“For thee have I bigonne a gamen pleye”

Playing the Parts of Courtly Love in *Troilus and Criseyde*

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In Chaucer’s poem *Troilus and Criseyde*, the three foremost characters are neatly positioned to play traditional courtly love roles. Troilus is the courtly lover, striving for his lady’s favor. Criseyde is the love-object, available to be wooed and won. Pandarus is the intermediary, working with Troilus to win the lady. Each of these characters, however, grapple differently with the framework of courtly love. Troilus wholeheartedly embraces his role and fulfills it devotedly, unaware of the difference between the courtly roles he and the others perform and reality. His inability to recognize that difference ultimately leads to his death. Pandarus embraces his position as his friend’s intermediary equally eagerly, but he plays the role as a game. He uses his awareness of reality to act as intermediary and manipulate Criseyde into her role as love-object. When Criseyde ultimately rejects that role, Pandarus dejectedly acknowledges his defeat. Criseyde initially performs as love-object, but she is all too aware of her personhood and the consequences of the game of love. Her social role as a woman places dangers and pressures on her that greatly limit her options and that Pandarus uses against her. She eventually rejects her courtly love role in favor of her life and her personhood.

The Chaucerian narrator struggles to unify his initial acceptance of the courtly love paradigm with his growing knowledge of and sympathy for Criseyde. Initially, he, like Troilus, embraces the ideology of courtly love and Criseyde’s role as love-object therein, but he soon demonstrates that he understands the reality of the world Criseyde faces, just as Pandarus does. Unlike Pandarus, however, that reality arouses the narrator’s sympathy for Criseyde, and he grows more and more uncomfortable with the paradigm of courtly love and the roles his characters play. The narrator ultimately cannot reconcile Criseyde’s personhood to the courtly love role she is forced to perform, and he rejects that paradigm.
Penny Schine Gold’s book *The Lady and the Virgin: Image, Attitude, and Experience in Twelfth-Century France* is essential to the study of courtly love, outlining the representations and lives of women across secular and religious spheres. Gold does not discuss *Troilus and Criseyde* itself, but she investigates the secular imagery of the literary genre of romance, referencing Chrétien de Troyes’ work *Yvain* as the prototypical romance. Gold compares aspects of romance to aspects of another popular medieval literary genre, *chanson de geste*. In romance, unlike *chanson de geste*, men and women are not geographically separated. In *chanson de geste* the arena of men and war is physically distinct, while in romance, “women are no longer excluded from the scenes of battle” (20). Women are not participants in battle in *Troilus and Criseyde*, but the Trojan war certainly permeates Criseyde’s life, and she spends the final book of the poem in a war camp, crossing the battle fields to reach it. Additionally, the role of women in romances, while central to the genre, is limited: women, particularly the love interests, do not fill advisory or nurturing positions but rather serve only as objects in need of protection or rescue (Gold 23-4). The actions and emotions of men are paramount, while the women serve only as the objects of those actions and emotions: “The love felt by the woman is unimportant; rather, the woman serves as the inspiration for the passion of the man” (Gold 27). Criseyde’s own emotions are given a fair amount of weight in the poem, but her feelings are almost always in response to male emotion or action. Additionally, the men of the poem (especially Pandarus) put considerable effort into manipulating Criseyde’s emotions in order to serve the male hero’s passion.

Gold sees women in romance as potentially disrupting men’s relationships; quoting Ferrante, she says that when the conflict between the hero’s love and his larger social commitments “is squarely faced…, the ending must be tragic” (26). This tragedy indeed occurs in Chaucer’s poem, but it is not caused by any disruption of the homosocial on Criseyde’s part.
Pandarus and Troilus instead bond over the pursuit of Criseyde. She is the focal point of all the time they spend together, and Pandarus, rather than resenting Troilus’s preoccupation, cheerfully and eagerly assists him. Criseyde strengthens their relationship rather than disrupting it, performing exactly as a woman should in the homosocial system.

Furthermore, Criseyde strengthens Troilus himself and his courtliness. Troilus, rather than continually struggling to reconcile his love for Criseyde with his love of knighthood, is bolstered and strengthened as a knight by her love. Cathy Hume, in her chapter “‘Nyce fare’: The Courtly Culture of Love in *Troilus and Criseyde*” from her book *Chaucer and the Cultures of Love and Marriage*, points out how in Book III of *Troilus and Criseyde* Troilus’s military prowess is improved, along with his speech, altruism, dress, and emotional intelligence, as he strives to obtain and be worthy of Criseyde’s love (146). How can these “beneficial effects of love on those that it inflames” be reconciled with the tension Gold describes as one of the hallmarks of a romance (Hume 146)? Despite the apparent contradiction between Gold’s outline of romantic structure and the beneficial effect that love has on Troilus, Gold’s analysis presents a solution. Yvain reconciles “the call of love (identified with a woman) and the call of adventure (identified with men)” by “fighting in order to help women rather than fighting a tournament—a battle whose only purpose is to increase the reputation of the knight” (Gold 22). Troilus, in contrast, does not begin the tale fighting only for glory, and thus the conflict does not present itself. Troilus fights in war. He fights to protect Troy—and Criseyde. His warrior’s call is not at odds with the call of love but rather is bolstered by it. In this respect, Troilus begins where Yvain

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1 Eve Sedwick, in her book *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, discusses the concept of the homosocial triangle, in which women, when serving as the heterosexual objects of male desire, facilitate the platonic relationship between men. Male homosocial relationships are dependent on their mutual heterosexuality directed towards a female object, although the relationship is disrupted by the actual presence of an active woman. Criseyde, as love-object, serves to facilitate the relationship between Troilus and Pandarus as long as she performs that role.
ends. Of course, there are two centuries between Chretien’s Yvain and Chaucer’s Troilus; Troilus is a development upon, not a replica of, Yvain. Chaucer, however, clearly draws upon and ties his characters to the paradigm of courtly love developed in the romances of the earlier era.

Carolyn Dinshaw, in the chapter “Reading Like a Man: The Critics, the Narrator, Troilus, and Pandarus” from her book Chaucer’s Sexual Poetics, discusses the history of masculine criticism of Troilus and Criseyde. Dinshaw establishes a dichotomy between the feminine text and the masculine reading thereof. She identifies a history of criticism in which male critics “read like men”—although she maintains that “reading like a man’…is not necessarily the destiny of male anatomy” (29). This branch of criticism is headed by E. Talbot Donaldson: “like Troilus and the narrator, he is one of ‘those who love Criseide.’ Indeed, he claims that ‘almost every male reader of the poem’ (p. 9) falls in love with her” (30). Dinshaw identifies the mutual reading of Criseyde as love-object as the crucial aspect of literary criticism aligning Donaldson, and with him all critics who read like men, with Troilus.

Derek Brewer, in his essay “Troilus’s ‘Gentil’ Manhood,” demonstrates that same identification with Troilus. Neither he nor Troilus recognizes that Troilus is playing a role; they both wholeheartedly buy into his performance as courtly lover. Brewer initially establishes Troilus as separate from the identity of the courtly lover, saying that “[t]o be in love is not essential to Troilus’s identity… He is fully himself when he is seen at the beginning of the poem “guiding” his young knights, looking at ladies, and mocking lovers” (239). The fittingness of the courtly love role for Troilus is apparent, however, as soon as he sees Criseyde. Love strikes him, and he falls into love sickness. As soon as Criseyde enters his life, Troilus plays the role of courtly lover to perfection. Brewer points out, “His sickness is the product both of his naturally
fine temperament and of his culturally produced *gentilesse*, the combination which constitutes his manhood” (243). *Gentilesse*—nobility, courtliness, inextricable from the role of the courtly lover—is essential to the definition of Troilus’s masculinity. Cathy Hume acknowledges the same tie: “In late medieval England and France, participation in the courtly culture of love was a way of expressing noble identity” (145). Once the love-object enters his life, Troilus’s personal identity is completely tied up in his identity as a courtly lover.

Brewer also recognizes the link between Troilus’s military prowess and his role as courtly lover. He acknowledges Troilus’s triumphant return to Troy, “looking as knightly a sight as Mars the god of battle” (241). He goes on to tie this image to Criseyde’s growing love for Troilus: “the sight of him is connected with all the praise given to him by Pandarus, and her own social knowledge of him. The poet in then looking forward to Criseyde’s eventual love for him says that eventually it was “‘his manhood and his pyne’ (II, 676) that made her love him” (242). Troilus embodies the courtly lover, striving to be worthy of his lady’s love. When he achieves it, he offers his submission as a sign of his devotion.

Brewer’s reaction to this declaration of submission ties him inextricably to Troilus. He too believes that the submission of the lover to the lady in a courtly love structure actually reflects reality:

[Under] the guidance of love [Troilus] himself will not seduce Criseyde. On the contrary he yields to her all the power. The superiority, the “governance,” of the beloved lady, and the humility of the lover are part of the convention of romantic love… Conventional as these may be, it is important to recognize that Criseyde’s status is genuinely superior and humility in love is genuine in Troilus. 248

Brewer, like Troilus and Donaldson, internalizes the role of courtly lover at the expense of reality. They all believe that Troilus’s declarations of submission and fealty to Criseyde’s governance are sufficient to enact that power dynamic—in Brewer’s words, to make Criseyde’s
status genuinely superior. However, the empowerment of women in the courtly love paradigm is a façade; in reality, they are trapped in a system that exclusively benefits men and their homosocial relationships. Troilus unreservedly believes in the power of courtly love. Criseyde, however, has to live in the reality of a world in which she is ensnared rather than empowered. Brewer is correct in saying that Troilus himself does not seduce Criseyde; the blindness with which he plays his part does not allow him to do so. Pandarus, however, is able to see beyond the parts played into the reality of the world, and he uses that knowledge to manipulate and seduce Criseyde for his friend. Pandarus’s role enables Troilus to remain—perhaps willfully—blind to the realities of Criseyde’s life and the impact of the courtly love-object role to which he and Pandarus confine her.

Troilus begins as a carefree youth, totally ignorant of love. He looks indiscriminately at all the women he desires, “for no devocioun / Hadde he to non, to reven hym his reste” (Chaucer I.187-8). He disparages love and lovers, saying he has heard “a labour folk han in wynnynge / Of love, and in kepyng which doutaunces; / And whan youre prey is lost, woo and penaunces” (I.199-201). Unfortunately for Troilus, his own words are turned against him. The god of love is angered and takes his revenge, making Troilus exactly like those at whom he scoffs, and Troilus transforms into a courtly lover. When he first lays eyes upon Criseyde, “sodeynly hym thoughte he felted yen, / Right with hire look, the spirit in his herte: / Blissed be Love, that kan thus folk converte!” (II. 306-8). Love converts Troilus, and he immediately embodies the part of the courtly lover, feeling as though he might die for the affections of his lady. His disparaging of other lovers becomes the prophecy of his own fate.

As Brewer and Hume observe, Troilus uses his position as warrior to fulfill his role as courtly lover. The two roles are essentially one and the same. When Pandarus visits Criseyde,
intent on wooing her for Troilus, he finds his opening in her questions about the war. Criseyde asks him “how Ector ferde, / That was the townes wal and Grekes yerde” (II.153-4). Pandarus quickly redirects the conversation from Hector to Troilus:

And ek his fresshe brother Troilus,
The wise, worthi Ector the seconde,
In whom that alle vertu list habounde,
As alle trouthe and alle gentilesse,
Wisdom, honour, freedom, and worthinesse. II.157-61

Pandarus segues straight from Troilus’s strength in battle to his virtues as a knight and courtly lover because the two are essentially the same. Troilus’s personal identity is completely tied up in his identity as a courtly lover, both to him and those close to him.

Even when Criseyde has abandoned Troilus, he clings to his courtly role. When he hears that Criseyde is to be traded to the Greeks, “[l]ove him made al prest to doon hir byde, / And rather dye than she sholde go” (IV.162-3). The most salient meaning of this ambiguous line is that Troilus would rather die than have Criseyde leave. However, it simultaneously expresses the desire that she die rather than leave him and in that way fulfill the role of the courtly love-object. Troilus completely ignores Criseyde’s own personhood and her desire to live and survive. In lines 1527-33 of Book V, when responding to Cassandra’s prophecy of Criseyde’s betrayal, Troilus compares Criseyde to Alceste, who chose to die in exchange for her husband’s life: “She chees for him to dye and go to helle, / And starf anoon” (V.1532-3). Troilus desires that Criseyde return to him from the Greek camp or die trying.

When it becomes clear that Criseyde has chosen instead to betray Troilus and take up with Diomede, Troilus is completely unable to comprehend her abandonment of her love-object role. Instead, he continues to play his own role as courtly lover, seeking out Diomede, either in an attempt to take revenge or possibly to win back Criseyde: “And dredeless, his ire, day and
night, / Ful cruelly the Grekes ay aboughte; / And alwey most this Diomede he sought” (V.1755-7). Troilus desires to gain victory over Diomede in battle and thus theoretically win back Criseyde. Despite his best efforts, however, Troilus is not able to defeat Diomede: “But natheles, fortune it nought ne wolde, / Of others hond that either deyen sholde” (V. 1763-4). Instead, “[d]ispitously him slough the fiers Achille” (V.1806). Thus, Troilus dies tragically while desperately clinging to his role of courtly lover, killed by Achilles in his attempt to confront Diomede. Here, Gold’s paradigm of the inevitable conflict caused by men’s relationship with women and men’s relationship with war and adventure comes back into play. Gold sees the conflict between the two as unavoidably ending in tragedy (26). In the case of Troilus and Criseyde, the conflict lies between the reality of Criseyde’s life and Troilus’s absolute embrace of the courtly love paradigm. Her choice to act not as a courtly love-object but as a person who values her own life and makes difficult choices when given only bad options conflicts with Troilus’s staunch devotion to the courtly love structure. The conflict between Criseyde’s personhood and Troilus’s adamant adherence to the courtly love code must and does end in tragedy.

In contrast, Pandarus is as aware as Criseyde of the reality she faces. He recognizes both the roles available in the courtly love game and the reality of their impact. He gladly steps in to play the role of the go-between, but he does not blindly embody it as Troilus does the role of lover. Pandarus is distinctly aware of the potentially dangerous reality faced by Criseyde, a reality to which Troilus is largely blind. Pandarus balances his performance of the role and his acknowledgement of reality in order to manipulate Criseyde—and Troilus, although Troilus happily accepts the manipulation. The morality of Pandarus and the role he plays has been a tricky subject in the history of criticism of Troilus and Criseyde. Predominantly male critics, like
Brewer and Donaldson, have often been, as Dinshaw says, “in love with Criseyde” (30). They read the poem in its entirety as an expression of the courtly love paradigm traditionally found in medieval romances. The historical tendency of male critics to adhere to the courtly love structure in their readings, treating Criseyde as a love-object, aligns them with Troilus, but their attempts to purposefully confine her to that role align them with Pandarus. His treatment of Criseyde fits neatly into the framework of courtly love in which a woman is an object to won by the lover, often with the assistance of the go-between—or pandrer, the role for which Pandarus is literally named.

Eugene E. Slaughter, in his essay “Chaucer’s Pandarus: Virtuous Uncle and Friend” offers a defense of Pandarus, correlating his role in the poem to the role of the intermediary in the tradition of courtly love. Slaughter’s argument centers around the strength and goodness of the friendship between Pandarus and Troilus. He claims, “Pandarus does everything he can to save his friend from death on account of unrequited love” (192). The strength of their friendship justifies Pandarus’s embrace of the role of intermediary: “[I]n naming his fear of Troilus’s death as a reason for intervening, Chaucer’s Pandarus gives the one reason which excuses whatever he does for his friend that love can excuse” (189). Slaughter reads Pandarus as the perfect friend, enthusiastically playing the courtly-love role of the go-between to save Troilus’s life.

Slaughter acknowledges that “critics condemn Pandarus… They say that he ought to protect his niece Criseyde from love affairs, and that by his abetment he destroys his friend Troilus” (186). Slaughter insists, however, “the role of intermediary in a court-of-love poem is widely accepted as innocent” (186). This claim is far from uncontested, as many examples of literature that question or condemn the role of the go-between exist contemporarily with or prior to Chaucer’s work (Dante’s *Inferno, The Roman de la Rose*). Slaughter’s defense of Pandarus,
however, extends beyond his elision of the questionable aspects of Pandarus’s courtly love role. Slaughter ultimately fails to perceive that the clash between Pandarus’s roles as Troilus’s friend and Criseyde’s uncle means he cannot in good faith perform both roles simultaneously.

Both Pandarus and Slaughter wholly ignore Pandarus’s familial connection to Criseyde in favor of his friendship with Troilus. The two roles cannot both be faithfully performed. The role of uncle stands in opposition to the role of go-between. Hume discusses the ways in which a young woman may protect herself and be protected from amorous advances, and she mentions uncles specifically. In a quote from *The Book of the Knight of the Tower*, Hume highlights an episode in which an uncle positions himself as the protector of a virtuous woman who is amorously pursued by a knight (163). The uncle physically imposes himself between the woman and her pursuer to shield her from his advances. Pandarus, far from shielding Criseyde, aids her pursuer. His role as uncle cannot be reconciled with his role as panderer. Slaughter ignores Pandarus’s protective role as uncle and concludes, “Pandarus must be esteemed as a perfect and faithful friend...for his action conforms entirely with the notion of Guillaume de Lorris in the first part of *The Romaunt of the Rose*... [A]s Chaucer understands it, Pandarus is an ideal friend” (195). Beyond ignoring the condemnation of the role of go-between in the second part of *The Roman de la Rose*, Slaughter completely ignores Pandarus’s role as uncle in favor of his role as friend, just as Pandarus does. Pandarus cannot fulfill both roles, and he chooses his friendship with Troilus, abandoning his role as Criseyde’s uncle. Slaughter speaks of Pandarus as “virtuous uncle and friend” in his title, but the relationship with Criseyde is ultimately elided entirely.

Cory James Rushton takes an opposite view of Pandarus. He links the history of older critical readings of Criseyde to Pandarus’s relationship to her, rather than to Troilus’s as Dinshaw does. He claims that “the possessiveness of Donaldson is a milder...form of the
possessiveness of Pandarus (147). Rushton’s reading of the dynamics of the relationship between Pandarus and Criseyde articulates the imbalance and power play between them and the discomfort in the modern reader resulting from those dynamics. Rushton discusses Pandarus’s relationship with Criseyde in terms of possession, voyeurism, and potential incestuous desire for Criseyde herself. Examining the power dynamics of love, he concludes that Chaucer, through Pandarus, is playing with the disconnect between courtly love and male aggressiveness. He reminds us of the close connection between the courtly ideal of the unattainable lady and the reality of men’s power to take what they want: “Chaucer only needs to invoke the idea of the unattainable to simultaneously invoke the idea of attainment by force” (149). Rushton returns often to the Ovidian metaphor of the hunt and the sexual violence and dominance it implies, referring to Criseyde, as the narrator does, as “a songbird in the claws of a raptor” (152). While Criseyde is certainly more than a soon-dead songbird, Rushmore’s analysis highlights the power imbalance between her and Pandarus (and Troilus).

Pandarus uses that power imbalance to manipulate Criseyde, actively betraying his role as her uncle, choosing instead to play the role of intermediary. He uses his position as Criseyde’s male protector to force her to comply, threatening the loss of his guidance and protection, which would leave her with no male relatives left in Troy. Pandarus knows how vulnerable Criseyde’s position is; her father is in exile and his treachery threatens Criseyde as well. At the beginning of the poem, the people are calling for revenge against her father, Calchas. They “seyden he and al his kyn at-ones / Ben worthi for to brennen, fel and bones” (I.90-1). By leaving Criseyde behind in Troy when he flees to aid the Greeks, Calchas leaves her to bear the brunt of his treason. Only by throwing herself at Hector’s mercy does Criseyde save herself. She arouses his piteous nature, and he tells her that she may “in joie / Dwelleth with us, whil yow good list, in Troie” (I.118-9).
Of course, this promise is not kept. Criseyde is ultimately sent from Troy against her will. Even before his failure, Hector is only a distant defender. He is removed from Criseyde and her social circle; he defends all of Troy, not just her. In the end, even his protection is not enough. Hector ultimately fails Criseyde as a protector, but her father fails her first. After her father’s escape, Criseyde is left with only her uncle Pandarus as a close male guide and protector, and he would rather play the role of her pimp.

Pandarus, throughout their interactions, often omits reference their familial relationship. When he first comes to visit her, he refers to her as “my lady” (II.79) and “Madame” (II.85) while she addresses him as “uncle myn” (II.87). In the span of over two hundred lines, he addresses her as “nece” twice while she calls him uncle six times and refers to herself as his niece once. Once Pandarus broaches the topic of Troilus, however, he highlights their relationship to manipulate Criseyde. Now, he calls her niece ten times in three hundred lines, at more than three times the rate of the previous section. The final words he speaks to her before he leaves are “my blood, my nece dere” (II.594). Pandarus largely ignores his blood relationship with Criseyde except when he wants to use that relationship to threaten and control her. His friendship with Troilus is always paramount, and he uses his familial relationship to Criseyde to manipulate her into accepting Troilus’s attentions.

Pandarus knows what their relationship means to Criseyde and is unafraid to threaten its loss to gain her compliance. In addition to his protective role as older male relative, Pandarus provides Criseyde with something she desperately desires: news about the war with the Greeks. When Pandarus says to Criseyde that he has something he could tell her, Criseyde seizes upon this opening in hopes that the war is over. She asks, “For Goddes love; is than th’assege aweye? / I am of Grekes so fered that I deye” (II.123–4). Criseyde hopes the news he bears is of the end of
the war, but Pandarus replies that his news is “a thing wel bet than swyche fyve” (II.126). Pandarus dismisses Criseyde’s fear of the Greeks, claiming that the news he carries—news of Troilus’s love for her—is five times better than the end of the war would be. Later in that scene, as they are talking, Criseyde inquires “how Ector ferde, / That was the townes wal and Grekes yerde” (II.153-4). Although Criseyde asks after Hector, on whom she depends as the defender of Troy and her own personal protector, Pandarus in the space of two lines turns the conversation from him towards Troilus again. In both these instances, Pandarus turns away from the war in favor of Troilus. Criseyde relies on Pandarus as a connection to the outside world and a source of information about the war that so frightens her. Pandarus, in turn, dismisses her fear in favor of talking up Troilus.

Pandarus, however, not only dismisses but plays on Criseyde’s fear. When he introduces Troilus’s suit, he almost immediately declares that Crisyeyle holds the power of life and death over Troilus. Additionally, he ties her power over Troilus’s fate to his own, claiming that “if ye late hym deyen, I wol sterve— / Have here my trouthe, nece, I nyl nat lyen— / Al sholde I with this knyf my throte kerve” (II.323-5). This declaration holds multiple layers of threats and manipulation. If she does not choose to love Troilus, both he and Pandarus will die as a result. If Pandarus dies, or kills himself, Criseyde will be bereft of the only male relative she has left in the city, someone on whom she relies both for protection and information. Pandarus draws attention to this aspect of his threat by addressing her as niece, reminding her of the role he plays in her life. His words, however, also contain a more implicit and directly violent threat. He swears that he will, if Troilus dies of unrequited love for her, slit his throat with “this knyf,” indicating that the knife is at that time in his possession, perhaps even drawn. While Pandarus is certainly not explicitly threatening Criseyde with violence and is perhaps even unaware of the implicit threat
of his words, it is nevertheless there. Criseyde is extremely frightened by violence and war, and she is likely acutely aware of the very physical power that Pandarus has over her.

Pandarus takes pleasure in holding power over Criseyde. His delight in his machinations comes to a head in the infamous bedroom and morning-after scenes. Pandarus carefully orchestrates a union between Criseyde and Troilus. The language of the hunt returns in Pandarus’s invitation to Criseyde in which he swears “she sholde him not escape” (III.557). She makes excuses, but finally she agrees—after Pandarus threatens her: “So at the laste herof they felle at oon, / Or elles, softe, he swor hir in hir ere, / He nolde nevere come ther she were” (III.565-7). Pandarus here returns to his earlier threats of abandonment to manipulate Criseyde. Following his threats, Pandarus turns to lies. Criseyde asks him if Troilus will be there, and he boldly swears that he is out of town (III.569-70). Eventually Criseyde is persuaded—or subdued—into accepting, and the invitation scene concludes with Criseyde having “graunted hym, sith he hire that bisoughte, / And, as his nece, obeyed as hire oughte” (III.580-1).

Pandarus’s familial connection to Criseyde and the reality of the impact that his threat to withdraw from that relationship would have enable him to manipulate her so that he can properly play his courtly love role as the intermediary.

Once Pandarus has obtained Criseyde’s agreement to attend, the next level of the game begins. Despite Pandarus’s promise that Troilus is out of town, he is in fact there at Pandarus’s house. When the weather serves to trap Criseyde and her household at Pandarus’s overnight, he enacts his plan. He houses her in a private room with her accompanying household in the room just outside. Everyone sleeps, except Pandarus:

But Pandarus, that wel koude ech a deel
Th’olde daunce, and every point therinne,
What that he sey that alle thing was wel,
He thought he wolde upon his werk bigynne. III.694-7
Pandarus views the game of courtly love as “th’olde daunce.” He knows the steps, and he is able to arrange the other performers to his satisfaction. Pandarus plays the game and is not subsumed by it as Troilus is. His outside point of view enables him to manipulate the players in order to create the tale—as he refers to it in line 769—that he desires.

Pandarus uses the social pressures resting on Criseyde to force her to play her love-object role in his preferred way. He sneaks into her room in the middle of night through a “secre trappe-dore”—a passage he did not inform Criseyde about when showing her to her room (III.759). She is confused, clearly uncomfortable with his presence, and frightened by his ability to bypass her protective household. She first asks, “‘What, which wey be ye comen, benedicite?’ Quod she; ‘And how, unwist of he m alle?’” (III.7578), and then she begs, “Lat me som wight calle!” (III.760). Pandarus, however, circumvents the social forces Criseyde desires to use for her protection and turns them against her. He predicts her instincts and immediately turns her fear of damaging her reputation against her, commanding her, “No word, for love of God, I yow biseche! / Lat no wight risen and heren of oure speche” (III.755-6). When this reprimand is not enough to dissuade her, and she still wants to call someone in, he warns her against that course of action: “‘I! God forbede that it sholde falle,’ / Quod Pandarus, ‘that ye swich folye wroughte! / They myghte demen thyng nevere er thoughte’” (III.761-3). Criseyde tries to use her household to protect herself, but Pandarus threatens her with one of her greatest fears: damage to her reputation. Any reaction on her part bears the possibility of gossip arising about her.

Pandarus then spins another lie to manipulate Criseyde. Having promised her that Troilus would not be there, he must now concoct an explanation for his presence. Pandarus falls back on a technique that he has used constantly throughout the courtship of Criseyde: appealing to her pity for Troilus’s life. As always, he pins the threat to Troilus’s wellbeing on Criseyde herself.
He also draws again upon their familial connection, calling her “nece myn” (III.771). To arouse Criseyde’s concern and pity for Troilus, Pandarus tells her that Troilus has come to him in “swich peyne and distresse” that he has “fallen into madness” (III.792). His pain is because he has been told by “a frend of his, / How that ye sholden love oon hadde Horaste; / For sorwe of which this nyght shal ben his laste” (III.796-8). Pandarus makes up an excuse for Troilus’s distress and aims his lie straight at Criseyde in blame. Criseyde is in turn distressed and attempts to placate Pandarus while protecting herself, but her offer to see Troilus tomorrow is not good enough for him. He subtly reminds her again of the ever-constant threat of the potential withdrawal of his protection, information, and friendship by using the familial term while berating her: “And nece myn—ne take it naught a grief— / If that ye suffer hym al nyght in this wo, / God help me so, ye hadde hym nevere lief!” (III.862-4). Criseyde continues to attempt to dissuade him, but he prevails, and she relents. He promises her, “Ne, parde, harm may ther be non, ne synne: / I wol myself be with yow al this nyght” (III.913-4). Pandarus swears by God that he will be with her—now invoking his protective role as uncle, a role in which he has utterly and purposefully failed—and that no sin will occur.

The extent to which Pandarus upholds his promise is not entirely clear. Certainly, sin occurs; this bedroom scene is the consummation of the relationship. However, the scene is not depicted in terms of God and sin but rather in terms of traditional Ovidian metaphors of the hunt. The Christian sin of premarital sex is elided by the framing of the bedroom scene as a consummation scene from a courtly love romance, allowable to a medieval audience because of the poem’s pre-Christian setting. Similarly, it is unclear whether Pandarus does in fact stay in the room. His exit is never explicitly stated, and he may stay in the bed chamber the entire time, as he promised. He eventually “[l]eyde hym to slepe” (III.1189), but it is never said whether he has
left the room. Pandarus either breaks his promise to Criseyde or is in the room while she and Troilus have sex. The first option is simply another betrayal of Criseyde, the second another example of the disturbing delight he takes in orchestrating their relationship.

In either case, Pandarus plays a heavy role in the consummation of the affair before his withdrawal. Criseyde, finally assenting to her uncle’s desires, says that she “wil up first arise” (III.940). Pandarus, however, commands her, “liggeth stille, and taketh him right here— / It nedeth nought no ferther for hym sterte” (III.949-50). Pandarus denies Criseyde even the control and dignity of deciding to meet Troilus out of her bed rather than in it. Criseyde is initially intensely embarrassed by Troilus’s presence, blushing deeply and losing her power of speech: “she wex sodeynliche red! / … / She kouthe nought a word aright out brynge / So sodeynly, for his sodeyn comynge” (III.956-9). Pandarus, however, takes action, directing Criseyde, “Nece, se how this lord can knele! / Now for youre trouthe, se this gentil man!” as well as fetching a cushion for Troilus to kneel upon (III.962-5). When Criseyde invites Troilus to sit on the bed rather than kneel, Pandarus tells her that she has done well and that she should also draw the curtains around the bed so they can better hear each other speak (III.974-977). Pandarus leaps into the position of the director, staging the lovers as he desires. He relishes his role as intermediary, helping—and forcing—each of the other characters to play their parts to his liking. He then “drow hym to the feere, / And took a light, and fond his contenaunce, / As for to looke upon an old romaunce” (III.978-80). Pandarus sits by the fire as if reading an old romance; perhaps he only pretends to read, or perhaps the romance he attends to is that of the two lovers. Either way, they have little privacy from his invasive attentions.

Despite the sheltering curtains, Pandarus immediately notices and springs into action when Troilus, overcome with self-blame at Criseyde’s distress, faints. Pandarus takes control and
advantage of the situation, springing “up as faste; / ‘O nece, pes, or we be lost!’ quod he, / ‘Beth naught agast!’” (III.1094-6). Pandarus first ensures that their secret is kept, hushing the noises of Criseyde’s distress. Then, “he into bed hym caste, / … / And of he rente al to his bare sherte” (III.1097-9). Having gotten Troilus into Criseyde’s bed and half-way naked, Pandarus again uses Troilus’s distress and potential death to manipulate Criseyde. He cries, “Nece, but ye helpe us now, / Allas, youre owen Troilus is lorn! / … / Sey ‘Al foryeve,’ and stynt is al this fare!” (III.1100-6). Again, he refers to her as ‘nece,’ a tool of manipulation that he uses when he wants to control her choices and behavior. Again, he places the responsibility for Troilus’s life in Criseyde’s hands, even though the entire situation is his creation—Criseyde has never loved this “Horaste,” the man with whom Pandarus has accused her of betraying Troilus. Her distress at Troilus’s belief that she has done so, the distress which causes Troilus’s faint, is of Pandarus’s own making, and he uses the results of his machinations to force her to forgive Troilus. Once he awakes, she does: “And therwithal hire arm over hym she leyde, / And al foryaf, and ofte tyme hym keste” (III.1128-9). Pandarus manipulates Criseyde into forgiving Troilus and even into asking him to forgive her: “‘And now,’ quod she, ‘that I have don yow smerte, / Foryeve it me, myn owene swete herte’” (III.1182-3). Pandarus, having engineered the situation such that Criseyde is asking forgiveness for a wrong he entirely invented, retires, either back to the fire or to bed.

Pandarus is then absent from the rest of the scene, whether or not he is absent from the room. He returns early the next morning. Rushton gives Pandarus’s morning-after visit much attention in his essay, quoting multiple stanzas wholesale. Rushton reminds us that “it is important to note that Chaucer did not find this scene in Boccaccio” (151). This scene is of Chaucer’s own invention, and its rather sinister nature is hard to escape. As Rushton says, “One
would have to work hard to avoid the strong implication of impropriety, even assault” (151). Pandarar bursts in, teasing Criseyde and joking about how she has spent the night: “Al this nyght so reyned it, allas, / That al my drede is that ye, nece swete, / Han litel laiser had to slepe and mete” (III.1556-8). Just as when Troilus entered her room the night before, Criseyde grows red: “With that she gan hire face for to wrye / with the shete, and wax for shame al reed” (III.1569-70). Pandarus responds by prying under the sheet, grabbing her, and kissing her (III.1571-5). The narrator ends the declaring, “And Pandarus hath fully his entente” (III.1582).

This scene is incredibly uncomfortably ambiguous, and, as Rushton points out, many critics have used that ambiguity to avoid full engagement with the scene: “Critics have generally been up to the task of working hard to avoid exactly those implications Chaucer seems to have intended, sometimes through outright denial but at other times through a refusal to make any kind of claim at all except for the saving throw of twentieth-century criticism, ambiguity” (151). Much of the impreciseness in this scene could be read, as Rushton does, as pointing to the specific and alarming act of incest: “[The narrator’s] insistence that he will ‘passe al that chargeth nought to seye’ sounds suspiciously like other medieval writers faced with the reality of incest” (152). I find Rushton’s claim that Pandarus harbors an incestuous infatuation for Criseyde less than compelling. There is definitely an alarming, abusive aspect of their relationship, and Rushton reads this element as incest. He sees Pandarus as participating “in a discourse that allows incestuous desire by paradoxically forbidding it” (152). He cites Evan Carton’s discussion of the moment in which Pandarus forces Criseyde’s silence by saying “they myghte demen thyng they nevere er thoughte” (II.763). Carton says, “[W]hat the attendants have never thought before but might now imagine is incest. [Pandarus], evidently, has imagined it” (Rushton, 150). This line, however, does not necessitate the reading of surfacing incestuous
thoughts. As I have discussed earlier, these words serve a very direct purpose. Pandarus reminds Criseyde that people may hear and draw conclusions that damage her reputation, which is one of the potential repercussions of her love affair she fears most. The threat that others may find out and blame the victim is one commonly used by abusers. In this light, the morning-after scene emerges as a manifestation of the pleasure Pandarus draws from his power over Criseyde. He has, through his machinations, gained control over Criseyde’s body as the object of Troilus’s love. In this scene, he physically asserts that control himself, grabbing her and kissing her despite her evasive attempts and, thus, “[having] fully his entente.”

Pandarus rejects his familial relationship with Criseyde in favor of his fraternal relationship with Troilus and the treatment of Criseyde as a courtly love-object which accompanies that relationship. Pandarus, however, does not blindly play his courtly love role as Troilus does. Rather, he plays with it. Pandarus uses the realities of which Criseyde is all too aware to manipulate her into the role of courtly love-object. When she ultimately rejects that role, Pandarus first attempts to redirect Troilus’s attentions. While Troilus bewails Criseyde’s departure, Pandarus suggests, “Go we pleye us in som lusty route” (V.402). When Troilus expresses his certainty that Criseyde will return, Pandarus is less sure, but “natheles, he japed thus, and pleyde, / And swor, ywys, his herte hym wel bihighte / She wolde come as soone as evere she might” (V.509-11). Pandarus views the entire affair as a game, something he can step into and out of, and so he attempts to distract Troilus and redirect his attentions with other forms of joviality.

When Criseyde does not return at the designated time, Troilus is full of excuses for her: mainly that “[h]ire olde fader wol yet make hire dyne / Er that she go” (V.1126-7). Pandarus is again less certain of her and again redirects Troilus’s attentions, bidding him to come and dine
and return later. When he sees his own brooch on Diomede’s collar, Troilus is finally convinced that Criseyde is not returning to him. He, in his distress, turns to Pandarus, hoping for the certainty and comfort Pandarus has always provided before. Pandarus, however, is stunned:

He nought a word ayeyn to hym answered;
For sory of his frendes sorwe he is,
And shamed for his nce hath don amys,
And stant, astoned of thise causes tweye,
As stille as ston; a word ne kowde he seye. V.1725-9

Pandarus may have imagined that Criseyde would not be able to return at the appointed time, aware as he is of the reality of the danger she would face in doing so. He has not, it seems, imagined that she would choose to entirely reject her role and take another lover. All of Pandarus’s attempts to manipulate and control Criseyde are ultimately for naught. She rejects the role he has placed her in, and that rejection leaves him stunned. Pandarus does not know how to react when faced with losing the game he has taken such delight in playing. Eventually, he declares, “I hate, ywys, Crisyede; / And, God woot, I wol hate hire evermore!” (V.1732-3). This almost childish outburst is exemplary of Pandarus’s attitude towards courtly love: he believed it to be a game he could and would win. When Criseyde bests him by rejecting the game, he reacts angrily over her assertion of her personhood. He ends his rant, “And fro this world, almighty God I preye / Delivere hire soon! I kan namore seye” (V.1742-3). For once, Pandarus has no more words. He does not speak again, unable to comprehend or accept Criseyde refusing his manipulations and stepping out of her role as courtly-love object.

Criseyde’s decision to accept Diomede’s attentions is the critical point that proves each of the characters’ relationships to courtly love. Throughout the poem she struggles to balance her fear of damaging her reputation—one of the only protections she has left—and the pressures placed on her by Troilus and Pandarus to accept Troilus’s suit. She tries to put off Pandarus and
protect herself from the advances of love, but he overcomes her defenses. Criseyde eventually accepts the suit and with it her role as courtly love-object, and she spends the relationship balancing her feelings for Troilus, the sympathy and responsibility she feels for him, and the potential of damage to her reputation and with that her protection. Ultimately, regardless of the care Criseyde has taken to ensure her safety, she is forced out of Troy into the Greek war camp and is faced with her greatest fear and a dilemma. She can continue to play her role as love-object at the expense of her life or perhaps, to her mind, worse—capture and (unspoken) rape—or abandon the courtly love ideology and with it Troilus.

The amount of agency and blame read onto Criseyde by various critics has differed greatly. Mary Behrman, in her article “Heroic Criseyde,” takes a stance of counter-reading the general criticism surrounding Criseyde. Just like Pandarus, many male critics have read her viciously, making a monster of her. Many female and feminist critics have victimized and diminished her. Behrman, instead, approaches Criseyde as a person, reading through her eyes. She locates Criseyde’s behavior in the recognition that the conventions of courtly love are a trap in which the woman only appears to be empowered; she is actually ensnared. Criseyde desires to abjure those conventions of courtly love and obtain a “love ruled by Nature and not Venus” (317). While she tries to establish such a love with Troilus, the attempt ultimately fails when Troilus “expects her to behave lie a proper lady and die for her love” (330). Behrman sees Criseyde’s acceptance of Diomede as the ultimate outcome of her loyalty to the “notion of a healthy, wholesome love, a love based on mutual desire and a meeting of the minds” (332). In accepting Diomede, Criseyde finds the love of equals she has been looking for and rejects the role Troilus and Pandarus want to trap her into playing.
Recognizing Criseyde’s circumstances is essential to understanding her entrapment in the courtly love role. Angela Jane Weisl, in her essay “‘A Mannes Game’: Criseyde’s Masculinity in Troilus and Criseyde,” examines the ways in which Criseyde reacts to the balancing acts she is forced to perform by her circumstances as a woman in war. She identifies multiple axes of tension in Criseyde: her fear, her romantic life, and her widowhood. In each of these Weisl sees the masculine and the feminine play out. Criseyde’s fear makes her vulnerable, but it also spurs her to action. She is both a sexually desired object and an active sexual authority. Her widowhood both isolates her and gives her autonomy. What ultimately separates male masculinity from Criseyde’s female “masculinity” are the options available to her: “At each attempt, Criseyde’s self-determining actions have turned out to be contingent. Because she is a woman, she cannot act alone; she must rely on the protection, and thus the decisions of men” (126). Criseyde’s choices are constrained by her position in society, but Weisl argues that those constraints do not prevent her from, at times, playing in “a mannes game.”

Margaret Hallissy also examines the various tensions in Criseyde’s life, focusing on her widowhood. She begins her essay with a discussion of the lives of medieval widows and the social roles available to them. She outlines various stereotypes: pathetic mourners, lecherous and impure, religious and solitary. Eventually, she turns to the ways in which these stereotypes play out and are contradicted in the character of Criseyde. Criseyde is incredibly concerned with her reputation, and yet she proves to be sexually available. She dresses in mourning for her late husband, and yet she gives him no consideration. She shows no tendency towards religious devotion. She becomes Troilus’s lover, not his wife, marriage being incompatible with the courtly love paradigm. She enjoys both a male protector and the freedom of her widowhood. This pragmatism similarly explains her decision to forsake Troilus, distant and unreachable, for
Diomede, present and available as a protector. Hallissy gives Criseyde more agency and pragmatism than many other critics, but with that agency she also assigns greater blame for Criseyde’s choice of Diomede, describing her as, “[o]nce unfaithful to her late husband’s memory, …now a second-time traitor” (152).

The question of Criseyde’s agency and guilt in this poem is a tricky one, as Weisl points out. She is given an enormous amount to balance; her position is riskier than that of any of the other characters’. Troilus risks his life fighting to defend Troy, but he does so backed by the strength of a patriarchal and homosocial system that has provided him with tools, training, and brothers-in-arms to aid him. Criseyde, in contrast, is a woman abandoned by her father, bereaved of her husband, and manipulated by her uncle. The women of her household with whom she surrounds herself support her, but they cannot protect her, and she has no physical skills with which to protect herself. She relies instead on the men who fight to protect her city and on her own status and reputation. She uses whatever tools she can to ensure her safety. When appealing to Hector, attending the festival in the temple, and in her first conversation with Pandarus, Criseyde even uses her widow’s robes as a form of protection. Pandarus twice asks her to set aside her widow’s habit and dance with him, but she laughs and refuses, citing impropriety. When Pandarus comes to her pressing Troilus’s suit, she struggles to put him off, crying, “Allas, for wo! Why nere I deed? / … / Allas, what sholden staunge to me doon, / Whan he that for my beste frend I wende / Ret me to love, and sholde it me defende?” (II.409-13). Criseyde attempts to play Pandarus back, reminding him of the closeness their relationship and his duty to defend her while also appealing to him through her distress: if she is treated so badly by her best friend, what more fear could strangers cause? Of course, Criseyde in fact deeply fears strangers in the form of the Greeks, and the salience of that fear highlights her attempt to dissuade Pandarus.
Throughout her early interactions with Pandarus, Criseyde continually attempts to put off his suit for Troilus. Pandarus pushes back against her resistance, hard. He again threatens her with his death, claiming he will starve himself to please her, “[f]or certeyn I wol deye as soone as he” (II.446). Criseyde grabs onto him when he rises, and “wel neigh starf for feere” (II.449). She woefully recognizes the trap she is in: “myn estat lith in a jupartie, / And ek myn emes lif is in balaunce” (II.465-6). After weighing the pressures on her from society, the war, and Pandarus’s threats, she decides that “Of harmes two, the lesse is for to chese; / Yet have I levere maken him good chere / In honour, than myn emes lyf to lese” (II.470-2). Ultimately—when faced with the cost of her uncle’s abandonment and potential suicide—she decides to give Troilus some of the attention he desires. She also declares, however, that attention is all she will give; she will not give him false hope. Even if both Troilus and Pandarus should die and her reputation be ruined, “Ne shal I nevere of hym han other routhe” (II.489). Criseyde clearly and forcefully defines her boundaries concerning this relationship. Pandarus, of course, continues to ignore those boundaries. In their next scene, Criseyde has developed some love towards Troilus but is determined not to begin an affair that may damage her reputation. Pandarus pushes her further, constantly mentioning the possibility of Troilus’s death and demanding that she “[l]at be youre nyce shame and youre folie” (II.1286). For every concession Criseyde makes under the pressures of Pandarus’s threats and her fears, he demands she relent more and more.

Ultimately, Pandarus overcomes Criseyde’s defenses, and she eventually accepts the courtly role of love-object, as much in an attempt to placate Pandarus and preserve their relationship as out of love for Troilus. After her first scene with Pandarus, Troilus passes by her window, and “Criseyda gan al his chere aspien, / And leet it so softe in hire herte synke” (II.649-50). This description stands in contrast to the scene in which Troilus feels the first stirrings of
love; he is described as “[r]ight with hire look thorough-shoten and thorough-darted” (I.325). While Troilus, ever true to the part of the courtly lover, is violently pierced through by love, Criseyde instead consciously chooses to let it sink into her heart. She is not overcome by love, as Troilus is. Rather, she considers the consequences, both “[f]or myn estat, and also for his heele” (II.707). If she refuses him, he might scorn her, and she “might stoned in worse plit” (II.711). However, he is an attractive man, and she recognizes his many good qualities; she certainly does not want him to die, but moreover he could be a good partner for her. A covert affair, however, could damage her reputation if discovered. She knows she does not want a husband; as a widow, she is her “owene womman, wel at ese” (II.750). The role of love-object allows her the possibility of a relationship with a man she admires—and who could add to her protection—while minimizing the threat to the little freedom she has as her own woman.

Criseyde chooses to accept that role as love-object. While she is painfully aware of the risks to her, both in refusing and in accepting Troilus’s suit, once she has accepted, she plays into the courtly notion of female sovereignty. She declares to him, “A kynge’s sone although ye be, ywys, / Ye shal namore han soveraignete / Of me in love, than right in that cas is” (III.170-2). In the bedroom scene, Troilus many times declares that he will obey her in everything: “N’y wol nat, certein, breken youre defence; / And if I do, present or in absence, / For love of God, lat sle me with the dede” (III.1300-2). Troilus speaks in earnest; he believes the role he plays. Criseyde, however, knows that her sovereignty is a farce. She accepts her role not because it makes her the sovereign lover but for the protections it offers her, both against the world at large and against Pandarus’s threats.

Unfortunately, Troilus, Pandarus, and even Hector cannot protect Criseyde from the will of the people. When her father decides, years later, that he wants to see her again, the Greeks
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offer an exchange. Troilus remains silent, afraid to draw attention to his connection to Criseyde.

Hector protests, but he is outnumbered. A prisoner of war is released, and Criseyde is sent to the
Greek war camp, abandoned again, this time in the face of her greatest fear:

Upon that other syde ek was Criseyde
With wommen fewe, among the Grekis stronge,
For which ful ofte a day “Alas,” she seyde,
“That I was born! Wel may myn herte longe
After my deth, for now lyve I to longe.
Allas, and I ne may it nat amende,
For now is wors than evere yet I wende! V.687-93

Criseyde’s desires initially align with her courtly role; to die of bereavement from her lover
would be one way to fulfill her role. Criseyde’s suicidal ideation, however, comes not only from
her bereft sadness but from her fear. She is surround by Greek warriors, denied the comfort
brought by the women of her household, and alone among strange men. She is separated from
her lover and the only world she knows. Ironically, Criseyde sees death as the only option which
protects her.

The immense fear that Criseyde feels here is essential to understanding the decision she
makes in not returning to Troy and instead choosing to enter a relationship with Diomede.
Behrman claims that her choice of Diomede results from her desire to find a natural love
relationship between equals and that Diomede sees that desire in Criseyde and is able to offer
such a relationship. No equality exists, however, between a woman who is essentially a prisoner
of war and a man who is an enemy warrior. In attempting to take Criseyde’s perspective and not
focus merely on her situation, Behrman ignores the reality of Criseyde’s circumstances. Criseyde
chooses Diomede not out of desire for a loving relationship of equals but rather a desire for
safety. Diomede as a warrior could offer her protection in this foreign war camp that her father
cannot. Additionally, Criseyde recognizes the immense danger she would face if she attempts to return to Troy:

> And if that I me putte in jupartie  
> To stele awey by nyght, and it bifalle  
> That I be kaught, I shal be holde a spie;  
> Or elles—lo, this drede I moost of alle—  
> If in the hondes of som wrecche I falle,  
> I nam but lost, al be myn herte trewe. V.701-6

Criseyde is not stalled as much by the thought of death as by the threat of rape, which presents both the ultimate violation of her body and a betrayal of her relationship to Troilus. By Criseyde’s accounting, she is likely to betray Troilus either way: by not returning to him or by being raped in her attempt. Ultimately, Criseyde abandons her courtly love role and does not attempt to return, choosing instead to accept Diomede’s offer. Her rejection of the paradigm of courtly love is the anvil on which the other character’s relationships to the ideology are proven. Troilus continues to embrace his role as courtly lover and warrior and dies attempting to avenge his betrayal. Pandarus bitterly accepts defeat in the game and curses Criseyde. Criseyde chooses her personhood, her safety, and her agency over her prescribed role as a love-object, making the best choice she can in a dismal situation.

The narrator ultimately follows Criseyde in her abandonment of courtly love, unable to reconcile his\(^2\) sympathy towards her with her treatment by the courtly love structure. In the opening of the poem, however, he embraces courtly love and its traditional roles. He speaks to a community of lovers, describing himself as someone who “God of Loves servantz serve” (I.15), and he dedicates the labor of the poem to the lovers of his audience: “if this may don gladnesse /

\(^2\) While Chaucerian narrators are not representative of Chaucer himself, despite being presented as authorial stand-ins in many of his works, it is both conventional and useful to use he/him pronouns to refer to the narrator of this poem. The narrator’s initial embrace of the courtly love structure, aligning him with Troilus, Pandarus, and the history of male criticism, supports the reading of him as male.
Unto any lovere, and his cause availle, / Have he my thonk, and myn be this travaille!” (I.19-21).

Like Pandarus, the narrator works within and outside of the courtly love system. They are both not (successful) lovers themselves but take pleasure in serving lovers. Both attempt to control the other characters of the story. The narrator’s failure comes from the premise of his role in the poem; he is not devising these characters but simply relaying their stories by translating from his source. Thus, he is unable to control their actions, and this lack of control agitates him. Pandarus, too ends up distressed by his inability to control the actors in the “old romaunce” he desires to enact. Pandarus manipulates Troilus and especially Criseyde as they enact their roles in the courtly love story he devises. When Criseyde breaks away from her role, choosing not to return to Troilus, he declares his hate for Criseyde and eventually falls silent, left without words in the face of her rejection. Both men eventually fail to control Criseyde. When she breaks away from her role as courtly love-object, they are forced to confront the fact that they cannot control her.

Carolyn Dinshaw’s chapter on *Troilus and Criseyde* discusses the narrator as both reader and writer. He styles himself a translator and “proposes, then, to read and retell this text faithfully… As a mere translator he must follow his *auctor*” (40). However, the narrator also makes choices about what to conceal and reveal: “[T]he narrator’s careful pacing of the love affair’s unfolding reveals his progressively escalating personal interest, a growing emotional involvement. He skips over details, makes choices, and paces his reading… And he hastens the progress of the courtship in book 2, telling not every word this time, but ‘th’effect, as fer as I kan understonde’” (41). The narrator initially drives towards the consummation of the love affair, taking delight in the lovers and his role in their story. When the paradise of that affair is shattered, his delight ebbs. Dinshaw claims that he ultimately rejects Criseyde when “the seemingly uncontrollable feminine threatens to destroy masculine lives and masculine projects”
(46). When Criseyde cannot be controlled, he turns from her to reveal instead the Christian metaphysical “‘moralitee’ of the tale…: all is ‘vanite / To respect of the pleyn felicite / That is in hevene above’” (46). The narrator ultimately turns away from Criseyde in a move which Dinshaw reads as the rejection of the uncontrollable, eternally alien feminine in favor of the Christian reward of clarity and ascension.

Jennifer Campbell finds a related meaning in the ending of the poem, also reading Criseyde as rejected. In her article “Figuring Criseyde’s Entente: Authority, Narrative, and Chaucer’s Use of History,” she investigates the narrator’s treatment of Criseyde as a knowable character. She claims that Criseyde is never depicted as wholly knowable. While the narrator is always able to express Troilus’s intentions, reactions, and emotions, many aspects of Criseyde remain unclear. The narrator uses narrative disclaimers to blame his sources for lack of information about Criseyde, making her enigmatic to the audience, and these disclaimers contrast greatly with the narrative affirmations he uses for Troilus. Campbell claims simultaneously that Chaucer as poet has given Criseyde greater point of view and intention than is available in his sources, and the accessibility of her perspective makes her more sympathetic and more relatable, especially to the female members of his audience. The narrator displays a desire to control both Criseyde and his audience, displacing the authority of his sources in favor of the authority he is creating. He balances Criseyde as both enigmatic and relatable, switching into her perspective when he anticipates interruption from his audience because of her unknowability. Her general unreachable status makes it easy for both the social narrative and the narrator to reduce her to an object of exchange in Book IV and reject her for her betrayal in Book V.

Both these critics read rejection in the narrator’s treatment of Criseyde in the end of the poem. I, however, read an over-arching sense of confusion and discomfort, stemming from the
narrator’s inability to reconcile his sympathy towards Criseyde with the courtly love paradigm he initially accepts. At the opening of the poem, he begins by himself employing the structures of the courtly love paradigm. In the proem of Book I, he focuses his story on Troilus, mentioning Criseyde only as the object of his love and sorrow. Indeed, while Troilus’s name is mentioned in the very first line, Criseyde’s does not appear until the penultimate line of the proem: “ye may the double sorwes here / Of Troilus in lovynge of Criseyde, / And how that she forsook hym er she deyde” (I.54-6). Throughout Book I, the narrator alternates between depictions of Criseyde as a person and depictions of her as an object. In one stanza he describes her as alone and afraid, “[f]or of hire lif she was ful sore in drede, / … / For bothe a widewe was she and allone / Of any frend to whom she dorste hir mone” (I.95-8). This glimpse into Criseyde’s fears is poignant and compelling. In the stanza immediately following, however, he ignores the reality of her personhood in favor of idolizing her like an object on a pedestal to be admired: “So aungelik was hir natif beaute, / That lik a thing immortal semed she, / As doth a hevenyssh perfit creature” (I.102-4). The narrator provides insight into Criseyde’s dilemmas, but he also reduces her to the courtly love-object. Additionally, the very sympathy elicited by the insights he provides into her fears supports her role as love-object: a woman in need of service and protection is the perfect match for a courtly lover and warrior like Troilus. In this way, the narrator is like Pandarus, acknowledging Criseyde’s fears and reality insofar as it serves to support her courtly love role.

As we have seen, however, eventually the conflict between Criseyde’s personhood and her role as love-object comes to a head. Of all the male characters of the poem, the narrator has the most access to Criseyde. Troilus is totally oblivious to Criseyde’s reality; Pandarus is aware of that reality, but he does not invite or allow Criseyde to confide in him. The narrator, however, is privy to Criseyde’s motivations, feelings, and thoughts. As Campbell points out, Chaucer has
embellished his narrator’s access to Criseyde’s motivations and emotions when adapting the text. This access means that when Criseyde’s personhood and courtly love role conflict, the narrator is privy to her reasons and fears. He knows how frightened she is of the Greeks and of damage to her reputation; he sympathizes with the position she is trapped in and the limited choices available to her.

Starting in Book IV, the narrator exhibits great discomfort in the twist he knows is coming: Criseyde’s betrayal. He hedges around the subject of “how Criseyde Troilus forsook— /

Or at the leeste, how that she was unkynde” (IV.15-6). He bemoans the treatment he knows is in store for her: “Allas, that they sholde evere cause fynde / To speke hire harm! And if they on hire lye, / Iwis, himself sholde han the vilanye” (IV.19-21). The narrator regrets that anyone might have reason to speak ill of Criseyde, but he knows that they will have reason in the end. He deflects from that reality, rebuking instead those hypotheticals who may lie about her. He tries his best to mitigate the size of Criseyde’s fault. She promises to do her best to return, and the narrator defends her good intentions:

And trewliche, as writen wel I fynde
That al this thyng was seyd of good entente,
And that hire herte trewe was and kynde
Towards hym, and spak right as she mente,
And that she starf for wo neigh wan she wente,
And was in purpos evere to be trewe:
Thus writen they that of hire werkes knewe. IV.1415-21

The narrator takes an entire stanza to say that he believes Criseyde did not leave with the intent of betraying Troilus, and he backs up this claim with his sources, saying that it has been “writen wel I fynd” and “[t]hus writen they that of hire werkes knewe.” His references to written, first person accounts legitimize his claims about Criseyde’s intent and demonstrate his discomfort with the possibility of condemning her for her choices.
Campbell and Dinshaw both read rejection into the narrator’s final treatment of Criseyde. He does pull away from her, but not in rejection. That distance instead reflects the narrator’s discomfort with the possibility of condemning Criseyde for her approaching betrayal. When the time comes that she does in fact betray Troilus, however, the narrator does not abandon her. Instead, he abandons the structure of courtly love which has betrayed and entrapped her. He indeed moves away from Criseyde, but this movement reflects the pain he feels for her rather than a rejection of her. He continues to defend her even in the face of her betrayal, saying “And if I myghte excuse hire any wise, / For she so sory was for hire untrouthe, / Iwise, I wolde excuse hire yet for roughte” (V.1097-9). The narrator continues to pity Criseyde and almost desperately tries to excuse the actions he cannot justify.

In response, he abandons the ideology of courtly love, just as she does. Troilus continues to embody his role as courtly lover and warrior and ultimately fulfills that role through his death. The narrator expresses great discomfort recounting Troilus’s actions, and when the time comes for Troilus to die, he interrupts for five stanzas to express his regrets for having to write this “litel bok…, litel myn tragedye” (V.1786), and he begs God to allow him “to make in som comedye!” (V.1788). When he finally returns to Troilus’s death scene, the ideology of the poem markedly shifts. As Dinshaw describes, the poem ends with the metaphysical, Christian assent of Troilus’s spirit into the heaven above. The narrator ultimately abandons the paradigm of courtly love which has betrayed Criseyde and turns instead to a Christian ideology and the possibility of redemption that accompanies it. In the final two stanzas, he calls out twice to Christ for mercy: “And to that soothfast Crist, that starf on rode, / With al myn herte of mercy evere I preye” (V.1860-1); “and to thy mercy, everichon, / So make us, Jesus, for thy mercy, digne” (V.1867-8).
The narrator’s prayer to Christ that he make everyone worthy of his mercy includes Criseyde, whose entrapment in the snare of courtly love he deeply pities and regrets.

Examining courtly love as an ideology with which the characters of *Troilus and Criseyde* interact on their own terms instead of as a paradigm that structures the poem in its entirety contextualizes the narrator’s reactions to Criseyde. The presence of the courtly love roles themselves is not essential but rather the ways in which the characters play and play with those roles. Troilus blindly performs his part. Pandarus relishes his own performance and his ability to manipulate the others into their roles. Criseyde, aware of his manipulation and yet unable to defend against it while protecting herself, reluctantly plays her role until it is no longer the best means of insuring her safety. She rejects her role when it demands her life, and the narrator is forced to reckon with the fact that the courtly love system first entrapped and then betrayed Criseyde. His sympathy for her and the impossibility of reconciling her choices with the courtly love paradigm cause him to reject that ideology. Acknowledging the interactions between the characters and their courtly love roles grants insight into the narrator’s reaction to Criseyde. He does not, as many have argued, reject Criseyde for her betrayal of Troilus and of her courtly love role. Rather, he rejects courtly love for its betrayal of her.
Work Cited


Works Consulted


