Volume 2: 2009-2010 ISSN: 2041-6776

INNERVATE
Leading Undergraduate Work in English Studies

The University of Nottingham
School of English Studies

'Myn auctor shal I folwen, if I konne' (*Troilus and Criseyde*, II.49) An analysis of the relationship between originality and authority in Geoffrey Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* and Robert Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid*.

Bernard Hirsch

This essay is essentially concerned with the medieval concept of authorship. With regard to secular literature, the Middle Ages were a time of looking back towards the classical writers. The particular reverence to authors like 'Vergile, Ovide, Omer' (*Troilus and Criseyde*[1] V.1792), etc. had its roots not only in the literary predilection for classical narratives but also in the perceived superiority of the language these texts (or their more widely known translations in the case of Greek originals) were written in: Latin was seen as the most prestigious of all tongues and therefore apt to be used by the 'auctores'.[2] A medieval writer who even used the English vernacular had no 'auctoritas'. It is thus vital to consider to what extent and through which literary devices a medieval author could introduce original, creative narrative/stylistic/thematic elements into his writing.

Geoffrey Chaucer was the pre-eminent author of the Middle English period, and it is thus appropriate that his masterpiece *Troilus and Criseyde* should be used here as the major example to illustrate the interrelation between adherence and proper respect paid to a literary authority and, on the other hand, the possibility of creating an innovative, original work of literature. It is the most prominent representative of a long tradition of the 'European History of Troilus'[3] and thus the result of a long process of merging different elements from different authors writing on the same literary subject together.

The second poem, which I will use as a co-text for my analysis, is Robert Henryson's *The Testament of Cresseid*.[4] While it is also part of the 'Troilus'-tradition, it develops original aspects of narrative and character, building only on a small part of Chaucer's poem. Thus Henryson, already accepting Chaucer as the main literary authority on the 'Troilus'-matter, finds a place within that grand work to insert his own innovative ideas on the story.

The overwhelming importance of Chaucer's *Troilus* may obscure the fact that Troilus as a literary figure was already some 2000 years old at the time of Chaucer's writing. A single line in the *Iliad* mentions him as one of the most renowned sons of Priam who were killed by the Greeks.[5] Other classical writers like Vergil in his *Aeneid* developed stories of Troilus' death at the hands of Achilles (a motif also frequently depicted on pottery). Only the very end of his life was narrated in classical literature;[6] there was no love story or any mention of Chryseis/Briseis in connection with him.[7] The other main classical writers on

[1] Henceforth abbreviated as *Troilus*; all references are to the *Riverside Chaucer*.
[2] cf. Machan 281
[3] cf. the title of Boitani's book
[4] Henceforth abbreviated as *Testament*; all further references are to the TEAMS website.
[5] cf. *Iliad*, canto XXIV, line 257
[6] cf. Boitani 2
[7] The killing of the protagonist by Achilles was certainly taken up into Chaucer's *Troilus* (cf. V.1805-1806) because it was such a well-established part of literary tradition.

Troilus, Dares and Dictyl, were thought to have been eye-witnesses of the Trojan war.[8] The Latin translations of their works from the 6th and 4th centuries, respectively, were highly influential in Chaucer's time because of their surmised authenticity; however, they provided little narrative material that survived into Chaucer's *Troilus*, focussing on the prowess in battle of the hero as a minor matter in the overarching theme of the war.

It was Benoît de Sainte-Maure who invented the love story of Troilus and Briseida in his *Roman de Troie* from about 1155. Chaucer certainly knew Benoît well because he borrowed certain pieces of narrative that are absent from all other works on Troilus, e.g. the conversation between Briseida and Diomedes when the former is escorted from Troy to the Greeks.[9] However, Chaucer's narrator does not acknowledge him among his sources; in fact, he does not mention any of those writers who actually covered the love story between Troilus and Criseyde.

Another of them was Guido de Columnis, whose *Historia Destructionis Troiae* from the mid-thirteenth century shows knowledge of Benoît's text but treats the Troilus-story much more marginally and less coherently; he is unanimously condemned for his utterly misogynist view of Briseida.[10] However, he is a perfect example of the above mentioned hypothesis that authors writing in Latin were automatically seen as more authoritative than those writing in the vernacular because, while his *Historia* was of inferior quality compared to the *Roman*, it was still more widely read.[11]

The most recent of Chaucer's sources was also his most important one: Giovanni Boccaccio's *Il Filostrato*. Boccaccio wrote a 'lyrical' (Natali 49) version of the Troilus-story which was for the first time almost completely unconnected to the war between the Trojans and the Greeks; he made the love story and its unhappy ending the centre of his work, thus inventing the beginning to an already given ending.[12] He is also to be credited with the introduction of the go-between Pandaro, who would later become the major dialogue-partner for the protagonists of Chaucer's *Troilus*, enriching the poem through his Boethian philosophical reasoning. In *Filostrato* the essential narrative elements of Chaucer's *Troilus* are already present; from the whole 'plan' or scope of the story to many striking details *Filostrato* provides the model that Chaucer used extensively. In his detailed source analysis of *Troilus*, Barry Windeatt compares the plot of the two works and shows that especially the first and (to a lesser extent) the fifth book of Chaucer's poem are very closely based on Boccaccio, at times being hardly more than a word-for-word translation.[13] In spite of that, Chaucer no-where mentions Boccaccio as his source; he is not the acknowledged 'auctour' he wants to 'folwen' (*Troilus* II.49).

Who, then, does the famous statement of Chaucer's narrator that is used as the title of this essay refer to? A second question comes to the mind: How can we – not only from a modern perspective – talk about Chaucer as an author when his narrator pretends only to retell something that is essentially the work of someone else – someone of 'auctoritas'? The proposed answer tells us that both questions are misleading: Chaucer does *not* try to 'follow' a particular author; rather, he tries to establish his own version in light of the vast background material (which he acknowledges through his many references to earlier versions of the 'Troilus'-story).

---

[8] cf. Windeatt (1992): 72; I include the year of publication in the short citation only when my bibliography contains more than one work by the same author.
[9] cf. *Troilus* V.106-189 and *Roman de Troie* 13539-13543, 13604-13610, qtd. in Havely 172-173; cf. also Windeatt (1992): 83-84
[10] e.g. cf. Antonelli 46-48, Windeatt (1992): 92-94
[11] cf. Havely 166
[12] cf. Windeatt (1989): 117
[13] cf. Windeatt (1992): 50-72 and Windeatt (1983): 164

The direct source for his text is said to be an author called 'Lollius' (cf. *Troilus* I.394, V.1653). We know of course that this is not true; Chaucer's major source was, as already discussed, Boccaccio's *Filostrato*. In fact, there is no evidence that 'Lollius' ever existed.[14] Windeatt suggests that at Chaucer's time, people believed in a Latin authority on the Trojan war of that name because of a misinterpretation of an Ovidian letter (cf. 1992: 38-39), but the very fact that Chaucer knew that the (Italian) poem he was actually working with was not by Lollius seems to indicate that Chaucer deliberately invented Lollius' work on Troilus, not believing in its possible existence. We must then assume that Chaucer's other mentions of his 'auctour' are not simply references to *Filostrato* (or any other work) but serve a more subtle purpose.

First of all, there was of course the need to anchor a poem that is set in ancient Troy within classical writing. That the tragic love of Troilus and Criseyde itself was first conceived in the Middle Ages made this anchoring difficult; hence we read the narrator's affirmation 'For as myn auctour seyde, so sey I' (II.18) or even more strongly 'And *treweliche*, as written wel I fynde' (IV.1415, emphasis added) referring to the non-existing Lollius. Windeatt points out that phrases such as these are often used precisely when Chaucer introduces original material (cf. 1992: 40-41). However, Chaucer also refers to his 'auctour' to justify the omission of certain pieces of information. I will look now closely at the most significant non-inclusion attributed to the lack of authoritative sources, namely Criseyde's fate after Diomede's seduction of her, which is in reality subservient to Chaucer's innovative recast of his female protagonist.[15]

It is the passage most densely interspersed with references to 'the storie' (1037, 1051, 1094) or even 'stories' (1044),[16] showing the narrator reporting what 'men seyn' (1050) – with which he does not agree (cf. ibid.). He even claims that he wants to 'excuse' (1099) Criseyde from the accusations of inauthentic accounts, which presumably refers to the *Roman de Troie* and especially to Guido's *Historia*, which rails against Briseida's unfaithfulness most relentlessly.[17] Lollius, conversely, is said not to go into detail about Criseyde's betrayal of Troilus, which only means that Chaucer does not want to dwell on it. While Chaucer obviously could have written a positive ending for Criseyde's part of the story, he found it more effective to re-interpret this character against the misogynist view of his *real* sources by pretending to be at a loss to give the full account of Criseyde's fate owing to the incompleteness of his *fictitious* source. Thereby, however, he also subverted and questioned the very idea of literary 'auctoritas' as such.

The originality of Chaucer's *Troilus* comprises two aspects: his 'medievalization' (Lewis 37) of the story and the characters and the philosophical enrichment of the poem through Boethian teachings. Lewis's umbrella term refers especially to the topos of medieval courtly love with which Chaucer replaces Boccaccio's sexualised love story already influenced by (very) early Italian renaissance thinking.[18] The vast expansion of Book III compared to Boccaccio's original version mainly serves to delay the consummation scene (thereby introducing many complications of the plot) because it would not have been appropriate according to the conventions of courtly love that the lovers have sexual intercourse as soon as they realise that they fall for each other.[19] As a consequence, Pandarus has much more to do in order to persuade not only Criseyde but also Troilus to give in to

[14] cf. Windeatt (1992): 37
[15] The passage in question is *Troilus* V.1037-1099.
[16] In this line Chaucer's narrator perhaps refers specifically to the *Roman de Troie*: 'When Diomedes was wounded [...] [s]he made it clearly apparent that she loved him from her heart.' (*Roman* 20202f, qtd. in Havely 179)
[17] e.g. cf. *Historia* VIII.85, XIX.166 (qtd. in Havely 184, 185)
[18] cf. also Windeatt (1983): 169
[19] cf. *Filostrato* part III, stanzas 21-30, qtd. in Havely 48-49

their desire. The careful build-up of the action until the happy union of the lovers allows for both an extensive reflection on the nature of love and a much more detailed characterisation especially of Criseyde, who is arguably the more complex of the two protagonists, and thus makes it possible to cast her in a positive – or at least, not entirely negative – light.

In addition to that, Chaucer used the story of Troilus and Criseyde also as a vehicle for philosophical considerations which mainly reflect his engagement with Boethius. I would argue that the *Consolatio Philosophiae* must be counted among Chaucer's sources for the composition of *Troilus* because Troilus' soliloquy on predestination (IV.953-1085), for example, could not have been written if Chaucer had not had intimate knowledge of Boethius's work.[20] In its lofty metaphysical speculations this speech is also far removed from the otherwise highly emotive depiction of Troilus, which shows that Chaucer considered the philosophical depth of his major poem at times more important than perfect consistency of tone and characterisation. Furthermore, the whole five-part structure of *Troilus* is modelled on the wheel of Fortune (ascension to happiness, zenith of bliss, downfall to unhappiness), which is central to Boethius' teachings on the fickleness of Fortune. I would say that Chaucer's willingness to 'excuse' (V.1099) Criseyde is derived from the Boethian (and ultimately Stoical) conviction that it is useless to trust in the constancy of something that is by nature inconstant – in this case, love. However, it is of course also in line with the fundamentally Christian conclusion to the poem, in light of which benignancy and forgiveness become essential factors for the evaluation of any character.

In how far, then, can it be said that Chaucer followed any of the previous authors of the 'Troilus'-tradition? He thoroughly Christianised the original pagan story, he developed dialogue and characterisation much further than any of his literary predecessors, and he sublimated the narrative material in philosophy;[21] it is not to be wondered at, then, that Chaucer himself became the literary authority for the story of Troilus and Criseyde, easily supplanting Benoît, Guido, and even Boccaccio.

In the second part of this essay, I want to look at the *Testament of Cresseid* as one of the direct literary responses to Chaucer's *Troilus*. Robert Henryson wrote this poem about a hundred years after the composition of *Troilus*, when Chaucer was already seen as the greatest Middle English author. By 1480, manuscripts of *Troilus* were circulating in Scotland so that Henryson could build on the common knowledge of Chaucer's work, which must have become a canonical text by that time even in Scotland.

It has been said already that the *Testament* is a much shorter poem with a much smaller scope. It engages only with Book V of *Troilus*, which it re-considers in many decisive ways. The key question against the uncritical reception of literary authorities is asked by Henryson's narrator: 'Quha wait gif all that Chauceir wrait was trew?' (*Testament* 64). The even more fundamental question underlying Henryson's pertains to the nature of literature as such: what does it mean to say that a piece of fiction is 'trew'? The narrator seems to undermine the very idea of literary authority by attempting to write a new version to excuse Cresseid (cf. lines 85-91), thereby also creating his own version of truth.[22]

Henryson is one of the main 'Chaucerian' poets. As MacQueen points out, this does not mean that he sees himself as Chaucer's 'disciple' but rather 'as a fellow innovator with Chaucer' (MacQueen 55). Of course, he does appear very Chaucerian in his use of rhyme royal, in his frame narrative reminiscent of Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*,[23] in Cresseid's complaint echoing Troilus' *ubi-sunt*-questions in V.218-221 and V.1674-1676, or in the use of astrology in the dream vision as in Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*.[24] However, he certainly

[20] cf. Reichl 138
[21] cf. Windeatt (1983): 178-179
[22] cf. Dunnigan 120: 'Henryson's narrator seeks to disavow the received authority of the Cresseid narrative.'
[23] cf. Twycross-Martin 37
[24] cf. Twycross-Martin 42

introduces thematic aspects and questions into the story especially regarding the character of Cresseid which go beyond the 'loose end' (Storm 107) of her fate in Chaucer's original.

In this context it is important to take the 'uther quair' (*Testament* 61) into consideration together with the extensive and highly controversial debate of its significance in literary criticism. Some critics think that this work was probably just made up by Henryson for the sake of irony,[25] others believe that the *Testament* itself recounts this source, the frame narrative thus referring to the embedded text as a work by a different author,[26] and a minority claims that there was indeed a text written after Chaucer which dealt with Criseyde's fate but is now lost.[27] Following Cullen's argument that the narrator's discussion of Chaucer parallels that of the 'uther quair' (cf. Cullen 140) and bearing in mind his forceful rejection of its reported condemnation of Criseyde (cf. *Testament* 85-91), I find it implausible that the *Testament* should actually retell the story of a fictitious second source. On the other hand, I do not think that there was any significant poem dealing with Criseyde's fate either; in this case, I believe, Henryson would have mentioned its author by name (as he names Chaucer, cf. line 41). The truth may be hinted at already in Criseyde's lamentation in *Troilus*, when she foretells that she will be seen as the prototypical wanton woman by future generations (cf. *Troilus* V.1054-1067). Henryson's 'uther quair' might have been an unnamed writer whom Henryson cited as a representative for the certainly already existing tradition of portraying Criseyde as a whore-figure in various contexts.[28] Thus his attempt to 'excuse' her deals not only with the Criseyde of Chaucer's text but also specifically with the literary and cultural reputation shaping this character in the ongoing 'Troilus-tradition'.

Given that Chaucer is certainly the most direct source to which the *Testament* responds it is important to identify the place taken by Henryson's poem within the storyline of *Troilus*. Although the Scottish poet wrote a continuation of Cresseid's part in the story, the *Testament* is not a sequel to *Troilus* as some have called it[29] but rather an 'in-quel' because it is definitely set before Troilus' death. Most of the narrative details are simply new but do not contradict *Troilus*. The major exception is of course the fact that in the *Testament* Troilus is informed of Cresseid's death and even erects a tombstone for her. Apart from this detail, Henryson's poem does not really question 'gif all that Chauceir wrait was trew' with regard to its plot. It is much more important for him to develop the character of Cresseid further from the point that Chaucer's narrator leaves her with Diomede onwards.

The interpretation and (re-)evaluation of Cresseid stands out as Henryson's major achievement in the *Testament* and must be discussed at some length. The problem of sexual infidelity lies at the core of this poem, which does not have the aloof philosophical spirit of the ending of *Troilus*, where Christian and in particular Boethian ideas distract the attention from the deeply sexual nature of Criseyde's unfaithfulness.[30] Henryson's narrator, however, also rejects the misogynist tradition after Chaucer which insinuated that Cresseid 'walkit [...] into the court commoun' (*Testament* 76-77). Still, she is not a sympathetic character at the beginning of the poem: she attributes the responsibility for her miserable situation solely to the gods of love, Venus and Cupid. With the dream vision and her illness, Henryson introduces a decisive twist of the plot, which has given rise to much controversy among the critics, who debated whether or not Cresseid deserved this fate in light of her conduct towards Troilus. I find this discussion beside the point because I agree with Cullen and Jentoft,[31] who claim that Cresseid is stricken with leprosy purely because of her blasphemy (a punishment

[25] cf. MacQueen 55
[26] cf. Machan 298, Twycross-Martin 39
[27] cf. Cullen 139-144
[28] cf. Cullen 141
[29] e.g. cf. Storm 118-119
[30] cf. MacQueen 93
[31] cf. Cullen 152-154, Jentoft 101-102

which, by the way, is even criticised by the narrator as being too severe, cf. *Testament* 323-329). If we accept that this doom has nothing to do with her act of infidelity, we can appreciate its impact towards the re-assessment of Cresseid's character. Her leprosy and subsequent descent among the poor teach her wisdom and lead her to repentance for her treachery towards Troilus. Henryson thus directly responds to Criseyde's complaint that her reputation will be ruined forever by narrating the ending of her life in a way that is likely to make the reader look on her with sympathy.

From a modern point of view this way of 'excusing' Cresseid still has a misogynist aftertaste because neither Diomede nor Pandarus (nor, for that matter, Troilus himself) arrive at a similar recognition of their part of responsibility for the tragedy – nor is it implied that they are guilty at all. Yet such an interpretation seems to me anachronistic; given that there were certainly many people (including poets) who would readily heap scathing scorn upon Criseyde (from which Chaucer's narrator refrained), Henryson's poem might indeed have shed a spark of light onto that otherwise blackened character.

At all times, authors have gained literary significance through inventiveness and originality. In the Middle Ages, the perceived authority of the classical authors made it more difficult for writers to translate their innovative ideas into a narrative because of the required reverence for and adherence to their classical predecessors. It was thus not the heyday of narrative invention; according to modern standards, Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* would be considered as a work of plagiarism.

However, there is more to originality than narrative. 'All that is most significant, most moving, and most mysterious about Chaucer's *Troilus* distinguishes it from *Il Filostrato*,' says Barry Windeatt (1992: 50) in spite of the close correspondence of the plot of the two poems because of Chaucer's style, characterisation, richness of dialogue, and depth of philosophical thinking. Henryson pays tribute to Chaucer and follows him in many respects but then also uses his source material cleverly to develop his own argument, building very much on his audience's expectations.[32] Without *Filostrato* as its major source, *Troilus* would have been impossible to write; without the knowledge of *Troilus*, the *Testament* is impossible to understand.

[32] cf. Storm 119

Bibliography

Primary literature

Benoît de Saint-Maure, 'Le Roman de Troie', *Chaucer's Boccaccio: Sources of Troilus and the Knight's and Franklin's Tales*, ed. and transl. by N.R. Havely (Woodbridge: Brewer, 1980), 167-183

Boccaccio, Giovanni, 'Il Filostrato', *Chaucer's Boccaccio: Sources of Troilus and the Knight's and Franklin's Tales*, ed. and transl. by N.R. Havely (Woodbridge: Brewer, 1980), 19-102

Chaucer, Geoffrey, 'Troilus and Criseyde', *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. by Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. (Oxford: OUP, 2008), 473-585

Guido de Columnis, 'Historia Destructionis Troiae', *Chaucer's Boccaccio: Sources of Troilus and the Knight's and Franklin's Tales*, ed. and transl. by N.R. Havely (Woodbridge: Brewer, 1980), 184-186

Henryson, Robert, *The Testament of Cresseid*, ed. by Robert L. Kindrick, without pagination, TEAMS website <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/teams/testfram. htm> [accessed 10 November 2009]

Homer, *Iliad*, ed. by Bernard Knox, transl. by Robert Fagles (London: Penguin, 1998)

Secondary literature

Antonelli, Roberto, 'The Birth of Criseyde – A Exemplary Triangle: "Classical" Troilus and the Question of Love at the Anglo-Norman Court', *The European Tragedy of Troilus*, ed. by Piero Boitani, (Cambridge: CUP, 1989), 21-48

Boitani, Piero, 'Antiquity and Beyond: The Death of Troilus', *The European Tragedy of Troilus*, ed. by Piero Boitani, (Cambridge: CUP, 1989), 1-20

Cullen, Mairi Ann, 'Cresseid Excused: A Re-Reading of Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid*', *Studies in Scottish Literature* 20 (1985), 137-159

Dunnigan, Sarah M., 'Feminizing the Text, Feminizing the Reader? The Mirror of "Feminitie" in the *Testament of Cresseid*', *Studies in Scottish Literature* 33-34 (2004), 107-23

Havely, N.R., *Chaucer's Boccaccio: Sources of Troilus and the Knight's and Franklin's Tales*, ed. and transl. by N.R. Havely (Woodbridge: Brewer, 1980)

Jentoft, C.W., 'Henryson as Authentic Chaucerian: Narrator, Character and Courtly Love in *The Testament of Cresseid*', *Studies in Scottish Literature* 10 (1972), 94-102

Lewis, C.S., 'What Chaucer Really Did to "Il Filostrato"' (1932), *Chaucer's* Troilus*: Essays in Criticism*, ed. by Stephen A. Barney (London: Scholar Press, 1980), 37-54

Machan, Tim William, 'Textual Authority and the Works of Hoccleve, Lydgate, and Henryson', *Viator* 23 (1992), 281-299

MacQueen, John, *Robert Henryson: A Study of the Major Narrative Poems* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967)
Natali, Giulia, 'A Lyrical Version: Boccaccio's *Filostrato*', *The European Tragedy of Troilus*, ed. by Piero Boitani, (Cambridge: CUP, 1989), 49-73

Reichl, Karl, 'Chaucer's *Troilus*: Philosophy and Language', *The European Tragedy of Troilus*, ed. by Piero Boitani, (Cambridge: CUP, 1989), 133-152

Storm, Melvin, 'The Intertextual Cresseida: Chaucer's Henryson or Henryson's Chaucer?', *Studies in Scottish Literature* 28 (1993), 105-22

Twycross-Martin, Henrietta, 'Moral Pattern in The Testament of Cresseid', *Chaucer and Fifteenth-century poetry*, ed. by Julia Boffey (London: KCLMS, 1991), 30-50

Windeatt, Barry, 'Chaucer and the Filostrato', *Chaucer and the Italian Trecento*, ed. by Piero Boitani (Cambridge: CUP; 1983), 163-183

-----, 'Classical and Medieval Elements in Chaucer's *Troilus*', *The European Tragedy of Troilus*, ed. by Piero Boitani, (Cambridge: CUP, 1989), 111-131

-----, *Troilus and Criseyde* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992)