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Desire, Frustration, and Resolution in the Ending(s) of *Troilus and Criseyde*

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ABSTRACT

This essay analyzes the final stanzas of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* in order to challenge the critical commonplace that the poem's ending is fraught, fragmented, unsatisfactory, or ultimately inconclusive. It questions the traditional view that the ending is a conspicuous departure from the poetic mode of the earlier poem, as well as the view that the final stanzas are dominated by an ideological struggle between earthly and divine love. Through a close reading of the final five stanzas of the poem—and with particular attention to their echoes throughout the larger work—the essay seeks to elucidate how Chaucer's poetics of desire continue to resonate throughout the poem's close. The result, the essay contends, is an ending of celebration, circumspection, and profound imagination that strives for love both earthly and divine

In Book II of *Troilus and Criseyde*, Pandarus tells Criseyde that “th’ende is every tales strengthe” (II.260). Later in the same book, Chaucer’s narrator claims that “for o fyn is al that evere I telle” (II.1596). Yet the final stanzas of Chaucer’s poem (his longest finished work) present multiple, successive endings, and have long been a source of critical contention. Murray J. Evans argues that the stanzas conspicuously and perhaps self-consciously frustrate a singular ending: “the multiple *endings* repeatedly draw attention to themselves” [emphasis in original] (220). He also observes that “where we might expect an ending...there are...eight or ten endings which...create a sense of chronic inconclusiveness” (227). That “chronic inconclusiveness” seems to put pressure on a poem which is otherwise concerned with the “strengthe” and singularity of ends, fyns, and endings. Timothy S. Miller notes that “*Troilus and Criseyde* takes as one of its major themes the relationship of ‘ends’ with endings, and at several moments anxiety intrudes about the ways in which final outcome may overshadow present actions. Arguably, the long shadow cast by a tragic ending hangs over *Troilus* from the first line of the poem” (102). Miller’s comment highlights a central source of ironic tension in the poem: namely, the eventual outcome of Chaucer’s tale is transparent from the very first line, if not before. *Troilus and Criseyde*, despite its concern with endings, is perhaps less about “th’ende” and more about the telling of the tale itself—telling which, I will argue, centers on the poetic representation of desire. The apparent aesthetic frustration of the poem’s multiple endings, in this light, might be viewed not as a sudden, unexpected contradiction to the poem’s established poetics, but as a final and newly intense, elevated statement of them. Chaucer’s endings, by forestalling a singular *fyn*, allow for the continued representation and poetic enactment of desire for loves both

“feynede” and divine (V. 1848). The play of desire implicit in the poem’s conclusion thus provides consolation and lasting pleasure beyond what a straightforward rejection of “feynede” loves ever could.

Commentary on the end of *Troilus and Criseyde* often focuses, perhaps excessively, on the ideological or rhetorical content of the final stanzas: the opposition between earthly and divine love, and the apparent rejection of the former in favor of the latter. As Clíodhna Carney asserts, “the question of whether [the ending] is or is not a palinode, whether the poem’s loyalties lie finally with the earthly life to which the bulk of the poem is so eloquently dedicated, or with the Christian values asserted in the closing stanzas” constitutes, for many critics, the central crux of the poem’s close, or perhaps even the poem itself (359). Winthrop Wetherbee, in an influential (though perhaps misguided) view, reads the stanzas as firmly palinodic and even liberating: “In the final stanzas of the poem the voice we hear is that of a poet who has been finally liberated from the darkness of his long and excessive involvement with the story of *Troilus*” (235).

Other critics read Chaucer’s apparent rejection of earthly love as tenuous at best. Anthony E. Farnham’s comment is representative of such a view: “the poem as a whole is in vigorous revolt against any such implied moral [that earthly love should be forsaken in favor of the love of Christ]” (208). Evans, for his part, argues that the endings are reflective of the narrator’s psychological unwillingness, or perhaps inability, to end his tale. They reflect, in other words, his continuing desire to tell, and a search for consolation through that telling. Chaucer’s persona, or perhaps Chaucer himself, thus “protects himself [psychologically] by an excess of endings” (Evans 221). The endings become, in this view, a sign of the narrator’s psychic

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struggle against silence—paradoxically, against “th’ende” itself—rather than an earnest rejection of his work.

This brief survey of critical approaches allows us to observe two elements which seem to dominate analysis of the poem’s close: first, an emphasis on the perceived opposition between earthly and divine love, and second, an almost *a priori* conviction that the final stanzas are a conspicuous departure from the poetic mode of the larger poem. In other words, the last stanzas are often seen (as Troilus sees Criseyde’s final letter to him) as “straunge” (V.1632), unexpected, and perhaps unsatisfactory.

Against these approaches, I wish to allow the last words of *Troilus and Criseyde*—specifically, the final five stanzas—to fully speak their intimate linguistic and poetic connection with the preceding poem, and thus allow them to play in their full, desiring capacity. Such play might reveal that Chaucer’s poetic language of love “feynede” and love divine is more convergent than many critics allow. By resituating his language of earthly love in a freshly religious context at the poem’s close, Chaucer charges earthly desire with divine power, and vice-versa. The ending serves as a consolation through its continuation of the poem’s celebratory poetics; moreover, it fulfills generic expectations of divine embrace even as it imbues that embrace with language charged by the memory of earthly love. The final stanzas thus complicate, develop, and recapitulate previous material in a richer form, rather than breaking from it entirely.

Troilus and Criseyde begins with an announcement of the narrator’s intent to tell a story: “The double sorwe of Troilus to tellen” (I.1). It ends with an apparently earnest prayer addressed to God: “And to the Lord right thus I speke and seye” (V.1862). The lines, taken together, indicate an interest in telling and saying that endures throughout the poem. Rather than prioritize the narrative content of his tale, which is known to readers from the beginning, Chaucer focuses his poetic energies on the expressive possibilities of telling itself. This focus allows beginnings and endings—the formal limits of the process of telling any story—to accrue an elevated poetic importance. Miller asserts that prologues “often serve as key locations for medieval writers to explicate their poetics” (52); in the case of *Troilus and Criseyde*, we might well say the same about endings. I will thus focus my analysis on the poem’s final five stanzas, which represent Chaucer’s religious ‘turn’ at the poem’s conclusion and contain the famous, last question of the poem: “What nedeth feynede loves for to seke?” (V.1848). Of this question, Bonnie Wheeler has sharply observed that “even those who recognize the double-edged property of most Chaucerian questions are tempted in this instance to absolute answer” (115). That temptation is certainly strong; a close attention to the memorial poetics of the final stanzas, however, might help us to resist it. I hope to elucidate how the final ending shares in the larger poetic project of the poem as a whole, and how it helps to bring Chaucer’s many endings together to a satisfactory end.

As the conclusion of his poem draws near, Chaucer admits that “for that I to writen first bigan / Of [Troilus’s] love, I have seyde as I kan” (V.1768–69). Yet, the poet writes another fourteen stanzas, trying multiple times, it would seem, to come to a properly satisfying conclusion. One basic explanation for the multiple endings might

reasonably be found in Chaucer’s treatment of the generic conventions of medieval romance. Indeed, Robert W. Hanning has observed that in *Troilus and Criseyde*, Chaucer probes the tension “between an authoritative poetic heritage and the ‘modern’ poet’s imaginative engagement with human desire” (105). Hanning specifically identifies that heritage as the “authoritative literary discourse of desire that [Chaucer] inherited from both recent French and Italian poets [Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio]...and their predecessors of ancient Rome: Vergil, Statius, and especially Ovid” (105). What emerges here is a formal tension of telling and desiring—a tension, especially, of telling *about* desire. Chaucer, then, negotiates between generic expectations of the medieval romance and his own poetic motivation to represent desire (his own, his narrator’s, his characters’, his readers’) in novel ways.

But there is more here than mere generic play: Chaucer allows his end to resonate with the rest of the poem in ways that encourage us to re-experience and remember much of the poetic representation of “feynede” love that has come before, even as we entertain the possibility of an earnest call to divine devotion. Chaucer’s multiple endings participate in an almost palimpsestic process of aspiration toward the fulfillment of desire (for God, earthly love, an end); they layer in progressive succession in order to build to a climactic (and cathartic) close. They also participate in a memorial layering process which recalls the specific language and poetics of the earlier poem into the play of desire of its conclusion. This layering allows Chaucer to progress to a sincere treatment of the divine while retaining a yearning remembrance of the earthly, which now resonates with a more heavenly poetic shimmer.

The final ‘ending’ (composed of the last five stanzas) of *Troilus and Criseyde* is initially puzzling. For the first time in the poem, it would seem, Chaucer urges us to reject earthly love (the subject of the preceding five books) and embrace the heavenly, eternal love of Christ. The first stanza surprises us with its sudden shift in tone, address, and subject matter:

*“O yonge, fresshe folkes, he or she,
In which that love up groweth with youre age,
Repeyeth hom fro worldly vanyte,
And of youre herte up casteth the visage
To thilke God that after his ymage
Yow made, and thynketh al nys but a faire,
This world that passeth soone as floures faire.”*
(V. 1835–41)

Chaucer no longer writes to an unspecified reader, but to “yonge, fresshe folkes, he or she,” and he seems suddenly and earnestly religious. Yet much of the language that gives these stanzas their poetic interest is familiar, often recalled from intense moments of representation of the “feynede” love that Chaucer’s persona now seems to reject. The stanza, however earnest in its religious appeal, contains conspicuous poetic remembrances of the “feynede loves” it claims to decry. The resulting resonance of earthly love within a divine context, we will find, is supremely expressive of both consolation and continued

desire—a duality that affords Chaucer’s final “Amen” a complex, poignant, and yet assured sense of resolution.

We begin with “yonge, fresshe folkes,” which recalls earlier statements that Troilus is “yong, and fressh” (V.830), or that Diomedes is “as fressh as braunch in May” (V.844), or that Meleagre “loved so this fresshe mayden free” (V.1475). All of these descriptions, notably, directly serve poetic representations of earthly love. We also remember the first use of “fresshe” in the poem, where Chaucer gives one of his most beautiful descriptions of love’s flowering in springtime: “In May, that moder is of monthes glade, / That fresshe floures...Ben quike agayn” (II.50–52). Along with “floures faire” of the quoted stanza’s last line, “fresshe folkes” reminds us of the moving opening of Troilus’s final letter to Criseyde, in which he addresses her as “Right fresshe flour” (V.1317). We also recall, notably, that the narrator elsewhere claims that there is no “fairer creature” than Criseyde (V.808).

It might be asserted that by describing his addressed “folkes” as “fresshe” and invoking the rapid passing of “floures faire,” Chaucer is ironically alluding to previously used language in order to emphasize his newfound commitment to religious devotion. In other words, perhaps the resonances identified thus far do not remind of the bliss of earthly love—much less betray a lingering desire to tell about or experience that bliss—but rather serve as warnings against the folly of believing in or desiring earthly love in the first place. They are not, perhaps, subtle and seemingly paradoxical expressions of lingering desire, but signs of a reformed sensibility, one that has its eye (or, perhaps, its pen) firmly set on God.

But then we look again at Chaucer’s language. The identical rhyme on “faire/faire” makes an attempt at sorrowful, almost sacred seriousness, but the repetition betrays a continuing desire for “floures faire” even though the narrator knows that they “passeth soone.” Indeed, the double incidence of “faire” works against the sense of the lines: “this world” may “passeth soone,” but that does not prevent us (nor, it would seem, Chaucer) from wishing, at least in part, that it did not. The rhyme, by rejecting the expected consonantal difference, contributes an almost indulgent, sensual richness to the lines that is nostalgic and yet keenly circumspect. Chaucer thus gives subtle expression to his (and our) careful but persistent desire for the fulfillment of earthly love, even as he begins to reject it.

Notably, even the narrator’s exhortation to “up casteth the visage” reminds of the many moments in which Criseyde casts her eyes, variably, up or down, often in a show of gently repressed desire. Most immediately, the phrase resonates with the moment in Book V in which Troilus desperately imagines that he sees Criseyde, and bids Pandarus to “Heve up thyn eyen, man! Maistow nat se?” (V.1159). Such linguistic resonances do not necessarily undermine the earnestness of Chaucer’s religious urging, but they are not mere coincidences, either. A more supple and playful mode of poetic desire, then, begins to emerge as we consider the ending in close detail. This paradoxical give and take of desire exists in something like a liminal tonal space, somewhere between absolute rejection and embrace of “feynede loves.” Howell Chickering keenly observes of Chaucer’s poetical figures elsewhere that they “invite our detachment from, and conceptualization of, Troilus’s

situation because these very same sonorities and figures of speech are set inside our ironic foreknowledge of the narrative” (243). Similarly, the highly charged language Chaucer uses at the end invites our thoughtful detachment from the immediate call to divine love; the resonances, most of all, invite us to remember the beauty, sorrow, and desire of the poem we have just read even as we attempt to follow Chaucer’s gaze toward God. Chaucer’s language fulfills a collective continuing desire for earthly love but elevates that fulfillment in a celestial, consolatory key. The result, we must contend, is something like solace in the face of the seemingly inevitable disappointment of love.

Chaucer’s religious language, too, resonates with the earlier poem. By doing so, it lessens the surprise of the religious turn while heightening that turn’s sense of verisimilitude and sincerity. This sincerity puts Chaucer’s religious language into equal play with his language of “feynede” love. Troilus’s first word in the poem is “God” (I.195); after falling in love with Criseyde, the first words he thinks to himself are “O mercy, God” (I.276). In the beginning of her first scene in the poem, Criseyde responds to Pandarus’s suggestion that they dance together with three oaths—one in each of three successive lines—all of which include the word “God” (II.113–15). She continues to swear heavily throughout the rest of her conversation with Pandarus and, indeed, the whole poem.

Elsewhere, Chaucer invokes ideas of God in more substantive ways. Criseyde’s expression of desire for peace in Troy is formed as a movingly earnest prayer: “O Troie town, / Yet bidde I God in quiete and in reste / I may yow sen, or do myn herte breste” (V.1006–08). One of the first ‘false endings’ of the poem invokes God in a novel, almost flippant tone: “Thus goth the world. God shilde us fro meschaunce, / And every wight that meneth trouthe avaunce!” (V.1434–35). Another prominent quasi-ending prays that “God leve us for to take it for the best!” (V.1750). Clearly, the religious language of the conclusion has precedent; Chaucer prepares for his ending with more thoroughness and forethought than many critics have recognized.

Neither does Chaucer hesitate to blend religious language with the language of earthly love. In the prohemium of Book I, the narrator asks the “lovers” (I.22) to whom he addresses the poem to pray to God so that he will have the strength to complete his tale: “And ek for me preieth to God so dere / That I have myght to shewe, in som manere, / Swich peyne and wo as Loves folk endure, / In Troilus unsely aventure” (I.32–35). Here, religious prayer and the pain of earthly love are both intensified through metrical substitution: the medial trochee on “preieth” lends that word a particularly sincere sense of yearning, and the initial spondee on “Swich peyne” (the words can be plausibly scanned as an iamb, but they cannot sensitively be heard or read that way) gives emphatic expression to the sorrow of Troilus’s (or any lover’s) “unsely aventure.” We notice, further, the expressive initial spondee, also in the penultimate line, of the “yonge, fresshe folkes” stanza: “after his ymage / Yow made.” Not only has Chaucer sincerely invoked God before; he has also used an identical metrical substitution, in the same position in the stanza, to emphasize the pain of “feynede” loves *and* the grace of God’s creation. Such parallelism in the poetics of Chaucer’s endings may not

be self-conscious, or even intentional; its effect, however, is surely essential if we are to fully account for the larger impact of the poem's conclusion.

The echoes and resonances of Chaucer's final stanzas continue. As early as the sixth stanza of the poem, we observe explicit parallels with the poem's close:

*“And biddeth ek for hem that ben despaired
In love, that nevere nyl recovered be,
And ek for hem that falsly ben apeired
Thorugh wikked tonges, be it he or she;
Thus biddeth God, for his benignite,
So graunte hem soone owt of this world to pace,
That ben despaired out of Loves grace.”*

(I. 36–42).

Here is another call to prayer, this time not on behalf of Chaucer but that of the “despaired” lover. We notice several conspicuous resonances here: “he or she” presages Chaucer's description of his “fresshe folkes,” and God's “benignite” prepares, across nearly the length of the entire poem, the “benignities” of “philosophical Strode” (V.1857–59) and the “benigne” of Jesus that is the penultimate word of the poem (V.1869). Most significantly, this is an earnest religious statement made for the benefit of woeful lovers at the outset of the poem—almost as if Chaucer's persona is presaging the consolatory religious statement he will make at the poem's end.

I would turn, finally, to the last stanza of the poem, which invokes the Trinity (following Dante) in a prayer to the Lord himself:

*“Thow oon, and two, and thre, eterne on lyve,
That regnest ay in thre, and two, and oon,
Uncircumscrip, and al maist circumscrive,
Us from visible and invisible foon
Defende, and to thy mercy, everichon,
So make us, Jesus, fo this mercy, digne,
For love of mayde and moder thyn benigne.
Amen.”*

(V.1835–70)

We principally notice the tension implicit in the figuration between three and two, Trinity and duality (or perhaps partnership, even the partnership of earthly love, of Troilus and Criseyde). The palindromic presentation of the numbers of the Trinity emphasizes God's mysterious, three-fold power, yet the two-sided, chiasmic nature of the figure reflects an almost cautious, uncertain duality. These lines are full of the grandeur and boldness of Christian theology, but they are also aware, it would seem, of the possibility that such theology alone, appended as it is to a poem about earthly love, may prove unsatisfactory.

I read this stanza, then, as fully asserting the Trinity while nonetheless allowing itself a broader, perhaps more permissive and generous inclusion of what has come before in the poem. Perhaps most important, it also allows the poem to end in a state of conspicuous linguistic and philosophical play; as Wheeler observes, “what is happiest about [Chaucer's choice of Dante's Trinity] is that its wit restores play to the poem” (120). Such moments of playful

inclusivity, generosity, and imaginative capaciousness are what, if we are reading him properly, we can never forget about Chaucer. The stanza's repetitions enshrine an emphasis on (re)iterative, double figuration: *Uncircumscrip/circumscrive, visible/invisible, mercy/mercy, mayde/moder, digne/benigne*. The poem that began with a “double sorwe” seems content, within its proclamation of the power of the Trinity, to end with a poetics dependent not on the triple figure, but the double one. Perhaps the poetic tension is reflective of what Carney calls “the structure of *difference within unity* that characterizes the Trinity itself” [emphasis in original] (364). It certainly imparts a tenderly sincere and yet lingeringly ironical or expansive tone to this last stanza. Most of all, it reminds, like the earlier “fresshe folkes,” of that which has come before. The ultimate “Amen” thus invites us back into the poem, instead of sending us away from it. This is surely, in part, what Carney means when she identifies “cyclicity” as the fundamental poetic and rhetorical movement of the final stanzas (359). As Wetherbee usefully observes, “[Chaucer's] concern is more with aspiration than with transcendence” (243). The poem, then, aspires to the Trinity despite its knowledge that the only thing it has *really* managed (or even desired) to understand is the thing that has, at least for Troilus, failed—the thing it now claims to reject but cannot, in good faith, reject absolutely.

Even the Trinity figure is implicated, earlier in the poem, in earthly love; Chaucer's chiasmic borrowing from Dante, perhaps, speaks a double commitment to God *and* to Venus. The very first lines of Book III, which celebrate the beauty and bliss of the love between Troilus and Criseyde, invoke the “thridde heven,” which is the planetary sphere of Venus (III.2). The celebratory opening of Book II (“In May, that moder is...”), for its part, is fundamentally associated with the formal principle of trinity, though there that principle is conspicuously and joyously secular, earthly, and belonging to Love.

The narrator opens the scene by telling us that he “shal synge” the events of “Mayes day the thrydde” (II.56). That date is mentioned elsewhere in Chaucer's poetry (*The Knight's Tale* and *The Nun's Priest's Tale*), but its significance—if it has any—is unclear. Perhaps it is enough, at least with regard to *Troilus and Criseyde*, to say that it establishes the importance of the number three to the scene that follows between Pandarus and Criseyde. When Pandarus approaches Criseyde for the first time in the poem, he does so accompanied by two ladies, so that “they thre / Herden a mayden reden hem the geste” (II.82–83). And then Criseyde tells Pandarus that she dreamt of him three times the previous night (her rising action also lightly parallels Christ's rise—they both “roos”): “‘Ey, uncle myn, welcome iwys, quod she; / And up she roos, and by the hond in hye / She took hym faste, and seyde, ‘This nyght thrie, / To goode mot it turne, of yow I mette.’ / And with that word she doun on bench hym sette” (II.87–91). This is trinity, itself in triplicate. It seems an unlikely coincidence that the final mention of ‘three’ in the scene (within less than forty lines of “Mayes day the thrydde”) coincides with Criseyde's wish that her dream “To goode mot it turne,” just as Chaucer's invocation of the Trinity at the poem's end coincides with a prayer for defense and mercy and love. We might remember, indeed, what Wheeler observes of the poem's final tonal

appeal: “Five times in the final two stanzas, the narrator asks for mercy and benignity; for narrator and reader, the final context is grace, not judgment” (119). The convergent use of trinity to express hope, mercy, and “benigne” softens the surprise of Chaucer’s ending and leads us away from the temptation of judgment; it reveals just how appropriate and satisfactory and perhaps inevitable the end really is.

What emerges from the swirl of referentiality at the end of *Troilus and Criseyde* is a co-existence, through a shared poetics and diction, of what have often been seen as opposing impulses in the poem. Chaucer is less concerned with a dogmatic rejection of “feynede” love in favor of love divine than he is with representing the agony, mystery, joy, and desire of human life as he observes it in the actual world: what Wheeler calls “the inevitable mysteriousness of the human” (106). Miller identifies an “unseemly union of joy and sorrow” in the poem that nonetheless resolves, through Chaucer’s fundamentally embracing poetics, into pleasure. We might observe a similar, initially unseemly union of earthly and divine love, made compelling and consolatory—even in its moments of tension—by a shared poetic locus of desire. Such a reading would pay homage to Farnham’s recognition of the lingering desire at the poem’s end, but identify the source of that desire as the resonating, even harmonious poetics of the poem’s endings, not their apparent frustration. In this sense, the end makes us all (Chaucer, perhaps, included) like Criseyde, in her lingering desire for a Troilus she knows she will never have again: “And thus she sette hire woful herte afire / Thorough remembraunce of that she gan desire” (V.720–21).

Perhaps Chaucer’s final ending also reflects something of Troilus’s state as he sings his last song of the poem, “as he that stood bitwixen hope and drede” (V.630). Troilus is inspired to sing when he is alone and with little hope; it is in this moment of the increasing impossibility that Troilus’s desires will be fulfilled that Chaucer’s representation of that desire becomes most impassioned: “And whan he was from every mannes syghte, / With softe vois he of his lady deere, / That absent was, gan synge as ye may heere” (V.635–37). Chaucer situates Troilus’s “softe vois” at the expressive juncture of the line’s first and second feet; the impassioned stresses of the first half of the line lend his voice, despite its softness and its liminal position “bitwixen hope and drede,” a stirring, lingering power.

That power—of a soft voice telling its woe to the world—finds heightened expression in Chaucer’s final poetic voice. Earthly love has proven false, but it continues to stimulate desire. That desire is strongly tempered by a reaching toward divine love, but this is, as Wetherby reminds us, “aspiration” toward transcendence, not

transcendence itself, and that is a good thing. The end speaks its desires and finds comfort in doing so; the end remembers and anticipates; the end celebrates loves both earthly and divine. Chaucer thus, like the God he invokes, “[circumscribes]” the “hope and drede” that come with the experience of desire and of loss—that come, even, with the reading of his poem. That he does so in such a celebratory and lovely way is a testament to an imaginative capacity that, despite its sorrow, nonetheless continues to find ample “cause for to synge” (l.854).

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