

***Privitee, Habitus, and Proximity:  
Conduct and Domestic Space in  
Chaucer's Troilus and Criseyde***

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When William Faulkner describes a decaying Southern mansion or Jane Austen the wonders of Pemberley, modern readers add our knowledge of the physical dimensions of such residences and their class and gender markers to the words on the page and enrich our reading experiences; we can 'see' these houses both physically and interpretatively. But since few examples of medieval English houses have survived into the twenty-first century, it's harder for us to pick up the subtleties that medieval authors may have incorporated into their works when they make specific references to domestic architecture and activities. A good case of this is found in Geoffrey Chaucer's tragedy *Troilus and Criseyde*. Though most of its action takes place within carefully-described medieval residential settings, our unfamiliarity with the cues Chaucer so painstakingly provides leads us to miss many of the subtleties of his description that would have struck his contemporary audience. And those missed cues, in turn, may lead us to misread the text and the actions of one of the title characters.

Modern readers often perceive Chaucer's Criseyde as timorous, vacillating, and indecisive—and those are just the ones who are being kind to her. My project here is to look at Criseyde in a new light, inspired by what Roberta Gilchrist calls "gender archaeology" which she defines as "the relationship between material culture and the social construction of gender,"<sup>1</sup> specifically aspects of gender and space. She connects this to the concept of *habitus*, "a common-sense knowledge of how to proceed as a man or woman in one's community."<sup>2</sup> By looking at what Chaucer specifically says about Criseyde's environment, her physical surroundings, her behavioral patterns, and her social interactions, I hope to show that Criseyde's behavior is more understandable—if, perhaps, still as unforgivable. I also hope to show that the stereotypical literary-critical perception of Criseyde as a woman

isolated and governed by fear is not entirely warranted by the physical circumstances of Chaucer's settings.<sup>3</sup>

Criseyde, when we meet her in the poem, is represented as dwelling in a residence appropriate for a wealthy widow in fourteenth-century London, as Chaucer would have known such households. In a large, sophisticated *paleis*, she resides

with swich meyne  
As til hire honour nede was to holde,  
And wel she was dwellynge in that cite,  
Kepte hir estat. (I, 127-30)<sup>4</sup>

Her *habitus* is thus established for Chaucer's immediate audience and modern readers. She resides in a *paleis*, a luxurious dwelling, with a *meyne*, an entourage, which helps to maintain her *honour*—her reputation—and her *estat*—her social status. This is not a middle-class widow but a very wealthy one, perhaps even an aristocratic one. The first picture of Criseyde interacting with other people is in a very public space for women—the large temple where the people of Troy gather for worship. While much criticism of the poem focuses on Criseyde's isolation and fear, from the beginning Chaucer shows her interacting with other people in social spaces appropriate to her *estate*. Almost always she is accompanied by the attendants expected of a wealthy widow interested in preserving her public appearance of chastity—especially important to Criseyde's political circumstances and to the expectations of Chaucer's upper-class readers, whose ladies also lived by these rules.

Since his audience was unlikely to have seen a pagan temple, Chaucer describes Troy's temple as a structure falling somewhere between the lines of a Gothic cathedral, whose nave would be flanked by aisles for roving bachelors to prowl and would feature plenty of doorways in which widows could stand, and the lines of a fourteenth-century neighborhood church such as St. Helen's Bishopsgate in London, where the convent nuns and parishioners mingled so closely that an ecclesiastical examiner had to be appointed to control the excessive socializing taking place during divine services.<sup>5</sup> As Chaucer's audience would know, such formal social settings allowed for a great deal of informal interaction, still governed by the approved codes of social etiquette. Thus we see the young prince:

This Troilus, as he was wont to gide  
His yonge knyghtes, lad hem up and down  
In thilke large temple on every side,  
Byholding ay the ladyes of the town,  
Now here, now there. (I, 183-87)

By contrast, Criseyde is alone in the crowd; unlike her later public appearances, there is no mention that members of her household accompany her, as would be expected:

And yet she stood ful lowe and stille alone,

Byhynden other folk, in litel brede,  
And neigh the dore, ay under shames drede. (I, 178-80)

As a young aristocratic male, Troilus is free to move around the temple, ‘gauring’ the crowd, but Criseyde deliberately hangs back from the prominent place a woman of her social status and wealth might take (consider, for instance, the Wife of Bath competing for the best position to join the offertory procession or the guildsmen’s wives whom Chaucer depicts in the *General Prologue*). Thus she preserves her privacy by hiding behind a “route” of people (I, 271) as a show of humility and voluntary segregation. But her humble ways are clearly a pose, since even the besotted Troilus notes that her “chere”

. . . somdel deignous was, for she let falle  
Hire look a lite aside in swich manere  
Ascaunces, “What! May I nat stonden here?” (I, 290-92)

‘Somdel deignous’ tells us and Chaucer’s contemporary audience a great deal about Criseyde’s *habitus*: as a politically suspect person she must seem humble and not fail to appear at community gatherings such as the temple service, lest she be thought even more unreliable; as the daughter of a traitor, she cannot flaunt her status as a woman “well at ese” lest she be thought to have profited from her father’s treason. But at the same time, she projects an air of aristocratic hauteur that warns off those who might challenge her right to appear in public. She is every inch a lady, negotiating the very difficult balance that protects her social position and her public persona: she understands the game and its rules as well as Chaucer’s largely-aristocratic audience would have. She must be seen as chaste, pious, and politically reliable; as a wealthy widow, she must have the protection of a male relative even if she is able to control her own finances. She must manage her large household and control its behavior, while maintaining her place in the social circles to which her rank entitles her. If she wants *privitee*, that is privacy, intimacy, a space for personal reflection, she must be very careful when and how she seeks it. In Gilchrist’s terms, she must know how to proceed in this community, and Chaucer’s initial depiction shows that she does. Her political savvy in seeking and receiving the public protection of Ector reinforces the impression that Criseyde is awake on all counts, very much aware of the traps that surround her.

Her understanding of the social rules is evidenced even further in her own house, the public and private space where she should feel safest. While Troilus, by virtue both of sex and rank, can wallow alone in his chambers without doubts being cast on his conduct, Criseyde knows she must, for the sake of her reputation, be seen by others, accompanied both by servants and women of her own class, to prevent the kinds of gossip and speculation that could damage her social standing. Thus, in Book II, when Pandarus comes to her house to initiate Troilus’ courtship, he finds her properly chaperoned by a “compagnie” of witnesses to her conduct, as would be expected:

“Wher is my lady?” to hir folk quod he;  
 And they hym tolde, and he forth in gan pace,  
 And fond two othere ladys sete, and she,  
 Withinne a paved parlour, and they thre  
 Herden a mayden reden hem the geste  
 Of the siege of Thebes, while hem leste.  
 Quod Pandarus, “Madame, God you see,  
 With al your booke, and al the compaignie!” (II, 78-86)

In this world an unescorted man—even if he is her uncle and guardian—would not be permitted private access to the lady of the house. They meet, properly, in the paved parlor of the house and converse on a bench within both sight and earshot of the chaperones. The fact that the house has a room for receiving guests indicates that this is a regular part of its owner’s activities; parlors in monasteries and convents were rooms where nuns were able to receive visitors and hold conversations with them under the aegis of a chaperone, and Criseyde’s parlor appears to serve the same function for her. She is decorously dressed in conservative widow’s weeds and wears a “barbe” on her hair, signifying her sexually unavailable status.<sup>6</sup> The *compaignie* only withdraws from earshot when Criseyde announces her intent to discuss financial matters with Pandarus: “And everi wight that was aboute hem tho, / That herde that, gan fer away to stonde, / Whil they two hadde al that hem liste in honde” (II, 215-17). Clearly in such a social setting, the need to discuss private matters in a public space was understood by both characters and Chaucer’s readers—uncle and niece are given privacy but *not* left alone. Criseyde is nominally in control of this environment, but Pandarus, of course, takes advantage of the opportunity to press Troilus’ suit—again seeking *privitee*, in public. The presence of the *meyne* affords them witnesses to ensure that their behavior is decorous, even as its placement, “fer away to stonde,” allows at least the impression of discretion.

As Gilchrist notes, “[h]abit is a practical logic and sense of order that is learned unconsciously through the enactment of everyday life.”<sup>7</sup> Chaucer’s readers would find Criseyde’s conduct reassuring; she is properly aware of the social niceties. In having her behave so circumspectly, Chaucer makes her seem more reliable and trustworthy to his audience—a sense that will make the outcome of Book V even more intolerable. Modern readers often miss these nuances; we assume that when the entourage goes far away, Pandarus and Criseyde are left alone. However, Chaucer’s careful cues make it clear that this is not the case.

When Pandarus finally leaves, Criseyde for the first time withdraws into a private space, her “closet” (II, 599), where she can sit and think. Chaucer uses this term only in *Troilus and Criseyde* and only in connection with his heroine; the term describes a small room whose purpose was to allow the homeowner to retreat for private prayer and meditation. In its coffers she might keep her treasured books, her household accounts, and other documents to be perused in private, as she pursued her accustomed duties of ordering her household. Criseyde’s *closet* is removed from

the hall and on another storey; it has a window from which she can hear the cries from the street and from which she eventually will see Troilus ride by—though he apparently will not see her. But such private time was a rare luxury for a woman of her class; she was expected to be in company, so as to avoid even the appearance of impropriety. Thus, her reflections do not last long and she goes downstairs into her garden to join her nieces and a “gret route” of her women (II, 813-19).

The importance of the garden to a medieval aristocratic woman’s *habitus* should not be underestimated: like the parlor, it linked public and private spaces. That Criseyde’s city house has a large garden further illustrates her high social status—besides the requisite kitchens and outbuildings, she can afford a large space designed for leisure. Medieval garden architecture had a strong scholarly background, drawing on the thirteenth-century works of Bartholomaeus Anglicanus and Albertus Magnus in particular.<sup>8</sup> *Herber* or *exedra* were the terms for a garden of under an acre, with a lawn, ornamental borders, and small planting beds, intended for the private recreation and meditation of a building’s inhabitants.<sup>9</sup> Particular after the appearance of *The Romance of the Rose* in the thirteenth century, the walls of such gardens were allegorized in the Middle Ages as symbols of chastity; they kept virtue in and hazard out.<sup>10</sup>

Criseyde’s garden follows Albertus Magnus’ prescriptions for the design and layout of an *exedra* or *herber*:

[About the lawn may be] planted every sweet-smelling herb such as rue, and sage and basil, and likewise all sorts of flowers, as the violet, columbine, lily, rose, iris and the like. So that between these herbs and the turf, at the edge of the lawn set square, let there be a higher bench of turf flowering and lovely, and somewhere in the middle provide seats so that men may sit down there to take their repose pleasurably when their senses need refreshment. . . . Upon the lawn, too, trees should be planted or vines trained, so that the lawn may have a delightful and cooling shade, sheltered by their leaves.<sup>11</sup>

Even in the space restraints of a city setting, Criseyde’s garden provides the space for such approved recreation:

This yerd was large, and rayled all th’aleyas,  
And shaded wel with blosmy bowes grene,  
And benched newe, and sonded all the weyes,  
In which she walketh arm in arm bitwene. (II, 820-23)

This is not a setting that was designed for private discourse; gardens were social spaces, and Criseyde’s is no exception. Medieval illustrations of gardens, such as those that frequently accompany *The Romance of the Rose*, make clear that these were settings for decorous public interaction that was clearly visible to all occupants of the garden. Albertus Magnus decrees that “[t]here should not be any trees in the

middle of the lawn, but let its surface delight in the open air” so that lines of sight are not impeded.<sup>12</sup> Criseyde believes she controls this open and public space and controls her own actions there.

That sense of security does not last long. The next day, when Pandarus returns to Criseyde’s *paleis*, he manipulates this presumably public space to speak ‘pryvely’ with her:

With that they wenten arm in arm yfeere  
 Into the gardyn from the chaumbre down;  
 And whan that he so fer was that the sown  
 Of that he spak, no man heren myghte,  
 He seyde hir thus, and out the lettre plighte. (II, 1114-20)

Pandarus takes advantage of the common practice of strolling in gardens to thrust Troilus’ letter into Criseyde’s bodice, knowing none of her company is close enough to see or hear their interchange. As Chaucer’s readers knew, aristocratic city gardens were not large enough to allow her to cry out without everyone else knowing what was going on. If she wishes to be thought chaste, Criseyde cannot put up public resistance to Pandarus’ act. In this moment, Pandarus takes control of Criseyde’s “privee” refuge, a control he will not afterwards give up.

Criseyde’s subsequent behavior, however, apparently is intended to cover the possibility that someone *might* have seen the letter being passed, since

. . . whan that she was comen into halle,  
 “Now, em,” quod she, “we wol go dyne anon.”  
 And gan some of hire wommen to hire calle,  
 And streght into hire chambre gan she gon;  
 Bot of hire besynesses this was on,  
 Amonges othere thynges, out of drede,  
 Ful pryvely this letter for to rede. . . .  
 And up it putte, and wente hire in to dyne. (II, 1170-76, 1179)

This is one of the few glimpses we get of Criseyde actually managing her household as a woman of her status would have been expected to do. Medieval conduct books are full of admonitions for women to keep busy so as to avoid the occasion of sin and to make sure that their *meyne* behaved virtuously as well, “for the standard of behavior observed by a household commonly leads to a judgment concerning the character and condition of the lord or lady.”<sup>13</sup> One of the duties of the lady of the household was to attend to her correspondence; Criseyde’s behavior is not out of the ordinary for her class in doing so, and when she returns to the great hall from her closet, she seizes Pandarus “by the lappe” as if to re-exert her control over her social sphere and leads, rather than follows, him into dinner. Pierre Bourdieu argues that such body-consciousness, or *hexis*, reinforces gender awareness and a sense of appropriate behavior and that it was reinforced from childhood on by social strictures;<sup>14</sup> here Criseyde’s assertion of authority is meant to rebuke

her uncle for his forward conduct without actually verbalizing her complaints. Her body language reminds the alert reader that she knows very well how a lady and gentleman *should* behave with each other.

And her rebuke seems to be accepted. Following the meal, Pandarus draws her into a window seat in that same hall and waits until “hire folk were alle awaye” (II, 1194) before quizzing her; unless one heard his actual words, an observer would believe he was acting within the bounds of accepted behavior. When Pandarus convinces his niece to write a return message to Troilus, she retires again to her private closet to do so, as was conventional—then goes back “in” to Pandarus at the window seat again, where she will see Troilus ride by, according to plan. A great deal of private maneuvering thus takes place in very public spaces to which Criseyde, as woman and widow, is confined by the constraints of the *habitus* of her social position and expectations. While she thinks she has regained control of the situation, Pandarus, though younger than Criseyde, shows his own mastery of the social codes in the ways he manipulates Criseyde in her own territory—and he has only just begun to work.

The same confinements of female gender will be seen the next day, when Criseyde and Troilus finally meet at Deiphebus’ house in a staged scene meant to reinforce Criseyde’s social safety. As that event plays out, Pandarus and Troilus manipulate Criseyde into a private rendezvous. First Eleyne the queen and her attendants, then Criseyde and her nieces arrive at Deiphebus’ palace and gather in the great hall to dine and talk. Pandarus contrives to have Eleyne and Deiphebus visit the “ailing” Troilus in a private chamber without attendants (whom, he plausibly argues, will make the chamber too hot and may cause harm to the sick man). As a diversion, the visiting royals are convinced to take a legal document out into the garden for discussion; they slip out a side door and down a private stair into Deiphebus’ gardens for an hour without being seen by the company in the larger hall. Thus, when Pandarus returns to the hall to fetch Criseyde, he is able to convince her to leave her chaperones behind, since all assume the two members of the royal family are still with Troilus. By conveying the impression to the company that Troilus’ bedchamber is a public, not a private, space, Pandarus is able to stage the lovers’ private meeting under the noses of the court. Criseyde has no alternative: if she protests loudly, the absence of proper supervision will be exposed and her reputation compromised. As Charles Muscatine argues, this stratagem increases the audience’s awareness of these multiple stratagems: “The reader and Pandarus know all. To Deiphebus’ guests it must appear that Criseyde sees Troilus in the company of Deiphebus and [Eleyne]. The latter, however, do not know how long Criseyde has been in the room, and they suspect none of the trickery.”<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, an outcry would expose Deiphebus and Eleyne to social scrutiny; they should no more be without supervision than she should be, for the consequences to their reputations if their private discussion was revealed would be greater. If Criseyde raised the alarm about being left virtually alone with Troilus,

she would embarrass her royal host and his sister-in-law, which might jeopardize her political protection and security. The constraints of her social situation force her to go along with the encounter that her guardian has so carefully orchestrated. Without intending to, she finds herself in a compromising situation; the tryst, however, is a threesome instead of a twosome. It is not just the man lying in bed with the lady reclining to take him in her arms; Pandarus injects himself into the space as well, peeking behind the covers, poking his niece, and pushing them both to declare their feelings, then warning them when he hears Eleyne and Deiphebus returning. Again taking protection in conventions, Criseyde leaves first, then the two royals, so that the people in the hall and the royals themselves have no idea that a privy meeting has taken place. Once again, public and private have been commingled by Pandarus' skilled manipulation of domestic space, and now Criseyde is as committed to the private exchanges as are Troilus and Pandarus.

Subsequently, the lovers continue "full warly" (III, 454) to further their acquaintance. The demands of chivalric courtship, of course, require such secrecy, and Troilus' political position prevents him from publicly courting the daughter of a traitor, no matter how widely she is praised for her piety and humility. But patience and discretion make for a poor story, so Chaucer once again puts Criseyde into a situation where *habitus* and architecture drive her choices. Pandarus, though unmarried and thus lacking a hostess, invites his niece to dine at his house. A short aside: Pandarus' dwelling is more modest than his niece's—a "hous" and not a "*paleis*." While his house is well-appointed, it is not palatial; yet its architecture is suitable for the domestic intrigues its owner has planned. Specific house names were significant social indicators to Chaucer's audience, and the fact that Pandarus' house is never called a *paleis* signals that it represents bourgeois rather than aristocratic architectural features; perhaps because of her late husband's wealth, Criseyde lives in a higher-class house than her young uncle does. The physical arrangement of the layout also would have been consonant with what medieval readers expected; as Barry Windeatt has argued, "Pandarus' accomplishing of the union of the lovers depends on a particular ground-plan of rooms in his house—the culmination of the interrelation of narrative and architectural structure in *Troilus*—and this becomes clearer if that night's action is imagined to take place within a structure like that of the medieval English house."<sup>16</sup>

Again, *habitus* plays its part. While no lady should put herself in a position to be caught unchaperoned at a man's house, especially after dark, she "as his nece, obeyed as hire oughte" (III, 581), though not without warning him "to ben war of goosish peoples speche" (III, 584). She believes that Troilus is out of town, and thus there is no reason to fear for her honor—but she is also properly concerned about those 'goosish' people and the damage their gossip might do to her. No obvious clues in Chaucer's text suggest that she is aware of the private plans that have been made to undermine her security. She feels that she can attend a dinner at a relative's house without compromising her *honour*, provided she takes the



expected precautions. Thus she sets out for Pandarus' house with "certein of hire owen men, / And with hire faire nece Antigone, / And other of hire wommen nyne or ten" (III, 596-98)—perhaps a larger retinue than her social status requires, but a necessary advertisement that her behavior is chaste. Even when visiting a relative, a woman must take extra care for her reputation: observance of the rules of social etiquette is particularly important to a woman whose father violated them by his treachery. Unbeknownst to Criseyde, Troilus is watching her arrival from a "litel window" in Pandarus' "stuwe." The "stuwe," a small hidden room, is apparently in the attic—a fact that Chaucer's audience would be able to visualize better than we can today. (In Chaucer's time the word *stuwe* usually meant a steam room or hot air bath; *Troilus* appears to be the first time it is used with the meaning 'a small room, a closet.')

Though Criseyde obviously intends to return to her *paleis* once dinner has concluded, a convenient heavy rainstorm provides an excuse for Pandarus' insistence that Criseyde spend the night, as well as providing enough noise to drown out small sounds without keeping sleepers awake. This will facilitate the stealth needed for his machinations to work. Now the interior layout of Pandarus' house becomes crucial, particularly with regard to the sleeping arrangements. Criseyde will sleep in the curtained bed in Pandarus' well-appointed bedroom suite; her women will lie in a middle chamber around the inner room with the open door between the rooms covered only by a "traverse" or curtain. In contrast to our modern expectations of privacy, her bedchamber will be shared by her women, and so her reputation, she believes, will be protected as Chaucer's readers would have expected. Pandarus guarantees that he will sleep in the outer "hous" or hall alone as a guardian of her women, and the rest of the servants are "out of the chambre gon" (III, 676). After the sleepers dispose themselves as Pandarus has orchestrated, he then unlocks the door to the *stuwe* where Troilus is waiting in his shirt, tells him to put on a furred cloak, and opens a trap door that leads into his chamber. The two men enter Criseyde's presumably secure refuge, apparently by lowering a stair or ladder, and Pandarus stealthily "goth to the dore anon, withouten lette, / Ther as they laye, and softly it shette" behind the traverse (III, 748-49). The bedchamber has now become truly private since the chaperones are locked out; the space Criseyde thought she controlled—and was protected by—is in her uncle's hands.

This violation of her sense of security awakens Criseyde's fears. Roused from sleep she begs, "Let me some wight calle" to serve as chaperone (III, 760), but is overridden by her uncle, who insists Criseyde must receive Troilus at once. Pandarus will not even allow her to rise and dress but forces her to receive them while lying in her bed, presumably wearing only her shift (or less). In a disturbing tableaux we see Troilus, on his knees at the bed's head, with Criseyde twisting to kiss him and Pandarus hovering anxiously by their sides. Criseyde has little choice: if she publicly accuses Pandarus of bringing Troilus to her bed, she destroys her own honor. Entrapped in her uncle's (and guardian's) bedchamber, her women

locked away from her, her options are limited. Pandarus' authorization of Troilus' entrance to the room deprives her of agency, and now all the behaviors she has clung to as protection for her status are gone. Though she is in a familiar space, it is unknown territory to her; the rules no longer apply. After the lovers begin to talk, Pandarus the voyeur retires to the chimney corner, within earshot but out of sight. He remains there while the lovers' encounter plays out. Thus, their most intimate encounter has an audience snoring in the inglenook: in this poem, truly, nothing is private.

Eventually, morning comes; Troilus presumably exits through the *stuwe* along with Pandarus, who then stages his public entrance. He enters, accompanied by Criseyde's women, to tease her in her bed, where she "gan hire face for to wrye / With the shete, and wax for shame al reede; / And Pandarus gan under for to prie," thrusting his arm under her neck and kissing her (III, 1569-71) and reminding readers of the episode where he thrust the letter down her dress, invading another private space. Presumably she is still unclothed or only in her shift, having no nightgear with her; and her pointed statement that Pandarus is a fox reminds us, once again, that she is his prey. The narrator's prurient "I passe al that which chargeth nought to seye" (III, 1576) invites us to think all those censorious thoughts Criseyde was so frantic to prevent—now we too are among the goosish people, whose sense of *habitus* is outraged by the actions of uncle and niece.

Once begun, the lovers continue to meet clandestinely for at least three years, moving their trysts to Criseyde's house as well. Presumably in this period she maintains the same public persona that she has taken such pains to establish, for Chaucer gives no evidence that the affair is even suspected (unlike Chaucer's source, *Il Filostrato*, where members of Troilus' family are clearly aware of the relationship). However, when the Trojans determine to trade Criseyde to the Greeks for Antenor, the public protection that Criseyde has cultivated so assiduously apparently is for naught. Although Ector puts up a token protest, no real opposition to "selling" women prevents the exchange from being arranged. Criseyde now is forced to entertain the women of Troy, listening to their commiserations and maintaining, as best she can, her public face; her tears are attributed to her sorrow about leaving her friends and hometown. Only when they leave can she retreat from the parlor into her own chamber to mourn her situation. She cannot suddenly make known a relationship she has taken such pains to conceal, nor can Troilus publicly show his dismay at her departure. Her society has expectations about how aristocratic people are expected to behave, which trap them into a public farce that disguises their private feelings.

Now comes the part that modern readers find hardest to understand: why Criseyde consents to leave Troy and why she does not return. Yet if we consider the notions of *habitus* and private versus public space, her actions become more comprehensible, if not forgivable. As the lovers debate their course of action, Criseyde argues that she will remain a public figure in the Greek camp, able to

control her own destiny. Troilus does not agree, but he has no choice, walled in by his previous actions as Criseyde has been. His wish for her to elope with him to some faraway place or to return despite the wishes of the Trojan government are unrealistic; as a part of the royal succession, he cannot marry against his family's wishes, especially not a traitor's daughter who would jeopardize the "tyme of truwe" (IV, 58) by invalidating the exchange of Antenor. Criseyde's promises to return are equally unrealistic, even if they are what Troilus longs to hear; as a political pawn, she will have no opportunity to decide her course of conduct. When the day of the exchange comes, they must part in public, exchanging only a few words, before she is escorted away by the savvy Diomedes, who deduces the couple's relationship despite their pains to disguise it. As an older, more-experienced courtier, he correctly interprets the signs in their behavior that the Trojans have misread.

Troilus' fears that the relationship is doomed prove well-founded; Criseyde in the Greek camp has no closets or gardens or maidens around her, just male servants to offer wine and spices when she must entertain a powerful soldier alone. Inside her father's tent she is without proper chaperonage or other guarantees of her status and chastity, no safer than when Pandarus perverted the rules to take control of her rooms in Troy. This is not *pleye* but deadly serious work: she is trapped in the *habitus* of a prisoner, with no defense against Diomedes's advances. Alliance with Diomedes (marriage is never specifically mentioned) offers her a kind of respectability and a secure place in Greek society—walls to hide behind again—and she responds as a conventional widow without friends might have been expected to in Chaucer's time. No longer is she her 'owene woman, wel at ese;' she realizes 'the perel of the town, / And that she was allone and hadde need / Of frendes help' (V, 1025-27). A knowledge of how to get on in one's own community is of little assistance here; she must attempt to apply the rules to a situation for which they were not designed.

Thus, as she has throughout the narrative, Criseyde trusts her fate to the protections of convention and social expectation. Putting off Troilus' increasingly-frantic demands for her return with carefully-phrased letters, she faces the reality of her situation bluntly:

But syn I se ther is no bettre way  
And that to late is now for me to rewe,  
To Diomedes algate I wol be trewe. (V, 1069-71)

A relationship with Diomedes restores her to a social position and codes of behavior that she understands and apparently endorses; in doing so, she protects her *estate* at the expense of her *honour*. Supposedly no one knows of her clandestine affair, but she believes she has already become a by-word for betrayal; realizing this, she chooses a familiar role in the camp of her enemy. The narrator seems to sympathize with the position she finds herself in, refusing to blame her for her actions: "Men seyn—I not—that she yaf hym hire herte" (V, 1050). And if the traditional story about the composition of the *Legend of Good Women* is to be believed, at least some

of Chaucer's aristocratic readers had great sympathy for her as well.<sup>17</sup>

Understood in terms of medieval expectations about *habitus* and architecture rather than in terms of modern concepts of isolation and personal agency, Criseyde's conduct portrays her as a woman trapped in her own social spheres, behind the walls of her own constricted understanding of class and behavior. She may have been the "ferfullest wight" (II, 450) in Troy, but unlike Troilus and Pandarus, those fears give her the impetus to change her station, even if it is by a betrayal of her Trojan lover. To Chaucer's readers, both in his time and our own, this makes her "slydyng of corage" (V, 825), but she has no other frame of reference to guide her actions than the rules of aristocratic conduct on which she has relied all her life. Only Troilus, after his death, will rise above these private and personal boundaries to achieve a broader Boethian understanding of how artificial they are—and laugh. For Chaucer's audience, familiar with the difficulties of conducting a clandestine courtship in an upper-class household, aware of how little privacy women of this social class actually had, and knowing how clever people might manipulate the rules of a highly-regulated society that placed a high premium on female chastity, Criseyde's world is not isolated but social, and her choices not excusable but understandable. In the end she chooses to live not by love but by worldly expectations—and these condemn her to her role as a byword for inconstancy. Yet she remains true always to the standards and *habitus* of her own class—anachronistically, those of a late fourteenth-century aristocratic English woman. When we keep that *habitus* in mind, we as modern readers can begin to recover the cues that Chaucer's medieval audience absorbed so naturally—and thus come to a fuller understanding of one of Chaucer's most perplexing characters. Rather than seeing her as paralyzed by her fears and acting out of personal weakness, the traditional literary-critical picture, reading Criseyde as constrained and increasingly isolated by the social expectations placed on a woman of her class allows us to evaluate her public actions and choices in the social light in which Chaucer so deliberately placed her.

#### Notes

- 1 Roberta Gilchrist, *Gender and Material Culture: The Archaeology of Religious Women* (New York, 1999), p. 1.
- 2 Gilchrist, *Gender and Material Culture*, p. 14.
- 3 The rules governing upper-class women's conduct are expressed in a number of medieval courtesy books; they are widely-enough known not to merit recapitulation here. Two of the most easily accessible medieval collections of these precepts are Christine de Pizan, *A Medieval Woman's Mirror of Honor: The Treasury of the City of Ladies*, ed. Charity Cannon Willard (New York, 1989) and Geoffrey La Tour Landry, *The Book of the Knight of La Tour Landry*, Early English Text Society o.s. 33 (London, 1868).

- 4 All quotations from Chaucer are taken from *The Riverside Chaucer*, gen. ed. Larry D. Benson (Cambridge, 1987).
- 5 William Page, ed. *A History of the County of London: Volume I: London Within the Bars, Westminster and Southwark* (London, 1909), pp. 457-61; see also Gilchrist, *Gender and Material Culture*, chap. 4.
- 6 See Laura Hodges, *Chaucer and Costume: The Secular Pilgrims in the General Prologue* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 183-84. Hodges suggests further that in continuing to wear such sober clothing once she has become involved with Troilus, Criseyde is being hypocritical; I would contend, rather, that she is maintaining a social façade required by her particular political circumstances.
- 7 Gilchrist, *Gender and Archaeology*, p. 81.
- 8 Sylvia Landsberg, *The Medieval Garden* (London, 1995), passim.
- 9 Anne Jennings, *Medieval Gardens* (London, 2004), pp. 29-36.
- 10 Gilchrist, *Gender and Archaeology*, pp. 138-45.
- 11 Jennings, pp. 16-17; 40; see also Laura Howes, *Chaucer's Gardens and the Language of Convention* (Gainesville, 1997), passim.
- 12 Qtd. in Landsberg, p. 13.
- 13 Christine de Pizan, p. 125.
- 14 Pierre Bourdieu, "The Berber House or the World Reversed," *Social Science Information* 9:2 (1970), passim.
- 15 Charles Muscatine, "The Feigned Illness in Chaucer's Troilus and Criseyde," *Modern Language Notes* 63:6 (1948), 377.
- 16 Barry Windeatt, *Troilus and Criseyde: Oxford Guides to Chaucer* (Oxford, 1992), p. 195; see pp. 192-96 for an extensive reconstruction of how the rooms of both houses might have been laid out.
- 17 John H. Fisher, "The Revision of the Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women*: An Occasional Explanation," *South Atlantic Bulletin* 43:4 (1978), 79.

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