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Mythological Lovers in Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*

by

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Chauncey’s *Troilus and Criseyde* is often criticized by modern scholars for the abruptness of its epilogue rejecting earthly love. Paull Baum objects that the moral of the epilogue is not, in fact, the moral of the tale and suggests that Chaucer might better have concluded in the manner of the stilnovisti, with Criseyde as a transfigured “gloriosa donna.”¹

J. S. P. Tatlock protests that “the feeling of the Epilog is in no way foreshadowed at the beginning or elsewhere; it does not illumine or modify; it contradicts. The heartfelt worldly tale is interpreted in an unworldey sense.”² He is joined in that opinion by Elizabeth Salter, Dieter Mehl, E. T. Donaldson, and others, including Aldous Huxley, who refers to the “hurried and boggled conclusion” of the *Troilus.*³ B. L. Jefferson, D. W. Robertson, and Chauncey Wood, among others, have presented evidence that the message of the epilogue is, indeed, anticipated within the tale itself,⁴ but no one has mentioned the foreshadowing provided by Chaucer’s allusions to the classical tales of love. These allusions—to Oenone, Tereus and Procne, Orpheus and Eurydice, and Myrrha—do not occur in Chaucer’s main source for the *Troilus*, the *Filostrato* of Boccaccio. In light of the medieval use and interpretation of these myths, it seems likely that Chaucer added them not just for “local color” but for a purpose: to remind the reader that the love of Troilus and Criseyde must ultimately take its place among the “feynede loves” of pagan history.
Chaucer takes his reference to Oenone from the *Heroides* of Ovid, from which he quotes at some length. Attempting to assure the lovesick Troilus that he himself, although unsuccessful in love, can help him to win his lady, Pandarus recalls the letter of Oenone to Paris:

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"I woot wel that it fareth thus be me
As to thi brother, Paris, an herdesse,
Which that icleped was Oenone,
Wrot in a compleynte of hir hevynesse.
Yee say the lettre that she wrot, I gesse."
"Nay nevyr yet, ywys," quod Troilus.
"Now," quod Pandare, "herkne, it was thus:

" 'Phebus, that first fond art of medicine,'
Quod she, 'and couthe in every wightes care
Remedye and reed, by herbes he knew fyne,
Yet to hymself his konnyng was ful bare;
For love hadde hym so bounden in a snare,
Al for the doughter of the kyng Amete,
That al his craft ne koude his sorwes bete.'"
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(1.652–65)

Oenone is like Phoebus, of whom she speaks in her letter, in being a skilled physician who cannot heal herself of love; Pandarus, as he claims, is like them both, in being a skilled go-between who cannot attain his own ends. He uses the *exemplum* of Oenone in an attempt to recommend his services to Troilus, but in fact the story of Oenone had a well-established traditional meaning that would have been familiar to a medieval reader or auditor: in the Middle Ages, Oenone was an example of *amor stultus*, foolish love.

We may see this, first of all, in medieval glosses on the *Heroides* of Ovid. Nogara, Przychocki, Sedlmayer, Huygens, Alton, Ghisalberti, Judson B. Allen, and others print *accessus*, or introductions, to the *Heroides* that show that, from the twelfth century through the time of Chaucer and beyond, the epistolary laments of Ovid’s heroines were read as a collection of *exempla* offered for the instruction of medieval Christian
readers, who were to abhor the evil and imitate the good. If one may judge by the surviving *accessus*, it seems that the only heroine generally regarded as virtuous was Penelope; all of the others supply negative *exempla*. A typical *accessus* (ca. 1180) comments:

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Actoris [sic] intentio restat condemnare
Amores illicitos, fatuos culpare
Et recte ferventium mentes commendare:
Utilitas nostra sit iustum pignus amare.

Nobis quis sit titulus, satis declaratur:
Publius de publica fama nuncupatur
naso vel Ovidius satis declaratur,
Si nasi species vel visere nomen agatur.

Ethicae supponitur res libri praesentis
Notetur intentio duplex: nam monentis
Una manet, alia restat componentis
Penelopes Naso commendat facta querentis.7

[The intention of the poet is to condemn illicit love, to blame the foolish, and to applaud the right-thinking. It should be to our advantage to love justly. Now I will tell you what my name means: I am called Publius, as if from "public repute," and Naso or Ovid is well explained from the shape of the nose, or the word "seeing." This book deals with ethics, and it has two intentions: one is to warn and the other is to commend the complaint of Penelope.]
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This early *accessus* treats the conventional *topoi*—*intentio, utilitas, parte philosophiae*—in a way that was apparently widely accepted at least through the end of the fourteenth century; also echoed over hundreds of years was its condemnation of all the heroines except Penelope. When Oenone is cited by name in the *accessus*, it is a representative of *amor stultus*. An *accessus* from MS. Berol. Lat. 219, given by Alton, tells us:
The subject matter of this (book) is licit, illicit, and foolish love. Its intention is to praise certain women like Penelope for their licit love, to blame others like Phaedra, who loved Hippolytus, her steps-on, for their illicit love, and to rebuke others, like Phyllis and Oenone, for foolish love. For it is folly to love guests as Phyllis did, whence the saying, 'with guests no love is certain,' or to love boys, as Oenone did, because they are generally inconstant, in accordance with the variability of their age. This is the first intention.  

This is perhaps not as simpleminded as it first appears, since at bottom the admonitions against loving guests or young boys address the unstable nature of sudden love and the newefangleness of passion, carnal love—matters with which Chaucer is deeply concerned in the Troilus. Bellorini’s discussion of the Filippo Ceffi translation of the Heroïdes, probably used by Chaucer in composing this passage of the Troilus, quotes from the gloss on Oenone with which Ceffi introduces her epistle: ‘la ‘ntenzione dell’ autore fu di trattare di folle amare per suo insegnamento’ [the intention of the author was to treat of foolish love by her example].  

Such accessus were widely used by historians, commentators, and poets, and indeed it can be shown that the interpretation given to the tale of Oenone by Chaucer’s thirteenth- and fourteenth-century sources was the same as that of the writers of the accessus. In Petrarch’s Trionfi, Oenone appears in the ‘‘Trial of Love’’ in the company of the other
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Ovidian heroines: Phyllis, Medea, Hypsipyle, Helen, Laodamia. In this, the lowest in the hierarchy of Triumphs (Chastity triumphs over Love, Death over Chastity, Fame over Death, Time over Fame, and Eternity over Time), the condition of the lovers is pitiable. Petrarch’s narrator speaks as a mature man looking back upon the experience of his life; he shows us the young Petrarch, in his Dantean situation as visitor to the Elysian Fields, assuring his guide that “... the toils of love / Dismayed me so that I abandoned them, / My garments and my heart already rent.” Warned of the “flame [that] is lit for [him],” he does not understand that love for Laura, still in the future, will bind him in lifelong servitude on earth and will eventually show him the way to Heaven. His guide deplores the power of Cupid, “who rives us thus of life and liberty,” and says of Oenone and the rest of Cupid’s retinue: “Hark to the sighs and weeping, hark to the cries / Of these poor loving ones, who gave their souls / Into the power of him who leads them thus.” That Petrarch’s attitude toward the classical lovers is consistent may be seen in the sixth book of the Africa, in which Oenone appears among the shades near Byblis, Myrrha, and Orpheus. Petrarch says of her: “… as if still fearful of his foe’s pursuit / Paris in silence trod, and on his heels / imploring him, Oenone came in tears, / But he turned from her.” The moral that interprets her experience is the same one Petrarch pronounces on the tale of Sophonisba: “She died for love; she was cast forth from light / By force.”

Oenone appears similarly moralized in the Amorosa visione of Boccaccio, in which a celestial guide (Robert Hollander believes she may be identified with the Uranic Venus) leads the rather foolish and distractible narrator through the triumphs of Wisdom, Glory, Wealth, and Love in the hope that he will eventually abandon the pursuit of these things in favor of the “bene eterne.” (He never does.) In his Triumph of Love, Boccaccio makes use of no fewer than fifty-three famous couples of classical antiquity; Oenone, “weeping sadly for her lost husband” and “with pitiful words … vainly calling him back to her,” is accompanied by Paris and Helen, Ianthe and Iphis, and Laodamia. When the narrator expresses to his wise guide his pleasure in the vision—“Oh how worthwhile / it has been, seeing these various things, / which You said were full of great evil! / Now what could ever be more worthy than they, / what more wondrous to have / or to consider or to hear about?”—she responds:
The good which you sought, does it seem to you that you see it painted here? And yet these things are fallacious and without truth.

To me it seems that such looking has goaded your mind into false opinion, extinguishing all sense of duty in you.

You should seek no other good than that to which the strait way leads us, where you did not wish to go, hastening here instead.

Oh, how greatly does it delight the wise, gracious and eternal as it is! And I told you so, when you were in such a hurry to enter this place.

Now see that your eyes are no longer fixed on such joys; for if you were to study well whichever one you pleased with clear sight, it would be obvious to you that whoever puts his hope, unwisely, in such things as these has for company burdensome tribulations.

You blind yourself in much error with your false imagining of these present things; they are but ostentatious show.15

Both the Trionfi and the Amorosa visione are concerned with the problem of spiritual allegiance; in both, the exemplum of Oenone is monitory, intended to illustrate the danger of pursuing temporalia and the superiority of higher goals. The exemplum is used in the same way in the Echecs amoureux, a fourteenth-century French love-allegory, which remains unedited today but was partially translated by Lydgate as Reson and Sensuallyte. In this poem of spiritual pilgrimage, the narrator begins by straying westward from the eastern road to virtue on which he has set out under the guidance of Nature. He soon finds himself in a locus amoenus with four startlingly beautiful strangers, whom he discovers to be the goddesses Minerva, Juno, and Venus, escorted by Mercury. Mercury explains to him that he must lead the goddesses to Paris and give his own opinion of the correctness
of Paris's judgment. Unaware of the significance of the test and eager to offer his opinion, the narrator seeks out Paris—whom he finds reclining with Oenone in a valley of Mount Ida—elicits his judgment, and immediately ratifies it: "For I wolde ha do the same / Of equyte and no fauour, / Yif I hadde be arbitrour; / For she semys, shortly for to telle, / Al the tother doth excelle." This untutored reaction identifies him as under the unmediated domination of the "lawe of kynde," and Venus welcomes him warmly as her servant, a status he retains despite the warnings of Diana to the end of the fragment. Lest we miss the moral significance of the action, there is supplied before the judgment what amounts to a long gloss on this portion of the Echecs, describing the attributes of the three goddesses and identifying them with three "lustes": wisdom, riches, sensuality. Venus, of course, is associated with the last. Her power is so great that she can draw into her service "by violence" all who look upon her; "no diffence may avaylle" against her. The narrator, who has already been warned by Nature that sensuality "causeth men, who that can se, / Of wilfulnes euer amonge, / To go the weye that is wronge," accounts for his choice, from his present perspective of greater experience, by explaining that the dazzling beauty of the world made him forget Nature's admonitions: the "false, veyn pleasaunce / Of thy wordly vanyte" made him "dul of mynde." The poet of the Echecs probably derived his identification of the three goddesses with three ways of life from Fulgentius and the Vatican Mythographers, but it was of course conventional by his time; for the medieval reader, this gloss had become the accepted meaning of the judgment of Paris. No explicit moralization is attached here to the figure of Oenone, and she appears (as she does rarely, but occasionally) without her Ovidian sisters. But the context within which she appears is clear; she is associated with the locus amoenus whose beauty leads the pilgrim astray, and with Paris, whom the Echecs-poet uses in the conventional way as a classical exemplum of servitude to sensuality. The task of the pilgrim in the poem is the election of a way of life. Oenone is clearly "framed" by images of the sensual life, within whose context her tragedy is to be understood.

As I have tried to demonstrate in my book, The Myths of Love: Classical Lovers in Medieval Literature, the best-known classical tales of illicit, betrayed, or unrequited love (including the tales of the gods as
lovers, to whom Troilus appeals for help at the beginning of the third book) were moralized in the Middle Ages in essentially the same way, as monitory *exempla* of foolish love. They were glossed in other ways only for purposes of characterization. In the *Roman de la rose*, for instance, La Vieille employs the *exemplum* of Oenone’s betrayal by Paris as a prop to her argument that women should expect to be deceived by men and should be prepared to deceive them in turn (13215–29). The argument, and the moralization, are perverse; they serve not to instruct the reader in the generally accepted meaning of the classical tale but to expose the point of view of La Vieille as carnal, indeed corrupt. To medieval readers, who were thoroughly familiar with these very commonplace myths and their traditional interpretations, the Old Whore’s perverse gloss on Oenone would have appeared both humorous and pointed. In the same way, Pandarus’s attempt in the *Troilus* to convert the traditional *exemplum* to his own purposes would have alerted Chaucer’s readers or auditors to the nature of Troilus’s predicament and of Pandarus’s proffered “help.” In terms of the fiction of the poem, Pandarus’s evocation of misguided love and betrayal is unintentional; it is Chaucer’s learned joke on him. A similar joke is implicit in his attempt to reassure Troilus by means of the *exemplum* of Oenone, for the generally accepted medieval understanding of the classical tales of tragic love was anything but reassuring to lovers *paramours*. Troilus, however, is “nat textueel” and accepts Pandarus’s perverse mythography at face value; in fact Chaucer is at pains to establish Troilus’s ignorance of the moral significance of the myths. Having heard Pandarus out, Troilus objects peevishly that “‘thi proverbes may me naught availle’” (1.756); “‘Lat be thyne old ensaumples, I the preye’” (1.760). At length, of course, he accepts Pandarus’s arguments and his assistance.

The Ovidian lovers Tereus and Procne appear, like Oenone, in apparently fortuitous fashion at the beginning of the second book of the *Troilus*. Procne, the swallow, awakens Pandarus on the day he is to speak with Criseyde on Troilus’s behalf. The narrator, however, goes into far more detail than necessary for such an apparently casual allusion:

The swalowe Proigne, with a sorowful lay,
Whan morwen com, gan make hire waymentynge,
Whi she forshapen was; and ever lay
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Pandare abedde, half in a slomberyng,
Til she so neigh hym made hire cheteryng
How Tereus gan forth hire suster take
That with the noyse of hire he gan awake,

And gan to calle, and dresse hym up to ryse,
Remembryng hym his erand was to doone
From Troilus, and ek his grete emprise;
And caste and knew in good plit was the moone
To don viage, and took his weye ful soone
Unto his neces palays ther biside.
Now Janus, god of entree, thow hym gyde!

(2.64-77)

Today it may strike us as bizarre that, in the Middle Ages, the Ovidian story of abduction, mutilation, murder, gory dismemberment, trickery, and cannibalism should have been referred principally to matters of love, but in fact the tale of Tereus, Procne, and Philomela was moralized in much the same way as that of Oenone. The mythographer Giovanni del Virgilio offers the meter:

Naso per historiam incestum condemnat amorem
Et notat obscenus quam male finit amor...
Et veteram renovat cantu Phylomena querelam
Quodque latens coluit pergemit illa nemus.19

[In this tale, Naso condemns sinful love and takes note of how badly an impure love ends... And Philomela renews her ancient plaint in song, filling whatever grove she secretly inhabits with her laments.]

The *Ovide Moralisé* similarly identifies Procne and Philomela with "amour decevable et faillie."20 Bersuire, who likewise uses the myth to condemn illicit love, like many medieval poets and commentators appears not to make the (to moderns) crucial distinction between the degree of Procne’s and Philomela’s guilt and that of Tereus. He glosses Tereus’s
victims as "malae mulieres" who are said to have been transformed into birds because, in their confusion, they learned to fly, and specifically into swallow and nightingale (birds with sweet voices) because such bad women are accustomed to occupy themselves in singing and playing instruments.\textsuperscript{21}

J. L. Baird protests against the insensitivity of the mythographers, who impose reductionist interpretations upon the beautiful, tragic tale, but in fact such interpretations are even more plentiful in the general literary culture.\textsuperscript{22} The earliest example may occur in the Old French romance \textit{Yder} (ca. 1220), in which the maiden Guenloiens, stricken with love for Yder, laments her condition by recalling the poor "cheitives qui o toi [i.e., Cupid] sunt, / Qui s'occistrent par druerie" [wretches of your company, who killed themselves for love]: Dejanira, Canace, Echo, Scylla, Phyllis, Hero, Byblis, Dido, Myrrha, Procne, Thisbe, Hypermnestra, "et des autres mil e cinc cenz."\textsuperscript{23} Reproaching Cupid, she asks why he does not repent the harm he does; of all the gods, he alone sins. She concludes from these \textit{exempla} that "N'est pas [bien] seins qui d'amer fole" [It is not (good) sense to love madly] (2608), a conclusion that does not prevent her from continuing to do so. In a similar speech against the destructive power of love \textit{par amours}, the Fiammetta of Boccaccio's \textit{Filocolo} uses the myth of Procne and Philomela, among others, to refute the claim of the young lover Galeon that love increases virtue. Defining the love of which he speaks, she calls it "love for pleasure":

And in truth, nobody who wants to lead a virtuous life ought to submit to this, since it takes away honor, brings troubles, awakens vices, abundantly provides vain worries, and unjustly steals the liberty of the other person, which ought to be treasured more than anything else. Who then, for his own good, if he would be wise, would not flee such a master? Live free of him if you can, following those things which in every respect increase liberty; and let vicious servants follow vicious lords.\textsuperscript{24}

Over Galeon's protests, Fiammetta continues by turning the \textit{exempla} of the classical lovers (which he had adduced as proof that lovers grow in virtue) back against him: Mars acted unjustly in taking to himself the wife of another, Medea came to a vile end, Hercules was rendered
effeminate by love, and the actions of Tereus show that love knows no law and is capable of the greatest enormities. Cupid "leads every one of his followers to every evil"; "the beginning of this love is nothing other than fear, the middle is sin and the end grief and sorrow."

Such moralizations of the tale of Procne and Philomela are ubiquitous in medieval literature. Boccaccio alludes to it again in the excursus "Against Women" that follows the story of Samson in the De Casibus; in this case, Procne (along with Delilah, Eriphyle, Arachne, Amata, Phyllis, Scylla, Cleopatra, and Medea, among others) illustrates that "the female of the species is very greedy, quick to anger, unfaithful, oversexed, truculent, desirous more of frivolity than of wisdom." Its conclusion is a sermon much like Fiammetta’s on the control of unrestrained passion. Procne, Philomela, or both appear in similar moralized contexts in the lyrics of the late fourteenth-century Italian poet Simone da Siena and in Lydgate’s Reson and Sensuallyte. Invoking Cerberus as his muse (one thinks of Chaucer’s invocation to Tisiphone in the Troilus), Simone complains of the yoke “d’amor crudel, che me fa tanto torto” [of cruel love that does me so much wrong]. Such love caused the mulberry to change color, made murderers of Medea and Phaedra, converted Daphne into a laurel; it caused Aristotle to be ridden like a horse by a young girl, and Philomela to lament the cruelty of Tereus. On the basis of many such exempla, Simone concludes, much like Fiammetta: “chi prende questo Amor falso a seguire, / uccide il corpo e l’alma va all’inferno” [he who undertakes to follow this false love kills his body, and his soul goes to hell]. The names of the same tragic heroines of mythology occur to him whenever he thinks of the pains of love; in the lyric “O magnanime donne,” the lament of a young girl deceived by her lover, the fates of Thisbe, Byblis, Dido, Philomela, and Medea foreshadow the ultimate fate of the speaker, who dies in the end. She reflects that Philomela, at least, had her revenge, whereas she sees no way to avenge herself upon the faithless nobleman who has abandoned her. In Lydgate’s Reson and Sensuallyte the goddess Diana, who attempts to reason the erring lover out of his determination to serve Venus, uses the classical exempla to demonstrate “the sorowes and mysaventures, / The meschef, and the violences, / And the inconvenyences / That loves folkys han suffred”: Narcissus was drowned at the “mortal welle”; Pygmalion fell into “swich a rage” that he loved a statue, and Pasiphae a goat [sic];
Myrrha loved her father "vn-to hir confusion"; Phaedra, her son-in-law; Tereus, his wife's sister; and Scylla, her father's enemy. The mournful catalogue continues, but after every few items Diana reminds the lover to whom she speaks of the point of all these examples: recalling the folly of the lovers of antiquity, he should be instructed to "be war and come no nere" to the Garden of Deduit. The gloss on the \textit{Echecs amoureux}, the French love-allegory upon which Lydgate's poem is based, says of this passage: "One can also say that Tereus was gross and base for indulging thus in the vice of lust, which is a stinking, excremental, and abominable thing." (The lover does not, of course, take Diana's advice.)

In the \textit{Troilus}, Chaucer neither comments upon nor openly moralizes the song of the swallow, but his placement of the lines "How Tereus gan forth hire suster take" (2.69) and "Remembryng hym his erand was to doone" (2.72) hints at the underlying nature of Pandarus's "erand," recalling the suggestions made by the moralizations of the myth of Procne and Philomela that love has dangerous potential for violence and the breaking of oaths. The real nature of the "erand" is suggested, also, by the narrator's astrological allusion only fifteen lines above to the rape of Europa ("Whan Phebus doth his bryghte bemes sprede, / Right in the white Bole" [2.54–55]) and by his (apparently uninflected) appeal to Janus, "god of entree." The presence of Procne in such a context places us unequivocally in the realm of irrational love; we see Troilus as a foolish sufferer like the young Fiammetta, the maiden Guenloiens, or the lover of the \textit{Echecs amoureux}, who will not be instructed by the experience of others but who will serve Cupid until death or disaster overtakes him. Chaucer's narrator, who is clearly deaf to the warnings he gives his readers, will remain "the servant of the servants of love" until the spirit of Troilus teaches him a different sense of those words. Neither he, Pandarus, nor Troilus himself wishes to heed the implications of violence and betrayal conveyed by the old tales of love. To a medieval reader, they would have conveyed as well the nature of Troilus's passion; it is \textit{amor stultus}, the "blende lust" condemned by the epilogue.

Of all the classical tales of love to which Chaucer alludes in the \textit{Troilus}, the tale of Orpheus and Eurydice is the best known and most widely glossed. The history of its appearances in medieval literature has already been written; I will confine myself here to providing some indication of its conventional significance in medieval love poems. It is
Criseyde who evokes the myth of Orpheus in her first sorrowful speech after the announcement of her impending deportation:

though in erthe ytwynned be we tweyne,
Yet in the feld of pite, out of peye, 
That hight Elisos, shal we ben yfeere,
As Orpheus with Erudice, his fere.

(4.788-91)

Clearly, we are meant to recall the eleventh book of the *Metamorphoses*, in which the ghost of Orpheus seeks and finds his Eurydice in the fields of the blessed: “There they stroll together, side by side; or sometimes Orpheus follows, while his wife goes before, sometimes he leads the way and looks back, as he can safely do now, at his Eurydice.” This is the successful Orpheus, whom we will meet again in other persuasive speeches of lovers; but the name of Orpheus was not, in general, reassuring to lovers. Medieval allusions to the myth were most often based, not upon the vignette of the eleventh book of the *Metamorphoses*, the happy lovers in the Elysian Fields, but upon the remarkable tale of the tenth book, Orpheus’s harrowing of hell. Criseyde chooses her words carefully, but the medieval reader would have evaluated her intended meaning in the light of his or her own knowledge of the double signification of Orpheus; like the other allusions to the classical lovers, this one carries within it clues to the meaning of the poem’s action, a meaning inaccessible to its actors. Like those allusions, too, this one tends ultimately to subvert the rhetorical purpose the speaker means it to advance.

The Orpheus of medieval glossators was not a happy lover. He grew out of medieval interpretations, retellings, and elaborations of the story in Ovid’s tenth book. In the Ovidian account, Orpheus’s marriage to his beloved Eurydice is accompanied by ill omens; shortly after, while wandering in the meadows, she dies from a snakebite. Unable to overcome his grief, Orpheus descends to the underworld in search of her and addresses to Pluto and Proserpine a musical plea for her return. So sweet are his words and the music of his lyre that the ghosts weep and infernal activity ceases: Tantalus forgets to reach for the water, Ixion’s wheel stands still, the vultures leave off gnawing the liver of Tityus, Sisyphus sits idle on his stone, and the Furies are in tears. Touched by his plea, the king and
queen of the underworld grant it on condition that Orpheus not look behind him as he leads Eurydice out of Hades. He joyfully consents, but his love for her and his anxiety for her safety make him forget his promise. He looks back, and Eurydice disappears forever.

The interpretation given to this myth by generations of medieval writers, beginning with Boethius, centers upon the question of spiritual allegiance, precisely the central issue of the *Troilus*. Orpheus represents a man who aspires to the *summum bonum*. Eurydice is his soul (or, sometimes, his concupiscible faculty or even "sensuality" itself) that leads him into servitude to *temporalia*, or Hades. He can still raise his eyes to celestial things, but if he then looks back upon the things of the world, his soul is lost. This gloss on the myth is ubiquitous in the Middle Ages; versions of it are given by Remi of Auxerre, Arnulf of Orleans, Guillaume de Conches, Giovanni del Virgilio, Bernardus Silvestris, Coluccio Salutati, Raoul de Longchamp, the *Ovide Moralisé*, Boccaccio, and even Robert Henryson in a long moralization attached to his *Tale of Orpheus and Erudices his Quene*. It is so widely abroad in the general literary culture that it is simply assumed as the meaning of the myth of Orpheus as early as the eleventh century; the German preacher Amarcius, admonishing his readers to "flee the blind commerce of the world" and hurry to the place of true joy, does not even bother to explain his allusion to Orpheus:

Ne dicas "Cras incipiam bene vivere," sed nunc
Incipe, ne tardes . . .  
Qui presbitero nunc
Crimina, que gessit, profiteri negligit et qui
Nunc ex corde suos non vult deflere reatus,
Post obitum supplex poscet nec habebit.
Occidit Eurydice, postquarum respexit, et Orpheus
In cassum flevit.  

[Do not say, "I will begin to live well tomorrow," but begin now, do not delay. . . Who neglects to confess the crimes he has committed now and who does not weep about his offenses from the bottom of his heart? After death, the suppliant will neither ask nor possess anything. Eurydice fell back into death after Orpheus looked back, and he wept to no purpose.]
The understanding of the myth that would have been shared by Chaucer’s first readers is explained in this way by Henryson, whose source is Nicholas Trivet’s gloss on the *Consolation of Philosophy*:

Fair Phebus is the god of sapiens;
Calliope his wyf is eloquens:
Thir twa mariit gat Orpheus belyf,
Quhilk callit is the part intellectif
Of mannis saull, in understanding fre,
And separate fra sensualite.
Erudices is our effectioun,
Be fantasye oft movit up and doun—
Quhilis to resoun it castis the delyte,
Quhilis to the flesche settis the appetit.
Aristyus, this herd that couth persewe
Erudices, is nocht bot gud vertewe,
Quhilk besy is aye to kepe our myndis clene;
Both quhen we fle out throu the medowe grene
Fra vertewe to this warldis vane plesans,
Mengit with caire and full of varians,
The serpent stangis—that is dedly syn
That poysonis the saule bath without and in;
And than is it deid and eike oppressit doun
To warldly lust—all our effectioun.
Than perfyte resoun wepis wounder saire,
Seand our appetit thus-gate misfaire,
And passis up to the hevin belyf,
Schawand till us the lyf contemplatif,
The parfyt will and als the fervent luf
We suld have allway to the hevin abuf;
Bot seldyn thare our appetit is fund—
It is so fast unto the body bund;
Tharfore downwart we cast our myndis e,
Blyndit with lust, and may nocht upwart fle;
Suld our desyre be soucht up in the speris,
Quhen it is tedderit on this warldis breis,
Quhile on the flesche, quhile on this warldis wrak,
And to the hevin small entent we tak.
In the poems of love, lovers and their spokesmen ignore this traditionally accepted interpretation of the myth in order to construct a “lovers’ Orpheus,” a character who typifies the successful lover. This is Criseyde’s rhetorical strategy in the *Troilus*, but it may equally well be seen in any number of medieval poems of love. Simone da Siena, in a verse to a pitiless lady to whom his heart is “suggetto,” protests that Orpheus found mercy even in the realm of Pluto; why, then, does his beloved remain unmoved by his song? Similarly, Froissart’s narrator in the *Paradis d’Amour* humorously compares himself, the unsuccessful poet-lover, to Orpheus. He mourns:

Je ne sui pas Orpheüs  
Qui par ses cancons  
Et ses douls melodieus sons  
Endormi les dieus de la jus,  
Mais sui li las Tantalus,  
De qui li mentons  
Joint a l’aïge et voit jusqu’au fons  
Et n’en puet estre repeüs.39

[I am not Orpheus, who with his songs and his sweet, melodious sounds lulled to sleep the gods below, but I am the weary Tantalus, whose chin touches the water, and who can see to the bottom, and yet cannot satisfy himself.]

In Boccaccio’s *Amorosa visione* the narrator, a lover, prays to Venus that his song may be as sweet as that of Orpheus; later he meets Orpheus as one of the figures in the triumph of Venus, among such others as Jason, Ariadne, Phaedra, Pasiphae, Myrrha, and Cephalus and Procris. Seeing the great poet-lover, the narrator takes heart and imagines that the song of Orpheus—a song in praise of Love, in the style of the *stilnovisti*—is his own (*Am. Vis.* 2.8 and 23.7). Elsewhere, of course, Boccaccio moralizes Orpheus in conventional fashion; so does Petrarch, who, however, also makes use of the successful “lovers’ Orpheus” in a lament for Laura: “Would that I had so sorrowful a style / That I could win my Laura back from death / As Orpheus won his Eurydice without rhymes, /
For then I would live more glad than ever!" And Machaut, assuming
the voice of a lover for humorous purposes in the Confort d'ami, retells
feelingly and at length the tragic tales of the classical lovers, in each
instance concluding illogically with an exhortation to his friend to take
hope: If Orpheus had known that he could not win Eurydice, would he
have undertaken so perilous an adventure? Never! He was led into it by
Hope, the friend of lovers. Therefore let us serve Love in the hope of success
(see Confort 2277–2762).

The Orpheus invoked by Chaucer's Criseyde is of course this happy
and successful "lovers' Orpheus," who really exists for only an instant in
the myth itself. We cannot know with certainty whether Criseyde is deceiv­ing
both herself and her lover, or only Troilus, but it is certain that readers
of the Middle Ages would have recognized her allusion to Orpheus as the
foolish utterance of a vainly hopeful lover par amours. The common
element in medieval treatments of the myth of Orpheus is the emphasis
upon misplaced spiritual allegiance, which is also the central problem of
the Troilus. Chaucer's treatment of this theme, although pervasive, is
oblique, so that his mythical additions to the poem constitute an
important guide to its meaning. He does not set Troilus' s choice explicitly
within a framework of philosophical options, as Jean de Meun does for his
lover, but his allusions to the classical tales of love help to establish the
Troilus as what Monica McAlpine would call a tragedy of the will. It is
in the loss of his Eurydice, in the permanent and indeed stubborn mis­
direction of concupiscible appetite, that Troilus's tragedy consists. The
allusion to Orpheus anticipates the epilogue's message on spiritual choice:
"Repeyreth hom fro worldly vanyte" (5.1837).

Myrrha, the last of the classical lovers I will address, is evoked by
the narrator in the fourth book, as Troilus and Criseyde embrace in the
knowledge that they are soon to be separated:

The woful teeris that they leten falle
As bittre weren, out of teris kynde,
For peyne, as is legne aloes or galle.
So bittre teeris weep nought, as I fynde,
The woful Mirra thorugh the bark and rynde;
That is this world ther nys so hard an herte,
That nolde han rewed on hire peynes smerte.

(4.1135–41)
Again, I believe that the fictional speaker's intention in making this allusion—to gain the reader's sympathy for his lovers—is quite different from Chaucer's intention in putting the allusion into the speaker's mouth. Like Oenone, Procne, and Orpheus, Myrrha was one of a group of classical lovers whose significance in medieval thought was well established. We have seen her in passing as one of the chief attendants in Cupid's train, the troop of ill-fated classical lovers who are consistently moralized as exempla of amor stultus. In Ovid's telling, Myrrha is the daughter of King Cinyras of Panchaia, desired by many suitors but herself desiring only her father. In an agonized psychomachia, which Ovid describes minutely, she tries to persuade herself to abandon any thought of lying with her father, but when the opportunity arises—the festival of Ceres, when her mother must sleep for nine days apart from her husband—Myrrha has her old nurse introduce her, disguised as a courtesan, into her father's bedchamber. Several nights the two lie together, until at length Cinyras brings a lamp into the room, discovers her identity, and, enraged, pursues her with his sword. Myrrha flees, pregnant with his child, and after nine months of wandering prays to the gods to be changed into another form, "in case I should contaminate the living by my presence if I live, or the dead if I die." They hear her prayer and transform her into the tree that bears her name, the weeping myrrh. The tale ends with the birth of her child, Adonis, through a fissure in the bark.

Logically enough, the tale of Myrrha came to be associated in the Middle Ages with perverse or unnatural love; her example furnished rhetorical ammunition to many a preacher on the wicked woman. Petrus Pictor, an early twelfth-century pious poet, seeks in his long misogynist poem De mala muliere to prove by exempla from classical and biblical history that women are fundamentally wicked. Of course he makes use of the medieval commonplace that Samson, Solomon, David, and other biblical heroes were brought low by trusting in women, and in addition he enumerates the crimes of Phaedra, Byblis, and Myrrha in support of the proposition that "Femina mors mundi, mala femina fabula mundi, / Exitium, reges, insontes, federa, leges, / Attulit, orbuit, struit, soluit, uioluit" [Woman, the death of the world, evil woman, the talk of the world, brings destruction, breaks up kingdoms, ruins the innocent, dissolves harmony, violates the laws]. Similarly, Bernard of Cluny, in one of many passages in the De contemptu mundi
on the viciousness of women, uses Myrrha—with Jocasta, Phaedra, and Lycissa—as *exempla*:

Debita s exibus inferioribus heu! sibi dantes,
Haec nimis efferar crimina caetera justificarunt,
Myrrha, Jocastaque, Phaedra, Lycissaque, jam sibi plaudunt.43

[Believing that things are owed to them as the weaker sex, Myrrha, Jocasta, Phaedra, and Lycissa have justified other excessively savage crimes, and even take pride in them.]

Later in the century, Alanus uses the example of Myrrha—this time in the company of Helen, Pasiphae, Medea, and Narcissus—to demonstrate the perversity of all humankind, as Nature laments the subversion of her great plan by inordinate lust:

Myrrha, also, goaded by the sting of the myrrh-scented Cyprian, in her love for her father corrupted a daughter’s affection and played a mother’s role with her father. Medea, turning stepmother to her natural son, destroyed a beautiful little product of Venus to produce a work that brought Venus no glory. Narcissus, when his shadow faked a second Narcissus, was reflected in a reflection, believed himself to be a second self, and was involved in the destruction arising from himself loving himself. . . . This great multitude of men monsters are scattered hither and thither over the whole expanse of earth and from contact with their spell, chastity itself is bewitched.44

It is worth noting that, although this passage from the *De planctu* retains in its discussion of the myth the emphasis on perversion established in the early Middle Ages, it also puts Myrrha into the company of Helen, a classical lover not ordinarily called perverse. Alanus explains her appearance here by linking adultery, a perversion of morality, with other forms of unnatural love. His linking of Myrrha with Helen is a harbinger of later medieval treatment of her tale, which will account her simply
as one led astray by love, often without particular attention to the unnaturalness of her acts. At the beginning of the thirteenth century, Walter Map, in the letter to Rufinus “De non ducenda uxorore” included in the fourth part of the De nugis curialium, links his discussion of Myrrha to other myths of the love inspired by Cupid, both “natural” and “unnatural” in kind. Seeking to demonstrate that there are no longer any virtuous women (“Friend, there is no Lucretia, no Penelope, no Sabine left. Mistrust all”), he speaks of Myrrha as leading “an army of all the vices,” together with Europa, Leucothoe, and Venus as the deceiver of Vulcan.45 Petrarch in the Trionfi, at the same time that he places Myrrha in the company of the “unnatural” lovers Semiramis and Byblis, “oppressed with shame / for their unlawful and distorted love,” includes in the larger context all the passionate lovers of biblical and classical history.46 In the Africa, Myrrha is seen by Sophonisba in Hades in the company both of the “unnatural” Iphis and Byblis and the “natural” Orpheus and Eurydice (Africa 6.68).

For the most part, the Middle Ages identified Myrrha simply as a lover in thrall to Cupid; when her story was allegorized or moralized, it was usually seen as dramatizing the choice between chaste or Venusian love, between love of God and allegiance to Satan. Arnulf of Orleans and John of Garland both use the tale as the basis for moralizations on the bitterness of love; Arnulf notes that Myrrha’s son Adonis (identified with myrrh through the Greek adon, “sweet savor”) was transformed into a flower as a sign that amor caritativus has a sweeter savor than amor venereus (Allegoriae 10.10–11). John says simply: “Rem miram mirare novam Mirram per amorem / In mirram verti quam dat amarus amor” [It is a marvelous thing to see Myrrha changed by love to a myrrh tree, for love gives bitterness].47 Throughout the Middle Ages, even among the poets, Myrrha almost never appears unmoralized—and the moralization most often may be summed up in that economical line from the early thirteenth-century romance Yder: “N’est pas [bien] sens qui d’amér fol.” We have seen that Myrrha appears in that work, along with Procris and others of the classical heroines, as one of the exempla of tragic love in the lament of the love-struck maiden Guenloiens. She appears again in the Roman de la rose, in the long speech of Amans just before the conflagration of Venus. The context is this: Genius has delivered his sermon in praise of generation and has thrown down his firebrand, whose flame
"spread among everyone" (20668 ff.). The forces of Venus are heartened and ready to assail the castle, still guarded by Shame and Fear. Venus reviles these two guardians and aims her torch at the "narrow aperture" in the tower between the two pillars (an anatomical allegory that hardly requires a gloss). Considering the beauty of these pillars and of the image they support, the lover is moved to compare it to the image of Pygmalion, and he proceeds to tell the story of Pygmalion at great length, likening his desire for the inanimate statue to the desire of Narcissus for his own image in the fountain. The story of Pygmalion, of course, has a happy ending, and the lover finds that it augurs well for his own success; he appears otherwise oblivious to what the comparison between himself and Pygmalion (or Narcissus!) might signify and concentrates with relish only upon the delightful fulfillment of the sculptor's desire: Now the lover further recalls that Pygmalion's grandson was King Cynaras,

a good man except for one instance, whose happiness would have been complete if he had not been deceived by his daughter, the fair Myrrha, whom the old woman—may God confound her for having no fear of sin—brought to the king in his bed by night. The queen was at a feast and the king took the girl in haste, without knowing by any word that he was to lie with his daughter. It was a strange trick for the old woman to allow the king to lie with his daughter. After she brought them together, the beautiful Adonis was born of them and Myrrha was changed into a tree. Her father would have killed her if he had discovered the trick, but it could not happen so, for, when he had the candles brought, she who was no longer a virgin escaped in swift flight, since otherwise he would have destroyed her. But all this is very far from my matter, and I must draw back from it. By the time you have finished this work you will know what it means. 48

The medieval reader, of course, would not have had to finish the work to know that the traditional glosses on the tales of Pygmalion, Narcissus, and Myrrha all warn against idolatrous love; as often occurs in the Rose (and in Chaucer), the ancient tales refuse to cooperate with the intention of the teller. The lover rejoices gleefully with Pygmalion

33
and expresses self-righteous disapproval of Myrrha’s incestuous love, without perceiving that, in terms of Christian morality, the error of the two is at bottom the same. It is that fact which leads the poets to assort the classical lovers paramours—successful or unsuccessful, incestuous or not—together in Cupid’s train, and to moralize upon their common servitude to Love. It is to such use that the poets of the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries put the myth of Myrrha. In the Echecs amoureux she appears as one of the monitory exempla in the speech of Diana, who seeks to dissuade the lover/narrator from following Venus. In Boccaccio’s Amorosa visione, another poem of spiritual pilgrimage, she appears in Cupid’s train, an exemplary group of sufferers whose moralization by the narrator’s celestial guide we have already seen. Examples might be multiplied: Myrrha is also to be found in Boccaccio’s De casibus, in “a gathering of the mournful” described as “examples to all the world of the overturn of Fortune,” and in the Elegia di madonna Fiammetta, in which the speaker, a young noblewoman tortured by desire for her faithless lover, seeks to “give examples to those who are happy, so that they will practice moderation in the use of their goods, and avoid becoming like me.”

She appears, too, in a moralizing poem of Simone da Siena, who preaches “contra i giovani presi d’amore carnale, e seguitanlo in opere loro” [against young people seized by carnal love, and following it in their acts]. Simone ends his poem in much the same way that Chaucer ends the Troilus: “Know yourselves at last, foolish people, and teach your hearts to love truly, to abandon cupidity and the vanity of the world!”

The moralization traditionally attached to the tale of Myrrha is omitted by medieval writers only in the complaints of lovers or their spokesmen, uttered by speakers incapable of attaching moral significance to the tales of love because they have themselves rejected the counsel of reason to become servants of Venus. Simone da Siena, who as we have seen both knew and used the traditional moralitas on the tale, omits it in one of his poems, the complaint of a young girl enamored of a “pellegrino garzone.” She pleads for his love, protesting that no one has ever suffered as she does: Myrrha, Thisbe, Dido, Phaedra, Ariadne, and Phyllis are famed for their love-suffering, but her fame will be greater than theirs because her lover’s cruelty—like her own sorrow—is greater. She draws no other conclusion from the myths, and her speech ends when she feels the Furies clutch at her hair to draw her down.
into the inferno—a dramatic lover’s death. Lydgate’s speaker in the “Complaynte of a Louers Lyf” and the “Complaint, for Lack of Mercy” alludes to Myrrha in an attempt to reinforce the familiar lover’s moralitas on the ancient tales of love: none has suffered as I do. It is precisely the point of the narrator in the Troilus, who commiserates with his lovers as, threatened with separation, they weep tears more bitter than Myrrha’s. It is the voice of the lover—or, in this case, of the ami—who cannot see through the letter of the tales to their meaning.

It should by now be apparent both that Chaucer’s allusions to classical lovers in the Troilus are meaningful and that they are governed by conventions observed by medieval writers of all kinds. The lovers Oenone, Procne, Orpheus, and Myrrha, as well as certain of their companions from the Heroïdes, Metamorphoses, and Aeneid, were interpreted throughout the Middle Ages as exempla of amor stultus, foolish and socially destructive love. It is certainly not the case that they were interpreted in that way by mythographers and not by poets; we have seen a number of examples in which the poets moralize them in one context and leave them unmoralized (or moralize them perversely) in another. The meaning of these myths was always the same, and it was known to the mythographers, to the poets (groups which, in any case, overlapped a good deal), and to all their educated readers. Whenever these myths appear in a medieval literary work, we are in the realm of amor stultus. When the speaker himself is aware of that, he will give the myths their traditional gloss. When he is a lover par amours, an ami, or the partisan of lovers, he will gloss them perversely or not at all. Knowledge of this convention can be of considerable value in interpreting medieval poems in which the classical lovers appear. Pandarus’s allusion to Oenone, for example, says less about Oenone—whose identity as a foolish lover had been well established for centuries—than it says about Pandarus, who actually trots out the exemplum in an attempt to comfort Troilus, or about Troilus himself, whose willful indifference to traditional wisdom makes him pliant in the hands of his foolish friend. Criseyde similarly characterizes herself as foolish and self-deceiving by her reference to the successful “lovers’ Orpheus,” and the narrator reveals himself as unreliable through his simpleminded “lover’s gloss” on the myth of Myrrha: however greatly she suffered, his lovers suffered even more. To medieval readers, these myths and their misuse by irrational speakers lacking in
objectivity would clearly have foreshadowed the message of the epilogue:

O yonge, fresshe folkes, he or she,
In which that love up groweth with youre age,
Repeyreth hom fro worldly vanyte
And of your herte up casteth the visage
To thilke God that after his ymage
Yow made.

(5.1835–40)

NOTES

5. This and all quotations from the works of Chaucer are from Larry D. Benson, ed., The Riverside Chaucer (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).


11. Trionfi 1.1.145–47; Wilkins, Triumphs, 11.


31. F. N. Robinson notes (*Works* 818) that “the epithet ‘white’ has been traced to Ovid’s description of the snow-white bull in the form of which Jupiter visited Europa (*Met.* 1.852). But the reason for the association is not obvious.” I believe, of course, that the allusion to Jupiter’s amorous adventures in this context is calculated.
33. The importance for the *Troilus* of the myth of Orpheus, interpreted in the Middle Ages as a parable of each person’s choice of carnal or spiritual allegiance, is shown by the fact that all of the characters of the myth appear in Chaucer’s poem.
34. By Remi and Guillaume in their commentaries on the *Consolation of Philosophy* 3, Mtr. 12; by Arnulf in *Allegoriae super Ovidii Metamorphosin* 10.1; by Bernardus in the *Commentum super sex libros Eneidos* 6.119–20; by Salutati in the *De laboribus Herculis* 4.5–7; by Raoul in his *In Anticlaudianum Alani commentum* (MS. B. N. Paris 8083, fol. 101v.–102r.); by the *Ovide Moralisé* 10.220–57; by Boccaccio in the *De genealogia deorum* 5.12; and by Henryson in *The Tale of Orpheus and Erudices his Quene*, lines 415–633.


46. Trionfi 1.3.76 and passim.


