

Geoffrey Chaucer. *Troilus and Criseyde*. Stephen A. Barney, ed. Norton Critical Edition. New York: W. W. Norton, 2006. Pp. 572.

First, the caveats. I have not yet taught *Troilus and Criseyde* from this edition, nor does my research take me into the poem itself on a frequent basis. Perhaps more to the point, I do not consider *Troilus* to be Chaucer's magnum opus, much less "the most important English writing between the eras of *Beowulf* [...] and Spenser's *Faerie Queene*," as Stephen Barney describes it in the introduction to his otherwise acceptable new edition. Not all of these qualities are bad, though. The last provides me some measure of critical distance and thus saves me from a weird attachment to the poem, the likes of which spurs Barney to make the absurd claim that "Troilus and Criseyde may have acquired the label 'drama' because it is good, and drama is good."

With these caveats firmly in the foreground, I feel comfortable stating that the Norton Critical Edition of *Troilus and Criseyde* seems to be a fairly good teaching text. What makes it such is not any revolutionary editing; it more-or-less reprints the version Barney did years ago for the Riverside edition of Chaucer's works. But this new version includes a facing-page translation of the *Filostrato* and a healthy selection of critical essays in the back, two elements that will help students navigate the poem's complicated origins and its subsequent resonances. I have some quibbles about the relationship of the essays to Boccaccio's poem, and about some of the essays themselves, but more on that later. First, a bit about the effect of having Boccaccio so close at hand.

Here I admit that I started as a naysayer. What, I thought, could possibly be helpful about having the *Filostrato* slivered and dispersed throughout the text, like expensive *parmigiano reggiano*? But actually, as one gets more comfortable with the side-by-side layout, the contrasts between the two poems become much easier to chart, as does the extent of Chaucer's meddling in Boccaccio's material. Indeed, although much has been made about the prologues that Chaucer places before each of his five books, still more could be said about his other changes to Boccaccio's poem. The comparison between these two poems provides a particularly powerful antidote to a common undergraduate assumption that medieval authors unthinkingly recycled material.

The clincher, for me at least, came near the beginning of Book Two, shortly after the narrator's lengthy homage to Cleo. Here, we learn that Pandarus awakens when he hears the "swalowe Proigne" sing her sorrowful lay about "How Tereus gan forth hire suster take" (Book II, ll. 64, 69). Upon waking, Pandarus proceeds to his niece's house, only to find Cri-

seyde reading Statius's *Thebaid*, a history of the siege of Thebes. It is customary to walk students through this moment, highlighting the self-consciously textual nature of Chaucer's writing. One way to teach this section is to line up Pardarus with Chaucer's other characters — for instance, the narrator of the *Book of the Duchess*, who wakes up surrounded by the *Romance of the Rose* — who seem to live a world composed entirely of other texts.

Having Boccaccio on hand deepens this comparison and yet simultaneously offers to take this conversation in other directions. For instance, in Boccaccio's poem Pandaro journeys straight from his interview with Troilo to chat with Criseida, and just seeing Chaucer's additions to this episode makes one aware of how much he has rethought the characters themselves. Moreover, that Boccaccio by this point is already in his second book while Chaucer is still plodding through his Book One draws one's attention to the matter of speed, the form here enhancing Pardarus's slowness.

One can chart these mechanical changes and narrative dilations quite easily, as the Norton layout preserves Boccaccio's book designations. Seeing the way Chaucer knits the *Filostrato*'s nine uneven books into five parts of roughly even length gives readers a dramatic illustration of the intimate ties between forms and function. Whereas the *Filostrato* appears as a swiftly moving river, with the argument in each book pushing it one way, then another, *Troilus and Criseyde* feels more like Fortune's wheel, with the first two-and-a-half books moving the characters up, two lines keeping them at stasis ("This joie may nought writen be with inke; This passeth al that herte may bythynke" III.1693–94), and then the final two-and-a-half books pushing them down an excruciating collapse.

I would go on here with more comparisons, which seem (at least to me) to contain infinite possibilities for exploration. Unfortunately, the essays in the final part of the book suggest otherwise. This is not to say that they are bad essays. On the contrary, Barney has selected a bountiful number of pieces by top-notch critics — E. Talbot Donaldson, Louise (now L. O. Aryane) Fradenburg, Lee Patterson, Karla Taylor, and Jill Mann among them — almost all perfectly suited to the classroom. Yet only two of these readers address the changes Chaucer has made. The first, C.S. Lewis, has an essay which is barely teachable. Perhaps I'm the exception, but I'm guessing that my students would have a hard time translating citations of Boccaccio in the Italian, the idea of *Frauendienst*, and the Greek word *Ūbrij*, which nobody seemed to feel worth of translation. The second, by Davis Taylor, manages to avoid the belletristic prose of Lewis's piece yet contains more numerical lists (including one comparing the superlatives in Chaucer with another list recalibrated to fit line proportions) than actual analysis.

In short, at the same time that the body of the Norton volume argues that Boccaccio's *Filostrato* is crucial for understanding Chaucer's poem, the essays at the end, if not arguing the exact opposite, do little to help us see the need for the additional 200 pages dedicated to Boccaccio's poem. Then again, this may be less of a problem with the edition itself than with the general lack of interest in comparative studies. Perhaps the editors wanted to include more essays of this type and simply failed to find any good ones out there. If this is the case, then the Norton edition might have an additional benefit, inspiring those teaching it and those coming to it afresh to think about new ways to understand each poem in the context of the other.

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