

## *The Audience of Chaucer's "Troilus and Criseyde"*

by Dieter Mehl

When we talk about Chaucer's audience we can mean very different things. We usually think of the poet reading his latest tale to a courtly circle of aristocratic men and women, including, perhaps, the king himself, as on the charming *Troilus* frontispiece of the Corpus Christi Manuscript.<sup>1</sup> Many recent critics have rightly insisted on the fact that Chaucer's poetry was written for a live performance, not for the study, and that this must have very definite consequences for our way of understanding these poems. There is no doubt that Chaucer belongs to a tradition of oral poetry, that he is essentially pre-Gutenberg, and that serious critical distortions result if we read him with the kind of expectation that the European novel from Richardson to James Joyce has helped to create. But it has also been observed that this particular audience at the court of Richard II is, for us, only a piece of historical fiction.<sup>2</sup> Whatever reality it may have had for Chaucer, for us it can never be more than an abstract reconstruction which does not really affect our experience when we read Chaucer.

There is, however, another, less specific kind of audience: Chaucer himself often mentions the more solitary and bookish reader who, like the Clerk of Oxenford, has a few manuscripts "at his beddes heed," and at the outset of *The Book of the Duchess* he pictures himself as a person who, troubled by insomnia, picks up a book, which then promptly sends him to sleep. I do not suggest that the poet wrote his works for that particular

Reprinted by permission of the author and George Allen & Unwin, Ltd., from *Chaucer and Middle English Studies in Honour of Rossell Hope Robbins*, ed. Beryl Rowland (London: Allen & Unwin, 1974), pp. 173-89. The original pagination is indicated between slashes. The Afterword was written for this anthology.

purpose, but I am sure that we take too limited a view of the kind of poetry he intended if we think of his audience only in terms of a well-defined group on one or two particular occasions. Chaucer, as is evident from every one of his major works, was deeply concerned with the function of literature within our experience of reality and our desire for wisdom and reliable authority. The ending of *Troilus* suggests very strongly that he saw himself, among other things, as a potential classic or at least as an author whose appeal would reach beyond the limits of his immediate /174/ surroundings and — more importantly — beyond the sphere of his personal control. When, in the Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*, he warns the reader of what is to come and asks him to skip a story if he does not approve of it, he is obviously not talking to the courtiers listening at his feet, but rather to the anonymous reader of one of the many manuscripts that were soon to circulate. It is this audience he has in mind when at the end of *Troilus* he expresses his anxiety about the formal integrity of his book and its transmission for the benefit of future generations. It is an audience that is, almost by definition, undefinable, unpredictable and independent of time and place; but it is not necessarily out of the author's reach. On the contrary — Chaucer seems to have been well aware of the challenge presented to his poetry by his consideration for such a wider appeal and he must have wondered, as many poets did before and after him, how he could extend his own influence beyond the personal recital. One of the obvious and traditional means of doing this is to incorporate into the text the idea of a close relationship between the author and his public, a relationship that would thus not depend on the actual presence of the author.

In a simpler form this problem applies to many of the so-called "popular" romances, many of which are, as Richard L. Greene once said of carols, only "popular by destination," not "by origin." The thirteenth-century romance of *Havelok the Dane* provides a good example. It is told by a lively entertainer who is evidently anxious to establish a friendly and sociable contact with his audience. Before launching into his tale he wants to make sure of a relaxed atmosphere and, like Chaucer's Pardoner, asks for a drink:

At the beginning of ure tale  
 Fil me cuppe of ful god ale;  
 And y wile drinken, er y spelle,  
 That Crist us shilde alle fro helle!<sup>3</sup>

The usual interpretation of these lines is that the poem was composed by a minstrel who would often recite it in some public place. This may of course be true of the first performances, but the work as we have it is a carefully constructed, highly rhetorical poem, neatly copied into a manuscript that could hardly be called a minstrel's book. It is a distinctly literary product and this means that the social occasion has become, as it were, fossilized; it has been turned into a literary motif designed to give to the poem an air of convivial spontaneity which survives even when we read *Havelok* in the study, far from any available "cuppe of ful good ale."

Spontaneity, as many modern theatre productions designed in /175/ the name of spontaneity have proved, is as a rule unique and not repeatable; but poetry, as Keats knew and demonstrated, can preserve this spontaneity and give an impression of fresh and transitory uniqueness at every reading. Every time we read *Havelok* we are included in an audience that is independent of the particular occasion and we are, at least to a certain point, persuaded to react to the poem in the same way as its first audience. In this sense, what Geoffrey Shepherd says of *Troilus* is true of *Havelok* and many less sophisticated poems as well: "Chaucer has convincingly stylized in permanent form the ephemerality of a living entertainment and the mobility of actual delivery."<sup>4</sup> This is a very good description of one important aspect of poetry that is at the same time oral and literary, composed for a live performance, but also meant to be preserved for an unlimited number of future performances.

More sophisticated poets have used subtler and less conspicuous means of controlling the reader's response, often in a way that openly admits the artificial and contrived character of such a relationship. In this respect, the English novelists of the eighteenth century are not as original as is sometimes assumed: Fielding's officious, patronizing and yet deferential concern for the good will of his reader can, I believe, teach us a good deal about the practice of earlier writers like Chaucer. Sterne is perhaps an even better example because his grotesque exaggerations of some of the traditional formulas adopted by sociable narrators can startle even the most innocent reader into an awareness of the author's method: "How could you, Madam," exclaims the author at the beginning of a new chapter, "be so inattentive in reading the last chapter?"<sup>5</sup> Why "Madam"? Surely, the novel is not just addressed to ladies? In fact, there are several places in the book where exactly the opposite is implied; but at this particular point, it is obviously the ladies' attention that is more important or more likely, and when we realize the extremely delicate nature of the question at issue, the author's comic intention becomes

very clear.

Chaucer, in his rather more subdued way, achieves very similar effects. Like Sterne and like Gottfried von Strassburg with his insistence on the "edele herzen" before him, he does not treat his imaginary audience as an amorphous assembly of identical minds, but he makes pointed discriminations when it suits his purpose. He creates the illusion of a lively and mutual relationship between the fictional narrator, who has been singled out so often and so out of proportion in recent criticism, and the fictional audience with which we are asked to identify ourselves.

That this fictional audience has its own very definite kind of reality will be felt by most readers because as we follow the poet /176/ through his narrative there emerges a clear picture of the sort of listeners this story is addressed to and of the response that is expected of them. It is not a static picture and it is by its very nature not to be confused with the actual court circle to which the poem was perhaps first read. Even if we did not know anything at all about Chaucer's real audience, the poem would still give us a very lively and precise idea of the quality of mind it wants to appeal to and of a personal relationship it seeks to establish between narrator and listener or reader. The poem, as it were, creates its own audience and it implies a set of expectations which it partly fulfils and partly disappoints. Taken in this sense, the term "fictional audience" describes a very important aspect of the poem's rhetoric and can be useful in approaching many problems of interpretation.<sup>6</sup>

At the outset of *Troilus*, Chaucer, developing a hint from Boccaccio, addresses himself to the lovers among his audience, but not, as Boccaccio did, to ask for their personal sympathy and pity, but to appeal to their superior experience. Only they can really appreciate what is to come and only they can therefore react in the right way, which is, not to judge, but feel sympathetic compassion for the characters in the story and for all who are in similar pain. To move his audience to such pity is the poet's chief object:

For so hope I my sowle best avaunce,  
To prey for hem that Loves servauntz be,  
And write hir wo, and lyve in charite,  
And for to have of hem compassioun,  
As though I were hire owne brother dere. (47-51)

By suggesting this distinction among his audience, the poet sets up a standard by which we are to judge ourselves and our response to the

story. There is a challenge in the poet's claim that only certain members of his audience can really understand his poem. Again *Tristram Shandy* can illustrate this technique in its more extreme form: "I told the Christian reader — I say Christian — hoping he is one — and if he is not, I am sorry for it — and only beg he will consider the matter with himself, and lay not the blame entirely upon this book, — I told him, Sir —" (VI, 33). Chaucer does not, of course, carry the trick as far as Sterne, but the effect is not entirely different. He forces us into a reflection on how far we ourselves qualify for inclusion in his audience. The point is not so much that, as one critic says, "the poem is addressed to lovers, not to theologians,"<sup>7</sup> but that there is a provocative tension between the ideal audience the poet seems to envisage and our own particular and necessarily limited reading. Once alerted to the poet's claims, /177/ the reader will become more self-conscious and more aware of the variety of possible responses.

In the course of the poem the lovers among the audience are several times singled out as the only people whose understanding and experience can make up for the shortcomings of the poet. This is, of course, a fairly conventional rhetorical device, but Chaucer often elaborates it in a way that makes us more conscious of the fact that we are part of an audience and that more than passive submission to the poet's spell is expected of us. Both the conventional and the more personal touch come out in the appeal to the experienced lovers to imagine the intensity of Troilus' experience:

Of hire delit, or joies oon the leeste,  
Were impossible to my wit to seye;  
But juggeth ye that han ben at the feste  
Of swich gladnesse, if that hem liste pleye!  
I kan namore, but thus thise ilke tweye,  
That nyght, bitwixen drede and sikernesse,  
Felten in love the grete worthynesse. (III, 1310-16)

Boccaccio is far more conventional at this point.

At other points in the poem, however, it is not the lovers to whom the story is specifically addressed. Troilus' conversion to love in the first book is presented as a warning to "Ye wise, proude, and worthi folkes alle," (I, 233) and at the end of the poem it is the "yonge, fresshe folkes, he or she" (V, 1835) who are the particular object of the poet's concern. The function of these varying appeals is again a sharpening of our



awareness of the poem's different levels of meaning and our active response.

More interesting and provocative is the poet's appeal to the audience's judgement in questions concerning the characters of the story. We are sometimes told by historically-minded critics that medieval poets, including Chaucer, were not interested in drawing psychologically consistent characters. This is true to a point, but only to a point, because at certain stages of the story Chaucer does invite us to form our own judgement of a character in terms that go beyond the stereotyped situation and can only be defined by the psychology of human behaviour. The most elaborate instance is Chaucer's ambiguous statement about Criseyde's complicity in the lover's meeting arranged so resourcefully by Pandarus. When he asks her to dinner at his house it is, in view of his previous strategy, only natural that she suspects a plot:

Soone after this, she gan to hym to rowne,  
And axed hym if Troilus were there. /178/  
He swor hire nay, for he was out of towne,  
And seyde, "Nece, I pose that he were;  
Yow thurste nevere han the more fere;  
For rather than men myghte hym ther aspie,  
Me were levere a thousand fold to dye." (III, 568-74)

This is not completely reassuring and Criseyde has every reason to remain unconvinced, but Chaucer, in one of his most brilliant auctorial interventions, leaves the situation open:

Nought list myn auctour fully to declare  
What that she thoughte whan he seyde so,  
That Troilus was out of towne yfare,  
As if he seyde therof soth or no;  
But that, withowten await, with hym to go,  
She graunted hym, sith he hire that bisoughte,  
And, as his nece, obeyed as hire oughte. (III, 575-81)

That Criseyde is not, in fact, reassured becomes clear from the following stanza where she asks him to be discreet whatever he may do with her.

In view of this deliberately unexplicit treatment of Criseyde's state of mind, the attempt of some critics to leap to her defence and prove her complete ignorance of Pandarus' scheme seems to me rather touching and, at any rate, to miss the point, because it is obvious that the audience

is not given a piece of precise information, but an incomplete and therefore ambiguous statement that demands an active effort of imagination and judgement.<sup>8</sup> Each reader has to make up his own mind about Criseyde at this point, as at many other points of the story, and attempts by critics to make up his mind for him or to prove that Chaucer does, in fact, suggest a clear-cut answer to his question, should be regarded with suspicion. What the poet asks, as Fielding does so frequently in *Tom Jones*, is simply this: "What would you think if a living person into whose mind you cannot penetrate behaved like Criseyde?" The poet wants to present us with the same kind of uncertainty, pleasure and provocation that we meet in our daily relationship with complex and unpredictable human beings. He makes us aware that a poetic characterization is but an outline that has to be filled in by every member of the audience according to his own experience and knowledge of human nature.

Chaucer's use of direct intervention by the narrator to draw the reader's attention to the artificial nature of his narrative can be seen in two other places in the second book, where two possible objections of the readers are answered before they even occur to most readers. /179/

The first is the famous passage describing historical changes and their influence on our attitude towards stories of the past. There may be, says Chaucer, among his audience a lover who, while listening, thinks to himself that he would have gone about love-making in a very different way. Nowhere else in Middle English literature — as far as I know — do we find this acute consciousness of the problems of historical fiction. At first sight we may feel that what Chaucer says here does not really apply to his treatment of Troilus and Criseyde because in many ways he has made his characters contemporaries of his audience. At least it can hardly be said that he has deliberately removed them from the manners and the sensibility of the fourteenth century. This is obviously not an example of historical pastiche, like the *Waverley* novels, for Chaucer does not intend that: he wants to make clear that these differences between periods are not more surprising and no more relevant than differences between individual human beings. His intervention here is obviously an appeal to his audience to distinguish between the ephemeral literary form and the genuine matter that cannot be made obsolete by linguistic and cultural changes. The responsibility for a true appreciation of the story is thus again returned to the audience and any potential criticism of the poem's style on the grounds of simple realism is refuted in advance.

Later on in the book an even more surprising kind of objection is

singled out and crushed, "with a fine show of indignation."<sup>9</sup> Again some particular members of the audience are separated from the rest and we are warned not to identify ourselves with them:

Now might som envious jangle thus:  
 "This was a sodeyn love; how might it be  
 That she so lightly loved Troilus,  
 Right for the firste syghte, ye, parde?"  
 Now whoso seith so, mote he nevere ythe! (II, 666-70)

To reproach Criseyde for falling in love too hastily would be far more appropriate in the case of *Il Filostrato* where things do indeed develop rather rapidly. Chaucer, however, goes out of his way to avoid any impression of undue hurry so that his intervention at first sight seems humorously pointless. In fact, it is another effective appeal for the mental cooperation of the audience. Once more we are reminded that literary fiction and reality are two very different things. Reality, as a rule, has no structure and no clearly recognizable transitions, but the poet has to select and to confine himself to a limited number of crucial moments. This is a commonplace of literary theory, but it is anything but a commonplace to be explicitly reminded of it in the /180/ midst of a most engrossing part of the story. Chaucer obviously does not care to have his audience too much engrossed by the story alone and therefore ignorant of the problems of its presentation. He also seems to urge his listeners, as at the outset and at the end of the poem, not to judge the characters by standards that are — in view of the fictional nature of his narrative — totally irrelevant.

Chaucer, it has been said, thought he was reporting a story that had actually happened. Even if this is true, it does not alter the fact that for him, the distinction between any historical Criseyde that may once have enjoyed and betrayed the love of a Trojan prince and his stylized portrait of her mattered far more than any kind of supposed accuracy. The reader is not simply encouraged to picture Criseyde as a human being of flesh and blood, although Chaucer's ambiguous rhetoric makes him do so most effectively, but he is also invited to help the poet recreate a particular emotional experience that cannot be adequately defined by literary means. By suggesting an objection which many readers might never have thought of he makes us wonder whether there are not many other possible responses to this story, whether we have, in fact, been sufficiently attentive to the text. And this constant awareness of our

duties as an intelligent audience seems to me far more important than any specific interpretation we would like to elicit from the narrative.

Several critics have claimed that Chaucer's professed-refraining from judgement is, in truth, his most effective means of judging his characters. This is, I think, one of the errors that result from too simple and anachronistic a conception of Chaucer's narrator. Nothing is gained, but a good deal is lost by putting Chaucer's tale into the mouth of a naive narrator who does not understand the meaning of his own story or commits serious errors of judgement, a "narrator" who "would have been unhappy if he had realized the effect he was producing."<sup>10</sup> It seems to me far more appropriate to see him as a poet who assumes different parts in the course of the narrative, who intentionally withholds information to sharpen our critical awareness or who pronounces simple judgements in order to suggest to us how inadequate such judgements are.

The most uncomfortable character problem in *Troilus and Criseyde*, and one that still baffles critics, is, of course, Criseyde's sudden moral collapse in the fifth book. Even a very recent introduction to the works of Chaucer repeats the traditional opinion that Chaucer "minimizes Criseyde's guilt in every way possible."<sup>11</sup> In fact, he does no such thing, but it would not be true to say that he does the opposite. I am convinced that all attempts to discover in the earlier books character-traits that would provide sufficient motives for her /181/ behaviour are beside the point. 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. Although the contrast between Troilus and the "sodeyn" Diomedes is heightened to the point of comedy, Criseyde is more easily persuaded to transfer her favours to Diomedes than Boccaccio's Criseida. "Why," a critic asks, "has Chaucer created unnecessary difficulties for himself by stressing at the same time the sincerity and beauty of her love and the suddenness and meanness of her betrayal. It would have been easy enough for him to make Criseyde's behaviour more consistent either by portraying her as an untrustworthy character from the start, as Shakespeare did 200 years later, or by softening her betrayal and making her appear less guilty (as he is claimed to have done by many critics). In fact, both alternatives have been seriously advanced in many interpretations and this genuine difference of opinion points to a real problem in the text. Perhaps this much discussed question becomes a little clearer if we see it as an aspect of Chaucer's treatment of his audience.



The poet (or, if you like, the narrator), as Chaucer presents him, is faced with the problem of having to tell a story he does not like and he cannot even find consistent. His solution is to pass the problem on to the reader and to incorporate into his work the difficulties of its composition. In this part of the book, more than in any other, we are constantly reminded of the fact that this is not a faithful image of reality, but an attempt to recapture events that have long passed out of existence, with insufficient information and the limited means of the poet's craft. We are made to distinguish between the bare story-material, the efforts of the poet and the full truth that lies somewhere behind all this and can never be recovered. It can only be tentatively approached by the groping gestures of the poet and the reader's active imagination they try to stimulate. From other parts of the poem we know perfectly well that Chaucer did not, in principle, hesitate to alter his material by inventing new details or providing motives for his characters where it suited his purpose. This makes it fairly certain that his scrupulous adherence to his source at this particular point is a calculated attitude to ensure the cooperation of the audience. Giving the stark facts of the story, he claims to have added nothing because he does not want to appear to blame Criseyde. Whether we read into this an even more devastating condemnation of the heroine or take the narrator's innocent apologies at their face value, is our own responsibility, but any interpretation that simplifies /182/ the issue or denies the need for the audience's own effort reduces the haunting provocation of the text to the level of plain statement. This is not so much a case of poetic ambiguity, but a supreme example of the way good narrative can involve the reader in the process of deciding, inferring and evaluating. And it is precisely this quality that gives us such a strong sense of the reality of Chaucer's characters.<sup>13</sup>

At this point, the poet no longer appeals to the lovers alone. Every member of the audience is included and no particular knowledge is required to appreciate the pathos of Troilus' disillusion and Criseyde's guilt, but at the same time the poet keeps us at a rational distance from his characters by constantly reminding us of the limitations of the poetic medium and his own deficiencies.

His appeal to the audience is not, however, confined to our evaluation of the characters, but applies to nearly all aspects of the poem's structure. One of the most interesting examples is the poet's treatment of time at the end of Book II. Troilus, whose pretended illness has by now almost turned into a genuine disorder, is waiting in his sickchamber while Pandarus is about to lead Criseyde to him. In the final stanza the poet

makes another appeal to the lovers' sympathy and creates a moment of intensely dramatic suspense:

But now to yow, ye loveres that ben here,  
Was Troilus nought in a kankedort,  
That lay, and myghte whisprynge of hem here,  
And thoughte, "O Lord, right now renneþ my sort  
Fully to deye, or han anon comfort!"  
And was the firste tyme he shulde hire preye  
Of love; O myghty God, what shal he seye? (II, 1751-57)

The last line takes us right into Troilus' mind; it could be described as an early example of interior monologue or reported thought which hardly reappears in English fiction before Jane Austen. But at the same time the poem breaks off abruptly ("*Explicit Secundus Liber*"). "In performance" this might even have meant the end of a sitting. There is, at any rate, a lengthy invocation at the beginning of the following book before we hear again from Troilus. After forty-nine lines the story is resumed:

Lay al this mene while Troilus  
Recording his lesson . . . (III, 50-1)

"Al this mene while" obviously means the time it has taken us to read the invocation. This deliberate confusion of two time levels is /183/ again very like Sterne's "It is about an hour and a half's tolerable good reading since my Uncle Toby rung the bell. . . ." (II, 8). It makes us conscious of the poem's careful artistry and again encourages us to dissociate the story from the way it is told. Yet at the same time we are persuaded to identify ourselves with Troilus and to enter imaginatively into his state of mind. It is a very personal and surprising version of the traditional topos which asks the audience to make up the deficiencies of the poet's art by an effort of good will and imagination, to "piece out our imperfections with your thoughts."

Modern literary criticism often draws attention to the fact that a work of fiction has no complete existence of its own, but depends on contact with a reader's mind to be brought to life. It is, to use Saussure's almost suspiciously useful terms, on the level of *langue*, not *parole*, that is to say, it is not a complete, self-sufficient statement, but a kind of abstract matrix, suggesting and allowing for an indefinite number of potential statements.<sup>14</sup> Every narrative asks us, implicitly or explicitly, to read

between the lines, to supply by our own experience, intelligence and imagination what the text has left out. Some poets, not usually the best ones, try to disguise this fact by being as explicit as possible on all important points of the story, thus leaving us very little room for independent mental co-operation; but it is in the very nature of fictional narrative that it must omit large portions of the story and it is most important for a critical understanding to recognize where these blanks occur and how the author makes use of them. What many lesser writers seem to be unaware of or try to pass over as an unavoidable failing, Chaucer deliberately exploits as a chief means of his narrative rhetoric. By directing the attention of the audience to gaps in his account at the most crucial points in the story, he makes sure that our imagination becomes active in the right direction. The simplest way of doing this is a demonstrative withholding of precise information. In some cases this may be a merely playful fussing over minor points, as in the question of Criseyde's age or the possible existence or non-existence of her children; but it becomes more disturbing when the poet confesses ignorance on such an important point as the time it took for Criseyde to give her heart (or at least the appearance of it) to Diomedes. It is a very characteristic example of Chaucer's relationship with his audience:

But trewely, how longe it was bytwene  
That she forsok hym for this Diomedes.  
There is non auctour telleth it, I wene,  
Take every man now to his bokes heede;  
He shal no terme fynden, out of drede. (V, 1086-90)

/184/ Again, this is obviously a calculated effect. If we take up the author's suggestion to do some independent source-study we shall find that it would have been easy enough for Chaucer to get some idea of a possible time-scheme from his sources, especially from Benoît, or to make up his own time-scheme; but, like Jane Austen at the end of *Mansfield Park*, he "purposely abstain[s] from dates on this occasion, that everyone may be at liberty to fix their own, aware that the cure of unconquerable passions and the transfer of unchanging attachments, must vary very much as to time in different people." This auctorial statement seems to fit Criseyde hardly less well than Edmund Bertram, and the function of the author's reticence is very much the same in each case.

Chaucer does not withhold this information in order to excuse Criseyde, but to make us aware of the very imperfections of the story, of

its many blank spaces, and this applies to all the other instances of the poet's appeals to his audience I have quoted. No narrative can give all the information any reader might require, but to deny us even information that most readers would consider essential and, in addition, draw our attention to this refusal, throws us back on our own mental resources, and this is precisely what Chaucer's poetry does.

Of course we also have to recognize the limits of this freedom the poet allows to his audience or, rather, to define the areas in which we are meant to exercise it. Most critics, without giving much thought to the problem, take for granted this lack of explicitness in Chaucer's poetry by expecting or persuading us to read between his lines to a considerable extent. But an important distinction has to be made here, for although Chaucer does leave a good many decisions to the reader, he is, as a rule, very clear about where these decisions lie and he does not encourage us to ask the wrong sort of question. Probably no two readers would quite agree on this, but I think it is important to keep in mind the difference between questions the poem really provokes and those it ignores.

To give a well-known example: one question which, I feel, we are not meant to ask, but many readers seem to like to ask, concerns the problem of marriage. From time to time it is claimed, even very recently, that this is, in fact, the crucial moral issue in the poem.<sup>15</sup> If this were so, Chaucer would indeed expect a great deal of mental co-operation from his reader, but to me, at least, the only thing the text suggests very strongly is that we are not invited to pursue this point any further than the poem does. The concept of marriage is only mentioned in a very few places and mostly in very conventional terms; it is never made a real issue. Criseyde, in her first soliloquy, /185/ refers to marriage in passing rather like the Wife of Bath as a form of power-game: "Shal noon housbonde seyn to me 'chek mat!'" (II, 754) and, in their last interview, Troilus expresses his fear that she might be conveniently married off to some Greek by her father.

The most important reference to marriage in the poem is, however, a non-reference, to be read by the learned reader between the lines of Troilus' ecstatic praise of love towards the end of the third book where he gives a fairly close paraphrase of Boece (II, Metrum 8). Several critics have noted that whereas Boece speaks of the "sacrament of mariages of chaste loves," Troilus means his own union with Criseyde. But does this really imply a criticism of Troilus's love? The argument that is used to support such an interpretation is one that turns precisely on the problem of the audience's participation: Chaucer's readers or listeners, it is said, would have noticed Troilus' misapplication of Boece. But would they



really? Chaucer's way of handling his audience suggests, on the contrary, that his readers should not notice the discrepancy or else if they noticed, nothing should be made of it. There is nothing to alert us to the presence of a real problem here, nothing to draw our attention to any basic flaw in Troilus' attitude at this particular point or to a significant silence on the part of the poet.<sup>16</sup>

It is, of course, perfectly possible for a modern or medieval reader, taking a sinister view of any extra-marital affair and of courtly love in general, to raise the question Chaucer has left alone, but this is a different kind of literary criticism from the one I am concerned with here.

Chaucer's rhetorical involvement of his audience is not arbitrary and it does not include all aspects of his story, but it concentrates on a number of important points where central questions of interpreting the story are at stake. Moreover, the poet does not leave us without any help or at least a precise idea of how we are to exercise our critical faculties. The first lines of the poem set the tone and describe very clearly the spirit in which all the following story should be read. This spirit underlies all the poem's rhetoric and its provocative silences, and as most readers feel — unless they are obsessed by a very naive and narrow idea of medieval Christianity — it is a spirit of sympathy and compassion for the sufferings and shortcomings of others. Although the poem continually appeals to our judgement and imagination it does all along give indications as to the direction our own appraisal should take. In this sense, the poet was perfectly right and sincere when he claimed in the Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women* that — whatever the spirit of his source may have been — his own intention was to further truth and to teach people to avoid falseness and vice. /186/

The most interesting thing about this passage to me is the emphasis it puts on the effect of Chaucer's poetry on his audience. This is not a question of didactic poetry. Chaucer does not portray himself as a straightforward moral teacher, but he is evidently worried about the reception of his poetry and the whole debate in the *Prologue* concerns not so much the subjects of Chaucer's actual writing, but the audience and its response. If Chaucer had any more specific or topical reason for writing this apology for his poetry it may well be that he felt his courtly audience had mistaken his intentions and he had to be more explicit about the impression he wished to create.

The theme of the poet's effect on his audience recurs again and again in Chaucer's poetry, especially, of course, in the *Canterbury Tales* where it is implied in the very structure of the work. The way the pilgrims react to

the individual stories is sometimes nearly as interesting as the stories themselves and tells us a lot about Chaucer's poetic intentions.

The problem of the audience and the way it is affected by poetry also lies at the heart of Chaucer's much discussed retraction at the end of the *Canterbury Tales* and, we may gather, of his poetic career. I am sure it is not a sudden impulse of humourless puritanism or a righteous rejection of all art and his own poetic achievement, but an expression of a deep concern for the effect of his poetry on the reader and, perhaps, a last effort to guide our response. Chaucer does, of course, explicitly revoke *Troilus and Criseyde* in its entirety, but "revoke" in this context can only mean that he does not wish to be responsible for any unedifying influence his poem might have and that he deeply regrets the fact that this poem and the others he mentions could ever have encouraged the wrong kind of response on the part of the reader. The *Retraction*, if it is not just a private confession of faith, is surely a last earnest appeal to the reader to believe in the good intentions of the poet and to read all the poems in this spirit. In this, the *Retraction* is not unlike the ending of *Troilus* where, though perhaps more ambiguously, the audience is also forced to reconsider the implications of the story and its presentation.

Middle English narrative literature before Chaucer was for the most part written with the expressed aim of entertaining and educating a public unable to read French or Latin. Often the audience is addressed as the recipient of a particular favour and of wholesome instruction. That is, the relationship between poet and audience is strictly a one-way communication. The only kind of co-operation expected of the listeners is attention and belief. Chaucer's attitude to his reader, as we have seen, is completely different. Even where his purpose is purely educational as in the treatise on the Astrolabe, /187/ written for the benefit of a ten-year-old boy whose Latin is not yet up to the original texts, he presents himself as the unworthy transmitter of his material: "I n'am but a lewd compiler of the labour of olde astrologiens." He goes far beyond the traditional humility formula in disclaiming any merit his work might have, and he thus draws the reader's attention to the author in a way quite unprecedented in Middle English literature; and this is not a particular cunning and subtle method of self-praise, but rather an intentional *Verfremdungseffekt* to make us a self-conscious and critical audience. The colourful diversity of Chaucer criticism shows that his poetry still achieves that aim, at least among a certain section of his audience.

To claim, as I have done, that Chaucer leaves many of the crucial questions raised by his story for the audience to decide, is not to confuse



the poetry with our personal reaction to it or to return to a simple form of New Criticism, but merely to state that Chaucer's poetry consciously presupposes and depends on an intelligent and co-operative reader, more, perhaps, than any other Middle English poetry. To be one of his audience does not mean just to listen to what he tells us, but to encounter a fictional reality that is full of questions and provocative blanks and to be in mental contact with an author who makes us aware of the truly sociable character of narrative poetry. In a general sense this is, of course, true of most good poetry, but it is often forgotten or ignored by less interesting authors and not often exploited in such a deliberate way as in Chaucer's text. To pronounce on the "meaning" of his stories is nearly always the wrong kind of critical approach. It is not our business as readers and critics to discover what Chaucer "really meant," how he himself judges his characters or what he thought about courtly love, but to respond to his appeal and participate in the dialogue his poetry wants to provoke.

Again, a classic statement of this kind of relationship occurs in *Tristram Shandy*, and though the critical vocabulary is clearly dated, due to "chaunge in forme of speche," it describes a fundamental quality of Chaucer's writing:

Writing, when properly managed, (as you may be sure I think mine is) is but a different name for conversation: As no one, who knows what he is about in good company, would venture to talk all; — so no author, who understands the just boundaries of decorum and good breeding, would presume to think all: The truest respect which you can pay to the reader's understanding, is to halve this matter amicably and leave him something to imagine, in his turn, as well as yourself. (II, 11)

In using the words of an eighteenth-century practitioner of the art /188/ of fiction I will not, I hope, appear to be blurring basic historical differences. It hardly needs saying that Sterne activates the reader's mind in a completely different direction and to completely different ends and that the audience Chaucer has in mind is very unlike the eighteenth-century reading public. And yet, the explicit appeal to its imagination and judgement, the teasing omission of information and unambiguous guidance reveal the same awareness of the limits and potentialities of poetic fiction. To say that "no author, who understands the just boundaries of decorum and good breeding, would presume to think all" seems to me a very Chaucerian statement — although Chaucer would

have seen the problem as one of rhetoric and "curtesie" rather than of decorum and good breeding. Consciously or not, Chaucer seems to have realized that to engage the readers' minds in a process of imaginative exploration and sympathetic evaluation can be a more effective means of instruction than anything that can be achieved by over-explicit and unquestioning didactic poetry.

## Notes

1. On the significance of the frontispiece see the interesting but highly speculative article by Margaret Galway, "The 'Troilus' Frontispiece," *MLR*, 44 (1949), pp. 162-77.

2. "Geoffrey Chaucer reading aloud to certain groups in the late fourteenth century is for us a fiction; what remains is Geoffrey Chaucer addressing us from the printed page." Paul F. Baum, *Chaucer: a Critical Appreciation* (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 1958), p. 204. A similar suggestion with regard to the *Troilus* frontispiece is made by Derek S. Brewer in his excellent interpretation of the poem in W. F. Bolton (ed.), *Sphere History of Literature in the English Language*, I, *The Middle Ages* (London: Sphere Books, 1970), pp. 195-223: "It (i.e. the frontispiece) might itself even be a product of the poem's power to create the sense of a listening group" (p. 196). Brewer's interpretation agrees with mine in a number of important points.

3. I have slightly modernized the text by W. W. Skeat, 2nd edn, rev. by K. Sisam (Oxford: 1915). On the artistry of the poem see Judith Weiss, "Structure and Characterization in *Havelok the Dane*," *Spec.*, 44 (1969), pp. 247-57, and my *The Middle English Romances of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries* (London: Routledge, 1968), pp. 161-72.

4. G. T. Shepherd, "Troilus and Criseyde," in *Chaucer and Chaucerians: Critical Studies in Middle English Literature* (London: Nelson, 1966), p. 72.

5. *Tristram Shandy*, I, p. 20. I quote from the edition by Ian Watt (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965).

6. I am here, of course, indebted to a number of recent works on narrative theory. One of the most interesting accounts of *Troilus and Criseyde* from this point of view is to be found in Robert M. Durling, *The Figure of the Poet in Renaissance Epic* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1965), pp. 44-66. There are also some very interesting observations on the audience of *Troilus* in Robert O. Payne, *The Key of Remembrance: A Study of Chaucer's Poetics* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1963), pp. 228-32.

7. See Durling, op. cit., p. 48.

8. See the rather one-sided interpretation by Robert P. apRoberts, "The Central Episode in Chaucer's *Troilus*," *PMLA*, 77 (1962), pp. 373-85.

9. See E. Talbot Donaldson, *Chaucer's Poetry: An Anthology for the Modern Reader* (New York: Ronald Press, 1958), p. 970.

10. See E. Talbot Donaldson, "Criseide and Her Narrator," in *Speaking of Chaucer*

(London: Athlone Press, 1970), pp. 65–83; the quotation occurs p. 77.

11. See S. S. Hussey, *Chaucer: An Introduction* (London: Methuen, 1971), p. 76.

12. See Hans Käsmann, "‘I wolde excuse hire yit for routhe.’ Chaucers Einstellung zu Criseyde," in Arno Esch (ed.), *Chaucer und seine Zeit: Symposium für Walter F. Schirmer* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1968), pp. 97–122; the quotation occurs p. 110. Käsmann's essay gives a particularly clear and thorough account of the difficulties of interpretation.

13. See Payne, op. cit., p. 182: "a fair share of the illusion of reality comes not from the actual processes of characterization, but from the affective immediacy of the moral and emotional problems within which the existences of the characters are defined."

14. See the interesting discussion of these problems in Hans Robert Jauss, *Literaturgeschichte als Provokation* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970), pp. 144–207.

15. I am largely in agreement with Derek S. Brewer on this point; see his "Love and Marriage in Chaucer's Poetry," *MLR*, 49 (1954), pp. 461–4. The question has been reopened by Käsmann whose interpretation is rather different on this point than the one suggested here.

16. See T. P. Dunning, "God and Man in *Troilus and Criseyde*," in Norman Davis and C. L. Wrenn (eds), *English and Medieval Studies Presented to J.R.R. Tolkien on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1962), pp. 164–82, especially pp. 175–6, and H. Käsmann, p. 118.

### Afterword: 1979

Since this article was written, it has become almost a critical fashion to direct as much attention at the reader and his response as at the text itself. The danger of this approach is that it tends to put the individual reader's psychological disposition in the place of the author's voice and makes our subjective impressions the chief guide.

This is not, however, what I tried to do here. My main concern was with the reader implied in the narrative itself, and I still feel that Chaucer's poetry involves the audience in the process of seeing, understanding and judging to a degree quite unusual in Middle English literature. It would be foolish to deny, however, that the poet has a definite point of view of his own and that he is far from indifferent. In the case of *Criseyde*, for instance, he insistently emphasizes the difficulties of judging a person whose real motives we can only infer from a distance of many centuries, but he is by no means uncertain about his standards and far from simply exonerating his heroine. What he wants is to prevent the reader from enjoying his own moral superiority. Pity and an awareness of human frailty are to be our final reactions. In reading Chaucer we have an exhilarating sense of being in the company of a particularly wise, tolerant and kind human being and it is this imaginative companionship that

makes each new reading of *Troilus and Criseyde* a challenge and a pleasure.

A more detailed and comprehensive account of Chaucer's narrative art and its relationship to its audience may be found in my book *Geoffrey Chaucer: Eine Einführung in seine erzählenden Dichtungen*, Grundlagen der Anglistik und Amerikanistik, 7 (Berlin, 1973); I have used some of the material again in my article, "Chaucer's Audience," *Leeds Studies in English New Series*, X (1978) 58–73.

D.M.



# Chaucer's *Troilus*

## Essays in Criticism

edited by

STEPHEN A. BARNEY

Since the Norton *Troilus* did not appear in time, I am making PDF's of some of the essays that were to be in available to you and substituting other essays. Please respect the copyright of these authors.

1980

Archon Books

Hamden, CT