

“Thow be understonde”: Writing a Good Reader in Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*

Honorable Mention, Humanities

Author: Stuart Cheyne

Writers have long worried that their work will be misinterpreted by their audiences. Authorial intent, regardless of how it might be dismissed by twentieth-century and contemporary theorists, has been paramount to writers throughout history. Geoffrey Chaucer is one of them. His short poem, “Chaucers Wordes unto Adam, His Owne Scriveyn,” directly addresses this issue. His other works are also indicative of this anxiety, foremost *Troilus and Criseyde*. Within this long poem, Chaucer attempts to instruct his reader on just how to be a “good” reader: careful, knowledgeable, and capable of understanding foreshadowing within the text. This paper will demonstrate how this readerly instruction is evident through narratorial interjection, historical and literary allusions, and character development, specifically the development of Criseyde’s reading ability. Understanding intent, or as Chaucer writes, “entente,” also plays a vital role in demarcating a “good” reader. Chaucer’s obsession with this word, though glossed variously as “effort” (285), “purpose” (13), and “intention” (49) in Stephen Barney’s annotated edition of *Troilus and Criseyde*, centres around this idea of proper comprehension.

Chaucer’s anxiety over his audience’s reading comprehension stems from his contemporary context. As John Nelson Miner notes, “one feature of later medieval English society... is the increase in literacy, that is, the increasing number of people - many of them in quite humble circumstances - who could copy, understand, and even draw up documents” (16), which “helped to bring about a distinctive class of literate laymen” (27). It is understandable, then, that in an age of increased literacy, Chaucer would have feared the misinterpretation of his literary works. The deference he has for clerks and traditional *litterati* shows up in the numerous references to “clerkes wyse” within the text, and the unquestioning faith in their wisdom. I would argue that, by referring to contemporary scholars in this way and inducing the newly-learned members of society to pay attention to their wisdom, Chaucer attempts to instruct his readers on how to read wisely.

Chaucer presents this scholarly wisdom through the use of proverbs. As Karla Taylor writes, “because proverbs represent an extreme form of convention, so petrified in form that they seem immutable, their treatment in [*Troilus and Criseyde*] can illuminate the use of other traditional modes as well” (540). Teaching and scholarly instruction is one of these modes, and one of the proverbs associated with these “clerkes wyse” is laid out in Book 3 of *Troilus and Criseyde*. Pandarus tells Troilus that “For which these wise clerkes that ben dede / Han evere yet proverbred to us yonge, / That ‘firste vertu is to kepe tonge’” (III.292-294). Here we have the traditional literate scholars associated with teaching proverbs to younger generations. Barney notes, in a footnote to these lines, that “[t]he widespread proverb originates in . . . a popular medieval schoolbook for learning Latin” (159). Thus, this intertextual

reference to literary instruction shows the attention that Chaucer pays to, and his concern with, the necessity of pedagogical reading techniques. The meaning of the proverb can be read generally as “the first virtue is to hold one’s tongue,” but is also noteworthy in the context of Chaucer’s narratorial intrusion at the end of the poem. In it, he directly expresses his concern over misinterpretation, stating:

And for ther is so gret diversite
In Englissh and in writyng of oure tonge,
So prey I God that non myswrite the,
Ne the mys metre for defaute of tonge;
And red wherso thow be, or elles songe,
That thow be understonde, God I biseche! (V.1793-1798)

Chaucer’s obsession with the “tonge” that his work is in, in its “writyng” and possible “defaute,” provides another way of analyzing the aforementioned proverb. If “tonge” in this sense can be understood to mean language, and the necessity of maintaining the cohesion of one language without any deficiency, then the phrase “to kepe tonge” can be interpreted as, not to keep quiet, but to preserve and, therefore, to well understand the meaning behind one’s language. As he is so concerned about being interpreted according to his own “entente,” and with the rise of a traditionally undereducated, newly literate public, Chaucer seems to reinvent the meaning of this proverb, instructing his non-traditionally-educated readers on how to read with full comprehension. Elizabeth Allen quotes Anne Middleton in describing how Chaucer sees himself as a “‘new man,’ whose literary conduct includes ‘an earnest and insistent honouring of old ways and the received high culture, for it is these to which he wishes to show himself accustomed and entitled’” (627). This is exactly so in *Troilus and Criseyde*, where he couches his mission of literacy within the proverbial teaching style of the “wise clerkes” so that his audience is aware that these outposts of wisdom exist, easing his anxiety over the textual interpretation that was far less present in previous modes of storytelling.

In opposition to oral poetry, as Franz H. Bäuml writes, “the freedom of the written word from cultural constraints governing formulaic composition and reception . . . results in a sharply reduced measure of redundancy of a written text as message, permits its manipulation, and through it that of its readers/hearers,” and “enables a text to yield a variety of ‘meanings’” (251). Thus, Chaucer implements other methods to ensure that his readers know how to interpret him properly. One of these is the liberal sprinkling throughout *Troilus and Criseyde* of both mythological and literary allusions. That the poem is set within the overarching storyline of the fall of Troy, set forth in Homer’s *Iliad*, is self-evident. One could not read the poem without coming to this realization. There is more to be examined, however, in terms of foreshadowing and hinting at the overall trajectory of the narrative.

While Chaucer’s poem can be read without foreknowledge of the *Iliad*, knowing, for instance, the fate of Hector and of Troy itself, puts readers into a position of power over his characters, giving them a sort of prophetic vision of what is to come. From the text, Hector is seen as a “most ydred of any wight”

(III.1775), “which that is the beste” (II.740), and “the townes wal and Grekes yerde” (I.154). This view of him is incessantly positive, and as he is the protector of Troy, it seems that when he offers his protection to Criseyde and says “yours body shal men save, / As fer as I may ought enquire or here” (I.122-123), nothing could go wrong. To a knowledgeable audience, however, this is highly ironic, given Hector's later downfall. Similarly, we see Criseyde wishing to be back in Troy again, lamenting “O Troie town, / Yet bidde I God in quiete and in reste / I may yow sen, or do myn herte breste” (V.1006-1008). For the informed reader, there is irony present here as well. Criseyde is praying to be back in Troy, “in quiete and in reste,” when the reality is that Troy will not last much longer. In this sense, Chaucer cultivates an awareness and comprehension of other literature in the reader through textual allusions, giving the informed reader a sort of prophetic ability.

In speaking of prophecy, it is important to note another mythological allusion within the text. Late in the poem, Troilus seeks out Cassandra for her Sibyllic guidance in interpreting a dream. Dream interpretation is similar to reading a text, and Chaucer uses this mythological interruption to prove this point. Just as a good reader would be knowledgeable about other literature, Cassandra explicates the dream to Troilus only after relating that “Thow most a few of olde stories heere” (V.1459), the nature of which “men in bokes fynde” (V.1463), and again, “Of which, as olde bokes tellen us” (V.1478). There is metatextuality going on here, as Cassandra explains the importance of relying on outside knowledge in interpreting a text, while the reader, too, in order to fully grasp the meaning of Troilus's rejection of her words, must also rely on outside knowledge of the myth of Cassandra. While I agree with Valerie Ross that Chaucer “refashions [Cassandra] as an alternative narrative voice,” I argue against her “resisting the “myth” of authority” (340) of her patriarchal society. By consistently reminding Troilus to read the “olde bokes” of past literary authorities, she is reaffirming their mythological power. The connections then, between reading, foreknowledge, and prophecy all intersect within Cassandra, who possesses an outside knowledge of the “text” of the dream due to her prophetic capabilities and implores Troilus to read the tales of which she herself is a part. Morton Bloomfield expands upon this idea, in saying that “*Troilus and Criseyde* is a medieval tragedy of predestination because the reader is continually forced by the commentator to look upon the story from the point of view of its end,” (471) because the future is known. Cassandra is the narrative strategy by which Chaucer instructs the reader on the importance of reading widely.

Chaucer's final attempt to write on good reading ability is shown through the necessity of comprehending the “entente” of a text, or authorial meaning. In the poem, Chaucer presents both good and bad readers in this regard. Troilus, for instance, is a bad reader. Although he is able to read and understand the words of the text, he cannot surmise their intent. In Criseyde's first letter to Troilus, she tells him that she would not “make hireselven bonde / In love; but as his suster, hym to plesse” (II.1223-1224). Upon Troilus's reading of this letter, however, he cannot make out the “entente” and “he took al for the beste / That she hym wroot, for somewhat he byheld / On which hym thoughte he myghte his herte reste” (II.1324-1326). Troilus completely misinterprets Criseyde's letter and injects his own hopes into it, thinking that because she wrote back to him, she must have similar feelings, when instead, she expressly states that she would please him “as his suster.” Later, before the consummation of their affair, he tells Criseyde that “Though ther be mercy writen in youre cheere, / God woot, the text ful hard

is, soth, to fynde!" (III.1356-1357). Victoria Warren's examination of Troilus's "text" shows that "the principal reason why Troilus is unable to see Criseyde in the context of her situation is that he is too self-absorbed, that is, he is primarily concerned with himself" (2), and that "he can only read the text that he himself has authored" (12). This is invariably why Troilus is a bad reader; instead of understanding the "entente" of Criseyde's "text," he writes one himself. Indeed, upon finding Criseyde and Pandarus at his bedside while pretending to be sick, Troilus asks, "Who is al ther? I se nought trewely" (III.67). This might as well represent his entire state across the poem, as he remains baffled by everyone's intent.

Chaucer gives the reader a more positive alternative in Criseyde's reading ability. At first, she is just as poor a reader as Troilus. In writing Criseyde his first letter, Troilus evokes the God of Love, declaring "blisful God prey ich with good entente, / The viage, and the lettre I shal endite" (II.1060-1061), while at the end of it, "he seyde - and leigh ful loude - / Hymself was litel worth, and lasse he koude" (II.1077-1078). Criseyde cannot see past his lie, however, and upon reading it, she "Avysed word by word in every lyne, / And fond no lak, she thoughte he koude good" (II.1177-1178). Having so closely read the letter, and yet not noticing the "leigh ful loude" which circumscribed it all, Criseyde is shown as a poor, simple reader. As the poem progresses, however, she is able to acquire the skills of a good reader.

One of the first skills Criseyde develops is literary awareness. In Criseyde's first appearance in the text, Pandarus finds "two othere ladys sete and she" (II.81), "and they thre / Herden a mayden redder hem the geste / Of the siege of Thebes, while hem leste" (II.82-84). She is seen to be listening to the supposed historical narrative of the siege of Thebes, but the important issue here is that she is not reading it. She is not actively engaging with the text itself. Later, however, when she misreads Troilus's intentions, she cries out that "I wolde hym preye / To telle me the fyn of his entente. / Yet wist I nevere wel what that he mente" (III.124-126). Her interest in becoming a better reader shows through, and not long afterwards she soliloquizes the argument of Lady Philosophy in Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, showing an expanded knowledge of "which clerkes callen fals felicitee" (III.814), and therefore, of literature in general.

Her next acquired reading skill, the foreknowledge of things to come, arrives as she laments leaving Troy. She realizes that:

On tyme ypassed wel remembred me,
And present tyme ek koud ich wel ise,
But future tyme, er I was in the snare,
Koude I nat sen; that causeth now my care. (V.746-749)

Thus, she admits to herself she lacked the insight into the future required to become a truly good reader.

A final requirement for her to realize herself as Chaucer's ideal readership comes through learning to fully comprehend one's "entente." In attending to Diomedes's speech, himself an able reader in

Chaucer's eyes, at first, "she naught his tales herde / But here and ther, now here a word or two" (V.178-179). Thus, she still cannot fully interpret his intention, who would "yow telle al myn entente- / But this ensiled til another day" (V.150-151), and "natheles she thonketh Diomedes" (V.183). Over the course of Book V, however, her ability to master intent develops. We see the final development of Criseyde as reader where Chaucer notes, "but as of [Diomedes's] entente, / It *semed* nat she wiste what he mente" (V.867-868, emphasis mine). Her inability to interpret "entente" thus slides away into the mere seeming of inability. After meeting with Diomedes then, she is shown to be "Retornyng in hire soule ay up and down / The words of this sodeyn Diomedes" (V.1023-1024). It is through this meditation on entente that she succeeds in being a good reader, and Chaucer rewards this achievement by unifying Criseyde and Diomedes: "She made hym were a pencil of hire sleve" (V.1043), and "Men seyn – I not – that she yaf hym hire herte" (V.1050). Thus, Criseyde appears, according to how Chaucer writes her into being, to be able to act fully of her own volition and create a happy ending, consistent with any romance. This is, of course, in opposition to Troilus and his persistently poor reading comprehension. Troilus is Chaucer's main concern embodied, and perhaps this is why his fate is so cruel, a "double sorwe" (I.1).

As I have shown, Chaucer is a writer keenly aware of the possibility of a newly-literate audience misinterpreting his works. In order to counteract this, he uses *Troilus and Criseyde* as a platform for espousing what he views as proper reading techniques. These include a wide knowledge of literary, historical, and mythological texts, an ability to accurately predict future events through prophetic knowledge, and understanding the full "entente" of a writer. Through the connection between traditional methods of literacy education, specifically proverbs, and the constant references to the "clerkes wyse" who represent them, Chaucer identifies the good readers of his poem. He also exemplifies knowledge of Boethius, the *Iliad*, and Cassandra's story to pinpoint these moments of knowledgeable readership in his characters. Chaucer's literacy instruction is reiterated through the development of Criseyde as a careful reader, in contrast to Troilus's stagnation. Her achievement in this regard allows her to marry Diomedes, another capable reader, and fulfill the medieval romantic "happy" ending.

Works Cited

Allen, Elizabeth. "Chaucer Answers Gower: Constance and the Trouble with Reading." *ELH* 64.3 (1997): 627-655. Print.

Bäumli, Franz. "Varieties and Consequences of Medieval Literacy and Illiteracy." *Speculum* 55.2 (1980): 237-265. Print.

Bloomfield, Morton W. "Distance and Predestination in *Troilus and Criseyde*." *Troilus and Criseyde*, ed. Stephen A. Barney. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006. 451-475. Print.

Chaucer, Geoffrey. *Troilus and Criseyde*, ed. Stephen A. Barney. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006. Print.

Miner, John Nelson. "Schools and Literacy in Later Medieval England." *British Journal of Educational Studies* 11.1 (1962): 16-27. Print.

Ross, Valerie. "Believing Cassandra: Intertextual Politics and the Interpretation of Dreams in *Troilus and Criseyde*." *The Chaucer Review* 31.4 (1997): 339-356. Print.

Taylor, Karla. "Proverbs and the Authentication of Convention in *Troilus and Criseyde*." *Troilus and Criseyde*, ed. Stephen A. Barney. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006. 538-553. Print.

Warren, Victoria. "(Mis)Reading the Text of Criseyde: Context and Identity in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*." *The Chaucer Review* 36.1 (2001): 1-15. Print.