Thesis Proposal

As the war between the Greeks and the Trojans rages and nations battle for power, a love story rises to center stage. Throughout the majority of Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*, the title characters, their meddling voyeur, the narrator, and the readers minimize the importance of Troy’s martial aim and shift their focus to the smaller but equally significant struggle for power in the microcosm of a romantic relationship. The two plots converge most completely as the politics of war interfere with the love relationship in book 4, when the Trojan council determines to trade Criseyde to the Greek camp. As Hector strives fruitlessly to protect the vulnerable widow, Troilus, her lover and more logical defender, stands mutely, neglecting to voice a word of protest. While many critics have emphasized the exchange of women referenced in and signified by this crucial scene, I would like to diverge from that issue in order to examine Troilus’s silence and reluctance to express his emotions not only in this incident but throughout much of the poem. Early in the narrative, after the God of Love’s arrow strikes Troilus, the formerly proud soldier attempts to conceal his plight from the probing Pandarus, insisting, “I hide it for the beste” (1.581). Disregarding his friend’s words, Pandarus persuades Troilus to disclose his secrets and, consequently, to cede his agency as a lover to the self-appointed go-between. At this point, Troilus situates himself in a powerless position from which he does not emerge for the majority of the narrative, and, in doing so, he gives Pandarus the ability to control the secrets in the text and to determine when and to whom to distribute them.
Focusing on the economics of information and the commerce of secrets, we see that not only Troilus and Pandarus but the majority of the characters in the text use information (communicated both verbally and nonverbally) and secrets as a means to maintain autonomy and to gain control over others. Even the reader and narrator partake in this information exchange; the narrator carefully controls what facts (both authoritative and speculative) to divulge to the reader, who, in turn, sorts and absorbs the information received and retains the responsibility of interpreting the text in its entirety. However, the examples of Cassandra’s explication of Troilus’s dream and the hero’s troubling silence at the town council indicate the delicate balance between revealing and concealing secrets, suggesting that when someone divulges more than is appropriate or hides truths better expressed, he or she will fail to achieve an influential position in society.

Troilus’s reticence in the presence of the Trojan council in particular indicates that the power gained through the wielding of knowledge is not only personal but political. This suggests important parallels between the interchange of secrets in the text and the information exchange and protection intrinsic to Chaucer’s social station in a dangerous political time, in which he struggled to retain a secure position in society. To make my argument about the historical significance of the use of secrets throughout Troilus and Criseyde, I plan to analyze Chaucer’s historical and social contexts and to examine the conveyance of information in the text, paying special attention to the methods through which different types of knowledge are communicated and exploring the localities, including public and private venues, in which information is divulged or concealed. I will demonstrate that the text employs the commerce of secrets to assert that the circumspect use and withholding of information are crucial to one’s survival in a precarious societal context.
Proposed Outline

Introduction

In a brief introduction, I will set up the textual and historical issues that I plan to discuss in the paper and will outline my argument, explaining my methodology and suggesting the connection between the text and its historical context.

Chapter One

I will begin my argument by analyzing the powerful figures in the text, those that possess the ability to use information in ways that secure their personal agency. In this chapter, I plan to examine the characters of Pandarus, Criseyde, the narrator, and Diomede, all of whom control information skillfully and use it to gain and exercise power, both narrative and societal. Examining the ways in which these characters divulge and conceal secrets and the scenarios in which they choose to do so, I will demonstrate how their conscious choices to use their knowledge results in their claiming powerful positions in the text and/or in society. I will also address the potentially problematic issue of Criseyde, arguing that, although, as a vulnerable individual, she cannot control her ultimate destination, the heroine nevertheless remains one of the text’s more powerful and influential figures.

Chapter Two

My second chapter will discuss those individuals who are generally unable to utilize language and information to gain and to retain power throughout the text, delineating their ineffective attempts to wield their potentially powerful secrets and examining the ramifications of their actions or lack thereof. In this section, I plan to focus primarily on the character of Troilus, whose combination of indiscretion and inappropriate reservation
of speech serves to procure at least some of the text’s tragic outcome. In addition, I will highlight the character of Cassandra, who lacks the ability to communicate properly her extensive prescience in a way that will result in her finding a stable place either in the narrative or in society.

Chapter Three

I will use the third chapter to historicize my argument, discussing the poem’s contemporary context and sketching Chaucer’s position in society. I will then tie in the assertions I developed in the previous two chapters, suggesting my argument’s reflection of and relevance to Chaucer’s time and personal situation. In this final chapter, I will conclude my argument, connecting more concretely the text and its historical context and examining the implications and significance of my claims.

Tentative Schedule

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>January 5, 2003</td>
<td>Draft of chapter one</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 5, 2003</td>
<td>Draft of chapter two</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 5, 2003</td>
<td>Draft of chapter three</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 20, 2003</td>
<td>Completed draft</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 5, 2003</td>
<td>Final draft (revisions done) sent to committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 18, 2003</td>
<td>Oral defense</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Partial Bibliography (Annotated)


Aers argues that Chaucer uses the character of Criseyde in order to focus on the role of women in the courtly society. He claims that, by doing this, the poet shows that his heroine is powerless in her society and, consequently, cannot be condemned justifiably for her actions at the end of the text.


Barney traces the language and images of bondage throughout the poem and demonstrates how Troilus is bound by his love for Criseyde until his world explodes and death frees him from his captivity.


In the course of his analysis of *Troilus and Criseyde*, Benson describes Troilus’s transformation from a public prince to a passive lover, demonstrating the hero’s inability
to assume the role of an Ovidian lover. In addition, he discusses the multiplicity of love in the text.

---, ed. *Critical Essays on Chaucer’s “Troilus and Criseyde” and His Major Early Poems.*


---. “The Opaque Text of Chaucer’s Criseyde.” *Chaucer’s Troilus and Criseyde.* By Benson.


Benson contends that, while Chaucer’s Criseyde is more complex than is Boccaccio’s heroine, she also remains more difficult to read, concealing her inner self from the reader. While readers occasionally seem to glimpse Criseyde’s thoughts and feelings, they ultimately must interpret her for themselves. By writing Criseyde’s “opaque” character, Chaucer provokes his readers to pass judgement on her while he refrains from condemning her.


This article traces the treatment of and portrayal of the death of Troilus throughout European literature and artwork.


Brewer discusses the character of Troilus, arguing that Troilus’ character conforms to Chaucer’s definition of masculinity.


Carton discusses the complicity of the poem’s involved members, including the narrator and the reader, and discusses our inability to obtain true distance from the narrative, despite the fact that we know the text’s outcome from its onset. In addition, the author contends that Troilus’s self-absorbed passivity turns him into an object who needs Pandarus.


David offers an explanation of why Troilus is Chaucer’s hero despite the widespread dislike of him.

Dietrich argues that Chaucer gives the character of Troilus masculine characterization while allowing him to move away from typical gender roles. While Troilus begins the poem exuding masculinity, he slips away from this strong male image, regaining his masculine position at the end, but not in time to regain his beloved.


Delany applies Brecht’s theories of alienation to Troilus and Criseyde, arguing that the end of the poem makes sense if one takes into consideration the fact that the reader is distanced from the narrative throughout the entirety of the poem.


In Dinshaw’s discussion of Troilus and Criseyde, she defines the act of “reading like a man” as a reading technique that promotes structure and unity by excluding, containing, and classifying as feminine anything disruptive to the order. She goes on to describe the ways that critics, the narrator, and the two major male characters read like men and explains that Criseyde, in her focus on wholeness and “every word,” reads like a woman. Although he does read like a man, Pandarus, Dinshaw argues, does so for Troilus’s benefit, indicating that men need not read like men despite their male anatomy.


Edwards discusses the issue of desire in the text, examining, in particular, Pandarus’s introduction of the problem of desire, which remains unresolved at the poem’s conclusion and helps to shape our reading of the text’s end.


Fradenburg, Louise O. “‘Our owen wo to drynke’: Loss, Gender, and Chivalry in *Troilus and Criseyde*.” Shoaf 88-106.

Examining the poem from a psychoanalytic perspective, Fradenburg discusses the poem and its relation to violence in the 1300s, paying particular attention to “honorable” or “chivalrous” violence. In her examination of this issue, the author contrasts Troilus’s “heroization of suffering” with Criseyde’s feminine desire to live.


Frantzen situates the poem in its historical context.


Fyler looks at Pandarus’s two major falsehoods created in the text and shows that they end up becoming reality (signifying Fortune’s “punishment” of Pandarus). Fyler argues
that these fabrications also serve to highlight the reader’s attitude toward reality and artifice, causing the reader to realize that, despite its distastefulness, artifice is necessary.


Hanning discusses the idea of desire in *Il Filostrato* and Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*, arguing that, in the former, desire must be uncovered or decoded, stripped from the language that shields it, and simultaneously must be given meaning.  By contrast, in Chaucer’s version of the story, desire (and, by default, Criseyde herself) is subject to multiple interpretations by the males in the text, who each must impose meaning on the uninterpretable canvas.


Howard gives *Troilus and Criseyde* a historical context and discusses the original audience of the poem.

Kearney and Schraer contend that Troilus has unjustly escaped condemnation for his failure to defend and protect Criseyde. Although Chaucer’s heroine is significantly more complex than Boccaccio’s, Chaucer differentiates Troilus from Troilo in only one major way: his inability to speak in public, which leads to his losing his beloved.


Koff, Leonard Michael. “Ending a Poem before Beginning It, or The ‘Cas’ of Troilus.” Shoaf 161-78.

In his article, Koff debates whether Troilus is a perfect lover and/or hero.


Comparing Chaucer’s version of the Troilus story to Boccaccio’s, Lewis contends that Chaucer approaches the story as a courtly love poet, narrating the theory that has already been described.


Analyzing Troilus’s notorious faint in book 3, Mann contends that the hero faints because he loses his identity. She also discusses the inversion of power relationships in love.


McInerney, Maud Burnett. “‘Is this a mannens herte?’: Unmanning Troilus through Ovidian Allusion.” Beidler 221-35.

McInerney focuses on Ovid’s influence on the masculinity of Troilus’s character.


Moore, Marilyn Reppa. “Who’s Solipsistic Now? The Character of Chaucer’s Troilus.”  

Focusing on the ethos of devotion, Moore counters the critics who accuse Troilus of  
being solipsistic by claiming that he abandons his self-centeredness when he lays eyes on  
Criseyde. In falling in love with Criseyde, he undergoes a religious conversion, after  
which he learns to suffer and to meditate in order to find a connection to his society and  
to his beloved.


Paxson, James J., and Cynthia A. Gravlee, eds. *Desiring Discourse: The Literature of Love,  


Reichl, Karl. “Chaucer’s Troilus: Philosophy and Language.” Boitani, *European Tragedy* 133-  
52.

Richmond, Velma Bourgeois. *Geoffrey Chaucer.* Literature and Life: British Writers. New  
Robertson, D.W., Jr. *A Preface to Chaucer: Studies in Medieval Perspectives*. Princeton:


After spending time outlining Chaucer’s work, Robertson discusses the “medieval doctrines of love.”


Stanbury discusses Troilus’ passivity and feminization in love


Strohm’s text analyzes the social structure of Chaucer’s time (as opposed to major historical events alone) and fits the poet and his work into the cultural context.


Taylor emphasizes Troilus’ re-creation of Criseyde for his fantasy and Pandarus’ creating action from his words.


Windeatt provides a helpful overview of the text as well as a discussion of the theme of love and the character of Troilus (as a romance hero).