Love in wartime: *Troilus and Criseyde* as Trojan history

Medieval readers beginning *Troilus and Criseyde* must have been surprised to find the Fury Tisiphone begged to assist in the writing of a pathetic love story. The appeal to Tisiphone, the ‘cruwel Furie, sorwynge evere in peyne’ (Chaucer 1987: *Troilus and Criseyde*, I, 9)\(^1\) possibly recalls Boethius’ *Consolation of Philosophy*, where the Furies ‘wepyn teeris for pite’ at Orpheus’ music (Chaucer 1987, *Boece*: iii, m.12); it also recalls Oedipus’ horrific invocation of her malice against Thebes in Statius’ *Thebaid* (Statius 1992: I, 103-09). Such an unlikely invocation at the outset indicates the unstable subjectivity of the narrator (Wetherbee 1998: 249). It also draws attention to the uneasy mixtures – love and war, romance and history, pathos and horror – which made up the later medieval tradition of Troy. Troy was a notorious battleground of authorities and interpreters in both classical and medieval times, with the effect that, as Barry Windeatt writes, ‘*Troilus* is constantly being set in relation to other writing … with acknowledgement that it is one interpretation of a story which exists in a number of sources’ (Windeatt 1992: 41).

So much European history was traced back to Troy in the middle ages that it was considered the narrative from which all the other

\(^1\) All further references to the text of *Troilus and Criseyde* are given only as book and line numbers.
narratives came. Thomas Gray’s *Scalacronica*, commenced in 1355, saw all historiography as supported on two bases, the Bible and the Troy story (Gray 1836: 2). Troy was the most famous secular narrative because it was seen not only as a disastrous end, but also as a fertile beginning of other nations and histories. In Joseph of Exeter’s phrase, ‘Troy, with its rich loss, filled realms with nations and cities with people’ (Joseph 1970: 8). Britain itself was supposedly named after a descendant of Trojan refugees, Brutus, and Chaucer’s London was occasionally styled ‘New Troy’, apparently a controversial matter, since it became an accusation to use against political enemies, including Richard II (Windeatt 1992: 7-8). Recent scholarship debates the existence of a split between the ‘Virgilian’ ‘propagandistic’ and ‘imperialistic’ Troys stemming from Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia Regum Britanniae* (c.1135), and the ‘anti-imperialist’ violence and destruction of versions stemming from Guido delle Colonne’s *Historia Destructionis Troiae* (1287) (Federico 2003: xvi). Yet in any version, medieval Trojan history could always function as a commentary on the present time. As Sylvia Federico writes, ‘medieval claimants to Trojanness invent not just Troy but also themselves in the process of imagining the ancient city’ (Federico: 2003: xii).

Chaucer’s invocation of Tisiphone reminds readers that the Trojan war was only one in a long line of ancient disasters, such as the preceding
war of Thebes. (Even Thebes had not always been there, but was founded by exiles from Tyre, as Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, the most popular classical text of the middle ages, attested [Ovid 1986: III, 541ff]). Thebes looms grimly behind the action of *Troilus*, sustained by two strategic references, given with increasing detail. On the May morning that Pandarus visits Criseyde to win her love for Troilus, he finds her with others listening to a maiden reciting ‘the geste/ Of the siege of Thebes’, apparently just at the section describing the death of Amphiaraus (II, 100-105). We may take Criseyde’s text to be a romance, like the well-known medieval *Roman de Thèbes*, since she refers to events present in it but not in Statius. Pandarus’s dismissive comment, that he already knows about Thebes in ‘bookes twelve’ (II, 108), points to Statius’ *Thebaid* as the more canonical, masculine version. By comparison to the *Roman*, where it features in shortened form as a marvel, Amphiaraus’ death in Statius is a central instance of the waste and horror of war that characterises his whole poem. As a modern commentator has expressed it, in Statius “… [f]renzy and bloodshed” … hold sway; and blind “fortune” … drives reason, virtue, faith, and pity from the darkened, blood-soaked world’ (Statius 1992: xxiii). The priest Amphiaraus is easily the best of the forces besieging Thebes, a major character. He strongly opposes the war, and, like Helenus in the Troy story, is attacked as a coward for it, with an argument – ‘It’s fear that first / Created gods’ – that Chaucer’s Criseyde
says she will use herself on Calchas (IV, 1408). At Thebes, knowing he is fated to die, Amphiaraus wins a ‘futile glory’ committing slaughter in the field before he hands his wreath of bays back to Apollo and descends to the Underworld (Statius 1992: VII, 690-823). Later in *Troilus*, when the war has ceded Criseyde to the Greeks, Cassandra interprets Troilus’s dream to him through an account of Diomede’s ancestry, with substantial reference to the Theban horrors – slaughter, siege, Furies, burning, drowning, thunderbolt, ‘how Amphiorax fil thorugh the grounde’, fratricide, the grief of widows, and the eventual destruction of the whole city (V, 1485-512). Manuscripts of *Troilus* usually introduced a Latin summary of Statius’ twelve books at this point. Through his evocations of the *Thebaid*, Chaucer points to the grim nature of siege warfare which remains a more distant impression in *Troilus*. The memory of Thebes should be a mirror for Trojans (and by extension for the New Trojans of 1380s London), but Pandarus interrupts the story, and Cassandra, as ever, is not heeded.

If Troy had important contemporary resonance in Chaucer’s time, it was not least because medieval history was predominantly the record of that continuing human instability of which Troy was the emblem. Another later fourteenth-century English poem, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, takes the burning of Troy as a frame to set off its theme of earthly transience, and to initiate its view of British history as the alternation of
‘blisse and blunder’ - the happiness of peace and the disaster of war.

Trojan inheritance is seen behind both the ‘wynne’ (‘joy’) in which Brutus founds his new nation and the ‘tene’ (‘harm’) which soon arises from ‘baret’ (‘strife’) amongst its aristocracy (Gawain 1967: lines 1-22). Chaucer seems to have treated the ‘fame’ of Troy as hybrid and protean, subject to the bias of writers. He had already illustrated its flexible scope by varied references in earlier allegorical poems. In The Book of the Duchess, a unified version of the whole story, from Laomedon and the Argonauts onward, is represented in the glass windows of the dream bedchamber, giving a much wider sweep of events than we find in Troilus itself (Chaucer 1987, Book of the Duchess: lines 326-31). Then in The House of Fame, Chaucer points to ‘Omer’ (known only in a Latin account at this time), but also to the anti-Homeric line of Dares the Phrygian (see Frazer: 1966), Benoît de Sainte-Maure’s Roman de Troie (c.1160) and Guido, as well as the Historia of ‘Englyssh Gaufride’, Geoffrey of Monmouth (Chaucer 1987, House of Fame: lines 1465-480). In The Parliament of Fowls, where the poem’s ‘matere’ is more clearly to do with forms of love, Helen, Troilus, Paris and Achilles are briefly seen amongst the wrecked lovers of the temple of Venus (Chaucer 1987, Parliament of Fowls: lines 290-91). By contrast, Troilus and Criseyde is a self-consciously ‘historical’ work, which depicts life in the last years of the city of Troy, understood both as a place vulnerable to the
forces of historical change, and as the focus of a long and contested historiographical tradition

The knowledge of generic and historiographical variety shown in his earlier Trojan references carries over into Chaucer’s free treatment of his sources for *Troilus and Criseyde*, a feature which was also tacitly traditional. Just as Chaucer never mentions that Boccaccio is his main source, Boccaccio himself falsely claimed to be following ancient legends; Guido delle Colonne says his *Historia* is based on the (supposed) eye-witness accounts of Dares the Phrygian and Dictys the Cretan, and never admits its real main source – Benoît's *Roman*. But it might have been apparent to Chaucer that Guido was so in debt to Benoît, with the consequent revelation that Latin prose writers did not necessarily have any better claim to historical truth than vernacular poets, and that there could be no clear distinguishing in this case between history and invention. In any case, Chaucer must have realised he was favouring the less trusted and often reviled poetic accounts over the ‘truth-telling’ prose historians (Nolan 1992: 203). One of *Troilus and Criseyde*’s most perceptive early readers, Robert Henryson, noted the uncertain relation of ‘authorised’ truth and ‘newly feigned’ poetic fiction in the poem (Henryson 1981, *Troilus and Cresseid*: lines 64-70).

Chaucer’s break in *Troilus and Criseyde* with mainstream Trojan historiography comes substantially from his following Boccaccio’s Il
Filostrato (c. 1340). It has been said that there is ‘a compositional imbalance between the Filostrato and the medieval Trojan stories’, because the author is ‘indifferent to the vicissitudes essential to an historical development’ of the narrative in the traditional terms (Gozzi, in Boccaccio 1986: xvii), and much the same can be said of Chaucer in Troilus. Boccaccio is not interested in giving a connected, explicit account of the macro-political action, so that he is not really an historical source per se for Troilus, but a major influence on its oblique method of delineating the historical events. Chaucer lets us find out a great deal about the manners and mentality of the Trojans, but he gives us relatively few connected material facts about the history of the war, or even about the public lives of the main agents. Pandarus’s exact social status and civic position remain unclear, for instance. The formal descriptions of Diomede, Troilus and Criseyde, usually thought to be drawn from Joseph of Exeter, come so late in Chaucer’s narrative (V, 799-840) that they question the information value of such rhetorical devices more than they direct our knowledge of the characters (Patterson 1991: 150). In a text where so much is dramatically presented through intense personal negotiation and direct speech – Pandarus’s detailed interactions with both Troilus and Criseyde in Books I and II are good examples – the function of traditional historical fact and explicit commentary is less secure than in, say, Guido. Instead of a truth-voice which marshals divergent facts
into a single narrative, we often have the impression in Chaucer of various commentators and discourses hovering around the action, with competing claims. Criseye’s change of heart, for instance, is reacted to in very differing ways by the narrator (pity), Troilus (anguish) and Pandarus (righteous anger), and (indescribably) by Criseyde herself, together with her premonition of anti-feminist treatments which women will be encouraged to internalise: ‘O. rolled shal I ben on many a tonge! / Throughout the world my belle shal be ronge! / And wommen moost wol haten me of alle.” (V, 1061-063). Chaucer knew this anti-feminist tradition. Benoît de Sainte-Maure, despite all his psychological subtlety, which influenced Chaucer, still has a furious Troilus shouting insults about Criseyde in public hearing (Benoît 1904-12: lines 20079-0103), and makes misogynist comments himself (Benoît 1904-12: lines 13425-3494). But readers of Chaucer’s poem do not necessarily reach any firm conclusion on his Criseyde. She retains the opacity of a complex character acting in difficult circumstances, and resists the breakdown of her specificity into exemplary applications. As with Chaucer’s attitude to the whole Troy story, her common ‘fame’ is not what he was mainly interested in. He gives us her private thoughts, dreams and fears – material that no eye-witness could have observed and only a poet could have invented.
Together with its notable originality and relativity of viewpoint, the most striking feature of Chaucer’s treatment of the Troy story is its comparative selectivity in both incidents and narrative emphases. Most medieval writers wanted to tell the whole story or a great deal of it, and to amplify it by additional incidents, characters and descriptions. Chaucer’s limited historical and thematic focus, part of his complex debt to Boccaccio (see Wallace 1985), makes Troilus and Criseyde radically different from wide-ranging texts like Dares and Dictys, Benoit, or Guido. The entire rationale of these predecessors is different. Benoît, for instance, says in his Prologue that he is obliged to pass on to others his knowledge of what really happened, and gives a very detailed summary of the whole poem. He follows through the ten-year course of the war on both sides, structuring the narrative by battles interspersed with truces and council scenes. He has not one, but four, doomed love stories. Guido takes this material and dignifies it with moral and philosophical commentary, named authorities, and a narrative preoccupation with historical truth (Guido 1974: xv-xvi). Chaucer, by contrast, confines himself to a few historical events and a much narrower chronological range, gives us little of the Greek side, concentrates on one love relationship, is vague about authorities, and apparently surrenders the conduct of the poem to a very subjective narrator whose highest aim is to help Love’s servants. The blank prolepsis at the end of the introduction to
Book I (I, 55-6) tells us not that Troy will fall, but that Troilus will suffer twice for love and that Criseyde will forsake him before she (not he) dies. That is to say, the actions of lovers take precedence as a theme over the death of the warrior whose name traditionally implied his whole city.

The emphasis on love defines Chaucer’s text, which succeeds, on one plane, in making readers forget for long periods the fateful context in which the lovers exist. The obvious ‘dramatic irony’ of the Trojan lovers’ position causes no lack of sympathy for them. The sad ending to the love-story, with the gradual revelation of human inconsistency and fallibility, does not devalue though its ironies the importance of the characters’ own history, as experienced by readers, or of their choices. The politics of the war are acknowledged to have great power over the narrative outcome, but the conduct and feelings of individual Trojans remain its central concern; compared to Statius or Guido, Chaucer places more emphasis on free will than on sheer fate. He attempts to render with sympathy a credibly ancient Troy and Trojan mindset; ‘how they thought and behaved in their historical time and place’ (Minnis 1982: 6). But he also largely avoids long-range historical moralizing, preferring instead, through his too deeply engaged narrator, to concentrate on the unfolding present action. When there is moralizing it is mainly of a different kind, especially in the first three books of the poem. We hear a lot of sententious utterance, for example, about how Cupid takes down Troilus
for his flippant attitude to love, but nothing about the futility of the Trojans’ prayers to the Palladium (I, 148-68), in the face of the prophecy that ‘Troye sholde / Destroyed ben, ye, wolde whoso nolde’ (I, 77-8) and the medieval audience’s knowledge of what will happen after the Palladium is stolen. When overt historical moralizing about Trojans does arise, it is through the narrator’s outrage at their betrayal of Criseyde (IV, 197-210). It is always possible, though hardly necessary, to take Chaucer’s relatively light use of long-range perspectives as an invitation to supply our own moral on the blindness of pagans and the futility of trusting to this world, as the narrative finally does (V, 1828-853). Yet in terms of sheer narrative attention, the effect of closeness to the lovers makes for an insider, ‘Trojan’ view of the action, though not for a partisan justification of Troy. The Trojan share of responsibility for the war, especially through the ravishing of Helen, is acknowledged at the outset and tellingly reprised (I, 62-3; IV, 547-48, 608-09; V, 890-96). Pandarus’s careless reference to ravishment as a red-blooded Trojan characteristic is especially jarring:

‘Artow in Troie, and hast no hardyment
To take a womman which that loveth the
And wolde hireselven ben of thyn assent?
Now is this nat a nyce vanitee?'
Rise up anon, and lat this wepyng be,
And kith thou art a man.’ (IV, 533-38).

The comment shows that Troilus offers a different example of masculinity from Paris or Pandarus, but also that he cannot escape the situation which attitudes like theirs have brought about.

A major difference between Chaucer’s treatment of the story and the historical sources is that ‘the Greeks’ in his poem are largely a faceless and distanced military force. Before Criseyde is sent from Troy, only one scene is set amongst them – Calchas’s plea to exchange her for Antenor (IV, 29-133). Detailed involvement of Greeks with the narrative only arises through Criseyde’s exchange, and we view her still for some time as a Trojan, ‘with wommen fewe, among the Grekis stronge’ (V, 688). Once she has left Troy in spirit as well as body, her life with the Greeks fades from direct view, and is accessible only through dream (V, 1233-252), by letter (V, 1590-631), and by the brooch found on Diomede’s captured coat-armour (V, 1646-666). The Greeks themselves, much as before the exchange, are seen only in the field of battle from that point onwards. The poem’s evocation of the Greek menace, so important in the delineation of Criseyde’s frightened behaviour, is linked to the narrative distancing of them as unknown aggressors. They receive little credit for chivalry, and we see little sign of them having other interests
beyond absolute revenge on Troy. There is nothing of the rivalry, betrayal, mixed motives and love-intrigue that characterise the invading force in other versions. This means that ‘sodeyn’ (‘sudden’) Diomede, when we come to meet him, can stand for all the Greeks in a way that Chaucer’s Troilus never really stands for Troy, differentiated as he is from a dozen other Trojans, and viewed within more varied life-contexts, like some other contemporary medieval heroes, Gawain in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and Theseus in Chaucer’s Knight’s Tale. By contrast, the keynote of Chaucer’s Greeks is their obsessive military implacability, which Diomede makes very clear to Criseyde (V, 883-917). After this brutal ploy, it is impossible to give credence to Diomede as a man truly in love, such as he is in Benoît. He seems as much a predator on Criseyde as he is on Troy, and his blushes and shaking voice look like a cheap version of Troilus’ earlier behaviour. It is hard to remember that Troilus, the true lover, is at least as fierce and lethal a warrior as Diomede, though readers are eventually forced to acknowledge it, after he is changed by the loss of Criseyde.

A very distinctive feature of Chaucer’s poem as a Troy story, especially an English one, is its relative lack of interest in the battles. From the outset, the poem apparently attempts to bracket off the war narrative as something already ‘wel wist’ (I, 57). It is even implied that the great fame of the fighting, traditionally the main reason for writing
about Troy at all (Laud 1902: lines 65-86), is the poet’s justification for choosing a different ‘matere’ (I, 144). Reference to combat is distant and impersonal – ‘The thinges fellen, as they don of werre’ (I, 134), one war seeming like any other – and we are tersely directed to Latin texts, ‘Omer’, Dares and Dictys, for what happened: ‘Whoso that kan may rede hem as they write’ (I, 147). A clear and original break with Trojan historiographical precedent, especially the Dares/Dictys line, is signified. Benoît had attempted to write equally about both love and war, with fierce characters such as Diomede and Achilles truly suffering the pangs of love-sickness, and copious detail about Troilus as fighter. Guido delle Colonne reduces the colourfulness of Benoît’s battles to some extent (Guido 1974: xiii-xiv), but he still uses battle narratives, including many involving Troilus, to make some of his most serious moral points, and because he leaves out or plays down love stories (Benson 1980: 4), the importance of fighting descriptions looms even larger. The death of Troilus in Guido is a good example. Achilles only manages it after more than a thousand Myrmidons have tired out his victim, and ‘he killed him more dead than alive’ (Guido 1974: 26, lines 281-85). The horrific scene becomes the occasion for a vaunting of Guido’s higher claims to historical truth over biased poetic accounts: ‘Notice, miserable Homer, that Achilles never killed any valiant man except by treachery’ (Guido 1974: 26, line 340). Yet even by this condemnation of Achilles, Guido
indicates that the main currency of his text is martial prowess and honour – who deserves most praise for which killings – in the manner of a contemporary ‘aristocratic chronicle’ (Benson 1980: 13-4). Throughout the course of Chaucer’s poem, there is virtually no such articulation of battles into their various ‘strokes’, with one named knight pitted against another, as we see frequently in other medieval English Troy versions, such as the Laud Troy Book (c. 1400), where ‘rarely is an opportunity missed to increase the violence or call attention to the exploits of … [the] favourite heroes’ (Benson 1980: 71). Hector is killed in Chaucer by an ‘unwar’ stroke, of which both Achilles and he may be unaware. (V. 1558-1600). As in the laconic Dares Phrygius, and in Boccaccio, we do not even hear with what weapon Achilles kills Troilus; narrative attention to the moment seems perfunctory and banal, in popular style: ‘But – weilawey, save only Goddes wille/ Despitously him slough the fierse Achille’ (V, 1805-806). Overall, Chaucer’s pointed lack of interest in nearly all the battle material he found in earlier writers means that both his characters and the whole action must be assessed in other ways.

Chaucer remarked again on his neglect of arms towards the end of Troilus and Criseyde:

And if I hadde ytaken for to write
The armes of this ilke worthi man,
Than wolde ich of his batailles endite;
But for that I to writen first bigan
Of his love, I have seyd as I kan –
His worthi dedes, whoso list hem heere,
Rede Dares, he kan telle hem alle ifeere. (V, 1765-1771)

Amongst all the possible historical sources Chaucer could have cited here, ‘Dares’ (if Dares Phrygius is meant) would provide the shortest, most summary treatment of combats – ‘alle ifeere’ (‘all together’) – not the nineteen battles of Benoît or Guido’s elaborations. If by ‘Dares’ Chaucer means Joseph of Exeter’s Iliad (based on Guido), as most scholars think (Windeatt 1992: 75), then it is still the case that Joseph collects much of Troilus’s prowess conveniently together in a few pages of his sixth book. Joseph concentrates on battles, often in repellent terms:

The detestable joys of Mars and his savage delights were boiling and bubbling everywhere. One had been blinded, and his eye dribbled down over his face. Another grinned hideously, his chin, his tongue and his nose hacked away. On others a lopped-off ear, or hand, or shoulder, dangled. Some pressed back their gaping innards with their hands. Others fell down, their knees hacked into, and crawled away from their enemy (Joseph 1970: 60).
If that is what Chaucer meant by ‘… [r]ede Dares’, then he was directing his audience to one of the most violent and least chivalric of Trojan war narrative treatments. He was also implicitly indicating his own very different version of masculine evaluation, one articulated through conduct in both peace and war, love and arms. The difference is not merely that Joseph subordinates love to arms, but that he makes it very hard to imagine his Troilus-type as a possible lover at all, certainly not of the kind Chaucer created: ‘He was a man of violent temperament, one who thirsted after war and whose advice was always the sword’ (Joseph 1970: 30). Joseph is in the tradition that treats love as a potential distraction from arms: ‘The heroes did not give their limbs to embraces, did not traffic in kisses – all these they shunned so that war might not be delayed’ (Joseph 1970: 10).

In Benoît, Chaucer had found an equally war-minded Troilus, who, for instance, sways Priam’s council to support Paris’s abduction of Helen, accusing his brother the priest Helenus of cowardice for warning against it. (The irony of Troilus’s earlier war-mongering is made clear when he himself becomes the victim of a later council’s decision.) Benoît’s poem is greatly complicated by the fact that his Troilus is an equally passionate lover, so that judgement of his actions (like those of Diomede and Achilles) ‘will encompass the largest questions about human conduct and
ethical value’, amongst them ‘public honour and reputation versus private passionate love’ (Nolan 1992: 70). Because Chaucer’s Troilus keeps his love very secret, unlike Benoît’s, that conflict is played out for him (and Criseyde) as an agonising series of personal inhibitions rather than as an open topic. Despite Chaucer’s use of a debate structure between allegorical personifications – Love versus Reason – to decide how Troilus should act, the result in favour of public honour seems inevitable. Troilus cannot support Criseyde’s cause personally ‘… [l]est men sholde his affeccioun espye’ (IV, 153). Fear of popular opinion also dissuades him from taking her away: for various reasons: he does not want to be seen to oppose ‘the townes goode’, and if he asks Calchas for her he could damage her reputation without getting what he wanted (IV, 547-574); Criseyde argues that the people would say he was motivated by ‘lust voluptuous and coward drede’, and that her ‘name’ would be lost for ever (IV, 1569-582). Troilus, in effect, is ultimately permitted only one legitimate role – Trojan warrior – and always has to hide his role as lover. His situation is something like that of Benoît’s Achilles, secretly in love with the Trojan enemy, Polixena, and it also resembles to some extent that of a Lancelot, in love with a married woman and attempting to ‘serve’ her without compromising her. On a more mundane level, Pandarus compares the case of people who see their secret lovers married off to others by family pressure (V, 344-350). Most of the important
action involving Troilus takes place in chambers, closets and other private spaces. Nearly all his conversations are held tête à tête. One can read that as a sign that the supposedly all-powerful agency of human love really operates within narrow and delusive limits – ‘Nothing is altered by the consummation of love’ (Wetherbee 1984: 107) – but perhaps it is also an acknowledgement that some of the deepest causes of history are off the public record, and must be supplied by poetic invention.

In this context of privacy, the belated re-appearance of Troilus in the field in V. 1800-06 has been seen as absurd, ‘underlining the arbitrariness of the rhetorical gestures’ involved:

Chaucer’s evocation of Troilus’s ‘wrath’ clearly recalls the opening of the Iliad, but its placement at the end of the poem rather than the beginning is faintly absurd. .... Troilus’s wrath is a medieval embellishment of Dares Phrygius, as alien to Chaucer’s carefully fashioned classical world as Pandarus himself.

(Wetherbee 1998: 245)

And yet, however little we have seen of his actual combat, Troilus’ status as fighter in the poem has been repeatedly insisted on. He is ‘Ector the secounde’ (II, 158), ‘holdere up of Troye’ (II, 645), acknowledged by the street crowd as much as he is boosted by Pandarus. And in some traditional ways, the poem’s matter of love is represented as depending
on and serving to underwrite Troilus’ value as a knight. As the stricken
but hopeful lover, he becomes a lion in battle (I, 1074). Love which
drives out all fear propels him into the field. Criseyde’s Isolde-like
question ‘who yaf me drynke?’ (II, 651) comes at the sight of his
returning victorious through Troy from a skirmish (II, 640-51), with a
hint of Geoffrey of Monmouth’s benign symbiosis between chaste
women and proven warriors in his Arthurian New Troy (London), where
deeds of arms in tournaments inspire love and love inspires to arms
(Geoffrey 1966: 229). Troilus’ ‘excellent prowesse’ (II, 659) is the first
of his lovable qualities Criseyde calls to mind, though not the chief. As
acknowledged lover, Troilus becomes her ‘wal of stiel’ (III, 479-80),
engaged by day with all his might ‘in Martes heigh servyse’, as he is by
night with thoughts of love (III, 437-41). As the fulfilled, true lover, he
increases in bravery and strength in all the town’s wartime requirements
(III, 1773). Finally, as the despairing betrayed lover ‘in many cruel
batailles’ he is even more effective in the field, the bane of ‘thousands’ of
Greeks before he dies. (V, 1751-806).

So although Chaucer does not write about Troilus’s historical
battles in detail, he does give his military role strong significance within
the love story. Prowess in ‘arms’ is made a ground, an accompaniment
and a sustained co-relative of Troilus’ love. How love relates to arms
becomes an issue, as in the Roman de Troie, but one raised by different
narrative means. Chaucer’s Troilus cannot ultimately sustain a strict
division like Benoit’s between the warrior gentle to his friends, fearful to
his foes, which we have seen in Pandarus’s first description of him to
Criseyde: “‘the frendlieste man’” (II, 190-207). The brooch Troilus gave
to Criseyde that turns up on Diomede’s coat-armour (V, 1646-666)
precipitates the transfer of his emotional energy as lover into ‘wrath’,
ostensibly against the Greek. But he cannot, like Pandarus, or like
Benoît’s Troilus, bring himself to ‘hate’ Criseyde and wish her death (V,
1730-43), so the persistence of love for her means that the anger which
love now generates is also turned suicidally against himself (V, 1672-
673): “‘Myn owen deth in armes wol I seche’” (V, 1718).

Chaucer does in one obvious way try to maintain a structural and
discursive division between the two ‘materes’ of arms and love. In stark
contrast to other writers on Troy, who follow the military out on their
deeds, he nearly always keeps the focus within the city, or later within the
Greek camp, while the fighting is conducted elsewhere, and viewed from
the perspective of a non-combatant civilian. We are offered a rather
feminised reading position, in medieval terms, perhaps a clerical one; we
share our superior knowledge of the war’s outcome with two priestly
figures, Calchas (the coward) and Cassandra. Yet given that the initial
picture (I, 148-49) is of citizens shut in and entirely surrounded by a
hostile army, beleaguered Troy keeps surprisingly much of its ‘old usage’
like a peacetime place of ‘lusty life’ (V, 393), oddly untouched physically by the war. After many years of siege it is (remarkably, yet unremarked upon) well-fed, leisured, gracious, and much preoccupied with traditionally peacetime business, including love itself (Meecham-Jones 2004: 148-50).

The non-specific nature of Chaucer’s war descriptions in Troilus supported a general resemblance of them to any prolonged international war, including contemporary medieval conflicts. In retrospect from the 1380s, a view of the long intermittent English hostilities with France, with their shaky causality, alternating fortunes, and involved and unsuccessful diplomacy, may well have resembled specific aspects of the Trojan-Greek conflict in the historical sources. To follow the exhortation to ‘read Dares’ would put the Trojan war in the similar context of a series of failed negotiations between enemies from the time of Jason and Laomedon onwards, compounded by the folly of the Greeks in refusing to listen to Priam’s emissary Antenor, and then by Priam’s foolish revenge, intractability and unpreparedness. Certainly, Chaucer does not draw direct or obvious links between Troy and New Troy, but London life around the time of the poem, with its alternation of relative calm and periods of great fear and disruption, bore some similarity to the double wartime/peacetime Troy of Troilus and Criseyde. The year 1377 saw splendid pageants for Richard II’s coronation, but where Chaucer lived,
over the wall at Aldgate, a portcullis, barbicans and chains were added, in fear of French invasion, one of many special measures taken that year (Chaucer Life-Records 1966: 145). We find reference in Troilus II, 617-18 to ‘the yate … / of Dardanus, there opyn is the cheyne’. It was through Aldgate that the peasant rebels were treacherously allowed to enter the city in 1381 (Myers 1972: 15-16). Chaucer’s lease for his rooms at Aldgate stipulated that they could be requisitioned for the defence of the city when necessary. (Crow 1966: 145). Alternating with or parallel to these intimations of war was a policy of truce, peace settlement and military retrenchment. Royal documents of the period referred habitually to ‘the afflictions, tribulations and evils which Christian people have suffered and suffer from day to day in the wars … [with France], on which griefs we have the greatest pity and compassion’ (Foedera 1740: III, ii, vii, 410. 12 Sept, 1383). In 1382, ‘an eight- to twelve-year truce’ was confidently anticipated (Palmer 1972: 45), and in 1384 the Commons (mainly worried about money) asked for peace with France as “the most noble and gracious aid and comfort” that could possibly be devised for them’ (Palmer 1972:14). Similarly, in Troilus and Criseyde, the initial picture of constant siege is modified by direct and prospective references to times of peace and truce, derived from the historical sources, where the

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2 My translation from the Anglo-French.
discussion of when and how long to make truces is considerable.

Criseyde hopes that peace negotiations – ‘Alday men trete of pees’ – will make free departures and returns from Troy the normal state (IV, 1352-1358). In interludes of peace, Troilus, like an English nobleman, visits his friends in the country, or goes hunting and returns to town under Criseyde’s gaze (III, 1789-785), providing a further nexus between love and masculine prowess in the ‘field’. Yet at other times, Criseyde is afraid to death of the Greeks (II, 124), and Pandarus jokes about Troilus’s becoming ‘lean’ as an effect of the siege (I, 553), perhaps a hint of depression, or even of threatened food supplies. Consciousness of the war dominated London life at times in the later 1370s and earlier 1380s, and the French were very much the ‘visible foes’ referred to in the poem’s final stanza. Fear of French invasion was common. Soon after Troilus was finished, in the summer of 1386, the prospect of French military invasion filled the South-East with panic, and ‘one writer compared … [the French fleet] to the fleet which destroyed Troy’. At London, measures expecting a siege were undertaken: aldermen were ordered to put their wards in array; householders were to lay in three months’ provisions; special forces were stationed within a 60-mile radius of London; people fled the city; houses near the wall were pulled down; and there was an outbreak of ‘last chance’ consumer spending before the French came. (Palmer 1972: 74-76). The hysteria of 1386 was always a
potential of a general situation which had bult up as the periods of war
had grown longer and more intensive and something of a siege mentality
had developed. Only four years in the period 1369-1389 were covered by
truces (Palmer 1972: 1).

It is not surprising therefore that in Chaucer’s Troy, as in his
London, there is an odd mixture of peace-time and war-time elements.
Consciousness of war becomes translated into many other discourses of
the fictional city. War becomes a matter of military settings out and
returns, of peace embassies, parliamentary discussions, literary
appreciation (as in Criseyde’s reading of a Roman de Thèbes), and talk of
strategy, rather than direct witness to combat. Pandarus, hardly a man
without leisure, spends all day with Priam, presumably in a war council
(V, 284), and advises on the defence of the city. But in one respect
Chaucer’s representation of Troy differs crucially both from the Trojan
histories which he knew and the experience of his contemporary
Londoners. We do not mainly find in Troilus the normal alternation of
discrete periods of peace and war typical of the Troy sources, and of
English experience in the wars with France and Scotland, either the cycle
of a time of peace following war that is invoked by Criseyde,

And if so be that pees heere-after take,

As alday happeth after anger game (IV, 1562-5),
or at least the typical relief of a truce mentioned by Pandarus:

‘This town is ful of lorde al aboute,

And trewes lasten al this mene while.’ (V, 400-01)

Instead we receive a version of the hero’s daily life which, impossibly, includes both war and peace, anger and game. Troilus apparently goes off to the war each day and returns home at night through the city gates, like a commuter. He spends his days killing Greeks and his nights loving Criseyde, in a strangely rapid version of the traditional war/peace cycle. His agency is split into a secret lover visible to the reader, and a public but largely unseen fighter, whose renown the narrator ‘reads’ or ‘finds’ in his sources rather than witnesses to directly (V, 1754, 1758). The only battle Chaucer narrates with an epic list of names concerns the capture of Antenor, and amongst nine knights listed, Troilus is not present [V, 36-56]. A consequence of this narrative separation is that it becomes harder than usual to reconcile conceptually the hero’s roles as fighter and lover.

Of course, Chaucer could not ignore the traditional chivalric notion that prowess in arms inspires love and love inspires to arms. But that tradition arguably loses something of its hold in the Trojan context. This war is not allowed to ‘prove’ the value of knightly love in the normal honorific and unmotivated way, because Paris’s initial love-vision leading to the ravishing of Helen is such a notorious historical cause of
damage. The recurrent Trojan mixture of love and war is a problem, not a resolution. Moreover, the symbiotic relation between love and arms is principally a motif of ‘peace is good after war’ descriptions – of court ceremonial, as in Geoffrey of Monmouth and his romance successors – rather than of siege warfare. The punitive nature of this war, which can bring about no peace, and is beyond any end but victory or disaster for Troy, suggests that it is truly a ‘noble game’, an aristocratic sport, to regard the blushing Troilus, hero of some unspecified ‘scarmuch’ (‘skirmish’), as another Mars, god of battle (II, 610-44.), and it is worrying too, given Mars ‘traditional association with impetuous, angry behaviour, and even death’ (McCall 1979: 23). This is by far the most elaborate and embodied chivalric description of the whole poem, with its wounded horse and spectacular damage to armour focussing vision on a central named knight, with a civilian crowd bearing witness to his prowess, and the heroine looking on. Yet it occurs outside the battlefield, made strategically irrelevant in the context of a total war ruled by Fortune. Nor does it truly inspire love. Despite her role in the chivalric tableau, Criseyde later specifically distinguishes ‘worthinesse ... /In werre or tourney marcial’ from the ‘moral vertu, grounded upon trouthe’ on which she bases her love of Troilus (IV, 1670-673). In saying so, she allows ‘moral vertu’ to mean far more than knightly ‘doing well’ before female spectators in romance combat narrative. The woman, normally the
love-struck witness to masculinist forms of virtue, here claims her own power to evaluate the man. Why she loves Troilus rests with her; he is her ‘pees’ (‘peace’) and ‘suffisaunce’ (‘sufficiency’) as much as her ‘knight’ (III, 1309).

As Lee Patterson notes, Troilus’ strenuous martial activity should protect him from criticism as a civically irresponsible casualty of Venus (Patterson 1991: 105-06), but it does not prevent him from finally becoming a casualty of Mars. Chaucer has denied the normal respectful engagement with the military action, and has distanced the ‘field’ so as to prevent an audience from being caught up in the fighting. His rapid alternation of quasi-peace and war, love and hate, the hero’s civilian and military roles, questions the chivalric and epic narrative codes that treat killing in arms as a special moral case. Troilus’ ultimate ‘wrath’ as warrior in Book V can therefore be seen as more troubling than merely inappropriate or ‘absurd’, especially coming so close to the poem’s dedication to Chaucer’s contemporary, ‘moral Gower’ (V, 1856). R. F. Yeager has pointed out that in the Mirour de l’omne, John Gower claims that acts in war are good or ill not in themselves, but according to the inner state of the warrior. In the Vox Clamantis, Gower treats war ‘as a violation, not a state, of being’ (Yeager 1987: 104). In Confessio Amantis, war comes under the heading of the sin of ‘wrath’ and its counter-virtue ‘mercy’ (Yeager 1987: 105-06). In Gower’s view, Troilus
would be fully entitled to fight in the legitimate defence of his home, but not to indulge a private anger by his killings. Gower’s distinction fits well with Chaucer’s careful charting of Troilus’s changing motivation in warfare: first from emulation of his brothers, then to impress Criseyde, with no hate for the Greeks or civic feeling (I, 477-82), progressing to dutiful actions ‘… [i]n alle nedes for the townes werre’ (III, 1772), and finally to half-suicidal, half-vengeful pursuit of Diomede (V, 1751-1806).

In the conclusion of Troilus and Criseyde, an implicit moral analysis of war emerges, in which cruel strokes, great words, anger and mass killings are not simply vouched for as virtue. This is partly because the methods of evaluating Troilus’s actions in love and war are seen to differ so much. Given the absence or disabling of the normal practices of chivalric narrative, this poem’s chosen method of battle description, with its generalising, pluralising tendencies, takes on a new, disturbing potential. Within the city, as lover, Troilus is specifically distinguished in kind from the false ‘avauntour’ or ‘lyere’ (III, 310) he might be, the inferior kind of lover Paris or Pandarus or Diomede is. But as fighter in the field, according to the traditional method of description which subsumes both combatants into a unitary ‘they’, he now becomes essentially like his opponents. He is Diomede’s equal and other half, for instance, as they so often ‘meet’ in battle, each side alternately ‘paying for’ the other’s anger. The resemblance is the more striking for coming
soon after the formal character descriptions of Troilus and Diomede in very different terms. The traditional reciprocity and bilateral exchange of chivalric combat here enforce a moral equation between them, in a context where the combatants’ mutual anger has ceded control to ‘Fortune’ (V, 1763-4), as we have been told from the outset: ‘and thus Fortune on lofte/ And under eft gan hem to whielen bothe/ Aftir hir course, ay whil that thei were wrothe’ (I, 134-40).

Such war is impersonal hazard rather than providential adventure. Its outcome will reflect the remote decision of ‘heighe Jove’ (V, 1543) mediated through Fortune, rather than an evident declaration of the worth of either side. Fortune, in this case, is a Boethian force empowered by the subjection of the suffering participants to its workings, rather than the exculpating ‘Destiny’ of Guido and the Laud Troy Book. Accordingly, Troilus’s pursuit of Diomede presents a futile, recurrent tableau of war rather than any decisive closure:

And, God it woot, with many a cruel hete
Gan Troilus upon his helm to bete!
But natheles, Fortune it naught ne wolde
Of oothers hond that eyther deyen sholde.’ (V, 1761-764)

Chaucer’s discourse in Book V heavily emphasises the number of the battles his text has so far excised from the record, and their generic
ferocity, rather than anything which would distinguish the combatants:

‘In many cruel bataille’; ‘ful cruwely’; ‘ofte tyme I finde that they mette/
With blody strokes and with wordes grete’ (V, 1751-760). Martial virtue
becomes fully quantitative, as Troilus kills ‘thousandes’ and so proves
himself again second to none but Hector (V, 1800-806). The poem’s early
comparisons of Troilus to Hector have also cited his ‘‘vertu …’/ As alle
trouthe and alle gentilesee/ Wisdom. honour, fredom, and worthinesse’’
(II, 159-61), and how he ‘bareth hym here at hom so gentilly’ (II, 186).
Now, for the first time the comparison of the heroes is based solely on
arms and uses the body-count standard found in traditional Troy
accounts, for instance in the Laud Troy Book’s praise of Hector:

    And ther was the best bodi in dede
    That euere 3it wered wede,
    Sithen the worlde was made so fere,
    That was Ector, in eche a werre,
    Ne that neuere sclow so many bodies –
    Fyghtyng In feld with his enemyes –
    Off worthi men that doughti were,
    As duke Ector of Troye there;
    For ther was neuere man that myght stand
    A strong stroke of Ectores hand,
    That he ne deyed In that stounde
With his dynt and falle to grounde,
But the strong Achilles,
That was best of all that pres
Off the kynde of Gregeys. (Laud 1902-03: lines 49-63)

In Chaucer, Troilus’ final comparison to Hector, so soon after Hector’s death, functions mainly as a sign of the younger brother’s impending end. In its impersonal style of war narrative so far, the text has largely forbidden both the martial enthusiasm of romance and the impressiveness of epic slaughter. Now these old generic traits emerge, with a sense of the Trojan historiographical tradition, like the war itself, closing in on Chaucer’s independent vision. Though taken from Boccaccio, like most of the battle details in Book V, Troilus’ ‘wordes grete’ to Diomede, so unlike his shy demeanour as hero in Book II, and unlike his courtesy in other contexts, now align the text more with Benoît (Windeatt 1992: 40), or the Laud Troy Book where Troilus ‘reviles’ Diomede, ‘as he were a theff’, and defies Achilles to hell (Laud 1902-03: lines 13436-3438; 14243-4250). Likeness to Hector implies a further likeness to Achilles, the older brother’s great rival and killer. The more Troilus excels as warrior, the more he loses his individuality, becoming simply the latest principal vessel of the ancient ‘wrath’ between Greeks and Trojans, in the hopeless tradition made up of innumerable battles where each insult, each
death, only increases the ferocity of reciprocal action. Love cannot inflect
the values of this ‘field’; there is no conclusive showdown with Diomede
over Criseyde, and although Chaucer well knew the Achilles-Polixena
sub-plot, a potential parallel linking love and war, he leaves it out here.
There is no mismatch, as in Virgil’s Aeneid, between an unfortunate boy
and a hardened warrior (Virgil 1974: I, 474-78), no distinction made, as
in Guido, between a brave, outnumbered Trojan and a treacherous Greek.
As the killer of thousands Chaucer’s Troilus above all resembles the
fierce and pitiless Achilles. Seeking his ‘owen deth in armes’ (V, 1718),
he finds it in an image of what he has finally become, a man with nothing
left to him but war.

Troilus’s death in battle might be read as a more significant moral
conclusion for the hero and the poem, were it not such a blind alley for
most of the preceding narrative. His public death is thoroughly irrelevant
as an ending to his private love story. His plan of revenge on Diomede is
frustrated by Fortune; his ‘summary’ romance ending ‘puts [him] back
into the world of artifice’, and the poem moves on to higher things
(Wallace 1985: 140). The death might also be seen as a failure on
Chaucer’s part to control the traditional historical discourse of a ‘matere’
he has mainly chosen to ignore, but which now necessarily obtrudes. In
whatever reading, the lesson of this ending is also that the prolongation of
the war through Trojan and Greek inability to conclude a peace dooms
Troilus as lover, as it has earlier doomed Criseyde. Peace after war, ‘game’ after ‘anger’ is the necessary condition of a benign medieval relation between lover and warrior. Without peace, ‘the noble life is at odds with itself, fulfilling its deepest romantic needs in a context that dooms them to extinction’ (Patterson 1991: 162). Chaucer’s narrative treatment of the historical sources has emphasised that love can neither be kept separate from the war, nor made to co-exist happily with it.

Troilus’s death, the penultimate historical event mentioned in the text (the last is the Crucifixion), initiates a move towards the Christian eternal, away from ‘…[T]his world that passeth soone as floures faire’ (V, 1841). The poem’s ending rebukes and dismisses secular history as ‘by definition the realm of the imperfect’ (Patterson 1991: 18). And yet, however we read the text’s historicisation of Troilus – as limited pagan or honorary medieval Christian – it is not possible to follow him into the post-historical state in which he laughs at the sorrow of the world. As Freud wrote, “… [w]henever we make the attempt to imagine … [our own death] we can perceive that we really survive as spectators’ (Freud: 15). Troilus and Criseyde offers a tragic medieval version of history, leading to death, but through its poetic depiction of love in the great city of Troy it also implicates readers in the great enjoyment of being alive. And in linking the love-tragedy so closely to a limitless war, it puts the
whole weight of medieval historical tradition behind the necessity for peace.

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