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State of Love and Love of State in Chaucer's Epic, Troilus and Criseyde

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State of Love and Love of State in Chaucer’s Epic, *Troilus and Criseyde*

Robert Allen Fuller

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

State of Love and Love of State in Chaucer’s Epic, *Troilus and Criseyde*

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Chaucer scholars have long recognized the generic complexity of *Troilus and Criseyde*, but they have tended to read it primarily as a tragedy or romance or as a text whose genre is *sui generis*. The following essay attempts to read *Troilus and Criseyde* as an epic and to articulate how such a generic lens would reorient readings of the text. To do so, fresh definition is given to the term “epic,” and insights from genre theory are drawn upon. Ultimately, *Troilus and Criseyde* is an epic poem because it invests within the composite hero of two lovers the fact that societal stability depends in part on romantic involvement.

Keywords: Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde*, epic, genre, genre theory
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ye holden regne and hous in unitee</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benigne Love, how holy bond of thynges</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virgile, Ovide, Omer, Lucan and Stace</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The question of genre in *Troilus and Criseyde* is a fraught but inevitable one. The narrator tells readers that he is writing “a sorwful tale” (I.14), a “storie” (II.31), a “litel bok” and “litel myn tragedye” (V.1786).¹ What should the modern reader make of such terms? A good first step would be to understand what these words meant to Chaucer and his contemporaries: for example, “storie” indicates *history*, and “tragedye” often referred to the idea in Boethius that a narrative begin in prosperity and end in ruin. After the philologists do their work in explaining these terms in medieval contexts, the literary critics are faced with the challenge of interpreting how *Troilus* lines up with other “stories” and “tragedies.” Since “story” today means the opposite of “history” and “tragedy,” as informed by Greek and Elizabethan playwrights, means something quite different from what *Troilus* is, despite efforts to read the poem dramatically, it would be misleading to call *Troilus* a “story” or a “tragedy” without doing violence to modern English usage. Even when philologists explain these different in terminologies, it is impossible for contemporary readers to not bring their current generic expectations into play as they interpret *Troilus*. Literary critics need to help mediate the expectations of modern readers with medieval texts since the generic labels assigned to the poems are crucial; after all, one’s understanding of a poem’s genre fundamentally alters one’s interpretation.

It is well known that in *Troilus* Chaucer draws on a variety of sources, including sources representing various genres as diverse as Boccaccio’s *cantare*, Roman epics, vernacular romances, histories, lyrics, and Boethian philosophy. This state of affairs results in Chaucer’s poem exhibiting a special inclusiveness of genres. This layering of genres in the poem, the combining, quoting, absorbing, transcending of genres, is a unique part of the nature and meaning of *Troilus*. Indeed, Susanna Fein and David Raybin have highlighted the need to

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¹ All citations to *Troilus and Criseyde* and to *Il Filostrato* come from Windeatt. Any translations are my own.
“refin[e] our narratives about how Chaucer . . . manipulated genre” as being one of the current frontiers of Chaucer criticism (vii). However, even though scholars generally recognize that *Troilus* is generically complex, they tend to give emphasis to one genre, usually romance or tragedy, at the expense of others, or to claim that the genre of *Troilus* is *sui generis*.

The problem with pigeon-holing *Troilus* into “romance” or “tragedy,” or with claiming that *Troilus* is a genre unto itself, is the misrecognition of how genres constitute themselves. Genre theorists have come to understand that the aim of genre criticism should not be to determine which sole genre a text “belongs” to. Instead, texts are seen as participating in a dynamic a genres, somewhat like the stars which constitute a constellation. Genre analysis should consider a text’s potential participation in multiple genres—not to classify but to clarify traditions and affinities—allowing richer, deeper, and fuller understandings of the text across differing cross-sections of literary space and time. Genre theorists maintain that genres (1) prefigure interpretation, (2) simultaneously inhabit and transcend local historical contexts, (3) exist interdependently, and (4) engage texts with complex multiplicity (see esp. Hirsch, 76; Frow, 2; Duff, 19–20). Since *Troilus* is unusually generically complex, readers must be sensitive to the full panoply of genres in which the poem participates.

Recently, Lee Patterson has argued for the inappropriateness of reading *Troilus* as a romance or as a tragedy, if by tragedy a reader assumes the simplified Boethian formulation of a poem beginning with prosperity and ending in ruin. He redefines the term “tragedy,” arguing that *Troilus* could be a tragedy because of Chaucer’s concentration on historical dimensions in the narrative; indeed, Chaucer “thought of [*Troilus*] as analogous to the great classical epics” (250). Patterson takes this cue from C. S. Lewis, who was the first to recognize that in rewriting Boccaccio’s *Filostrato* Chaucer approaches his work as a “historical poet” (19), but Patterson
thinks Lewis does not go far enough in considering *Troilus* as an engagement with historical discourse. Chaucer certainly has more interest in Trojan history and its contemporary relevance than does Boccaccio, for Boccaccio has virtually no interest in it at all. At the time he was writing *Il Filostrato*, the Italian poet sent a letter that contained poorly masked expressions of disgust for noble families of Italy who claimed their lines descended from Trojan heroes (see Wallace, 176; also *Fil.* VIII.31). Chaucer, despite moments in *Troilus* when he would seem to be deflecting the relevance of history for his story, diligently maintains the texture of his classical context, which includes nearly a hundred classical allusions that are absent from Boccaccio. Likewise, Chaucer consistently reminds the reader throughout of the historical significance of his narrative by using the archetypal epic setting of Troy under siege as the story’s backdrop. In Chaucer’s day the Trojan War was considered not only the start of secular history, but the events at Troy also represented the origin story for England itself, with Brutus of Troy the founder of London (also known as Troia Nova).

Patterson’s argument is compelling because it dispels problematic generic labels, which scholars have previously applied to the poem, with historical evidence. He considers the wide range of meanings that “tragedy” could have in the Middle Ages and recognizes that there were uses of that term beyond Boethius which would justify Chaucer dubbing *Troilus* a “tragedye.” (The best explication of what “tragedy” meant to medieval writers is given by Alexander Gillespie, whose findings are summarized below in a more appropriate context.) Patterson argues that what matters is that Chaucer is writing, to use the modern term, an “epic,” but Patterson insists on using the non-anachronistic term, “tragedy.” I find this insistence to be a weakness in Patterson’s argument because while Patterson maintains that “tragedy” (correctly understood) is the appropriate label, he argues from a historicist impulse that privileges generic terms that
Chaucer himself actually used. Patterson has done much to show that Chaucer is indeed interested in the problem of history in *Troilus*, but in failing to call the poem an epic he has overlooked a key to understanding the poem. As long as critics insist on reading *Troilus* as a tragedy, there will continue to be mislaid emphasis on the plot’s structure and on the psychologies and fates of the characters at the expense of the Chaucer’s own epic consciousness and the poem’s primary thematic concerns. In *Troilus*, I argue that Chaucer is doing more than engaging historical discourse: he is consciously writing in a heroic mode and epic style. Chaucer writes a poem that uses legendary material to weigh in on the process of history as it pertains to the development of his present day—he writes, in other words, a consciously Virgilian epic.

Though Chaucer’s audience would not have used the term “epic,” for modern readers it activates appropriate expectations about tensions between state and domestic relations. By closely reading three key passages—the proem to book III (1–49), the hymn to love with the verses that surround it (III.1240–1309), and the poem’s epilogue (V.1765–1869)—I redirect Patterson’s argument from a historicist approach to a hermeneutic one informed by modern genre theory by exploring how “epic” serves better for understanding *Troilus* than does “tragedy,” for the latter does not capture the former’s sense of a poem that both embodies within its heroes the fundamental values of a society and also provides historical explication for how those values came into being. Chaucer’s fundamental concern in *Troilus* is to ask if and in what way it is possible to reconcile the irreducible tension, deeply inscribed by classical poets into epic discourse, between obligations of personal romance and societal duties. Chaucer embodies this concern by making Troilus and Criseyde (not one or the other) the narrative’s composite hero.
I. Close Readings.

In the following close readings, I argue that *Troilus* presents Chaucer’s epic consciousness from the opening lines through the last stanzas. I also argue that while epic consciousness ranges from the poem’s beginning to its end, Chaucer’s epic concerns are most concentrated in book III. The following sections focus, therefore, on these claims: (1) the proem of book III marks a shift in register and theme that turns the poem more fully into epic discourse; (2) the central stanzas of book III serve to raise Criseyde to heroic status, making both her and Troilus the poem’s composite epic hero; and (3) while book III constitutes the main material of Chaucer’s epic, the conclusion nevertheless continues the poem’s epic focus.

1. *Ye holden regne and hous in unitee* (III.29)

Chaucer’s epic consciousness (i.e., the sense that he is writing in the tradition of poets primarily concerned with presenting societal virtue through heroic action) enters the poem from its very first lines with a statement of theme—a syntactical structure of complement preceding the verb, of lofty inversion and delay, echoing the openings of the epics by Virgil, Lucan, and Statius:

The double sowre of Troilus to tellen,
That was the kyng Priamus sone of Troye,
In loynge, how his aventures fellen
Fro wo to wele, and after out of joie,
My purpose is, er that I parte fro ye. (I.1–5)

But it is not until the proem of book III that Chaucer fully turns his poem toward a high epic mode, making the audacious claim that love holds both “regne and hous in unite” (III.29). This line stands as representative of the poem’s epic ethos because it captures Chaucer’s primary
concern with a sense of community, in which the political and domestic, public and private, state and family are interlocked. And the line is audacious because it diverges markedly from the epic ethos of Chaucer’s Roman predecessors, who considered romantic love anathema to the welfare of the state. Though Chaucer writes an epic that looks quite different from his classical models, both parties write epics because they have in common the fundamental concern for articulating the historically conditioned why behind a present system of values. By considering three aspects of the proem—Chaucer’s changes to Boccaccio, his invocation of the muse, and his treatment of Venus—it becomes clear how epic conventions in the opening of book III marks a significant shift in the poem that simultaneously alters one’s reading of the first two books while also establishing expectations for how to read what follows.

In the first two books of the poem, Troilus falls in love with Criseyde but requires Pandarus’s help in wooing her. After nearly 3,000 lines, Troilus and Criseyde still have not met, but book II ends with Pandarus leading Criseyde to Troilus, who waits anxiously in a bedchamber. When book II breaks off, Chaucer surprisingly inserts forty-nine lines of praise and invocation to Venus and Calliope, where Boccaccio had simply continued the story. In book III of Il Filostrato, Troilo does sing a hymn to love in front of Pandaro after he and Criseida have consummated their love, but not until stanzas 74–89. Chaucer indeed uses this song but cuts the last ten stanzas out (80–89) and moves the first six (74–79) from the end of the book to its opening. This move makes Troilo’s song to Venus after the consummation of his affair with Criseida the preface to the whole third book of Troilus and Criseyde. The significance of this transposition should not be lost as it signals the process Chaucer went through in recognizing an organizing force in Fil. III.74–79—the idea that love itself should take center stage in an epic-historical poem—which caused him to use these lines as an introduction to the central book of
his poem. (Troilus still sings a hymn after the consummation scene, but Chaucer instead uses a
song based on Boethius’s *Consolatio* [II.8; see TC III.1744–50].) Nor should we lose sight of
the uncharacteristic literalism with which Chaucer renders these lines into English. Due to such
literalism, the changes Chaucer introduces when translating *Fil*. III.74–79 become all the more
interesting because the evidence suggests that Chaucer rewrites Boccaccio to introduce a clearer
connection between the affairs of state and affairs of the heart.

Several changes occur in the opening stanza of book III, which corresponds with *Fil*. III.74:

O luce eternal, il cui lieto splendore
fa bello il terzo ciel dal qual ne piove
piacer, vaghezza, pietate ed amore,
del sole amica, e figliuola di Giove,
benigna donna d’ogni gentil core,
certa cagion del valor che mi muove
a’ sospir dolci della mia salute,
sempre lodata sia la tua virtute.

O blissful light, of which the bemes clere
Adorneth al the thridde heuen faire;
O sonnes life, O Ioues doughter deere,
Plesance of loue, O goodly debonaire,
In gentil hertes ay redy to repaire;
O veray cause of heele and of gladnesse,
I-herayed be thy myghte and thi goodnesse.

The first change is in how Boccaccio and Chaucer refer to Venus, the former with the appellation
“luce eterna” (*Fil*. III.74.1) and the latter with “blisful light” (*TC* III.1). Chaucer removes the
transcendent term “eternal,” replacing it with “blissful,” to imply his poem’s embeddedness in
history and time and to emphasize sensual, as opposed to ethereal, interactions between people.
Though Chaucer uses *Troilus* to articulate how love is a necessary ingredient for institutions to
sustain themselves over time, he does not offer a simple remedy for the tensions between erotic
relations and political obligations. To be clear, *Troilus* does not represent an attempt to cleanly
reverse the primary concern of public responsibility with that of private love. Rather, it
prescribes an emphasis on the neglected (in previous epics) necessity of romantic attachment for
the state’s welfare. This prescription, however, does not completely alleviate the inevitable ruin
of the state; it only delays it. Yet there are merits to delaying ruin, and romantic love within a
political context should therefore be protected, despite the vision of the poem remaining tragic.
Chaucer cannot imagine a resolution to the irreducible tension between interpersonal
relationships and societal obligation, but he still argues for new ways of conceiving the problem.
So though his epic audacity verges on hubris, Chaucer nevertheless desires to consider the
problems he raises in a pragmatic way: “luce eterna” is too ethereal and “blisful light” comes
nearer the truth.

The next change occurs at line 5, where Chaucer renders Boccaccio’s “beninga donna
d’ogni gentil core” (Fil. III.74.5) as “In gentil hertes ay redy to repaire.” The line echoes Dante’s
“Amor, ch’al cor gentil ratto s’apprende” (Inf. V.100) but is closer to Guido Guinizelli’s “Al cor
gentil rempaira sempre amore,” which Dante cites in the Convivio (see IV.20). The semantic
differences between Chaucer’s and Boccaccio’s text are less significant than the change itself,
which signals the care that Chaucer took in composing this first stanza. Either he struggled to fit
Boccaccio’s line into the rhyme royal and found the similar sentiment from Convivio more
congenial, or it is a coincidence that both he and Guinizelli use the word “repair.” In any event,
Chaucer’s change from Boccaccio renders further deference to the power love has to enter hearts
and bind them up.

There is a third change to the first stanza, appearing at line 6: “O veray cause of heele and
of gladnesse” from “certa cagion del valor che mi muove / a’ sospir dulci della mia salute”
(Fil. III.74.6–7). While Boccaccio writes two lines that focus on the personal effect “a sure cause
of valor” has on Troilo, Chaucer condenses the statement into a single, generalized statement spoken by the narrator. Love is not only the power which motivates sighs in the chivalric lover; it is also the cause for health and gladness in all things. It is as if Boccaccio fills the first stanza of Troilo’s hymn to love with stock expressions of medieval romance, whereas Chaucer uses conventional material from romance to recast it toward a different purpose. It has already been noted how Chaucer inserts historical discourse back into Boccaccio’s Troy story to assert an epic consciousness for the poem. Here we see another evidence for the insertion of that epic consciousness: instead of adding an effect of history to Boccaccio’s narrative, “O veray cause of heele and of gladnesse” marks an epic move from the strictly personal to a more communal concern. The inquiry imbedded in Troilo’s exultation—whence these sighs of mine?—shifts in Chaucer to a more dramatic questioning—whence health and joy at all? The answer: love itself.

The epic concern continues in the next two stanzas as Chaucer alters the role of deity relative to human relations. Because the second stanza follows Fil. III.75 almost exactly, the change Chaucer makes to Fil. III.75.7 is a slight but vital one. Boccaccio includes gl’iddii, “the gods,” in the catalog of living creations; Chaucer, however, alters the line from “the gods,” who sense love in a pleasing season (nel tempo piacente), to “God,” who himself “loueth, and to loue wol nought werne [refuse]” (III.12). This change puts God in a causal relationship with the last two lines of the stanza: “And in this world no lyues creature / With-outen loue is worth, or may endure.” Deity becomes not another evidence of love as a force, but the motivator behind love and thus the means by which living creatures may endure and have value. This change marks Chaucer’s epic consciousness of the intervention of deity in the affairs of the heart, which is a notable shift from more secular attitudes toward love often found within romances. What’s more, Chaucer singularizes not only Boccaccio’s iddii but every creature in the catalog—uomini
becomes “man,” *fiere* becomes “beste,” and so on—suggesting a unity among things. In the third stanza (*Fil. III.76; TC III.15–21*), the effect of love on Jove has different outcomes: in Boccaccio, love makes Jove “gentle towards those actions of us mortals that offend him, and so you turn well-deserved woe into glad and delightful rejoicing”; in Chaucer, love makes Jove “amorous . . . on mortal thyng.” Though different from the reference in the second stanza to God, this change nevertheless signals again the role deity plays in amorous relationships. Later in book III, Chaucer makes another addition to Boccaccio where he has Troilus tell of Jupiter’s liaison with Europa (see 722–24). That story indicates Chaucer’s concern for the relationships between erotic love, divine intervention, and state formation—three topoi, when put together, that constitute major features of Chaucer’s epic consciousness.

Finally, changes in the last three stanzas (*Fil. III.77–79; TC III.22–38*) offer further evidence that Chaucer rewrites Boccaccio to introduce a clearer connection between the affairs of state and affairs of the heart. For example, both Chaucer (III.22–23) and Boccaccio (III.77.1–2) recognize love’s mollifying effect on Mars (a metonym for political conflict), but Chaucer shortens Boccaccio’s two lines on Mars to one so he can add this relevant corollary: “And as you list ye maken hertes digne.” Not only does love reduce the level of state conflict, it simultaneously cultivates nobleness of heart. The next stanza presents the reader with similar material, except Chaucer first reduces Boccaccio before expanding him. In *Fil. 78.1–2*, Troilo says how love “holds houses and cities and kingdoms and provinces and all the world in unity.” As with the change from “luce eternal” to “blisful light,” Chaucer lessens Boccaccio’s rhetorical flourish by removing the reference to *il mondo tutto*. Chaucer is not wrestling with global or ahistorical issues: he is concerned with the relationship between lovers within domestic politics. Chaucer also collapses Boccaccio’s “houses, cities, kingdoms, and provinces” to the simpler yet
crisper juxtaposition of “regne and hous.” (Note too how as before Chaucer singularizes Boccaccio’s plurals, suggesting further unity.) At the stanza’s close, Chaucer replaces Troilo’s loftier philosophical reflections (“onde il costrutto vi metti tal” [III.78.6–7]) by wondering “how it may jo [come about that] / She loueth hym, or whi he loueth here” (III.33–34). True, love governs the cosmos and leaves one in awe, but love also plays (the hapax legomenon “jo” may come from joer) an inevitable and inexplicable role in individual lives, which is a dynamic that needs to be accounted for in the grand movements of governance. Who knows how the spark of love between individuals first starts any more than why one fish and not another “comth to were [weir, trap]” (III.35)? Yet there is a law “set in vniverse” (III.36) that fish and lovers get caught in such webs. Chaucer knows of this law from observing not so much the cosmos, as Boccaccio emphasizes, but by seeing love enacted in the lives of people near him: “this knoewe I by hem that louers be” (III.37). He sees that love is the force that binds individuals and ultimately a community together, and that whoever “stryueth [contends]” against love “hath the worse” (III.38).

At III.39, Chaucer breaks away from Fil. III.79, rounding out the proem with eleven lines of original verse. This is the moment in Troilus where Chaucer is most explicitly epic, signaling that what happens in the proem should be read as a key for interpreting both book III and the poem as a whole. Chaucer omits any translation of Fil. III.80, where Troilo sings of Hercules, though such heroic material would seem natural to include. Hercules, after all, could not resist love’s power. But Boccaccio does not mention that Hercules died because of love, when Deianira put on him the poisoned shirt of Nessus. Chaucer leaves out the reference to Hercules for two reasons. First, Troilus is not about how love kills innocents (war does that), and we should not see causation where there is only correlation. Were it not for the exchange of
prisoners, for Achilles’s slaying Troilus, for the social impropriety of Troilus and Criseyde’s arrangement, there would be no “double sorwe of Troilus to tellen.” The tragedy is not that Troilus and Criseyde loved each other, but that their love could not be sustained in the current political atmosphere. The story of Hercules and Deianira contradicts that strain: it was because Deianira loved Hercules that she adorned him with the coat. Second, Troilo sings of Hercules to compare himself with the hero—“he who does not wish to cover himself with fraud will never say that what was formerly right for Hercules is wrong for me” (III.80.6–8)—but Chaucer does not want to approximate Troilus with Hercules because Troilus is not, of himself, an epic hero. Whereas Hercules’s legendary strength was jeopardized by love, Troilus’s attainment of heroic status has purchase in the requirement that without Criseyde he is nobody’s hero.

Instead of the stanza on Hercules, which would have confused his epic purpose, Chaucer inserts an invocation to Calliope, the muse of heroic verse. This is the third invocation in *Troilus.* The first is to the fury Tisiphone, inaugurating book I; the second is to Clio, the muse of history, opening book II. The previous invocations are appropriate to their context, as Chaucer begins in a tragic mode then moves into a more historical one, but the invocation to Calliopeunderscores the fact that Chaucer desires in book III to transcend history and the tragic to enter more completely into epic discourse. To do so, he requires the help of the greatest muse, Calliope, known in the Middle Ages as the *vox optima* (see Windeatt, 251). The invocation in book III also distinguishes itself from other invocations in the poem in that it lacks Chaucer’s customary humble tone. Here the mood is one of full confidence and earnestness, “sestow nought my destresse?” (III.46). This move makes clear that Chaucer purposefully preludes the central moment of the entire poem (the speech by Troilus in worship of love and the consummation scene), by leading up to it with epic consciousness in the fore; “thi vois be now present / for now
is need” (III.45–46). The muse of epic is needed to describe amorous bliss. The emphasis continues after the proem, as Chaucer invents a scene wherein Troilus and Criseyde first meet (III.50–238). It should not be thought inconsequential or coincidental that directly following the invocation of Calliope Chaucer includes an original scene where the lovers meet, for the immediate juxtaposition of love, heroic verse, and an invented meeting combine together to present a thematic unity.

Before leaving the proem, attention should be paid to the complex presentation of Venus in these verses, as Chaucer represents her in a multifaceted way that reinforces his epic focus. She is invoked as the planet, with positive astrological influence, and also as the pagan goddess of love, with reference both to sexual attraction and to the cosmic force that binds the universe together. Briefly put, she is addressed astrologically and mythologically. As a planet, she is “the thridde heven” (III.2), after the moon (first) and Mercury (second), and before the sun (fourth) and Mars (fifth). She is the “sonnes lief” (III.3) because she accompanies the sun as the morning and evening star, but she is in tension with Mars, which is a planet of negative astrological influence and also the god of war. Nevertheless, she holds sway over Mars, able to “apaisen [him] of his ire” (III.22), for astrologically Venus offsets Mars’s effects, and in myth Mars becomes Venus’s lover. It is important that Venus, though of a lower order than stately Mars, plays a key role in affecting his influence. Also important is that not all of her influence is erotically driven. Though Venus is the goddess of concupiscence, she is also the goddess of generation, the patron deity of friendship, and the source of filial and patriotic love. Venus is also presented in Troilus as the chief force for moral improvement and ennobling effects: “And as yow list, ye maken hertes digne” (III.23; see also I.1076–85 and III.1786–1806 for love’s influence on a person’s goodness). In order to account for the many possible roles of Venus, it
was common for medieval mythographers to refer to two Venuses, or three, and distinguish her functions in different myths and in various astrological situations. At times, Venus is related to areas as separate as sacred prostitution and matronly modesty (Venus Verticordia), basic religious force and mother of Rome (Venus Genetrix), Lucretian creative force and the goddess of victory (Venus Victrix). Throughout the proem, Chaucer pulls together as many significances of “Venus” as possible, daring readers to try to separate her erotic functions apart from her more political ones. A clear indication he does this is the simple pronominal preference of “ye” over “thou.” Troilo consistently addresses Venus in the tu form, but Chaucer switches to ye not only for formal reasons but also to signal the plurality of personhood whom he addresses. So while Troilo primarily praises Venus as goddess of concupiscence, Chaucer praises her sexual force as well as her many other facets. Most audaciously, he even compares her, albeit implicitly, with the Holy Ghost (“Ye . . . thorough which that thynges liven alle and be” [III.15–16]; cf. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I.45.6). Chaucer also suggests that Venus functions like the Blessed Virgin Mary, whose “benignite” (III.39) Chaucer invokes elsewhere (see *CT* VII.478; also *TC* III.1261–67, where Chaucer recasts *Paradiso* XXXIII.13–18: “Donna . . . La tua benignità”). Indeed, here is a goddess who holds both “regne and hous in unitee.”

2. *Benigne Love, thow holy bond of thynges* (III.1261)

Following the proem in book III, Chaucer inserts over a thousand lines into Boccaccio’s narrative. Most of these lines, culminating in the consummation scene between Troilus and Criseyde, do not exist for the purpose of making *Troilus* a prolix romance. Rather, they serve to elevate Criseyde’s heroic status, and in the consummation scene, she and Troilus become united as a composite epic hero. An epic hero embodies ideals of value, and since Chaucer is primarily concerned in *Troilus* with the value of interpersonal love (including but not limited to eroticism),
it would be impossible to make the hero any single individual. In bringing Troilus and Criseyde into union, Chaucer does not elide politically inflected language—in fact he introduces it. In doing so he gestures to the inextricability of love and state, entertaining, if only momentarily, the utopian vision of harmony which love and state could enjoy.

At this point in the argument, it may serve to summarize how the lines Chaucer continually attributes to “myn auctour” (III.1196; see also III.91, 1199) actually distance the poem from its real, more romantic sources, producing instead a heroic effect. Lee Patterson has done the most to show how “romance” does not adequately indicate what kind of a poem \textit{Troilus} is. He writes, “The problem with using the term \textit{romance} to describe the poem is not only that it ignores Chaucer’s own generic identification of ‘tragedye’ but that \textit{romance} was one of the few generic terms that had a distinctive meaning for medieval readers” (251). In the Middle Ages, “romance” signaled a wide range of semantic meanings and, as a concept, was never subject to extended critical reflection. At first it referred to texts written in French, as opposed to Latin, but the main medieval definition of romance as narrative also had a long history by the close of the fourteenth century. The Middle English Dictionary captures this definition well: “A written narrative of the adventures of a knight, nobleman, king, or an important ecclesiastic.” This definition presupposes focus on an individual hero and the absence of any requirement that the adventures be amorous. The idea that “romance” means more than adventure and specifically a “love story” is not medieval but originates in the nineteenth-century (see Patterson, 251). It would be misguided to suppose that the intense sensuousness of Chaucer’s additions to \textit{Il Filostrato} somehow make his poem more of a romance. Chaucer changes Boccaccio by turning the story of Troilus and Criseyde into a historic-heroic epic, and the lines he invents serve that end.
In the narrative of book III, the consummation scene warrants the closest attention, but there are significant moments leading up to it as well. Troilus and Criseyde meet for the first time directly after the invocation of Calliope. At this meeting, Criseyde accepts Troilus into her service but with the following admonition:

“But natheles, this warne I yow,” quod she,

“A kynges sone although ye be, ywys,

Ye shal namore han sovereignte

Of me in love, than right in that cas is.” (III.169–72)

Criseyde understands romantic involvement in terms of power relations but consents to Troilus because she sees a chance for love, not to annihilate the issue of power, but to negotiate the issue in a potentially sustainable way. After the meeting, Criseyde leaves and later that day arrives at Pandarus’s house for dinner. She had planned to go home after eating but a storm, sent by Fortuna, prevents her. Pandarus situates Criseyde in a bedroom by herself, with her women attendants in an outer chamber, and then introduces Troilus into the room through a trapdoor. Although Chaucer does not write whether Pandarus leaves the room before the intimacy begins, his return at line 1555 implies as much.

When Troilus enters Criseyde’s bed, she reacts anxiously at first. But soon, perhaps to her surprise, she finds herself yielding (III.1211) and assumes a confident poise consonant with her noble character. She is most self-assured when she and Troilus “as aboute a tree, with many a twiste, / Bytrent and writh the swote wodebynde [honeysuckle]” (III.1231–32). In connection with these lines, Chaucer describes Criseyde’s transformation from being a frightened nightingale to becoming the hero who rescues a man from his death:

the newe abaysed nyghtyngale,
That styneth first whan she bygynneth to synge,
Whan that she hereth any herde tale,
Or in the heges any wyght styrynge.

. . .
And right as he that seth his deth yshapen,
And dyen mot, in ought that he may gesse,
And sodeynly rescous doth hym escapen,
And from his deth is brought in sykerness. (III.1234–36, 1240–43)

The juxtaposition of nightingale and heroic savior is slightly odd, and some critics have found irony in these lines. But in terms of poetic genres, the two stanzas together work well together.

The first stanza depends for its primary image on the conventional notion of the lyric poet as a nightingale. The lyrical bent compounds with reference to the shepherd’s tale, another stock image of pastoral verse. As the poem moves into the next stanza, we find not a warbling bird but a mover of fate. A man is destined to die, but suddenly someone comes to the rescue. The object of fate in this stanza lifts Criseyde from the genre of lyric (where women have a place) to the genre of epic (where women have been traditionally marginalized). This heroicizing effect introduces the next stanza: a detailed description of Criseyde’s female body. Usually, a description like this befits the passive, absent lady of Petrarchan verse, but in this scene it presents a heroic woman. If anyone is passive or absent it would be Troilus: Pandarus had to carry him into bed and remove his clothes for him; also, after consummation Criseyde calls Troilus back from his idealistic hymn to love, saying, “lat us falle awey fro this matere” (III.1306), marking a shift from ideal love to the personal love between two people. But it would be a mistake to claim that Troilus is a passive character in general, due to what we know about
his performance on the battlefield. His passivity in this scene serves rather to contrast with Criseyde as a self-possessed agent. Troilus’s character here acts as a counterweight to Criseyde: since she cannot prove her heroic worth on the battlefield, she does so in the bedroom. These heroic descriptions are meant to put Troilus and Criseyde on the same level, not to elevate one at the expense of the other.

Chaucer’s description of love-making/foreplay in III.1247–53 is much more explicit in physical detail than Fil. III.31–32, yet it is free of the titillation and archness of Fil. The scene constitutes what C. S. Lewis considers “some of the greatest erotic poetry of the world” (1958, 196). In response to consummation, Troilus breaks into a three-stanza worship of love followed by a four-stanza praise of Criseyde as the paragon of womanhood. These seven stanzas, followed by one where Criseyde speaks, constitute the most concentrated part of Troilus where Chaucer explicates his epic theme—namely, it is love itself that holds society together.

In III.1254–60, Chaucer reintroduces the conflation of Venus’s separate roles, as we saw in the proem to book III, to reinforce the myriad ways love manifests itself and permeates various facets of life. She is not only the mother of “Love”—i.e., cupidity—she is also the mother of “Charite.” In the proem, she receives the narrator’s highest praise for her intrinsic astrological and mythological significance, but here Troilus gives higher praises to “love” itself—“After thiself next heried be she” (III.1256). This reversal of who receives highest praise should not be confusing, because throughout Troilus Venus and Love signify in highly interchangeable ways. Indeed, this interchangeability serves Chaucer’s purpose to intertwine the masculine and feminine aspects of love, arguing how each sustains the other. Chaucer writes Venus in one place or Love in another, and the differences between these instances deserve close attention, but on the whole he is nodding toward the same idea whatever the word. The idea is
what gets someone like Troilus “brought fro cares colde” (III.1260), which prowess on the battlefield is not capable of doing *sui generis*.

Perhaps the greatest evidence for Chaucer’s primary epic concern in *Troilus* comes in the middle stanza of the central passage of the entire poem. It is well known that this stanza is adapted from an address to the Virgin Mary as mediator of divine grace, spoken by St. Bernard in Dante’s *Paradiso* XXXIII.14–18; it is also widely understood that the first line, “Benigne Love, thow holy bond of thynes” (III.1261) is elaborated from Boethius. What has not been appreciated is the change Chaucer makes to Boethius’s notion of love as a bond by placing the sentiment at the center of his epic poem. By doing this, Chaucer shows that love is not only a deserving topic for epic but an essential one, for epic concerns itself with how a society holds itself together according to that society’s historically developed systems of value. The material of epic potentially includes everything relating to human society, but no single poem could actually address all that in practice. Necessarily, epics of different societies have their differently emphasized systems of value, and the systems of value exist as a dynamic of tensions within themselves and in relation to the society’s other value systems. In the epic discourse Chaucer engages, one of the tensions of value is that between “obligations of romantic love” vs. “state duties.” What Chaucer does, in writing his epic, is make that tension central. This move shows how Chaucer’s epic system of value places romantic love at the heart of understanding how society holds itself together. Crystalizing his thought in the poem’s central stanza, Chaucer argues in *Troilus* that if we give love a chance, it might actually do the state good (take as an example Troilus’s fighting abilities before and after his union with Criseyde). This idea openly opposes the love-state relations in previous epics. But *Troilus* is tragic because Troy’s societal infrastructure champions *Realpolitik over amor*—and the expulsion of love leads to the fall of
the state. Chaucer’s epic question—“how can the tension between personal love and public duty be resolved?”—is systematically addressed and ultimately unanswered. Chaucer is not supporting love at the expense of the state, or vice versa, but probing how the two might live in better harmony, with the result that his society might hold itself together better for longer. And the love Chaucer invokes is not purely theological, as might be thought of St. Bernard’s address to the Holy Virgin, for virginity at this moment is the last thing on Troilus’s mind. Nor is what Chaucer means by love as the “holy bond of thynges” to be taken in a strictly philosophical way, but in an actual, temporal sense. Because Chaucer transplants this notion from Boethius into the heart of his epic, he shows the central role love plays in matters of state.

Finally comes the third stanza, III.1268–74, where Chaucer makes explicit the link between love and heroism. This stanza marks the mathematical center of the 8239-line poem, and lines 1270–72 constitute the heart of the stanza. These lines read: “[thow] Hast holpen [me], ther I likely was to sterve, / And me bestowed in so heigh a place / That thilke boundes may no blisse pace.” In a deft stroke, Chaucer yokes together in the literal middle of his epic-length poem the following ideas: Troilus, though a capable fighter, would have perished without love; the experience of romantic love exalted Troilus higher than his martial exploits ever could by themselves, for Troilus is always second to Hector; and Criseyde was the key for Troilus’s salvation and glory. And lest the reader think that this passage serves solely to elevate Troilus, Chaucer follows the three-stanza praise of love with an even longer praise of Criseyde, concluding with a stanza in her own voice. The praise of a donna bella is common enough, but the opportunity to respond is rarely given to women in conventional love poetry.

If lines III.1254–74 have become known as the praise of love, then lines III.1275–1302 are the thanksgiving to love. Though Troilus is a lament for love from beginning to end, Chaucer
allows in these lines a brief insight into love’s bliss, including a moment of reflection on what makes Criseyde the paragon of womanhood, Troilus’s “wommanliche wif” (III.1296). For the first time in the poem, both Criseyde, who “felte no disese” (III.1276), and Troilus, who is experiencing a degree of “ese” unknown to other men (III.1279), enjoy themselves without anxiety. Before and after this moment, the lovers are separated by place and circumstance, writing endless letters to each other, but here they find themselves “on the same page.” They see each other as equals, unconcerned with expectations of social propriety or justice, for “here may men seen that mercy passeth right” (III.1282). And though Troilus tries at first to continue in the role of a courtly lover, who of necessity finds himself below his lady (Troilus twice calls himself “unworthy” [III.1284, 1286]), Criseyde says to leave off such talk, “For it suffiseth, this that seyd is here, / And at o word, withouten repentaunce, / Welcome, my knight, my pees, my suffisaunce” (III.1307–9). Whereas Troilus (unconsciously?) had found himself playing the role of a conventional, textual lover, Criseyde breaks through the poetry to generate non-conventional but sounder romantic involvement; for Criseyde, Troilus is not deficient but “suffisaunce.” This situation is unique to Chaucer: only his Troilus and Criseyde thus acclaim each other at the consummation with the qualities they see and value in each other (contrast with Fil. III.31–32). Criseyde is Troilus’s “wommanliche wif” because she pulls Troilus out of medieval romance and into Chaucerian epic, in the sense that she makes space for a sustainable relationship based on “trouth” (III.1297). Trouthe in the first place means fidelity to a commitment or principle, especially in terms of one’s relationships with others. As the central moment of Troilus comes to a close, the thanksgiving to love might also be thought of as a praise of trouthe, and commitment to love has been presented in a heroic way.
Before moving to the final section of close reading (the epilogue), two observations pertaining to book III remain: first, a comment on whether Troilus and Criseyde marry; and second, a comment on the curious way book III ends and book IV begins.

Among other details, the mention of “Imeneus” (Hymen, goddess of marriage; III.1258) has generated a long critical debate as to whether book III presents the reader with a marriage. Ultimately, however, the text is ambiguous, and the ambiguity matters because it resonates with the uncertain marital circumstances between Dido and Aeneas as described in Aeneid IV. In TC IV, Troilus says to Pandarus, “I have ek thought, so it were hire assent, / To axe hire at my fader, for his grace” (554–55), apparently referring to a possible marriage arrangement. These lines stand as an obstacle to the otherwise provocative idea that book III depicts a “clandestine marriage” which medieval canon law condemned but considered valid. In a clandestine marriage, the couple would exchange vows in private and without witnesses. The principal evidence that supports this argument comes from moments in book III which are adapted from the affair in Boccaccio’s Filocolo. Chaucer was almost certainly influenced by Filocolo in book III, and he makes the affair more solemn—maybe more like a marriage ceremony—than it is in Boccaccio. The purpose of a clandestine marriage would be to conceal the arrangement from the community, which makes sense according to the protagonists’ social concerns described throughout the poem. What strengthens this view is the exchange of rings (III.1368), but the evidence remains circumstantial. Even C. S. Lewis, who describes book III as “a long epithalamium,” admits to the scene being adulterous, if only by “accident” (1958, 196–97).

The motivations behind this debate seem unclear: what would be the result if it were determined Troilus and Criseyde either were or were not married? Clearly, marriage is not the poem’s focus—love is. No, what matters is that Chaucer uses the ambiguous state of his heroes’
marriage to echo a moment from Virgil’s epic, and two other aspects of book III strengthen the allusion: the storm sent by supernatural power that puts the lovers in bed together, and the emphasis on fated deaths (Dido is the lone character in the Aeneid unfated to die [see IV.696]). Book IV of the Aeneid might be considered a classical manifesto articulating the diametrically opposed interests of amor and Roma, for Virgil writes that Aeneas’s coupling with Dido marks the first day of ruin and cause of woe, the seeds of the Punic Wars (“ille dies primus leti primusque malorum / causa fuit” [IV.169–70]). And even though Virgil calls the arrangement a marriage (“heaven was witness to the marriage [conubii]” [IV.168]), the narrator likewise accuses Dido of covering up her culpa by calling it coniugium (see IV.172). When the gods tell Aeneas he must leave Dido for the sake of his country, he claims the two never were married, which results in Virgil’s critics having a similar debate as Chaucerians as to whether a marriage actually takes place in the text. Chaucer uses this ambiguity to resonate his text with Aeneid IV in order to subvert it; this preservation of ambiguity explains the otherwise odd fact that in closely translated passage (III.1744ff) Chaucer omits Boethius’s reference to sacramental marriage in II.m8. Not only does he move the debate about love and state from being a non-central episode to the apex of his poem, Chaucer also explicitly reverses what Virgil, among others, perceive to be love’s role with regards official duties. In both books, love reverses fate, but Dido ends up dead and Troilus saved, if only temporarily (see III.1240–43).

As stated above, Chaucer does not resolve in Troilus the tension between personal love and public responsibility, and though Chaucer foregrounds his hope that love (Venus) will have increased influence on state (Mars), the vision closes by the start of book IV, presaging Criseyde’s leaving and Troilus’s death. After the consummation scene, little time passes before the two lovers have their second meeting; this encounter is better than the first because Troilus
and Criseyde no longer feel reluctance or anxiety about being together; the narrator claims that their joy is so complete that words fall short; the lovers are enjoying a state of nearly perpetual bliss; and the synergy between love and state strengthens as Troilus becomes even more famous for his nobility, his generosity, and his skill on the battlefield. Finally, book III closes with the *canticus Troili*, where Troilus speaks of love as a force that binds together otherwise contrary or disruptive forces in nature, as well as the hearts of men and women, and thus keeps the universe functioning in an orderly fashion. These hopeful expressions come crashing down when Chaucer begins book IV by invoking Mars and the furies. Whereas book III had been bracketed by prayers to Venus—that her influence might continue, despite being lower than Mars—books IV and V recount state mechanisms whose priority of force crushes what is beautiful between two individuals. Strictly speaking, what happens to them is not any one person’s fault—not Calkas’s, not Diomede’s, and certainly not Criseyde’s. Rather, the lovers’ end results from the way things are. The principal director of the poem’s end is Mars, the father of Romulus, the man who founded a state by committing violence against a loved one, his own brother. The composite hero that had carefully come together in book III starts disintegrating in the proem of book IV before ending ultimately in Troilus’s death and Criseyde with Diomede.

3. *Virgile, Ovide, Omer, Lucan and Stace* (V.1792)

Although Chaucer’s epic consciousness comes through most strongly in book III, it has also been remarked how Chaucer begins *Troilus* with epic formulations of language. In this section, it is argued how the epic consciousness which opens the poem continues through to the end. Three moments in particular reinforce this claim—Troilus’s death, Chaucer’s appropriation of and allusion to other poets, and the seeming dismissal of personal love—and each shall be considered in turn.
Although Chaucer follows his source in writing only a single line to describe Troilus’s death (V.1806), the circumstances leading up to his death remind the reader of Troilus’s role in the poem’s heroic narrative. The composite hero, Troilus and Criseyde, come together in book III but soon fall apart in book IV as political forces beyond their control constrain Criseyde to leave Troy and join her father in the Greek camps. Criseyde soon realizes her relationship with Troilus cannot continue, so for her own security she agrees to ally herself with Diomede. When Troilus learns what Criseyde has done, he seeks death on the battlefield, searching always for Diomede but eventually dying at Achilles’s hand. It is vital that, contra Virgil (see *Aen.* I.474–75), Chaucer preserves the idea that Criseyde’s abandoning Troilus serves as a cause for his death. This is key because there was a prophecy that though Hector was Troy’s greatest hero, the city would fall only after Troilus’s death. Troilus, whose name traditionally implied his whole city, represents the embodiment of the state but only (as Chaucer tells it) insofar as he is coupled with Criseyde, linking the fate of the lovers with the destiny of Troy. Troy will fall once Troilus has, but Troilus will not perish until his union with Criseyde dissipates. The destiny of the state depends on the outcome for the lovers, a fact that constitutes the poem’s important linkage between erotics and politics.

Such a situation generates the poem’s tragic mode. As Alcuin Blamires has written, “Political responsibilities impinge on any prospect that Troilus, a member of the royal family of Troy, might avert his separation from Criseyde by running off with her” (439). What would have sustained the body politic (Troilus staying with Criseyde) is made impossible by the impropriety of putting personal love before societal expectation; Troilus cannot prevent the exchange by carrying Criseyde off since it would be appalling for him to compromise his Trojan duty “for any woman” (IV.1557). Yet it may be argued that Troy was destined to fall no matter what. This is
true, but there was no requirement that it fall by a certain time. When Venus visits Vulcan in
*Aeneid* VIII to petition the god to make armor for her son, Vulcan asks why the goddess did not
come to him sooner, for “neither Jove almighty nor the Fates forbade Troy to endure, Priam to
live, ten more years” (398–99). Hypothetically, had it been possible for Troilus and Criseyde to
continue their relationship, the sack of Troy would have been delayed. The short bliss of book III
might have gone on for years, the lovers might have had children together, Troilus might have
lived long enough to die of old age, after which time Troy would have fallen. These possibilities,
Chaucer laments, are impossibilities, winked out of existence by state mechanisms that prevent
them from ever occurring. In other words, human relations and not the gods or the fates split
Troilus and Criseyde apart, and human forces, neither divine nor inexorable, lead to the ruin of
the state.

Furthermore, though Chaucer expands Boccaccio elsewhere to strengthen the poem’s
heroic ethos, it might come as a surprise that Chaucer preserves Boccaccio’s decision to give
only one line to Troilus’s death. While the line in Boccaccio indeed makes Troilo less heroic,
Chaucer’s text has the opposite effect because he leads up to Troilus’s death by writing,

If I hadde ytaken for to write
The armes of this ilke worthi man,
Than wolde ich of his batailles endite;
But for that I to written first bigan
Of his love, I have seyd as I kan. (V.1765–69)

I agree with Blamires that we need to sense the shock-value of demoting the master narrative of
Troy’s “destruccion” to the status of digression from something more important—i.e., the
narrative of two lovers’ struggle to maintain their relationship within a broader political complex.
Chaucer’s work is certainly more self-consciously epic in manner and scope than Boccaccio’s, yet *Troilus* remains an epic wrought from private lives. Chaucer does not give primary attention to the heroic business of the siege and defense except as material that reinforces the poem’s first concern with the composite hero’s romantic relationship.

As Chaucer winds up the ending of *Troilus*, he weaves together his plot and narration with a number of complex moments of intertextuality, several of which contribute to the poem’s overall epic concerns. One of the most complex comes just before Achilles slayes Troilus:

> Go, litel bok, go, litel myn tragedye,
> Ther God thi makere yet, er that he dye,
> So sende might to make in som comedye!
> But litel book, no making thow n’envie,
> But subgit be to alle poesye;
> And kis the steppes where as thow seest pace
>
> Virgile, Ovide, Omer, Lucan, and Stace. (V.1786–92)

This stanza’s primary concern is with the genre of *Troilus*. As such, it simultaneously claims a generic assignment for the poem while bolstering that claim by approximating *Troilus* with authors that have written poems of a similar kind. In order to understand how this stanza furthers Chaucer’s epic consciousness at the end of *Troilus*, it is important to consider why Chaucer calls Virgil, Ovid, Homer, Lucan, and Statius writers of tragedy. But first, we must be in possession of the literary facts relative to what Chaucer is doing in line 1792.

In recalling these five particular poets, Chaucer appropriates material from Statius, Dante, Boccaccio, and even himself to put *Troilus* in company with fellow writers of epic. Chaucer not only lists the poets he considers as models for *Troilus*; he also borrows material from them to
infuse his own poem with their authoritative verses. As we have seen, Chaucer also cribs from non-epic poets, but he frequently does so to change their verses so they newly signify within the generic expectations of epic. So, while Statius, Dante, and Boccaccio had their individual motivations for writing a line like V.1792, Chaucer’s reasons are his own: he seeks to put himself in company with the listed poets.

The closest parallel comes from Statius, who exhorts his poem, “Do not strive to rival the divine Aeneid, but follow it from a distance and always adore its footprints” (Theb. XII.816–17). Critics generally agree that Statius’s modesty is earnest: he has no profound desire to displace Virgil. Chaucer’s modesty is more fraught, and critics tend to acknowledge its conventional, rather than sincere, nature. So while Statius is sooner recognized as an epic poet, albeit lesser than Virgil, here we find Statius trying to put some distance between what Virgil did and what he is doing. Chaucer, on the other hand, seems to be in an opposite situation. Few today recognize him as an epic poet, but in echoing Statius he seems rather to repurpose his source text so that he can narrow the gap between himself and his epic predecessors. And while Chaucer explicitly connects his text with Statius, he incorporates material from Dante only by implication. Chaucer finds himself in a situation like Dante, who in limbo includes himself among the same company of poets (excepting Horace for Statius). But unlike Chaucer, Dante distances himself from these epic predecessors by writing in a different genre, that of comedy. (Virgil, Dante maintains, had written a “tragedia” [Inf. XX.113]—the genre Chaucer claims Troilus belongs to.) But Chaucer probably first found this list of poets not in Dante but in Boccaccio’s Filocolo. But Filocolo is oftentimes considered an early example of the novel, and it does not allude to these poets so as to lend itself epic authority. Since Filocolo sets up markedly different generic expectations than does Troilus, the allusion to these poets in Chaucer establishes Troilus as putting Chaucer in their
same class. Finally, Chaucer includes the same list of poets in *House of Fame*, which could be considered Chaucer’s first attempt to get his mind into the epic code. *House of Fame*, however, is an aborted attempt to thoroughly engage epic predecessors and to give sustained treatment of themes like fate and fame. In contrast, *Troilus* musters the range of Chaucer’s mature poetic powers to invoke these poets and include his name among them. In fine, Chaucer includes line V.1792 to simultaneously distance himself from non-epic uses of this otherwise conventional list while also elevating his poem into the highest ranks of poesy.

But if Chaucer wants to class himself among Virgil et al., it must be asked why he calls *Troilus* a tragedy and not an epic. The short answer has already been given: writers in the Middle Ages did not use the word “epic” as it is used today. Though the situation is rather complex, what we call epics were called tragedies in the Middle Ages. The fullest explication of this topic comes from Alexander Gillespie, who explains that during the Middle Ages “tragedy” did not signal a one-to-one substitution for “epic,” but that tragedy was “little more than a set of very loose generic parameters,” an “empty genre” and “the locus of a genuinely dramatic synthesis of genres” (207, 222). Medieval views of tragedy were formed by three main sources of information, including books 8 and 18 of Isidore of Seville’s *Etymologiae*, commentary on Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy*, and scholia on earlier discussions of dramatic theory and practice, such as the opaque and elliptical remarks on tragedy in Horace’s *Ars poetica*. Isidore defined tragedy as songs in poetry of the ancient deeds and crimes of wicked kings. The commentary on Boethius, as stated above, focuses rather on the wheel-of-fortune tragedy, where a prosperous person ends in ruin. The commentaries on Horace put primary emphasis on tragedy as the opposite of comedy, in that it deals with kings in high style. This last formulation in particular associated tragedy with epic, though the idea that tragedy and epic might constitute
distinct realms of literary experience did not find articulation until the fourteenth century in the writings of Albertino Mussato and Nicholas Trevet. But the poems we refer to today as “epic” were often considered history in the Middle Ages. Alexander Nequam, for example, calls Virgil, Lucan, and Statius “ystoriographos” (see Gillespie, 212). It is in this sense, epic as history, that Chaucer calls *Troilus* a “tragedye.” The example of Lucan as epicist-historian becomes especially relevant at the end of *Troilus* when Chaucer appropriates an image from the *Pharsalia*. After Troil dies, he ascends into heaven and, looking down at where he died, laughs at “this wrecched world, and held al vanite” (V.1817). The parallel passage in *Pharsalia* comes at the opening of book IX, when Pompey’s spirit flees the tomb, ascending into the eternal spheres where it sees and laughs at the corpse that once housed it. Chaucer creates this intertextual moment to incorporate more material from epic into the poem’s close, thus projecting his epic consciousness from the first lines of the poem to its last; the allusion to Lucan also serves to inaugurate the poem’s notorious “epilogue,” or retraction on love.

The narrator concludes the scene of Troilus’s death and sets the tone for the final lines with this stanza:

O yonge, fresshe folks, he or she,
In which that love up growth with youre age,
Repeyreth hom fro worldly vanyte,
And of youre herte up casteth the visage
To thilke God that after his yumage
Yow made, and thynketh al nys but a faire,
This world that passeth soone as floures faire. (V.1835–41)
This passage is sometimes read as if Chaucer meant to renounce everything he wrote about love in the rest of the poem, that one ought to give one’s love to God rather than to a woman who can betray you. Such a reading is problematic, however, since a short excerpt at the end of the poem, no matter what it says, does not have the strength to obliterate the 8,000+ lines that come before. It seems absurd to think that the greatest poetic conversation on love in English should conclude with a rejection of love’s primacy in our lives. The passage is rather an ironic hyperbole that actually exists to reassert once more that despite the built-in tragedies of love in the face of political constraints, interpersonal love remains necessary to and worthy of public concern. Chaucer includes a summary of the dominating ideology, feeding into a pessimistic world view, to display the absurdity of it. If loving a woman were only a foolhardy enterprise, then why should Chaucer remove Boccaccio’s misogynistic moral? (Boccaccio claims that whoever reads his poem correctly will be slow to trust women [see VIII.29].) Modern readers, however, are not alone in their misreading of these verses. Medieval readers, in general more sympathetic to the moral put forward in this passage, were likewise seduced by the idea that Chaucer could not have meant what he said about love in book III. As a result, Chaucer addresses the problem in *The Legend of Good Women*: “of Creseyde thou hast seyd as the lyste, / That maketh men to wommen lasse triste” (F.332–33). Yet Chaucer protests,

> I of Creseyde wroot . . .
> God woot, yt was myn entene
> To forthren trouthe in love and yt cheryce,
> And to ben war fro falsnesse and fro vice
> By swich ensample; this was my menynge. (F 469, 471–74)
Because it is common to come to Chaucer’s earlier work after being exposed to *The Canterbury Tales*, readers sometimes find themselves with a vertiginous sense of irony when analyzing *Troilus*. With the conditioning of rampant irony in the *Tales*, it is understandable to find examples of Chaucer’s slyness throughout all his poetry. There is nothing wrong with that, of course, except if readers believe Chaucer is being silly when he is striving to be earnest. In the so-called retraction on love, Chaucer is being absurd for the sake of what he considers a serious matter. The epilogue, in other words, is not a *contemptus mundi*. It, along with other aspects of the poem’s ending, act as material for Chaucer’s playfully serious epic purpose to present work that grapples with the seemingly unresolvable intricacies of interpersonal relationships and societal obligations.

II. Conclusion

By claiming that *Troilus* is an epic poem, there exists the danger of pigeon-holing Chaucer’s generic tour de force. There has been a need to present the argument in a firm way with much evidence that is capable of counterbalancing the tendency of dismissing *Troilus* as an epic. Despite the rigidity of focus, however, what matters is not that *Troilus* “is” an epic at the exclusion of everything else. What matters is that *Troilus* invites the reader to consider it according to the concerns of epic *in addition to myriad other concerns*. Chaucer simultaneously coaxes the reader to think about the poem in several ways, but these other approaches to the text do not exclude a concern for epic consciousness from critical analysis. To appreciate the text’s endless diversity, there is value in considering the vast panoply of genres that Chaucer draws on and the ways he manipulates generic expectations. Instead of focusing exclusively or even primarily on the conventions or names of genres in a particular historical context, critics can benefit from understanding the ways generic labels are used in current scholarship throughout
several fields to learn how these terms line up with medieval texts. To widen the possibilities for critics interested in the ways Chaucer stretches the deployment of genre, it may be useful to conclude by summarizing several ideas about genre that may help modern readers better understand how Chaucer himself may be tinkering.

In the introduction, a summary of four ideas about genre was provided. In a small way, these ideas helped to frame what is at stake in considering *Troilus* as an epic poem. Of necessity they were condensed into pithy statements leading up to close readings of the text. Now that evidence from close reading has been provided, and it is possible to see *Troilus* as an epic, it may serve to take a step or two back and consider these and other principles about genre. Doing so will bring into clearer focus the complexity of the generic contexts of Chaucer’s poetry. Also, in anticipation of future analyses of Chaucer’s uses of genre, a brief excursion into genre theory may help readers appreciate the potential difficulties and rewards for reading that can come from taking what follows into consideration.

First, genres prefigure interpretation. It might also be added that genres precondition all utterances. Because there is no genreless text, and because genre frames the way a transmission of language is communicated, any utterance, poetic or otherwise, finds itself always already performing within generic expectations. For communication to take place, there must exist some link between the sender and receiver, and no communication is transparent or direct but rather always mediated. In the instance of genre, therefore, the clearer the terms are of the generic contract between communicating parties, the greater the effectiveness is of the communication. Effectiveness of communication, however, does not necessarily mean clarity of content. Especially in the case of poetry, the message is rarely an amorphous body of information to be downloaded. Chaucer does not, for example, write an 8,000-line poem in order to communicate
“mixing love and politics—that’s the solution!” Rather, the poem’s effectiveness of communication increases when considered according to defensible generic framings, because, in the case of epic, the reader is better equipped to see the questions Chaucer is asking about the tensions between romantic and political involvements. Such a communication becomes inaudible, illegible, and irrelevant without a sense for the poem’s participation in epic as a genre. As John Frow has written, “Genres create effects of reality and truth, authority and plausibility, which are central to the different ways the world is understood” (2).

Second, genres simultaneously inhabit and transcend local historical contexts. Genres are historically contingent, but not in the sense that their generic expectations remain fixed according to the conventions of a small location in space and time. As the earlier discussion on medieval understandings of “tragedy” shows, a genre never limits itself to a single mediating function. When a text is seen as participating in a genre—at any time in the text’s history—that text’s involvement bends the understanding of what that genre is and does. While it is consistently beneficial to more fully understand the generic expectations of a poem like Troilus according to the conventions of the 1380s in and around London, it is unnecessarily limiting to restrict generic involvement to an indeterminate geographic space within an unfixable number of years surrounding the poem’s emergence. For example, both Aeneid and Troilus and Criseyde are epics and therefore mutually signify because they participate in a shared semiotic network, even though they emerged first from vastly different milieux. True, each epic generates from and disseminates into distinct cultural contexts, thereby performing different kinds of signification, but all genre unfolds through time and space, pitting together texts that, culturally speaking, otherwise have little in common. In fine, genre analysis depends on a poetics that is simultaneously formal and historicist.
Third, genres exist interdependently. Each genre is more or less distinctive from other genres but depends for its existence on the fact that finds itself within a network of genres. And genres do not exist under equal circumstances—some are broad while others narrow, some shallow and others deep, some newer and others older. A genre cannot exist independently, and it arises to compete or to contrast with other genres. Genres, as mediums of discourse, remain efficacious so long as there exist competing forms. One cannot, in the final analysis, discuss a particular genre without reference to other genres; a genre’s existence depends on its coexistence with, and against, other genres. Relative to other genres, genres are more simple or more complex (epic being among the most complex known literary genres). Because such is the case, studying genre is a different task from studying a particular genre, but each activity requires the other; understanding how one genre constitutes itself depends on understanding other genre itself exists as a concept that ties genres together. To say a similar thing but in a different way, there is no knowable ur-genre. Genre is knowable only by seeing genres work over against themselves. Therefore, the study of generic formation is the study of generic transformation, and to see how a poet like Chaucer engages a genre is to observe how he changes the genre.

Fourth, genres engage texts with complex multiplicity. Just as there is no genreless text, there is no text which participates in only a single genre. No text is so limited as to allow for only a single generic distinction, which is to say that texts perform various generic constraints simultaneously. And though a text participates in several genres simultaneously, the text does not participate in all these genres to the same extent—i.e., local impact of the genres involved signifies variably. Similarly, the generic complexity of individual texts varies widely according to the skill and aims of the poet. Though the idea cuts against much traditional scholarship, any analysis that attempts to privilege one genre for a text to the exclusion of all others will likely
prove a waste of time. And poems, especially generically complex ones like *Troilus*, resist being situated within a single genre, even if that genre is as conventional and well-known as, say, the sonnet, for genres have their own subdivisions, potentially, ad infinitum.

Finally, I would add three more observations about genre that could be of use to those interested in more nuanced conversations about the genre of *Troilus*. First, there is no text so typical of a class that it could be called anything other than unique; neither is there a text so atypical that it could be considered non-participatory. While it is understandable that some critics would consider *Troilus*’s genre as so complex as to be *sui generis*, it is in fact incorrect, within a context of genre theory, to think that any text could exist beyond the genres to which it is bound. Second, discursive understandings of genre, as of all things, depend on the metaphors involved. Currently, there exists little criteria for accepting or rejecting one metaphor over another in understanding how genre constitutes itself. It is vital that different metaphors be employed so as to allow for potential growth in our understanding, but it would also be beneficial if the field could strike a better balance between flexibility and consistence. In the present situation, genre theorists tend to stick to their guns, metaphorically speaking, generating much confusion for the non-specialist as to which metaphors represent the best thinking that has occurred over the past generation or so. Throughout this essay, I have tended to favor the metaphors used by Frow, for two reasons: (1) he neatly, if briefly, summarizes the different metaphors theorists tend to privilege (e.g., see 52), and (2) he remains conscious of the fact that he is using metaphors. Lastly, to understand how genre “works,” there needs to be an understanding of how recognition works. With regards to genre, literary criticism at present knows very little about the process of recognition (outside literary criticism, there exists the work of cognitive psychologists, phenomenologists, and the followers of Wittgenstein). The best essay on the topic is Stanley
Fish’s “How to Recognize a Poem When You See One,” but this piece remains a suggestive foretaste of what could be learned about recognition and genre, more than being a rigorous analysis of the problem. In fine, to ask a question like “is Troilus an epic?” we must know how to recognize epic when we see one. In future analyses, it is key to understand that texts are simultaneously unique and participatory, and it will become more urgent to understand the mechanisms driving favorable metaphors and recognitions.

In conclusion, few have been able to see Troilus as an epic because what that genre means, and what “genre” itself means, have been understudied. In order to refine our narratives of how Chaucer manipulates genre, we must do more to understand (a) how Chaucer puts his poems into interaction with other texts (source hunting alone is insufficient) and (b) how genre functions according to more or less generalizable principles as articulated by contemporary theorists. The first process represents an inductive approach to the question, while the second represents its deductive counterpart. Both are necessary. To cordon off one when both are available would be like shutting one eye to look at something: we see that things are generally in the same place regardless of which eye we use, but using only one eye removes any sense of depth. When both inductive experience and deductive analysis are applied to the genre of Troilus, it becomes possible to see the depth with which Chaucer writes, creating a sweeping epic concerned at its heart with the place love between individuals plays in respect to the sustainability of the state.
Works Cited


