

(Originally published in Newman, F. X., ed. *The Meaning of Courtly Love* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 1968), 1-18.

The Concept of Courtly Love as an Impediment to the Understanding of Medieval Texts

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I have never been convinced that there was any such thing as what is usually called courtly love during the Middle Ages. However, it is obvious that courtly love does exist in modern scholarship and criticism, and that the idea appeals to a great many people today.

Our evidence concerning medieval people as it appears in court records, historical narratives, and other sources reveals them as being severely practical within the limits of their knowledge, and not at all sentimental. But what modern scholars have described as “courtly love,” a thing, I might add, that medieval scholars refrain from describing, is not only impractical but downright inconvenient. For example, as a “courtly lover” I should be constrained to love someone else's wife, unless, that is, I happened to live in England, where, some authorities insist, I might on occasion practice the art with my own wife.¹ The non-English situation is not only inconvenient for the lady, but dangerous, since adultery on the part of a wife in medieval society, as in modern Italy, was not taken lightly by law and custom. In fact, during the late Middle Ages in some areas adultery on the part of the husband was not always regarded with much tolerance either. In late fourteenth-century London, for example, a man and woman taken in adultery were required to be shaved, except for two inches of hair around the head, taken to Newgate Prison, and thence paraded publicly through the streets accompanied by minstrels more than half way across the City to be incarcerated in a small prison in the middle of Cornhill called the Tun.² However, a further feature of “courtly love” is that it was frequently “pure,” so that wife or no wife what one got for his pains, and these were considerable, was little more than anticipatory elation, presumably identical with a feeling described by the troubadours as “Joy.” Although at least one modern scholar has described this, quite seriously, as “the highest earthly good,” I have personally found no medieval counterparts of *Playboy Magazine*, nor indeed any sort of encouragements then of the kind of vicarious joys we seem to pursue with such avidity today. I should imagine pure courtly love especially inconvenient in England, where one might be a “courtly lover” to his wife, although I should not be surprised to find it adduced any day now to explain the merriment of Merry England and the curious lineage of the True Born Englishman.

We are told further that the lady involved should be of much higher station than the lover, that she should be located at a distance, that the lover should tremble in her presence, and that he should obey her slightest wish. He should, moreover, fall sick with love, faint when he sees a lock of the lady's hair, preserve his chastity, and perform great exploits to attract the attention of the lady. All this seems to me a terrible nuisance, and hardly the kind of thing that Henry 11 or Edward III would get involved in. But that is not all. The lover should also use all the techniques recommended in the *Rowan de la rose*. That is, he should spend all his wealth, employ outrageous flattery, engage in blatant hypocrisy about what he wants, and convince the lady that she can accumulate great wealth and a kind of eternal youth by granting her favors. Of course, I realize that various forms of irrational conduct are now carried out with a “holier-than-thou” air, in the name of sophistication; but I doubt that many medieval noblemen could be persuaded to go so far as to become “courtly lovers,” even for the sake of a superior social tone and that great ideal frequently attributed to them, and to modern real estate developments, “gracious living.”

The advocates of “courtly love” in my audience are probably eager to point out by this time that I have generalized too hastily. Some will allege that “courtly love” is represented only

by the troubadours, some will say that its secrets are revealed only in the pages of Andreas Capellanus, or, perhaps, in the romances of Chrétien de Troyes. Some will say that it is the ancestor of modern romantic love, while others will allege that modern romantic love has nothing to do with it. A few may state that it is a French invention, and that through it France taught the Western World how to appreciate women properly. This diversity of opinion about the nature of “courtly love” is matched by accounts of its origins, which include such things as Pictish matriarchal customs, Manichaeism, neo-Platonism, the scarcity of women in Provençal courts, and the Cult of the Blessed Virgin Mary. In spite of this enormous diversity of learned opinion concerning both the nature of courtly love and its origins, the fact remains that almost any medieval literary work that has anything at all to do with love will inevitably be said to show the “conventions of courtly love.” Indeed, in most instances, these “conventions,” carefully selected to fit the work in question, will be said to “explain” the work. Students will dutifully repeat this explanation, because students may be led to say almost anything, and those among them who grow up to become teachers will almost inevitably repeat it to their students.

At various times in the past I have sought to show that works presumably illustrative of “courtly love” like the *De amore* of Andreas Capellanus, or the *Lancelot* of Chrétien de Troyes, or the *Roman de la rose*, are, in fact, ironic and humorous.³ The result of this effort has frequently been a reaction to the effect that the works in question may not advocate “courtly love,” but at least they satirize it. That is, “courtly love” is like a see-saw: if a man pushes down hard on one end, the other end comes up, and, behold! it is still there. What is being satirized in the works in question is not “courtly love” at all, but idolatrous passion. Idolatrous passion is not a peculiarly medieval phenomenon. It appears in the Old Testament, for example in the stories of Amnon and Holofernes; it is condemned by Lucretius, who recommended visits to prostitutes to get rid of it; and Ovid wrote a whole treatise, the *Remedia amoris*, supplying techniques by means of which one might extricate oneself from its snare. It seems to be a chronic human weakness, although attitudes toward it change with changes in style. It was glossed over with sentiment by the late eighteenth century, glorified with rebellious individualism by the romantics, and thoroughly sentimentalized by the Victorians. Today it seems to be cherished as a manifestation of the deep needs of the personality, and is frequently greeted with what might be called profound psychological piety. In the Middle Ages, however, the classical attitude toward it remained, although it frequently looks “feudal” or “courtly” because it is described in a medieval setting, and it also looks fairly harmless when it is couched in the delicate conventions of the Gothic style. At that time it had overtones of meaning in Christian thought that made it highly significant as a vehicle for philosophical ideas. Christianity was then recognized as a religion of love, rather than as a cult of righteousness, so that aberrations of love were thought to have far-reaching implications in the conduct of everyday affairs. Because of the broad area of associations connected with it in theology and philosophy, idolatrous love was a useful vehicle for the expression of literary and poetic themes. But it was not regarded in terms of sentiment, romantic rebelliousness, sentimentality, or, that great criterion for aesthetic appeal in modern novels, plays, and television programs, stark psychological realism.

Medieval love poetry is extremely varied. There are poems expressing sexual desire, although these are usually not “lyrical” in the modern sense; poems sung in praise of great ladies; crypto-religious poems, written, like the Song of Songs, in terms of physical love; popular songs that do not differ much, except for a certain lack of sentimentality or crypto-sentimentality, from popular songs written today. Aside from the lack of lyrical subjectivity and sentimentality, medieval poetry sometimes shows what might be called frank physical optimism. The medieval

troubadour was a Latin, and like some Latins today, he tended to regard women functionally, that is, with an eye to their potentialities either as bed companions or as childbearers. The required qualities are frequently identical. It was possible, moreover, to contemplate and even to celebrate these potentialities in a disinterested way, without feeling any deep personal urge to exploit them. Moreover, the ladies seem to have enjoyed being praised for the physical assets peculiar to their sex. Neither the troubadours nor their successors in the Middle Ages dwell much on sentimental attributes: locks of hair curling over the ear or forehead, little tilts of the nose, characteristic gestures, or other endearing individual traits. The general attitude extends frequently to the Blessed Virgin, and poems addressed to her often display what is to our psychologically sensitive ears a shocking concern for her red lips, white teeth, straight back, graceful shoulders, and so on.⁴ But she was, after all, a woman, and, presumably sufficiently beautiful to become the Mother of God.

Although medieval love poetry displays what is to us a certain lack of appreciation for the richness of the human personality, its variety is sufficiently great so that the label “courtly love” is hardly adequate to describe it. Indeed, there are times when the use of this label simply turns the poems upside-down, so that we have little chance of understanding them at all. To illustrate this process, I have chosen two examples from the poetry of Chaucer. Let us begin with an early work, *The Book of the Duchess*.

The standard interpretations of *The Book of the Duchess* all stem from the account of the poem developed many years ago by Professor Kittredge. There have been strong disagreements among scholars about the nature of the malady experienced by the speaker at the beginning of the poem, and about whether the dreamer in the poem is a naive and inept fool or a skilful guide and counsellor. But almost everyone agrees that the Black Knight is at least in part a representation of John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster, and that, whatever else he may be, he is an ideal courtly lover, belonging to the sub-type: English courtly lover of his own wife. Although the portrait of Blanche, if it can be called a portrait, that appears in the poem is highly stylized, we are told that she is made to represent an ideal “courtly mistress.” This is a dubious compliment. But, in any event, the poem as a whole is said to illustrate the transference of current French fashions about courtly love to English soil, where they were somehow made appropriate to an elegy for a great lady.

I think it is proper to ask what Professor Kittredge's assumptions about love were when he wrote his interpretation of the poem. This is what he said:

Now there is nothing new in the Black Knight's story, either ill form or substance. The experience he describes is typical, and he speaks throughout in the settled language of the chivalric system. Love was the only life that became the gently nurtured, and they alone were capable of love. Submission to the god was their natural duty; in his grace and favor was their only hope; for no man's heart was in his own control.⁵

We are led to believe, that is, in rather touching language, that the English nobility subjected themselves to Cupid, and that their “only hope” lay in that god's favors. Medieval views on this subject were quite different. For example, in 1346 the distinguished Mertonian, Thomas Bradwardine, who was at the time Chancellor of St. Paul's and Master of the London schools generally, delivered a sermon celebrating English victories at Crécy and in Scotland. Of the conquered enemies of England, he said in part,

Embracing a seventh error, they seem to emulate antique pagans worshipping Hymen or Cupid, the god of carnal love. Soldiering in Venus, associating themselves with the retinue of Aphrodite, they think the vigor of their audacity to be probity, victory, or triumph. But they say that no one can be vigorous unless he is amorous, or loves amorously, that no one can fight strenuously to excess unless he loves to excess. But how profane is this foolishness, how false, insane, and wild! . . . They labor strenuously in arms to make for themselves a name like the name of the greatest upon earth. . . And why do they wish such a name? That they may be loved by foolish women. . . . And who gives them the payment and reward for their labors? Who, except for the god for whom they fight, to whom they devote themselves, and whom they worship. And what payment or reward do they get for their pride? Public and immense disgrace. And for their lechery? A stinking and intense burning.⁶

Bradwardine goes on to explain that devotion to Cupid or Venus is actually enervating, and that English restraint in this matter partially accounts for the victories of English chivalry.

It is obvious that our representatives of Harvard and Merton were not talking about the same thing. To begin with the first, Professor McLuhan has assured us, and I think properly, that most of us look at the world through a rear-view mirror. I might add that this mirror does not give us a very distant view into the past, and, moreover, that it is frequently tilted upward toward the clouds. Both the god of love and the “gently nurtured” as they are alluded to by Professor Kittredge clearly belong to the realm of romantic and Victorian fiction, and have nothing to do with the Middle Ages. He had in mind a sentimental passion only faintly and enticingly tinged with sex, a tinge made decorous by reference to the uncontrolled “heart.” Bradwardine, on the other hand, regarded Cupid and Venus as figures for lecherous desire, pure and simple. His insistence, moreover, that lechery or amorous passion is destructive of chivalry is a commonplace of medieval thought from the twelfth century onward among both religious and secular writers on the subject. In so far as Chaucer is concerned, the references to Venus in his work are all consistent with the view expressed by Bradwardine. His two most famous descriptions of her temple, in the *Knight's Tale* and in *The Parliament of Fowls*, are derived largely from Boccaccio's *Teseida*, and Boccaccio himself informs us in his notes to that work that Venus represents irrational concupiscence.⁷ It is hardly surprising that in this temple Palamon vows to make “werre alwey with chastitee,” and it would be difficult to describe this vow as being either very noble or very chivalrous.

To return to *The Book of the Duchess*, it should have been clear in the first place that the Black Knight could hardly be regarded as an admirable figure in the poem. He explicitly describes his loss as a loss to Fortune in unmistakably Boethian terms. Anyone who has read *The Consolation of Philosophy* with any care, and not simply as a source for more or less meaningless labels, knows that subjection to Fortune was regarded as a kind of foolishness brought on by too much concern for mere externals. The Black Knight is not only foolish in this respect; he is also very clearly suffering from sloth, a vice regarded during the Middle Ages as stemming from a lack of fortitude. No one in Chaucer's audience would have regarded lack of fortitude and subjection to Fortune as “chivalric” qualities. The fact that advocates of “courtly love” cheerfully embrace them as characteristics of the doctrine they advocate is simply another indication of the inherent absurdity of the doctrine itself. As for John of Gaunt, it may be that the grief he suffered at the death of Blanche in 1369 may have led him temporarily into an attitude somewhat resembling that of the Black Knight, but this does not mean that the Black Knight is John of

Gaunt. John of Gaunt was a Duke, not a knight. To put this very simply, when the time for paying poll taxes came around, the Duke of Lancaster paid more than any other man in England.⁸ Earls paid somewhat less, and mere knights still less. Chaucer did not put a Black Duke in his poem. There are other reasons for not associating the Black Knight too closely with the Duke, but in spite of these facts, preconceived notions of “courtly love” turned the Black Knight into a kind of romantic hero and exemplar of true chivalry. That is, the concept of “courtly love” has prevented generations of scholars from seeing that if the figure of the Black Knight makes any sense at all in the poem, it is intended as a criticism of an attitude toward the deceased Duchess of Lancaster. Those who grieved for her immoderately, like the Black Knight, were thinking of her as mere flesh and blood, an attractive object of desire forever lost. Needless to say, this attitude neglects the lady's more human qualities: her virtues and the value of her memory as an inspiration to chivalric conduct. And it is 'Just these qualities that are celebrated in the poem.

If there was, during the Middle Ages, any such thing as “chivalric love,” it was the medieval precedent for the kind of love any Englishman is still supposed to have, however faintly, for his King or Queen. Every subject was expected to love his overlord, man or woman, and his overlord's wife if the overlord happened to be a man. Great ladies like Blanche of Lancaster might have expected the love and devotion of all those in their households, and of many lords, knights, squires, and clerks in other households besides. Blanche of Lancaster specifically was a national figure, the greatest lady in England at the time of her death. But this love was a disinterested devotion, somewhat like that inspired by the Blessed Virgin during the Middle Ages.⁹ It had nothing whatsoever to do with either sex or sentimentality, and could not be associated with Cupid or Venus in any way. We have become so preoccupied in recent years with “personality” and the “inner life” that this sort of thing has become very difficult to understand. Nevertheless, this is the kind of love that Chaucer undoubtedly felt and expected others to feel for, Blanche. With the love of Sir Lancelot for Guenevere or the love represented as that of the dreamer in the *Roman de la rose*, a poem that ends with a thinly veiled description of sexual intercourse, it has nothing whatsoever in common.

For a second and final example of the kind of obfuscation that results from “explaining” medieval poems in terms of “courtly love” let us turn very briefly to *Troilus and Criseyde*. The protagonist belongs, of course, to another English sub-species of the type: he is a “courtly lover” of a widow. Nevertheless, Professor Robinson assures us, he is an “ideal courtly lover.”¹⁰ Like other ghosts, the “ideal courtly lover” takes many forms. As the poem is usually described, its appeal is essentially romantic; it is a tragic and moving story of love in flower and love in frustration. It is consistent perhaps with that eternal pattern of dashed hopes so movingly described by Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, a pattern with which all of us seem to acquire a certain experience. It is not difficult now, in fact, to talk about it in terms of “archetypes,” another family of ghosts that clank their chains through modern academic halls. Now it is true that the obvious relevance of *The Consolation of Philosophy* to the thematic development of this poem should have prevented any such concept of it from arising, but “courtly love” is more pleasant to talk about than the philosophical intricacies of Boethius, and it is much easier to talk about it than it is to get students to read *The Consolation*.

Before we consider the poem itself, I think it might be proper to ask ourselves why Chaucer was interested in the story of Troy. The obvious answer, of course, is that the story was popular during the Middle Ages and that Chaucer read Boccaccio's *Filostrato* in some form, liked it, and wrote a poem based on it. But this does not answer our question very specifically. Chaucer probably finished *Troilus* in the latter part of 1386 or in 1387. He was living at the time above

Aldgate in London in the apartments granted him by the Mayor and Aldermen of the City in 1374. In this connection, we should remember that the Mayor of London ranked as an Earl, the aldermen as barons or tenants-in-chief of the Crown, and Chaucer as a squire. Although the city of London itself enjoyed increasing prosperity, with some interruptions, during the later fourteenth century, England as a whole did not. There was, in the first place, a severe agricultural depression that created considerable uneasiness among the feudal nobility who were largely dependent upon agricultural production. At the same time, after 1369 the rivalry with France went badly for the English, so that by the end of the century the French court had replaced the English court as the center of European chivalry. The behavior of Edward III in his latter years was, to say the least, unedifying, especially in view of his neglect of the realm and his besotted concern for Alice Perrers, who, incidentally, had a sumptuous residence in London. King Richard was never able to live up to the promise he showed in confronting the rebels in 1381. The nobility was factious, and Parliament reflected their intrigues. The Parliament of 1386 indulged in fanciful accusations against the King's friends, and was probably instrumental in depriving Chaucer of his position at the Custom House. And in 1388 the Merciless Parliament proceeded to more or less wholesale Judicial murder. Armed bands roamed the countryside; the court was sapped by intrigue and rumors of intrigue; brawling and disorder broke out not only in the country and in the streets of the towns, but even before the royal justices in the King's Bench. In short, the ties of the old feudal hierarchy seemed to be breaking down in favor of self-seeking, personal ambition, and greed. As Chaucer himself put it, in a poem probably written at Aldgate,

. . . in oure dayes nis but covetyse,
Doublenesse, and tresoun, and envye,
Poyson, manslauhtre, and mordre in sondry wyse.
(“The Former Age,” 61-64)

Under these circumstances it was natural that men should turn to the traditions of the past to find inspiration for reform. Some of Chaucer's friends were “Lollard Knights” who exhibited a remarkably serious concern for traditional Christian moral doctrine.¹¹ Chaucer's old patron, John of Gaunt, was the patron and devoted friend of the famous reforming mayor of London, John of Northampton.

Where would a Londoner, concerned about decay in the society around him, look for the traditions of his city? In 1419 when Richard Whittington was mayor, the Clerk of the City, John Carpenter, compiled a *repertorium*, of city customs based on documents, some of them very ancient, available at the Guildhall. This book became a standard reference, known, because of its original binding, as the *Liber Albus*. Carpenter was a man with whom Chaucerians should sympathize, for he left a number of books in his will that we know were familiar to Chaucer, including the *De planctu Naturae* and the *Anticlaudianus* of Alanus de Insulis, the *De miseria humanae conditionis* of Innocent III, and the *Philobiblon* of Richard de Bury. Incidentally, the tradition of Richard de Bury's inspiration was quite strong at St. Paul's during the latter fourteenth century. Concerning the City of London the *Liber Albus* tells us,

In the year from the beginning of the World 4032, and before the Lord's Incarnation 1200, the city that is now called London founded in imitation of Great Troy, was constructed and built by King Brut, the first monarch of Britain, being at first called ‘New Troy’, and afterwards ‘Troinovant’¹²

Another passage, which may be an addition to the text but is said to be based on “ancient books,” elaborates this idea:

Among the noble cities of the world which fame has rendered illustrious, the City of London is the one principal seat of the realm of England which diffuses far and wide the celebrity of its name. It is happy in the salubrity of its climate, in the enjoyment of the Christian religion, in its liberties so well deserved, and its foundation at a most ancient date. Indeed, according to the testimony of the chronicles it is much older than the City of Rome; for, springing from the same more ancient Trojans, London was founded by Brut, in imitation of great Troy, before the foundation of Rome by Remus and Romulus; whence it is that, even to this day, it possesses the liberties, rights, and customs of the ancient city Troy, and enjoys its institutions.¹³

We may remember that the Merciless Parliament accused the then former Mayor of London, Nicholas Brembre, of wanting to change the name of London to “Petty Troy,” to declare himself Duke, and to execute several thousands of his opponents. The charge was ridiculous, but the mention of the word *Troy* probably added to its initial plausibility. In any event, the 'Judicial murder of Brembre duly ensued.

Troy, then, served as the great exemplar of the *City* of London specifically and of the realm of England generally, an idea that we can see operative in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, although it is true that the purport of that work has been obscured by talk about “courtly love.” The fall of Troy loomed as a warning to all Englishmen. It came about as a result of the choice made by Paris, who thought Venus, or the life of pleasure and self-satisfaction, more attractive than either Juno, the active life, or Pallas, the life of contemplation or wisdom. The result was the rape of Helen, a lady not venerated in the Middle Ages as she came to be in the pages of Yeats or Camus. The action was an insult to Pallas or wisdom, who had been, so to speak, a kind of patron saint of Troy. To understand the implications of these fabulous events, we should remember that wisdom was regarded throughout the Middle Ages as a royal virtue, proper to kings and princes, and in the individual the supreme control over the passions. Christ was conventionally called *Sapientia Dei Patris*, the Wisdom of God, and the Blessed Virgin was sometimes associated with Pallas, since she had brought Wisdom to mankind. As Raoul de Preslles says in his commentary on *The City of God*, so long as Minerva or *Sapience* ruled the city, Troy was full of virtue, but when she lost her *seignorie*, the city reverted to fleshly lusts and idolatry and thus became doomed to fall.¹⁴

Boccaccio's poem contained the story of a young prince of Troy who fell passionately in love with a young widow and lost her. His name, “Troilus” in English, suggested a Latin form meaning “Little Troy,” so that it was not difficult to make the downfall of Troilus an analogue of the downfall of Troy itself. Just as Venus, or the cultivation of Venus, brought about the destruction of Troy, so also it brought about the destruction of Troilus. The general moral situation is clear enough in Boccaccio, but it had a specific applicability to London and to England as a whole that made it peculiarly suitable for Chaucer's use. Chaucer could refurbish the old object lesson in a new guise, and, with very little difficulty, use Troilus to typify the kind of individual action that brought about the downfall of the City. It does not matter especially whether Chaucer believed the Trojan origin of London literally; the story was well known, and its poetic implications were sufficient. It seems to me that the first step we should make in our understanding of the poem is a recognition of the fact that medieval poetry generally is functional

in the society that produces it. It does not have a “reality of its own.” Nor was Chaucer a detached historian of past events. The real subject of *Troilus and Criseyde* lies in the life around Chaucer and not in the remote Trojan past. No one in the fourteenth century thought of art as existing “for its own sake.” Art was, rather, a vehicle for cherished ideas designed to be practical in its effects.

In the light of these considerations, the general purport of the poem becomes fairly obvious. However, it might be well to point out certain specific features that appear in it to suggest their general significance. In this very hasty account, I shall emphasize what might be called “social” considerations rather than those philosophical aspects of the poem that I have discussed in another place, although it is true that what we call social and political ideas were discussed in moral terms during the Middle Ages. The action of the poem begins at a festival of Pallas in Troy. Since Pallas is the deity of wisdom and what happened to Troy was the result of neglecting her, this scene has considerable thematic importance. Instead of paying any attention to the civic ceremonies, Troilus and his companions are wandering around

Byholding ay the ladies of the town.

(l. 126)

That is, they are tempting Cupid instead of worshipping Pallas. The arrow flies and sends the young Prince of Troy to his chamber alone, where he begins to dream about Criseyde's figure. Very soon he is saying to himself

“myn estat roial I here resigne
Into hire hond.”

(l. 432-433)

We should notice that it is his royal estate, not his person, that Troilus surrenders so quickly to a woman he does not really know. If we remember that there is a sense in which Troy is London, or the realm of England, what we are witnessing is an action typifying the beginning of that decay that Chaucer could see so well in the life around him. To make this idea clear, Chaucer adds that Troilus becomes very fearful, but not fearful concerning the condition of the city. He is afraid of not being able to win Criseyde:

Alle other dredes weren from him fledde,
Both of th'assege and his savacioun.

(l.463-464)

He goes out to fight Greeks, not for the “rescous of the town,” but to win the kind of Venereal fame Bradwardine thought appropriate to defeated Frenchmen. The opening action of the poem is thus a thematic echo of the Judgment of Paris. Troilus has spurned Pallas and embraced Venus. At the same time, he has abandoned the interests of his community in favor of self-interest and self-satisfaction.

Perhaps I should pause briefly to emphasize the fact that I am not trying to make Chaucer a Puritan. No one expected medieval noblemen to observe strict chastity. But it is one thing to engage in occasional dalliance and quite another to abandon oneself completely to idolatrous passion. Any man in a position of responsibility who devoted himself entirely to any kind of self-interest could hardly be considered admirable. The fact that we are able to romanticize the

behavior of Troilus is due to post-Renaissance cultural developments that Chaucer could not possibly have foreseen.

After Pandarus has promised to get Troilus anyone, even his own sister if that is desirable, he leads Troilus in a prayer to Cupid, asking forgiveness for his earlier jokes about love and lovers. He is soon praying also to “blisful Venus” and beseeching Pandarus on his knees to help him. All this “religious” activity has usually been rendered harmless by what has been called “the religion of courtly love.” It is, of course, actually a bitter comment on the substitution of “covayse” and “doublenesse” for the devotion that had made London “happy . . . in the enjoyment of the Christian religion.” We see Troilus praying to Venus again in Book II after Pandarus has won a kind of qualified assent from Criseyde and has learned that what she is chiefly concerned with is her “honor,” which means for her not the virtue itself, but worldly reputation. Incidentally, the anticipatory “joy” supposed to be characteristic of “courtly love” is here described, just as Bradwardine described it, as a fire. It grows warmer the closer Troilus gets to his goal and is not extinguished after he has attained it. The “doublenesse” apparent in Criseyde's conception of honor is further emphasized in the technique used by Pandarus to bring the lovers together. That is, he lies to both Delphebus and Criseyde. It is not accidental that the ruse he employs recalls the story of Amnon, whose affair led to civil war.

Medieval men had a strong sense of social hierarchy. Disturbances in society were thought of as violations of that hierarchy, and failures to maintain the integrity demanded by one's estate or degree were thought to be productive of social chaos. Chaucer plays amusingly on this theme in Book III. At the opening, in the house of Deiphebus, Criseyde approaches Troilus as he lies in bed feigning sickness with a request for “lordship” and protection. But what she receives is a promise from Troilus that he will be under her “yerde.” The phrase *sub virga*, which this promise reflects, was conventionally used to describe the condition of children, or, occasionally, of wives. Although this inversion is amusing on the surface, the implications for “New Troy” are hardly comic. We can see an analogy to this situation in the punishment for “common brawlers” decreed in the City of London by John of Northampton. A convicted “brawler” was to be led through the City with minstrelsy holding a distaff with tow on it in his hand and placed in the “thews” or stocks designed especially for women, the implication being that his unruliness deprived him of the worth proper to the masculine estate. The predicament of the “brawler” as he holds his distaff is amusing, but the implications of his presence are nevertheless serious. To call Troilus' desire to be under Criseyde's “yard” a manifestation of “courtly love” is a little like saying, quite seriously, that the distaff in the hand of the brawler is a sign of the irrepressible medieval reverence for women.

The theme of the inverted hierarchy is clear enough in Troilus' complete submission to Venus and to Fortune in Book III. It receives an added emphasis on a social level in Book IV, where the Trojan Parliament is shown considering whether to turn Criseyde over to the Greeks in exchange for Antenor. Hector, who is an exemplar of chivalry in the poem, takes a firm attitude:

“We usen here no wommen for to selle.”

(4.182)

But he is overcome by “noyse of peple” as furious as a fire blazing in straw. The image is probably intended to recall the proverbial fire in the bed-straw and to emphasize the analogy between the fury of the people and the passion of Troilus. Chaucer had undoubtedly had plenty of experience with “noyse of peple” in London; and the scene, as others have pointed out, is

probably a comment on English Parliaments, perhaps a specific reflection of the Parliament of 1386.¹⁵ The passage looks forward to a similar one in the Clerk's Tale:

O stormy peple! unsad and evere untrewel!
Ay indiscreet and chaungynge as a fane!
(“The Clerk’s Tale” iv [E] 995)

In neither instance is the poet simply making an historical observation; he is calling attention to something very real in the life of his times. For Chaucer, who had not enjoyed the benefits of the French Revolution, passionate popular outbursts were an inversion of the natural order of sovereignty in the commonwealth. They boded ill for Great Troy and New Troy alike.

The decision of the Trojan Parliament emphasizes the helplessness of Troilus in the situation he has created for himself. He cannot, for shame, reveal his own connection with Criseyde, and he cannot, because of what she calls her “honor,” take her away stealthily. He can only blame Fortune, whom he has always honored, he says, “above the goddes alle,” and the god of love, who seems to have “repeled” his grace. The two go together, both in the individual and in the state. That is, if the state succumbs to the passions of the people, disregarding its ordered hierarchies in the pursuit of self-satisfaction, it is, in effect, worshiping Venus and subjecting itself to Fortune. That is why Chaucer is able to say in Book V,

Fortune . . .
Gan pulle away the fetheres brighte of Troie
(5.1546)

A city or a realm can, like a man, give rein to its passions and subject itself to the whims of Fortune. It can also enjoy what Bradwardine calls the reward of Cupid, “a stinking and intense burning.”

When Troilus has found his death on the battlefield, a death deliberately sought in despair and hence a form of suicide, and the city, having lost Hector, is dying also as a result of its own foolishness in abandoning Pallas, the poet adds a stanza that includes a reference to paganism:

Lo here, of payens corsed olde rites,
Lo here, what alle hire goddes may availle,
Lo here, this wrecched worldes appetites. . .
(5.1849-1851)

The “worldes appetites” and the “goddes” are essentially the same thing. Chaucer is not engaging in idle moralizing; he is condemning exactly the same kind of weakness that Bradwardine attributed to the conquered French in 1346, who “seemed to emulate antique pagans, worshiping Hymen or Cupid, the god of carnal love.” Chaucer obviously felt that the English might be doing the same thing, so that New Troy stood in danger of suffering the fate of Great Troy, whose “liberties, rights, and customs” it preserved.

To call Troilus a “courtly lover” caught in the snares of a romantic universe, and to grow sentimental over his fate, is simply to disregard the text of the poem and to foster a kind of historical desecration. From a literary point of view, the “courtly love” interpretation takes all of the humor out of the poem, and, at the same time, substitutes lustful or, if you prefer,

“psychological” seriousness for the poem's true serious purpose. We have done the same kind of thing with a great many other medieval works. Even Arcite in the Knight's Tale, who says that “positif lawe” is “broken al day for love,” and excuses his own conduct on the ground that a lover simply has to have his beloved whether she is a “mayde, widwe, or elles wyf” has been turned into an ideal “courtly lover” and made a hero. Do my colleagues really believe that Chaucer had no moral or social responsibility? I think it is time we stopped teaching medieval texts to the tune of “Hearts and Flowers.” The sophistication of the tune with things like pseudo-Albigensian heresies, pseudo-Platonic philosophies, or pseudo-Arabic doctrines does not conceal its true nature, nor do these walling ghosts on the sidelines make it any more respectable intellectually. The study of courtly love, if it belongs anywhere, should be conducted only as the subject is an aspect of nineteenth and twentieth century cultural history. The subject has nothing to do with the Middle Ages, and its use as a governing concept can only be an impediment to our understanding of medieval texts.

Notes

1 E.g., see John Lawlor, “The Pattern of Consolation in *The Book of the Duchess*,” *Speculum*, XXXI (1956), 626-48.

2. *Liber Albus*, trans. H. T. Riley (London, 1861), p. 396.

3. E.g., in *A Preface to Chaucer* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), pp. 195-203, 391-452.

4. See the interesting discussion by James I. Wimsatt, “The Apotheosis of Blanche in *The Book of the Duchess*,” *JEGP*, LXVI (1967), 26-44. A good example is described by Charles Schmidt, “Gottfried de Hagenau,” *Revue d'Alsace*, XXIV (1873), esp. pp. 164-65.

5. *Chaucer and His Poetry* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1933), p. 63.

6. *Sermo Epinicius*, ed. H. A. Oberman and J. A. Weisheipl, *Arch. d'hist. doct. e. litt. d. m. a.*, XXV (1958), 323-24

7. Ed. Aurclio Roncaglia (Bari: G. Laterza, 1941), p 417

8. R. R. Sharpe, *Calendar of Letter-Books ... of the City of London: Letter Book H* (London, 1907), P. 129, note.

9. On this feature of Marian devotion, see Dom Jean Leclercq, *La liturgie et les paradoxes chrétiens* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1963), PP. 200-204

10. *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1957), P. 387

11. See Derek Brewer, *Chaucer in His Time* (London: Nelson, 1964), pp. 226-30.

12. *Liber Albus*, P. 42 7,

13. *Ibid.*, p. 54. Among the “ancient books” were obviously Fitzstephen's description of London and Geoffrey's *Historia*.

14. (Abbeville, 1468), I, Sig. A viii recto. I owe this reference to Prof. John V. Fleming. On the tradition of a moral cause for the fall of Troy -- and on the relationship between Troy and Troilus suggested below, see John P. McCall, “The Trojan Scene in Chaucer's *Troilus*,” *ELH*, XXIX (1962), 263-75.

15. See John P. McCall and George Rudisill, Jr., “The Parliament of 1386 and Chaucer's Trojan Parliament,” *JEGP*, LVIII (1959), 276-88.