ARISTOTELIAN TRAGEDY IN *TROILUS AND CRISEYDE*

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That *Troilus and Criseyde* is a tragedy there is no doubt. Modern readers have, in addition to their own experience, the testimony of estimable critics whose copious reflections assure a deeply studied affirmation of the doom of tragedy. As might be expected, though, critics differ in their views of the tragic qualities of that long poem and exactly what kind of tragedy that work expresses.

Walter Clyde Curry states forcefully that "Chaucer's Troilus and Criseyde is a tragedy, strongly deterministic in tone, the action of which is presided over by a complex and inescapable destiny" (34).

Howard R. Patch states just as forcefully that Troilus has free will, that is, while fate or necessity or predestination surround him with predestined influences—he is fated to love, since all humans are, and he is fated to suffer the destruction of Troy, since victory over the Greeks is out of his hands—Troilus still has not only the opportunity but the obligation to choose how he will love and how he will react to the fated destruction of his culture. We readers may ourselves observe that truism in our own lives—that while our lives are fated by race, gender, and condition of origin, we still have choice, within the fated limitations, about what we make of our race, gender, or condition of origin. Patch says,

> The fact that Aristotle puts the cause of real tragedy in a flaw, moral or otherwise, in the leading character, rather than in the crushing power of more purely external circumstance, suggests that his own preference was typically humanistic—that he held that character, rather than forces outside the individual, is destiny. By this we cannot mean that character is only another variety of destiny (inasmuch as character is partly a gift of nature); for it is an impressive fact that Aristotle does not put the prime cause in outer nature or in the plan of the gods. The whole point of [hamartia] is not that it is the necessary hypothesis for destruction, but that it brings the one touch of human nature in which we may resemble the hero and apply his

> case to ours and ours to his. (73)

For D. W. Robertson, Jr., *Troilus and Criseyde* is a simple tragedy because all the main characters are sinful in a Christian sense, even though they are pagans. Being sinners, they are susceptible to flaw, as is every mortal sinner. Says Robertson,

> Troilus subjects himself to Fortune by allowing himself to be overcome by the physical attractions of Criseyde. His fall is an echo of the fall of Adam. (118)

Other commentators on the poem see the work as lacking in depth; others as too maudlin, too domestic, or merely as unspeakably unsuitable to the tragic theme as outlined by Aristotle.

Likewise, while critics differ somewhat on the ending of *Troilus and Criseyde*, they usually unite in condemning Chaucer's over-saccharine, sentimental, blatantly pious, lip-smacking, hypocritical, treacly offering of Troilus' immature smirking at the problems of earth while he lounges about the portals of an orthodox Christian heaven.

In this paper I will attempt to show Troilus as a truly tragic character, as defined by Aristotle, and offer a possibility for an ending that may redeem the poem from seeming a long descent from pathos into banality.

Troilus and Criseyde is not a drama. It is a narrative. The reader can therefore dismiss dramatic conventions of time, place, and action and concentrate on the essence of tragedy.

The essentials of Aristotle's definition of tragedy are too well known to quote at length. His idea may be illustrated by Sophocles' *Oedipus*, or Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. Tragedy occurs to a basically decent person who enjoys a happy life until he meets with a reversal of contentment, smacks like a bug into the windshield of misfortune. The abrupt reversal of his good fortune, called *peripeteia*, or a turnabout, is caused by two factors: sheer chance or fate and a tragic flaw, a small and unremarkable human error on the part of the protagonist. The hero goes to his irrevocable doom with only the small recognition that his own doing, his tragic flaw, started him on the road to disaster. In his downfall, Aristotle shows, the hero becomes a scapegoat for the drama's audience, whose members heap their guilt and tragic flaws and angst upon the victim, who carries them away, leaving the audience

purged of self-pity and self-doubt and of fear, guilt, and anxiety. Like worshippers in a religious service, they are cleansed and emerge feeling whole and contented, at peace with other humans and with the limiting predestination of fate.

Troilus meets Aristotle's criteria for a good person. He is gentle, heroic, dutiful—a boyscout with merit badges and also a king's son. He enjoys the praise and company of Trojans and lives well until he falls in love with Criseyde. She, however, is not the cause of his downfall. He is. Certainly, Chaucer pays lip service to Boethian predestination in the ensnarements of love. He also makes Troilus a victim of the star-crossed fate of Troy itself, which is doomed by the gods to be destroyed. But Chaucer is not fatalistic. Troilus is not doomed by love or by a lost war. After all, love could turn out well (as it does for three years) and others, notably Aeneas, are able to escape the doomed city and continue Trojan culture.

It is not outside influence, then, that ruins Troilus. His tragedy comes from his flaw. It is interior. It is part of his character—he lacks self-knowledge. One might argue that he is young and naive and therefore not at fault. But one can be young and have self-knowledge; indeed, that is a requirement for a successful human life.

Troilus first reveals his tragic flaw of naiveté or self-ignorance by his mid-pubertal scoffing at love:

> 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 ladies of the town,
> Now here, now there; for no devocioun
> Hadde he to non, to reven hym his reste,
> But gan to preise and lakken whom hym leste.
>
> And in his walk ful faste he gan to wayten
> If knyght or squyer of his compaignie
> Gan for to syke, or lete his eighen baiten
> On any womman that he koude espye.
> He wolde smyle and holden it folye,
> And seye hym thus, "God woot, she slepeth softe
> For love of the, whan thow turnest full ofte!

"I have herd told, pardieux, of youre lyvynge,
Ye loveres, and youre lewed observaunces.
And which a labour folk han in wynnynge
Of love, and in the kepyng which doutaunces;
And whan youre prey is lost, woo and penaunces.
O veray fooles, nyce and blynde be ye!
Ther nys nat oon kan war by other be." (I, 183-205)[1]

Angry at Troilus' scoffing at love, the God of love sends an arrow to predestine the scoffer. But note that Troilus is fated to love only because of his former laughter at it; his tragic flaw precedes what Cupid sends him. He is fated only because of his ignorance. Had he wisely chosen to accept love as a natural and normal part of life, he could have controlled love rather than love controlling him. Thus, his conduct is naive, revealing a character unaware of self—and character is destiny.

At this point, Chaucer interjects a long commercial into the program, praising love and its power. He says that all humans are subject to love. The god of love can

The fredom of youre hertes to hym thralle;
For ever it was, and evere it shal byfalle,
That Love is he that allething may bynde,
For may no man fordon the lawe of kynde.

That this be soth, hath preved and doth yit.
For this trowe I ye knowen alle or some,
Men reden nat that folk han gretter wit
Than they that han be most with love ynome;
And strengest folk be therwith overcome,
The worthiest and grettest of degree:
This was, and is, yet men shall it see.

And trewelich it sit wel to be so,
For alderwisest han therwith ben plesed;
And they that han ben aldermost in wo,
With love han ben comforted moost and esed;
And ofte it hath the cruel herte apesed,
And worthi folk maad worthier of name,
And causeth moost to dreden vice and shame.

Now sith it may nat goodly ben withstonde,
And is a thing so vertuous in kynde,
Refuseth nat to Love for to ben bonde,
Syn, as hymselven liste, he may yow bynde;
The yerde is bet that bowen wole and wynde
Than that that brest, and therfore I yow rede
To folowen hym that so wel kan yow lede. (I, 235-259)

Again, the reader needs to be aware that Chaucer says only that all humans are subject to love—not that they are predestined to love naively and unwisely.

After being caught, Troilus taunts himself and is filled with self-loathing, not because he loves, but because he has so suddenly realized his former stupidity and adolescent callowness. His Boethian song about being fated to love further shows his lack of ability to see himself; immature or tragic people blame others for their own faults.

Troilus continues to reveal naiveté by wallowing in the self-pity of courtly love. Granted that the conventions of courtly love demand that the lover place his beloved on a pedestal, worship, woo, and pursue her, even though she is conventionally cruel in refusing his suit. But Troilus indulges in adolescent pathos and condemns himself for doing so. He wails, "She nyl to noon swich wrecche as I ben wonne" (1, 777).

He equally shows his lack of self-knowledge when he insists to Pandarus that his love is moral and idealistic:

"[H]erke, Pandare, o word, for I nolde
That thow in me wendest so gret folie,
That to my lady I desiren sholde
That toucheth harm or any vilenye;
For dredeles me were levere dye
Than she of me aught elles understode
But that that myghte sownen into goode." (1, 1030-1036)

Pandarus' reply is merely laughter at Troilus' protest that his lust is holy. He know that Troilus is fooling himself.

That Troilus is unaware of his baser motives is further proved by his first letter to Criseyde, which is mawkish and gauche. He wallows in humility. When Pandarus proposes to get the lovers together by having Troilus feign illness, Troilus says that it would

not be a fraud:

> "[T]how nedeles
> Conseilest me that siklich I me feyne,
> For I am sik in ernest, douteles,
> So that wel neigh I sterve for the peyne." (II, 1527-1530)

Again, Troilus goes beyond courtly love convention. His illness is an admission of one who lets events so dominate him that he is distraught. He has no insight or self-awareness; he merely reacts blindly to love's stimulus.

For a corrective comparison to Troilus' self-ignorance, the reader can contrast Criseyde. The two are about the same age but she possesses the sophistication of objectivity. She thinks rather than blindly reacting. Aware that Troilus loves her, she rationally considers the blessings and problems that love might bring:

> [S]he gan in hire thought argue
> In this matere of which I have yow told,
> And what to doone best were, and what eschue,
> That plited she ful ofte in many fold. (II, 694-697)

She considers that he is a worthy person, that he is a king's son, that if she repudiates him her fortunes might worsen because of his likely anger and finally decides to obey the golden mean of conduct:

> "In every thyng, I woot, ther lith mesure;
> For though a man forbede dronkenesse,
> He naught forbet that every creature
> Be drynkeles for alwey, as I gesse." (II, 715-718)

Criseyde is also aware of her own beauty:

> "I am oon the faireste, out of drede,
> And goodlieste, who that taketh hede,
> And so men seyn, in al the town of Troie." (II, 746-748)

Such self-awareness makes tragedy impossible for Criseyde. She might suffer misfortune, but she will be competent to meet it. Criseyde will succeed. Troilus, for all his idealistic merit, will fail because he is too close to himself for objectivity. Like Aristotle's

model of the tragic hero, Oedipus, Troilus does not know himself. In his ecstasy and his swooning over Criseyde's love and his emotional hysteria over her being exchanged to the Greeks, Troilus is blind to himself and to the reality that both love and war, by their nature, force upon humans. Troilus merely plays at love. He sports at war. He toys with the extremes of his emotions. He is never the master of himself or any situation. He does not know himself or his world.

Self-ignorance can be one of the tragic flaws that, coupled with fate or chance, bring about tragedy. But the tragic hero, as Aristotle suggests, has a recognition scene, a point after his downfall when he realizes that his character flaw was instrumental in his misfortune, that his tragedy was self-caused. In a drama, that scene takes place before his death, when he is consciously able to realize it. Chaucer, however, is writing a narrative, a literary form that allows a story to continue after death.

I believe that Chaucer was writing such a psychological narrative that he often used himself as a model for the faults of mankind, especially lovers such as Troilus. He was also so imbued with the framework of Christianity as a model for events of all time that he could not avoid a kind of final judgment for all humans, pagan or Christian. His recognition scene for Troilus, therefore, can take place when, in a Christian context, it would naturally occur. That is the time after death when the mind is free of worldly blindness, when man's soul is not crippled by the clay carcass of his body. Troilus soars through the hollowness of the eighth sphere. In heaven, he has perspective, both literally and figuratively, for the first time. He can look down and see the little ball of earth, the seas, the continents, the small blue orb that one takes so seriously while there.

In the catastrophe or dénouement of the poem is a sense of restored order. At this point Troilus can see how insignificant his former problems were. Now he has insight. He sees himself. And he sees worldly vanity for what it is. His tragedy is at an end. In the words of Morton Bloomfield,

> Here free will and predestination, human dignity and human pettiness, joy and sorrow, in short all human and terrestrial contradictions, are reconciled in the pattern of all reconciliation: the God who becomes man and whose trinity is unity and whose unity is trinity. Here the author-

> historian can finally find his peace at another distance and leave behind forever the unhappy and importunate Troilus, the unbearable grief of Criseyde's betrayal, the perplexities of time and space, and the tyranny of history and predestination. (87)

While Chaucer's overly Christian ending to *Troilus and Criseyde* causes most critics to groan, and while I dislike it myself, not only for its sentimentality and its orthodox Christian *deus ex machina*, but also for its literary anachronism, I can understand a literary reason for the ending's being as it is. Chaucer might have been a heavy-handed Christian apologist in his choice of endings, but he was true to his craft by his narrative structure of recognition at its proper time and true to his religious beliefs in the heaven of self-knowledge that, one hopes, will be a part of the afterlife.

If there is one.

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