

# THE CHARACTER OF CRISEYDE

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The medieval court is, to modern man, a picturesque world of kings, knights, and lovely ladies who are constantly making love, enjoying tournaments, hawking, and hunting. In *Troilus and Criseyde*, Chaucer presents a brilliant picture of the courtly love and takes the reader back to the medieval era. But this is not a mere courtly love poem. John Speirs calls it "human comedy,"<sup>1</sup> and G. L. Kittredge states that "this is an 'elaborate psychological novel,' instinct with humor and pathos, and passion and human nature."<sup>2</sup> Indeed, out of the medieval pageant arise several characters who cannot stay within the framework and become individual human beings. One of these vivid characters is Criseyde.

She is a complex and realistic character. This may be affirmed by such controversial discussions among Chaucer scholars. Some have tried to explain her conduct by fate which is prevalent throughout the poem; others have thought that she is simply a weak character. For others, she is merely a selfish courtly lady. All these can explain parts of her character, but they do not tell the entire story. She is beautiful, amorous, merciful, and proud. She has all the traits that the Courtly Code requires. Yet, she has something more than a courtly lady. She is thoughtful in her meditation; she is witty in her conversation; she is practical and wise in her planning. And in the end, she is overcome by the hard circumstance. Throughout the story, she is very realistic. Speirs remarks that "she is the first woman completely realized in English literature" (p. 49).

She is both a beautiful courtly lady and an admirable woman. In this paper, I shall try to analyze her character, following the development of the story.

The first reference to Criseyde is a description of her extreme beauty. Chaucer states that her beauty is angelic, and that she seems to be immortal. When she appears among the crowd at the festival in the temple, he still emphasizes her beauty, to which he adds something mysterious. Her "widewes habit blak"<sup>3</sup> seems to conceal something equivocal in her nature. In spite of her surpassing beauty, she stands inconspicuous:

And yet she stood ful lowe and stille allone,  
Byhynden other folk, in litel brede,  
And neigh the dore, ay undre shames drede,  
Simple of atir and debonaire of chere,  
With ful assured loking and manere. (I. 178-182)

This humble demeanor will show her consciousness of her comparatively inferior position as a widow and as a daughter of a traitor. She is modest and seems to be afraid of the people; yet she is sure of herself. This confidence hidden under the humbleness is more explicitly disclosed when Troilus first looks at her. She seems a little haughty and lets her look fall on one side as if to say: "What! may I nat stonden here?" (I. 292). Already, she is provided with all the traits that a courtly lady must have—beauty, goodness, nobility, and pride. In Book I Chaucer presents her mainly as a typical courtly heroine, though he hints at the complexity of her character in the description of her personal appearance.

In Book II Criseyde is shown more realistically and directly than in Book I. Robert Root remarks that Book II may be called "the book of Criseyde," as a large portion of its lines is dedicated to the unfolding of her character and her subtle feeling.<sup>4</sup> Criseyde, who was seen standing

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silently only at a distance in the first book, is now presented in a closer intimacy in her own house. She talks and laughs as an individual woman. The lively conversation between her and Pandarus reveals her humor and wit.

When Pandarus first visits his niece as a messenger of love, she has been listening to a story with her maidens. Pandarus, apologizing for disturbing her entertainment, asks "what seith it? telle it us! Is it of love? O, som good ye me leere!" (II. 96-97). She teases him who has failed in his love affair, answering archly: "youre maistresse is nat here" (II. 98). In contrast to her sad appearance and scornful attitude at the festival, her response to Pandarus is very cheerful and witty. She is humorous. There is no tone of humility suggesting a situation of inferiority. When she meets her uncle, she often welcomes him with a joke. This kind of amusing greeting occurs again when he brings Troilus's love letter. Pandarus begins to jest:

"Ywys, myn herte,  
So fressh it is, although it sore smerte,  
I may naught slepe nevere a Mayes morwe;  
I have a joly wo, a lusty sorwe." (II. 1096-1099)

Being curious about the cause of his coming, she answers:

What manere wyndes gydeth yow now here?  
Tel us youre joly wo and youre penaunce. (II. 1104-1105)

This effective repetition of his words shows that she is attractively bright.

Let us go back to the scene in which Pandarus first visits her. After the exchange of the amusing greeting, she begins to talk about her story. Pandarus, uninterested in it, urges her to "do wey youre book" and says "lat us daunce" (II. 111). Criseyde's reaction here is marvelously pleasant:

Is that a widewes lif, so God yow save?

By God, ye maken me ryght soore adrad!  
Ye ben so wylde, it semeth as ye rave.  
It sate me wel bet ay in a cave  
To bidde and rede on holy seyntes lyves;  
Lat maydens gon to daunce, and yonge wyves. (II. 114-119)

Shrewdly, he takes this opportunity to hint at his business:

“As evere thrive I,” quod this Pandarus,  
“Yet koude I telle a thyng to doon yow pleye. (II. 120-121)

And he immediately arouses her curiosity and keeps her in suspense until he finally discloses that Troilus is in love with her. During this time, she is utterly under his control. Her reaction is very innocent. His shrewdness and her innocent curiosity form the comic scene.

This scene is of particular interest not only for her witty conversation but also for the light it sheds on her feminine intuition. In the midst of her curiosity, she feels that something amorous is concealed under his tone. She instinctively foresees that she is going to hear something concerning love and lowers her eyes:

Tho gan she wondren moore than biforn  
A thousand fold, and down hire eyghen caste. (II. 141-142)

This beautiful gesture vividly displays her womanly bashfulness and the delicacy of her sentiment. Through the congenial conversation between Criseyde and Pandarus, Chaucer presents a marvelous interplay of her wit, her keen perception, and her womanly shyness. She is no more a mere courtly heroine. She is a real woman of complex nature.

A few stanzas later, when Pandarus finally declares Troilus's love for her, her enigmatic nature is explicitly illustrated in her reaction to his revelation. In spite of her tremendous shock, her response is rather calm and dry. She indifferently asks him: “What is youre reed I sholde don of this?” (II. 389). This question significantly suggests her ambiguousness.

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Since she is a widow and has experienced amorous affairs, it is not necessary for her to be advised by him. Besides she must be aware of what he wants her to do. She pretends to be cool and conceals her embarrassment under this indifferent attitude. But she cannot keep this calm state of mind for a long time. She bursts out crying when she hears Pandarus's answer: "ye hym love ayeyn for his lovyng,/ As love for love is skilful guerdonyng" (II. 391-392). She is very mysterious here. Why does she cry? Presumably, she cannot bear her astonishment and embarrassment any more. She knows that Troilus is perfect as a knight and a lover. She must be pleased with having him as her lover. But it is astonishing that her uncle advises her to love him. She thinks that if she refuses, it may offend him. Her mind is so confused and stirred up that she herself does not know how to act. The whole perplexity is revealed in her bursting into tears.

But reason has not deserted her. Even in this excitement, she considers Troilus and her uncle's possible death caused by her hard-heartedness and thinks "It nedeth me ful sleighly for to pleie" (II. 462). Choosing the less harm, she decides to receive Troilus rather than "myn emes lyf to lese" (II. 472). This process of her thinking is very logical. However, behind this reflection lies her awakening interest in Troilus. Immediately after this, Criseyde is eager to hear more about Troilus and urging her uncle to "Tel me how first ye wisten of his wo" (II. 501), she gladly listens to his discourse on the details of Troilus. She can be both amorous and thoughtful, passionate and reasonable at the same time.

When she is left alone, she becomes introspective and contemplative. She goes back over every word Pandarus has spoken. She objectively considers the situation and finds that she is in no peril and should not be afraid. Finally, like a courtly lady, she comes to the haughty conclu-

sion that she needs not love him in return if she does not want to.

In the following scene in which she watches her hero ride under the window in triumph, Chaucer further deepens her attractive and complex character. Being touched with the noble figure of Troilus, she dreamily says to herself: "Who yaf me drynke?" (II. 651). She is emotional and almost like an innocent girl. T. Kirby notes that "her emotion almost gets the better of her reason,"<sup>5</sup> but this is only momentary. Immediately after this, she begins to observe the circumstance from practical points of view—Troilus's excellent prowess, estate, renown, wit, shape, and his "gentillesse" (II. 662); besides he is a son of the king. She supposes that it would be an honor to love such a man. Kittredge's comment on this point is adequate when he says that this observation does not mean her selfish regard to her personal interest; she is merely seeking justifying her feelings to her reason (p. 133). Kittredge also claims that naturally she has an excellent mental habit of looking at a subject from several points of view (p. 133). After the analysis of Troilus's situation, she turns her eyes to her own:

I am oon the faireste, out of drede,  
And goodlieste, whoso taketh hede,  
And so men seyn, in al the town of Troie.  
What wonder is though he of me have joye?

I am myn owene womman, wel at ese. (II. 746-750)

Judging from various points—her beauty, liberty, renown, etc.—she concludes that it is no wonder that he loves her. But she worries about fear and pain of love. Men are so faithless, and women are so helpless. (This is very ironic, for it is she who becomes faithless.) At last, she comes to the rather optimistic conclusion that "He which that nothing undertaketh,/ Nothyng n'acheveth" (II. 807-808).

In this long meditation, the subtle complexity of Criseyde's feeling is

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vividly disclosed. She has womanly vanity in her confidence of beauty. She feels feminine shame of love. She is sensitive and mature enough to perceive the essence of love—its fear and its joy. The mingled feelings of hope and fear and these contradictory thoughts which fill her mind are quite natural for one in her situation. Speirs rightly comments on this scene as follows:

Spectacular as the scene is, it is again on the human emotions involved that the attention is centered and particularly on the effect on Criseyde's heart. (p. 60)

Indeed, this scene marvelously illuminates the psychological movement of her mind.

In Book III, the love between Troilus and Criseyde reaches its climax. Seemingly she is united to Troilus by Pandarus's intrigue, but, as Kittredge indicates (p. 132), she is in no sense a victim of the plot. When Pandarus tries to get the lovers together and invites her to his house, she asks "if Troilus were there" (III. 569). Pandarus denies it. But she sees through his plan and instinctively perceives her lover's presence. Later she professes her willingness:

Ne hadde I er now, my swete herte deere,  
Ben yold, ywis, I were now nought heere! (III. 1210-1211)

It is she who surrenders herself. She knows how to woo under disguise of being wooed.

The prudence of Criseyde before the fulfillment of her love is beautifully contrasted with her charming embarrassment and agitation shown in the morning after the consummation. When Pandarus creeps into the room and, rallying her about the storm's interfering with her sleep, asks how she feels, she blames him for his trick and cries:

Nevere the bet for yow,  
Fox that ye ben! God yeve youre herte kare! (III. 1564-1565)

And she covers her face with the sheet, blushing. This is one of the most realistic pictures of Criseyde in the whole poem. Her words are living. Her action is amiable. Her blushing suggests both her glory in love and shame of love. Furthermore, as she has been pretending to be manipulated by Pandarus, her reproach and blushing are very significant. In addition, calling her uncle "Fox," she shows her ability to read and adequately express his shrewd nature.

In Book IV, her happy love must come to an end. She displays more vitality and depth in her unhappiness. The Parliament decides to send her to the Greek camp in exchange for Antenor. Despite her sorrow and despair, she analyzes the situation carefully. She objects to Troilus's suggestion of elopement from very logical reasons—Troy needs him; people will evaluate them badly; they cannot come back in case peace comes. Instead of being sentimental, she consoles him by offering the devised means for her return (IV. 1405-1407). She exploits her father's avarice, which will be used for her excuse for return. Here, Edward Wagenknecht recognizes a touch of cynicism about her. He explains as follows:

...she is making terms with life, as Troilus cannot do it. Now she even tells herself as she is telling him, that her absence will be only temporary...<sup>6</sup>

It must be also indicated that her vitality to offer this adroit plan in this sad situation is admirable. Her vitality will remind the reader of that of the Wife of Bath.

The final book deals with Criseyde's infidelity, which is one of the most controversial points in the analysis of her character. Criseyde is above reproach up to this point and is almost an ideal woman and an ideal courtly lady. This virtuous lady's sudden ignominy causes various

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interpretations. C. S. Lewis, in *The Allegory of Love*, explains her faithlessness by one ruling passion—fear; fear compels her to seek protection in Diomedes.<sup>7</sup> Her fear should not be ignored. It may be one of the ruling feelings in her behavior as she is always in the inferior position—widow and traitor's daughter. But C. S. Lewis oversimplifies her character which is too complex and ambiguous to explain only by one passion. Kirby admits complexity of her character but still tries to interpret her faithlessness by identifying her as "an opportunist and that in no prejudicial sense" (p. 235). Root expresses a similar opinion:

Her indecision, her irresolute tendency to drift with circumstance, the trait of her character which Chaucer sums up in the phrase, "slydyng of corage," have brought her to the depth of ignominy. (p. 114)

Though each opinion has some truth, the search for one all-sufficient explanation of her infidelity will be unsuccessful. As her character is complex and enigmatic, so the cause of her breaking truth will be mysterious. Chaucer says:

Whan they kan nought construe how it may jo  
She loveth hym, or whi he loveth here. (III. 33-34)

Nobody can tell the cause of falling in love. Therefore, it is not necessarily important to find a key of the cause of her dishonor, nor does Chaucer want his readers to do so. The readers can accept the mysteriousness of her condemnation as Chaucer does. I agree with Constance Saintonge's opinion:

Surely Chaucer intended his readers to take more pleasure in her charm. Pleasure and perhaps something more: another perception of Chaucer's feeling about the difficulties of human life.<sup>8</sup>

In fact, what dominates Book V is Chaucer's profound pathos for Criseyde and his awareness of difficulties of human life. This will be proved by his careful and sympathetic revelation of her mind throughout the final

book.

In the Greek camp, Criseyde finds things do not go as she has supposed in Troy, and spends many days in sadness and finally decides to steal away under any condition. Immediately after this firm resolution, Chaucer states as follows:

But God it wot, er fully monthes two,  
She was ful fer fro that entencioun! (V. 766-767)

And he prophesies the change of her mind:

For bothe Troilus and Troie town  
Shal knotteles thourought hire herte slide. (V. 768-769)

Chaucer effectively uses the words “knotteles” and “slide” which foreshadow and harmonize with Criseyde’s disposition of “slydyng of corage,” shown in a few stanzas later.<sup>9</sup>

Before Chaucer comes to describe Diomedes’s making love and Criseyde’s final infidelity, he sums up the characters of Diomedes, Criseyde, and Troilus. Diomedes, from his first appearance in the poem, has been watching for a chance to trap Criseyde. His interest in her is calculating and mean (V. 100-115). His wooing is laying out hook and line to “fisshen hire” (V. 777). His character is

...in his nedes prest and corageous,  
With sterne vois and myghty lymes square,  
Hardy, testif, strong, and chivalrous  
of dedes,... (V. 800-803)

Then, Chaucer represents Criseyde’s beauty of her appearance and her good manner:

Charitable, estatlich, lusty, and fre;  
Ne nevere mo ne lakked hire pite;  
Tendre-herted, slydyng of corage. (V. 823-825)

The last phrase “slydyng of corage” is significant. It shows her soft,

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unresisting nature. It also reflects Chaucer's pity for her. This sketch of her is followed by that of the noble character of Troilus. By contrasting these three characters, Chaucer emphasizes the irresistible force of the circumstance and helplessness of Criseyde. Diomedes is far from the ideal courtly lover and incomparable to Troilus in any points—mind, love, disposition, and appearance. There is little possibility that she falls in love with him. But to this unworthy lover, her soft, delicate heart slides. Here is an enigma of human nature, which Chaucer observes mercifully. In the emphasis of unpleasantness of Diomedes and virtue of Criseyde, Chaucer increases the reader's pity for her and displays his own affection for her.

After summing up these characters, Chaucer carefully traces the process of the change of her mind. The sliding of her love from Troilus to Diomedes is delicately followed in her answer to Diomedes's wooing:

Myn herte is now in tribulacioun,  
And ye in armes bisy day by day.  
Herafter, whan ye wonnen han the town,  
Peraunter, thanne so it happen may,  
That whan I se that nevere yit I say,  
Than wol I werke that I nevere wroughte!  
This word to yow ynough suffisen oughte.

...

And er ye gon, thus mucche I sey yow here:  
As help me Pallas with hire heres clere,  
If that I sholde of any Grek han routhe,  
It sholde be youreselven, by my trouthe! (V. 988-1001)

Her answer is inexpressively delicate. Without noticing and against her intention, she lets her heart slide. Even though she is such an experienced and wise woman, she does not know what to do. J. Bayley will be right when he describes her ignominy as "the failure rather than the faithless-

ness.”<sup>10</sup>

A few stanzas later, the sliding is almost completed. But still she thinks of the noble Troilus. In her sore lament, she finds the only consolation and says weakly: “To Diomede algate I wol be trewe” (V. 1071). The word “algate” is suggestive. It illuminates her grief and helplessness; at the same time, this adverb reflects Chaucer’s sympathy with her. From this point, she disappears from view.

Chaucer unconsciously reveals his pity and affection for her. At times he deplores her condemnation so deeply that he withdraws from the story: “the storie telleth us” (V. 1037) and “Men seyn-I not-” (V. 1050). At other times, he puts his sentiment into brief comments; for example, in the description of Criseyde’s gift of the brooch for Diomedes, he inserts “that was litel nede” (V. 1040). Finally he says mercifully:

For she so sory was for hire untrouthe,  
Iwis, I wolde excuse hire yet for routhe. (V. 1098-1099)

At this point Chaucer’s love and pity for Criseyde are elevated to those for man as a whole. He knows the complexity and difficulty of human life and accepts them. Indeed, Chaucer has created such a realistic and vivid character as Criseyde from his profound knowledge and love of man.

Thus, Criseyde—standing humbly in black in the spring festival “With ful assured loking and manere”; cracking a joke with her uncle; dreamily watching her lover; blushing in the bed after the joy of love; offering a practical plan even in her sadness; and finally falling a prey of Diomedes—she is always ambiguous and yet charming. She is hardly a mere courtly lady, though she has all the qualities the Code requires. She cannot be compressed into that framework. She is a real woman created and enriched by Chaucer’s love of mankind. As Criseyde is marvelously realized as woman, her faithlessness and weakness will be touching and

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excusable. Indeed, Chaucer's love of man has made him a master of "human comedy" in *Troilus and Criseyde*.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>*Chaucer the Maker* (London: Faber and Faber, 1951), p. 49.

<sup>2</sup>*Chaucer and His Poetry* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1946), p. 112.

<sup>3</sup>Geoffrey Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde*, in F. N. Robinson, ed., *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1961), I. 170. Citations from Chaucer in my text will be to this edition.

<sup>4</sup>*The Poetry of Chaucer: A Guide to its Study and Appreciation* (New York: Peter Smith, 1950), p. 106.

<sup>5</sup>*Chaucer's Troilus: A Study in Courtly Love* (Louisiana State University Study, No. 39, 1940), p. 198.

<sup>6</sup>*The Personality of Chaucer* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1968), p. 89.

<sup>7</sup>London: Oxford University Press, 1968 (1936), pp. 189-190.

<sup>8</sup>"In Defense of Criseyde," *Modern Language Quarterly*, XV (1954), 312-320.

<sup>9</sup>Michio Masui, *A Study of Chaucer* (Tokyo: Kenkyusha, 1962), p. 114. (In Japanese).

<sup>10</sup>*The Characters of Love: A Study in the Literature of Personality* (New York: Basic Books, Inc.), p. 83.

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