GEOFFREY CHAUCER

TROILUS AND CRESSIDA

Rendered into Modern English Verse
by George Philip Krapp

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Introduction

Readers of this tale who may be interested in sources will look in vain for the story of Troilus and Cressida in Homer, Vergil or any other classic authority. Homer mentions Troilus but briefly, in allusion to his death. It was the early and unhappy end of this youth that stirred chiefly the interest of the ancients. This was probably the subject of a lost tragedy by Sophocles, and the few lines that Vergil devotes to Troilus are to be found in a description of the manner of his death. To the ancients Troilus appears to have figured as scarcely more than an engaging youth, one of the younger of the many sons of Priam, remarkable for his beauty and his valor, who was slain in his first flower by Achilles. A career cut short so early obviously provided little opportunity for the development of tales of heroic exploit and adventure, and so far as is known from surviving records, the ancients never got beyond this single pathetic incident of the death of Troilus as the result of his rash encounter with Achilles. Cressida cannot be connected with any character in classical tradition, except in mere name, and the whole story of the love of Troilus and Cressida is of much later origin, or at least of much later record.

It is not impossible, however, that the legend of Troilus began to grow very early, and that even in classical times

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Troilus stories of greater extent and detail than those now known were current. However this may be, we know that later writers continued to be interested in Troilus, and two late Latin historians must be mentioned in this connection. They are Dictys Cretensis, of the late fourth century, and Dares Phrygius, of the sixth century, both of whom wrote rather brief epitomes of the Trojan war in Latin prose. But neither Dares nor Dictys helped the story of Troilus along very far, and neither of them contains any hint of the love adventures of Troilus and Cressida. The first writer to develop this theme was Benoit de Sainte Maure, in his *Roman de Troie,* a long narrative poem in French written about the middle of the twelfth century. A hundred years or so later, Benoit's story was reproduced in Latin prose by Guido delle Colonne in his *Historia Trojana,* and from these two works not only the story of Troilus and Cressida, but a great part of the whole body of medieval information—or supposed information—concerning the Trojan war was derived. On the basis of Benoit and Guido, Boccaccio told the story of Troilus and Cressida in his *Filostrato.* On the basis of Boccaccio's *Filostrato* mainly, Chaucer told the story in his poem, and on the basis of Chaucer mainly, Shakspere made the story into a play in his *Troilus and Cressida.* These in briefest outline are the stages of growth of this story, but the reader who desires more detailed information will find it in abundance in Karl Young's *Origin and Development of the Story of Troilus and Criseyde* (1908).

It may seem strange that Chaucer mentions explicitly neither Benoit, Guido or Boccaccio, though beyond question, Boccaccio was his main source. But Chaucer was telling what purported to be an authentic episode in the Trojan war, concerning which these writers, approximately contemporary

with himself, could not be regarded as authorities of high value. Very discreetly, therefore, he put the whole matter of source beyond debate by a blanket citation of a mysterious Lollius, whom nobody could question because nobody knew anything about him—though naturally nobody would acknowledge such ignorance.

Although Boccaccio's *Filostrato* provided Chaucer with the main elements of the plot of his *Troilus and Criseyde,* this latter work is far from being a translation of Boccaccio's poem. This can readily be seen by examining William Rossetti's study of the two poems, in a publication of the Chaucer Society, where those parts of Chaucer's English that are derived from the Italian are placed in a column parallel to the corresponding parts of the Italian text. The most notable expansion of Chaucer is the character of Pandarus, and there are a great many omissions, but line for line and phrase for phrase, one will observe an infinite number of those minor details of incident, tone and color which give its real life to narrative, and which derive from Chaucer alone. The mingling of sentiment and pathos in *Troilus and Criseyde* with somewhat Byronic, but never bitter, wit and cynicism is entirely Chaucer's. *Troilus and Criseyde* is, as has been well said by Professor Ker, "the first great modern book in that kind where the most characteristic modern triumphs of the literary art have been won; in the kind to which belong the great books of Cervantes, of Fielding, and of their later pupils." "It is a tragic novel," continues Professor Ker, "and it is also strong enough to pass the scrutiny of that Comic Muse who detects the impostures of inflated heroic and romantic poetry."

These very just commendations are perhaps sufficient warning to the modern reader against the assumption that

because Chaucer lived and wrote five and a half centuries ago, he was therefore a simple-minded person. The adjective simple is the last that should be applied to Chaucer. When Chaucer referred to Christian theology and heathen deities in the same breath, when he mingled the notions of medieval chivalry with those of classical antiquity, he knew perfectly well what he was doing, and the juxtapositions were as amusing to him as they are to us. If any reader of this tale feels inclined to put the gods of antiquity and the saints of the calendar on very much the same level, he need not hesitate to find in Chaucer a kindred spirit.

The critics have ever been united in praising Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* as the most perfect of his completed works. Comparison with *The Canterbury Tales* inevitably suggests itself, but the stories of *The Canterbury Tales* were left by Chaucer as fragments of a noble plan never carried out. *The Canterbury Tales* is, moreover, a collection of short stories, one may say, and as such not rightly to be compared with the sustained effort necessary to the conception and completion of a highly organized narrative like *Troilus and Criseyde*. This work has frequently been called the first great English novel, and the comparison with the modern novel is not unjustified. The limits of space do not permit assembling here any selections from the chorus in praise of *Troilus and Criseyde,* but the reader must be referred to the three volumes, *Five Hundred Years of Chaucer Criticism and Allusion, 1357–1900,* by Caroline F. E. Spurgeon, Professor of English in the University of London, a work not only of extraordinary industry, but also of great and varied interest.

The whole of *Troilus and Criseyde* has never before been presented to English readers in a modernized version. The

story was extremely popular in the time of Shakspere, and a number of other plays on this theme, besides Shakspere's own, were written and acted in Elizabethan times. Shakspere's play, by no means one of his best, was probably prepared to satisfy a popular demand. But these old plays were all adaptations of Chaucer's materials and are scarcely to be regarded as versions of his story. The first three books were retold in English verse by Jonathan Sidnam, about 1630, "For the satisfaction of those Who either cannot, or will not take y^e^ paines to vnderstand The Excellent Authors Farr more Exquisite and significant Expressions Though now growen obsolete, and out of vse." But the most remarkable effort of this kind was the complete translation into Latin verse, made by Sir Francis Kynaston, the first two books of which were published in 1635. This work was received with loud acclaim, and it would appear that many readers in that day found Kynaston's Latin easier than Chaucer's English. But English was then frequently regarded as an unsafe and impermanent medium of expression. Sir Francis Kynaston obviously thought he was performing a pious duty when he translated *Troilus and Criseyde* into Latin, thus securing it from all possible chance of decay. In this, it will be remembered, he had the illustrious example of Sir Francis Bacon, Lord Verulam, who in his later years undertook to translate all of his English writings into Latin, "for these modern languages," he opined, "will at one time or other play the bank-rowtes with books." But Bacon's English writings have not been kept alive by his Latin translations of them, nor has Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* required the embalming process of a Latin version to preserve it for posterity.

Of later modernizations of *Troilus and Criseyde* I need

mention only the poet Wordsworth's metrical version of part of Book Five. Doubtless there have been many other and later attempts made by lovers of Chaucer to give *Troilus and Criseyde* a modern English form, but these enthusiasts have all fallen by the wayside, and as they have left no record of their labors of love, of them I can tell no tale.

Since this version of *Troilus and Criseyde* now presented to the reader does not seek to give a literal and verbally exact rendering of Chaucer's language, a thing beyond the limits of human power in a metrical rendering which would be both readable and true to the spirit of the original, the question of the particular readings followed among the various surviving manuscripts of *Troilus and Criseyde* is not of great importance. The manuscripts agree, on the whole, with remarkable unanimity, but anyone interested will find all the variant readings recorded by Professor Robert Kilburn Root, in his scholarly and exhaustive edition of the text of *The Book of Troilus and Criseyde*. But if this version of the story of Troilus and Cressida does not correspond word for word with Chaucer's, it comes closer to corresponding with it line for line. Chaucer's unit of composition was his favorite seven line stanza, and since the same unit of composition is employed here, and since nothing has been added or taken away, it follows that the number of stanzas in the two versions is exactly the same, and in consequence, the number of lines.

The Temple Door

BOOK I

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The double sorrow of Troilus to tell,
Unhappy son of Priam, king of Troy,
And how he fared, when first in love he fell,
From woe to weal, then back again from joy,
Until we part my time I shall employ.
Tisiphone, now help me to endite
These woful lines, that weep e'en as I write!

On thee I call, Goddess malevolent,
Thou cruel Fury, grieving ever in pain!
Help me, who am the sorrowful instrument
That lovers use their sorrows to complain;
For truly this is not a saying vain,
A gloomy man should have a gloomy mate,
And faces sad, those who sad tales relate.

For I to serve Love's servants ever try,
Yet dare not seek, for my unlikeliness,
The aid of Love, although for love I die,
So far am I from prospect of success.
But yet if this may make the sorrows less
Of any lover, or may his cause avail,
The thanks be his and mine this toilsome tale.

But O ye lovers, bathed in bliss always,
If any drops of pity in you be,
Recall the griefs gone by of other days,
And think sometimes upon the adversity
Of other folk, forgetting not that ye
Have felt yourselves Love's power to displease,
Lest ye might win Love's prize with too great ease.

And pray for those who suffer in the plight
Of Troilus, as I shall tell you here,
Beseeching Love to bring them to delight;
And pray for me as well, to God so dear,
That I may have the skill to make appear,
In this unhappy tale of Troilus,
How dark may be love's ways and treacherous.

And pray for those that dwell in love's despair,
From which they never hope to be restored;
And pray for them who must the burden bear
Of slanderous tongue of lady or of lord;
Pray God that he the faithful may reward,
And to the hopeless grant a quick release
And bring them from unrest to lasting peace.

And pray for lovers all who are at ease,
That they may still continue to be so,
And pray that they their ladies still may please
And unto Love a reverent honor show;
For thus I trust my soul in truth shall grow,
Praying for those who Love's commands fulfill,
And setting forth their fates in all good will,

With pity and compassion in my heart,
As though I brother were to lovers all.
Now take, I pray, my story in good part;
Henceforth I shall endeavor to recall
What sorrows once on Troilus must fall
In loving Cressida, who first returned
His love, but for new love this old love spurned.

Well known the story, how the Greeks so strong
In arms, went with a thousand vessels sailing
To Troy, and there the Trojan city long
Besieged, and after ten years' siege prevailing,
In divers ways, but with one wrath unfailing,
Avenged on Troy the wrong to Helen done
By Paris, when at last great Troy was won.

Now so it chanced that in the Trojan town,
There dwelt a lord of rank and high degree,
A priest named Calchas, of such great renown
And in all science such proficiency,
That he knew what the fate of Troy would be,
For at the shrine at Delphi he had heard
Phoebus Apollo's dire foreboding word.

When Calchas found his priestly computation
Confirmed the oracle Apollo spake,
That with the Greeks came such a mighty nation,
That in the end the city they would take,
He straight resolved the Trojans to forsake;
For by his divinations well he knew
That Troy was doomed, for all that Troy might do.

With stealth to leave the city he prepared,
For cunning plans he knew well to devise;
In secret to the Grecian host he fared,
Where they received him in most courtly wise,
As one of high distinction in their eyes;
For they had hope that by his priestly skill,
He might ward off their future harm and ill.

Great cry arose when it was first made known
Through all the town, and everywhere was told,
That Calchas had turned traitor and had flown,
And to the Greeks his faithless honor sold;
And every Trojan, both the young and old,
Declared that Calchas, with his wicked kin,
Deserved to burn alive for this great sin.

Now Calchas left behind him when he fled,
Innocent of this so false and wicked deed,
His daughter, who in grief her life now led,
For mortal fear she felt in her great need,
And had no one in Troy her cause to plead,
For she a widow was without a friend
Who might bear aid and helpful counsel lend.

Cressida was the name this lady bore,
And in the Trojan city, to my mind,
Was none so fair, for in her beauty more
Angelical she seemed than human kind,
As though a thing immortal were combined
Of all of heaven's gifts of choicest worth,
And sent down here in scorn of our poor earth.

This lady could in no way close her ears
To her own father's evil deed and fame,
And driven near distracted by her fears,
In widow's sober habit dressed, she came
Before great Hector, where she doth proclaim
Her loyalty with tearful voice and eye,
And pleads for grace and treason doth deny.

Now Hector was a man of kindly heart,
And when he saw how great was her distress,
And then her beauty likewise played a part,
These words of comfort to her did address:
"About your father's wicked deeds, the less
That's said the better! But you yourself in joy
Dwell here with us the while you will in Troy!

"And all respect that men owe unto you,
As though your father still were dwelling here,
That shall you have, and all regard that's due
Your person, I assure you without fear."
She humbly thanked him for these words of cheer,
And would have thanked him more had he desired,
And took her leave and to her home retired.

And there she dwelt with such a retinue
As fitting was for one of her high station,
And kept good house, as she was wont to do,
Enjoying love and honest reputation
As much as any in the Trojan nation;
But if she children had, I do not know,
I have not heard, and therefore let it go.

The fates of war were there exemplified
Between the Trojan and the Grecian forces,
For one day those of Troy were sorely tried,
But next the Greeks, for all their great resources,
Must yield; for Fortune hath uncertain courses,
And now her wheel goes up, and now goes down,
And now she wears a smile and now a frown.

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