

The role of allusions

Literature



Both Chaucer in *Troilus and Criseyde* and William Langland in *The Vision of Piers Plowman* make frequent allusions to other texts in their works. *Troilus and Criseyde* uses mythological figures and tales to foreshadow events and highlight characters' flaws in Chaucer's own story, whilst Langland adeptly uses the Bible to drive the tale of *Piers Plowman* and ensures to romanticise central characters to make them more appealing to his audience. This essay will explore the ways in which both authors allude to secondary texts and the role that each of the discussed allusions plays in their texts.

Pandarus plans to head to his niece Criseyde's house to tell her about Troilus, a great warrior who has fallen in love with her. Pandarus intends to set the two up. Initially, the reader is told that it is " May, that moder is of monthes glade" (50) and a month that is generally associated with love and new beginnings. However, Pandarus is reminded of his past, in which he had " a teene / In love" (61-2) and tossed and turned in his bed all night. This already highlights the negative impact love has on the characters' lives. Furthermore, Pandarus is awoken by " the swalowe Proigne, with a sorowful lay." This is in reference to the Greek myth of Procne, who was married to King Tereus. Her sister, Philomela, came to visit the couple but was raped by Tereus, who ripped out her tongue. In revenge, Procne killed her son and cooked him as a meal to her husband, who only found out what had happened after he had finished his meal. Tereus chased after the sisters in a fit of rage, so Procne and Philomela prayed to the gods to be turned into birds in order to escape Tereus's wrath. Procne was turned into a swallow and Philomela, a nightingale. Chaucer's brief allusion to this myth is debated, although it seems that the swallow Proigne sings to Pandarus to warn him.

As Elaine Tuttle Hansen points out in *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender*, modern readers are quick to believe that Criseyde is a victim of the men in her life, including her uncle and her lover; I would argue that she is, in fact, independent of these men and in no way victimises herself, as it would be so easy for her to do—instead, she declares “ I am myn owene woman, wel at ese” (750). In the end, it is Criseyde who takes advantage of these men, betraying them for her own desires. Proigne singing to Pandarus is a warning of the wrath of women: Troilus—and Pandarus, for that matter—will be his own hamartia, whilst Criseyde flitters away in pursuit of her own fate.

William Langland alludes to the story of the Crucifixion in *Piers Plowman*. In *Passus XVIII*, Will has a dream-vision in which he sees Jesus riding “ barefoot on an asse” (11). By comparing Jesus to Piers Plowman and the Samaritan, Langland suggests that Christ manifests Piers’s humility (riding on a mule) and the Samaritan’s empathy and generosity. The Biblical reference continues in the *passus*, when Jesus is “ nailed [...] with thre nailes naked upon the roode” (51). Will continues on to explain that everyone present at Jesus’s crucifixion “ were unhardy [...] / To touchen hym or to tasten hym or taken hym down of roode” (83-4) except for a “ blynde bachelor” (85), Longeus, who is spoken about in the gospel of John. Langland refers to the only gospel in the Bible in which Jesus is pierced after he has been crucified—John. The lance links to Jesus because the poem reveals that he has come to “ juste in Jerusalem [...] / And fecche that the fend claymeth.” (19-20) Of course, Jesus, as he appears in the Bible, is a non-violent figure; the Jesus of Wills’ dream-vision becomes a knightlike figure, embodying something of a redemptive character. The concept of Jesus as a knightly character is also

echoed in the line of Longeus, “ this blynde bachelor, that baar hym thorough the herte.” (85) By consciously referring to the only gospel that mentions Jesus being pierced, Langland ensures that his Jesus becomes a romantic, tragic figure, one that has died of a broken heart.

Another mythological figure Chaucer alludes to is Helen of Troy, who is used as a symbol to amplify Criseyde’s female sexuality and the hold she has over Troilus. Helen, who is actually featured in Chaucer’s tale, is a woman renowned for her beauty—so renowned, in fact, that there was a competition amongst her suitors for her hand in marriage. King Menelaus of Sparta eventually emerges victorious and they marry; however, after a period of time, she leaves Menelaus for Paris of Troy. Accounts differ over whether she eloped or was abducted. Interestingly, Ovid associates the killing of Procne’s son with the manic Bacchanals. Virgil, in *Aeneid*, also relates some of Helen’s actions with that of the Bacchanals. Bacchus is the god of religious ecstasy and ritual madness, and is thought to originate in Thrace, whose king was Procne’s husband. These symbolic women are both linked to Criseyde, and it could be said that the carnage the Thracian women celebrate in is something Criseyde is affiliated with. Valerie Ross contends that Chaucer is deliberately “ anti-misogynist” and that his “ reconstruction [...] of Criseyde [...] radically departs from his source-texts” and whilst it is true that Chaucer’s Criseyde differs from Boccaccio’s Criseida in *Il Filostrato*, the inspiration for Troilus and Criseyde, Chaucer is not constructing strong female characters who are seen in a positive feminine manner. In fact, Criseyde, whilst strong, MONOLOGUE ABOUT MEN is certainly not the heroine of the story. THE NIGHTINGALE COMFORTS HER I would argue that she is portrayed as something of a

femme fatale; she does not approve of domineering men and uses them herself to her own end. By alluding to her own Bacchic tendencies with the association of both Procne and Helen, Chaucer subtly portrays her as manic; and by setting her against Helen of Troy and the story of Philomela, her feminine sexuality is seen as a weapon. It can be argued that these attributes are that of a strong female character who does not need the men in her life to dictate her autonomy; however, it can equally be argued that being written as a manic, confused succubus is not an accurate representation of the work of an “ anti-misogynist” author.

Further into Will’s dream-vision, he descends into Hell with Jesus, where he is met by “ a wench” by the name of Mercy and her sister, Truth. Mercy explains that “ man shal man save thorough a maydenes helpe” (139), referring to Jesus coming to rescue the “ patriarkes and prophetes” (138) that had preached about him. Truth rejects Mercy’s explanation, crying that it is “ but a tale of waltrot” (142) and insists that Hell is a permanent place, referring to the book of Job 7: 9 in the Bible: “ For that is ones in helle, out cometh it nevere.” (148) Whereas Truth turns to the Old Testament to back up her argument, Mercy relies on an old Latin hymn to explain to Truth that Jesus has come to defeat Satan: he will “ bigile the gilour,” (161) and will overcome death. Mercy using a hymn suggests that she already knows the significance of the crucifixion of Christ and understands that he has come as a redemptive figure to save the patriarchs and prophets from Hell. This links to the idea of Jesus being a knightly character, and something of a romantic symbol. Christians believe that Jesus is the way to save one’s soul and enter heaven, so by romanticising him in Piers Plowman, Chaucer almost

inadvertently makes Christianity an attractive and appealing way of life as his audience comes to see Jesus as a heroic and loving symbol of the religion.