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Criseyde from Benoît de Sainte-Maure to Shakespeare

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Introduction

I chose the mythical character of Criseyde as the subject of my master thesis after a Medieval Literature class I took during my first year of University. Criseyde is a controversial character, loved and hated by writers, critics and readers. It is impossible to remain indifferent to Criseyde. She has been studied for centuries, but she has not been deciphered in her entirety or unanimously, yet. The lack of fixed elements and the introduction of new characteristics, has caused Criseyde to change over the years according to the writers and the poems in which she is featured. After all, mutability is the reason why she has become famous in literature. This is why Criseyde's studies do not converge. There are many Criseydes, as the different poems analysed in this thesis show. The only thing that is not modified is her fault, that is her betrayal to Troilus. Criseyde does not even keep the same name, which is modified in every poem. Just to mention some of the names used by the authors through the centuries, she has been called Briseida, Criseida, Criseyde, Cresseid and Cressida. In addition, her genesis is legendary, because she was created by Benoît de Sainte-Maure. Even though he was influenced by the characters of the Homeric Brises and Chryseis, his Briseida is not a historical character. Her lack of historical identity enables writers to modify her to their liking. Hence, she is a maiden for Benoît, a widow for Boccaccio and Chaucer, and a maiden for Shakespeare, again. She is an extremely versatile character, who has been exploited by authors in literature, who have been moulding her into someone they want her to be.

I organised my thesis in three chapters, using Chaucer as the main reference, in order to divide the tradition of Troilus and Criseyde's love story in categories, represented by the before and after Chaucer's poem, and Chaucer's categorisation, which is found in the middle. Every chapter contains three sections.

In the first chapter I focus on the Criseydes before Chaucer. The first section describes how the character is created by Benoît in the twelfth century, giving some references to the sources he uses to write his poem, that is the Latin writer Ovid and the Latin translations of the poems Dares and Dictys, a Trojan and a Greek, who during the Middle Ages were believed to have been witnesses of the war, and who have allegedly left some written records of it. Benoît creates the myth of Criseyde as the epitome of the

inconstant woman, and he is considered a misogynistic writer for his monologues against the feminine genre. The second section introduces Guido delle Colonne's historical account of the war in which he reports the love affair, highlighting the fickleness of Criseyde's character. Guido shows openly his misogyny against the heroine. He has no real interest in her. The third section is about Boccaccio and his *Filostrato*. Boccaccio's poem puts into the foreground the relationship between Troilus and Criseyde, removing the other love stories and using the war only as a background. He introduces some new elements about the relationship and about Criseyde, and even though he cannot be defined an antifeminist author, he creates some ambiguities about his heroine's behaviour.

The second chapter is entirely focused on Chaucer and his love-hate relationship with Criseyde. The first section explores the opposition between the narrator and Chaucer's positions. The narrator is extremely fascinated by Criseyde and tries as much as he can to defend her. However, Chaucer turns some of his narrator's attempts to defend the woman into sources of ambiguity. The other two sections of the chapter are two differing interpretations of Criseyde's behaviour. The second section tries to find a justification for the heroine's betrayal in her fearfulness. She is pushed to forsake Troilus because she is afraid of men, of being in an enemy camp without protection, afraid of becoming lonely. On the contrary, the third section supports the thesis of Criseyde's self-determination as the main driving-force of her actions. She is pictured as a strong-willed woman, conscious of the situation in which she is and the importance to protect herself.

The last chapter analyses the best known poems written after Chaucer. The first section studies Lydgate's *Troy Book*, demonstrating how he is influenced by Guido delle Colonne's misogyny, even though he tries to show himself in the opposite position. The second section regards *The Testament of Cresseid*, that is Henryson's attempt to carry on Chaucer's heritage and create something new from the voids left in the story by his illustrious predecessor. Henryson's poem is very short compared to Chaucer's tragedy and focuses entirely on the heroine, writing about her infamous destiny, that is becoming a leper and dying horribly disfigured. The subject of the last section is Shakespeare's contribution to the Troilus and Criseyde's tradition. Drawing from all of his predecessors, Shakespeare creates a heroine who is at the same naive

enough to fall in love with Troilus without knowing if he truly deserves her trust, and world-wise to know she needs to be smarter than men, especially during wartime.

Chapter 1

Criseyde's origins

1.1 Benoît's Briseida

Chaucer was not the first author to write about the love story between Troilus and Criseyde in the Middle Ages. Even though his poem was probably the best known on the subject matter, many scholars, such as Sally Mapstone, Douglas Kelly and E. Talbot Donaldson, suggest that the author who wrote about the love affair for the first time was Benoît de Sainte-Maure, in his *Roman de Troie* during the twelfth century.¹ Since it is debatable that Benoît had this idea totally on his own, it could be useful to try and make a study of his sources, in order to find elements that could show how he developed this love story and its characters, especially the female protagonist, who is the main focus of this topic.

In the *Roman de Troie* the female protagonist's name is Briseida. In their poems, the authors that follow Benoît's work, modify her name, calling her Criseida, Criseyde, Cresseid or Cressida. Later on this study, this aspect of the protagonist will be discussed in a more satisfactory way, especially when referring to Boccaccio, who first called her in a different way from his source. In Benoît's poem the youngest of the Trojan princes, Troilus is in a love relationship with Briseida, the daughter of Calchas, the Trojan traitor seer who fled to the Greek camp after he realised that Troy's fall was inevitable. When Briseida is exchanged for a Trojan prisoner and forced to join her father in the Greek camp, she gradually forgets about Troilus as she surrenders to Diomedes' wooing.² At the end of the poem, when the war is won by the Greeks, Troilus is killed and Diomedes returns to his wife, while no information about the destiny of Briseida is given by the author.³

¹ Mapstone, Sally, "The Origins of Criseyde", in Wogan-Browne, Jocelyn, et al., eds., *Medieval Women - Texts and Contexts in Late Medieval Britain: Essays for Felicity Riddy*, Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2000, p.132. Kelly, Douglas, "The Invention of Briseida's Story in Benoît de Sainte-Maure's *Troie*", *Romance Philology*, 48 (1995), p.224. Donaldson, E. Talbot, "Briseis, Briseida, Criseyde, Cresseid, Cressid: Progress of a Heroine", in Vasta, Edward, Thundy, Zacharias P., eds., *Chaucerian Problems and Perspectives. Essays Presented to Paul E. Beichner*, London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1980, p.5.

² Kelly, p.224.

³ Kelly, p.224.

The name Briseida could easily recall the Briseis introduced by Homer in his *Iliad*, the most famous poem recounting the war of Troy, fought between Trojans and Greeks. Sally Mapstone points out that it was easy for Benoît's readers in the Middle Ages to associate his Briseida to her predecessors Briseis and Chryseis from the *Iliad*.⁴ Briseis is a young Trojan maiden reduced to slavery and taken to the Greek camp as a war prize for Achilles, the strongest warrior among the Greeks. She is often associated to another Trojan maiden, who shared the same fate with her, that is Chryseis, the slave donated to Agamemnon, chief of the Greek army. Both women are mentioned at the beginning of the *Iliad*, as they are the reasons why the quarrel between Agamemnon and Achilles occurs. Agamemnon, who refuses to return Chryseis to her father Chryses, a Trojan priest who had gone to the Greek camp to ransom her, is later forced to renounce her, in order to stop the pestilence sent by Apollo to the Greek camp. In compensation for the loss of his own war prize, Agamemnon demands to receive Achilles' Briseis, causing the famous wrath of the Greek hero and his consequent retreat from the battle. In the *Iliad*, Homer does not give any information about the lives of the two Trojan maidens before their enslavement.

Both Chryseis and Briseis have things in common with Briseida and the other Criseydes that will follow her in literature, which is why Mapstone suggests that Benoît, and later on Boccaccio and Chaucer, combined features from both women to create the protagonist of their poem. A similarity that Briseida has with both maidens is the ransom.⁵ All of them are taken to the Greek camp against their will. Some parallels Benoît's Briseida shares with Chryseis only are the Trojan priest father and the association with Calchas; if in the *Iliad* this connection is simply based on the fact that it is Calchas who persuaded Agamemnon to return the maiden, in the *Roman de Troie* he is the father of Briseida.⁶ By contrast, a similarity she shares with Briseis, is her being wanted by two men who fight for her.⁷ Moreover, another thing in common between the Greek maidens and Briseida, that is not mentioned by Mapstone, but that I believe to be important for a complete analysis, is the sexual element. The sexual exploitation imposed on these women since the very beginning of their appearance in

⁴ Mapstone, p.132.

⁵ Mapstone, p.134.

⁶ Mapstone, p.134.

⁷ Mapstone, p.134.

literature, is a stigma that will persist for every Criseyde protagonist in future poems. As will be examined later, her feelings and her physical desires seem to cloud her judgment. While the years and writers pass by, the opinion about her gets harsher and harsher, so that Shakespeare openly calls her a prostitute some centuries later. The passivity linked to the sexual abuse, makes her character vulnerable to the writers' will. The lack of a clear past makes it easy for the authors to shape her at their own will. Even if the medieval Criseydes are not portrayed as concubines or slaves, their characters are subjected to antifeminist judgment and accusation of fickleness. Benoît de Sainte-Maure makes some antifeminist and hostile comments on his Briseida and on women in general, and although Chaucer seems to care about his protagonist more than his predecessors, in the end Criseyde is always pictured as the bad character in the poem.

In the *Iliad*, Chryseis is totally silent, something that according to Mapstone could justify why authors from the Middle Ages were not interested in her, as she believes that Chryseis “had little literary tradition of a distinctive speaking voice”.⁸ Nevertheless, if an opposite view is adopted, Chryseis' silence could also be seen by writers as an opportunity to create a history for her, because she is a blank slate. On the contrary, Briseis is given the opportunity to speak when she mourns Patroclus' death in Book XIX of the *Iliad*, after she has been sent back to Achilles' tent. Here, she says that Patroclus had comforted her and promised her a marriage with Achilles:

οὐδέ μὲν οὐδέ μ' ἔασκες, ὅτ' ἄνδρ' ἐμὸν ὠκὺς Ἀχιλλεὺς
ἔκτεινεν, πέρσεν δὲ πόλιν θείοιο Μύνητος,
κλαίειν, ἀλλὰ μ' ἔφασκες Ἀχιλλῆος θείοιο
κουριδίην ἄλοχον θήσειν, ἄξειν τ' ἐνὶ νηυσὶν
ἔς Φθίην, δαίσειν δὲ γάμον μετὰ Μυρμιδόνεσσι.
τὼ σ' ἄμοτον κλαίω τεθνηότα μείλιχον αἰεὶ.⁹

[but you, Patroclus, even when

Achilles slew my husband and sacked the city of noble
Mynes, told me that I was not to weep, for you said you
would make Achilles marry me, and take me back with
him to Phtia, we should have a wedding feast among the
Myrmidons. You were always kind to me and I shall never

⁸ Mapstone, p.132.

⁹ Omero, *Iliade*, edited by Rosa Calzecchi Onesti, Torino: Einaudi, 2009, pp.690, 692, ll.295-300.

cease to grieve for you.]¹⁰

Pierre Brulé assumes that it was only chance that allowed Briseis to speak in order to mourn Patroclus. He suggests that Briseis spoke because she was the only woman who could perform the custom of the wailer, that is the professional mourner who tore her hair and her clothes on the occasion of funeral rites.¹¹ Brulé's idea seems to belittle Briseis' role, as if her presence in the poem was just coincidence. On the contrary, Briseis has a considerable influence on the events of the war of Troy, albeit only in a passive way, since she has no active role in the poem.

It is true that Briseis was taken into greater consideration than Chryseis by the authors that followed Homer. In order to show that, it is enough to mention Ovid. Briseis is one of the women writers in Ovid's *Heroides*. In this poem, women who were abandoned or mistreated by their men write letters to their lovers. Briseis' epistle is the third and it is addressed to Achilles. She writes while she is being held captive in Agamemnon's tent. In Briseis' words it is easy to detect great fear and insecurity about her future; she is a widow, because Achilles has killed her husband and now she is also far away from the Greek warrior, who now is her new family. She laments that Achilles has sent her to Agamemnon's tent without fighting for her or saying goodbye, now all she does is crying:

Si mihi pauca queri de te dominoque viroque
fas est, de domino pauca viroque querar.
non, ego poscenti quod sum cito tradita regi,
culpa tua est—quamvis haec quoque culpa tua est;
[...]ei mihi! discedens oscula nulla dedi;
at lacrimas sine fine dedi rupique capillos —
infelix iterum sum mihi visa capi!¹²

[If 'tis right for me to utter brief complaint of you, my master and my beloved, of you, my master and my beloved, will I utter brief complaint. That I was all too quickly delivered over to the king at his demand is not your fault—yet this, too, is your fault; [...]
Ah me! I had to go, and with no farewell kiss; but tears without end I shed, and rent my hair—miserable me, I seemed a second time to suffer the captive's fate!]¹³

¹⁰ Homer, *Iliad*, translated by Robert Fagles, New York: Penguins Classics, 1990, p.506, ll.261-267.

¹¹ Brulé, Pierre, *Women of Ancient Greece*, translated by Antonia Nevill, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003, p.44.

¹² Ovid, *Heroides and Amores*, translated by Grant, Showerman, eds. T.E. Page, W.H.D. Rouse, London: William Heineman, New York: Macmillan, 1977, p.32, ll. 5-8, 14-16.

Briseis is not writing a love letter to her lost lover, she is pleading for him to take her back. She is angry at Achilles and wants to make him feel sorry for her. She wants him to know she has been crying by sending him a letter blotted in tears. She informs him she thought about escaping, but then recoiled in fear of being captured and taken to Troy. This is certainly an interesting point. It would be logical for a person who has been reduced to slavery by the enemies, to desire to go back to their city and their people. On the contrary, Briseis says she wants to remain with Achilles. She tells him that she does not want to become his wife, because he deserves better, she says she will be satisfied to be taken back just as a slave or as a wool worker. She is subjecting herself to him completely. Ovid pictures a fearful Briseis. Mapstone says that her epistle has a “profound sense of loss, estrangement, and failure”.¹⁴ From Briseis’ words it is clear that, at this point, her world turns around Achilles:

tot tamen amissis te compensavimus unum;

tu dominus, tu vir, tu mihi frater eras.

tu mihi, iuratus per numina matris aquosae,

utile dicebas ipse fuisse capi¹⁵

[For so many lost to me I still had only you in recompense; you were my master, you my husband, you my brother. You swore to me by the godhead of your seaborne mother, and yourself said that my captive's lot was gain]¹⁶

She says that if she cannot go back to him, she would prefer to die. Despite being the killer of her family, Achilles is the only person whom she has left.

In addition to Homer and Ovid, Benoît uses other sources in order to have a thorough knowledge of the character. He draws on *De Excidio Trojae Historia* attributed to the Trojan Dares and the *Ephemeris Belli Trojani* attributed to the Greek Dictys. Both authors were believed to have been eyewitnesses of the war of Troy. Since the Greek language was not known by medieval writers, they referred to the Latin translations of their sources’ writings. In Dares a Briseida is included in the Greek catalogue, she is the last character to be described; she has no kinship specified, nor is her story reported. Dares only paints a physical portrait of her in a few lines. She is pictured as a beautiful and amiable woman, with soft and blond hair, conjoined

¹³ Ovid, p.33.

¹⁴ Mapstone, p.138.

¹⁵ Ovid, p.36, ll.51-54.

¹⁶ Ovid, p.37.

eyebrows, gracious eyes, and a sincere mind.¹⁷ Even though it is not known to which family Briseida belongs to, it is clear that she is not a slave or a concubine, because Dares puts her into the same rank as Helen.¹⁸ He gives no information on his Briseida's fate, since it is known that he escaped Troy before its fall.¹⁹ Benoît could have taken advantage of the lack of history around her person to create a new life for her. It is the lack of information around Briseida that makes her interesting and attractive. Nevertheless, Benoît also knew Dictys' work. In the *Ephemeris Belli Trojani*, no Briseis is mentioned; however, there is a Brises featured, whose daughter's name was Hippodamia and who was Achille's concubine. Hippodamia's patronymic is Briseis or Briseidas, and Dictys recounts that she has been given to Agamemnon to make up for the loss of his own concubine Astynome, whose patronymic is Chryseis or Chryseidas.²⁰ Therefore, Briseida is a perfect mixture of the different sources used by Benoît. He gathered as much information as he could and filled up the holes left by the previous writers.

The love story between Troilus and Briseida is not the only one reported by Benoît in his poem. The *Roman de Troie* is a historical account of the Trojan war, in which Benoît includes the narration of infamous love relationships between famous people from ancient time, such as Jason and Medea, Achilles and Polyxena, Paris and Helen, and Troilus and Briseida, of course. Scholars have developed two opposite views on Troilus and Briseida's story in the context of the *Roman de Troie*. Quoted by Lumiansky in his article, W.W. Lawrence and Tatlock believe that Troilus and Briseida's love story is given the same importance as the other love stories in the poem; whereas, writers from the opposite side, supported by Lumiansky himself, argue that the relationship between Troilus and Briseida is the most important in the poem, because it occupies a larger section than the other love stories.²¹ However, being Troilus and Briseida's love affair an idea of Benoît, he has the opportunity to shape it at his own will. This is not possible for the other love stories pictured in the poem, because their stories are known from previous works and their events are already outlined. Even

¹⁷ Donaldson, p.5.

¹⁸ Kelly, p.227.

¹⁹ Kelly, p.224.

²⁰ Kelly, p.226.

²¹ Lumiansky, R.M., "The Story of Troilus and Briseida According to Benoit and Guido", *Speculum*, 29 (1954), p.728.

though Benoît does not give any direct indication of his favourite couple in the poem, the love affair between Troilus and Briseida had a greater success than the others, as it inspired many writers after Benoît.

In the *Roman de Troie*, Benoît represents different types of love. Troilus and Briseida's love story is used by Benoît to create a negative exemplum of the love triangle, introducing some innovations in the literature of the courtly love as it was traditionally pictured during the Middle Ages.²² Briseida is the character Benoît experiments on the most. Her portrait is different from the traditional woman who is the protagonist of courtly love, usually pictured as an angel adored by the unfortunate poet, who can never conquer her heart and so laments his impossible love. The courtly love stereotype considers the woman as a perfect human being; however, this idea does not correspond to reality, as she is just a creation of male imagination.²³ If Briseida had been angelic, she would have just been identical to the other flawless women and eventually forgotten among them; in this way Benoît makes her stand out.²⁴ She is a realistic woman with feelings, thoughts and desires. She evaluates her situation, analysing the advantages and disadvantages and choosing what is better for her. In the *Roman*, Briseida is a well rounded and contradictory character. Her contradiction lies in her being a free and inconstant woman, but at the same time having positive qualities, in order to make her worthy of Troilus' love.²⁵ Talbot Donaldson defines her "a woman with every quality a man might admire and love except an inconstant heart and joined eyebrows".²⁶ Already from the first appearance of Briseida in the *Roman de Troie*, the reader can perceive that there is something ambiguous about her.

Benoît introduces Briseida among the portraits of the Greek characters. In the first lines, he has only compliments for her, she is an extremely beautiful woman:

Briseïda fu avenzanz,
Ne fu petite ne trop granz.
Plus esteti bele e bloie e blanche

²² Antonelli, Roberto, "The Birth of Criseyde – An Exemplary Triangle: 'Classical' Troilus and the Question of Love at the Anglo-Norman Court", in Boitani, Piero, ed., *The European Tragedy of Troilus*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989, p.36.

²³ Antonelli, p.22.

²⁴ Antonelli, pp.21-22.

²⁵ Antonelli, p.22.

²⁶ Donaldson, p.5.

Que flor de lis, ne neis sor branche, [...] ²⁷

[Briseida was graceful; she was not small, but yet not very tall. She was more beautiful and more fair and more white than a lily or than snow on the branch;] ²⁸

Benoît compares Briseida to a lily, symbol of innocence and purity. However, already in the fifth line of her portrait, Benoît includes an element that clashes with her lovely appearance, introduced by a strong adversative conjunction:

[...] Mes les sorcilles li joigneient,

Qui auques li mesaveient. (ll. 5279-5280)

[[...] but her brows were joined, which a little misbecame her.] (p.5.)

As Benoît himself says, he does not consider her conjoined eyebrows a blemish that can truly spoil her pretty appearance. Nonetheless, the mark of the joined eyebrows is an important element in the understanding of the character of Briseida. It is apparent that this feature makes the reader uncomfortable, because it clashes with the very pleasant words used to describe her previously. The reader is given the idea that something is wrong, or at least unusual with Briseida. It seems as if the writer is telling the reader not to believe his words, because she is not as good as she seems. Benoît gets Briseida's physical characteristic from his source Dares, the first to talk about it.²⁹ In ancient Greece joined eyebrows were not only a sign of beauty, but they also were considered an indication of a restless and impulsive person.³⁰ Donaldson suggests that, having read of Briseida's peculiarity, Benoît automatically associates the woman with a bad reputation and creates for her an appropriate story.³¹ Douglas Kelly highlights the fact that during the twelfth century, external beauty was a manifestation of virtue, and virtue in turn increased fortitude; in Briseida's case, her joined eyebrows make her flawed, physically and so morally as well.³² It seems as if Benoît is preparing the reader to expect bad conduct from her, to foresee her infidelity to Troilus. In his *Filostrato*,

²⁷ De Sainte-Maure, Benoît, *Le Roman de Troie*, ed. by Emmanuèle Baumgartner, Françoise Vielliard, Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 1998, p.198, ll. 5275-5278. Hereafter my references for the French text are to lines in Baumgartner and Vielliard's text.

²⁸ De Sainte-Maure, Benoît, *Le Roman de Troie*, ed. by R.K. Gordon, Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 1988, p.5. Hereafter my references for the English translation are to page numbers of Gordon's text.

²⁹ Donaldson, p.5.

³⁰ Hanson, Thomas B., "Criseyde's Brows Once Again", *Notes and Queries*, 18 (1971), p.286.

³¹ Donaldson, p.5.

³² Kelly, p.228.

Boccaccio does not mention Briseida's conjoined eyebrows, nevertheless, Chaucer uses them in a turning point in his *Troilus and Criseyde*, as will be analysed in the following chapter.

Briseida is pictured as the perfect woman, who knows how to behave in every situation and who always remains reserved in public, yet once again Benoît is adding information that confuses the reader,

Mout fu amee e mout amot,

Mais ses corages li chanjot; [...] (ll. 5285-5286)

[Greatly was she loved, and greatly did she love; but her heart was not constant.] (p.5.)

The first line is ambiguous. By saying that she was greatly loved, Benoît may simply suggest to the reader the idea that Briseida was appreciated by the people around her. Nevertheless, the part in which he says that she greatly loved in turn, makes it clear that the writer is talking about love relationships. Benoît seems to imply that his protagonist has had many relationships during her life, an implication that certainly does not flatter the woman and raises doubts about her moral conduct. Moreover, the adversative conjunction at the beginning of the first line introduces again a great contrast from what has been said before. Briseida is a woman with a changeable heart, she is not constant in her feelings and this makes her unfaithful and untrustworthy. It is because of the mutability of her heart that she will get much attention and many reproaches as well, from the authors that followed. The last part of Briseida's portrait ends with other good qualities of the protagonist.

In Benoît's *Roman de Troie*, the narration of the events related to the love story between Troilus and Briseida, begins when Briseida is taken to the Greek camp, after the request of her father Calchas. Benoît does not say how the lovers met or how their relationship developed; however, he writes that their love story was public, a detail that is changed by the other writers in later works. Benoît shows his protagonists in the moment of separation and pain. Briseida cries and sighs, lamenting her unhappy destiny. Interestingly, the first thing that comes to her mind is not her separation from Troilus, which she laments afterwards, but the humiliating situation in which she is going find herself in the Greek camp. Being a woman and being unable to stand up for herself, she is helpless against the soldiers' vexations. During times of war, the dangers for women increase. There are great risks for them to be victims of sexual assaults from

men, since the perception of justice and common sense is altered by the fighting. Soldiers, who have to endure the savage war, may act on impulse and surrender to violence against helpless women. Briseida worries about the fact that she is alone in a place where nobody can protect her or can do her honour. However, in reality she does know someone in the Greek camp, that is her father, who should be the most ideal person to go and ask for protection, so Briseida's complains may be reasonable, but not completely true. Unlike what one may believe, Briseida is not happy to reunite with her father; she is resentful towards him, because not only he has betrayed her people, the Trojans, but now he even compels her to join him in the Greek camp, without asking if she would be happy about it.³³

Successively, in her lament to Troilus she says,

Ja mais niul jor que seize vis

Nos amera riens plus de mei. (ll. 13288-13289)

[Never henceforth in your life will anybody love you more than I.] (p.8.)

What she tells him seems a curse disguised as a love declaration for the Trojan knight. If later in his life Troilus will find another love, his new woman will not be able to love him as much as she does. She is unique in her act of loving. Maybe she is trying to cause a reaction in him, in order to make him stand up for her and oppose his father's order. Moreover, knowing Briseida's successive conduct, this statement sounds very ironic to the reader, who will soon find her in the arms of another man. Briseida is starting to show her falseness. However, at this stage of the story, Briseida's complaints seem legitimate. She has done no wrong to anyone yet. She is forced to go into exile against her will, because of a fault she is not guilty of, so for the reader she is still a woman of wise conduct. At this point she is the victim of circumstances, she is losing her house and her lover. Troilus does not object to Priam's decision, nor does he try to find a way to keep his lover in Troy. Troilus' behaviour may be a sign of weakness in Briseida's eyes, while initially she falls in love with him for his prowess. Briseida's change of heart may be caused by her disappointment in Troilus, she wants a man who fights for her.

³³ Kelly, p.233.

In the part where Briseida is preparing to leave the city, it may be interesting to note her concern while packing. She wants all her precious goods, clothes and jewellery, to be taken with her. She wants to dress with her most valuable garments:

Ses chiers aveirs fist enmaler,

Ses dras e ses roubes trosser;

Son cors vesti e atorna

Des plus chiers garnemenz qu'el a. (ll. 13329-13332)

[She caused her loved possessions to be gathered together; her clothes and garments packed up. She arrayed and adorned her body with the most precious raiment she had.]

p.9.

It seems unusual that someone who is suffering for love and is being taken away worries so much about clothes. It may be that the writer's aim is to imply that Briseida is a frivolous woman, concerned more about her appearance than the serious situation in which she is. Benoît seems to suggest that she has a coquettish personality. The detailed description of her tunic that follows in the poem, covering seventy-six lines, strengthens this idea.

However, the circumstances in which she is exchanged must not be forgotten. All her valuable things may be useful for her to survive in a place where she does not know anybody and she needs to pay to be protected, a thesis that sounds very plausible since she is going in a military camp, full of men enraged by the fights. She may find herself in situations where her wealth and nobility may turn out to be useful to save herself from assaults or even hunger. These kinds of dangers may justify the tears shed by the Trojan ladies on the moment of Briseida's departure. They may be crying not only for their friend leaving the city alone, but also for their unfortunate role during the war. The Trojan ladies are crying for themselves, because women are the principal victims in these difficult circumstances, they are subjected to men's will and cannot protect themselves. It is frequent for women to be abused by soldiers and they are crying because they believe that this is Briseida's destiny. Among them, bidding Briseida farewell and feeling great pity for her, there are queen Hecuba and Helen, a sign that Briseida is very appreciated in Troy, despite her father's treachery.

The atmosphere changes abruptly when Benoît starts saying that the pain Briseida is suffering now will soon be replaced by a new love. The element of change is held against Briseida by the author himself. Briseida changes her feelings quickly, she is

able (or guilty) to find a new lover in a little time. In these circumstances, Benoît gives a misogynist explanation to justify Briseida's future behaviour. He denounces Briseida's unfaithfulness in order to criticise women in general. Benoît shows clearly his antifeminist idea. He hurls a sharp invective against the female genre, using Briseida as a negative exemplum.³⁴

A femme dure duels petit,

A un oil plore, a l'autre rit. (ll. 13441-13442)

[A woman's sorrow is short-lived, for whilst one eye weeps the other smiles.]³⁵

For Benoît every woman is false and changes her feelings at the first opportunity. "All women are two-faced traitors who cannot be trusted".³⁶ They are inconstant and only looking for their profit. Benoît seems to strongly despise women, but at the same time he recognizes them to be clever, because they are able to make the best out of every difficult situation and to solve any problem. They are liars and opportunists. The author claims that beauty and chastity cannot dwell together in the same woman. The word chastity recalls the comparison between Briseida and the lily inserted by Benoît in the portrait, that seems very unlikely now. His statement is a veiled attack on every woman, because he divides the female genre into two groups. If a woman is beautiful, consequently she is mischievous and nasty. On the contrary, if a woman is pure, then she must be unattractive. According to Benoît's way of thinking, Briseida, who has been described as extremely beautiful, is certainly a bad woman. Strengthening his antifeminist views, Benoît claims that women are controlled by their carnal desires. For him a strong woman should have the ability to avoid every kind of temptation, an ability that should be greatly cherished by the lucky man who manages to find this type of woman. Perfect women are compared to angels, innocent and pure. The references to the angelic woman of the courtly love poetry are very clear.

When it is time to leave, Briseida is afraid to lose Troilus and she promises to him the most romantic things:

Ne li fine hore de prier

Qu'il ne l'oblit, car a sa vie

³⁴ Antonelli, p.38.

³⁵ Antonelli, pp.37-38.

³⁶ Doyle, Kara, "Beyond Resistance: Azalais d'Altier, Christine de Pizan, and the 'Good' Female Reader of Briseida", *Exemplaria*, 20 (2008), p.77.

Ne sera ja autrui amie;
S'amor toz jorz li gardera,
Ja mes jor autres ne l'avra,
Ne riens n'avra joie de li. (ll. 13498-13503)

[nor did she ever cease praying him to forget her not, for while she lived henceforth she would not love another. She would always keep her love for him; never should another have it, nor should any one have joy of her.] p.10.

Briseida swears to remain always faithful to Troilus and is afraid that he will forget about her. This is the reaction that a reader would expect from a person in love, who is forced to leave their lover. However, since it is known how Briseida behaved once she arrived in the Greek camp, every word pronounced by the protagonist seems ironic. Her promises are totally empty, as she will break them one by one in a few days after her departure from Troy. Benoît is picturing his protagonist guilty of every fault a bad woman has.

Entering the Greek camp, Briseida is received by some Greek kings and knights, among whom is Diomedes. While he is escorting her, Diomedes expresses his love to her in a very flattering and courtly manner. Antonelli claims that for the Greek knight it is love at first sight, the same kind that is frequently described in the courtly love poetry of the twelfth century.³⁷ Between Troilus and Diomedes there is already a fierce rivalry, as is shown in some passages of the poem recounting fights between the two of them. Hence, Diomedes' interest in Briseida may not be as sincere as Diomedes claims it to be, because his wooing could be seen as a way to steal Briseida from Troilus, his deadly enemy. He tries to conquer her love telling her she is the only woman he has ever loved, swearing that he is sincere and he will always be faithful to her. He says what every woman wants to hear. In the act of answering Diomedes' request, Briseida is described by Benoît as wise and virtuous. Her refusal is very polite, as expected from an honourable woman. However, analysing in detail some of the sentences she says, her intentions could be judged ambiguous, or questionable at least. In the first part of her reply she says:

Sire, fait ele, a ceste feiz
Ne nest biens ne reasons ne dreiz
Que d'amer vos donge parole:

³⁷ Antonelli, p.39.

Por trop legiere e por trop fole

M'en porriez toz jors tenir. [...]

Mes poi vos ai encor veü

A vos doner si tost m'amor. (ll. 13619-13623, 13626-13627)

['My lord', she said, 'at this time it is not well or reasonable or right for me to promise to love you, for you might always account me light and senseless. [...] But I have not known you well enough to grant you my love so soon.] p.11.

She has not mentioned that she already has a lover, who is waiting for her in Troy, even though, as said before, her relationship with Troilus is not a secret. Instead, she tells Diomedes that it would be morally unacceptable to start a new relationship. The general reference to time made by Briseida is open to different interpretations, as it may be an allusion to the fact that she has just arrived to the Greek camp, or to the period of war in which they are living. If the first interpretation is correct, Briseida's refusal seems only temporary, she is only afraid to appear hasty, an interpretation that is supported by the other statement in which she says that she does not know him. However, the second interpretation could be plausible as well, because for women wartime is very complicated, as already mentioned before. It may be dangerous to show their desires openly.

In the next part of her answer, Briseida shows the wisest side of herself as she makes a speech against deceitful men who have no respect for women. Men are liars and women are naive. Briseida does not want to jeopardise her already difficult position since now she is in the Greek camp. She is already desperate because she had to leave her friends and her city, and she starts to become conscious of the fact that it will be hard to go back to Troy. She acts as is appropriate for an honest woman.

Se en li a point de saveir,

Garder se deit de blasme aveir. (ll. 13653-13654)

[If she [a damsel] has any wisdom in her, she must keep herself free from reproach.]

p.12.

Briseida wants to protect herself from any potential negative accusation. Having a bad reputation in a foreign military camp could be extremely dangerous for a woman. Until now, Briseida's refusal seems final, she has no intention to engage in a hasty relationship. However, in the last part of her answer, something changes. She shows appreciation for Diomedes, as she says that he is discreet, worthy and that any woman

would be lucky to receive his love. What she says next contradicts the first part of her speech,

Ne je nos refus autrement,
Mais n'ai corage ne talent
Que vos ne autre ain aparmeins.
Se pöez ester bien certains,
S'a ce me voleie apresmier,
Nul plus de vos n'avreie chier, (ll. 13673-13678)

[under other circumstances I would not refuse you, but at present I have neither inclination nor desire to love you or any other. Thus you may be very sure, if I were willing to give myself to love, I would hold none more dear than you.] p.12.

Hence, after formally refusing Diomedes' love, Briseida is actually raising his hopes. She is raising doubts in the reader as well, because she does not seem sincere no matter how her words are interpreted. If the reader still believes in Briseida's faithfulness to Troilus, it seems as if she only wants to be in Diomedes' good graces, in order to have a friend in the Greek camp where she knows nobody. If this interpretation is correct, Briseida is pictured as a manipulating woman and not the innocent, kind girl depicted in Benoît's introductory portrait. She is using Diomedes' love for her profit. Moreover, Briseida's words could be seen as the beginning of an affinity between her and Diomedes, and consequently, the reader starts to be suspicious of her conduct, because her betrayal seems increasingly probable. Either way, from this moment on, Briseida's actions will show more and more why she is a negative exemplum. No one believes in her innocence and it becomes more and more complicated to defend her.

In contrast to the laments made by Briseida previously, Benoît then underlines how, as soon as she arrives at the Greek camp, the woman stops worrying about her position and starts to enjoy the pleasure of her new condition. She is receiving great honour and respect. Even in this circumstance, Benoît uses Briseida to make a general negative comment,

Molt sunt corage tost mué,
Poi veritable e poi estable;
Molt sunt li cuer vein e muable. (ll. 13861-13864)

[Fickle and infirm, her feelings were very soon changed; very weak and inconstant was her heart.] p.14.

The theme of change related to Briseida is mentioned again. It seems that Briseida has already forgotten her friends and Troilus in a few days. Benoît's misogynistic remarks become more and more frequent and he pictures his female protagonist in an increasingly unfavourable way. For the author, Briseida's immoral behaviour can be justified referring to her female nature, because the more women are loved, the more they are mean. For Benoît, they are despicable and take pleasure in the suffering of men.

During the first period she passes in the Greek camp, Briseida despises Diomedes, she even makes fun of him when he loses his horse while fighting. The woman who was fearful to go to an unknown place is gone. Briseida has already taken control of her situation and she knows the effect she has on Diomedes. The Greek knight continues relentlessly to woo her, paying her great compliments and begging for her love. His love confessions are full of passion and on many occasions he clearly tells Briseida that his greatest desire is to sleep with her. She does not seem embarrassed by these erotic declarations, even though talking so frankly to a woman is very disrespectful. The reader would expect Briseida to run away shocked. On the contrary, if initially she seems detached from Diomedes' feelings, later on she starts to become very pleased with the attention that the Greek knight devotes to her. She is not a resolute woman and her love for Troilus does not seem as strong as before. She is so flattered by Diomedes' words that she gives him a token,

La damaisele est molt haitee
E molt se fait joiose e lee
De ce qu'il est si en ses laz.
La destre manche de son braz,
Nueve e fresche, d'un ciclaton,
Li baille en lué de confanon. (ll. 15173-15178)

[The damsel was well pleased, and she rejoiced very much and was glad that he was in her power. To take the place of his pennant she gave him the right sleeve off her arm of new and fresh silk.] p.17.

Benoît makes it clear that Briseida is changing her mind on Diomedes and that it is only a matter of time before she totally surrenders to the Greek knight. There is some confusion about the exact period of time that passes from Briseda's arrival to the Greek camp and the beginning of the relationship between Diomedes and her. In a previously mentioned passage, Benoît implies that Briseida's decision was taken hastily and she

accepted Diomedes' love as soon as she was exchanged. However, considering all the battles recounted in the poem, Douglas Kelly claims that at least two years have passed, a period of time in which Briseida reflects on and analyses carefully her position.³⁸ This is a crucial point, because the less time she took to change her feelings the stronger the accusation of fickleness. Kelly believes that Briseida's love for Diomedes is sincere, just as her love for Troilus; he maintains that for a certain period of time the woman loves two men at the same time.³⁹

During the battle in which Troilus fights and wounds Diomedes, the Trojan prince casts a slur against Briseida. He has heard that she is not faithful to him anymore and laments Diomedes' destiny for having chosen the wrong woman to love. Troilus' speech is a misogynist attack against Briseida. He depicts Briseida as an evil woman. He is the betrayed lover, the victim of the story with whom the reader should sympathise,

S'esté avez la ou jo fui,
Pro i avra des acoilliz,
Ainz que li sieges seit feniz;
Assez avreiz qui'escharguaitier.
S'ensi l'avez senz parçonier,
N'est s'est ancor pas arestee,
Dès que li mestiers li agreee;
Quar, se tan test qu'un poi li plaise,
Li ostelain i avront aise. (ll. 20092-20100)

[If you have been to her what I used to be, there will be plenty more accepted lovers before the siege is ended; you will have to keep good watch. You may have her wholly to yourself now, but she has not yet made an end, since she finds pleasure in the trade of love. For, if there are so many that somewhat please her, the very innkeepers will have her favours.] pp.18-19.

Troilus' insults to Briseida are terrible. And as Benoît says, they will pass from mouth to mouth for months, as they were clearly heard by many people around them in the battlefield. It is interesting to underline that Troilus uses the word "ostelain", translated with "innkeepers". Some centuries after Benoît's poem, Shakespeare associates his female protagonist with the inns, implying that she became a prostitute. It could be

³⁸ Kelly, p.235.

³⁹ Kelly, p.235.

possible that he draws inspiration from the line above of the *Roman de Troie*. Briseida's destiny as the bad woman is clear from the beginning.

In the last sequence of events concerning the love triangle of Briseida, Troilus and Diomedes, the woman is pictured discovering that she has fallen in love with the Greek knight. The sight of Diomedes wounded is enough for her to understand her feelings for him,

Senblant fait bien que de son cuer

L'aime sor tote rien vivant. (ll. 20208-20209)

[She made it abundantly clear that she loved him from her heart, more than any other person alive.]⁴⁰

For Diomedes' love, she goes against her good judgement and her father's will. She knows that people will talk badly of her, but her desire to see him is so strong that she is willing to sacrifice her reputation. For all this, Briseida could be considered a passionate woman, who will suffer anything for her lover. However, at the same time she is aware of her wrong-doing towards Troilus, whom she unfairly betrayed. Benoît gives Briseida a monologue as a way to end this story. It seems as if he gives her the possibility to justify her behaviour to the reader and to make amends to the people she disappointed, especially Troilus. She explains her reasons and say that her love for Diomedes is a true kind of love. At the beginning of her monologue, she makes a prophecy that will haunt her character in every future work in which she will appear,

De mei n'ert ja fait bon escrit

Ne chantee bone chançon.

Tel aventure ne tiel don

Ne vousisse je ja aveir! (ll. 20238-20241)

[Henceforth no good will be written of me, nor any good song sung. No such fortune or happiness will be mine henceforth.] p.19.

In this way, it seems as if Briseida gives to the authors that later write of her the right to portray her as a bad woman, because she is admitting to be inconstant in her feelings. The adjectives she uses to qualify herself are the same that both the narrator and Troilus used previously to denigrate her,

Fause sui e legiere e fole

⁴⁰ Antonelli, p.43.

La ou d'autre escoute parole. (ll. 20249-20250)

[I was false and inconstant and mad when I gave heed to words.] p.19.

She asks for forgiveness to the Trojan ladies, because she is proving that the prejudice against the female genre is right. Because of her bad behaviour, every woman has to atone for Briseida's guilt. A doubt could arise in the reader's mind on the nature of Briseida's guilt. Many times in the poem Benoît says that Briseida's conduct is justified by her being a woman; but, it is Briseida herself who says that, in the future, women will pay for her misconduct. It is not clear if Briseida is guilty just because she is a woman or if the female genre will be always considered guilty because of Briseida. For her part, the woman seems to take on the role of the negative exemplum assigned to her by Benoît. She is offering a *mea culpa* to the readers. Benoît's intentions on his protagonist appear contradictory. On the one hand, he scorns Briseida, but on the other hand, he gives her plenty of space to justify her actions, since Briseida's monologue covers more than a hundred lines. Not even Troilus is given so much space to express his sorrows, even though he is the one to have been betrayed. The author raises the possibility that Briseida is in part a victim of the circumstances. In her soliloquy, she tries to attract the sympathy of the readers, showing how difficult is for her to live in the Greek camp on her own. She gives various reasons in order to explain her behaviour,

E n'eüst pas ensi esté
Se encor fusse en la cité:
Ja jor mis cuers ne porpensast
Qu'il tressaillist ne qu'il chanjast;
Mes ci esteie sans conseil
E sans ami e sans feeil; (20283-20288)

[And it had not been thus were I still in the city. My heart would never have thought of wavering or changing, but in this place I was without counsel and without a friend and without a loyal champion.] p.20.

If previously she assures the reader that her feelings for Diomedes are pure and sincere, here Briseida implies that she was forced to look for another lover and protector. Briseida's speech reflects the consequences of the female role in society, in both ancient and medieval times. Behind her conduct there is a great insecurity for the future, because independence is not possible. From the first part of the monologue, the readers start to put themselves in Briseida's shoes and try to set her decisions in the greater

context of the war. In this way, even though they do not share Briseida's choices, they are able to understand them. However, in the same monologue, Briseida gives also an egoistic justification of her conduct, showing the reader that she is more interested in her well-being than her reputation. She does not care about people talking badly about her, as long as she is happy with her new lover. She concludes her soliloquy by stating that from now on she will always be faithful to Diomedes and she wishes Troilus well. Both statements are difficult to believe for the reader, because she already showed her inability to remain faithful to her previous lover and the kindness towards Troilus appears hypocritical. The readers know she is false and fickle, and that her promises are useless. If Benoît's intentions in giving Briseida the possibility to speak and explain her reasons were good, it seems that she only worsens her position. This is the last time that she appears in the poem, as the author does not mention her again, except for the moment when she gets insulted by Troilus and the Trojan ladies. Briseida is soon forgotten, she is not worthy to be talked about anymore.

The final aim of Benoît's poem is to give a lesson on the untrustworthiness of women.⁴¹ In the *Roman de Troie* Briseida's reputation is destroyed. She has not any occasion to redeem herself and she expiates her fault in every work she will be in. Benoît's misogyny is justified by the fact that if she was not free to refuse going to the Greek camp, she was free when she decided to change her feelings for Troilus and to start loving Diomedes. Hers is a conscious choice. Benoît's antifeminist view influences the authors that follow, who pictures Briseida even worse than Benoît, even though not all of them condemn her as clearly as Benoît does. From this moment on Briseida will face a progressive downfall.

1.2 Guido delle Colonne's misogyny

Another medieval author who writes about the love triangle of Troilus, Briseida and Diomedes is the Italian Guido delle Colonne, who in the thirteen century, composed the *Historia Destructionis Troiae*. As reported by Lumiansky, many writers believe that

⁴¹ Sepherd, Sepherd, Robert K. "Criseyde/Cresseid/Cressida: What's in a Name?," *Sederi: Journal of the Spanish Society for English Renaissance Studies*, 4 (1993), p.229.

Guido's work is only a translation from Benoît's *Roman de Troie*.⁴² However, this is not entirely true because some differences can be spotted in the way the story is narrated. For example, the summary that Benoît gives at the beginning of his poem is totally omitted by Guido.⁴³ Moreover, some episodes concerning the love story are shortened or totally erased from the *Historia*. Guido is less interested than Benoît in the love triangle. As the title suggests, the *Historia Destructionis Troiae* is a chronicle of the war, so it is logical for Guido to talk largely about the events related to the fights, giving less importance to the love affair, because it is not necessary to the historical events and it does not influence the developments of the war. Guido's *Historia* appears to lack a proper structure.⁴⁴ Some modifications, and especially some cuts he makes, cause a lack of connection between the events, causing great confusion to the reader, who has not the elements he needs to fully understand the development of the story.

Guido makes some changes to the portraits of the characters as well. For example, in Diomedes' description Guido adds that he is a very lustful man, and Troilus' portrait is greatly shortened.⁴⁵ Moreover, he slightly modifies the name of his female protagonist from Benoît's Briseida in Briseyda, and he highlights her blemish, that is the conjoined eyebrows, and her changeable heart.⁴⁶ Guido's comments on Briseyda's behaviour and in general against the feminine genre are harsher than Benoît's. For Guido women are fickle by nature; inconstancy is innate in them.⁴⁷ His misogynistic judgment is projected onto Briseyda, whose position in Guido's *Historia* is worse than it was in Benoît's *Roman*. He makes her change her feelings sooner than Benoît, as the love of Briseyda for Troilus begins to cool already on the same day she is exchanged and taken to the Greek camp.⁴⁸ Guido emphasises the sexual desires Briseyda feels for Diomedes, reducing love to lechery, as anything romantic in the poem disappears. In addition, in the *Historia* Briseyda's monologue is missing. This may suggest that Guido is not really interested in developing his characters, who, as

⁴² Lumiansky, p.727.

⁴³ Griffin, Nathaniel Edward, *Historia Destructionis Troiae*, Cambridge: The Medieval Academy of America, 1936, pp.4-5.

⁴⁴ Lumiansky, p.733.

⁴⁵ Griffin, pp.84, 86.

⁴⁶ Griffin, p.85.

⁴⁷ Griffin, p.157.

⁴⁸ Griffin, p.166.

Lumiansky claims, seem only “wooden figures rather than actual people”.⁴⁹ The love story as recounted by Guido, is very essential. There are not direct speeches with which the characters could have expressed their emotions or thoughts, so it is difficult for the reader to understand what is in their mind. For example, Guido does not give Briseyda any freedom to speak or to justify her conduct, for him she is a lustful woman and she is guilty, so she should pay for her sins with public humiliation. No chance is given to the woman. He does not feel any kind of compassion for her and does not care about the hostilities she may encounter in an unknown camp. He is antifeminist and his preconception against women is clear in the *Historia*. Briseyda simply disappears from the story as soon as she decides to surrender to Diomedes’ love, Guido does not want to or does not believe it to be necessary to talk more about her. Given the lack of interest Guido shows in the love triangle, the reasons why he talks about it in his work in the first place may be called into question. A logical reason may be that Benoît was his primary source, so Guido tries to stay faithful to the *Roman de Troie*’s general structure.⁵⁰ The reason why he keeps the love story in his chronicle is because both Troilus and Diomedes are involved in the war.

1.3 Boccaccio’s Criseida

Giovanni Boccaccio is the author of *Il Filostrato*, another poem narrating the love affair between Troilo and Criseida, as he calls his protagonists, and the betrayal of the woman with Diomede. His modification of his characters’ names is evident. In Troilo and Diomede’s cases, it is merely a translation into the vernacular language adopted by the author, while in the female protagonist’s case more clarifications may be needed. Since in the previous works the woman is given the name of Briseida, with only minor alterations on the suffix, it seems reasonable to ask why and how Boccaccio changed it to Criseida. Wilkins claims that Boccaccio uses Ovid’s poems *Remedia Amoris* and *Tristia*, in order to freely form a new name for his heroine, because in some

⁴⁹ Lumiansky, p.733.

⁵⁰ Windeatt, Barry, *Oxford Guides to Chaucer, Troilus and Criseyde*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992, p.90.

manuscripts the names of Chryseis and Briseis were erroneously switched.⁵¹ In addition, in some editions of the Italian poem the name of the female protagonist is Griseida, because of a phonetic tendency recurring during the Middle Ages in Italy.⁵²

The term “Filostrato” means one stricken by love, and it is used by Boccaccio to identify himself at the beginning of the proem. In the proem the author explains that Troiolo’s story of sorrow is the most suitable to talk about his own misery, as he finds parallels between the male protagonist and himself.⁵³ As it happens to Troiolo, the author has been left by his lover, but Boccaccio does not specify if his woman is unfaithful or not. Before starting with the narration of the story, Boccaccio hastens to tell his lover, whose name is Filomena, that every compliment paid to Criseida is meant for her. However, it should be analysed what Boccaccio does not clarify. If he is associated to Troiolo, as a result his lover is identified with Criseida, implying that the author’s lady is guilty of the same faults as Criseida. Perhaps Boccaccio considers Filomena’s abandonment a form of betrayal and, implicitly, wants her to receive the same treatment as Criseida.

In contrast to his main sources, that is Benoît de Sainte-Maure and Guido delle Colonne, Boccaccio focuses exclusively on the love affair, using the war only as a background, and writes original episodes which cover the first three books, recounting the history of the love relationship between Troiolo and Criseida from the very beginning. For example, he introduces the protagonists separately, he writes about the lovers’ first meeting in the temple and the consummation scene of the first night they spend together. Moreover, he creates round characters, giving them a complex personality and making the reader able to investigate their inner lives, through dialogues and soliloquies.⁵⁴ Boccaccio does not hide his characters’ thoughts, but he makes them ponder openly for the reader to understand. In this way the reader is more sympathetic towards the characters and feels involved in the action, which is a significant improvement on his predecessors. One last new invention of Boccaccio is the character of Pandaro, Criseida’s cousin, who becomes the mediator between the two lovers.

⁵¹ Wilkins, E.H., “Criseida”, *Modern Languages Notes*, 24 (1909), p.66.

⁵² Wilkins, p.66.

⁵³ Savi-Lopez, P., “Il *Filostrato* di Boccaccio”, *Romania*, 107 (1898), p.444.

⁵⁴ Boccaccio, Giovanni, *Il Filostrato*, ed. by Stephen A., Barney, New York, London: Norton, 2006, xii.

In his first description of Criseida, Boccaccio informs the reader that she is the daughter of a traitor. Her father Calchas is the main cause of her sorrows, initially, because of his escape from Troy without her knowledge, and afterwards, because of his request to have her exchanged with a Trojan prisoner and taken to the Greek camp, away from her lover. Hence, Criseida's attitude towards her father is not positive. She accuses him openly in front of Hector when she tries to find a new protector in Troy and curses him when she finds he wants her to join him in the enemy camp. The portraits Boccaccio gives of Criseida emphasise her beauty, her gentle manners and her nobility, "ch'era più bella ch'altra creatura".⁵⁵ Through the eyes of Troiolo she is compared to angels and goddesses. On the day of their encounter her disdainful attitude towards the crowd is what fascinates Troiolo the most, she looks at people as if they were inferior to her. Given the situation she is in, one would expect her to keep a low profile, but this is not Criseida's case, she is not an ordinary lady, she appears a strong and independent woman from the beginning. However, the compliments given to the protagonist seem only superficial flattery, needed for medieval courtly conventions.⁵⁶ It seems that Boccaccio includes his poem in the courtly love tradition.

In contrast to his sources, Boccaccio does not talk about any of Criseida's blemishes, that is the conjoined eyebrows and her changeable heart. However, if at first glance it may be seen as an act of kindness towards Criseida, I believe that Boccaccio does it for the opposite reason. Conscious that the reader already knows everything about his heroine, he remains silent about her blemishes, so that they may hover in the air. Also on this occasion what Boccaccio does not say is more important than what he says.

In *Il Filostrato*, Criseida is not as passive as her counterparts. Even though the real protagonist of the story is Troiolo, she is given great space in the narration and she is able to speak her thoughts and feelings, at least until she is faithful to her lover. The first time she is nominated in the poem, she is described as "l'amorosa Criseida".⁵⁷ In Italian the adjective "amorosa" is usually used to qualify someone who has a positive disposition towards love, even though in a less common context it may have sexual

⁵⁵ "she was fairer than any other creature". Boccaccio, Giovanni, *Il Filostrato*, ed by Cesare Segre, Milano: U. Mursia & C., 1966, p.784. Hereafter my references to the Italian text of *Il Filostrato* are to page numbers of this text.

⁵⁶ Kellogg, Laura, "Boccaccio's Criseida and Her Narrator, *Filostrato*", *Critical Matrix*, 6 (1991) p.52.

⁵⁷ Boccaccio, p.781.

connotations.⁵⁸ Hence, Boccaccio's choice may be a source of ambiguity, especially in translation. For example, both Gordon and Barney translate it with "amorous Criseida", implying the strong sensuality of the heroine, as in English "amorous" means "showing sexual desire and love towards somebody".⁵⁹ Boccaccio may not want to give this strong meaning, although in the poem there is an admittedly great exaltation of the sensuality and physical desires of both Troiolo and Criseida, and the woman is far more sensual than her predecessors. Nevertheless, in contrast to the usual condemnation against women who show their lust openly, Boccaccio does not make it a fault for his female protagonist. He creates for her the perfect context in which her sensuality can be considered justifiable and makes it fit her portrait. In fact, he is the first to make her a widow and it is Pandaro, her cousin and the one who persuades her to start a secret relationship with Troiolo, to say that she knows and has sexual desires. Widowhood is Boccaccio's device to enable his heroine to freely show her sensuality. Criseida is a sexually experienced woman and this is an important difference from the previous female protagonists of the story, who were depicted as young, prudish girls. Boccaccio's choice may be interpreted as his desire to create a female character who does not match the characteristics of the perfect courtly women, but is more similar to real women. Criseida has feelings and desires, she is not emotionally detached from events or people around her, she is influenced by the environment in which she is and above all she has faults. Boccaccio alters partially the conventions of courtly love.

The relationship between Criseida and Troiolo may be interpreted according to the same point of view. Criseida is older and more experienced in love matters than Troiolo. The courtly tradition in which the woman is subjected to the man is reversed, because Criseida is the active partner in this relationship, while Troiolo is passive.⁶⁰ Moreover, as mentioned above, Criseida's status of widowhood is very important. Falling in love with maidens should be preferred only if the final aim is marriage, but

⁵⁸ www.treccani.it/vocabolario/amoroso

⁵⁹ Boccaccio, Giovanni, *Il Filostrato*, ed. by R.K., Gordon, Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 1988, p.31. Boccaccio, Giovanni, *Il Filostrato*, ed. by Stephen A., Barney, New York, London: Norton, 2006, p.8.

<http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/amorous>

⁶⁰ Petrina, Alessandra, "Briseida, Criseida, Cressida: la costruzione di un mito", in *Il personaggio: Figure della dissolvenza e della permanenza*, ed. Chiara Lombardi, Alessandria: Edizioni dell'Orso, 2008, p.174.

this not what Troiolo wants, nor is Criseida interested in having another husband.⁶¹ In addition, a marriage between them could not be acceptable, because Criseida is not noble. Her widowhood gives her autonomy, because she has no husband and her father is far away, so she is not dependent on any man. She has no children to take care of, and she is still young and extremely beautiful, so that she stands out among the Trojan ladies. Boccaccio has created the perfect potential lover for Troiolo. The key to Criseida's character is her widowhood, because it enables Boccaccio to portrait her more worldly-wise, and perhaps less predictable to the readers.

However, there are some critics who believe that Boccaccio uses Criseida's openness to talk about her physical desires in order to make the woman condemn herself in front of the reader, and they assume that her unfaithfulness is only a consequence of her lust.⁶² It is true that some parts of the poem may justify this opposing point of view. Some of the things Pandaro says may lead to ambiguity about Boccaccio's position towards his Criseida. For example, in Book II of *Il Filostrato*, Pandaro, after discovering that the woman Troiolo loves is one of his kinswomen, says:

Deh, dilmi tosto, ché, s'ell'è colei,
 Ch'io vo meco pensando ch'ella sia,
 Non credo che trapassi il giorno sesto,
 Ch'io ti trarrò di stato sì molesto. (II. 17 p.798)

[Ah, tell me quickly, because if she is the one who I am thinking she may be, I do not believe the sixth day will pass before I shall draw you from such a painful state] (II. 17 p.54)⁶³

It seems that Pandaro has already understood that the woman loved by Troiolo is Criseida. Such a statement casts a shadow on Criseida's virtue, because Pandaro appears sure that her cousin will not be difficult to convince, which is exactly what happens some scenes later. The reader may gather that Criseida is an easy lady and not the prudish girl usually expected in these circumstances. Nonetheless, perhaps in order to refute this hypothesis, it is again Pandaro, after the confirmation of the woman's identity, to praise her cousin greatly. Among her qualities he tells Troiolo, one could be

⁶¹ Natali, Giulia, "A Lyrical Version: Boccaccio's *Filostrato*", in Boitani, Piero, ed., *The European Tragedy of Troilus*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989, p.66.

⁶² apRoberts, Robert P., "Love in the *Filostrato*", *The Chaucer Review*, 7 (1972), p.1.

⁶³ Boccaccio, Giovanni, *Il Filostrato*, ed. by Stephen A., Barney, New York, London: Norton, 2006, p.54. Hereafter my references to the English translation of *Il Filostrato* are to page numbers of this text.

an obstacle to his aim, because she is the chastest woman in Troy and she scorns love. Criseida's virtue is, at least apparently, saved by Pandaro, who by adding that she is not interested in the things of love, may imply that she has already rejected many suitors before and that she wants to stay faithful to her late husband. Hence, despite Pandaro's controversial certainty over Criseida's approval, Boccaccio seems not interested in giving a negative image about his heroine. Furthermore, he removes the misogynistic attacks against Criseida and the female genre of his sources, a choice that shows that he is not an antifeminist and he does not hate women as, on the contrary, Benoît de Sainte-Maure and Guido delle Colonne do.

The process of wooing, made by Pandaro on behalf of Troiolo, sees Criseida feeling a range of different emotions and once again it is an ambiguous passage in the poem. Criseida is curious about the name of the man who loves her and at the same time she is ashamed and disappointed because of Pandaro's behaviour. She is a woman of virtue, and she does not understand how her cousin could push her to start a secret relationship, outside marriage, since he, as a member of her family, should defend her honour. This kind of reaction is the one expected from a person with a strong morality, and Criseida fits, or wants to demonstrate she does, the portrait of the honourable woman. Nonetheless, it takes very little to Criseida to belie her first disdain. By changing her mind so quickly, she is already showing signs of her inconstancy. All her doubts and tears of shame are only a set-up, probably to maintain some decency in front of her male relative, because soon enough she is accepting Troiolo's love. If initially she only consents to the exchanges of glances in public, she swiftly becomes bold and amorous. When Pandaro leaves her, she reflects on the advantages and disadvantages of starting a love relationship, showing her coquettish side,

Io son giovane, bella, vaga e lieta,
Vedova, ricca, nobile ed amata,
Senza figliuoli ed in vita quieta,
Perchè esser non deggio innamorata? (II. 69 p.54)

[I am young, beautiful, lovely and gay, a widow, rich, noble and beloved, without children and leading a quiet life. Why should I not be in love?] (II. 69 p.809)

Criseida's reasoning cannot be questioned, as she has every right to start a new relationship with another man. Her husband is dead, so she cannot be considered unfaithful. The only reason why she may be criticised is her will to keep the relationship

secret, therefore outside marriage. However, Boccaccio does not even seem to take into consideration the possibility to have his characters marry for multiple reasons. Firstly, as mentioned above, her social status is lower than Troilo's, because he is a prince. Secondly, as Criseida says during their last night together, making the relationship public would cause their passion to fade. A public relationship would not be acceptable, so it seems fruitless to condemn Criseida for having a secret one, because she has no choice. Furthermore, no accusation is made by Boccaccio in the poem.

The consummation scene is the most lustful moment in the poem. Since the first times the two lovers exchanged looks, Criseida starts to feel a desire for the man, which becomes stronger and stronger. Even though initially she reacts disdainfully to Troilo's request to have an intimate encounter, she soon consents to meet him. Also on this occasion Criseida's initial upset reaction is only illusory and should be put in the context of the courtly love tradition. The act of smiling while she takes Troilo's letter from Pandaro's hands is a sign that she is happy about the proposal. She is desirous as much as Troilo. During the first night they pass together, Criseida is anything but shy. She is not embarrassed, nor is she shameful. On the contrary she makes comments on the bashfulness of newly married girls,

Dove la donna nell'ultima vesta,
Rimasa già, con piacevole detto
Gli disse: -- Spogliami io? Le nuove spose
Son la notte primiera vergognose. --
A cui Troilo disse: -- Anima mia,
Io te ne priego, sì ch'io t'abbi in braccio
Ignuda sì come il mi cor disia. --
Ed ella allora: -- Ve' ch'io me ne spaccio. --
E la camiscia sua gittata via,
Nelle sue braccia si ricolse avaccio; (III. 31-32 p.834)

[where the lady, remaining still in her last garment, with pleasing speech said to him, "Shall I strip myself? The newly married are bashful the first night".

To whom Troilus said, "My soul, I pray that I may have you naked in my arms as my heart desires". And then she: "See how I free myself of it." And her shift thrown away, she gathered herself quickly into his arms;] (III. 31-32 p.192.)

Criseida is an experienced woman who knows what she wants and how to get it. She does not need to be convinced by her lover. In this scene Boccaccio clearly wants to

emphasise that she is not a maiden, and that she has already lived her bashful moment on her first night of marriage. In this way the experienced Criseida is put in opposition to inexperienced maidens. Moreover, later, it is she who asks for another encounter with Troiolo. She is more passionate than her lover and she is not afraid to express it. This is another proof of Boccaccio's modification of the courtly love tradition; Criseida's experience is made obvious by the inexperience of Troiolo.

As said before, the consummation scene is an original idea of Boccaccio, and it differentiates Criseida from her predecessors, since none of them ever shows her level of sensuality. Kellogg suggests that by mentioning the new spouses Criseida is trying to conceal the sin she is going to commit, that is having sex with a man outside marriage.⁶⁴ Criseida refers to the act of consummation as a marriage in itself. If marriage is the most important event in a normal, that is public, relationship, then the consummation has the same significance for a secret relationship. Criseida is unofficially marrying Troiolo. Perhaps Boccaccio means to protect his heroine, to make her sin disappear, but it is not enough to hide her fault, because the reader knows that they are not married. Her actions are real and words are an abstract entity. So, what is left to ambiguity is if Criseida honestly believes their relationship to be a proper marriage, or if her words are only a justification. In Book IV the first thesis proves to be right. After discovering that she has to return to her father, Criseida says:

Or vedova sarò io daddovero,

Poi che da te dipartir mi conviene,

Cuor del mio corpo, e 'l vestimento nero

Ver testimonio fia delle mie pene. (IV. 90 p.868)

[Now I shall in truth be a widow, since I am obliged to part from you, heart of my body,

and the black attire will be a true testimony of my sufferings.] (IV. 90 p.262.)

Away from Troy she is a widow again, so for Criseida her relationship with Troiolo is a real marriage.

Nonetheless, if on one hand Criseida's statement dispels every doubt, on the other hand it leads to another observation. Given that she considers herself a widow after being exchanged, she implies that Troiolo is dead for her, at least figuratively. At this point, it is clear how important is language for Criseida. She has entered into

⁶⁴ Kellogg, p.57.

marriage with Troiolo through language, and she is widowed through language again. This new condition of widowhood takes her to the same situation in which she was at the beginning of the poem. Without Troiolo, she can take a new lover, and that is exactly what she does with Diomede. It is unlikely that Criseida's words are casually used. Perhaps Boccaccio is trying to give a justification to her conduct. Moreover, after accepting Diomede's love, Criseida disappears from the poem, so we do not know whether she feels guilty about betraying Troiolo, whether she believes to have engaged in bad conduct, or, on the contrary, whether she thinks she did the right thing. In contrast to Benoît de Sainte-Maure, who gives his Briseida the occasion to justify her behaviour, no monologue is delivered by Criseida.

However, Boccaccio wants to condemn Criseida because of her betrayal, not because of her lasciviousness or because of the secrecy of her relationship with Troiolo. The cause of Criseida's fault is not secrecy. On the contrary, it is clearly expressed by Troiolo in the poem that it entails a greater fidelity than love inside marriage.⁶⁵ It shares some characteristics with courtly love, in which a man loves a woman outside marriage, and their relationship is usually kept secret. Although Boccaccio erases the harsh antifeminist remarks of his sources, there are some parts in the poem in which he shows no interest in Criseida's potential ruin and makes some negative comments on the female genre, using sometimes his voice as narrator and sometimes his characters' voices. For example, Troiolo, in Book I, talks about the inconstancy of heart of women, despising them and the men who fall in love with them. Troiolo's statement seems a gloomy prediction of what is going to happen to him, because if initially he criticises women, later he falls victim to their fickleness. Later on in the poem, misogynistic ideas are found on the mouth of Pandaro, who claims that women do not show their physical desires only for fear of shame, but they are as libidinous as men. If Benoît's and Guido's attacks against the female genre have no personal reasons, Boccaccio's case is different, because he is suffering because of a woman and this may fill him with hate towards women.

After knowing that Criseida is going to be soon exchanged with a Trojan prisoner and taken to the Greek camp, the two lovers weep bitterly and meet for the last time. Kellogg has noted an analogy between Criseida's purple circles around her eyes

⁶⁵ Boccaccio, pp.860-861.

and Dante's crying purple face after feeling guilty at having noticed a lady other than Beatrice.⁶⁶ For Dante this colour is a sign of fickleness, and Boccaccio may use the same association to prove that Criseida's inconstancy is written all over her face. As said above, Boccaccio does not accuse openly Criseida of fickleness, he provides the reader with some clues throughout the poem. Perhaps he is worried that Filomena may believe that the open accusation is referred to her. However, the reader is conscious of the implicit criticism expressed against the woman who left the narrator, and it is probable that Filomena herself knows the story of Criseida. During their last night together, Troiolo seems the most affected by her forthcoming departure, while Criseida has already prepared a good plan to go back to Troy. She promises Troiolo to be back within the tenth day, a promise that, unfortunately, she does not fulfil. Even on this occasion, Troiolo is in a position of inferiority. He tries to be more reasonable than her, but Criseida is stubborn. The author portrays the man as the most suffering of the pair in order to emphasise his own sorrow, because he sees himself in Troiolo. Moreover, in the intimate scene of the lovers grieving in each other's arms in bed, there is a detail that cannot pass unnoticed,

Per che andar men conviene con Diomede,
 Ch'è stato trattator de' patti rei (IV. 130, p.876)
 [therefore I must go with Diomede, who has been the negotiator of these cruel pacts]
 (IV. 130 p.288)

Criseida says the name of the man with whom she later betrays Troiolo. It is an intrusion in a place, the bed, sacred for two lovers. It seems a gloomy prediction of what is going to happen. Boccaccio seems to play with Criseida, because knowing already her future behaviour, the reader is led to think even worse about her. The author is giving another clue of Criseida's fickleness. The moment of truth is increasingly approaching for her character. One of the first cues given by Boccaccio is in Book II. While she converses with her uncle, Criseida says:

Che or vaghezze si trovano spesse
 Chente egli ha ora, e quattro dì o sei
 Durano, e passano poscia di leggero,
 Cambiando amor, così cambia il pensiero. (II. 50 p.805)

⁶⁶ Kellogg, p.60.

[the fancies which he now has often occur and last four or five days and then pass away lightly, since love changes as thought changes.] (II. 50 p.84)

Boccaccio makes her talk about changing love, again because he wants to play with his heroine. He makes her reveal her true self gradually, without exposing himself to potential accusations of misogyny.

From the moment Criseida accepts Diomedes's love, she disappears from the poem. Now that Criseida has shown her true self, which ironically is her falseness and inconstancy, Boccaccio has lost any interest in her.⁶⁷ As it occurs in Guido delle Colonne's *Historia*, Criseida disappears because she is not worthy of note after her betrayal. Nonetheless, Boccaccio has another reason not to talk about her, that is his predominant interest in narrating Troilo's sorrows. Criseida is not the main protagonist of the poem, she is the mean to convey the reader (specifically Filomena) the pain suffered by Troilo, which is as strong as the narrator's. In Book VIII Troilo expresses some hostile thoughts against his lover, which are implicitly aimed at Filomena too. Criseida is disloyal, deceitful and false. She does not keep any of the promises made to his lover. What is not taken into consideration is the context in which Criseida makes her decision. She finds herself foreigner in an enemy camp during a war, in which every prediction proves the destruction of her people. While Boccaccio's predecessors at least acknowledge it, Boccaccio does not say anything about it. It is presumed that she changes her feelings only because she is false and so predisposed to treachery. Probably, this is the clearest example of how little Boccaccio is interested in the character of his heroine, even though it cannot be considered a real form of misogyny.

The final aim of Boccaccio's poem is to show an exemplum of bad female conduct.⁶⁸ The narrator advises young males not to trust the love of young maidens, because it is misleading. He advises them not to follow Troilo's example, implicitly referring to himself too. It is not clear if his Filomena should be included in the group of unfaithful young maidens or considered one of the perfect older ladies. If the first hypothesis is right, Boccaccio's critic against his lover is very strong, because he would compare her openly to Criseida, an idea that he never expresses clearly in the poem, but let readers imply. On the contrary, if the second assumption is right, Boccaccio's aim is

⁶⁷ Mapstone, p.14.

⁶⁸ Boccaccio, xvii.

to compare Filomena to Criseida, but with the aim to prove that her lover is better than Troilo's. It is more probable that Boccaccio's is a veiled attack against Filomena, the reason of his terrible pain, even though in the conclusion of the poem, he talks about her as his angelic and excellent woman.

Chapter 2

Chaucer's Criseyde

2.1 The narrator's love for his heroine

Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* is another poem to be included in the literary tradition of this story of love and betrayal, and today it may be considered the best known work on the subject from the Middle Ages. In contrast to his predecessors, Chaucer seems less interested to portray Criseyde as a negative exemplum and to make the poem a lesson on women's moral conduct. Proofs are the addressees at the end of the poem, when the narrator underlines how not only men, but also women, should beware of beguilers. The poem is not another misogynistic attack against the female protagonist of the story. On the contrary, Chaucer seems to be genuinely concerned about his heroine, so that he has been praised as one of the most feminist authors of English literature, even though Sell specifies that this view is often based on ironic readings of his poems.⁶⁹ Indeed, the character of Criseyde has caused many debates on whether Chaucer's aim is to represent his heroine as a victim of circumstances or as a woman who unfairly betrays her lover.⁷⁰ Chaucer removes from his poem the misogynistic remarks used by the previous authors against Criseyde, trying to deeply explore the reasons behind the woman's behaviour. He creates a Criseyde who is more interesting than her forerunners, because the author gives her a larger space and explores her inner thoughts, through both dialogues and soliloquies. Moreover, Chaucer's Criseyde is portrayed as belonging to a higher class than her predecessors, she lives in a palace with many people as servants, and she associates herself with powerful people in society.⁷¹

An important element in *Troilus and Criseyde* is the narrator, who should be considered a character to all extents and purposes in the poem. The narrator's aim is to

⁶⁹ Sell, Jonathan, P.A., "Cousin to Fortune: On Reading Chaucer's Criseyde", *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses*, 48 (2004), p.195.

⁷⁰ Flannery, Mary C., "A Bloody Shame: Chaucer's Honourable Women", *The Review of English Studies*, 62 (2011), p.342.

⁷¹ Winderatt, p.286.

defend his heroine, and in order to do so he tries to engage in a dialogue with the readers. Vainly, he attempts to distance Criseyde from the negative portraits written by his sources, and throughout the narration he clearly blames his authorities for her bad behaviour. He even tries to minimise the gravity of her fault, by defining her conduct towards Troilus only “unkynde”. However, her character has already been historically determined, and it is impossible to modify her nature at this point: the narrator can simply try to make her good qualities stand out before her misconduct, and that is what he does. The only reasons why Criseyde is known are her inconstancy and faithlessness, since if she had been a virtuous woman she probably would have been easily lost among all other positive heroines. Knowing that he cannot change the historical accounts and wanting to stay as faithful as possible to his sources, the narrator introduces and talks well about his heroine in the first part of the narration, that is in Book I, II and III, in order to make the reader sympathise with Criseyde. He tries to make the reader forget Criseyde’s forthcoming betrayal, which, after being acknowledged at the very beginning of the poem, is not mentioned again till its occurrence. Great emphasis is given to the surrender of Criseyde to Troilus’ love, while the woman’s capitulation to Diomedes’ wooing is not given the same importance. This structure is probably due to the narrator’s aim to overshadow Criseyde’s fault; however, it may cause ambiguity and suggest even more the fickleness of the heroine, because the reader is given the idea that Criseyde surrenders to Diomedes more easily than she does to Troilus. This result may not be the narrator’s aim, but it may be wanted by Chaucer, who manages to confuse and manipulate the narrator in order to create this sense of ambiguity.

At this point, it is necessary to make a distinction between Chaucer and the narrator, as they do not correspond. As said before, the narrator cares about Criseyde, but it is not clear whether Chaucer is sincerely concerned about his heroine or not. As we will see later in this analysis, there are some moments during the narration in which it is evident that Chaucer creates some difficulties to the narrator in his act of defending Criseyde. The narrator’s good intentions are hindered by Chaucer, who gives him ambiguous phrases and language constructions. As a result the reader receives the opposite message of the one the narrator wants to convey, worsening Criseyde’s position. For this reason Chaucer’s love towards his heroine is uncertain, as is her feminist attitude, since in some cases he is the one to put her honour in jeopardy. Sell

explains that Criseyde is a “woman with two faces” that contradict one another.⁷² The narrator shows the readers the innocent side of the heroine, while Chaucer makes the readers understand that the woman has a devil side too.

The narrator fights against the conventional prejudices created by his sources against Criseyde, which may cause the reader to start reading the poem already pointing at her as the guilty character of the story.⁷³ The reader is manipulated to care about the woman by the narrator. Corrigan explains that, instead of saying openly that Criseyde is a fickle woman, Chaucer makes her act and speak words that may only suggest signs of volatility in her behaviour.⁷⁴ It is up to the readers’ ability to understand them. For example, when Criseyde assures Troilus that there is no other man in her thoughts, she says “Now God, thow woost, in thought ne dede untrew to Troilus was nevere yet Criseyde”⁷⁵. The sentence would be flawless were it not for “yet”, which conveys the idea that Criseyde’s fidelity is only temporary. The love the narrator feels for Criseyde is not of the sexual kind, but it is a protective paternal affection, and what the character seems to lack is a father figure. Not only has her real father left her, but also her uncle seems more concerned to satisfy the desires of his friend than to protect her virtue. The narrator tries to save her reputation. It is a sentimental matter, he does not want to destroy his heroine.

Criseyde is the first character to be described in the poem, even before Troilus. At the beginning of the poem the feeling that the narrator wants to instil in the reader is pity, so he describes Criseyde as a widow, left by her traitor father Calchas, without any friend. The initial situation in which the woman finds herself is precarious, because of her father’s treachery, so she pleads with Hector to save her honour. The narrator devotes about forty verses to praise the peculiar beauty of Criseyde, the most beautiful creature in Troy, angelic and honourable. However, some of the qualities used by the narrator to describe his heroine are contradicted in other parts of the poem, sometimes

⁷² Sell, Jonathan, P.A., “Cousin to Fortune: On Reading Chaucer’s Criseyde”, *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses*, 48 (2004), p.201.

⁷³ Kellogg, Laura D., “Chaucer’s Criseyde and Her Narrator”, in Kellogg, Laura D., ed., *Boccaccio’s and Chaucer’s Cressida*, New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1995, p.61.

⁷⁴ Corrigan, Matthew, “Chaucer’s Failure With Woman: The Inadequacy of Criseyde”, *The Western Humanities Review*, 23 (1969), pp.113-114.

⁷⁵ Chaucer, Geoffrey, *Troilus and Criseyde*, ed. by Stephen A. Barney, New York, London: Norton, 2006, p.183, Book II. ll. 1053-54. Hereafter my references for the text of *Troilus and Criseyde* are to lines in Barney’s text.

by Criseyde herself. For example, he tells the reader that she is young, even though already a widow, but in Book II, when the woman speaks for the first time, she talks about young maidens as if she were different from them. Her youth seems to be called into doubt, and the reader is baffled by the contradictory information given. However, it seems most likely that Criseyde is referring to a different level of experience between the maidens, who are young virgins, and herself, who is a widow. In addition, even though the narrator's intentions are good, there are some details which cast a shadow on the woman's appearance. Criseyde wears only dark coloured garments, because of her status as a widow and in order to attract less attention from people, given her precarious situation. Since she is described as an angelic beauty, Greenwood, somewhat controversially, links her image to the black angel, who is symbol of death, sin and doom in the Christian view.⁷⁶ A very ambiguous, if not sinister, connection that may be interpreted as a prediction of the imminent tragedy.

Greenwood talks about another contradiction in the lady's portrait, which initially pictures her as an abandoned daughter and an upset widow, and soon afterwards as the perfect angel.⁷⁷ In this last instance, I believe a clarification is needed. The part in which Criseyde is described as a heavenly creature comes after Troilus has been stricken by the god of love, so the narrator is showing the woman through the eyes, already in love, of the protagonist. Furthermore, another contradiction in the poem concerns the definition of Criseyde as alone, without any friend to count on. In the first part of Book II, when Pandarus goes to her house to pay her a visit, he finds her in the company of three maidens while listening to a story. Even more, the presence of Pandarus contradicts her solitude, since he is her uncle, a family member who, conventionally, should take care of her. The contradiction can be explained considering the narrator's aim to produce a sense of pity towards Criseyde in the reader's mind, as mentioned earlier. The damsel in distress may not be in such a dangerous distress after all. It seems a contradiction intentionally introduced by Chaucer the author for the reader to notice, with the purpose to expose the narrator's lie. However, Cartlidge tries to explain this contradiction by assuming that the friends Criseyde lacks are reliable

⁷⁶ Greenwood, Maria K., "Women in Love, or Three Courtly Heroines in Chaucer and Malory: Elaine, Criseyde and Guinevere", in Dor, Juliette, ed., *A Wyf Ther Was. Essays in Honour of Paule Mertens-Fonck*, Liège: Université de Liège, 1992, p.177.

⁷⁷ Greenwood, p.176.

friends, that is older relatives, associates and acquaintances, who may take in charge her material interests, especially since she is a widow.⁷⁸

Sometimes in the poem the narrator intrudes to make some comments on Criseyde's behaviour. His apparent purpose is to clarify any potential ambiguity to the reader. However, his intrusions make the reader suspicious of things he or she would have probably not thought of, if the narrator had not mentioned the possibility. An example may be found in Book II. After Pandarus has confessed Troilus' love to Criseyde and has left the house, she is reflecting on the situation on her own, while all of a sudden some cries outside her house announce the arrival of Troilus from the battlefield. Criseyde watches the Trojan knight and is strongly fascinated by his appearance and his manners,

Criseyde gan al his chere asprien,
And leet it so softe in hire herte synke,
That to hireself she seyde, "Who yaf me drynke?"(II. 649-51)

Worried about the potential accusation of Criseyde falling in love too hastily with Troilus, the narrator forestalls her detractors by saying:

For I sey nought that she so sodeynly
Yaf hym hire love, but that she gan enclyne
To like hym first, and I have told yow why;
And after that, his manhod and his pyne
Made love withinne hire for to myne,
For which by process and by good servyse
He gat hire love, and in no sodeyn wyse. (II. 673-679)

Implying that Criseyde's love for Troilus is sudden or that it is love at first sight may convey the idea that the woman loves lightly or casually.⁷⁹ The narrator says that Criseyde gives Troilus her love after some time has passed, as it is appropriate for an honourable woman. Till this point it is plausible that the majority of readers have not thought about this implication, so what the narrator is really doing, certainly unconsciously for him, is instilling the idea in every reader's mind. However, what may be unintentionally for the narrator, may be done purposefully by the author.

⁷⁸ Cartlidge, Neil, "Criseyde's Absent Friends", *The Chaucer Review*, 44 (2010), p.233.

⁷⁹ Harhr, Joan G., "Criseyde's Inner Debate: The Dialectic of Enamorment in the *Filostrato* and the *Troilus*", *Studies in Philology*, 89 (1992), p.269.

Presumably, the majority of readers have considered Criseyde's curiosity a normal reaction for a woman who discovers that a prince is desperately in love with her.⁸⁰ Furthermore, in Book III, Criseyde's happy thoughts about Troilus clarify that it was not sudden love, as "she thought that love, al come it late, of alle joie hadde opned hire the yate" (III. 468-69). The narrator's comments may be justified by the fact that the story of Criseyde's betrayal is already known and this may lead the reader to analyse carefully every action or word pronounced by the heroine, in order to detect in advance signs of her inconstancy. Instead of helping his heroine, the narrator is worsening her position. Another intrusion can be found in Book IV, when Criseyde explains to Troilus her plan to go back to Troy.

And troweliche, as written wel I fynde
That al this thyng was seyde of good entente,
And that hire herte trewe was and kynde
Towardes hym, and spak right as she mente,
And that she starf for wo neigh whan she wente,
And was in purpose evere to be trewe. (IV. 1415-20)

The narrator wants to put an emphasis on the woman's sincerity. However, the strong stress is counterproductive. The narrator seems more concerned than Criseyde herself to show how sincere she is.

Another strategy adopted by the narrator to avoid ambiguity which backfires on him is skipping the narration of Criseyde's reactions to some events. Usually, the narrator justifies the sudden change of scene with the silence of his sources. For example, he blames his fictional source Lollius for not writing about Criseyde's thoughts on the absence of Troilus during the dinner at Deiphebo's house, in Book III. The reader is not given information about Criseyde's inclination to believe or not her uncle, even though it is certainly unusual for Troilus to miss such an opportunity to spend some time with the woman he loves. It is left to ambiguity if Criseyde is conscious of Pandarus' lie or is totally oblivious; and if she trusts her uncle, it is not clear if Criseyde is relieved or sad about Troilus' absence. Afterwards, another source of ambiguity is the narrator's comment on the time passed before Criseyde forsakes Troilus for Diomedes, in Book V:

⁸⁰ Donaldson, E. Talbot, "Criseyde and Her Narrator", in Donaldson, E. Talbot, ed., *Speaking of Chaucer*, London: Athlone Press, 1973, p.66.

But trewely, how longe it was bytwene
That she forsok hym for this Diomede
Ther is non auctour telleth it, I wene. (V. 1086-1088)

The narrator's intention is to contrast the information given by his sources, who imply that it takes only a few days for their heroine to betray Troilus. However, the justification provided by the narrator seems too weak to be taken into real consideration. This is the last time the narrator is trying to defend his heroine, and even though he admits her fault and recognises her inconstancy, he does not judge or despise her. On the contrary, he says he pities her. Moreover, as Benoît did in his *Roman de Troie*, the narrator gives Criseyde the opportunity to explain her decision. Chaucer's Criseyde seems more sorry, but also more tenacious than Benoît's Briseida. The narrator's affection towards Criseyde is probably the main reason why the woman disappears from the book after her last soliloquy. He stops talking about Criseyde because he has nothing good to say about her, and swiftly returns to the suffering of Troilus.

There is a moment in which the positive attitude of the narrator towards his heroine starts wavering. In Book V the narrator writes new portraits about his protagonists. The choice seems unusual, since there are already portraits of Criseyde and Troilus at the beginning of the poem. If Troilus' description is very similar to the first, Criseyde's new portrait has an important difference. The narrator adds that the woman's eyebrows are joined. Since no trace of this characteristic is found in Boccaccio's poem, it is clear that Chaucer draws it from other sources, that is Benoît, Guido and Dares.⁸¹ It is remarkable that he reintroduces an element left out by Boccaccio, who is his main source. Griffin claims that Chaucer is driven by his desire to be as faithful as possible to historical facts.⁸² However, this does not seem the only reason behind Chaucer's choice. The blemish is not mentioned at the beginning of the poem, but only in Book V, when it is clear that the relationship between Troilus and Criseyde is reaching its end. The new detail on Criseyde's physicality may be important to understand how the narrator is slowly but increasingly showing her fickleness. The narrator is accepting the destiny of the woman and begins to show not only her goodness, but also her wickedness. In this way it may be explained why the narrator spoils her beauty, after having celebrated it in four books. However, Boboc suggests

⁸¹ Root, Robert, Kilburn, "Chaucer's Dares", *Modern Philology*, 15 (1917), p.13.

⁸² Griffin, p.43.

another possibility, that is Criseyde's will to let her eyebrows grow because of the apathy she felt in the Greek camp.⁸³

In contrast to his predecessors, Chaucer creates a much more complex character out of Criseyde. Book II, almost in its entirety, is devoted to his heroine, who is portrayed while reasoning about the advantages and disadvantages of starting a love relationship with Troilus. If in Book I she is described only concerning her peculiar beauty, in Book II she is more than a beautiful lady. In Book II and III Chaucer engages in a careful analysis of the character, who is shown in her interactions with people and in her deep reasoning of her situation. Criseyde is at once very intelligent, able to discern her best interest, and fearful of her future. She is helpless but strong, an attitude that creates a debate on what really makes her decide how to proceed, whether it is only fear of the future consequences, or whether she makes her choices fully conscious.

2.2 Criseyde's fear

Fear is an emotional state often associated to Criseyde, that recurs throughout the poem. Unlike Boccaccio, Chaucer introduces Criseyde's isolation and fearfulness in his first description of her.⁸⁴ In her first portrait, the narrator describes her as a damsel in distress looking for protection, and this sense of powerlessness and vulnerability in Criseyde remains unchanged for the entire poem. Hers is a "nature easily frightened, but also easily soothed".⁸⁵ Mieskowski describes her as a weak, coward woman, who submits to other people's decision instead of making her own choices.⁸⁶ Lewis, quoted by apRoberts, maintains that fear is the weakness that led Criseyde to sin.⁸⁷ Many decisions taken by the woman may be justified by fear. According to the situation in which she is, Criseyde's fear is caused by multiple and different reasons.

Fear may be considered an element introduced by Chaucer in order to justify Criseyde's betrayal. According to Aquinas, fear may influence the free will of a person,

⁸³ Boboc, Andreea, "Criseyde's Descriptions and the Ethics of Feminine Experience", *The Chaucer Review*, 47 (2012), p.80.

⁸⁴ Windeatt, p.284.

⁸⁵ Windeatt, p.282.

⁸⁶ Mieszkowski, Gretchen, "Chaucer's Much Loved Criseyde", *The Chaucer Review*, 26 (1991), p.109.

⁸⁷ apRoberts, Robert P., "Criseyde's Infidelity and the Moral of the Troilus", *Speculum*, 44 (1969), p.384.

making their faults less sinful.⁸⁸ For this reason, someone who is forced to make a certain choice, especially a bad one, should be considered less guilty. This belief is shared by apRoberts, who assumes that the difficult situations in which Criseyde is makes her less responsible for her wrong choices.⁸⁹ If we take this hypothesis into consideration, Criseyde's decision to betray Troilus may be partially explained by her reduced free will, caused by the tragedy of being forced to go to the enemy camp and being unable to go back to Troy. Her fear of isolation and death is stronger than her fear of losing her honour.

At the beginning of the story she is in a precarious position because of her father's treachery. When Criseyde is first introduced in Book I, she is a woman afraid for her life, so fear is the first feature the reader is given to identify her. In her first appearance, the woman is moved to action by fear, when she asks Hector for mercy. Her condition as a widow puts her in an even more vulnerable position, because she is a powerless woman in a male-oriented society, and she has no male figure to protect her. In order to understand Criseyde's character better, it may help to contextualise it into the period in which the poem is written. Chaucer is certainly exposed to influences of his time, and it is known that in the Middle Ages women are considered the weaker sex. A woman is the possession of a man, be him her father or her husband.⁹⁰ In addition, the time of war in which the story is set makes Criseyde's situation even worse, since women may be objects of exchange, which is exactly what happens to her.

During the Middle Ages, the fear Criseyde feels at the beginning of the poem was classified as "natural fear". According to Minnis and Johnson, natural fear is "commonly defined as the reflexive concern for one's personal well-being in moments of difficulty or danger".⁹¹ The unusual and sudden way in which her father leaves her, contributes to fuel Criseyde's dread, which is aggravated by her solitude, since the narrator tells the reader that she has no friends to ask for advice. In addition, for her Calchas' treachery is a source of embarrassment and shame, both elements referred as

⁸⁸ Minnis, Alastair, Johnson, Eric J., "Chaucer's Criseyde and Feminine Fear", in Wogan-Browne, Jocelyn, et al. eds., *Medieval Women - Texts and Contexts in Late Medieval Britain: Essays for Felicity Riddy*, Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2000, p.209.

⁸⁹ apRoberts, p.392.

⁹⁰ Corrigan, p.110.

⁹¹ Minnis, Johnson, p.204.

parts of natural fear.⁹² In the majority of cases, Criseyde feels natural fears, even though they are caused by different sources. Criseyde's most important moments are usually characterised by her fears, that are sometimes fuelled and sometimes overcome.

When Pandarus reveals Troilus' love to Criseyde, she is pictured as the "ferfulleste wight that myghte be" (II. 450-451). On this occasion, Criseyde's fear has many reasons to be. It is the fear of the unknown.⁹³ She has been told by her uncle that a powerful man is in love with her and would like to start an extramarital relationship with her. Criseyde is shocked that the only father figure she has is more interested to please his friend's desire than to defend her honour. She is afraid because the man who should take care of her does not seem interested in her well-being and she feels vulnerable. In addition, Troilus is a prince, so she fears that an eventual refusal of his proposal may endanger her already precarious position in the city. However, even accepting Troilus' love is a source of fear for Criseyde, because she is worried about her reputation, which has been unblemished till now and may be completely lost if the love affair were discovered. As if Criseyde's fears were not enough already, Pandarus adds another type of dread in his niece's mind. In order to convince her to take into consideration Troilus' proposal, he tells her that, should she refuse the prince's love, the noble man would die of pain, and he threatens to let himself starve to death too. Criseyde is strongly pushed to change her mind and starts to consider the possibility. She is afraid not only of the tragedy that the death of such important people would be, but especially that her fellow citizens would hold her responsible for them. Hence, it seems that, at least at the beginning, the reason behind Criseyde's surrender to Troilus' request is fear of the circumstances.

According to Thomas Aquinas, as reported by Minnis and Johnson, fear may be the seed for love to grow.⁹⁴ The two critics believe that this is Criseyde's case, because from the moment she considers accepting Troilus' love, she ponders on the advantages of a relationship with someone who, in Troy, is believed to be second only to his brother Hector. Criseyde starts to feel flattered by the attentions so noble a man gives her and little by little her fear begins to subside. Indeed, important lines that supports this idea say "And ay gan love hire lasse for t'agaste than it dide erst" (II. 901-902), and

⁹² Minnis, Johnson, p.206.

⁹³ Minnis, Johnson, p.206.

⁹⁴ Minnis, Johnson, p.207.

they are found immediately after she has heard Antigone's song. If initially Criseyde is fearful of starting a secret relationship, now she understands that love is not a bad idea after all; she is overcoming her fear. However, as Wetherbee has noticed, the fact that her dilemma is easily resolved by a song casually sang by her niece, calls the sincerity of Criseyde's fears into doubt.⁹⁵ In Book III, there is another moment which shows that Criseyde is not afraid anymore: "So wis he was, she was namore afered" (III. 482). The narrator insists in telling the reader that Criseyde has dispelled her fears, now that she has fully accepted Troilus' love and she has started to feel the same about him. However, even though she has overcome her fears of Troilus, she is still portrayed as a fearful woman. Fear is intrinsic in her character. In many circumstances she reacts in a very uneasy way, so she has a "dredful herte" (II. 1110) when receiving her uncle, and she stands "ful dreadfully" (II. 1120) when presented with Troilus' letter.

A different kind of fear is felt by Criseyde during the consummation scene. First, she is compared to a trembling leaf, when Troilus holds her. Minnis and Johnson assume that Criseyde's fear is sexually motivated and puts her in a position which is inferior to Troilus', making her even more attractive to the man, who feels more powerful.⁹⁶ Nonetheless, as the reader well knows, the woman is not a virgin, but a widow, who has already experienced sexual encounters. For this reason, it seems improbable that she fears the intimacy with Troilus, since it is something known to her. Her reaction may be justified by the conventions, which expect women to act as passive characters in these circumstances.⁹⁷ Later, she is compared to a nightingale overcoming her fear:

And as the newe abaysed nyghtyngale,
That synteth first when she bygynneth to synge,
Whan that she hereth any herde tale,
Or in the hegges any wyght stiryng,
And after siker doth her vois out ryng,
Right so Criseyde, whan hire drede stente,
Opned hire herte and tolde hym hire entente. (III. 1233-1239)

⁹⁵ Wetherbee, Winthrop, "Criseyde Alone", in Vitto, Cindy L. and Smith Marzec, Marcia, eds., *New Perspectives on Criseyde*, Asheville: Pegasus Press, 2004, p.315.

⁹⁶ Minnis, Johnson, p.212.

⁹⁷ Minnis, Johnson, p.212.

The passage is very poetic, but believing that Criseyde's trembling is associated to fear is not utterly convincing. It seems to reduce it only to a romantic interpretation. On the contrary, it may be more plausible to associate her emotional state to a strong desire which is near fulfilment and which causes her to be jittery.

In Book V Criseyde is gripped by fear again. Priam has accepted the Greeks' request for her exchange with a Trojan prisoner, and suddenly she has found herself in the enemy camp, away from her city and her lover. In the last part of the poem, Criseyde is again in a precarious situation, very similar to the one she was in at the beginning of Book I. She is alone, without knowing what to do. She experiences different types of fears. When, in the Greek camp, she analyses her situation, she shows to be afraid about going back to Troy on her own for multiple reasons: she fears to be accused of being a spy if discovered running away and she fears to fall in the hands of some wretched man. So, again, she is afraid for her life. Moreover, similarities between this Criseyde and the Briseis from *Heroides* may be found; both are prisoners and both are afraid to escape. As we have seen before, fear causes Criseyde to make some choices, so it brings her to action again. For fear Criseyde gives up every attempt to escape and decides to remain in the Greek camp. In addition, as Pandarus did in order to persuade her to consider Troilus' proposal before, Diomedes takes advantage of her fearfulness and tries to scare her even more by exploiting her father's prophecy about Troy's destruction. Criseyde makes her choice to stay after hearing Diomedes' dreadful words:

Retornyng in hire soule ay up and down
The words of this sodeyn Diomede,
His grete estat, and perel of the town,
And that she was alone and hadde need
Of frendes help; and thus bygan to brede
The cause whi, the soothe for to telle,
That she took fully purpose for to dwelle. (V. 1023-1029)

These few lines make clear the rush of emotions in Criseyde's mind, originated by fear. If Criseyde's choice to surrender to Diomedes' love is made out of fear of remaining alone during a time of war in an enemy camp, it seems hard to criticise. Finding herself alone, Criseyde needs to find protection again, and Diomedes seems the most suitable person for her, because he is a powerful warrior and has just confessed her his love.

Hence, Weisl is right when she says that Criseyde's decision is made taking into consideration the circumstances around her with the aim to save herself, and not simply because she is overcome by Diomedes' pressure.⁹⁸ On this occasion, she has to choose between death and dishonour, and she saves her own life, knowing what the future consequences will be. Criseyde opposes the tradition of women who prefer to kill themselves rather than facing dishonour. Dido, for example, slays herself with Aeneas' sword after he abandons her. Criseyde may be criticised because she makes an egoistic choice, but should she really be blamed for it? The circumstances in which she finds herself do not seem to leave her any other choice.

In addition, as said before, Criseyde's position in the Greek camp is very similar to the position she is in at the beginning of the poem. If Criseyde's choice to surrender to Diomedes, is strongly despised, the same condemnation should be expressed of her plea to Hector, or of her decision to accept Troilus' love, because all of them are made out of fear. However, as highlighted by Minnis and Johnson, the fear Criseyde feels in Book V is not emphasised as much as the fear of the woman in Book II.⁹⁹ They justify it by claiming that in the last book the narrator gives up his attempt to lessen Criseyde's fault. However, if we bear in mind what said in the previous paragraph, that is the different aims of narrator and author, the lack of importance given to Criseyde's fear in Book V may be wanted by Chaucer to remove any potential justification for the woman's betrayal.

The idea that fear is not used by Chaucer to redeem his heroine is supported by the common belief that among the admirable characteristics of a medieval woman there is fearfulness. So, the author's aim may be to simply depict Criseyde as a woman who is endowed with all virtues expected from her.

2.3 Criseyde's self-determination

In opposition to the fearful Criseyde presented in the previous paragraph, it seems possible to read the heroine's actions in a very different way. The complexity that

⁹⁸ Weisl, Angela Jane, "A Mannes Game": Criseyde's Masculinity in *Troilus and Criseyde*", in Pugh, Tison, Smith Marzec, Marcia, eds., *Men and Masculinity in Chaucer's Troilus and Criseyde*, Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 2007, p.127.

⁹⁹ Minnis, Johnson, p.214.

Chaucer gives to Criseyde's character provides the opportunity to put an entirely different interpretation on her behaviour. In many moments, during the narration, Criseyde proves to be intelligent and headstrong. She demonstrates that her decisions are not taken on the basis of simple instinct, but after long and careful reasoning. She does not abandon herself to emotions; on the contrary, she is a very rational woman, who cautiously analyses her position, and the pros and cons of every situation.

When her father flees to the Greek camp leaving her unaware of his intentions, Criseyde is very upset, and the narrator informs the reader that she does not know what to do, because she has no friends that may help her. However, the construction of sentences used may be misleading. If we analyse it carefully, we may notice the peculiar use of the comparative "as":

For of hire lif she was ful sore in drede.

As she that nyste what was best to rede; (I. 95-96)

The need to compare Criseyde to a general woman is not clear, unless the narrator wants to convey the opposite idea from the one he actually writes about. The events that follow seem to support this hypothesis, because Criseyde knows perfectly well what she has to do, that is seeking protection from Hector, the most powerful man in the city. In addition, the narrator says that she wears mourning when she goes to Hector, as if he wanted to highlight this detail, when, since she is a widow, she must dress in this way. It seems that the narrator's intention is to suggest that Criseyde exploits her mourning clothes in order to arouse Hector's pity. If this is true, she proves to be very astute, playing the role of the helpless woman, victim of the circumstances, in front of a knight. Criseyde is able to take advantage of her widowhood. Marelj writes that her intention is to "deceive and manipulate" in order to call "attention to her vulnerability and social isolation in a patriarchal society".¹⁰⁰ Since her father has left her, her widowhood may be another reason to be worried, because she lacks any male figure to defend her. Hector's protection not only allows her to live in Troy without worries about a revenge for her father's defection, but also enables her to enjoy her widowhood freely, because the Trojan prince does not want any favour in return, nor does he want to control her. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, widowhood is a complicated status for women

¹⁰⁰ Marelj, Jelena, "The Philosophical Entente of Particulars: Criseyde as Nominalists in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*", *The Chaucer Review*, 47 (2012), p.217.

during the Middle Ages. It gives them a degree of independence they do not possess when the husband is alive. Usually, as noted by Collette, at their spouse's death they inherit his property, assuring themselves financial security and a measure of autonomy; however, it may occur that male relatives steal their inheritance.¹⁰¹

Under Hector's protection and free of restrictions, Criseyde is a self-possessed woman. She proves it during the festivities in the temple. If on the one hand she tries to keep a low profile in the middle of the crowd, on the other hand she is ready to reproach whoever shows her perplexities about her presence in a public event. For example, when she notices that Troilus is staring at her, and not knowing that he has just been struck by the god of love, she does not withdraw in fear; on the contrary she stares back at him, conscious that he is a prince and she is still the daughter of a traitor. She acts as a very proud woman, who, even if she is afraid on the inside, does not display it on the outside. Chaucer's Criseyde is focused on her safety and she is even willing to challenge a king's son in order to protect herself.

In Book II the reader finds her in the company of three nieces listening to a story. The narrator explains that she lives in a household, most likely her own property. Hence, it is clear she is economically stable, if not rich. Criseyde enjoys the advantages of widowhood. Moreover, it seems that she controls her own finances and that she is able to talk about business, as shown in her dialogue with Pandarus, to whom she asks for advice in the management of her affairs. Taking into consideration this information, Criseyde seems to be portrayed as a sort of matriarch. Behrman claims that the image of the heroine surrounded by her nieces in the garden recalls a group of Amazons in opposition to their male-centred society.¹⁰² The comparison seems weak, but a curious element is the genre of the book they are reading. During the Middle Ages, women were expected to read romances, so it comes as a surprise to find they are reading an epic about the siege of Thebes.

However, it is her way to face the news of Troilus' love that shows her intelligence and self-will. She carefully listens to Pandarus and maintains her

¹⁰¹ Collette, Carolyn P., "Criseyde's Honour: Interiority and Public Identity in Chaucer's Courtly Romance", in Maddox, Donald, and Sturm-Maddox, Sara, ed., *Literary Aspects of Courtly Romance*, Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1994, pp. 49-50.

¹⁰² Behrman, Mary, "Heroic Criseyde", *The Chaucer Review*, 38 (2004), p.319.

composure while asking her uncle for advice. Her outraged reaction comes in a second moment, causing the reader to doubt the truthfulness of her indignation. The narrator tells the reader about her thoughts, among which there is a sentence that makes clear how calculating the mind of the woman is, that is “it nedeth me ful sleighly for to pleie” (II. 462). From this moment on, Criseyde displays her strong will and independence of thoughts. Her main concerns are her estate and honour, which she wants to protect at all costs. If, at first, she is afraid of Pandarus’ suicidal threats, she makes it clear that she will not accept to be Troilus’ mistress only to save their lives:

But that I nyl nat holden hym in honed,
Ne love a man ne kan I naught ne may
Ayeins my wyl
[...]
And here I make a protestacioun
That in this process if ye depper go,
That certeynly for no salvacioun
Of yow, thought that ye sterven bothe two,
Though al the world on o day be my fo,
Ne shal I nevere of hym han other routhe. (II. 477-480, 484-489)

The reader may be surprised by the resoluteness of this speech, because it seems not to leave doubts about her intentions, while it is already known that she soon agrees to start a love affair with the Trojan prince. This double perception of Criseyde’s will may be explained by her attempt to preserve her innocence. Windeatt states that she is manipulated to fall in love with Troilus by Pandarus’ persuasions and the circumstances in which she is.¹⁰³ However, as said by Criseyde herself many times, both in Book II and III, she is conscious of the choice she makes, that is to start a secret relationship with Troilus, so we may say that she is not manipulated, but that she accepts to be manipulated instead. Supporting this way of thinking, Burnley blames the woman for “moral abnegation of responsibility”, citing Criseyde’s reproaches against her uncle about forcing her into this situation, and claiming how this informs her behaviour with

¹⁰³ Windeatt, p.282.

Troilus.¹⁰⁴ McTaggart defines her “protestations a carefully staged performance of modesty”.¹⁰⁵

When Pandarus leaves his niece alone, Criseyde starts to think over the proposal. Suddenly, she is stopped in her reasoning by the arrival of Troilus, who is coming back from the battlefield. Criseyde’s judgment is clouded as she is fascinated by the physical prowess of Troilus. The scene comes right after the woman’s comment on the impossibility to love a man without her consent, which reiterates her determination to act in her own best interest only. However, if initially she only agrees to acknowledge his presence whenever they meet, after seeing Troilus, things have changed in Criseyde’s mind and this may be considered the moment in which she starts to fall in love. Her ensuing monologue is inevitably influenced by the physical attraction she feels. As stated in the previous paragraph, Criseyde is not struck by love suddenly and powerlessly, in the same way as Troilus; she surrenders to love only after a long internal debate on the advantages and disadvantages of a potential love affair.

Criseyde’s debate is perhaps the most evident proof of the woman’s wit. She is very rational and objective in her considerations. Both Nair and Costomiris defines her reasoning a sort of negotiation.¹⁰⁶ Criseyde is divided between two opposite ideas: being in love and cherished by a great and powerful man who desperately longs for her love, or keeping her independence and safeguarding her public honour. She entertains the idea of a new love in her life and she praises her beauty: “I am oon the fairest, out of drede, and goodlieste” (II. 746-747), displaying great confidence in herself. Perhaps, Criseyde feels the need to prove that she is beautiful enough to deserve the love of a prince, even though she does not belong to a royal family, and she cares to specify that this is the people’s judgment, not her own. Moreover, she demonstrates to be smart enough to understand how precarious is (again) her position, because Troilus is her king’s son and, should she refuse his proposal, he may put her life in the city in jeopardy. Hence, she considers both her emotional and practical needs, trying to make

¹⁰⁴ Burnley, J.D., “Criseyde’s Heart and Weakness of Women: An Essay in Lexical Interpretation”, *Studia Neophilologica, a Journal of Germanic and Romance Languages and Literature*, 54 (1982), p.30..

¹⁰⁵ McTaggart, Anne, “Shamed Guiltless: Criseyde, Dido and Chaucerian Ethics”, *The Chaucer Review*, 46 (2012), p.386.

¹⁰⁶ Nair, Sashi, “‘O brotel wele of mannes joie unstable!’: Gender and Philosophy in *Troilus and Criseyde*”, *Parergon*, 23 (2006), p.37. Costomiris, Robert, “Criseyde’s Swoons and the Experience of Love in *Troilus and Criseyde*”, *Renascence*, 65 (2013), p.252.

the best out of her situation. For this reason, she begins to draw up her own rules to the potential love affair and shows herself extremely self-assured in her abilities,

He shal me nevere bynde in swich a clause
[...]
Shal noon housbonde seyn to me 'Chek mat!
For either they ben ful of jalousie,
Or maisterfull, or loven novelrie. (II. 728, 754-756)

Before the relationship has even started, Criseyde states that marriage is not taken into consideration, since, as said above, she pleasantly enjoys her widowhood status. She is determined not to endanger her economical independence. However, it is also true that she would not have been able to formally marry Troilus, because she is not noble, and except for this occasion, a potential marriage is never mentioned again in the narration.

In Book III Criseyde shows her authority. She accepts to start a love affair only if Troilus promises to keep her honour safe. From this moment on, she is the one in control between them. The speech she gives Troilus seems almost a threat, as she is very direct in her message:

"But natheles, this warne I yow", quod she,
"A kynges sone although ye be, ywys,
Ye shal namore han sovereignete
Of me in love, than right in that cas is.
N'y nyl forbere, if that ye don amys,
To wratthe yow; and whil that ye me serve,
Chericen yow right after ye disserve." (III. 169-175)

Ironically, she is the one wielding power over her lover; and it must not be forgotten that she is talking to a prince. Weisl suggests that, since Troilus has to play the part of the courtly love's passive knight, his masculine role is adopted by Criseyde.¹⁰⁷ Truly, many events may support this argument. For example, she starts the first physical contact between them and kisses him first (III. 182). When the trick to get Troilus into Criseyde's bedchamber is discovered, the Trojan prince faints, overwhelmed by emotions. He is afraid of Criseyde's wrath and shows to be totally subjected to the woman's authority. On the contrary, Criseyde keeps control of the situation and is

¹⁰⁷ Weisl, p.117.

surprised by her man's reaction, so that she hurries to assure him that she is not angry at him. A bizarre scene, since the reader expects the role to be the other way round.

During the consummation scene, when the reader might expect the man to be in control, Criseyde establishes again her position of power over Troilus, when she makes it clear that she has not been caught by him. It's by her own choice that she is in bed with him: "Ne hadde I er now, my swete herte deere, ben yolde, ywis, I were now nought here!" (III. 1210-1211). Criseyde chooses this crucial moment to express her self-determination, perhaps because she does not want to be seen as a passive agent in these circumstances. Kittredge and apRoberts, quoted in Marelj's article, agree that Criseyde's agency is conscious and free throughout the poem.¹⁰⁸ If in the previous paragraph Criseyde's every action is justified by her fear of the events, this new kind of interpretation of the woman's behaviour proves that she is not forced to make her choices by external forces that are stronger than her will. Undoubtedly, they have a great influence on her when she is doing her reasoning, but Criseyde is still in a position to refuse to surrender if she wants to. She is her "owene womman" (II. 750).

When Priam accepts to exchange Criseyde for Antenor, both lovers react desperately to the forthcoming separation. However, also in these circumstances Criseyde displays more self-determination than Troilus. The Trojan knight is not able to go against his family, his city and the social judgement; on the contrary, he expects his woman to find a solution. Criseyde hopes that Troilus would take action and take her away, for this reason she faints asking in despair for his help.¹⁰⁹ Nevertheless, he is not bold enough, and believing her dead, announces his own suicide. When Troilus is ready to take his life, Criseyde comes to her senses stopping her lover's plan. Taking into consideration what has been said above, that is the woman's will to push her man into action, the reader may speculate on the sincerity of Criseyde's swoon. The fact that she recovers just in time to avoid the tragedy may be a hint that she was faking.

Nonetheless, when Criseyde finds out that her request for help is not understood by Troilus, she understands she has to rescue herself, because she is in the same situation of danger she was at the beginning of the story. While the lovers are in bed, she launches into a speech about plans on how to deceive her father and come back to Troy after the exchange. Criseyde's arguments show how confident she is, so that she

¹⁰⁸ Marelj, p.214.

¹⁰⁹ Behrman, p.327.

manages to persuade Troilus himself. However, it is not clear whether she actually believes in what she is saying or whether she is only trying to reassure her lover. What seems to be certain is her disappointment caused by Troilus' lack of courage to act. The attention she puts in making her plans is extremely meticulous, so that it resembles Pandarus' manipulation.¹¹⁰ Behrman points out that Criseyde is fascinated by men of actions, who believe in heroic ideals and are willing to sacrifice themselves for them.¹¹¹ It is true that she pleads for protection with Hector, who is considered the most powerful and valiant knight in Troy. She falls in love with Troilus after seeing him coming back from the battlefield covered in blood and dust, because she is charmed by his manliness. Also, in Book V, she is captivated by Diomedes, one of the strongest warriors among the Greeks. The line pronounced by Criseyde at the end of the last night the lovers spend together may be read in support of this hypothesis. Criseyde says "And fareth now wel, for tyme is that ye rise" (IV. 1687). It seems as if the woman want to hastily dismiss her lover, a completely different reaction to the one she has in Book III after their first night together.¹¹²

If during the first weeks in the Greek camp Criseyde is still convinced to put into effect her plan to return to Troy, as time goes by her hopes begin to fade. Again, she focuses only on her self-interest and tries to improve her situation. As she does in Book II, Criseyde ponders about her position and chooses consciously to accept Diomedes' proposal. This time her reasoning is shorter than before:

Al be I nat the first that dide amys,
 What helpeth that to don my blame away?
 But syn I se ther is no better way,
 And that to late is now for me to rewe,
 To Diomedes algate I wol be trewe. (V. 1067-1071)

Even with Diomedes, she shows to be in control and able to manipulate the man at her own will: "I say nat therefore that I wol yow love, n'y say nat nay" (V. 1002-1003). So, as it occurred previously in her relationship with Troilus, Criseyde begins a new love

¹¹⁰ Bauer, Kate A., "Criseyde's Routh", *Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, 19 (1988), p.14.

¹¹¹ Behrman, p.316.

¹¹² Costomiris, Robert, "Criseyde's Swoons and the Experience of Love in *Troilus and Criseyde*", *Renaissance*, 65 (2013), p.259.

affair for her personal advantage. She needs a protector, and she is pragmatic about it. Also, in the letters she receives from Troy, she becomes aware that Troilus is a self-centred whiner, who does not take into consideration her difficulties, even though they are more serious than his. The reader must not forget that Criseyde is a widow and is older than Troilus. Hence, she has more experience of the world than the Trojan youth. She knows that happiness is temporary, and she is aware of the inevitability of change, caused by the up-and-down movements of Fortune's wheel.¹¹³ In addition, she shows to be astute till the her very last appearance in the poem. In her last letter to Troilus, she has already betrayed him, but she tries to turn the tables and tells him that it is his fault if she is not able to go back to Troy (V. 1610-1613). Not only has he made their relationship public and put her name on wicked tongues, but he also has spied upon her and spread rumours about her infidelity without any proof of her misbehaviour.¹¹⁴

Berhman disagrees with those critics who consider Criseyde a devious monster whose aim is to destroy men, only because many of the female protagonists in medieval writings were pictured as bad women.¹¹⁵ Even though intelligence seems a characteristic more suitable than fearfulness for Criseyde, her choices should not be interpreted by exaggerating her self-determination. Criseyde is not entirely a victim, nor is she entirely a villain.

¹¹³ Nair, pp.41, 49.

¹¹⁴ Graydon, Joseph S., "Defense of Criseyde", *PMLA*, 44 (1929), p.172.

¹¹⁵ Berhman, p.314.

Chapter 3

Criseyde after Chaucer

3.1 Lydgate's Criseyde

Among the authors who accept the challenges of Chaucer's legacy, there is John Lydgate. He was a monk, charged with the translation of Guido delle Colonne's *Historia Destructionis Troiae* by king Henry V.¹¹⁶ From the beginning of his poem, whose modern title is *Troy Book*, Lydgate clarifies his will to stay faithful to his main source Guido; however, in many passages Chaucer's influence is evident, and usually it is Lydgate himself who mentions him, calling him "master". Unlike Chaucer, who mainly focuses on Troilus and Criseyde's love story, using the Trojan war only as a background, Lydgate considers the love affair one of the various episodes of the Trojan myth. Following Guido's *Historia*, he introduces Troilus and Criseyde separately, and begins the account of the love story from the moment the two lovers are parting from each other, not taking into account Boccaccio's and Chaucer's original first part of the narration.

In his *Troy Book*, Lydgate makes a negative exemplum out of Criseyde, linking himself to the tradition started by Benoît de Sainte-Maure and Guido. Criseyde finds herself in the medieval stereotype of antifeminism again.¹¹⁷ However, Lydgate's condemnation of Criseyde is subtle. For example, Criseyde's first portrait in Book II is not entirely based on the *Historia*, as Lydgate tries to soften Guido's harsh comments with Chaucer's more favourable attitude towards Criseyde.¹¹⁸ In Book III he pretends to be upset with Guido because of his bitter antifeminism that he has to translate in order to stay faithful to his source. During the attack against women, Lydgate repeats that he is only translating Guido's opinions, but he is actually enlarging the amount of terrible

¹¹⁶ Blake, Norman F., "John Lydgate and William Caxton", *Leeds Studies in English*, 16 (1985), p.275.

¹¹⁷ Benson, C. David, "Critic and Poet: What Lydgate and Henryson Did to Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*", *Modern Language Quarterly*, 53 (1992), p.32.

¹¹⁸ Torti, Anna, "From 'History' to 'Tragedy': The Story of Troilus and Criseyde in Lydgate's *Troy Book* and Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid*", in Boitani, Piero, ed., *The European Tragedy of Troilus*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989, p.176.

comments against Criseyde and the women in general, intensifying Guido's harshness. In addition, he claims to defend Criseyde, but his arguments are deceitful, because, instead of helping her position, he causes her even more damage.¹¹⁹ It is an attack in disguise. He excuses Criseyde's betrayal claiming that it is in women's nature to be inconstant:

Nature in werkyng hath ful grete power,
And it were harde for any that is here
The cours of hir to holden or restreyne,
For she wil nat be guyed be no reyne,
To be coarted of hir due right.
[...]
For yif wommen be double naturally,
Why shulde men leyn on hem the blame?¹²⁰

For Lydgate women are characterised by duplicity and variability. In his veiled attack against the feminine genre, he uses a great quantity of synonyms to define the changeable nature of women. In *Troy Book* they are pictured as cunning monsters, who deceive and plot against men. For the author women's trickeries are "unrivaled".¹²¹ Shutters suggests that for Lydgate, women's duplicity should be considered a crime, because Criseyde is a scheming and false woman, who not only betrays her lover, but also her city and people.¹²² He even compares them to snakes, a comparison that may lead the reader to think about the biblical meaning of this animal and therefore associate the woman to Satan.

In the poem, Criseyde is not the only woman despised by the author, as the treatment is received by Medea and Helen too. However, Lydgate contradicts himself when he says that these women are untypical and only a few behave in this despicable manner, while the conduct of the majority of women is flawless. In his narration, he tries to give another model of behaviour. He wants to celebrate the purity and virginity

¹¹⁹ Torti, p.182.

¹²⁰ Lydgate, John, *Troy Book: Selections*, ed. by Robert R., Edwards, Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1998, p.192, III. 4401-4405, 4408-4410. Hereafter my references are to line numbers in Robert R., Edwards.

¹²¹ Simon-Jones, Lindsey, "Mischievous in Masculinity: Gender in John Lydgate's *Troy Book*", *Medieval Feminist Forum*, 48 (2013), p.47.

¹²² Shutters, Lynn, "Truth, Translation and the *Troy Book* Women", *Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, 32 (2001), p.80.

of women such as Polyxena, who prefers to die instead of sacrificing her honour and betraying her city, in opposition to Criseyde, who, in order to save herself, forsakes the man she claims to love and accepts the favour of the enemy.¹²³ After Criseyde chooses to love Diomedes, Lydgate shows no more interest in her and with a simple “Her-of no more” (IV. 2178) dismisses her.

For Lydgate, Criseyde is the epitome of feminine instability and dishonesty. He does not take into consideration the possibility of her redemption. She is guilty and cannot be otherwise. Moreover, from this way of looking at things, it should be noticed that Criseyde is never given the chance to talk or express her feelings and thoughts to the reader in order to justify her choices.

3.2 Henryson’s Cresseid

Henryson is another author who writes inspired by Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*. If Lydgate is more interested in the historical events surrounding the love affair, Henryson focuses on a void left by Chaucer in his narration, that is Criseyde’s fate. This gives Henryson the possibility to write his original piece on the love story, since he is the first to write about the destiny of Cresseid, which is the spelling he uses for Chaucer’s Criseyde. In order to understand *The Testament of Cresseid*, the reader has to be familiar with the war of Troy and the events concerning the relationship and the betrayal between Troilus and Cresseid. McKim describes Henryson’s poem as a continuation of Chaucer’s or an alternative conclusion to it.¹²⁴ However, it is more accurate to define it a parenthesis in Chaucer’s last book of *Troilus and Criseyde*, after the woman’s betrayal and before Troilus’s death.¹²⁵ *The Testament of Cresseid* may be considered a feminine poem, because at the centre of it there is not a man, but a woman. The main character is Cresseid, who speaks throughout the poem and gives her point of

¹²³ Watson, Nicholas, “Outdoing Chaucer: Lydgate’s *Troy Book* and Henryson’s *Testament of Cresseid* as Competitive Imitations of *Troilus and Criseyde*”, in Karen Pratt, ed., *Shifts and Transpositions in Medieval Narrative*, Bury St Edmunds: St Edmundsbury Press, 1994, p.98.

¹²⁴ McKim, Anne M., “Orpheus and Eurydice and The Testament of Cresseid: Robert Henryson’s ‘Fine Poetical Way’”, in Bawcutt, Priscilla, Williams, Janet, Hadley, eds., *A Companion to Medieval Scottish Poetry*, Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 2006, p.112.

¹²⁵ Torti, p.186.

view of the events to the reader. Certainly, Henryson's focus on the heroine, instead of the male warriors, makes his poem more original than its predecessors.

Opposite interpretations on some aspects of the poem divide critics. For example there are disagreements on the author's attitude towards Cresseid. Some critics believe that Henryson's aim in writing the poem is to inflict on the woman a punishment that Chaucer has tried to spare her from. Stearns claims that by making Cresseid a leper, Henryson has forever damned her as a loose woman, since, as we will see later on in this analysis, during the Middle Ages leprosy may have been considered a venereal disease.¹²⁶ Pearsall believes that Henryson is not satisfied by Chaucer's absent conclusion on Cresseid's fate and thinks that a punishment for her immoral conduct is needed.¹²⁷ For this reason he maintains that the poet invents the blasphemy story in order to be able to punish Cresseid, since a betrayal is not a punishable offence. Aronstein and Riddy, cited by Wang in her article, accuse the author of misogyny because of the way he treats his heroine, disfiguring her by leprosy and depicting her as a woman in need of a lesson.¹²⁸ Admittedly, Henryson is the first to insinuate that, according to some sources he does not specify, Cresseid becomes a whore at the royal court, after being repudiated by Diomedes.¹²⁹ It's Henryson who writes about her punishment by the gods and her leprosy for the first time in literature. He willingly chooses to create for her a disturbing death. When Chaucer decides to avoid recounting the way she dies, he gives the reader the possibility to speculate on it freely. The probabilities that readers imagine her death to be caused by leprosy are very low, since she may have been more easily killed during an attack as she lives in a period of wartime.

However, some critics suggest that Henryson writes about Cresseid because he wants to give her a voice that was denied her by Chaucer and his other predecessors. Craun points out that, at the beginning of the poem, Henryson describes Cresseid as a

¹²⁶ Stearns, Marshall W., "Robert Henryson and the Leper Cresseid", *Modern Languages Notes*, 59 (1944), p.265.

¹²⁷ Pearsall, Derek, "'Quha Wait Gif All That Chaucer Wrait Was Trew?': Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid*" in Powell, Susan, Smith, Jeremy J., eds., *New Perspectives on Middle English Texts. A Festschrift for R.A. Waldron*, Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 2000, p.173.

¹²⁸ Wang, Laura, "Cresseid's Testament: Rewriting Herself", *English Studies*, 93 (2012), p.143.

¹²⁹ Henryson, Robert, *The Testament of Cresseid*, ed. by Stephen A., Barney, New York, London: Norton, 2006, p.435, l.77. Hereafter my references are to pages and line numbers in Stephen A. Barney edition.

victim of the inconstant lust of men and of unfavourable situations.¹³⁰ Torti highlights how the author shows pity towards the woman and tries to justify her bad reputation with the changeable behaviour of Fortune.¹³¹ Henryson may have the positive intention to grant Cresseid the possibility to recognise her faults and find redemption. Cresseid enjoys more freedom than her predecessors, but it is true that she is the main, if not only, protagonist of *The Testament of Cresseid*. The poem is utterly focused on her, and other characters, such as Calchas or Troilus, play minor roles in the narration. Volk-Birke claims that for the author Cresseid is not only an example of crime and punishment, but an instance of a woman who emancipates herself on a spiritual level.¹³² Henryson enables her to achieve her growth through suffering and isolation.

As in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, also in Henryson's poem we must make a distinction between the author and the narrator. It seems that the narrator and Cresseid share some similarities. As he says at the beginning of the poem, the narrator is an old man who seeks shelter from the cold weather. The thing he has in common with the heroine is the involvement in the religion of love. Dunai claims that the links between Cresseid and the narrator are two, that is their "exclusion from the game of love and association with unlawful sexuality".¹³³ In the poem, both narrator and Cresseid are angry at Venus, the goddess of love, but their anger has different reasons. The woman claims to have been deceived by her, while the man is upset because he is not able to satisfy his desire as he is too old. In addition, they share the coldness and dryness which cause them to be unable of being involved in a new relationship, Cresseid because of leprosy and the narrator because of his age, again.

If Chaucer's narrator is openly on Criseyde's side and tries to defend her, the position of Henryson's narrator is ambiguous. It is not clear if he is critical or sympathetic towards his heroine and this doubt has left critics siding on opposite views. According to the humanistic point of view, the narrator takes pity on Cresseid, especially when she is stricken by leprosy after the gods' judgment. For example, when

¹³⁰ Craun, Edwin D., "Blaspheming her 'Awing God': Cresseid's 'Lamentatioun' in Henryson's *Testament*", *Studies in Philology*, 82 (1985) p.27.

¹³¹ Torti, p.188.

¹³² Volk-Birke, Sabine, "Sickness Unto Death. Crime and Punishment in Henryson's *The Testament of Cresseid*", *Anglia: Zeitschrift für englische Philologie*, 113 (1995), p.182.

¹³³ Dunai, Amber, "'Ane Doolie Sessoun' and 'Ane Cairfull Dyte': Cresseid and the Narrator in Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid*", *The Chaucer Review*, 50 (2015), p.429.

Saturn announces his verdict, the narrator calls him cruel and aggressive, for his harsh condemnation. Craun highlights how the narrator shows the woman as victim of some bad circumstances, when he introduces her at the beginning of the poem and hastens her destiny,

I have pitie thow suld fall sic mischance!
Yit nevertheles, quhat ever men deme or say
In scornfull langage of thy brukkilnes,
I sall excuse als far furth as I may
Thy womanheid, thy wisdom and fairnes,
The quhilk fortoun hes put to sic distres
As hir pleisit, and nathing throw the gilt
Of the – throw wickit langage to be spilt! (84-91)

The narrator tries to find a justification for the woman's behaviour. He blames Fortune for Cresseid's misconduct, because she has repeatedly put Cresseid in difficult positions. Speaking of Fortune, it should also be noticed how she is associated to Venus in the description given of the goddess during the planetary vision. The narrator describes Venus using words that belong to the meaning field of inconstancy, such as: "variance, inconstance, changit, alterait, variant and unstabill" (ll. 223-224, 227, 230, 235). This association may be seen as the narrator's way to support Cresseid in her rage against the goddess. Venus resembles Fortune. When mentioning Cresseid's faults, the narrator openly refers to Cresseid's blasphemy against the gods, but the reader may easily include her infidelity. Also Sepherd thinks that the narrator is sympathetic towards Cresseid, as he believes that she would have been faithful to her lovers, if Fortune had not decided otherwise.¹³⁴ However, justifying her blasphemy may be more complicated, because Cresseid is committing it willingly. Fortune may have put her in a difficult position again, but Cresseid's anger is all her own.

The opposite point of view considers the narrator's attitude towards his heroine very critical. Pearsall believes that the narrator's sympathy is not sincere and that the good words the narrator has for her are only disguised insults which hint at the leprosy she is going to contract.¹³⁵ In addition, there are some parts in the poem in which the narrator casts doubt on Cresseid's redemption. After the end of her vision, he writes that

¹³⁴ Sepherd, p.231.

¹³⁵ Pearsall, p.174, 176.

“Gif scho in hart was wa aneuch, God wait!” (l.350), suggesting that she is not openly showing any sign of repentance. Cresseid has understood the reason why the gods have punished her, but it may be possible that she does not feel guilty about her blasphemy. On the contrary, she considers herself a victim of the ill-tempered gods. The punishment has not worked in its entirety, because Cresseid does not show any regrets. She begins to feel contrition only after seeing Troilus for the last time. Spearing believes that the woman’s position at the end of the poem is not repentance, but powerlessness.¹³⁶ Truly, Cresseid’s first complaint, in which she laments the loss of her beauty and of the material things she enjoyed when she was not sick, confirms this thesis. She is sorry for herself, but she does not repent. The narrator’s intention may be to show how superficial Cresseid is. The only thing she is able to do is to blame Fortune. Cited by Dunai, Cox describes the narrator as “slanderer” of Cresseid, because he wants and hates her at the same time, while Calin believes that the narrator’s inability to have sexual encounters with women causes him to detest Cresseid because for him she represents the female genre.¹³⁷ The narrator is pictured as a misogynist. Furthermore, when he explains he will focus on Cresseid, he makes some insinuations about her promiscuity, but he is not certain about their trustfulness, because his only source consists in “sum men sayis” (l.77). It seems impossible to read this accusation only as a form of narrator’s naivety. He is an old man who has experienced the world, so he would know that this information will arouse doubts in the reader’s mind. Moreover, in the stanza that follows, the narrator refers openly enough to Cresseid’s lasciviousness, giving the reader the feeling that for him she is already guilty (perhaps of Troilus’ betrayal, perhaps of her lasciviousness in the Greek camp), before she commits blasphemy, the main reason why she is punished in the poem.

In support of the misogynistic interpretation of the narrator may also be read his choice of leprosy as Cresseid’s punishment. It is interesting to notice that of all the different ways in which she could have died, the narrator chooses one of the cruellest and most symbolic. Leprosy is an awful disease for many reasons. During the Middle Ages it was an incurable disease. As the narrator mentions throughout the poem, leprosy

¹³⁶ Wetherbee, Winthrop, “Cresseid vs. Troilus in Henryson’s *Testament*”, in Burton, T.L., Plummer, John F., eds., *Seyd in Forme and Reverence: Essays on Chaucer and Chaucerians in memory of Emerson Brown, Jr.*, Provo: The Chaucer Studio Press, 2005, p.134.

¹³⁷ Dunai, p.423.

disfigures Cresseid. It makes her unrecognisable and disgusting. She loses her extraordinary beauty and her angelic voice. For Cresseid, who based her life on her physical appearance, leprosy seems a fitting punishment, along the same lines as Dante's *Divine Comedy*; she was beautiful and now she is undesirable. In all previous texts, beauty is one of her main characteristics, and most importantly it is the quality that allows her to find protectors. Then, during the Middle Ages, for the Christian religion, leprosy was considered a divine punishment, which could be caused by sexual sins or heresy.¹³⁸ However, since it was an incurable disease, leprosy was also seen as God's sign of special grace, because the person who was sick had to turn to God, who was considered the ultimate healer.¹³⁹ Leprosy was thought to open a direct path towards redemption, because the sinners had enough time to reflect on their sins and make atonement for them.¹⁴⁰ Gray, perhaps forcing it, associates Cresseid's pain to Jesus, defining leprosy as Cresseid's passion.¹⁴¹ Also, it seems ironic that Cresseid's leprosy has been chosen by Cynthia, who is the epitome of female dependence on male's will, since, in order to exist she needs to borrow the sun's light. Wetherbee believes that Henryson's choice is a form of revenge taken by the feminine genre against a woman who has damaged the reputation of all women.¹⁴²

Furthermore, Henryson's description of Cresseid's symptoms may be associated to syphilis, a venereal disease.¹⁴³ During the Middle Ages syphilis had not been discovered yet. This confusion has led critics to believe that Cresseid is made a leper because of her betrayal of Troilus and her alleged promiscuity among the Greek soldiers after being repudiated by Diomedes.¹⁴⁴ According to this point of view, blasphemy is only an excuse to punish her for her real faults, that is infidelity and lust, which cannot be prosecuted by law. However, not all critics agree on this way of reading. Petrina

¹³⁸ D'Arcy, Anne Marie, "'Into the kirk wald not hir self present': Leprosy, Blasphemy and Heresy in Henryson's *The Testament of Cresseid*", in D'Arcy, Anne Marie, Fletcher, Alan J., eds., *Studies in Late Medieval and Early Renaissance Texts in Honour of John Scattergood*, Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2005, p.103.

¹³⁹ Beardsley, Kelly Charlene, "Cresseid and The Providential Understanding", *Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, 16 (1985), pp.6-7. Volk-Birke, p.170.

¹⁴⁰ Volk-Birke, p.170.

¹⁴¹ Gray, Douglas, "Medieval Scottish Poetry", in Saunders, Corinne, ed., *A Companion to Medieval Poetry*, Singapore: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010, p.604.

¹⁴² Wetherbee, p.138.

¹⁴³ McTurk, Rory, "Redemption Through Iambic Reversal? The Case of Henryson's Cresseid", *Leeds Studies in English*, 41 (2010), p.141.

¹⁴⁴ Craun, p.25.

refutes this interpretation, as she believes that it is only an attempt to read in the poem something that is not present.¹⁴⁵ On the contrary, Henryson makes it clear that Cresseid is being punished because of her offence against the gods, and Cresseid does not show repentance for her lascivious life, so she probably has not made the association between leprosy and her lust.

As said before, Henryson is the first poet to give Cresseid a voice and a place to be more than a passive object in men's hands. However, this does not mean that Henryson respects her more than his predecessors. Cresseid is still the bad woman enslaved to her passion. Even though the poet is entirely focused on her, he does not seem interested in the reasons why the woman behaves as a wanton. Her lust is never in doubt, but the readers know that her misconduct may be justified by the danger of the war or her feminine weakness, for example. Henryson and his predecessors take for granted that Cresseid is willing to go from man to man as if she takes pleasure from it. Nonetheless, in the *Testament* Cresseid is given a chance. Throughout the poem the reader can see a gradual spiritual growth of the protagonist, who seems to become increasingly independent. In Henryson's poem she is not a passive character, ruled by men's power and wants. She is the active protagonist of the narration and shows the events from her own point of view. She becomes more interesting than her predecessors, because she walks from self-pity to responsibility, when she says "Nane but my self as now I will accuse." (l.574).¹⁴⁶ When she writes her testament, Cresseid is trying to have the last words on herself. She is conscious that many poets had denigrated her in the past and many more will do it in the future, so the poem may be seen as her attempt to make her voice heard. The testament is her biography, because it will survive among the other books that had slandered her.¹⁴⁷

It must be said that in normal conditions, she would not have had the chance to write her own testament, because she is not noble, but paradoxically, it is leprosy that grants her a new voice. Being a leper, Cresseid is dead for society, so she is free of any law constraint. She has lost her property and her rights, but she has gained a new voice.

¹⁴⁵ Petrina, Alessandra, "Le doti di Cressida", in *Il personaggio nelle arti della narrazione*, ed. Franco Marengo, Roma: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2007, p.30.

¹⁴⁶ Benson, p.40.

¹⁴⁷ Wang, p.148.

Her testament is both proof of personal agency and attempt at self-redemption.¹⁴⁸ She tries to define her future, by disposing of the few things she has left, including her body and soul. For Wang it is surprising that Cresseid is showing action and control only in the exact moment when she is more helpless.¹⁴⁹ Cresseid is a new person. She has found a new self, estranged by the woman who was in total control of the men around her. She has recognised her faults and attempts to make amend. For Petrina, she assumes a new identity and a new authority that she had not before, sacrificing the most important thing she has, that is her beauty.¹⁵⁰ At the end of the poem, Cresseid makes an example of herself for the female genre and puts herself in a position of power towards women in general. She addresses them and advices them not to make her same mistakes. She is not the lustful woman of the literary tradition anymore.

3.3 Shakespeare's Cressida

Approximately two centuries after Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid*, also William Shakespeare shows interest in the story of love and betrayal between Troilus and Cressida.¹⁵¹ He does not write a poem, but a play, whose title is *Troilus and Cressida*. Since the play contains elements from all the four categories used by critics to divide Shakespeare's writings, scholars disagree on which genre it belongs to, if it should be considered a tragedy, a comedy, a history, or a romance.¹⁵² For information purposes, it must be said that during the XV and the XVI centuries, the story of Troilus and Cressida has not been forgotten. On the contrary, over these centuries, many authors wrote about the love story or mentioned its protagonists in their poems.¹⁵³ After Henryson's narration of the sinner and leper Cresseid, punished by the offended gods, her character has come to an unforgiving downfall.

¹⁴⁸ Wang, p.144.

¹⁴⁹ Wang, p.145.

¹⁵⁰ Petrina, p.35.

¹⁵¹ Cressida is the name variation adopted by Shakespeare in his play. From now on and throughout the paragraph, this name will be used to call Shakespeare's heroine.

¹⁵² Shakespeare, William, *Troilus and Cressida*, ed. by David, Bevington, London: Thomas Learning, 2006, p.4.

¹⁵³ For a detailed account of the poems including Troilus and Cressida see Rollins, Hyder E., "The Troilus-Cressida Story from Chaucer to Shakespeare", *PMLA*, 32 (1917), pp.383-429.

Among the sources used by Shakespeare, there are both Chaucer and Henryson, but he seems to treat his Cressida more harshly than his illustrious predecessors. Shakespeare introduces some original changes in the development of the story and in the portrait of his characters. Cressida is not a widow, but a virgin maiden and she does not live in a household with a garden and servants. She is not a wealthy woman, but a plain young girl. If Chaucer's Criseyde is surrounded by people, as she lives with her nieces and is involved in society, Shakespeare's Cressida is truly alone, as she seems to have no friends. With Criseyde she shares the kinship with Pandarus, who is her uncle. However, he is not interested in her wellness and she is conscious about it, so that she does not confide in him and mocks him every chance she has. For example, during the dialogue in which Pandarus tries to stir up an emotional and physical interest for Troilus in her, when she refers to her action of keeping guards on things and people she says to him

CRESSIDA Upon my back to defend my belly, upon my wit to defend my wiles, upon my secrecy to defend mine honesty, my mask to defend my beauty, and you to defend all these; and at all these wards I lie, at a thousand watches.

PANDARUS Say one of your watches.

CRESSIDA Nay, I'll watch you for that; and that's one of the chiefest of them too.¹⁵⁴

Not only does Cressida tell her uncle that he is among the many things she has to stay alert for, but she underlines that he is one of her main worries.

Admittedly, Pandarus does not even try to oppose his niece's insinuations and openly shows to care chiefly about Troilus' wishes. When Cressida needs her uncle's help the most, he does not give her any comfort. It's Pandarus who tells Cressida about Priam's decision to exchange her for a Trojan prisoner, and he utters bitter words at her to do it. He yells at her as if she were the victimizer and not the victim in this situation, as if she were willingly choosing to leave Troy. Pandarus thinks only about Troilus' pain, not taking into consideration the consequences of the exchange for his powerless niece. Davis-Brown maintains that Shakespeare's aim in exacerbating Pandarus'

¹⁵⁴ Shakespeare, William, *Troilus and Cressida*, ed. by David, Bevington, London: Thomas Learning, 2006, p.153, I.2.251-258. Hereafter my references are to pages and line numbers in David Bevington edition.

character is to aggravate Cressida's isolation in Troy.¹⁵⁵ It is a subtle change from Chaucer, but it causes Cressida to feel estranged from the people around her and to make her count only on herself. Unlike Criseyde, she is truly on her own.

She experiences total isolation in the Greek camp, too. As transpires in Calchas' request to the Greeks, he does not seem sincerely enthusiastic to reunite with her, but merely willing to have a compensation from the Greek chiefs in return for his services. Even though Chaucer's Calchas is not the most devoted father, he still cares about his daughter's honour, so that she feels the need to hide her visits to Diomedes' tent when he is hurt. Henryson removes any trace of Calchas' faults towards his daughter, picturing him as a caring father, who takes care of her even when she gets leprosy. Shakespeare's Calchas does not have any good word for his daughter, he does not even ask to have Cressida taken to his tent once she is in the Greek camp. She is received by the Greek chiefs, who take advantage of her vulnerability. In addition, Calchas, like Diomedes, expects her to start a relationship with a Greek general.¹⁵⁶ However, he is not concerned with her destiny, rather, he seems keen to grant her to Diomedes. When the Greek warrior asks "Where's your daughter? (V.2.3-4), he answers without hesitations "She comes to you" (V.2.5).

A topic that has sparked the interest of critics is Cressida's worth. The question originates from a sentence pronounced by Diomedes, who, urged by Troilus to treat Cressida with respect, says "To her own worth she shall be prized" (IV.4.132-133). In a male-dominated society, women's value is established by men, that is by the valuer's eyes. So Cressida's worth changes based on whether we are talking about Troilus' consideration of her value, or Diomedes'. Already from the beginning of the poem, Troilus clarifies in which respect women are held in his society, as his comparisons say "I am weaker than a woman's tear" (I.1.9) and "[I am] less valiant than the virgin in the night" (I.1.11). His statements set the tone of the play. He scorns Cressida's chastity, which, on the contrary, he should be proud of, as it makes her a woman of good morals, and he objectifies her. On the other hand, Diomedes has an even lower estimation of Cressida. It seems that the only thing that matters to him is having a sexual encounter with her. However, at the same time, he does not seem concerned with having to woo

¹⁵⁵ Davis-Brown, Kris, "Shakespeare's Use of Chaucer in *Troilus and Cressida*: 'That the Will Is Infinite, and the Execution Confined'", *South Central Review*, 5 (1988), p.18.

¹⁵⁶ Bevington, p.55.

her, as he simply puts her under pressure and threatens her to leave. It has already been mentioned in this analysis how little respect Pandarus shows for his niece. It may be added that, when speaking about her to Troilus, he compares her to food (I.1.13-24). He tries to build up Troilus' (sexual) appetite, for him she is a cake to be baked. Cressida is deeply conscious of these circumstances and expresses her awareness clearly in her soliloquy, when she says that "men prize the thing ungained more than it is" (I.2.294). It may be used as a justification for all her cool scheming. Cressida "is a blank cheque on which men write their own estimates of value".¹⁵⁷

Cressida's character is a source of disagreement among scholars. Shirley has divided critics' positions towards the heroine claiming that

ambivalence remains about whether she is a victim of masculine power and politics, a helpless responder to her own shifting urges, or an opportunistic young female seeking her main chance first with romantic Troilus, then with pragmatic Diomedes¹⁵⁸

Through these three interpretations, scholars have tried to explain Cressida's main fault, that is her sudden change of heart, which has caused her to forsake Troilus and accept Diomedes' proposal. The third option seems to be the less probable. Cressida is not opportunistic, because she is not trying to achieve a higher status in society. She is smart enough to understand that jeopardising her honour may not be worth the result. Her aim is to save herself in a male-dominated society. Her opportunistic goals may be caused by a different reason, that is her condition of subordination. She is an intelligent woman and she is conscious of her powerlessness. Her only assets are intellect and wit, therefore she has to make a plan to protect herself. For Snider, all her machinations make her a false woman.¹⁵⁹ She makes cool calculation and is even able to hide her true feelings in order not to show her vulnerability. For example, the reader knows that she is desperately in love with Troilus, because she has confessed her love in her soliloquy, a moment of the narration during which the character knows she has total privacy,

¹⁵⁷ Mann, Jill, "Shakespeare and Chaucer: 'What is Criseyde Worth?'" in Boitani, Piero, ed., *The European Tragedy of Troilus*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989, p.235.

¹⁵⁸ Shakespeare, William, *Troilus and Cressida*, ed. by Frances A. Shirley, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, p.1.

¹⁵⁹ Snider, D.J., "Shakespeare's Troilus and Cressida", *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, 10 (1876), p.401.

But more in Troilus thousandfold I see than in the glass of Pandar's praise may be. Yet hold I off. Women are angels, wooing; things won are done: [...] men prize the thing ungained more than it is. [...] 'achievement is command; ungained, beseech'. Then, though my heart's contents firm love doth bear, nothing of that shall from mine eyes appear. (I.2.275-278, 280, 284-286)

The love declaration is followed by the scheming. Moreover, when Cressida and Pandarus are watching the Trojan knights coming from the battefield, she is able to appear indifferent to Pandarus's appreciations of Troilus (I.2.219-239). On this occasion she is protecting herself from both her uncle's perversion and Troilus' eventual abuse. According to Lombardo, her scheming attitude generates in her a realistic view of live, especially in such precarious times of war, she knows that "survival requires a rational and more clear-sighted acceptance of reality".¹⁶⁰ However, Donaldson does not agree on Cressida's mental acuity, because he claims that her love for Troilus is a sign of her frivolousness.¹⁶¹ On the same wavelength is Davis-Brown, who adds that, unlike Chaucer's Criseyde, Cressida has fallen in love with Troilus and has capitulated without being certain of his trustworthiness, showing her lack of control over the situation.¹⁶² However, one may wonder how possible it may be for her to control the growth of her love feelings towards Troilus.

Another example in which Cressida uses her wit in an attempt to safeguard herself, is the scene of her arrival in the Greek camp, when all Greek chiefs demand a kiss from her. She finds herself alone and vulnerable, surrounded by a group of man who consider her a war trophy. Her only weapon is her language. Initially she accepts kisses from the majority of them almost helplessly, but when it is Ulysses' turn to receive his, with her wit she manages to avoid being kissed again. It causes her the infamous humiliating description Ulysses gives of her, but she succeeds in stopping them from abusing her.

¹⁶⁰ Lombardo, Agostino, "Fragments and Scraps: Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*", in Boitani, Piero, *The European Tragedy of Troilus*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989, pp.214-215.

¹⁶¹ Donaldson, E. Talbot, "Cressid False, Criseyde Untrue: An Ambiguity Revisited", in Mack, Maynard, deForest Lord, George, eds., *Poetic Traditions of the English Renaissance*, New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1982, p.73.

¹⁶² Davis-Brown, p.20.

The other aspect ascribed to Cressida by scholars is her high sexuality. Jago calls her a “high-class courtesan”.¹⁶³ He believes that Cressida’s sexuality is overt because the woman is aware of men’s inclination to consider her a sexual object, so every action she takes has a sexual meaning.¹⁶⁴ Ulysses’ portrait of Cressida is perhaps the most exploited passage critics quote in order to support the theory of the woman’s wantonness. Ulysses’ words are very powerful

There’s language in her eye, her cheek, her lip, nay, her foot speaks; her wanton spirits look out at every joint and motive of her body. O, these encounterers, so glib of tongue, that give accosting welcome ere it comes, and wide unclasp the tables of their thoughts To every tickling reader! Set them down for sluttish spoils of opportunity and daughters of the game. (IV.5.56-64)

For Ulysses Cressida is a prostitute. However, it should be taken into consideration that he has just been mocked by a maiden (IV.5.49-53), so the harshness of his reaction may have been produced on the spur of the moment, caused by his hurt pride. Guinle has noticed a hilarious wordplay. After Ulysses’ cruel remarks against Cressida, all characters on stage cry “The Trojan’s trumpet” (IV.5.65), a phonological sound which may convey two different meanings to the English audience, that is “the trumpet of the Trojans”, but also “the Trojan strumpet” (the Trojan prostitute).¹⁶⁵ Accusations of being a whore are justified by the flirtatious attitude adopted by Cressida on some occasions, mainly her dialogue with Troilus in the third act, and her exchange with Diomedes in the fifth act of the play. Donaldson does not seem to agree on the exaggerated flirtatiousness some critics impute to Cressida. He maintains that, since she is going to betray Troilus, the majority of the readers are prone to read in her words traces of bawdiness and sexual allusions.¹⁶⁶ He believes that in some instances, the suspicion of sexual innuendos is unjustly fuelled.¹⁶⁷ For example, during the kissing scene in the Greek camp, some readers may interpret Cressida’s first lack of reaction as a tacit consensus. Joseph Papp, cited in Davis-Brown’s article, suggests that “her banter and

¹⁶³ Jago, David M., “The Uniqueness of Troilus and Cressida”, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 29 (1978), p.23.

¹⁶⁴ Jago, p.23.

¹⁶⁵ Guinle, Francis, “‘This is, and is not, Cressid’: La Verité en Question dans Troilus et Cressida”, *XVII-XVIII. Revue de la Société d’études anglo-américaines des XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles*, 68 (2011), p.39.

¹⁶⁶ Donaldson, p.75.

¹⁶⁷ Donaldson, p.75.

flirtatiousness appear to be defensive in nature rather than overt manifestations of raging desires".¹⁶⁸ Wit is her only weapon to defend herself from men's power.

Nevertheless, the main episode advocating Cressida's lasciviousness is her betrayal of Troilus. As already mentioned for Chaucer's Criseyde, the central justification for her wrongdoing is the inevitability of her decision. She is alone in an enemy camp and she needs male protection. She is faced with "an unappealing choice between being promiscuously used or accepting the protection of a predatory male".¹⁶⁹ In favour of Cressida, Bevington argues that her yielding to Diomedes is not originated by the woman's desire, but by her fear, her weakness and her subordination to male authority.¹⁷⁰ It is true that Cressida shows herself not totally persuaded by her decision, when she says "Troilus, farewell! One eye yet looks on thee, But with my heart the other eye doth see" (V.2.114-115).

Finally, apart from Ulysses' insults, Cressida is offended by Thersites too, as said before. On a couple of occasions, he calls her "the Trojan drab" in the fifth act and says of her that "any man may sing her, if he can take her clef" (V.2.12-13), making a strong sexual innuendo. It seems to me that Cressida is seen as a whore from the characters' points of view, rather than from the audience's eyes. The audience knows beforehand that Cressida is going to betray Troilus, but it is not biased against the heroine. On the contrary, it seems as if the characters expect her to misbehave. Perhaps this is Shakespeare's attempt to highlight the irony of it, because all characters who blame Cressida and calls her a whore, specifically Ulysses and Thersites, are as immoral as her. Unlike the previous poems, *Troilus and Cressida* has no omniscient narrator, because it is a play, hence, only the characters are able to speak. This means that the audience does not fall under the influence of someone who may want to lead it to interpret events in a certain way. Between the audience and the characters on stage there is no mediator. The audience is choosing on its own which attitude to adopt towards the heroine.

Critics have wondered about Shakespeare's attitude toward Cressida. In the play the heroine is led to a gradual but relentless downfall. If in the beginning she is an innocent woman, in the end she is guilty of betrayal, like her other counterparts.

¹⁶⁸ Davis-Brown, p.20.

¹⁶⁹ Bevington, p.55.

¹⁷⁰ Bevington, p.55-56.

Shakespeare makes her take the blame for forsaking Troilus (V.2.115-118), but, like Chaucer, he does not punish her, nor does he make her destiny clear within the story. However, while watching the conversation between Cressida and Diomedes in which she accepts his proposal, Thersites openly calls her a whore (V.2.119-120). Bowers suggests that Shakespeare's intention in writing the scene of betrayal from the point of view of Thersites is to make the audience hate Cressida.¹⁷¹ In addition, if we extend the field of our analysis to other plays written by Shakespeare, we discover that Cressida has not been totally forgotten and he has not saved her from damnation. She is mentioned again in the history play *Henry V* as a basis of nasty comparison "the lazar kite of Cressid's kind".¹⁷²

In order to understand better Shakespeare's attitude, we should consider that his *Troilus and Cressida* is a play, written to be performed on a stage and with the aim to please and captivate the audience. Shakespeare knows it and this is why Cressida, like all his other heroines, is not an ordinary woman, she has to appear unique in her good or bad qualities. In addition, Shakespeare's time was characterised by frequent corruption and infidelity, which concerned many aspects of society, such as politics and morality.¹⁷³ He may have been influenced by the social decay of feminine virtue discussed by Crocker in her study.¹⁷⁴ Also, political treachery and corruption of morality are typical features of wartime in which Cressida herself lives. Hence, the reader should analyse and take into consideration the context in which she behaves. Cressida is not the only treacherous character of the play. No character in the play may be held as a good example, because all of them are morally corrupted. Shakespeare's interest is to show how corruption got the better of both Greek and Trojan society. Paris has violated the code of honour by abducting a woman from her husband. Helen has betrayed her husband; a reason why Cressida is often compared to her, but Helen's behaviour is definitely worse than Cressida's, because she is a married woman. The Trojan Aeneas

¹⁷¹ Bowers, John M., "How Criseyde Falls in Love", in Smith, Nathaniel B., Snow, Joseph T., eds., *The Expansion and Transformations of Courtly Literature*, Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2008, p.149.

¹⁷² Shakespeare, William, *King Henry V*, ed. by Jonathan Bate and Eric Rasmussen, London: Macmillan Publishers Ltd, 2007, p.1044, II. 1.57.

¹⁷³ Herdeman Jr, H.H., "The *Troilus and Cressida* of Chaucer and of Shakespeare: A Comparative Study", *The Sewanee Review*, 7 (1899), p.176-177.

¹⁷⁴ Crocker, Holly A., "As False as Cressid: Virtue Trouble from Chaucer to Shakespeare", *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 43 (2013) p.303.

and Antenor betray their own Troy and its citizens, selling them to the Greek chiefs; and the same consideration is valid for Calchas, who flees to the enemy camp as soon as the oracle has revealed Troy's imminent destruction. Also Achilles may be considered a traitor of the code of honour, as he calls his Myrmidons for help when he is not able to kill Hector on his own. Furthermore, almost every character in the play has shown to be prone to corruption and obscenities, in conduct and/or language. Among them we may acknowledge Pandarus and Thersites, who are the most evident examples. Finally, Diomedes is described as the epitome of the dissolute man, strongly pressing Cressida to assent to sexual encounters. Cressida is one of them, she is as corrupt as them.

Shakespeare does not seem particularly interested in Cressida, or even in the love story. Even though the title may give the idea that Troilus and Cressida are the main protagonists of the play, the importance given to the love affair is limited, because large spaces are given to the historical events of the war of Troy. This may be explained by Shakespeare's interest to represent on stage the theme of social decay, of which Troilus and Cressida are an example in the field of love relationship.

Summary

Il primo autore a raccontare della storia d'amore tra Troilus and Criseyde fu il francese Benoît de Sainte Maure nel dodicesimo secolo. Tuttavia, nella sua opera, intitolata *Roman de Troie*, la protagonista si chiama Briseida, nome che non rimarrà tale nelle opere degli scrittori successivi, i quali si sentiranno in diritto di modificarlo, ogni volta, a loro piacimento. Nel *Roman de Troie* Briseida è una giovane donna troiana, figlia del traditore Calchas, fuggito da Troia per allearsi con i nemici greci. Briseida è innamorata ed in una relazione con Troilus, il più giovane dei figli di Priamo. In seguito ad uno scambio di guerra, la donna è costretta ad abbandonare la città di Troia e a ricongiungersi col padre nel campo greco, dove ben presto cede alla corte del guerriero greco Diomedes, tradendo e dimenticando Troilus. Alla fine della guerra, Troilus viene ucciso e Diomedes ritorna in patria dalla moglie, mentre nulla viene chiarito sul destino di Briseida.

La Briseida di Benoît ricorda facilmente le due giovani ancelle presenti nell'*Iliade* di Omero, Chryseis e Briseis, trofei di guerre dati in dono rispettivamente ad Agamennone e Achille. Non essendo conoscitore del greco e quindi impossibilitato ad una lettura del testo omerico, è probabile che Benoît abbia fatto uso di una traduzione latina dell'opera diffusasi in periodo medievale. In effetti, è facile trovare dei punti in comune tra queste donne, come l'essere oggetto di scambio in periodo di guerra, l'essere figlie di sacerdoti, ma soprattutto l'elemento sessuale che le contraddistingue. Briseis e Chryseis sono delle schiave sessuali, mentre Briseida e le altre Criseyde che la seguiranno, saranno sottoposte all'accusa di essere donne lascive, tanto che Shakespeare nel diciassettesimo secolo definirà la sua Cressida una prostituta.

Tra le principali fonti utilizzate da Benoît, si annoverano il latino Ovidio, il troiano Dares e il greco Dictys. Ovidio fa di Briseis la mittente di una delle epistole delle *Eroidi*, mettendone a nudo la disperazione e la paura dell'abbandono da parte dell'amato. Dares e Dictys erano, invece, due autori che, nel Medioevo, si credeva fossero stati testimoni diretti della guerra di Troia e di cui Benoît conosceva le traduzioni latine delle loro opere. Al primo è attribuita l'opera *De Excidio Troiae Historia*, in cui egli fornisce una descrizione fisica di una certa Briseida, la cui appartenenza familiare o la storia non sono specificati. Al secondo viene attribuita la

paternità dell' *Ephemeris Belli Trojani*, in cui nessuna donna col nome di Briseis o Briseida viene nominata, ma è presente un sacerdote di nome Brises, la cui figlia Hippodamia è la concubina di Achille, similmente a quanto riportato nell' *Iliade* omerica, se si tiene in considerazione il patronimico della donna, che è Briseida.

Nel *Roman de Troie* l'intento di Benoît è di raccontare diversi tipi d'amore tramite diverse relazioni tra eroi ed eroine dell'epica. La storia di Troilus e Briseida ha lo scopo di criticare il triangolo amoroso. Allontanandosi dalla tradizione dell'amore cortese, Benoît fa di Briseida un personaggio a tutto tondo, lontano dall'idealistica immagine che si aveva della donna-signora, angelica e irraggiungibile, a cui il cavaliere innamorato si sottometteva. Briseida è una donna realistica, con dei sentimenti, delle paure e delle contraddizioni. È una donna bellissima e amorevole, ma ha un grande difetto, la sua incostanza, che diviene la sua caratteristica per eccellenza, e che la renderà celebre, suo malgrado, nella letteratura.

Nella prima descrizione fatta da Benoît, Briseida viene introdotta come una bellissima donna, il cui viso, però, ha un difetto, ovvero le sopracciglia giunte. Nell'antica Grecia, le sopracciglia unite erano sinonimo di una personalità inquieta. Questa peculiarità dona, quindi, a Briseida un'ambiguità sospetta, che mette in allarme il lettore, portato a vedere in questo difetto fisico l'origine della colpa della donna. Inoltre, Benoît non è l'unico a farne uso, poiché anche Chaucer, nonostante la sua fonte boccacciana non ne faccia menzione, attribuisce questa caratteristica alla sua Criseyde in un momento decisivo della narrazione, cioè quando lo stesso narratore riconosce il torto perpetrato dalla donna.

In molti passaggi del poema Benoît crea per Briseida delle circostanze ambigue, che tendono a metterla in cattiva luce agli occhi del lettore. Per esempio, di lei dice che fu una donna molto amata e che lei stessa amò molto nella sua vita, intendendo che ebbe numerose relazioni sentimentali, sintomo di un cuore facilmente mutabile. Inoltre, nel momento in cui la donna viene a conoscenza del suo imminente scambio, la sua prima preoccupazione è la mancanza di amicizie che la possano proteggere in territorio nemico, mentre l'abbandono dell'amato Troilus passa in secondo piano. A questo si aggiunge la falsità delle sue affermazioni, poiché Briseida, una volta trasferita nel campo greco, non rimarrà da sola, ma si congiungerà con il padre. Tuttavia, è importante tenere in considerazione il momento storico in cui Briseida viene scambiata.

Quello di guerra è un tempo complicato per la vita di tutti, specialmente per le donne che si trovano in una posizione ancora più vulnerabile rispetto al solito. Esse possono cadere facilmente vittime di rapimenti, stupri e abusi da parte degli uomini. Un'interpretazione simile può essere data anche alla dettagliata descrizione fatta dall'autore del ricco mantello di Briseida. Se da un lato l'intenzione di Benoît potrebbe essere stata quella di implicare la civetteria della donna, dall'altro lato il lettore non deve dimenticare che i gioielli e il denaro potrebbero essere il mezzo adoperato da Briseida per salvaguardare la propria virtù.

Benoît è stato definito da molti critici un misogino, in quanto nel suo poema si scaglia contro Briseida e il genere femminile. Secondo l'autore, infatti, le donne sono bugiarde e infedeli, così come dimostrato dalla protagonista. La loro bellezza è sinonimo di meschinità e lascivia, perché una donna bella non può essere allo stesso tempo virtuosa. Briseida è colpevole di mentire al suo amato, giurandogli fedeltà eterna e poi tradendolo a pochi giorni dalla loro separazione. Inoltre, se la donna si mostra disperata agli occhi di Troilus, una volta giunta nel campo greco, inizia a godere del rispetto che i soldati greci le garantiscono. Anche in questo caso Benoît ne approfitta per inveire contro la donna e la sua volubilità, e sfrutta l'occasione per creare altre situazioni ambigue a danno di Briseida.

Nel campo greco, Briseida viene ardentemente corteggiata da Diomedes, che sembra essere realmente innamorato di lei. In seguito alla sua dichiarazione d'amore Briseida si mostra combattuta se dover o meno accettare la proposta del soldato greco. Inizialmente il suo rifiuto sembra categorico, tuttavia le sue motivazioni sembrano avere varie interpretazioni. La donna respinge l'innamorato perché a suo dire questo non è il momento adatto per lei di iniziare una nuova relazione, senza fornire ulteriori spiegazioni. È stato ipotizzato che Briseida possa fare riferimento alla guerra, un periodo delicato per una donna, preoccupata di non voler dare un'impressione negativa di sé. Tuttavia, un'altra ipotesi vede nella vaga risposta di Briseida solo un tentativo di confondere le acque, rendendo il suo rifiuto solo temporaneo. Si tratta di un'ipotesi solida, in quanto Briseida si affretta a sottolineare che in caso contrario Diomedes sarebbe di certo la sua prima scelta. Inoltre, come il lettore ben sa, la donna abbandonerà Troilus proprio per Diomedes. Da questo momento della narrazione gli attacchi misogini di Benoît contro Briseida diventano sempre più violenti. Le donne

vengono dipinte come delle mangiatrici di uomini che provano piacere nel vedere soffrire i loro innamorati per poi gettarli via.

L'autore dichiara che tra l'arrivo di Brisida nel campo nemico e la sua resa alla corte di Diomedes passa un breve periodo di tempo, tuttavia alcuni studiosi hanno dimostrato che almeno due anni trascorrono prima che la donna accetti di diventare l'amante dell'eroe greco. Questo, però, non fa altro che avvalorare l'ipotesi di una Briseida manipolatrice, in grado di ingraziarsi uno dei più potenti soldati greci e sfruttarlo per il proprio tornaconto. Nel concludere la storia di Briseida, Benoît permette alla donna di pronunciare un monologo. Apparentemente, si potrebbe ritenere che l'autore voglia dare alla donna la possibilità di giustificarsi e fare valere le sue ragioni. Tuttavia, l'intento di Benoît è esattamente l'opposto, in quanto Briseida riconosce di avere agito ingiustamente nei confronti di Troilus, profetizzando per se stessa un futuro di ingiurie. Paradossalmente è lei stessa ad affermare che l'opinione malevole dell'autore nei suoi confronti è giusta, perché lei è colpevole. Si modella all'esempio negativo che fin dall'inizio Benoît vuole fare di lei.

Sulla scia della misoginia troviamo anche Guido delle Colonne, che nel tredicesimo secolo scrive la *Historia Destructionis Troiae*, da molti ritenuta una mera traduzione latina dell'opera di Benoît. Tuttavia, è possibile riscontrare alcune differenze nell'organizzazione dell'opera e soprattutto nell'intento. Quella di Guido è un'opera il cui obiettivo è narrare gli eventi storici della guerra di Troia, motivo per il quale egli si mostra meno interessato a raccontare nel dettaglio le vicende amorose di Troilus e Briseida. Guido inasprisce la misoginia nei confronti di Briseida, definendo la sua mutevole personalità una caratteristica presente in tutte le donne. Donna è sinonimo di incostanza. Per Guido, Briseida è una donna lussuriosa, che cede alla sua libidine verso Diomedes il giorno stesso in cui viene trasferita nel campo greco. Guido non le concede nessuna possibilità di spiegarsi, poiché essendo colpevole deve essere umiliata pubblicamente, anche se la mancanza di dialoghi può essere giustificata anche dalla volontà dell'autore di ridurre l'interesse nella liason all'essenziale.

Dopo Guido delle Colonne a mostrare attrattiva nella storia d'amore e tradimento tra Troilus e Criseyde è un altro scrittore italiano, Giovanni Boccaccio, che ne parla nel suo *Il Filostrato*. Boccaccio fa numerosi cambiamenti rispetto alle sue fonti. Innanzitutto modifica il nome della protagonista, che da Briseida diventa Criseda, poi si

concentra unicamente sulla storia d'amore tra i due protagonisti, relegando gli eventi legati alla guerra a semplice contesto storico. Infine altra importante novità riguarda lo status di Criseida, la quale da ragazza nubile diventa una vedova. Inoltre, Boccaccio inserisce numerosi nuovi episodi, raccontando la relazione tra i due amanti fin dall'inizio. Per esempio, egli racconta le circostanze del loro primo incontro e della loro prima notte trascorsa insieme, o l'inserimento di un nuovo personaggio, Pandaro il cugino di Criseida, che funge da intermediario tra i due amanti.

A differenza delle sue omologhe, la Criseida di Boccaccio è un personaggio molto più attivo. L'autore le conferisce un più ampio spazio narrativo, in cui la donna ha la possibilità di esprimere i propri sentimenti e i propri pensieri. Boccaccio esalta la sensualità di Criseida, rendendola più attraente rispetto alle sue predecessore. Essendo una vedova, infatti, Criseida conosce già il desiderio sessuale, di cui sembra non fare mistero. Inoltre, la donna dimostra di avere più esperienza rispetto a Troiolo, che viene trasformato nel personaggio passivo all'interno della relazione. Alcuni studiosi ritengono che Boccaccio sia fortemente critico nei confronti della sua eroina, che per lui rappresenta la sua amata, fuggita da lui all'improvviso. In effetti, alcuni momenti della narrazione sembrano appoggiare questa ipotesi. Ad esempio, Pandaro, dopo aver compreso che l'amore segreto di Troiolo è Criseida, assicura l'amico della riuscita nella conquista della donna, implicando, forse, la lascivia della cugina. Tuttavia, poco dopo, è lo stesso Pandaro ad assicurare il lettore che Criseida è la donna più casta della città.

Come i suoi predecessori, Boccaccio crea delle situazioni ambigue a danno della sua protagonista. Per esempio, la reazione di Criseida alla notizia che Troiolo è innamorato di lei e alle insistenze sui vantaggi di una nuova relazione da parte di Pandaro in favore dell'amico, sembra mostrare la falsità della donna, che dopo un iniziale categorico rifiuto, sembra facilmente acconsentire a degli incontri. Boccaccio sembra voler sottolineare per tutta la narrazione il desiderio sessuale della donna, che con il tempo diventa sempre più forte, e che raggiunge il suo culmine durante la prima notte d'amore tra i due amanti. La sensualità è una caratteristica fondamentale per la Criseida di Boccaccio. Non bisogna dimenticare che è stata la stessa Criseida a chiedere a Troiolo di mantenere segreta la loro relazione, in quanto la donna vuole preservare la sua libertà, assicurata dalla sua vedovanza.

L'atto sessuale diventa per Criseida una sorta di matrimonio con Troiolo, in quanto dopo il loro primo rapporto, lei si considera sposata con il suo amante. Un matrimonio vero e proprio non sarebbe possibile perché Troiolo è un principe, mentre Criseida non appartiene alla nobiltà troiana. Tuttavia, se questo in parte giustifica l'ardore della donna, dall'altra parte apre ad una nuova ambiguità. Se attraverso il linguaggio Criseida ha celebrato il matrimonio con Troiolo, allo stesso modo ne sancisce la fine, quando, poco prima di essere condotta nel campo greco afferma che d'ora in avanti si comporterà come una vedova. Paradossalmente, Criseida, proclamandosi vedova di Troiolo, si garantisce la possibilità di iniziare una ennesima nuova relazione lontano dal suo amato. Nell'ultima notte d'amore che i due amanti trascorrono insieme, Criseida si dimostra ancora una volta il personaggio più forte e attivo della coppia. È convinta di poter facilmente rientrare a Troia e riesce a placare ogni tentativo di Troiolo di trovare un'altra soluzione.

È importante notare come ogni attacco misogino presente in Benoît e Guido scompare nell'opera di Boccaccio. Tuttavia, alcuni critici ritengono che l'opinione dell'autore nei confronti della sua eroina sia altrettanto negativa, perché, anche se Boccaccio non accusa apertamente Criseida di volubilità, pone la donna in alcune circostanze in cui è lei stessa, gradualmente, a dimostrare la sua incostanza. A supporto di questa tesi è l'assenza di un monologo della protagonista. Dopo il tradimento Criseida semplicemente scompare dalla narrazione, senza che l'autore spieghi quale sia stato il suo destino o se si senta colpevole del dolore causato a Troiolo.

Un altro autore che ha contribuito alla saga della storia d'amore tra Troilus e Criseyde è Chaucer, la cui opera, *Troilus and Criseyde*, è forse considerata la più importante in quella che può essere definita la tradizione criseydiana. Nei suoi cinque libri, Chaucer elimina qualsiasi invettiva antifemminista dei suoi predecessori e analizza in maniera più profonda il personaggio femminile di Criseyde, anche se, a tutt'oggi, i critici non riescono a raggiungere un accordo sul ruolo che il poeta voleva dare alla sua eroina, se voleva farne una donna vittima delle circostanze e dei giochi politici dei potenti, oppure una consapevole traditrice del proprio innamorato.

Figura importante nell'opera chauceriana è il narratore, che deve essere distinto dallo stesso Chaucer, autore del poema. Il narratore ama Criseyde, e cerca in tutti i modi di difenderla e di giustificare il suo cattivo comportamento. Per questa ragione, egli ne

decanta le qualità nei primi tre libri, in cui Criseyde è rappresentata come una figura angelica, la cui unica colpa è quella di essere figlia di un traditore. Quello del narratore è un amore paterno, di cui Criseyde sembra sentire l'assenza. Tuttavia, in svariati casi Chaucer compromette l'azione del suo narratore, che pensando di agire per il bene della sua beniamina, ne danneggia ancora di più la condizione. Per esempio, il narratore sottolinea la solitudine in cui versa la donna, cercando di smuovere un senso di pietà nel lettore. Eppure, è ben presto smentito da se stesso, quando racconta che Criseyde vive in un palazzo in compagnia di alcune nipoti e servita dai domestici, senza contare la presenza di Pandarus, che da Chaucer viene trasformato nello zio della donna. Altri esempi sono costituiti dalle intromissioni improvvise nella narrazione da parte del narratore, che si rivolge al lettore quando ritiene che alcune circostanze potrebbero sembrare ambigue. In realtà, è proprio l'atteggiamento del narratore a fare insospettare il lettore, scatenando un vero e proprio effetto contrario. Questo avviene quando, dopo che Criseyde rimane affascinata dalla vista di Troilus insanguinato e di ritorno dal campo di battaglia, il narratore si affretta a chiarire che l'amore della donna non è nato in maniera improvvisa, sottolineando che la sua eroina non ama velocemente o casualmente. Tuttavia, l'improvvisa giustificazione del narratore ha l'effetto negativo di fare insospettare anche quei lettori che a questa possibilità non avevano pensato.

Un'altra strategia adottata dal narratore che si rivela nociva per la sua protagonista è la decisione di evitare di raccontare situazioni che potrebbero essere male interpretate, come la mancata reazione di Criseyde all'asserita assenza di Troilus alla cena presso la casa del fratello; oppure, quando il narratore giustifica la sua impossibilità a fornire l'esatto arco di tempo trascorso tra l'arrivo di Criseyde nel campo greco e il suo tradimento, addossandone la colpa all'ignoranza delle sue fonti. Inoltre, nel momento in cui si rende conto della colpevolezza della donna, il narratore preferisce fare svanire la sua eroina nel nulla, senza inveire contro di lei come avevano fatto gli autori precedenti.

Come già anticipato, la critica chauceriana è divisa in due, da un lato quelli che interpretano Criseyde come una donna paurosa, il cui comportamento scaturisce prevalentemente dal timore delle persone e delle circostanze in cui si trova; e da quelli che invece la vedono come una donna fortemente determinata, che agisce, nel bene e nel male, nel pieno della sua volontà. Secondo il primo gruppo di critici, la paura è una

caratteristica essenziale di Criseyde, che può essere utilizzata per giustificare il tradimento perpetrato dalla donna a danno di Troilus. Si tratterebbe di un'ipotesi sostenuta dal pensiero di Tommaso D'Aquino, secondo cui una colpa commessa sotto costrizione o per paura deve essere considerata meno grave. La situazione di Criseyde sembra corrispondere, in quanto la donna si ritrova costretta ad abbandonare la sua città, il suo amante, i suoi amici e la sua vita, per essere condotta in un luogo dove non conosce nessuno ed è totalmente vulnerabile. Ma Criseyde non è mossa dalla paura solo in questa occasione, poiché anche all'inizio dell'opera, è il timore della propria vita a portarla a chiedere pietà e protezione a Ettore. La condizione di paura in cui si trova Criseyde la accompagna dall'inizio alla fine della storia.

Quando Criseyde scopre che Troilus è innamorato di lei, tante e varie paure la assalgono. Paura della reazione che Troilus, principe di Troia, potrebbe avere nell'eventualità di un rifiuto, che potrebbe danneggiare ulteriormente la sua già precaria situazione in città. Paura della possibilità di perdere la propria reputazione se, dopo aver accettato di iniziare una relazione segreta con Troilus, questa dovesse essere scoperta. Paura della minaccia di ritorsioni da parte dei suoi concittadini se un suo rifiuto dovesse causare la morte di Troilus, come minacciato da Pandarus. Inoltre, alcuni critici hanno giustificato con la paura il tremore di Criseyde durante la prima notte trascorsa insieme a Troilus. Tuttavia, in questo caso, sembrerebbe più plausibile spiegare la reazione della donna come semplice trepidazione dovuta all'anticipazione dell'atto sessuale.

Dopo essere stata scambiata e portata nel campo nemico, Criseyde prova nuove forme di paura. Paura dell'isolamento e dell'assenza di una figura maschile che possa proteggerla. Paura di essere presa per spia, o rapita, o stuprata, nel tentativo di fuggire e fare rientro a Troia. Paura di un'imminente distruzione della sua città, come profetizzato dal padre e ricordato da Diomede. Anche in questa circostanza Criseyde è mossa all'azione dalla paura, che la porta a decidere di abbandonare ogni tentativo di fuga e di cedere alla corte di Diomede, l'uomo adatto a proteggerla. Ogni azione di Criseyde sembra quindi essere dovuta alla paura.

Nell'opposta direzione va invece l'idea secondo cui Criseyde è perfettamente cosciente delle decisioni che prende. Dagli studiosi che supportano questa interpretazione, Criseyde viene definita come una donna intelligente, in grado di

ragionare sui vantaggi e gli svantaggi della situazione in cui si trova. Secondo questa ottica la richiesta di protezione a Ettore viene intesa in maniera diametralmente opposta a quella data in precedenza. Criseyde dimostra di sapere perfettamente cosa fare per risolvere la precarietà della sua posizione, cioè chiedere aiuto all'uomo più potente della città. Inoltre, l'utilizzo di abiti umili e scuri che mostrino chiaramente il suo status di vedova è segno dell'astuzia della donna, che cerca di muovere la pietà del principe troiano.

Criseyde viene descritta come una donna dotata di autocontrollo, in grado di salvaguardare se stessa e non piegarsi al giudizio della gente, come in occasione della festività al tempio, in cui tiene testa allo sguardo di Troilus, inconsapevole che egli sia stato appena colpito dal dio dell'amore. Per di più, Criseyde sembra avere piena gestione delle sue finanze, come dimostrato dal dialogo con Pandarus; la sua è una vita di totale indipendenza. Ma la dimostrazione più palese della sua intelligenza e razionalità, la donna la fornisce quando Pandarus le rivela i sentimenti di Troilus. Inizialmente la sua reazione è molto pacata, come se stesse valutando la situazione, per poi reagire indignata solo in un secondo momento. Criseyde è disposta a qualunque costo pur di difendere la sua proprietà e il suo onore. Il dibattito interno di Criseyde mostra l'arguzia della donna, che non lascia nulla al caso. Nel momento in cui inizia a considerare di iniziare una relazione con Troilus, Criseyde pone subito delle regole atte a preservare la sua indipendenza.

Fin dall'inizio della relazione, Criseyde sembra essere la persona in controllo. È lei che accetta la corte di Troilus, è lei che lo bacia la prima volta, è lei che reagisce quando lui sviene sopraffatto dall'emozione, ed è sempre lei che lo infila nel suo letto. Inoltre, dopo la decisione dei troiani di accettare lo scambio con i greci, Criseyde si rende conto che Troilus non farà nulla per salvarla. La determinazione della donna arriva a tal punto da pianificare dei modi per scappare dal campo nemico. Tuttavia, alcuni studiosi sostengono che Criseyde sia consapevole dell'impossibilità di attuazione dei suoi piani e che in realtà lei sia addirittura propensa a lasciare Troia, dato che Troilus, impotente, ha perso su di lei qualunque fascino. Una volta giunta nel campo greco, Criseyde si comporta con Diomedes così come aveva fatto con Troilus, manipolandolo e controllandolo.

Secondo questo punto di vista ogni decisione presa da Criseyde è calcolata nei minimi dettagli per la propria salvaguardia. È vero che Chaucer presenta al lettore una eroina più intelligente di quelle che l'hanno preceduta, tuttavia, dover minimizzare il carattere di questa donna alla sola intelligenza o alla sola paura sembra non fare giustizia alla complessità della sua figura.

Nel panorama post-chauceriano, il primo autore che accetta di confrontarsi con il suo illustre predecessore è Lydgate, che scrive il *Troy Book*. Come aveva fatto in precedenza Guido delle Colonne, Lydgate dà un'impronta storica alla sua opera, concentrandosi soprattutto sugli avvenimenti della guerra. Ispirato dalla misoginia di Guido, Lydgate descrive Criseyde come un esempio negativo da non seguire. Tuttavia, la sua critica è molto sottile, in quanto egli finge di voler criticare i commenti anti-femministi di Guido, mentre, in realtà, amplia e inasprisce i giudizi misogini presenti nella *Historia*. Per Lydgate Criseyde è l'epitome della instabilità e della disonestà femminili, che secondo lui sono innate in ogni donna. L'autore non fornisce un originale contributo nella caratterizzazione dell'eroina al centro di questa analisi.

Anche lo scrittore scozzese Henryson accoglie la sfida lanciata da Chaucer. Henryson si concentra su un vuoto narrativo lasciato da Chaucer, cioè il destino di Criseyde e modifica, nuovamente, il suo nome inasprendolo e facendolo diventare Cresseid. L'opera di Henryson si intitola *The Testament of Cresseid* e può essere definita una parentesi del Libro V di Chaucer, in quanto racconta gli eventi verificatisi tra il tradimento di Cresseid e la morte di Troilus. I critici sono divisi riguardo la posizione assunta dall'autore nei confronti della sua protagonista. Alcuni sostengono che Henryson voglia infliggere a Cresseid quella punizione da cui Chaucer l'aveva salvata. Questa sarebbe la ragione per cui Henryson si inventa l'idea della bestemmia contro gli dei, in modo da avere una legittima motivazione per punirla davanti agli occhi della legge divina. Inoltre la punizione scelta è molto severa, Cresseid viene colpita dalla lebbra. Opposta è l'idea di chi ritiene che l'obiettivo di Henryson sia quello di garantire alla donna la possibilità di fare sentire la sua voce e di trovare redenzione.

La stessa opposizione è riscontrabile nell'atteggiamento assunto dal narratore nel poema. Alcuni credono che egli sia mosso da pietà nel vedere Cresseid ridotta alla condizione di lebbrosa e che incolpi la mutevole Fortuna per la tragedia che ha colpito la donna. Tuttavia, è corretto notare che se è vero che Fortuna ha messo Cressid nella

circostanza di tradire il proprio amato, la bestemmia contro gli dei scaturisce unicamente dalla rabbia della donna. I critici che, invece, reputano negativo il giudizio che il narratore ha di Cresseid, motivano le loro idee con le ombre che il narratore stesso getta sulla sincerità della conversione della donna. In effetti, Cresseid inizia a pentirsi dei suoi misfatti solo dopo aver incontrato per l'ultima volta Troilus. Alla fine del poema Cresseid non è pentita, ma rassegnata. Inoltre, è importante notare che la donna viene giudicata colpevole ancora prima di pronunciare la bestemmia. La decisione stessa di punire Cresseid con la lebbra è sintomo di odio, poiché nel Medioevo era una malattia incurabile, che distruggeva i lineamenti del viso e che veniva considerata una punizione divina per i peccati di lussuria ed eresia.

The Testament è un'opera davvero originale, perché permette a Cresseid di diventare la protagonista assoluta della scena. Questa donna non è più sottoposta al potere degli uomini e si dimostra capace di migliorare spiritualmente. Il testamento è il suo tentativo di avere l'ultima parola su se stessa, a discapito di tutti quegli autori che l'hanno denigrata nel corso dei secoli. Paradossalmente, la lebbra le assicura la possibilità di scrivere un lascito, che in condizioni normali non avrebbe avuto. Cresseid ha perso la sua proprietà e i suoi diritti legali, ma ha conquistato una nuova voce. La malattia ha dato vita ad una nuova donna, una nuova identità e una nuova autorità che prima non aveva.

Circa due secoli dopo Henryson, anche Shakespeare decide di dedicarsi alla storia d'amore tra Troilus and Criseyde, che lui chiama Cressida, scrivendo un'opera teatrale, intitolata *Troilus and Cressida*. Ai tempi di Shakespeare Cressida ha ormai raggiunto la sua completa rovina. A differenza della Criseyde di Chaucer, l'eroina shakespeariana è veramente sola, senza amici su cui contare e senza proprietà. A Troia non può contare sullo zio Pandarus che è più interessato ad esaudire i desideri sessuali dell'amico, e quando viene condotta nel campo greco, nemmeno il padre prova il minimo interesse per lei, anzi sembra fortemente predisposto a spingerla tra le braccia di Diomedes.

Come per i suoi predecessori, l'atteggiamento di Shakespeare nei confronti di Cressida è ambiguo. Secondo alcuni studiosi, egli è il più crudele degli autori, tanto da definire apertamente la sua eroina una prostituta. Secondo altri, tuttavia, la sua brutalità può essere giustificata dalla situazione politico-sociale in cui versava la società ai tempi

dell'autore, un periodo in cui l'assenza di virtù e la corruzione dilagavano. La stessa situazione è riscontrabile nel contesto storico in cui vive Cressida. Tutti i personaggi sono corrotti o corruttibili, per cui le scelte della protagonista sono dettate da uno spirito di adattamento. In fin dei conti, Cressida è solo un oggetto nelle mani degli uomini, il suo non è un valore reale, perché cambia a seconda del giudizio degli uomini presi in considerazione.

La personalità di Cressida è stata molto dibattuta dai critici. È una donna intelligente, in grado di comprendere e assecondare i voleri degli uomini nel tentativo di salvaguardare se stessa. Così, riesce a nascondere a Pandarus che in verità è disperatamente innamorata di Troilus, e riesce ad bloccare gli abusi che i guerrieri greci esercitano su di lei quando arriva presso il campo greco. La sua arguzia viene criticata e bollata come freddo complotto. Inoltre, a Cressida viene attribuita una forte sensualità, descritta dal famoso passaggio di Ulysses, che la definisce una prostituta. Per supportare questa ipotesi, molti studiosi fanno riferimento agli atteggiamenti provocanti che Cressida assume in alcune occasioni, sia con Troilus che con Diomedes. Tuttavia, in molte circostanze, la lettura di questi ipotetici doppi sensi risulta essere forzata o del tutto inventata.

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