

An exploration of the
nature of decision-
making in Chaucer's
Troilus and Criseyde...



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In *Troilus and Criseyde*, Chaucer presents decision-making in a variety of ways, including through the relationship between fate, knowledge and freedom of action, ideas that are at the centre of medieval philosophy. Troilus claims to not believe in total free will, but rather a passive free will of succumbing to his own death wish, whilst both Troilus and Criseyde are seen to curse the gods throughout the poem for affecting their lives so badly, essentially replacing any sense of free will with fate and dooming them to be tragic lovers. Chaucer presents Troilus' decision-making as particularly flawed in that it is relative to himself alone; Troilus attempts to prove how necessary it is to love Criseyde with very little logic, using instead a decision-making process that is encompassed entirely in his own imagination. Troilus states that love must exist as it is possible to imagine it, making him question his decision of love to the very core of his beliefs. In contrast, Criseyde values rational processes of thought and her own free will, making intelligent and informed decisions. This makes it far more intriguing when Chaucer explores Criseyde's internal dialogue of thoughts than Troilus'. This is shown in the following quotation: ' Allas! Syn I am free,/Sholde I now love, and put in jupartie/ My sikernesse, and thrallen libertee?/ Allas how dorst I thenken that folie?/ May I naught wel other folk asprie/ Hire dredfull joye, hir constreinte, and hire peyne?'[1] (Book II, 771-776) The particular interest for the reader in these internal dialogues lies in the knowledge that Criseyde's conscious decision to love Troilus could potentially remove her freedom of thought; the 'dredfull joye' of other people is not dissimilar to her own feeling of apprehension when she first learns that Troilus has chosen to love her. However, it is important to note here that the initial introduction

between Troilus and Criseyde was merely a meeting set up between two
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friends. With this in mind, it is plausible that the decision to love on Troilus' part was perhaps a marginally calculating one, as befriending a person was sometimes used as a strategy to form unions amongst those in court and to better one's own social standing. Troilus decides to view Criseyde first and foremost as a friend, secondly as a lover: ' hire love of friendship have I to the wonne/ and also hath she leyd hire feyth to borwe'[2] (Book II, 962-963).

A totally different style of decision-making can be seen with Pandarus, whom Chaucer displays as competent yet still very human and accessible to the reader. Pandarus adopts the role of an unrequited lover, making him appear instantly less indecisive than a person unsure of their romantic intentions. However, Pandarus' irrational level of reasoning should not be overlooked; this is used in order to coerce Troilus into telling Pandarus his most closely guarded secret: the fact that he loves Criseyde. This shows that Pandarus has a tendency to act in an illogical fashion. The sheer tenacity of this is shown in his decision to continue pushing Troilus until he receives an answer, resorting to physically shaking him for a response: ' And with that word he gan hym for to shake,/And seyde, " Thef/thow shalt hyre name telle"'/[3] (Book 2, 36-38). Troilus is understandably frightened by these actions, prompting Pandarus to become yet more irrational in his choice of actions, choosing to seek the help of his niece to help Troilus, a less than logical decision. Whilst Pandarus is not in the least practical in his decision-making, he does have a tendency to oversimplify problems and not empathize fully with other characters, making him seem emotionally detached. In the process of decision-making itself, instead of coming to a rapid conclusion concerning his actions as Troilus might, he offers verbal

summaries of situations, unfailingly lacking in a final solution. This is evident in his response to Troilus' grief at losing Criseyde; he quotes 'newe love out chaceth ofte the olde'[4] (Book 4, 414). This reading of Zanzis is highly ironic and once again shows the flaws in Pandarus' decision-making, as it was this same effect that 'newe love' has on the old that leads Criseyde to tragedy in the first instance. Pandarus' limitations become very visible to the reader here, in that he has no capability for positive or comforting response, only the ability to make decisions of retrospect, in the hope that Troilus may take from it a little short-lived happiness. It is also significant to note that whilst Pandarus' ability to make informed decisions becomes gradually more limited, Chaucer chooses to display the opposing style in the narrative voice. The tone becomes detached and progressively more expansive from this point onwards, eventually becoming a detached voice able to comment objectively from the point of view of an outsider.

The final decision-making technique to be explored is on the part of Chaucer himself, and his conditioning of our responses to relationships in 'Troilus and Criseyde' throughout the text, often in order to achieve a comedic effect. An example of this is the structure of Book V. This is the point at which Chaucer chooses to give the reader significantly superior knowledge to Pandarus, undermining his authority in a comical fashion and distancing the narrator from him. When Troilus' interpretation of his dream as symbolizing Criseyde's unfaithfulness to him is dismissed by Pandarus, Chaucer subtly manipulates the reader to know that the dream was actually prescient. This further enhances the distance between the omniscient narrator and Pandarus, who is desperately in need of control and freedom of thought whilst those are the

two things he ultimately lacks. Chaucer's careful decision to shape the text in this way allows certain ironies to take place, but is inconsistent with the narrative voice that changes between ideas so rapidly, reflecting both the illogical decision-making technique of his main characters and Troilus' never-ending introspective nature.