

## Humour in Chaucer

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This article deals with the consummation of love between Troilus and Criseyde as Chaucer narrates it in the third Book of his great Poem (1).

It seems to me that this love-making is retold by Chaucer in a humoristic, ironic, although subtle way. Our main aim here would be to approach, in a close and careful study, Chaucer's language in this definite and concrete theme 'LOVE' in order to reach his message, obtaining, I hope, a better knowledge of him both as a linguist and as a literary man, through a humoristic vision of life in its sentimental aspect as I think I will be able to extract from a close examination of his language.

We take as our working hypothesis the assumption that language is myth-creative in the way that A. E. Darbyshire establishes in his work (2).

Humour here might stand in the ambiguity and ambivalence of expression used by the author to relate the phenomenon of copulation

- (1) ROBINSON, F. N.: (ed) *The Complete Works of G. Chaucer*, O. U. P. (1966), 1977.
- (2) DARBYSHIRE, A. E.: *A Grammar of Style*, O. U. P. 1971.

between two persons, within the tenets of Courtly Love (3), but at the same time trying from inside a frontal attack against these same tenets or ideals of Courtly Love. Chaucer, although he produces a terminology totally framed within the Courtly Love theory, intends to undermine the concept of such a mentality, mainly by means of comical and funny situations.

To obtain his purpose the author has several means. For instance, irony, use of language in an elevated style or in a quite colloquial register but always appropriate and never low or vulgar. He also counts on the cooperation of the reader/listener, helping him with some linguistic hints or putting him in situations so that from a personal and experienced view he can build up his own idea of what is going on in spite of the lofty tone of chevalery and Courtly Love code that the whole Poem is immersed in.

Our exposition will be structured as follows:

\*\*\* In the first place, an INTRODUCTION which takes account of stanzas 1 to 29.

\*\*\* Secondly, an immediate PREPARATION which runs from stanza number 33 to 49.

\*\*\* Finally, the central SCENE of the love making of the two main characters of the Poem, covering stanzas 86 to 193.

### *Introduction*

The introduction consists of two parts. The first one, the Proem which is focused upon an invocation to Venus. This reference to Venus indicates to the reader from the very beginning, that the atmosphere of the whole third Book is going to be in the line of sexual and material realisation of love as Venus represents disordered love, destructive and blind passion (4).

The second part of the introduction is developed in Deifebus's house as a continuation of the second Book of the Poem. It recounts Criseyde's asking Troilus for his help against Polifeto in the presence

- (3) LEON SENDRA, A.: *Troilo y Criseida*, Biblioteca de Estudios de Anglística, n.º 2. Córdoba, 1985. The reader will find a select bibliography concerning "Courtly Love" in pages 11 to 15. See also M. HUSSEY, *Chaucer's World*, Cambridge, 1967, where "fine amour" is defined as: "an elaborately conceived approach towards personal relations in which the young man gave a reverence to his lady that can best be described as a parody of religion" (pp. 51-52).
- (4) See A. RUIZ DE ELVIRA: *Mitología clásica*, Madrid, 1975, pág. 50.

of Pandarus.

Under Pandarus's urging, Criseyde directly inquires Troilus's purposes (stanza 18). His answer "*to don you my servyse*" must be seen inside an authentic code of Courtly Love. This service to his lady is specified in stanzas 20 & 21, as blind obedience and total fidelity. Criseyde herself will develop this service in stanzas 24 & 26. And we can find here a sort of ambiguity as she is telling Troilus not to indulge himself in wishful thinking about her love, in her own words "*ye shal namore han sovereignete of me in love, than right in that cas is*". We must suppose that Criseyde means the general norm of Courtly Love which as far as physical and bodily matters are concerned should be of total refusal; or perhaps the expression intends to leave the door open in order to put the border of this "sovereignete" where circumstances demand, in other words, that which is 'permissible' will depend on each particular case. This norm or "sovereignete" seems a little odd when the narrator comments in stanza number 26 "*and hym in armes took, and hym kisse*".

The following stanza, number 27, with its direct praise to Venus and Cupid enhances the reader's incertitude and ambiguity as where to outline this border-norm of love behaviour.

Just to end this introduction, Pandarus (5), the great intermedial, is there, giving warning of the arrival of Helene and Deifebus and at the same time summoning both lovers for a future meeting which is described by Pandarus as a kind of tournament between Troilus and Criseyde when he says, "*And lat se which of you shal bere the belle, to speke of love aright*". Everybody bears in mind that "*to speke of love*" is a concept that must be included in the core of the courtly love code, but coming from Pandarus, a character so practical and positive I wonder if what here is really meant is 'speaking'. This example of incertitude is more relevant thanks to the author's commentary in the same line "*therewith he lough*".

### *Preparation*

The second part of our exposition deals with a series of different activities, mainly conversations and situations, whose unique aim is to prepare the great love scene.

- (5) A. MISSKIMIN says, describing Pandarus:  
 "He is Chaucer's most brilliant and subtle dramatic characterization, the source of all the poem's wit, intelligence, and energy, and he makes its compromises with reality entirely with words". *The Renaissance Chaucer*, 1975, pp. 171-172.

Let us see, then, in the first place, a chat between Troilus and Pandarus as a colophon to the previous situation. Here again, we find this doubtfulness between the Courtly love code, expressed here by Pandarus' preoccupation: "... for the have I my nece, of vice cleene, so fully maad thi gentillesse triste, that al shal ben right as thiselven liste".

Chaucer, in stanzas 65 & 66, says that Troilus and Criseyde's affair runs smoothly, "he say his lady somtyme, and also she with hym spak". Here again we are inside the Courtly love frame of mind, but that is quite dubious if we stop to consider the narrator's following wish, "as that Cupid wolde hem grace sende to maken of hire speche aright an ende", this end, this golden brooch of 'hire speche' demands something more active, practical; I believe it is not too difficult to imagine what kind of action Pandarus, through Cupid, is referring to.

Chaucer himself will deal again with the theme of the "love speche" in stanza number 73, "ne leiser have hire speches to fulfelle". Let us see how the author is preparing the ground for this "to fulfelle". Thus, when he says two lines further on, "As for to bryngen to his hous som nyght, his faire nece and Troilus yfere, wheras at leiser al this heighe matere, touchyng here love, were at the fulle upbounde" he is suggesting that this "to fulfelle" must be taken in the line of practical and positive deeds and not chats. Let us also take notice that the description made by the author in stanzas number 75, 76, 81 and 83 reflects effectiveness and positive results.

I have already stated that the narrator is preparing the reader/listener for the great scene of this third Book: the consummation of love between Troilus and Criseyde, in stanzas 77 and 78. Thus with reference to Troilus, he speaks about "This servyse" and about "this nede". Both terms fit into the theoretical tenets of Courtly love, although the second one looks more ambiguous above all because of its connexion with Apollo, a practical, positive and active God much more than a God of conversation and mystic dissertations.

There is also, according to my view, a preparation for the reader in reference to Criseyde, in stanzas 82 to 84. Thus, we see that Criseyde after a small opposition leaves everything in her uncle's hands, which might drive the reader to imagine, knowing Pandarus, something very definite and quite materialistic.

So up to now, what we have found so far, both in the introduction and in these preparatory stanzas of the Poem, has been a contrast, an ambiguity between on one side the theoretical principles of the Courtly love code and on the other side the practical and material suggestions from Pandarus and the positive results (let's interpret these as 'bed') Pandarus is looking for.

*Central scene*

Let us go down to the central scene now, that is, the situation in which Troilus meets Criseyde in her bed, and how Chaucer weaves the whole plot with a humoristic and ambiguous approach.

Let us observe, first of all, how the author seeks the complicity, acquiescence of the reader, when he says, *"But who was glad now, who, as trowe ye, but Troilus, that stood and myght it se thoroughout a litel wyndow in a stewe"*.

In stanzas 89-90 the author adorns the situation with astrological references, thus, Fortune, this blind Goddess, knows how to arrange things in such a way that things happen as they are meant to (6).

Furthermore, Criseyde's acceptance of staying the night at her uncle's house is described in ambiguous and provoking terms, in the sense that the reader does not see a clear and logical reason for staying, on the contrary, she seems prepared to make the best of the situation.

The interest and hurry shown by Pandarus in getting his niece into bed stimulates the audience's imagination as to the denouement of the scene. In fact, the reader-listener knows quite well what is going to happen, what he does not know is how. And this is where the artist comes in with his mastery of language, his magic touch in managing words. This is why the creation of myths has more to do with language function than with the message itself.

Once Pandarus has persuaded Criseyde to go to her chamber and before going in search of Troilus, there is in the text a series of details given by the narrator and whose contribution, it appears to me, is in the line of creating an atmosphere of sensual expectation; for instance, line 674 *"the voide dronke, and travers drawe anon"*; verse 679, *"that wel neigh no man heren other koude"*; lines 691-3, *"but boden go to bedde, with meschaunce, if any wight was steryng anywhere, and lat hem slepen that abedde werw"*.

The author's comments concerning Pandarus anticipates the latter's role as a go-between, *"But Pandarus, that wel koude ech a deel the olde daunce, and every point therinne"*. Here again we can discover a double interpretation as *"olde daunce"* could mean the act of love itself which does not conform with the theory of Courtly love, or it might refer to the entire context, the group of circumstances, details,

- (6) N. COGHILL in his translation of the Poem into Modern English, states: "O Fortuna, O Executrix of Dooms, O Heavenly influences in the sky". *Troilus and Criseyde*, (1971), 1977. See also ROBINSON, *op. cit.*, pág. 824.

precautions and reserves which surround the air with in an amorous situation of romantic conquest, and this could certainly fit in with a chivalrous romance ethic.

Troilus' insistence on praying for Venus' help seems to me quite relevant and meaningful not only because the symbolisation of Venus (sexual commitment), but also because Troilus is giving an image of himself as a man, a young man, without any previous sexual experience, "*For nevere yet no nede hadde ich er now, ne halvendel the drede*". I think these words either have the effect of provoking the reader's hilarity or at least the benevolent smile of the experienced person.

In relation to his last word "*drede*", let us note that the theme of fear appears with strong marks of humour throughout the whole scene, thus Pandarus will reproch him "*Thow wrecched mouses herte, artow agast so that she wol the bite?*"; "*O thef, is this a mannes herte?*". Even Criseyde herself will tell him, once in bed together, "*Is this a mannes game?*".

Troilus' continuous pleading of Venus' assistance is reaffirmed by mentioning other Gods intercedence (7), for instance, Jupiter, Mars, Foebus, Mercury, Aglarous (see stanzas 104 and 105). The pleading to these Gods is made through their respective lovers and there are two words which define the cause and the argument of his petition. This two terms are "*at this nede*" and "*to this werk*". Both show in a neat way the positivism and the effectiveness of the plot intentions, which does not, according to my thinking, provide the ideal of Courtly Love.

But let us explore the central situation, object of our article; Criseyde awakes and finds Pandarus beside her bed. He is going to insist upon secrecy, silence, clandestinity and discretion; all of this (stanzas 108-110) is taken for granted on the premises of Courtly Love; and he (Pandarus) goes on speaking using jealousy as an excuse to explain Troilus' presence in his house and as the pretext to convince his niece of seeing him immediately (see stanzas 111-131).

Pandarus's pressure upon his niece is enormous and his dialectic blackmailing is quite strong and the result of it will be her total giving in when she says, "*doth herof as you list*".

Her last effort in selfdefense consisting of her intention to get

- (7) J. FRANKIS in his publication "Paganism and pagan love in Troilus & Criseyde" edited by M. SALU in *Essays on Troilus and Criseyde*, 1979, writes: "In such cases the pagan gods, as often in medieval writing, are represented not as powerless fictions but as actual forces with some capacity to influence human life, and their role can obviously not be dissociated from the influence of the planets that bear their names" pág. 59.

out of bed before Troilus's arrival, will be easily defeated by her uncle's verbosity not exempt from irony and comicalness, "*But liggeth stille, and taketh hym right here; it nedeth nought no ferther for hym sterte*" (8).

The same touch of irony and humour will be used by Pandarus when he tries to persuade Criseyde to receive Troilus in her bed, thus in stanza 140 he says, "*upon yource beddes syde al ther withinne, that ech of yow the bet may other heere*" (9). Let us point out here how Pandarus gives an excuse of 'pillow-talk' when he is intending somethins else.

Let us observe that Pandarus is not only humorous in his speech but also in his deed, for instance, in stanza 157, according to the narrator: "*...but certeyn, at the laste, for this or that, he into bed hym caste, and seyde, 'O thef, is this a mannes herte?' And of the rente al to his bare sherte*"; thus when Troilus faints he reacts immediately by picking him up from the floor, undressing him and putting him into bed (10).

(8) See A. LEON SENDRA, *Op. cit.*, Notas 86 y 87 al libro III del Poema. pág. 207.

(9) Dr. LEON says:

"Estamos ante otra de las claves que el autor va desgranando ante la imaginación del auditorio. Es verdad que 'al ther withinne' podría interpretarse como dentro y bajo el dosel de la cama, artilugio corriente en aquel tiempo. Pero dada la razón que Pándaro alega, esto es 'oirse mejor', no exenta de ironía, dentro del mismo lecho se oírían mejor todavía". *Ibidem*, nota 90 del libro III. pp. 207-208.

(10) Notes 91, 92, and 93 are here quoted in reference to this funny event. These notes are taken from the above mentioned publication, pág. 208.

Stanza 155: "W. LAMBERT nos comenta con profunda ironía esta escena al decir, "Troilus as he enters his lady's bed for the firts time, seems an absurdly unthreatening a figure as one could wish. He is of course not pretending to be weak here, had not planned to faint, but in the first half of the *Troilus* all things do conspire to bring the lovers together, and if one wanted to enter the bed of the fearfulest wight that might be, sorrow, fear, and a swoon would not be the worst of tactics; the lady is in command". *Essays on Troilus and Criseyde*, ed. por M. SALU. 1979, pág. 119.

Stanza 156: "HOWARD-DEAN afirman que se trata de un tratado de medicina medieval: 'Evidently what happens inside Troilus is that a powerful emotion in his heart blocks the flow of the spirits from the liver ('natural spirit') to the brain ('animal spirit'). Hence his tears cannot flow (1087), he cannot feel emotion (1090-91), and ultimately cannot sustain consciousness (1098)'. *Troilus and Criseyde*, pág. 142.

La gran sensibilidad con que el autor describe a Troilo no es sino un rasgo más de su calidad humana y la intensidad de la misma no hace sino preparar su desvanecimiento que ocurre en la estrofa siguiente. J. D. BURNLEY afirma: 'Sensitivity, then, is a key notion in understanding —gentillesse—, and this is revealed by the ease with which the —gentil herte— is impressed by

Another funny note with Pandarus is when he tries to set the mood for the lovers by leaving them in darkness, saying as he removes the candle: "... *For aught I kan aspien, this light, nor I, ne serven here of nought*".

Irony here is evident on the basis that according to the narrator, Criseyde is embracing Troilus, "*and therewithal hire arm over hym she leyde, and al foryaf, and ofte tyme hym keste*", and at the same time she is trying to provoke him, as when she asks: "*Is this a mannes game? What Troilus wol ye do thus for shame?*". One would hardly think that this is appropriate to Courtly Love motif (11).

In stanza 170, Troilus finally decides on action and makes up his mind to take the initiative, "... *and sodeynly avysed, he hire in armes faste to hym hente*", the aforesaid initiative is signalled by the exit of Pandarus, whose 'command' to Troilus is not in keeping with the assumed delicacy of Courtly Love, "*If ye be wise, swouneth nought now, lest more folk arise*" meaning more or less —act like a man!—.

The next step of Troilus is out of line with the mentality of Courtly Love because he is using a rather crude expression, perhaps due to nervousness, "*O swete, as evere mot I gon, now be ye kaught, now is ther but we tweyne! now yeldeth yow, for other bote is non!*". It seems to me as if Troilus were trying to take advantage of the 'fait accompli', hence his insistent repetition of the adverb 'now'. In reaction to this, going against the policy of Courtly love, Criseyde replies with a delicate and feminine acceptance in obedience to the Courtly Love code, that the author offers us in a logical web of tenses revol-

the moods of man and of nature external to it. But it is also revealed by the intensity with which it suffers emotion'. *Chaucer's Language and the Philosopher's Tradition*, 1979, pág. 155.

Stanza 157: "Nada más lejos en esta escena que la imagen del don Juan conquistador. Esta estrofa presenta un botón de muestra de lo que vemos a todo lo largo del libro tercero: la unión de estilos contrarios y de formas contrapuestas de comportamiento. Sin duda alguna, Pandaro llega aquí al culmen de su misión como intermediario. ROWE comenta esta situación así: 'When Troilus swoons in fear of Criseyde's displeasure, Pandarus—for this or that, he into bed hym caste—, we may be in the private territory of Troilus, the bedroom, but Pandarus and Criseyde have brought the real world into it with a vengeance. The ridiculousness of farce and the sublime of romance are one'. *Op. cit.*, pág. 54.

- (11) In a certain way BURNLEY thinks it could be, when he says: "Yet, if emotional intensity is a feature of the —gentil herte— it is its susceptibility to 'pitee' which is its outstanding feature. In the courtly love situation, operating as it frequently does in the shadow of the tyrant image, —pitee— is very often the precursor of the fulfilment of love". *Op. cit.*, pág. 156.



ving around the adverb 'now'. Thus, before Troilus's demands brought across by a present perfect in passive, "*be ye kaught*", a present "*is ther*" and an imperative "*yeldeth yow*", Criseyde is answering in a more profound way with a past perfect, "*ne hadde I er now, my swete herte deere, ben yold*" and a present conditional, "... *ywis, I were now nought heere!*", implying that her acceptance does not depend upon casual circumstances, but up her own previous decision (12).

Chaucer reminds the reader with two particular hints that he is witnessing a love scene. One is by means of the image given in lines 1230-2; "*and as aboute a tree, with many a twiste, bytrent and writh the swote wodebynde, gan ech of hem in armes other wynde*".

The second one is concerning the description of Troilus caressing the body of Criseyde in stanza 179, and here again a final humorous stroke is present when the author says: "... *that what to don, for joie unnethe he wiste*". Perhaps, Chaucer with this commentary intends to sharpen the reader's curiosity.

In any case, Chaucer aims to maintain an ambiguous and perhaps balanced atmosphere in this love scene between spiritual Courtly Love and physical appetites (13). Thus, we see Troilus singing in praise of lo-

- (12) A little further on, in stanza 175, the author will suggest to every woman to act as Criseyde did. G. WILLIAMS comments this text in the following way:

"These lines (1224-5) are Chaucer's own devout approbation of the illicit affair, and his advice to every woman to do as Criseyde did. It is just what Chaucer would have said of the Gaunt — Katherine affair". *A New View of Chaucer*, 1965, pág. 184.

- (13) Dr. LEON's note to stanza 179, *Op. cit.*, pág. 210, is worth quoting concerning this matter:

"Nos encontramos en esta estrofa con otra de las claves que el autor establece a modo de comentario a fin de que el lector se haga su propia situación del paisaje... A pesar de toda la farsa irónica que la ambigüedad, querida por el autor, deja traslucir en la confusión entre lo puramente carnal y lo espiritual, debemos pensar que se trata de algo más profundo, impreso en la naturaleza humana. ROWE comenta la siguiente estrofa así: 'One laughs —perhaps too quickly— at Troilus' mouse heart and at his apparent confusion of 'cupiditas' and 'caritas'. The pleasures of Criseyde's body termed charity seem as misnamed as Cupid is here. There is more than irony here however, for the fact Troilus is forever forgetting to act and remembering to pray is a significant indication of the nature of his love, as well as of his psychology and his blindness... Certainly, Troilus began by seeing Criseyde and has progressed to stroking her heavenly anatomy. It is equally certain that he repeatedly turns from that which he is touching to that which he sees in Criseyde... Thus we find Troilus in bed with a naked Criseyde, in what is decidedly the traditional territory of 'cupiditas', and find him praising God and coming to the realization that —mercy paseth right—. *Op. cit.*, pp. 105-106.

ve in stanzas 180 to 186, and from where Criseyde calls him back in stanza 187, by means of the imperative "*welcome*". It would appear that if it were not for Criseyde's interruption Troilus would continue in his spiritual cloud. In reference to this, Rowe is right when declaring:

*"With Troilus thus inspired and transported by love, Criseyde seems almost forgotten. Indeed, she finds it necessary to call Troilus back down from his lyrical and spiritual flights in praise of love, to remind him that she and her body are there waiting" (14).*

In short, I think that Chaucer has achieved a superbe linguistic exposition of a love scene situation, contrasting spirituality and earthliness with many comical notes whose main consequence is perhaps to make the reader assume a relaxed attitude in order to reach a better and more complete understanding of his message.

Let us point out finally that although Chaucer does not describe in detail the sexual act in its entirety he enhances it invoking as witnesses those of his readers who are experienced in the matter (15).

I would like to end this article offering the double effect of love that Chaucer himself gives at the end of this third Book of his Poem. One more immediate which consists of having "*as much joie as herte may comprede*". And a second one, much more profound and vital and present in lovers daily life, "*... and this increes of hardynesse and myght com hym of love, his ladies thank to wynne, that altered his spirit so withinne*", such an effect must be thought of as both a genuine and authentic line of Courtly Love code and also a modern, up to date, concept of love.

(14) ROWE, D. N. *O Love O Charite!*, 1976. pág. 109.

(15) See Dr. LEON's note to stanza 188, *Op. cit.*, pág. 211, in reference to their love making scene:

"No cabe duda de que tanto esta estrofa como la siguiente representan la cota máxima de una serie de datos que el autor ha ido dejando caer a lo largo de este tercer libro del Poema para que el propio lector opine sobre si realizaron o no el acto de amor. Aunque la versión de COGHILL, 'they learnt the honour and excellence of love' permite dejar la situación en un estado de ambigüedad, nosotros opinamos que sí hubo acto de amor y ello en base al vocabulario empleado aquí: 'delit', 'joies', 'at the feste of swich gladnesse', 'that pleye', 'that night', 'felten in love the grete worthynesse', sobre todo cuando una de las acepciones del verbo 'felten' es según el OED —'to mat or press together into a felt like consistence'— es decir, de una unión o acoplamiento total. Toda la situación llama a la acción práctica, así 'the wit' no puede comprender el gozo mientras que sí pueden los que han experimentado 'swich gladnesse'. Otra clave puede residir en el papel jugado por la 'noche' y la siguiente estrofa es claro exponente. Otro argumento en el que nos apoyamos reside en la relación —narrador y acto de amor—, por eso su insistencia en no poder describir el menor de sus deleites 'kan namore' y en el último verso de la estrofa: 'that is so heigh that al ne kan I telle!'.