"WHITE BY BLACK": CHAUCER'S "EFFECT CONTRAIRE" IN *TROILUS AND CRISEYDE*

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Regardless of how many times one reads *Troilus and Criseyde,* he is never prepared for what C. S. Lewis calls the pure and unrelieved pathos of the last two books in which "all is to be endured and nothing is to be done."[1] Most shocking and perplexing of all, of course, is the devastating betrayal by the beautiful Criseyde. However, that betrayal should come as no surprise, for from the beginning of the poem, Chaucer portrays his heroine as an ambiguous personality. The two major colors associated with her throughout the poem are the traditionally conflicting opposites, white and black. Thus, while Criseyde is repeatedly described in terms of whiteness—a characteristic she shares with the "bright lady" Venus, goddess of love—she is consistently linked with death and its symbolic manifestation in blackness.[2] Observing that "of two contraries is a lore," Chaucer uses this pervasive pattern of "white by black," to present a vision of love that includes death, love's seeming opposite (I. 642, 645). Ultimately for Troilus these two "irreconcilables" are reconciled, for to Chaucer death is the measure of love and love is the only thing that can transform and conquer death.[3]

It is surprising that we are not conscious of this "effect contraire" since the whole work is a "web of doubleness, contraries and ambiguities" (I. 212).[4] Indeed, the poem is a tale of love framed by an overarching pattern of death, set in the war-torn and doomed Troy, from which, as Kittredge has pointed out, the lovers cannot separate their fate.[5] In addition, the leading lady is a widow and the leading man a warrior described as he "that the Grekes as the deth him dredde" (I. 489). Of course, since Chaucer was bound by the classical story in Benoit and Boccaccio, he could not set the story in Provence and make the leading lady an innocent ingenue. Though Alfred David has noted that Boccaccio made Criseyde a widow because it was the tradition that widows were more amorous, Chaucer uses Criseyde's marital status mainly to imply death.[6] Widowhood is something Chaucer never allows his Criseyde to abandon; she is always both lover and attendant to death.

Though it is Troilus who becomes unified by the reconciliation of love with

death—being about his "double sorrow," the poem is organized from Troilus' point of view—it is Criseyde who is the embodiment of the opposites, symbolizing both death and love.[7] In Chaucer's structural framework one theme dominates, while at the same time its antithesis, though initially barely audible, is always present. This minor theme ultimately overwhelms and dominates the first theme, and thus the cycle begins again.

As Chaucer interweaves both patterns of white and black he often juxtaposes them to create a jarring effect, further reinforcing the ambiguity but also necessitating a reconciliation of the two. The interplay of the themes of death and love works in the following manner: in Book I the minor theme of Criseyde's brightness is immediately juxtaposed with her darkness, which then blackens and dominates that book; in Book II there is continuing darkness, but it is lightened by Troilus' hope of attaining Criseyde's love; in Book III Troilus achieves a secular version of the Heavenly Rose in the heart of Criseyde's whiteness; however, the ominous dark theme which has been present throughout is starkly set against that radiance and assumes dominance in Book IV; in Book V Troilus attains a heavenly radiance through the resolution of love and death.

Probably for many readers Criseyde's most memorable physical characteristic is her brightness, referred to so often in Books IV and V, on which the narrator focuses his first description of her in Book I. The traditional courtly Caucasian beauty with the shining quality that blondes have, she is described as an "heavenish parfit creature," "aungelic" in her "natif beaute" and of whom "nas non so fair" (I. 101–104). Nevertheless, in Book I Criseyde's aura of blackness overshadows her "sunnish" qualities (IV. 736).

Just sixty lines after her first radiant portrayal, the narrator gives a more ominous description, linking Criseyde with black three times in two stanzas. She is referred to as wearing "widewes habit blak," and just a few lines later she is again described as in "blake wede" (I. 170, 177). One of the first examples in the poem of the startling effect of the immediate juxtaposition of the "white by black" follows when Criseyde is described as "under cloude blak so bright a sterre" (I. 175). This is a description that shockingly fuses love and death in one woman. She will guide him who loves her, but the love is doomed by the "blak cloude." The dark note is sounded again in the simple and strange description of Criseyde as "this in blak, likynge to Troilus," which also indicates Troilus' pleasure in viewing and in fact loving his dark nemesis (I. 309).

The theme of darkness and death is also fused with the medieval manner of falling in love through concourse of the eyes. After Troilus has been hit "atte fulle" by the god of love, "his eye percede, and so depe it wente / Til

on Criseyde it smot" (I. 209, 272–73). But even though "withinne the subtile stremes of hir yen," he finds the source of love, she is also the source of impending death, for it is "right with hire look" that Troilus "felte dyen" the "spirit in his herte" (I. 305–307).

After Troilus falls in love with "this in black," he avows that she is "his lyff, and from the deth his cure," and "as hire man I wol aye lyve and sterve" (I. 469, 427). Indeed, from then on he consistently and repeatedly, almost fifty times in the poem, links his own death to love for Criseyde.[8] Thus darkness overshadows the brightness in the whole of Book I, and it is only Pandarus' meddling suggestion that Troilus pursue his beloved—with the help of Pandarus, of course—that motivates Troilus enough to leave his deathbed.

In the Proem of Book II Troilus is described as sailing out of the "blake wawes" into "clere" weather, the black waves signifying his suicidal tendencies resulting from unrequited love for Criseyde, the clear weather indicating his anticipation of being loved by her (II. 1–2). In this book there is the rising sense of love and the first stirrings of coming happiness pictured by a return of life. It is May, the "moder . . . of monthes glade" when the "fresshe floures" are brought to life again that "wynter dede made" (II. 50–52). There is also a feeling of the spreading of light as "Phebus doth his bryghte bemes sprede / Right in the white Bole" (II. 54–55). Love's power to resurrect life from death is symbolized by this radiance.

But though a sense of hope and light is restored, it never fully overwhelms the theme of death. Just as it is spring's task to resurrect nature, it is Pandarus' task to resurrect Troilus from the "blake wawes" by obtaining Criseyde's love for him. Pandarus, to persuade his niece to do some "observaunce" to May, must appeal to her to turn to love and abandon her "widewes lif," in other words, her observance to death (II. 112, 114). His attempts are humorous but ominous as well, for despite the playful repartee between Pandarus and Criseyde concerning love, we are constantly reminded of death.

Pandarus' scheme, for instance, is to claim that Troilus will die, along with Pandarus himself, if Criseyde does not return his love. Thus in his stylized account of Troilus' feelings for Criseyde, this first of panderers pictures his friend as "to Love he gan hym for to pleyne, / . . . 'Lord, have routhe upon my peyne'" (II. 522–23). Furthermore, he relates the effect of the blackness on Troilus, quoting him as saying, "'For certes, lord, so sore hath she me wounded / That stood in blak'" that for love of her "'[I] moot nedes deyen'" (II. 533–36).

While Pandarus goes through the machinations of the courtly pimp, Troilus is left throughout Book II "betwixen hope and derk diseperaunce" (II. 1307). When Pandarus finally obtains an epistle from Criseyde and brings this first

written communication to Troilus, it is another example of the jarring aspect of the two opposites fused. Pandarus bursts into Troilus' room triumphantly and says, "Have here a light, and loke on al this blake" (II. 1320). The lightness and darkness are again linked, not only out of physical necessity—light to read the black characters by—but by Criseyde's words as well, for they give Troilus both "hope" and "drede" (II. 1323).

Though Troilus is still in that state of uncertainty in Book III, it is also the book in which "gladder was ther never man in Troye" than he (III. 357). The reason is that Venus, referred to as "lady bryght," allows Troilus to obtain Criseyde as his "owen lady bright" (III. 39, 1485). This is the book most full of radiance and bliss in which the blackness of the first book is almost totally dispelled. The Proem itself begins with the apostrophe "O blisful light, of which the bemes clere / Adorneth al the thridde heven faire!" (III. 1–2).

In addition, in this section Troilus first calls Criseyde "lady bryght" and first refers to her "eyen cleere" (III. 129, 1485). At the heart of Book III Troilus partakes of "hevene blisse" and love's sacrament through Criseyde's glorious bodily whiteness, as he takes "delite" in her flesh "smothe and white" and her "snowisshe throte" (III. 704, 1248–53). In "Goddes hond," these lovers are in earth's only heaven (III. 1187). But the blissful moments are few and the lines describing them all too brief, and ultimately we know that this "sweetness semeth more swete" because of the "bitternesse" that was "byforn" (III. 1219–20).

In retrospect, this is also the book in which, when the two lovers are fused in flesh, the two abstracts, love and death, come into sharpest focus. There are subtle hints of death from the beginning of Book III that become increasingly intense when continually set against the radiance. To begin with, when Pandarus brings Criseyde to Troilus' bed at Deiphebus' house in the preliminary to their lovemaking at his own house a few days later, he presents her as "she that is youre dethe to wyte" (III. 63). That theme of death is subtly heard again when the actual seduction takes place. Pandarus uses the crass tactic of Troilus' jealousy of an alleged rival suitor to manipulate his niece into allowing Troilus into her bedroom. This reminds the reader of the inexorable fact that later a very real rival in the person of Diomede will woo and win Criseyde, thus causing Troilus' death.

Also, even though it is a "blisful nyght" for the lovers, the darkness that enfolds them is described as "bitwixen drede and sickernesse" (III. 1315–17). It must be remembered, too, that it is a "blake cloud," the "smoky reyn," that has provided the opportunity for Criseyde to stay at her uncle's house in the first place and discreetly consummate the affair (III. 628). Presumably those dark clouds and that rain continue the whole time the lovers are together.

Furthermore, Criseyde's chastening of the night for not allowing the lovers to be together longer reminds us of the dark theme. In fact, she who has previously been referred to as "this in black," calls the evening "blake niyht" in its "derke wede," at once linking their night of blissful love with death, and, more devastatingly, linking both love and death with herself (III. 1429–31). Finally, Troilus and Criseyde's second night of love is only briefly described, but when it ends and cruel day comes, those lovers "hem thought feelen deathis wounde" (III. 1697).

Hence the pattern of death almost immediately begins to overwhelm the dominant theme of bliss and radiance. It sounds its shrillest note in the lines just previous to the stanza on the lover's sexual "feste" (III. 1312), in the narrator's strange comparison of the happiness of Troilus with that of a man who "seth his deth yshapen" and is suddenly rescued from it (III. 1240). What is so devastating about such a metaphor is the implication that Criseyde is at once both pardoner and executioner.

In Book IV just as Troilus has been rescued by Venus and the love of his "lady bryght," Criseyde, Fortune immediately turns her "brighte face" from him, throwing him back into the black sea (IV. 8). And Criseyde, so bright in Book III, takes on deathly features. Around her former "eyen clere" are purple rings, while to look at her "it a deth was for to see" (IV. 856). Also, she links herself with death by vowing to wear "blake . . . in tokenyng" of her eternal fidelity to Troilus, a vow which also intimates a death for him whom she loves (IV. 779). Meanwhile, crushed by the news that Criseyde must be exchanged for Antenor, Troilus goes to his "derke chambre" to lie on his bed, now more a coffin because he is "ibounden in the blake bark of care" (IV. 354, 229). Knowing that he will end like "Edippe in derknesse," Troilus calls continually for death to slay him, saying, "O deth, allas! why nyltow do me deye?" (IV. 300, 250).

Brightness is present in Book IV, but it is a pathetic and tarnished light in which only Criseyde believes. Just after she barely prevents Troilus from committing suicide because of her own pseudo-deathlike trance, she affirms that she would die even if she were to be "crowned queene / Of al the lond the sonne on shynneth sheene" (IV. 1238–39). Obviously, the "light" of this earth has great importance to her and thus she tries to persuade her gloomy lover, who feels "dethes cares colde," not to give up hope (IV. 1692). Accordingly, she devises a plan to outwit Fortune, and for awhile Troilus believes in it, so that the two in hope, "bigan for joie th' amorouse daunce, / And, as the briddes, whanne the sonne is shene, / Deliten in hire song in leves grene" (IV. 1431–33). For a time, then, the two lovers have "hertes clere" (IV. 1435). Nonetheless we suspect that the lady doth protest too much as she swears by

the radiance of "every god celestial" (IV. 1541). Through the help of "Juno, hevenes quene," Phoebus' sister "Lucina the sheene," and, of course, by "blisful Venus," Criseyde vows that she will return (IV. 1591–94, 1661).

Our suspicions are validated in Book V when we are immediately told that she will not keep her vow and that Troilus' "fatal destyne" approaches (V. 1). Troilus' agony is fully felt here for in his "throwes frenetik and madde" he curses all nature, himself and his fate (V. 206–10). In his slumbering, he is afflicted by nightmares in which he "dremen of the dredefulleste thynges," most dreadful of all that a boar sleeps next to Criseyde (V. 248). Again the dark theme is heard as Cassandra reveals that the Greek has in fact taken the Trojan's place in Criseyde's heart. Though denying his sister's prophecy, Troilus cannot ignore the owl, harbinger of death, which shrieks two nights in a row, causing him to "devysen of [his] sepulture," and once again prepare for death (V. 319–20, 299).

That blackness, however, is once again overwhelmed by the subordinate and totally unexpected theme of brightness. Though he is preparing for darkness and death, in Book V Troilus most often refers to Criseyde in terms of her whiteness. Whereas in Book I when he first actually saw Criseyde in the temple, it was her "blake wede" that was most fully impressed on his mind—indeed, he made no mention of her brightness—in Book V when reminiscing about that first meeting he forgets the blackness and remembers, rather, her "eyen cleare." At the same time he reminisces about her "white brest" and calls her his "lode-sterre" (V. 218, 232). Gradually the terms of endearment fused with light become more intense as he comes closer to death: he calls her his "lufsom lady bryght," "Criseyde the bright," "Criseyde, bright of hewe," and "brighte Latona the clere" repeatedly (V. 465, 516, 1573, 162, 922, 1264).

But as we come to see, it is the ambiguous light of mortal love that Troilus' references to Criseyde's radiance conjure up, tainted as they are by the fact that Diomede also refers to her as his "lady bright" throughout Book V (V. 162, 922). In fact, even as the narrator describes the beauty of Criseyde's "eyen cleare," he also emphasizes her dilemma: though "Paradis stood formed in hire yen . . . / Strof Love in hire ay, which of hem was more" (V. 817–21). And when Criseyde essentially chooses to shine on Diomede, a garish light surrounds her as:

> The brighte Venus folwede and ay taughte
> The wey ther brode Phebus down alighte;
> And Cynthea hire char-hors overraughte
> To whirle out of the Leoun, if she myghte;

> And Signifer his candels sheweth brighte,
> Whan that Criseyde unto hire bedde wente
> Inwith hire fadres faire brighte tente.
>
> (V. 1016–22.)

When Criseyde's tent burns brightly for Diomede in Greece, the light is extinguished in the house in Troy where she and Troilus made their assignations. And there is once again a jarring fusion of the "whit by blak" in Troilus' pathetic viewing of that house formerly "Enlumyned with sonne of alle blisse" the "lanterne of which queynt is the light" (V. 548, 543). That "paleys, whilom day, that now art nyght" is the "cause of wo, that cause hast ben of lisse" (V. 544, 550). Troilus then says of his former "lodesterre," Criseyde,

> O sterre, of which I lost have al the light,
> With herte soor wel oughte I to biwaille,
> That evere derk in torment, nyght by nyght,
> Toward my deth with wynd in steere I saille.
>
> (V. 638–41.)

Troilus does in fact steer himself towards death, for his is a deliberate choice to die. But when he does die, those of us who have laughed at his protestations of impending death throughout the work find such laughter has backfired because Troilus has prophesied correctly: his love for Criseyde has caused him to die. That we find his continual morbidity strange and almost psychotic is more a reflection of our own hypocrisy. Troilus has only kept faith with a vow to be true to the beloved till his death, a vow incorporated in the whole of Western man's view of love, yet one more honored in the breach than in the observance. He is the ideal lover and has followed love's demands for fidelity to the only possible conclusion.

His death, then, validates his love for Criseyde. That death is Chaucer's measure for love is evident in his stark description of the lovely Criseyde's major flaw: "she forsook [Troilus] ere she deyde" (I. 56). Hence, unlike Troilus, she cannot fully attain a "newe qualitee" because although she does love him, as evidenced in the radiant Book III, it is not sacrifice or "Loves heigh servyse" that she seeks, as witness her acceptance of the crass Diomede (III. 1654, 1794).

Troilus' dedication to the purest fulfillment of earthly love makes him worthy to transcend death and attain the "pleyn felicite" and "harmonye" / With sounes ful of hevenyssh melodie" in the eighth sphere (V. 1810–18). In Chaucer's vision it is a harmony and radiance only made possible through the reconciliation of discord: love is intensified and enlarged by being set against death; and the meaning and importance of death is intensified by being set

against the moment of most intense living, sexual consummation with the beloved. Thus, just as the theme of darkness and death is sounded when the theme of love and light are at their fullest, so too is the radiance of love present at the moment of death.

In his love story, Chaucer has shown that mastery of the principle of fidelity to sexual union and earthly love leads to knowledge of the mystery of spiritual communion and heavenly charity. Troilus' bliss in heaven, described in the fifth book, is a culmination of the knowledge he gains in Book III that "Benigne Love" is the "holy bond of thynges" that brings "concordynge" out of that which is "discordable" and "holden" in a "bond" the "rosy day" and the "nightes" (III. 1261, 1751–57). Having fully and purely loved "this in black," Troilus reconciles himself with his own death. It is appropriate that it is spring in Book V when Troilus dies, for he is prepared for another and higher resurrection.

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NOTES

1. C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love* (Oxford: Oxford Univ Press, 1961), p. 195.
2. F. N. Robinson, ed., *Troilus and Criseyde* in *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961), V. 516.
3. Charles A. Owens, Jr., "The Significance of Chaucer's Revisions of *Troilus and Criseyde*" in *Troilus and Criseyde and the Minor Poems*. ed. Richard J. Schoek and Jerome Taylor (Notre Dame: Univ of Notre Dame Press, 1961), p. 163.
4. Murray F. Markland, "Pilgrims Errant: The Doubleness of *Troilus and Criseyde*," *Washington State University Research Studies* (Pullman), 33 (1965), 65.
5. George Lyman Kittredge, *Chaucer and His Poetry* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ Press, 1933), p. 120.
6. Alfred David, "Chaucerian Comedy and Criseyde" in *Essays on Troilus and Criseyde*. Chaucer Studies III. ed. Mary Salu (Cambridge: Rowman & Littlefield, 1979), p. 94.

7. Criseyde has been viewed by many critics, among them Alfred David, as the symbol of the change and mutability of life, p. 102; Tatlock, in "The People in Chaucer's *Troilus*" in *Chaucer: Modern Essays in Criticism*, ed. Edward Wagenknecht (London: Oxford Univ Press, 1959), pp. 342–43, finds that Chaucer has created two Criseydes, while Charles Berryman, in "The Ironic Design of Fortune in *Troilus and Chrisede*," *Chaucer Review*, 2 (1967), 2–3, sees her as the personification of changing Fortune. Peggy Knapp, in "The Nature of Nature: Criseyde's 'Slyding Corage,'" *Chaucer Review*, 13 (1978), 136, suggests that at the same time Chaucer portrays a very real, variable woman, he also uses Criseyde as a symbol.

8. I. 460, 522, 535–36, 573, 606, 616, 758; II. 1075, 1529–30; III. 111–12, 713–14, 1292–93, 1270, 1483, 1613–14; IV. 250, 279–80, 322, 376, 444–48, 470–74, 509–11, 634–37, 1079–82, 1198–1211, 1446–49, 1656–57; V. 84, 225–31, 295–97, 316–18, 545–46, 573–74, 624–30, 638–41, 1270–74, 1367–70, 1408–10, 1415–21, 1681–87, 1516–22.