

Lover's Story vs Sister's Story: Parallels between Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* and Ovid's
Procne and Philomela

For decades scholars have discussed the connection between Chaucer and Ovid; how Chaucer uses allusions to tie *Troilus and Criseyde* into several of Ovid's stories, how imagery is used to bring an Ovidian feel to Chaucer's works, and even how Chaucer uses one of Ovid's characters' songs to draw characteristic parallels between two stories and characters. It is unavoidable to discuss one without the slightest mention of the other, because of how entwined their stories are. However, despite the large amount of scholarship on the different ways Chaucer and Ovid are connected, there is very little discussion on Chaucer's use of Ovid's story about sisters Procne and Philomela within *Troilus and Criseyde*, and how Chaucer's characters mirror Ovid's. Though the sisters are barely mentioned throughout the *Troilus and Criseyde* books, most of their story is mirrored by that of Troilus and Criseyde. Through providing evidence of the scholarly conversations that have been taking place about both stories, the aim is to show how scholars are missing the connections between these two stories and how their characters, and occasionally plot lines, parallel each other.

The "love" story of Troilus and Criseyde, guided largely by Pandarus, loosely parallels the tale of Procne, Philomela, and Tereus in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. The sisters' story is as follows: To bring peace to the kingdom, Procne is married to Tereus and is therefore forced to leave Philomela in Athens. Five years after their marriage, Procne begs her husband to retrieve her sister, only he becomes consumed by lust for Philomela and determines that he will have her whether it be with her consent or not. Upon returning to Thrace, Tereus drags Philomela into the forest where he proceeds to rape her. When Philomela declares that she will tell the world of his crime, Tereus cuts out her tongue before assaulting her again. After imprisoning Philomela in a

hut in the woods, Tereus returns home claiming Philomela died on the journey. However, Philomela is one step ahead of him. Weaving a tapestry that details her story, she sends the completed tapestry to Procne, who comes to her rescue. Wanting revenge, the sisters kill Itys, Procne and Tereus's son, and serve his flesh to Tereus that night at a banquet. When he discovers the truth, an enraged Tereus chases the sisters around the banquet hall until the Furies transform the trio into birds, eternally doomed to endlessly pursue each other.

On the surface these may appear to be wildly different stories with no connection at all, after all *Troilus and Criseyde* is about a man pining over a woman to the point of not being able to function, however when looking at certain aspects of each story a connection can be made. The parallels in these two stories are not as much in the plot lines of the stories—though there are still similarities there—but rather in the actions of its characters: Troilus, in his dependency, is representative of Procne, Criseyde, whose autonomy is taken, parallels Philomela, and Pandarus, the master of persuasion and manipulation, mirrors Tereus. If broken down to the essential elements, each story consists of a person who deeply desires a connection with someone they care for, another who is manipulated or violated, and a third individual who does the manipulation—often under the guise of care or intervention.

Beginning with this modest—and still developing, for now—example, the connections should start to slowly click into place. Yet, most of the scholarship over Chaucer's use of Ovid falls anywhere from single character comparisons to masculine identity analysis to imagery of the Gods paralleling characters. An example of such scholarship would be *Ovidian Allusion and Imagery in Chaucer's "Troilus and Criseyde"* by Stephanie Althof. In her work, Althof argues that *Metamorphoses* is often overlooked in comparisons between Chaucer to Ovid. Instead of looking at the similarities between the lovers, Troilus and Criseyde, and the sisters, Procne and

Philomela, she explores the connection between the Gods, and Troilus and Criseyde. She examines how the imagery of Mars and Venus are used to establish a connection between the Gods of warfare and love and Troilus and Criseyde, and how metamorphosis plays a role in the third book. As Troilus begins to turn from a warrior into a lover he reconciles the two halves of knighthood, which makes him a more balanced character (23). Though this is an analysis highlighting the fact that the Ovidian invocation of Gods from a book titled *Metamorphoses* can then be used to indirectly detail Troilus's change is fascinating, it misses out on other connections. These omissions show that even in scholarship that discusses both *Troilus and Criseyde* and *Metamorphoses*, scholars still fail to make the connections between Troilus and Criseyde's story and that of Procne and Philomela.

One such connection can be seen in this conversation between Pandarus and Criseyde. Though this is an example of a minor plot connection between the stories, it helps set the foundation for bigger connections to be made. In Book II, Pandarus does not threaten Criseyde with violence as Tereus does to Philomela; rather he uses emotional manipulation and guilt, causing Criseyde's empathy to compel her compliance. In this conversation Pandarus tells Criseyde:

Doth what yow lest to make hym lyve or deye.

But if ye late hym deyen, I wol sterve—

Have here my trouthe, nece, I nyl nat lyen —

Al sholde I with this knyf my throte kerve. (Chaucer 493)

Here, Pandarus is essentially claiming that if Criseyde does not show affection to Troilus, the young prince would die of heartbreak, and that if Troilus died, he, Pandarus, would commit

suicide in response. Criseyde would then have to live the rest of her life knowing she killed the king's son and her own uncle. The indirect threat in this situation could be considered more imposing than a direct threat, not only because of *who* she killed, but because women are often seen as more empathetic than men. By putting the pressure of potential guilt over two important people's deaths directly on Criseyde it provides significantly more pressure on her to comply.

By doing this Chaucer's story feels disturbingly realistic. While it is unfortunate that manipulative family members seem to be everywhere, it is a good thing that family members like Tereus are not as common. Having Pandarus play the role of loving uncle all the while using his niece to achieve his goal shows a level of calculation that Tereus did not have. Tereus saw his sister-in-law and let his desires take over the first chance he got, but when exposure is threatened, he does not think through the possibility that Philomela, a princess with access to more education than common folk, would be able to find a way to communicate other than using words. While Pandarus mirrors Tereus in their hidden motives and deceit, Chaucer's version is raised a level higher by being more calculated and complex.

The women on the other hand show defiance towards the men that try to control them. Philomela presents a loud and directly defiant approach towards Tereus, yelling that she will tell the world and the Gods of the way he forced himself on her, and then later on by refusing to wallow in self-pity, making the tapestry, and helping Procne enact revenge on him. Criseyde, by contrast, takes a quieter, more strategic approach. She allows herself to be guided by the wishes of Pandarus and Troilus, but never fully submits to them. Criseyde does as Pandarus instructs—after a bit of hesitation—and enters into a relationship with Troilus, and though she does come to care for him, she does not fall completely under their spell as per the end of their story. After being traded at the request of her father, she makes little effort to return to Troilus and even goes

as far as sleeping with another man. Though she was then bowing to the whims of her father at that time, her defiance against Troilus and Pandarus is shown clearly in her refusal to even attempt to return to Troilus. This hints not at her lack of control over her own life, but rather the extreme control she has in order to navigate her own way in the male-dominated world in which she exists. It is in this defiance, both outright and understated, that Philomela and Criseyde mirror each other in the grand schemes of their stories.

Breaking the comparisons down further, each of the characters in *Troilus and Criseyde* closely parallel characters in Procne and Philomela's story. Troilus has a strong desire to be in a relationship with Criseyde, so much that he is physically ill whenever he is not around her or she rebuffs his initial advances. Procne has been separated from her sister for five years which leads her to beg Tereus to bring Philomela to Thrace so they can be reunited. Both of these characters are blissfully unaware of the manipulation and threats that are placed upon the ones that they care about by those that are supposed to be helping rectify the situation. Criseyde, while initially unsure of getting into a relationship with Troilus, eventually gives in to Pandarus after he claims that Troilus would die of heartbreak if she were to reject him, and that if his friend died Pandarus would kill himself, so she would effectively have two deaths on her conscience. Philomela, though not hesitant to go to Thrace, is forced into her situation by brute strength and has her own life threatened. She believes Tereus is going to cut her throat and she accepts that fate, however he cuts out her tongue so that she would never be able to tell of his crime. This reinforces the earlier point that, to a woman, a threat on family or a loved one is deemed scarier and much more coercive than a threat on her own life; where Criseyde complies under emotional pressure, Philomela surrendered when she felt she had no other choice.

Pandarus and Tereus also share key similarities. Pandarus manipulates everyone into coerced situations and makes threats to his niece to achieve his goals. Tereus, by contrast, employs physical violence and threats against his sister-in-law to ensure that his name is not besmirched. Nonetheless, both of these men have their own motives. They each prioritize their goals and threaten those they should care about and respect to do so—though scholars still debate what Pandarus’s motives are, because they are never explicitly stated within any of the books, he does have some sort of motive. Each of these characters mirror each other in desires and characteristics to such a striking degree that their connection should be widely acknowledged by those that study Chaucer’s works.

Threats are not the only connection Pandarus has with Tereus. As Jennifer Garrison explains in her article *Chaucer’s “Troilus and Criseyde” and the danger of Masculine Interiority*, “Throughout *Troilus and Criseyde*, Chaucer directly links the Trojan War and the inevitable fall of Troy to a courtly love discourse that is widespread throughout the poem’s Trojan culture. This discourse encourages men to believe that they can and should relentlessly pursue women in order to fulfill their elite masculine identities, regardless of the consequences” (336). Readers can clearly see this happening in *Troilus and Criseyde*, perhaps not as much in Troilus as in Pandarus. However, it is Troilus’s lovesick despair that prompts Pandarus to intervene. Each character is driven by the other, consciously or not, to pursue Criseyde. Despite knowing that an affair between the widowed daughter of a traitor and a prince could result in serious consequences, they continue to act on their desires. Either way, this does not stop Troilus from being so enamored with Criseyde that he physically cannot get out of bed in some scenes because the thought of not being with her makes him depressed. Due to his unpleasant state, Pandarus intervenes and coerces Criseyde into a relationship with Troilus. During this process,

Pandarus also has to convince Troilus that the relationship has a chance; Troilus's woes convince Pandarus and Pandarus convinces Troilus that Criseyde will cave to their wishes. While Pandarus and Troilus take a more subdued approach to pursuing Criseyde, Tereus, as discussed earlier, takes on a more direct and abrasive approach towards Philomela. In each story the men do not take no for an answer, it does not matter if the woman was lightly coerced or forcibly taken.

This is enforced by Kendra Slayton's point in *Tied in "lusty leese": Gender and Determinism in "Troilus and Criseyde,"* in which she emphasizes that the significance of Procne's song lies in its subject—the raping of her sister, Philomela—which triggers Pandarus's recollection of his role to bring Criseyde to Troilus. Slayton claims the song does not operate merely as a narrative device but as a deliberate parallel to Philomela's story, invoking powerful themes of betrayal and sexual violence. The use of this allusion casts a shadow on Pandarus's motivations, suggesting that they are not for familial betterment but more for male desire at the expense of Criseyde's autonomy. Like Tereus, whose loyalties clearly lie with his own desires instead of familial duty or morality, Pandarus similarly prioritizes Troilus's romantic desires over the welfare of his niece. Slayton therefore states that the classical intertextuality complicates the moral framework of the scene as it critiques Pandarus's role while also placing him within a broader literary line of men that manipulate and betray women under the guise of mediation (81). Though Slayton's focus is on men manipulating women, which is the obvious stance to take, Pandarus can also be seen manipulating Troilus. Afterall, Pandarus is the one that convinces Troilus that a relationship with Criseyde is possible.

For example, as discussed in *"Little Troilus": "Heroides 5" and Its Ovidian Contexts in Chaucer's "Troilus and Criseyde"* by Jamie C. Fumo, when Pandarus asks Troilus if he has read Oenone's letter, which he had not, Pandarus proceeds to tell Troilus that the letter details the

unfortunate story of Apollo, who, though he had invented the art of healing, was unable to heal himself of his love for Admetus's daughter. Fumo continues by saying:

Pandarus goes on to apply his reading to his own situation as an unsuccessful lover eager to guide Troilus in his pursuit of love: since this letter describes a doctor who can heal others but not himself, then Pandarus, who has never been able to heal himself, must be able to heal others.

As usual, Pandarus's logic is hilariously flawed. Pandarus, rivaling such other notoriously abusive exegetes as the Wife of Bath and Chaunticleer, has in fact suppressed the real relevance of Oenone's letter to Troilus's life: it narrates a story of a fateful courtship, love betrayed, incurable suffering on the part of the betrayed, and (proleptically) the very fall of Troy as a result of this betrayal. (286-7)

Not only does this highlight Pandarus's blatant manipulation of Troilus, instilling a belief that Pandarus has honorable and true intentions in his pursuit of connecting Troilus and Criseyde, but it also reveals to readers that—even though his motives are unknown—completing this goal is important enough to conceal the true message of the letter as it relates to Troilus. While this letter does not necessarily connect to Procne's story, the parallels are eerily similar; the fateful courtship to Tereus in order to save Athens, Tereus betrays Procne by harming her sister, and she betrays him by killing and making a meal of their son, which inevitably leads them all to suffer. The only part of the letter that may not play a part in their story is the fall of the city, the state of which remains unknown. Nevertheless, the parallels both stories have to the letter are uncanny and the scene itself in *Troilus and Criseyde* begins to hint at what lengths Pandarus is willing to go to achieve his goals.

Chaucer omitting the ending of Procne and Philomela's story also serves a purpose though. By leaving the gruesome end of Procne and Philomela's story out of his version, Chaucer leaves the door open for another comparison to be made. After hearing how the sisters murdered their own flesh and blood, only to then feed his remains to his father, it is reasonable that any sane person would claim that their story is nothing like that of Troilus and Criseyde's. Seeing as the only betrayal that happens at the end of their story is that instead of returning to Troilus, Criseyde sends him placating letters while sleeping with another man. Though, even in this Troilus discovers the betrayal and becomes vengeful, mirroring Procne once again, though he does not go as far as killing his own child, or at least the closest relative he has to a child. This shows that even though Chaucer omits the gruesome details of Ovid's ending, there is still a parallel between the characters and plots of both stories, and when breaking each story down to the earlier actions of their characters and the base line of desire, manipulation, and concession, the stories share more in common than first glance permits.

Motioning once again to Chaucer's use of indirect Ovidian connections to songs, he uses a birdsong to essentially foreshadow the entire plot of *Troilus and Criseyde*. Which, for anyone who does not know the story of Procne and Philomela, would think nothing more of the birdsong. However, when considering that Procne, Philomela, and Tereus are transformed into birds at the end of their story—one of desire, betrayal, and downfall—and Chaucer's use of birdsong happens at precise points in the narrative, it is not difficult for readers to piece together what the birdsong might foreshadow. As Garrison states:

By using birdsong—a form often closely associated with courtly love lyric—to allude to a violent tale of rape, uncontrolled masculine desire, and a kingdom's ultimate destruction, these allusions link the pleasant sound of courtly love rhetoric to its violent,

destructive consequences. Chaucer positions these allusions at key points in the development of the title characters' romantic relationship and, in doing so, reveals how the aristocratic obsession with interiority paradoxically both structures and threatens to destroy masculine authority. (337)

While most readers may not interpret Troilus's action towards Criseyde as rape, it should be considered whether or not coerced sex is considered assault. As mentioned earlier, Troilus is only able to secure Criseyde's so-called "love" with the help of Pandarus, who does threaten Criseyde with the possibility of the two deaths on her hands. In this ambiguous area of consent for Criseyde lies an opportunity for comparison between her and Philomela, whose situation leaves far less room for the interpretation doubt. Patricia Ingham emphasizes this point in *Chaucer's Haunted Aesthetics: Mimesis and Trauma in "Troilus and Criseyde"* noting that author L.O. Aranye Fradenburg reads Chaucer's fragmented allusions to Ovid's gruesome tale of Procne, Philomela, and Tereus as an insinuation to Criseyde's rape. This reframes the way readers understand the way that trauma and its repetition completely reshape Chaucer's version of Troy (227). The perspective that Fradenburg speaks of changes the entire storyline of *Troilus and Criseyde* from a love story yet again set in the city of Troy, where every reader knows from the start that the city will fall, to a story that has the foundation to be a love story, but courtesy of a few dubious characters and some questionable actions, is easily turned into a story of psychological trauma and emotional captivity, mirroring the fall of Troy itself.

Chaucer's use of Ovid, among other authors, within his own work is almost as extensive as the scholarship written about him centuries later. Yet, even knowing that Chaucer likes to draw connection between his work and that of other authors, scholars fail to make the connection between *Troilus and Criseyde* and the story of Procne and Philomela. Granted, the tale of the

siters is barely more than a passing mention in *Troilus and Criseyde*, the parallels between the characters and sometimes plot are too similar to brush off as mere coincidence. From the desires of the characters to the defiance and manipulation they exhibit, each character in *Troilus and Criseyde* mirrors that of a character from Ovid's story to such an extent that it is a wonder that scholars have not written on this connection. The presented evidence, when considered with the current scholarly conversations, reveals not only a clear connection between the stories but also highlights the extent to which many have overlooked the apparent but unmistakable parallels between the two stories.

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