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Lies, Deception, and Criseyde's Heart

Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* is a complicated and intricate tale of love, passion and despair. Each character realized by Chaucer's pen takes on a vibrant and flashy life, attracting the reader to their stories and emotions. One of the more intriguing aspects of the poem is its dedication to those who have been betrayed by love. This passage, which logically should be addressed to men, is instead addressed "moost for women that bitraised be / Trough false folk... / ...with hire grete wit and subtitle" (5.1780-1782). Furthermore, that the work is described as "litel myn tragedye" (5.1786) leads the reader to question whose tragedy the work is. As the tale progresses, it becomes clear that Criseyde did not maliciously betray her beloved as tradition asserts. A deeper reading reveals that Criseyde is perhaps the greatest victim of the story, constantly afflicted by the machinations of those around her. The tragedy of *Troilus and Criseyde*, then, is the constant manipulation and deception visited upon Criseyde, which drives her to give her heart first to Troilus then to Diomedes.

The central theme of this work is the love between Troilus and Criseyde. The intensity of their love reminds the reader of other famous lovers throughout history, and seems to evoke the same notions of star-crossed love. Closer inspection reveals that this love, however strong, has its roots in fear and lies. For whatever reason, when the god of Love strikes Troilus and "bigan his fetheres so to lyme" (1.353), he finds himself incapable of wooing Criseyde himself, necessitating a go-between: Criseyde's uncle Pandarus. At first, this intervention seems simply

pragmatic; Troilus is a prince, his love for Criseyde, who is not mentioned to be of near rank, would be best concealed. Pandarus approaches Criseyde, telling her a tale of a young lover's suffering and woe. Criseyde's response is ambivalent to this tale, yet Pandarus still goads Criseyde that she will surely "save his lif" (2.575) if she loves him. After Pandarus' departure, the reader sees Criseyde torn between accepting her uncle's suggestion or not. Interestingly, Criseyde's reasons for loving Troilus involve safety, "it were honour... / ...with swich a lord to deele / for myn estat" (2.706-708). Her reasons for rejecting the suit follow different lines: "I am myn owene woman, wel at ese... / ...as after myn estat" (2.750-751), "shal noon housbonde seyn to me "Chek mat!"'" (2.754). Her reasoning in this scene clearly identifies that Criseyde is not participating a loving relationship—she is simply considering her options. Ironically, she cites "how ofte tyme hath it yknowen be / The tresoun that to women hath ben do" (2.792-793), yet she does not seem to identify Pandarus' actions toward her as this same treason.

Criseyde fully resolves to be a friend to Troilus and allow the relationship to progress as it can, but this is not what Pandarus intends. His actions toward Criseyde here become cruel and full of deceit. After coaching Troilus through his first love letter, Pandarus goes again to Criseyde, telling her that "there is right now come into town a gest, / A Greek espie,... / For which I come to telle you tydynges" (2.1111-1113). When Criseyde discovers Pandarus' true intent and refuses to take the letter for fear of her reputation, Pandarus boldly "hente hire faste, / And in hire bosom the letter down he thraste" (2.1154-1155). Beside this, he refuses to leave her home without receiving her response. This she does, and staying true to her original intentions she writes:

She thanked hym of al that he wel mente
 Towardes hire, but holden hym in honed
 She nolde nought, ne make hireselven bonde
 In love; but as his suster, hym to plese

She wolde fayn to doon his herte an ese.
(2.1221-1225).

This gesture is not enough for Pandarus, who accuses Criseyde of being a “tirant” (2.1240) and beats her down until he “felte iren hoot, and he bygan to smyte” (2.1276-1277) his words into Criseyde, convincing her that her actions are “folie” (2.1286).

Despite her seeming concession at the end of this scene, Pandarus leaves no room for her retraction and speeds on to weave another complicated web of deceit to ensnare Criseyde. After he has secured Deiphebus’ help, Pandarus runs back to Criseyde with horrible news, “false Poliphete / Is...aboute...to plete, / and brynge on yow advocacies newe” (2.1467-1469). When Criseyde avows that even through this tragedy she has “ynough for us” (2.1478), Pandarus hurriedly assures her that they have the support of Deiphebus, with whom she is to dine. At this dinner, Troilus feigns sickness, and the guests take turn naming remedies. This clever ruse by Pandarus forces Criseyde to see herself at fault for the illness, and she thinks to herself, “best koud I yet ben his leche” (2.1582). Shortly thereafter, Pandarus finds a way to bring Criseyde privately to Troilus, with Criseyde “al innocent of Pandarus entente” (2.1723). Pandarus’ intentions at this point are devious and questionable. He is deliberately scheming against Criseyde’s will and express desires. Having engineered this meeting so well, even orchestrating (though not directly) Criseyde’s guilt to be favorable to Troilus, Pandarus is betraying Criseyde.

This is fully realized when Pandarus invites Criseyde to dine with him. Ostensibly, this meeting is for the pleasure of her company, but again Pandarus is scheming for Troilus. Fortunately for him, the elements prove conducive to his plan; at the end of dinner it is raining so hard that it is impossible for Criseyde to return home. Despite Pandarus’ repeated assurances that Troilus “was out of towne” (3.570), he is ensconced in Pandarus’ house waiting for the opportune moment. This moment comes later in the evening, when all Criseyde’s attendants are

sound asleep and there is no one to defend her. Pandarus approaches her with yet another lie; he concocts a rumor involving her and ““Horaste”” (3.797) that is driving Troilus ““fully wood”” (3.794). After convincing Criseyde that any delay will cause death, Pandarus assures Criseyde that her lover ““wol to [her] no jalous wordes speke”” (3.907). This ensures Criseyde will again be in the right mindset to pity Troilus, this time begging his forgiveness for an act she has not committed. Once Pandarus has brought Troilus into Criseyde’s bedroom, he further orchestrates the scene to Troilus’ advantage by suggesting ““no doth hym sitte... / Upon youre beddes side al ther withinne, / That ech of yow the bet may other here”” (3.975-977). The scene continues, playing out perfectly—until Troilus faints. Here, Pandarus seems, in pure exasperation, to take matters into his own hands; he ““into bed [Troilus] caste, / ...And of he rente al to his bare sherte”” (3.1097-1099), which, in essence, gives the couple no option but to see the situation as openly sexual, further compromising Criseyde’s position.

Criseyde’s reaction to this set-up is truly piteous. She abases herself in front of Troilus, blaming herself for his pain and forgiving him even his display of ““childissh jalous”” (3.1168). Nevertheless, she has been delivered, largely without her consent, directly into Troilus’ power. The guilt she has been made to feel drives her to pity the young man who has been literally thrown in her bed; giving her no time to consider her actual circumstances. Her situation is helpless; even the narrator gives a sympathetic voice to her position: ““what myghte or may the sely larke seye, / What that the sperhawk hath it in his foot”” (3.1191-1192). Again, Criseyde is depicted ““right as an aspes leef she gan to quake, / Whan she [Troilus] felte hire in his armes folde”” (3.1200-1201), picturing her as fearful and unwilling, a quivering animal stuck in a trap.

Despite this reaction, the love between Troilus and Criseyde deepens as time progresses. Their relationship stays a secret, despite its longevity, and eventually Pandarus seems to fade

from the picture. A considerable amount of time seems to pass in this blissful state; but the story is not yet finished. Though Pandarus and Troilus have created an ideal situation for the love to exist, they cannot maintain it. This is evidenced when Calkas, Criseyde's father, repents having left his daughter in Troy, and, sensing that "the tyme is faste by / That fire and flaumbe on al the town shal sprede, / And thus shall Troie torne to ashen dede" (4.117-119), begs the Greeks to bargain for her. The leaders of the Greeks assent, and offer the great Trojan hero Antenor in exchange for Criseyde. Though Hector strongly declares "she nys no prisonere... / ...We usen here no women for to selle" (4.179-182), the Trojan people are overwhelmingly in favor of this bargain, and it is sealed.

With this fate at hand, Troilus is faced with a series of difficult decisions. His first impulse is to steal away with Criseyde, but he fears damaging her reputation and thrusting their relationship into the public sphere. In this sequence of scenes, it becomes apparent that though Troilus is the king's son, he has no power to protect Criseyde. Criseyde is herself powerless here, she "lest these tales soothe were, / She dorst at no wight asken it, for fere" (4.671-672). She also sees no alternative to leaving Troy and "sorwfully she sighte" (4.714) at "remembryng hir, fro heven into which helle / She fallen was" (4.712-713). Here, instead of being comforted by her love and reassured by its promised protection, Criseyde is abandoned by her love. Her pain in these moments is so deep that the narrator confesses

if I discryven wolde hire hevynesse,
It shoulde make hire sorwe seme lesse
Than that it was, and childishly deface
...it.

(4.802-805)

Despite this, Criseyde is forced into the position of comforter. Once again, Pandarus enters the scene, and when he sees Criseyde's sadness he declares, "if I wende / To han this fare, he [Troilus] should nat come here" (4.919-920) and exhorts her to "his sorwe...t'abregge, / And

nought encesse” (4.925-926). Criseyde does this, burying her own fears and sadness and comforts Troilus by saying, “me thynketh thus: that nouthur ye nor I / Ought half this wo to maken” (4.1264-1265), assuring him that she will be true and will return quickly. She quickly dismisses all his schemes and plots, promising that they will be unnecessary. In these moments, Criseyde becomes the man that Troilus should be; she is confident and brave. She herself receives little comfort from Troilus, and finds no relief for her despair.

The next morning, when Criseyde is led out of Troy, she is still very unhappy, “men wiste / nevere woman han the care, / Ne was so loth out of town to fare” (5.20-21). This removal scene is one of the most crucial in the piece. Here Criseyde is handed over directly from Troilus into the hands of Diomedes, who immediately “by the reyne hire hente” (5.90). Criseyde is abandoned, however unwillingly, by one man and placed at the mercy of another. “This Diomedes” (5.92) becomes what Troilus would have been, if he were but a little more experienced. He immediately recognizes that Criseyde’s sorrow stems from love, perhaps even guessing that her lover is Troilus (“if she have in hire thought / Hym that I gesse” [5.102-103]), but also recognizes, “he whoso myghte wynnen swich a flour / From hym for whom she morneth nyght and day, / He myghte seyn he were a conquerour” (5.792-794). He begins to plan “how he may best, with shortest tarynge, / Into his net Criseydes herte brynge” (5.774-775).

His schemes will find no check in Criseyde’s father. From the moment Criseyde is delivered to his tent she “stood forth muwet, milde and mansuete” (5.194), demonstrating her constrained position in her father’s presence. Criseyde will not find solace or comfort in her father; she says of him, “my fader nyl for nothing do me grace” (5.694). It seems clear in this passage, combined with her sudden self-repression, that she will not be able to confess her love

or her desires to him. Furthermore, Calkas makes no attempt to check Diomedes's courtship of his daughter. On the day when Diomedes first wins Criseyde's heart, Calkas is mysteriously absent; the text suggests he might even be asleep, "Diomedes... / Com to the tent ether as Calkas lay" (5.844-845).

Criseyde's isolation in the Greek camp is further augmented by the fact that "there was no wight to whom she dorste hire pleyne" (5.728). Criseyde is completely alone, unprotected by her love and her father, stripped even of a confidant. She considers fleeing the Greek camp, but fears being "kaught,...[and] holde a spie" (5.703). Realizing at last how trapped she is, Criseyde responds to Diomedes's visits and friendliness. In the end, she decides "she was alone and hadde need / Of frendes help" (5.1026-1027), and chooses to let Diomedes "refte hire of the grete of al hire peyne" (5.1036). The friendship that Diomedes offers is not without its taint. As we have already established, Diomedes sees Criseyde as a great conquest, and uses plentiful images of the hunt to describe his desire toward her. Just like Pandarus, he is not above using tricks. He seems especially sensitive to Criseyde's love of courtly behavior, and when he confesses his feelings for her he takes special care to seduce her through his own noble-seeming behavior:

He gan to waxen red,
 And in his speche a litel wight he quok,
 And caste aside a litel wight his hed
 And stynte a while; and afterward he wok,
 And sobreliche on hire he threw his lok.
 (5.925-929)

Not only is this strange behavior for a man, it seems particularly odd for a man "with sterne vois and myghte lymes square" (5.801). Combined with his use of "al the sleghte and al that evere he kan" (5.773), Diomedes's conquest of Criseyde is really no different than the deception Pandarus uses to ensnare Criseyde for Troilus.

This moment, when most readers would condemn Criseyde for her unfaithfulness, is the moment when she is most vulnerable and weak. She is surrounded by enemies, distanced from her friends, and must act the way she does to protect herself. Even after she yields herself to Diomedes, she still has cause to weep over Troilus; our author relates “how longe it was bytwene / That she forsook hym for this Diomedes, / Ther is non auctour telleth it” (5.1086-1088). Indeed, in the scenes after Criseyde gives over to Diomedes, there is no indication that she is happy. When Diomedes is wounded in battle, the author makes an interesting comment: “and for to helen hym of his sorwes smerte, / Men seyn—I not—that she yaf hym hire herte” (5.1049-1050). The narrator seems to highlight the possibility that this is not at all what Criseyde desired. Working strongly alongside this argument is the censorship of Criseyde’s feelings after she devotes herself to Diomedes. The narrative masks her feelings beyond this point, concealing her internal arguments and her true feelings about Diomedes. It is clear that she did not want to betray Troilus. In the last clear insight the narrative gives into her thoughts (5.1058-1085), Criseyde mourns her unfaithfulness and envisions the revile she will receive from the future. Thus the narrative leaves Criseyde abandoned by her love and in a mournful position. She does not leave the reader with a sense that she is rejoicing in her new love, or that her future will be happy. Unlike Troilus, who attains happiness once he has left the world behind, Criseyde is left stranded in an earthly limbo between sorrow and joy, caught in the midst of fear and love.

Though it is impossible to ascertain the state in which the narrative leaves Criseyde, it is clear that the loves she encounters in this work are far from pure and honest. Whether by family or by lovers, Criseyde is beguiled and tricked into love, forced to meet the balance between her safety and her heart’s desires. Her tragedy is augmented by her constant misuse by those she should be able to trust: her uncle, her father and her lovers. All of these characters manipulate

Criseyde's weakness as a widow and solitary woman by forcing her under the protection of another. This trickery pushes Criseyde into a position where her only means to survive are found through another person, not herself, which forces her to betray those she loves most when they abandon her and are unable to protect her as they should. The strength and power found in Criseyde's character are compromised by the constant scheming of those around her, which takes away her autonomy and places her directly in the inconsiderate care of others.

Work Cited

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