

Chaucer's troilus and criseyde: the frivolity of femininity



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To be female is to be frivolous and inconstant. This is the position that Geoffrey Chaucer takes in his love poem, "Troilus and Criseyde". The lovely Criseyde, with whom Troilus falls madly in love, is the epitome of frivolity and inconstancy, in her actions as well as her thoughts. Criseyde's own uncle, in reference to the wavering woman's heart, says that "keeping is as hard as winning [it]" (book3. verse234). Chaucer also uses symbolism: the moon parallels Criseyde's actions; it is ever-changing, like a woman's prerogative. Chaucer also reflects on the role of Fortune, who, having a feminine character, is constantly subject to whimsy and change. Chaucer's negative view of the female gender can clearly be seen throughout this tale.

Criseyde is the most significant example of Chaucer's perspective, and by far the most straightforward. She promises Troilus with many heartfelt words that she will forever be true to him, swearing to God that she will never stray: "For I am yours, by God and this true oath" (3. 216). She makes these vows with honesty in her heart: "All she said was said with good intent, / ... she spoke just what she meant" (4. 203). While this may appear to prove that she does not deceive her love when she leaves him for Diomedes, in truth, it only shows how fickle and frivolous a woman can be. When Criseyde chooses to leave her "love", Troilus, it is for very shallow reasons. She does not leave Troilus because she loves another:

The sayings of this sudden Diomedes,

His high position and the sinking town

...[which] thus began to breed

The reason why...she made it her intention to remain

(5. 147)

Criseyde chooses not to return to her beloved, as she promised time and again that she would. Criseyde is portrayed as quite petty; she leaves Troilus based on extremely superficial motives. To make matters worse, rather than immediately feeling sorrow towards Troilus or remorse for what she has done to him, she laments what her actions will mean for her own well-being. She thinks to herself that "no good of me, to the world's end, / will ever now be written, said, or sung / ...alas that I should suffer such a fall" (5. 152).

Chaucer rips away any pity that one might feel towards Criseyde by emphasizing her vanity and her inconstancy. She causes Troilus, a character that Chaucer has given readers no reason to dislike, such pain that he is "defeated and so woebegone" (5. 175). Troilus is faithful to his promise of love until his death, while Criseyde's feelings change dramatically.

Chaucer uses moon imagery to foreshadow the fact that Criseyde's heart will indeed change. The moon is frequently found in Chaucer's poem, and most often in a context that parallels Criseyde's decision. He uses phrases such as "change of the moon" (3. 79), and "bent was the moon" (3. 90) to weave in the idea that the moon is in a constant state of flux. He connects it to Criseyde's actions in order to show that she is also in constant transformation. Troilus "...every night rose up to see the moon/to say 'Yet moon, the night your horns renew/I shall be happy - if all the world is true'" (5. 93). He watches the moon to keep track of when Criseyde might return to him, but as the moon changes, so does his sweetheart's mind. Chaucer hints

at this when he writes, "in heaven still the stars were to be seen, / although the moon was paling, quickly too" (5. 40). This symbolizes the fact that while Criseyde still loves Troilus, her love will soon fade, and then disappear entirely. The moon, linked to femininity through its association with Criseyde, is constant changeing.

Another significant female character in the poem is "Fortune, to whom belongs the permutation / of things under the moon" (5. 221). Fortune, a female, is portrayed as quite fickle and mean-spirited. Her negative qualities far more obvious than Criseyde's; Chaucer refers to her as "Fortune the Inconstant" (4. 241) and rarely shows her being kind. The fact that she is feminine only adds to the negative light shed on women in this poem. Like Criseyde, she changes her mind, "for she began to turn her shining face / away from Troilus, took of him no heed, / and cast him clean out of his lady's grace, / and on her wheel she set up Diomedes" (4. 2). She is both cruel and frivolous, wont to toy with the hearts of men for her enjoyment. Chaucer believes that "Fortune had planned to dupe them, for her laughter" (5. 162). Not only is Fortune cruel, but she is cruel with a wicked degree of constancy, even though her very nature suggests a tendency towards continuous change: "For if her wheel should ever cease to turn/Fortune would then no longer Fortune be" (1. 122). With such negativity infused into both of the major female characters, it is clear that Chaucer has a remarkably negative opinion of women.

The events that made Chaucer despise women and believe them to be so fickle and inconstant are impossible to know. Chaucer's beliefs are, however, repeatedly expressed throughout the poem in statements both brazen and

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subtle. The negative portrayal of women persists to the very end, when Troilus dies and Criseyde is left alive with her new lover. The story is touching enough to bring one to tears; one can relate to Troilus and his lost love. Chaucer writes, in conclusion, that one should “ give your love to [God] ... / Since He is best to love... / What need is there in a feigning love to seek” (5. 264)? Because of the frivolity and inconstancy that Chaucer associates with femininity, he advises men to avoid love altogether.