Why don’t we like troilus?

Chaucer's ' Troilus and Criseyde' opens to the ringing tones of Troilus's ' double sorwe'. From the first lines it is ascertained that he is the main character of the poem, no matter how attractive Pandarus and Criseyde appear. Troilus' heartbreak, explained in 8, 000 glorious lines, is the subject of some contention amongst the poem's various audiences. Criseyde's guilt, and so Troilus' worth, has been extrapolated by the likes of Robert Henryson, who described Criseyde's horrible punishment and eventual death. Here Criseyde becomes the villain of the piece, and Troilus is exonerated. But what of his ramrodding her into confessions of love? Perhaps Chaucer intended him to be no more than a tragic dreamer who had no right to expect from Criseyde the same devotion that he gave. At the end of the poem Troilus is left, feeling rather foolish, mocking and alone, but this is also part of how we seem him. At whom is he laughing? The question of how much an audience ' likes' Troilus is as important as that of how Chaucer intended him to be understood. Using Benson as the key text, this issue of our appreciation of Troilus will be the main focus of this essay. Perhaps it is most rewarding to look at Troilus with respect to others' responses to him as a character. The first charge to be levelled at Troilus, here by the narrator, is that of his blind pride. He is, in his heart, a ' proude knyght'. He is brother to the famous Hector, prince of the city, and a man for whom love holds no attraction. Initially, he appears haughty, but proud not of his wealth or his birth, his good looks or his strength, but instead of what he conceives as his ability to withstand temptation. Troilus is a man who leads his colleagues in ' girl-watching': This Troilus, as he was wont to gideHis yonge kyghtes, lad hem yp and downIn thilke large temple on every side, Byholding ay the ladies of the town. (Book I, 1 83-86)His enjoyment is, as Chauncey Wood

suggests, ‘ not solely in the aesthetic evaluation of the ladies themselves’ , but more in his resistance to their charms and in the ‘ discomfiture of those in his retinue who cannot admire dispassionately, but who become emotionally entangled’. Proleptically as a blind fool himself, he denounces them and adds to it his own endorsement: He gan caste up the browe, Ascances, ‘ Loo! Is this naught wisely spoken? His irritating confidence make him a hard hero to love. We can cross-reference this confidence in personal infallibility with what Chaucer has already propounded, for example through what the Parson tells us in the Canterbury Tales: Goodes of grace been power to suffre spiritual travaille … Withstondynge oftemptacioun …Of which forseyde goodes, certes it is a ful greet folye a man to priden hym inany of hem alle.’ (l 455)The parson exposes this phenomenon of self-love as well known to a medieval audience. This pride in one’s own virtues was a common distaste. It is Troilus’ ‘ greet folye’ to be such a tempting target for the humbling darts of Cupid, and his suitability as a target is insisted on in this early section of the poem. He is compared to a proud peacock, his pride is said to be caught by the God of Love, he is called a proud knight, the effects of ‘ surquidrie and foul presumpcioun,’ (I, 213) are highlighted. Troilus is set for a fall. Most interesting is the immediate analogy with Bayard, who ‘ moot endure … horses lawe’ despite his proud prancing. Patricia Kean has interpreted this as a simple link between the horse obeying his law and Troilus obeying also the ‘ lawe of kynde’ (I, 238). Thus , she continues, the laws governing Troilus’ character, given to him by (his own) Nature, lead to an inevitability in the development of the story. However, she continues to argue that love ennobles Troilus, which seems at odds with this comparison to a common stable horse. More, it seems, that instead of being

ennobled, Troilus is ‘ subgit’ to love as Bayard is subject to the Traces and the whip. Bayard is traditionally the name for a blind horse, and the suggestion of the noble prince as a fat, blind horse, does not seem to suggest his elevation by love. Other critics have pointed out that the horse has sometimes been seen as a metaphor for carnal appetite, and this seems to have only complicated this particular debate. It seems Troilus is cursed with love, awakening his sleeping appetites. He is forced, in the end, to be simply a man and to conform to the laws of man and nature. It is important though to notice how Chaucer emphasizes the element of pride in the comparison. Set in the time about which Homer wrote, perhaps proud Troilus too ought to have an honorific epithet. Most distasteful to a modern audience, perhaps, is our understanding that Troilus’s pride is based on a false preconception: he believes he is immune to temptation because he has never faced it. This can been seen when he declares:’I have herd told, pardieux, or youre lyvynge, Ye lovers, and your lewed obervaunces’ (I, 197)Troilus can sneer at lovers because he has ‘ heard tell’ of them. He has never been in love, and doesn’t understand what it entails, and we can see this right from the very beginning of the tale. Here Chaucer sets him up for his descent into idolatry. He also hides his love initially, where he ‘ softe sighed, lest men myghte hym here.’ This could be due to his total shock and sudden undermining of the foundations of his pride and sense of self worth. However, it seems deceitful and adds to our impression of him, initially at least, as an un-admirable character. Some critics have leaped to Troilus’ defence saying that he is merely an exemplar of courtly love – but how far is this true and vindicable? C. S. Lewis defined the conundrum of courtly love as ‘ Humility, Courtesy, Adultery, and the Religion of Love.’ Compare this to

Troilus’ initial reflections on his new awakened love: And to the God of Love thus seyde he …Yo thanke I, lorde that han me brought to this. But wheither goddesse or woman, iwis, She be, I not, which that ye do me serve; But as hire man I wol ay luve and sterve. (I, 422, 424-7)Here Troilus shows his obedience to his lady. It has been argued that the idea of courtly love originated in the court of the Countess Marie of Champagne, who was amused by the idea of a world ruled by women where, as Benson says ‘ all the handsome young men faithfully served their ladies for the sake of love, rather than their loutish feudal lords for the sake of plunder.’ His humility is now to Cupid, having realised the folly of his pride. But does this make him more loveable? As the poem progresses Troilus is mostly accused of being melodramatic, for example: Yet Troilus for al this no word seyde, But longe he laye style as he ded were; After this with sikunge he abreyde… that in feereWas Pandarus, lest that in frenesieHe shoulde falle, or elles soone die. (I, 722-5, 727-8)Here the language Chaucer uses does seem very emotive, perhaps overly so. Compared to the assured refinement of, for example, Sir Gawain, Troilus seems ill-equipped to cope with the pangs of love. His lack of experience shows in this response to the pressures of unrequited idolatry – he seems to be incapacitated, as is physically evident in his stillness and, more, in the way he takes no action until goaded by Pandarus. Troilus is a curiously passive lover. It is debateable whether he is to be praised for his restraint, or condemned for indecisiveness. He seems weak, however, in that it requires all of Pandarus’ skill even to convince him to, for example, ride past Criseyde’s house. His immediate response to trouble is to go to his room and cry, as when he discovers the news that Criseyde has been traded: To bedde he goeth, and walwith ther and torneth in furie’ (V, 211)This makes

him less appealing. However, surely he works in the same way as Othello, who is equally incapable of coping with his Jealousy, or Macbeth who trips over his own ambition? The intensity of the scene is a tool used to show Troilus' workings and his destroyed naivete. His inactivity is symptomatic of the horror of the moment. Also to exonerate him from undue dramatics, the narrator backs him up by initially explaining the horror of his situation: Forthi ful ofte, his hote fir to cesse, To sen hire goodly looke he gan to presse; For therby to ben esed wel he wende, And ay the ner he was, the more he brende. (I, 445-8)Here we see the narrator explaining the burnings of Troilus' desire so that we are not tempted to condemn his whining. Troilus is a soul in genuine torment and his endurance is thus an admirable trait. One of the places where a reader is moved most is when Troilus stands on the walls of Troy, waiting all day, hoping to see his love riding towards him. Even though he seems a little foolish in his hopes, an audience can still sympathise with the plight of waiting in hope, of stretching out his hope even unto the closing of the gates of the city, and then the crushing sadness of his rejection. For a while his hope even re-lights anew each morning until he accepts his loss. This Troilus is the evocative hero, hurt and undeserving. It has been argued that the character expects too much of Criseyde to hope for her to fight her way out of the Greek camp and ride across no-man's land alone and vulnerable to come and visit him for a day. At times in the poem Troilus seems to force himself on Criseyde, paradoxically even whilst vowing to be obedient to her. He threatens her with his own death if she does not show him some sign of affection, and she consents in accord with her own desires. Troilus is a character of war: in the same world of Achilles and Hector there are enemies and foes; he sets about his entrapment of his lady with

aggressive self-sacrifice, almost as though she were the city to be conquered. And yet this is a result of Pandarus’ goading; perhaps it is true to say that Pandarus nudges Troilus into reacting in the only way he knows how; as though it were a military problem. His initial inactivity is symptomatic of his inability to deal with the problem as one of naked love. The narrator is important to this poem. As G. T. Shepherd suggests, the narrator is the only fully-developed character in the poem – he is … the only figure who reacts and changes with the sequence of events narrated’. He also goes on to comment interestingly that the narrator is ‘ both inside and outside the story’. It is true that the narrator speaks of himself when introducing the story, as well as acting the parts of characters later in the story. He is not always impartial. In the case of Troilus, it is important that the narrator emphasises this ‘ lawe of kynde’, as though to highlight that the events are outside of Troilus’ control. But the counterweight to this is the invisible third person exclaiming ‘ O blinde world, O blynde entencioun’. The narrator is as duped as Troilus. Shepherd suggests that to an ‘ inflammatory’ medieval audience the narrator must ‘ maintain throughout something of that initial naivete lest he be help responsible for the calamity.’ Troilus, then, rises and falls on the strength of his own character and is not manipulated by the fallible narrating figure. Troilus does not seem to have the same sense of fun that Criseyde and Pandarus have, and takes himself more seriously than they seem to do. Criseyde returns from her bedroom (where she has been reading Troilus’ initial love letter) to sneak up behind Pandarus, pull his hood, and exclaim ‘ Ye were caught er that ye wiste’. As Alfred David says, ‘ even such a light moment reveals her essential nature … she regards life as a most enjoyable game.’ This is a somewhat stark contrast to the ‘ proude

knyghte’ who takes himself so seriously that when he believes Criseyde dead he pulls out his sword and prepares to kill himself. Not all courtly lovers were so dedicated: much later by Shakespeare’s time he slyly remarked ‘ Men have died from time to time and the worms have eaten them, but not for love. ‘ Bearing this in mind, Troilus has become more a source of gentle mockery as the centuries have passed and the ideals been lost. The final stanzas of the poem show a curious ‘ disembodied laughter’. Alfred David comments that ‘ a poem in which the tragic hero’s ghost is permitted to laugh at the mourners of his death … expresses a qualified view of the tragic experience’ and suggests that ‘ Troilus’ celestial laughter is also at the expense of the reader’s tragic sensibility.’ More specifically Chaucer ends: And in himself he lough right at the woOf hem that wepten for his deth so faste, And dampened al oure werk that foloweth soThe blynde lust, the which may nat laste. This suggests a bitter mockery on the part of Troilus, rather than a cheerful laughter. Chaucer suggests that he mocks not only those that mourn for him, but all those that are in the thrall of ‘ blynde lust.’ Whether this is because he in retrospect believes his love was no more than lust, or that Criseyde’s was, is uncertain. Here he would mock himself and his old foolish heart. Instead perhaps he mocks them because he is certain of the purity of his love and its futile outcome. It is even possible that he finds the antics of the living amusing – whatever the truth, Chaucer’s strange ending to the poem is thought-provoking at the very least and leaves us uncertain of Troilus’ standing. The fact that he goes to the ‘ eighth sphere’ and not Tartarus, the Elysian Fields, Heaven, or even Hell is telling. Troilus is not a simple black and white character. Also interesting in this poem is the unusual ‘ double sorwe’ structure, rather than just being the tale of Troilus’

fall from grace. Troilus begins on what he believes to be an emotional peak. From here he falls in love and sinks into the depths of unrequited love. Next he gain his love and reaches a new and greater highpoint, and then with news of the swap for Diomedes sinks again to the floor. Only when he dies is he perhaps raised up again, as with his laughter Chaucer attempts to have both a tragedy and a happy ending. This makes a ‘ W’ shape. If we compare this to a graph of conventional morality, Troilus starts at the bottom with his pride and lack of self-knowledge. He is raised up by his falling in love to a level of understanding, and yet stoops to sex which is, if not technically adultery, then at least out of wedlock and morally extremely questionable. From here he loses his love and perhaps is raised a little higher as he stops committing this sin and his eyes are more open from the self-deceit he has been practising when he realises Criseyde has left him. At the end he sits in the ‘ eighth sphere’ where he was taken by Mercury and laughs at those he has left behind. This would seem to form a very rough ‘ M’ shape to complement the graph of his feelings. Troilus is the driving force in the poem and as Malone said ‘ movement of the poem conforms throughout to the feelings of its hero’ . Here Troilus seems to ricochet between euphoria and despair, making him a hard character to follow. His emotions are also so extreme that they can be hard to empathies with. Troilus is not a character who immediately yields to interpretation. He is an exponent of courtesy and courtly love, and yet one who seems almost to force Criseyde into her response to him. He cries alone in his room and can take no action without being pushed into it, and yet is a fierce and noble warrior, second only to Hector himself. Criseyde’s unfaithfulness drives him to his death but he does not find peace; instead his mocking laugh echoes throughout the poem. His

pride and arrogance are major flaws, and yet he pays for them. He is naive and foolish, and yet none can claim that he doesn’t get his comeuppance, even harder perhaps than he deserved. We are not encouraged to like him, and yet we must find sympathy for one so unhappy. He finds it nearly impossible to cope with the trials of love, and is finally rejected. Perhaps we appreciate him best when we see, just as all Chaucer’s characters, that he is human after all.