thus when Criseyde is considering whether or not to accept Diomedes’s advances, she considers

His grete estat, and perel of the town,  
And that she was alone and hadde nede  
Of frendes help ...

(V.1025–27)

And when she is deciding whether she should return to Troilus alone, without her father’s support, she displays a great fear for her personal safety:

‘And if that I me putte in jupartie  
To stele away by nyght, and it bifalle  
That I be kaught, I shal be holde a spie;  
Or elles – lo, this drede I moost of alle –  
If in the hondes of som wrecche I falle,

<sup>24</sup> Minnis and Johnson, ‘Chaucer’s Criseyde’, pp. 210–11. Other romances in which fear is an appropriate feminine characteristic include Marie de France’s *Guigema*, in which a lady who fears her abusive husband is rewarded by the love of a good knight; and *Sir Orfeo* in which a wife’s terror ensures that we are aware that her residence in the court of a fairy king is against her will.

I nam but lost, al be myn herte trewe.  
Now, myghty God, thow on my sorwe rewel!’

(V.701–07)

Along with a fear of rape and a pointed reference to woman’s lack of independence, Criseyde’s decision, here, is grounded in her awareness that she may be accused of a treachery akin to that of her father, who put her life in danger when he defected to the Greek camp (I.99–112). Criseyde is certainly no hero, nor does she discover a spiritual means to circumvent her powerlessness, but her ‘excuses’ do emphasize the extent of her vulnerability, and continue to make the case for her defence.

Although Troilus’s faith and devotion are unstinting, his approach is as worldly as Criseyde’s, and is clearly invested in that ‘blynde lust’ that he scorns in the poem’s closing lines (V.1824). When his faith is tested by a dream, he writes:

‘Right fresshe flour, whos I ben have and shal,  
Withouten part of elleswhere servyse,  
With herte, body, lif, lust, thought, and al,  
I, woful wyght, in everich humble wise  
That tonge telle or herte may devyse,  
As ofte as matere occupieth place,  
Me recomaunde unto youre noble grace.’

(V.1317–23)

Troilus focuses so firmly on Criseyde that he can find no reason to live once she has forsaken him:

‘From hennesforth, as ferforth as I may,  
Myn owen deth in armes wol I seche;  
I recche nat how soone be the day!’

(V.1717–19)

Troilus seeks romantic love, while Criseyde seeks security, yet neither seeks to turn from earthly cares to the spiritual quest that will enable them to transcend the fickleness of Fortune.

Troilus’s Boethian ascent to the Eighth Sphere privileges the struggle for an omniscient perspective over his own passive response to earthly love, for in Boethian terms, ignorance is the antithesis of happiness, and it is thus Troilus, rather

than Criseyde, who is furthest from enlightenment for most of the poem. Criseyde possesses an acute consciousness of the futility of a quest for earthly happiness which is nowhere more apparent than in the scene in which Pandarus begins to manoeuvre Troilus into Criseyde's bed. When Pandarus informs Criseyde that she must allow Troilus into her room because he is 'in swich peyne and distresse' (III.792) due to her 'love' of 'oon hatte Horaste' (III.797), she responds with horror. Criseyde clearly views the accusation as a betrayal on the part of Fortune, rather than Troilus.<sup>25</sup> Fortune has dealt Criseyde a traitorous father, a dead husband, and a manipulative uncle, and now it seems that the trust she has invested in Troilus was misplaced. Thus her complaint is more generalized than would be expected under the circumstances. She does not bemoan her present situation, but instead expresses her dissatisfaction with the rise and fall of Fortune's wheel:

'O brotel wele of mannes joie unstable!  
 With what wight so thow be, or how thow pleye,  
 Either he woot that thow, joie, art muable,  
 Or woot it nought; it mot ben oon of tweye.  
 Now if he woot it nought, how may he seye  
 That he hath verray joie and selynesse,  
 That is of ignoraunce ay in derknesse?

'Now if he woot that joie is transitorie,  
 As every joye of worldly thyng mot flee,  
 Than every tyme he that hath in memorie,  
 The drede of lesyng maketh hym that he  
 May in no perfit selynesse be;  
 And if to lese his joie he sette a myte,  
 Than semeth it that joie is worth ful lite.'

(III.820–33)

Criseyde's suggestion that he who is unaware of the mutability of good fortune is not truly happy, gestures toward Troilus, whose ignorance leads him to believe that his love affair can survive secrecy, the siege of Troy, and, in the end, Criseyde's departure to the Greek camp. He may believe he is happy with Criseyde, then,

<sup>25</sup> Although Criseyde does protest that 'My deere herte wolde me nought holde / So lightly fals!' (III.803–04), her expression is clearly one of disbelief, rather than anger.

but within the Boethian frame of the poem, he cannot truly claim that ‘he hath verry joie and selynesse’. Criseyde, on the other hand, is always conscious of what she has to lose, and if she experiences ‘joie’, it is a joy shadowed by the impending downturn of Fortune’s wheel. Criseyde’s awareness of the inevitability of change enables her pragmatism, and as Saunders points out, she has too *much* faith in her capacity to alter the future, given the importance of ‘fate’ to Boethian philosophy.<sup>26</sup> In contrast to Troilus’s refusal to apprehend the inevitability of change, Criseyde’s misinterpretation of the Boethian philosophy that guides her *adds* to the impression that she is exercising agency within the bounds of social constraints. That is, these constraints may cloud her capacity to fully understand the machinations of Fortune, but they add to the complexity of her characterization. Of course, neither Criseyde nor Troilus realize that death will enable Troilus to achieve perfect happiness without a philosophical journey.

Troilus relies for much of his happiness upon Pandarus’s penchant for manipulation and emotional blackmail, while Criseyde acknowledges that only Fortune’s unreliability can be relied upon. It may be noble to die for love, but Criseyde’s faith in human emotions has been compromised by many men (including Troilus) so such a decision, and the abandonment of self that it requires, is never a possibility within the terms of her characterization. Troilus dodges any guilt he may feel for manipulating Criseyde so shamelessly by transferring the responsibility to Pandarus<sup>27</sup> (not a particularly spiritual strategy), but Criseyde excuses Troilus when she turns from human failings to Boethian philosophy. Her philosophical musings are strikingly similar to the musings of Lady Philosophy herself, who also argues that true happiness cannot be achieved through chance:

... the unstableness of fortune may nat atayne to reseceyven verry blisfulnesse. And yit more over, what man that this towmblynge welefulnesse ledeth, eyther he woot that it is chaungeable, or elles he woot it nat. And yif he woot it nat, what blisful fortune may ther ben in the blyndnesse of ignoraunce? And yif he woot that it is chaungeable, he mot alwey ben adrad that he ne lese that thyng that he ne douteth nat but that he may leesen it ...; for whiche the contynuel drede that he hath

<sup>26</sup> Saunders, ‘Love and the Making of the Self’, pp. 149–50.

<sup>27</sup> See Diamond (*Troilus and Criseyde*, p. 97) who discusses the way in which the ‘lover’ in *Troilus and Criseyde* is split into ‘active Pandarus and passive Troilus’. She argues that such a split ‘frees Troilus from responsibility for his masculine privilege’.

ne suffreth hym nat to ben weleful – or elles yif he lese it he weneth to  
ben despised and forleten.

(*Boece*, II.4.148–63)<sup>28</sup>

The resemblance between this Boethian passage and Criseyde’s lament on Fortune’s ‘brotel wele’ is immediately apparent, pointing to the possibility that Criseyde’s ‘failure’ is social, rather than spiritual.

Troilus proves later in the poem that he, too, is versed in Boethian philosophy. He enters into a dialectical soliloquy on the relationship between prescience and God and draws complex conclusions about the nature of predestination (see IV.960–1078). Yet Allen Frantzen points out that Troilus misrepresents Lady Philosophy’s position, for while she warns Boethius ‘*away from* trust in earthly love’, Troilus ‘uses the poem to confirm the very same attachment’.<sup>29</sup> Troilus debates the relationship between God and predestination and concludes that Criseyde’s leaving is inevitable because

‘... whan I woot a thyng comyng,  
So mot it come; and thus the bifallyng  
Of thynges that ben wist before the tyde,  
They mowe nat ben eschued on no syde.’

(IV.1075–78)

He then prays to all-knowing ‘Almyghty Jove’ (IV.1079) to ‘bryng Criseyde and me fro this destresse!’ (IV.1082). His philosophical musings bring him to worldly conclusions and unlike Boethius he is unable to transcend his own pain. Lady Philosophy discusses *divine* love throughout the *Consolation*, while Troilus can think of nothing but Criseyde.

Troilus’s lack of philosophical acuity can be attributed to the life he appears to have led and the position he has occupied in society. As a man who has always enjoyed good fortune, Troilus is ill-prepared for the inevitable downward turn

<sup>28</sup> All references to *Boece* are taken from *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, based on *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. F. N. Robinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 397–469.

<sup>29</sup> Allen Frantzen, *Troilus and Criseyde: the Poem and the Frame* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1993): p. 100. See also Frank Grady, ‘The Boethian Reader of *Troilus and Criseyde*’, *Chaucer Review*, 33.3 (1999), 230–51 (p. 231). Grady argues that Troilus’s Boethian soliloquy underscores his ‘insufficiency as a philosopher’.



of Fortune's wheel. He does not possess the skills to reason his way out of the incapacitation Cupid's arrow inflicts upon him (love 'him forbar in no degree' but 'held hym as his thral lowe in destresse'; I.437, 439), or, more seriously, the trade of Criseyde to the Greek camp ('I not, allas, whi lete ich hire to go'; V.226). On the other hand, Criseyde's circumspection is the result of her experience as Fortune's hapless and perpetual victim, a fact which serves to emphasize the vulnerability of her position. And it is Criseyde who seems most familiar with Boethius' argument that 'contrarious Fortune profiteth more to men than Fortune debonayre' (*Boece*, II.8.11–13). Lady Philosophy states that

... alwey, whan Fortune semeth debonayre, thanne sche lieth, falsly byhetyng the hope of welefulnesse; but forsothe contraryous Fortune is alwey sothfast, whan sche scheweth hirself unstable thurw hir chaungynge.

(*Boece*, II.8.13–17)

When Criseyde declares '[t]o Diomedes algate I wol be trewe' (V.1071), she accepts the inevitability of 'contrarious Fortune'. Clearly, neither she nor Troilus fully understand the Boethian notion that '*thou maist wel chaungen thi purpos; but for as mochil as the present sothnesse of the devyne purveaunce byholdeth that thou maist chaunge thi purpos*' (*Boece*, V.6.246–49, my emphasis). Yet if neither character grasps the intricacies of the role of free will within the bounds of predestination, Criseyde attempts to exercise agency where she can, while Troilus is incapacitated. If Criseyde is ultimately understood as something that happens *to* Troilus, then, it is because the generic expectations of the tragic romance come to take precedence over the intricacies of characterization.

Criseyde continues to atone for her behaviour long after *Troilus and Criseyde* has concluded. In Robert Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid* she is rejected by Diomedes, and her subsequent promiscuity leads her to contract leprosy.<sup>30</sup> Gayle Margherita argues in relation to a Criseyde/Cresseid who spans both poems that Troilus does not 'gain [a] stoical and proto-Christian perspective' until he reaches the 'privileged vantage point of the eighth sphere', while in order to transcend her

<sup>30</sup> Her sharp wit in Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* renders her a less sympathetic character here, too, although Troilus is also constructed with less sympathy, and the story places more emphasis on the politics of war. Cressida's spirit and the focus upon peripheral men ensures that this is a different kind of story altogether.

earthly existence Criseyde/Cresseid must suffer ‘physical pain and degradation’.<sup>31</sup> Yet even if the analysis is confined to Chaucer’s text, Criseyde, at best, ‘fades out of her story and is forgotten’.<sup>32</sup> Priscilla Martin suggests that Criseyde’s disappearance is a result of the narrator’s final condemnation of and consequent lack of interest in his heroine.<sup>33</sup> Frank Grady notes Criseyde’s disappearance as well, arguing that ‘Troilus’ ascent is the one unexpected event of the poem’, and that the ‘merits that get Troilus to heaven’ are ‘vague and unspecific’.<sup>34</sup> The ascent itself is what ultimately enables Troilus to transcend the pain of his earthly existence: Criseyde is afforded no such opportunity. If Criseyde’s Boethian pragmatism has contributed to her agency and served to differentiate her from her Boccaccian counterpart, it is clearly not enough to enable her to transcend the constraints foregrounded by her Chaucerian characterization. And problematically, Criseyde’s absence from the poem’s final stages invited readers like Henryson to fill in the gaps.

Many critics have discussed the way in which misogyny and gender stereotypes contribute to the construction (or destruction) of Criseyde’s reputation. And the diversity of these theories demonstrates the multi-faceted nature of the forces that oppress Criseyde throughout the poem, contributing to her complex social personhood. Hansen argues that Criseyde ‘accepts the meanings of those who have social power over her’,<sup>35</sup> in spite of her awareness that she is constantly interpreting the ‘intentions of men who do not say what they mean or mean what they say’.<sup>36</sup> According to Cannon, Criseyde’s ‘self-representation’ in her final letter to Troilus (V.1590–1631) highlights the ‘impossibility that [her] version will find a sympathetic hearing’,<sup>37</sup> but Chaucer is ‘complicit’ in the ‘failure’ of Criseyde’s version of events when he gives ‘the condemnations of Troilus and Pandarus the last word in his poem’.<sup>38</sup> Catherine Sanok points out that a ‘woman like Criseyde, not legally defined by a husband’ can be traded because she is ‘deemed not

<sup>31</sup> Gayle Margherita, ‘Criseyde’s Remains: Romance and the Question of Justice’, *Exemplaria*, 12 (2000), 283–84.

<sup>32</sup> Priscilla Martin, *Chaucer’s Women: Nuns, Wives and Amazons* (London: Macmillan, 1990), p. 129.

<sup>33</sup> Martin, *Chaucer’s Women*, p. 184.

<sup>34</sup> Grady, ‘Boethian Reader’, p. 243.

<sup>35</sup> Hansen, *Chaucer and the Fictions*, p. 173.

<sup>36</sup> Hansen, *Chaucer and the Fictions*, p. 167.

<sup>37</sup> Cannon, ‘Rights of Medieval Women’, pp. 177–78.

<sup>38</sup> Cannon, ‘Rights of Medieval Women’, p. 178.

essential to the history of Troy by the Trojan council',<sup>39</sup> while Aers argues that Criseyde so internalizes 'conventional social ideologies' that she succumbs to the 'overwhelming pressure' of her situation and accepts Diomedes with self-disgust.<sup>40</sup> Perhaps most pertinent is Maureen Fries' argument that because Criseyde exhibits all the virtues expected of the woman submitting to male 'auctoritee' she cannot escape her fate: she exemplifies the courtly lady and the courtly lady does not elope or disobey her father.<sup>41</sup>

Like Fries, many critics argue that Criseyde is ultimately condemned because of the (gendered) contradictions she is forced to embody. Rebecca Hayward, for example, points out that in the Middle Ages the 'misogynistic stereotype of the widow' was that she was 'inconstant'.<sup>42</sup> The widow as romance heroine was suspect because 'an ideal widow remains celibate, whereas an ideal romance heroine yields to love for the hero'.<sup>43</sup> According to Hayward the narrator does not rely on stereotypes to characterize the widow Criseyde when she is 'fulfilling the hero's desire', but he reverts to misogynistic clichés once Troilus and therefore romantic conventions have been disappointed.<sup>44</sup> Hansen argues that Criseyde is condemned for her 'obedience, submission and flexibility', qualities that are deemed by her culture to be 'valuable and proper in a woman'.<sup>45</sup> Finally, Aers argues that the 'romance genre', in *Troilus and Criseyde*, highlights 'the tensions between the place women occupied in society and the various self-images presented to them'.<sup>46</sup> These critics and others provide adequate explanation for Criseyde's demise, yet the tensions they identify also contribute to the nuances of her characterization: her agency, grounded in a negotiation of generic and gendered oppression, relies upon that which apparently renders her personhood unsustainable.

Criseyde persistently tries to make the best of the difficult situations in which she finds herself, and she possesses a pragmatism that arises from her prior subjection to the rise and fall of Fortune's wheel. Yet as a woman written into the romance tradition, she is subject to a range of insurmountable pressures. She is unable to escape condemnation because she cannot satisfy the expectations of the

<sup>39</sup> Sanok, 'Criseyde, Cassandre and the *Thebaid*', pp. 58–59.

<sup>40</sup> Aers, *Chaucer*, p. 100.

<sup>41</sup> Fries, 'Slydyng of Corage', p. 58.

<sup>42</sup> Hayward, 'Between the Living and the Dead', p. 221.

<sup>43</sup> Hayward, 'Between the Living and the Dead', p. 222.

<sup>44</sup> Hayward, 'Between the Living and the Dead', p. 230.

<sup>45</sup> Hansen, *Chaucer and the Fictions*, p. 142.

<sup>46</sup> Aers, *Chaucer, Langland*, p. 119.

romance genre's yielding heroine, of the idealized chaste widow, of the dutiful daughter, and of a patriarchal social structure. To avoid disgrace, Criseyde would have had to be fearful and brave, malleable and steadfast, chaste and sexually available. She would have had to submit to the will of the Trojan Parliament while at the same time deceiving her father, the most significant patriarchal figure in her life.

Criseyde's last spoken line demonstrates that her pragmatic reasoning makes reference to Boethian principles, but rules out any possibility that she may take these principles far enough to transcend her earthly pain. '[A]l shal passe; and thus take I my leve' (V.1085) reduces Criseyde's philosophical work throughout the poem to a trivial cliché. The narrator briefly discusses Criseyde's betrayal (in relatively sympathetic terms) then returns to Troilus, who is still awaiting the return of his beloved ten days after she leaves Troy. The poem apparently has no further use for Criseyde, and her final letter to Troilus is more relevant to his story than hers. On the other hand, Troilus's narrative trajectory is by no means complete, and the narrator spends several hundred lines detailing his hope that Criseyde will return, and his despair when he knows that she will not. Troilus's realization that the affair is over does not mark his departure from the narrative, however. Following a direct address to the audience by the narrator (in which he preempts any accusation of gender bias and sends his 'litel bok' into the world), he returns to Troilus, who vents his 'wrath' on the Greeks in anger and despair and is finally killed by Achilles. This is still not the end for Troilus, whose transcendent vision follows his death. Criseyde leaves the story when she steps out of the love affair, as Troilus and the romance genre are privileged, before the poem's Boethian trajectory is appropriated by its courtly hero: romance and philosophy are only reconciled when the former is subsumed by the latter, providing Troilus with an unexpected and perhaps unearned reward for his earthly suffering. The attribution of philosophical insight to Criseyde may facilitate the seamless narrative progression of a sophisticated romance containing a variety of generic features and a complex central female character, but it cannot provide that character with a positive outcome.

Criseyde's judgments are not always based upon the clearly gendered expectations imposed upon her by society and 'romance': her characterization as a powerful female agent also proves to be her undoing. As a woman Criseyde can legally and unproblematically be traded for a prisoner, for example, but even with this awareness she overestimates her right to choose her own destiny. In book

II when Criseyde delineates the obstacles she believes she will encounter if she accepts Troilus as a lover, she first posits that if she chooses to love Troilus,

‘Men myghten demen that he loveth me.  
What dishonour were it unto me this?’

(II.730–31)

And,

‘men ben so untrewē,  
That right anon as cessed is hire lest,  
So cesseth love, and forth to love a newe.’

(II.786–88)

With arguments such as these, she demonstrates a keen awareness of the social organization that dictates the movements of women regardless of status. That her astute appraisal of her situation falls short of what is necessary, however, is exemplified by one phrase in particular: ‘I am myn owene womman, wel at ese’ (II.750). Criseyde is not now and will never be her ‘owene womman’, for within the time-frame set out by the poem her father leaves her physically and socially vulnerable, Hector fails to protect her in spite of all his efforts, Pandarus manipulates and blackmails her and Troilus allows him to do so. The very options that Criseyde allows herself in the passages in which she declares her independence demonstrate just how little independence she has, and she finally declares that she can ‘se ... no better way’ than to be ‘trewē’ to Diomedes (V.1069, 1071).

Sheila Fisher argues that when she succumbs to Diomedes’s advances, ‘Criseyde, the woman exchanged twice before in this romance, becomes a threat to Troilus and to Troy because, this time, she exchanges herself’.<sup>47</sup> Yet although Criseyde takes decision-making power out of the hands of the men of Troy when she attaches herself to Diomedes, this again emphasizes her limited options, and this time she makes the decision that will exclude her from the narrative. The narrator states that Criseyde was ‘sory ... for hire untrouthe’ (V.1098) before turning his attention to Troilus, and this marks the end of her independent subjectivity.

<sup>47</sup> Sheila Fisher, ‘Women and Men in Late Medieval English Romance’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance*, ed. R. Krueger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 150–64 (p. 60).

Social pressures have combined to foreclose the possibilities open to Criseyde, and she has no option other than to apologize; there is no role for this character to play in saving the romance or Troilus. In the end, Criseyde's agency provides her with a complex and layered characterization, as well as a justification for her dismissal once she has chosen badly. Her layered personhood, characterized by a pragmatism that justifies her decision not to return to Troy, is compromised by a narrative that ultimately attributes more blame to her than to the men who deemed her an object of exchange.

Criseyde plays a vital role in her poem's Boethian trajectory, just as Boethian philosophy is vital to her characterization, yet she is subject to gendered and generic limitations that relegate her to the less sophisticated realm of unreliable womanhood and tragic romance. Critical readings rarely conceive of any relationship between Criseyde and Boethius, yet as I have demonstrated, the poem lends itself explicitly to an investigation of Criseyde's Boethian role. The philosophical Criseyde cannot be separated from 'Criseyde the woman' (and all of the social implications of her womanhood), and her often transgressive subjective agency provides insight into Chaucer's conception of femininity. Yet the end to which she comes tends to obscure the complexities of her personhood, for her very agency, and the complex web of social pressures and Boethian pragmatism that constitute it, prove to be her undoing. Criseyde's agency, and the philosophical acuity that facilitates its representation, should be recognized as bearing productively upon our understanding of medieval female subjectivity, even as we ask why that subjectivity was not reconcilable with the requirements of the poem's generic frame.

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