

IN SONDRY FORMS

Dreams and Truth in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*

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The desire to understand a literary text often translates into a desire to neatly categorize meaning; and by consequence, to flatten the complexity of the work through oversimplification. This is true for both casual readers and literary critics—and, as demonstrated in this paper, for interpreters of dream visions. Yet some elusive texts slip out of reach, instead mystifying and elevating the literary genre. Geoffrey Chaucer's work *Troilus and Criseyde*, an exquisite retelling of the Troy myth, subverts the formal employment of dream visions common to medieval writing. This paper attempts to illuminate the genius of the two major dream scenes in this work through the analytic frameworks of Stephen Kruger and Valerie Ross. To offer a more comprehensive picture of Chaucer's career, this paper also explores how he incorporates dreams in other key works. By way of this investigation, I find that the natural obscurities surrounding unconscious dreamspace allows Chaucer to access—and challenge—readers' conceptions of narrative epistemology, thereby achieving both authorial agency and critical liberation. Understanding Chaucer's stylistic legacy within his oeuvre and the larger English canon grants unique insight to even a contemporary reader's personal relationship to liminality.

In his work *In librum sapientiae*, a likely reference for medieval dream visions, author Robert Holkot cautions readers: "It is clear that in certain dreams there is some certainty, but in few of them [is this true], and therefore, 'Do not pay attention to dreams, for dreams deceive many.'¹ The complicated nature of dream philosophy reaches far back in history, as individuals have grappled with the significance of these unconscious visions without finding a satisfactory resolution since Biblical times. Holkot is far from the only writer to express such strong skepticism and reservation towards the pursuit of dream divination. Nonetheless, the mystery remains at the forefront of public fascination with magic and the occult; the inherent ephemerality of dreams, implying the seductive possibility of prophetic revelation, continues to capture audience imagination in literature as well as life. Geoffrey Chaucer's poem *Troilus and Criseyde* centers around the tragic fate of two lovers, each of whom experiences a significant dream vision within the text.² These dream visions, rich in symbolism and foreshadowing, extend beyond the surface level of the dreamer and the dream. In exploring the tension between these visions and the larger textual frame in which they are set, it is important to note that dream psychology is inherently complex—the practices of interpreting both dreams and literature negate attempts at reductionism. The same need for ambiguity and complexity in the reading of texts demands a willing suspension of disbelief and active participation in the construction of a diegetic world, allowing dreams to be "read" for meaning. This

1 Steven F. Kruger, *Dreaming in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 94. Translation from Kruger; emphasis mine. The final line references Jeremiah 29:8, from the Old Testament, warning Christians against false prophecy.

2 Geoffrey Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde*, ed. Barry Windeatt (Penguin Books, 2003).

mystical nuance that creates the transfixing opalescence of narrative that draws audiences in, time and again, to the process of decoding a work for higher significance. The capacity of literature to deemphasize a perfect correlation between story and reality creates space for narratives to exist in limbo between real and imagined spaces, as dreams hang in limbo between pseudoscience and philosophical triumph. This paper will explore how the use of dreams within Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* functions on both a literary and generic level: on a literary level, working as a device of stylistic mystique and character development; on the generic level, as a ploy to reimagine the overlap between fiction and divine truth.

I. Late-Medieval Dream Theory

The field of medieval dream analysis embraces complexity and nuance—most prevalent theorists preferred not to generalize on the nature of dreams, positioning both the origin and meaning of dreams as impossible to retroactively pin down and decode by a universal rubric.³ Author Steven Kruger explains that the instinct to diagnose dreams with concrete roots in reality conflicts with the conceptualization of dreams in the Middle Ages: “[D]ouble statements are the norm rather than the exception in medieval writings about the dream; the ambivalent attitude toward dream experience ... asserts itself repeatedly and pervasively in the culture of the Middle Ages.”⁴ Macrobius and Aristotle, for example, are notable among numerous dream philosophers who composed carefully-tiered hierarchies that organize dreams by type or origin, seeking to categorize and understand the exact prophetic potential of such visions.⁵ Though these thinkers certainly may have influenced later writers like Chaucer, there is no single reliable method that contemporary readers can use as a key to definitively decode such an author's intentions. Seemingly prophetic dreams like Criseyde's predict the future or reveal hidden truths of moments past, creating a grey zone of reliability, shifting understandings, and bridging moments in the chronology of the story. If Chaucer were to write in explicit interpretations of Criseyde's or even Troilus' dream, the clarity would circumvent the point of the dream imagery itself. The incorporation of intriguing duality would be crushed by a codified, boxed-in answer to the question of the dream in the first place. The success of these dream visions lies in the flexibility of their reading.

Bringing the nearly unresolvable problem of reading dreams to the forefront acknowledges potential skepticism. Chaucer doesn't shy away from exploring the messy, liminal space of the subconscious psyche. Indeed, parsing dream sequences judiciously within a text calls upon a cultural history of interpretive opacity. Like adding a well-timed smoke machine to a theatrical performance, it adds mystique and dramatic visual symbolism—not to mention aesthetic flair—while simultaneously playing up to and staring down the fourth wall that separates audiences from characters. The overt puppetry of a classical dream vision draws audience members' attention to the fact that they are indeed observing a work of fiction right in the midst of trying to make itself appear lifelike, forcing the audience to intentionally choose how they will observe the duration of the play—or read the duration of the text. By weaving uncertainty into the work, the narrator uses the dream a tool for self-examination during the process of storytelling—and the reader, in the process of understanding.

II. Dreams, Myth, and Plot

On a structural level, the use of dreams within the text complicates the chronology of the plot. The infamous legacy of the fall of Troy stands taller than any specific retelling of the myth. The scope of the Troy story is grand enough that readers in both medieval and contemporary contexts are likely familiar with the ill-fated romance of the eponymous characters before they even pick up Chaucer's text. Yet in reading, audiences simultaneously discover anew Chaucer's detailed embellishments on his retelling and recognize the ultimate predestination of the narrative arc, pulling at two ends of an epistemological thread as the story unfolds. The dreams, foreshadowing what is to come, create dramatic tension as characters struggle with internal conflict while the audience already sees the

3 Kruger, *Dreaming in the Middle Ages*, p. 60-61.

4 Ibid., p. 16. This description refers to the illicit status and popularity of “dreambooks,” used to decipher symbols in dream visions. The “ambivalence” describes a duality in attitude, more than an apathetic stance.

5 Ibid., p. 22-24, p. 35-37. These categorizations hierarchize dreams from high to low, depending on the degree of divinity, or truth, in the dream. These systems often borrow from one another, but none appear entirely conclusive.

inevitable conclusion, playing back and forth upon this chronological canvas by cross-pollinating information about how the plot will develop. From Criseyde's father's predictive vision that the city of Troy will fall, to Cassandra's ultimately sound interpretation of Troilus' unhappy dream, the motif of oneiric insight plays a major role in the motivating mechanisms of the story. Even the opening of the first book, foretelling the fate of Troilus' "double sorwe" and his overall arc from "wo to wele, and after out of joie,"⁶ portends that the lovers' affair will not end happily. The challenge of retreading a timeworn tale while keeping readers engaged demands a mode of narration that exists in the liminal space between faithful translation and innovation. Invoking both inspired muses and the readers themselves to ultimately judge his poem, Chaucer's narrator speaks to audiences both old and new. In this delicate balance of credibility and skepticism, Chaucer's narrator creates diegetic interplay between past, present, and future in unsettling moments of blurry temporality.

Chaucer himself added Criseyde's dream to the text, deviating from his source material. This deviation, a marker of Chaucer's hand in the creation of the poem as distinct from Boccaccio, its source text, indicates a key moment in the text to consider authorial role in the process of storytelling.⁷ Chaucer's speaker repeatedly claims to remain true to his original documents, following his author word for word, repeating "naught only the sentence, / As writ myn auctour called Lollius, / But plainly, save our tonges difference, / ...every word right thus / As I shal seyn" to capture the exact essence of the original prose.⁸ While this claim seems to assert that the narrator himself has no creative agency, the broad exemption for the "tonges difference" allows for an expansive loophole that belies any apparent humility. Positioning himself as a humble translator, the narrator denies *intentional* intervention. Yet, he goes on to describe a vivid dream sequence that was formerly part of Troilus' vision later in the text as Criseyde's own vision when she falls asleep to the song of a nightingale outside her window.

And as she slep, anonright tho hire mette
 How that an egle, fethered whit as bon,
 Under hire brest his longe clawes sette,
 And out hire herte he rente, and that anon,
 And did his herte into hire brest to gon —
 Of which she nought agroos, ne nothyng smerte—
 And forth he fleigh, with herte left for herte.

(Book 2, lines 925-31)⁹

This interruption in the narrative fidelity, a striking choice on the part of the narrator, demands a closer examination. The violent diction in this stanza, describing an imposing bird of prey with "longe clawes" that "rente" her breast, initially threatens Criseyde with physical harm. Comparing the eagle's feathers to bone builds upon this ominous tone, as does the physical positioning of the powerful bird looming above Criseyde's sleeping and defenseless body. The gendering of the eagle as male, using the pronouns "he" and "his," further plays into this predatory dynamic, in line with the social roles that cast the female as passive and the male as aggressive. At this point in the story, Criseyde has just begun to turn her sentiments towards Troilus; the gendering of the eagle and the graphic exchange of hearts could be read as a dramatic conquest, or even that she feels forced into an unwanted courtship, or rape. Indeed, the description of the nightingale singing outside her window right before she falls asleep recalls the Greek myth of Philomela and Procne, two sisters who escape Procne's abusive husband by turning into a nightingale and a swallow.¹⁰ This recursive allusion implies parallels of graphic sexual violence and emotional abuse.¹¹

6 Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde*, Book 1, lines 5.

7 Valerie A. Ross, "Believing Cassandra: Intertextual Politics and the Interpretation of Dreams in 'Troilus and Criseyde'" in *The Chaucer Review* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1997), p. 352. Ross argues that Chaucer deliberately employs dreams to empower female characters in this text.

8 Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde*. Book 1, lines 393-96.

9 *Ibid.*, Book 2, lines 925-31.

10 Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde*, Book 2, lines 918-24. Earlier in the text, Pandarus also hears "the swalowe Proigne," or Procne (Book 2, lines 64-70), outside his window while he sleeps, twittering her laments into his window.

11 "Philomela." *Myths and Legends of the World*. Encyclopedia.com.

Yet in this Greek myth, what the two women ultimately find via their transformations into birds is freedom. In this moment in Chaucer's work, Criseyde's heart becomes that of a bird, suggesting her own claim to freedom. Indeed, she does not appear to be troubled by the dream, for "nothyng smerte," and so she sleeps on in peace, and the narrator spends no more time explaining the images Criseyde has seen. Left to stand alone, this dream holds potential for duplicitous or oppositional readings. The association of whiteness with spirits, or even purity, could indicate the eagle's innocence instead of its deathliness. A feminist reading of the gender dynamics in this scene could interpret the eagle as a manifestation of masculine power benevolently endowing Criseyde with strength, rather than taking it from her. In fact, author Valerie Ross posits that Chaucer deliberately superimposed this dream onto Criseyde's character not to degrade or disempower her, but as a form of positive authorial intervention on Criseyde's behalf.¹² Regardless of whether the dream is interpreted as foreboding or simply intense, the imagery develops Criseyde's internal emotional life and fleshes out a more comprehensive character. In giving each of the lovers their *own* dream sequences, Chaucer maintains neat symmetry between the two, leveling the playing field and further demonstrating his hand in the creation of the text as it deviates from the existing sources.

III. Dreams and Character

Chaucer employs this ambiguity and duality for Criseyde because this key point in the narrative justifies deviation from his source material. Giving Criseyde a dream scene further establishes her as an independent, actualized psyche and humanizes her character, which is one of Chaucer's achievements in this retelling. Ross elaborates on how Criseyde's dream could be read through an actively recuperative lens of gender dynamics: "Chaucer is not only investing his Criseyde with the subjectivity of having a dream of her own, but is assigning her the agency to imagine her own emotional transformation, instead of having it projected upon her by her lover's sublimated anxiety."¹³ Instead of a coercive or violent scenario, she proposes that the exchange of hearts implies that Criseyde has been empowered with regal courage and the valorous heart of an eagle, a symbol of royalty, therefore aligning her with sovereignty.¹⁴ Ross' reading strengthens the possibility of Criseyde actually gaining power from this exchange, directly drawn from power held by Troilus in previous renditions of the myth. The range of undercurrents in this single dream vision, told by different voices, demonstrates how such narrative innovation can be a deliberate method of offering alternative readings. In this case, the author stakes a claim on editorial authority, motivated to alter the canonical memory of Criseyde as a harlot and betrayer. In recovering her reputation from its previous status as a wicked character, Chaucer asserts his narrative voice as a writer in his own right, changing the story as he passes it down. In this respect, deviating from the source material gives Chaucer narrative command to independently typify Criseyde, and the success of these alterations validates him as an author of equal standing with the writers he translates.

In treating the dream as a device of characterization, Criseyde's example of a dream as a literary device critically interacts with medieval dream philosophy and superstition. Dreams carry the same kind of prophetic mystique that seduces literary audiences, delving into the unknowability and mystery surrounding the inner workings of the mind. A dream, therefore, creates an interiority for the characters who bear witness, showing an internal psychic life and depth of consciousness that create a more well-rounded, interesting personality. The natural insolubility of these images supports the idea that there is not one objective truth to be learned. In this respect, Kruger posits that dreams operate as a parallel for literature: "Enigmatic dreams and figural literature call each other to mind. And more strikingly, every kind of dream evokes ... a literary analogue: as dreams range from the unreliable to the undeniably true, so literature exists in a realm between the wholly fabulous and the prophetic."¹⁵ Kruger goes on to explain how authors can capitalize upon this tension "between truth and falsehood" to "explore, in the ambiguities of the dream experience, anxieties about the ambiguity of literary art."¹⁶

12 Ross, "Believing Cassandra," p. 348-9.

13 Ibid., p. 352.

14 Ibid., p. 350-1.

15 Kruger, *Dreaming in the Middle Ages*, p. 133. This selection refers to the connection of Pascalis Romanus to the works Macrobius, both late-antique authorities that emphasize the "allegorical quality of the *somnium*," the middle-most type of dream, that bridges the gap between the realms of the true and false.

16 Kruger, *Dreaming in the Middle Ages*, p. 135.

For an author such as Chaucer, the concerns of the status of art are fundamental. Both literature and dreams are layered and changeable and are interpreted by different readers in a range of different ways, calling into question the purpose of striving for factual reality in narratives.¹⁷ Resisting archetypes of genre and form, Chaucer pushes the boundaries of the role of authorship. Successful dream visions essentially validate incredible, escapist stories as well as historical ones. Thus, dream vision poetry functions from a self-aware position in critique, recognizing the duality of the human experience through the medium of poetry itself.

IV. Dreams and Genre

Ross supports the idea that the introduction of this tension works not only on a literary level but a generic level as well. She posits that Chaucer's self-contradictory use of dream visions in this text works to undermine simplistic readings: "Thus the notorious 'ambiguity' for which Criseyde has so often been criticized becomes instead a sign of Chaucer's larger project of resistance against the edifice of *auctoritas*, creating a literary space in which no positions are fixed, and no origins are stable."¹⁸ Readers aware of the story of Troilus and Criseyde may form character judgements early in the text, predicting and striving to categorize Criseyde's eventual absence; yet, the narrator discourages these assumptive condemnations, much in the manner that dream theorists discouraged assumptive interpretation of dreams. The nesting of Chaucer's narrative voice within both his narrator's character and the actions of the characters within the story itself allow for slippage in so-called "authorial intent." Chaucer's work both challenges readers to grapple with the dream and withdraws from such reductive action itself, leaving room for ambiguity of meaning in the narrator's silence or layered commentary. Dreams represent a grey area of truth and untruth in art, a useful mechanism for further undermining the authority of the source texts and proposing alternative, anti-misogynist narratives.

In contrast to Criseyde's earlier dream, Troilus' dream springs from a place of direct emotional torture after losing Criseyde, and the images continue to wreak havoc on his state of mind as he struggles to cope with their apparent message. Complicating the previous function of Criseyde's dream as a stand-alone image that, while significant to the reader, is largely uninterpreted by Criseyde herself, Troilus' dream is not only shared but extensively debated by his companions. Upon waking, Troilus describes his dream to Pandarus, in a state of panic, looking for solace for "this thing" he fears most of all:

'My lady bright, Criseyde, hath me bytrayed,
In whom I trusted most of any wight.
She elliswhere hath now hire herte apayed.
The blisful goddes thorough hire grete myght
Han in my drem yshewed it ful right.
Thus in my drem Criseyde have I biholde —'
And al this thing to Pandarus he tolde.

(Book 5, lines 1247-53)¹⁹

He goes on to describe that in his dream, he saw Criseyde kissing and laying by the side of a boar in a forest.²⁰ He rashly interprets this to mean that Criseyde now loves another, represented by the ugliness of the boar and her apparent affection towards this other, wild creature. While the reader knows that Criseyde indeed has begun to fall for Diomedes in the Greek camp, Troilus has no way of confirming any suspicions he may harbor. Yet, he begins this speech to Pandarus not with the dream itself, but the radical—and painful—conclusion he has drawn from it. Already using past tense verbs to describe his love for Criseyde, assuming that she already "hath me bytrayed," and declaring that he only "trusted" her in the past, he assumes his conclusion is correct and simply treats the dream as evidence of something he already knows. He goes on to attribute this dream to "the blisful

17 Ibid., pp. 131-134.

18 Ross, "Believing Cassandra," p. 342.

19 Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde*, Book 5, lines 1247-53.

20 Ibid., Book 5, lines 1233-44.

goddess” who showed this truth to him in “ful right”; moving distinctly into the realm of dream philosophy that interprets dreams with divine potential as prophetic, Troilus’ description further credits the validity of his beliefs. His initial conviction falls in line with the significance and prevalence of dream divination as a form of trusted insight into the future or fates.

In spite of this apparent conviction upon first experiencing this dream, Troilus is quickly swayed by the discouraging words of Pandarus, his friend and mentor. Later, these discouraging words bring him to also doubt his sister Cassandra, an oracle and prophetess who is doomed to be continually disbelieved. Hearing Troilus’ dream for the first time, Pandarus is skeptical, and voices personal doubts to introduce a dismissive reading of the images:

Pandare answerde and seyde, ‘Allas the while
That I was born! Have I nat sayd er this,
That dremes many a maner man bigile?
And why? For folk expounded hem amys.
How darstow sayn that fals thy lady ys
For any drem, right for thyn owene drede?
Lat be this thought; thow kanst no dremes rede.’
(Book 5, lines 1275-81)²¹

Echoing Holkot’s warning, “that dremes many a maner man bigile,” Pandarus attempts to instill a Biblical approach to denying dreams as false prophets and dangerous to the spirit. Rather than deny that dreams ever hold truth in the first place, Pandarus simply warns that folks inevitably interpret them “amys,” and implies that Troilus has made an error in reading the signs, too emotional over his lady’s absence and unable to remain objective. Advising Troilus to “lat be this thought,” Pandarus seems to think that trying to decode the symbolism of dreams is a fruitless pursuit that Troilus should let go. The repetitive assonance in the words “dreme,” “drede,” and “rede” elide both the auditory distinctions between these words and the murky process of distinguishing one’s emotional center from the reading of the dreams themselves. Troilus’ shift between unequivocal belief to contemplating plausible doubt demonstrates Chaucer’s complication of the dream vision as pure truth.

Later regretful, acknowledging how the gods have truthfully “shewen both joie” and affliction in dreams, Troilus blames Pandarus for telling him not to trust and believe in his own dream prophecy that Criseyde was indeed unfaithful. Pandarus, for once in the story silenced and “stille as a ston,” is notably contrite for leading Troilus astray.²² This tension pushes the readers to consider how dreams fit into literary genre as a shifting variable, serving both a rubric for symbolism or potentially just stylistic synchronicity at various moments in the text.

V. Dreams, Ambiguity, and the Literary

Further, the separation of the dream from the dreamer instills more yet more ambiguity. As Pandarus argues, human dreamers are fallible, and won’t necessarily interpret a dream correctly. This division reflects the separation of the text from the audience, as this embedded dramatic irony opens the door for the reader to take action in deciphering a dream *for* the characters—thereby attempting to claim their own authority on the “true” meaning of a symbol, in the same way readers claim authority on the “true” meaning of a story. This give-and-take interpretive dynamic demands that the authorial role as perfect arbiter of meaning is diminished, allowing the story to stand in its multiplicity. In presenting Criseyde’s unresolved dream vision, the author-narrator confronts the tangled issue of historical credibility, but crafts the text to validate his literary choices. In opposition to this affirmation of interpretive power, readers are presented with the rapid discrediting of Cassandra’s predictions. Without declaring whether Cassandra or Pandarus is a more effective voice of reason to advise young Troilus, Chaucer’s narrator refrains from inserting judgement—whether or not his source loyalty is true, the passive narrative voice allows readers to take an active stance. Lamenting the fact that he didn’t listen to Cassandra’s advice when it is revealed

21 Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde*, Book 5, lines 1275-81.

22 Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde*, Book 5, line 1729.

that Criseyde is indeed having an affair with Diomedes, Troilus blames Pandarus for being so dismissive of his dream and what it signified:

‘O Pandare, that in dremes for to triste,
 Me blamed hast, and wont art oft upbreyde,
 Now maistow sen thiself, if that the liste,
 How trewe is now thi nece, bright Criseyde!
 In sondry formes, God it woot,’ he seyde,
 ‘The goddes shewen both joie and tene
 In slep, and by my drem it is now sene.’

(Book 5, lines 1707-15)²³

Confronted with a saturated and striking dream vision that now clearly carries a higher message, readers can consciously choose to believe that fiction inherently holds some worthwhile truth, for which they are willing to suspend their disbelief. This willing participation grants the author room to continue to interpret—and potentially deviate from—the factual historical record, inviting yet more creative intervention into the narrative. Troilus’ epistemological struggle translates from the diegetic realm to the literary realm of critical readers. In this instance of dream, competing interpretations are provided for the characters, leaving the readers to discern who speaks with the most honesty.

Alternately, pessimistic readers can disagree that no fiction approaches the truth, so when presented with such an upending of reality, one could sit back and entirely eschew the search for meaning. This lateral disengagement still allows for equal consideration of multiple interpretations, as none is inherently biased towards truth. In this case, as well, Chaucer invites readers to sit with ambiguity. Carving out this space for both authors and discerning audiences to explore a broader, more nuanced range of unanswered questions rather than simply reverting back into the familiar traditions of historical literature avoids the moralistic instinct to search for a simplistic, reductive takeaway message. Dreams, like smoke—variable and compelling for all their potential “sondry forms” and burlesque temptations—hold unique potential for impending revelation, just waiting in the wings. Kruger explains that this conflict is central to a realistic approach to dream theory as it evolves: “Twelfth-century writers, like their antique forerunners, thus associated dreams with a variety of opposed terms: truth and falsehood, internality and externality, demonic and divine agents, moral probity and perversity.”²⁴ The diametric understanding of dreams as a motif in literature establishes these moments as the perfect opening for the introduction of both striking insight and fatal fallacies; and this philosophical tradition has been handed down to later writers, like Chaucer, as they seek to contextualize their work. Kruger goes on to explain that these foils don’t exist in separate worlds, but rather overlap and find middle ground: “[A]s also in late-antique thought, none of these oppositions was allowed to stand without qualification, without the suggestion that there existed mediate kinds of dream.”²⁵ By creating two radically different dream experiences—Criseyde’s as vivid but unconscious and largely uninterpreted by characters within the text, and Troilus’ as apparently direct symbolism but emotionally torturous when it is deciphered for him—Chaucer validates both perspectives, and the possibility of dreams functioning in different ways.

The myriad potential of dreams within Chaucer’s writing is supported by the various ways he crafts his other dream vision poems. Amongst these poems, each presents a different view on the role of dreams and their interpretive potential. This pattern provides evidence for the clever deployment of dreams within *Troilus and Criseyde* as yet another literary device, on both a textual and generic axis. For example, the opening lines in *The House of Fame* sheds critical light on the range of dreams and their various causes:

God turne us every drem to goode!

23 Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde*, Book 5, lines 1707-15.

24 Kruger, *Dreaming in the Middle Ages*, p. 78.

25 Ibid., p. 78.

For hyt is wonder, be the roode,
 To my wyt, what causeth swevenes
 Eyther on morwes or on evenes,
 And why th' effect folweth of somme,
 And of somme hit shal never comme;
 Why this is a drem, why that a sweven,
 And noght to every man lyche even;
 Why this a fantome, why these oracles,
 I not...

(Book 1, lines 1-12)²⁶

From the outset, this passage turns authority and power over to a higher being; in this case, God. The speaker proceeds to acknowledge that he doesn't know what causes certain kinds of dreams, or "swevenes," and what differentiates certain categories of dreams—those that are in the morning or at night, those that are fulfilled or not, those that are called "fantomes" or "oracles," and everything in between. This description carries on, describing the various ways that dreams can be brought on; but the speaker still self-deprecates his position of knowledge and refuses to name himself an authority on dreams, returning to the power of God to ultimately determine what dreams are important. This direct relinquishment of power, claiming if anyone knows, "I not," indicates that Chaucer, as a dream-vision author, uses the form of the dream vision as he sees fit to best serve the story he has in mind. Kruger notes that "while echoing authoritative treatments of the dream, Chaucer points up—in his narrator's repeated confusions—the problems that such complex treatments pose for the particular dreamer attempting to deal practically with his own 'wonderful' dreams."²⁷ Without pinning down a coherent system of classifying dreams, the narrator leaves it open to be interpreted as the audiences believe most fitting.

This pattern of using dream visions as a literary framework rather than a religious or spiritual device is mirrored in several other central dream vision poems written throughout Chaucer's literary career. In the poem *The Parliament of Fowls*, the speaker explains that many dreams are simply brought on by the dreamer's own obsessive thought patterns, released into the unconscious mind through intense focus right before falling asleep.²⁸ This perspective dismisses the dream vision as divine, and places it firmly back in the physiological realm of the brain. Instead of the godly insight that prophets and seers believe them to be, this poem suggests that dreams are just a pattern of thought brought on by human behaviors. Yet in *The Book of the Duchess*, the speaker seems to again elevate the important status of dreams, explaining that:

Me mette so ynly swete a sweve,
 So wonderful that never yit
 Y trowe no man had the wyt
 To konne wel my sweven rede...

(Book 1, lines 271-9)²⁹

In other words, so wonderous and complex is *this* dreamer's vision, that "nat skarsly Macrobeus"³⁰ himself, one of the most important authorities in dream philosophy, could interpret it. This dreamer's description doesn't diminish the qualities of divinity within this vision, only the powers of man to properly decrypt the meaning. *The Book of the Duchess*, written to commemorate an important woman in the English court, Blanche of Lancaster, was a more fitting occasion to employ the heightened status of dreams as a form of access to the knowledge of the gods; as such, this dream vision is deemed prophetic, creating a tone of mystery and importance.

26 Geoffrey Chaucer, *Chaucer's Dream Visions* (Start Publishing, 2012), Book 1, lines 1-12.

27 Kruger, *Dreaming in the Middle Ages*, p. 57. This section compares the structural components of Chaucer's *House of Fame* to Prudentius' "Hymnus ante somnum"

28 Chaucer, *Dream Visions*, Book 1, lines 92-105.

29 Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde*, p. 15, Book 1, lines 271-9.

30 Chaucer, *Dream Visions*, Book 1, line 284. "Macrobeus" here refers to Macrobius, one of the influential dream philosophers mentioned earlier.

Finally, in *The Legend of Good Women*, Chaucer's dreamer turns to a more accessible presentation of the purpose of dreams in daily life. Explaining that he "spak, to yeve credence / to bokes olde" because men tend to trust old books when they have no other form of proof, the narrator continues that in this tradition, he wants to tell "many a story, or elles of many a geste, / As autors seyn; leveth hem if yow leste!"³¹ Concluding on the seemingly casual note, that readers may take or leave his stories, makes the dream sequence function more as a secular generic framework for the content to follow, than as an urgent retelling of a compelling and revelatory dream. Written after *Troilus and Criseyde*, the introduction to *The Legend of Good Women* seems to continue pushing the flexibility of the dream image as an adaptable tool for literary purposes. The self-reflexive moment as the author in *Legend* explains how people tend to trust books as sources of fact seems to be a conscious critique of the form of fiction and dreams within the scope of storytelling as an art form. While dreams and old history books seem to hold cultural weight, all this narrator claims to do is submit his stories to be read, whether or not they are accepted into the canon. Chaucer himself, over the course of his literary career, produces alternative solutions to the question of the true nature of dreams. The contrast between each different use of the dream in these texts shows a chameleon-like ability to change modes between dream styles, as best suits the rest of the poem in question; and for *Troilus and Criseyde*, this mode seeks conflict and debate.

This multi-use functionality of the dream vision within Chaucer's works demonstrates a cunning use of the connotations of the dream within literature as a whole. The denial of permanent or stable categorization allows for more freedom in the ways it serves authorial motive. While the dream is employed in a diverse pattern to suit the respective speakers' works, the pattern is still quite intentional. Specifically, the social interaction embedded in *Troilus and Criseyde* provides an opportunity for contested readings not afforded in the single-voice structure of the other dream poems. Ultimately, we can look to Troilus' violent reaction to Cassandra's contested prophecy as a manifestation of power dynamics in the struggle for authority. Ross posits that "Chaucer produces a poetic pastiche that not only parodies and critiques his source material, but undermines the very premise of authority they represent."³² The "pastiche" effect allows for a stronger narrative voice and control over the texts in their final form, drawing on the techniques and symbols of previous works to forge new literary landscapes. Cassandra's critical role in interpreting Troilus' dream grants her status by virtue of her prophetic knowledge; but Troilus, displeased with her reading, lashes back.

'Thow seyst nat soth,' quod he, 'thow sorceresse,
 With al thy false goost of prohecy!
 Thow wenest ben a gret devyneresse!
 Now sestow nat this fool of fantasie
 Payneth hire on ladys for to lye?
 Away!' quod he. 'There Joves yeve the sorwe!
 Thow shalt be false, peraunter, yet tomorwe!
 (Book 5, lines 1520-6)³³

This remarkably misogynist rant accuses Cassandra, his own sister, of falsely claiming to be a sorceress, spreading lies about other women. He goes on to curse her for her lies, sending her away and wishing her sorrow for her delusions of grandeur. His insults deploy distinctly gendered language, accusing her of being "false" and backstabbing, as feminized aggression is routinely characterized as passive and subversive rather than forthright. Accusing her of being a "fool," he also parrots misogynist rhetoric that diminishes feminine intelligence. Going so far as to command that she go "away," Troilus attempts to assert his masculine power by controlling her behavior at his demand. This immediate and visceral accusation of Cassandra, who only confirmed his initial fears, shows a suspicion of dream prophecy when it doesn't serve his own ends. The readers, knowing Cassandra is right, must critically assess Troilus' condemnation of his sister for what it actually is: a sublimation of what he feels towards the woman who has truly betrayed him: Criseida."³⁴ In the end, this reversal of credibility as Troilus

31 Geoffrey Chaucer, *Legend of Good Women*, Book 1, lines 83-88.

32 Ross, "Believing Cassandra," p. 339.

33 Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde*, Book 5, lines 1520-6.

34 Ross, "Believing Cassandra," p. 345.

attempts to degrade Cassandra only succeeds in showing Troilus' own weaknesses, and his desperate desire to remain in control.

VI. Conclusion

Chaucer demonstrates that dreams, complex as they are, can function as an intertextual, reflexive critique of literature and poetry when incorporated into poems themselves. The dreams call upon the cultural fascination with dream imagery as well as the myriad potential uses for such rich, vivid scenes of fancy or truth. Within the philosophical tradition of dream literature and categorization, as Kruger explains, the inherent contradictions underscore an epistemological mystique and allure. When treated as a parallel mechanism that encourages meta-reflection, the use of dream visions within Chaucer's work alternates between simply a formulaic device or a critically important and divine insight into the future. Examining Chaucer's corpus of dream work, it becomes clear that the dream is an effective and central tool for crafting narratives that touch upon questions of fate, agency, and reality. The dreams in *Troilus and Criseyde* take multiple forms, changing shape under close examination. Indeed, this ontological mercuriality enables the author to mold the original content into their own masterpiece—an especially relevant tool, when considering that Chaucer himself manipulates the structure of the dream visions within the traditional myth of *Troilus and Criseyde* to give each of the eponymous characters their own moment of revelation. Ross suggests that this restructuring of the source narrative allows Chaucer to deepen the characterization of Criseyde, from the archetype of the cruel lover, into a sympathetic person with a unique, complex psyche. This paper argues that Chaucer uses dreams in the same way he conceptualizes literature: readers are invited to engage with the potential meanings of the dreams as an entry point into engagement with literature as a whole, as the ambiguity of both mediums overlaps in critical ways. The very lack of easy answers is what draws readers in, time and again, to try and puzzle out the elusive gossamer strands of truth within such a text; but tantalizingly, each time a concrete solution is proposed, it slips out of reach.

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