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# The Logic of Authorship in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*

Stefania D'Agata D'Ottavi

The paper analyses the function of the speaking voice in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* from the point of view of medieval sign theory. The idea of change is argued to be one of the most relevant in the poem and the paper shows that it can be extended to include the first-person pronoun in the text. At times the pronoun stands for the narrating voice, but can also refer to an apocryphal author who pretends to translate from a fictitious Latin source. By analysing the lines of the poem as propositions, it is possible to highlight the points where the first-person pronoun *supponit pro*, stands for the narrator, who is not part of the story, and those where the speaking voice becomes that of an author who uses his feigned source in an autonomous and critical way. The paper argues that the transformation occurs whenever the emphasis concerns the nature and the uses of language and whenever they become the object of a metalinguistic analysis. By pretending that the poem is the translation of an authoritative text, and by interpreting the idea of translation in terms of linguistic change, the apocryphal author emphasises the fact that authorship is a matter of re-elaboration rather than of mere imitation.

*Troilus and Criseyde* is Chaucer's *Mutability Canto*. The idea of change is one of the most important in the poem and is explored from every point of view. Criseyde's inconstant attitude toward Troilus's love, from the first hesitation to the final betrayal, becomes the occasion for an analysis of every possible transformation in nature, language and human behaviour, which provides the story with a multiplicity of possible interpretations. According to Aristotle's *Physics*, nature is "a principle of motion and change"

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(Weisheipl 527), and this is at the basis of all considerations of transformation, both in the physical world and in man's actions. Moreover, if we take into account the fact that two treatises included in the *Aristoteles Latinus*, *Physics* and *De anima*, were often studied together, it is easy to see that the ideas of motion and change could be transferred from the analysis of the physical world to that of the *motus animae*, and to emotions in particular. In fourteenth-century England the so-called Oxford calculators, the philosophers and mathematicians of Merton College, concentrated on the moments when motion begins and ends. Treatises *de primo et ultimo instanti* or propositions including such verbs as *incipit* or *desinit* considered these moments to be problematic and worthy of analysis (Courtenay 243).

In Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* change appears to be the *leit motiv* of the story: the sight of Criseyde changes Troilus's sceptical attitude towards love, the intervention of Pandarus changes Criseyde's disposition towards Troilus; the (ex)change of Criseyde for Antenor provides the story with its turning point for the destinies both of Troilus and Troy, since Antenor will prove to be a traitor of his country and Troy's end is traditionally related to the death of Troilus. Finally, Diomedes's words change once more Criseyde's behaviour towards Troilus. Less macroscopic changes are caused by the main ones and become signs of feelings and emotions. I will only mention the change in the colour of Troilus's face whenever he experiences strong emotions related to his love for Criseyde or to his grief for her behaviour. To the traditional pallor of the lover, described by Andreas Capellanus, Chaucer adds moments of subtle changes when Criseyde forms the object of Troilus's remembrance or when he, before her empty palace, calls back to his mind the time they spent together. All these situations modify the emotions of the lover and the change in hue is the visible sign of this modification. The text thematises this from the very beginning, when Troilus's "double sorwe" is explained in terms of movement: "fro wo to wele, and after out of joie" (Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde* I 4).

The complex structure of the poem – the fiction of the Latin text from which the story is translated – invites consideration of another way of rendering the idea of change a structural feature of the poem, that is the creation of a speaking voice that is shifting in nature, and varies from that of a storyteller – the more or less traditional narrator of a well-known story – to that of an apocryphal author who, disguised as a translator, shows how poetry, and writing in general, can be signs as well as causes of change through a modification of the world picture and of the literary tradition. The theme has been explored in a seminal work by Eugene Vance (*Marvelous Signals* 268-70) from the point of view of Chaucer's idea of history.

Two essential characteristics of the poem show that the role of the speaking voice is not always the same. It can therefore be interesting to analyse the points where its function changes. The first is the already-mentioned fiction of the Latin source. It has been noticed that the invention of the Latin – and therefore authoritative – text, and of the imaginary author Lollius, gives the poet a greater freedom “with an increasing number of possible reading conditions” (Lawton 13), a freedom that is comparable to the one the dreamer-persona enjoys when relating the dream experience (Lawton 14). To this I would like to add that the feigned source and the invented ancient author serve also another purpose: They help to create a speaking voice that is at times the external narrator of a fictitious Latin text, but becomes also a sort of character in the vernacular story when the feigned translator engages in a constant comparison between his own work and that of the imaginary author. The Latin text is therefore *en abîme* within the vernacular poem, and this in itself doubles the speaking voice.

A second feature concerns the fact that the unhappy outcome of the story is known from the beginning and the opening lines of each book remind the audience of that. There is nothing new to be learned from the progress of the narration and readers seem to be invited to concentrate on the way the story is told rather than on the events themselves. The emphasis is therefore, as has long been recognised by many scholars (among others, Delany, *Chaucer's "House of Fame"* 103 ff.; Wetherbee, *Chaucer and the Poets* 30-4; Windeatt, *The Oxford Guides to Chaucer* 251-4), on the development of the narrative techniques and on the way the text is built. The mutable speaking voice renders the fictitious authoritative source less dogmatic and assertive. It is then interesting to analyse some of the points where the first-person pronoun, the “I,” is used, in order to establish whether it refers to the fictitious translator or to an apocryphal author who re-elaborates the old story in an original way.

As Emil Benveniste (303) and Roman Jakobson (154) have observed, the first-person pronoun has a special place in language and has a different status with respect to the other pronouns, since it refers directly to the actual situation of discourse. The only reality to which the first-person pronoun refers is the speech act in which it appears. In terms of sign theory, the first-person pronoun is what modern linguists call an “empty sign” since it only signifies in the actual situation of discourse in which it is used, and ceases to signify when the speech act is concluded. Even if the “I” is repeated in the same message, there can be no certainty that it has the same reference. This kind of approach to the complex relationship between the first-person pronoun and its referents is an example of the way medieval logic interpreted ancient grammatical categories in order to develop an analysis of the parts of speech in terms

of sign theory. In the case we are considering here, the *multiplex propositio*, that is the ambiguous sentence (Vance, *From Topic to Tale*), can be analysed by means of two important concepts. The first is the concept of *impositio*, that is the conventional meaning attributed to a term (Pinborg 138-42; Knudsen 480). From this point of view, it can be argued that the first-person pronoun needs a new *impositio* whenever it becomes part of a proposition. The second is the distinction between categorematic and syncategorematic terms, that is between those terms that have meanings in their own right and those who signify only when they are joined to categorematic words.

Henry of Ghent has an interesting way of explaining the difference between these important concepts of logic. Terms are said to be syncategorematic "not because they signify nothing on their own, but because they have a signification that is not definite, but indefinite, a signification whose definiteness they derive from those words that are adjoined to them" (Kretzmann 213). From this point of view, personal pronouns are believed to signify nothing unless they refer to a person who is present when they are uttered. The result is that the logicians' interpretation of categorematic and syncategorematic terms is more flexible than the grammarians', since it takes into account the whole proposition rather than the single word only.

This approach is really a step further, because it does not require a new proposition for each situation, as the idea of *impositio* necessarily implies, but considers the change in meaning according to the context in which the first-person pronoun happens to find itself. If this point of view is developed and extended to all terms that are either subjects or predicates in a proposition, the idea of *significatio* can more profitably be replaced by that of *suppositio*, that is the reference of the word within the context in which it is used. This concept is based on the interpretation of the term – the element of a proposition – as a sign, that is, as a substitute for objects, and this establishes a connection between logic and semantics. Moreover, in fourteenth-century semiotics, after William of Ockham's and John Buridan's work, the sign is no longer an instrument to get from the visible (signifier) to the intelligible (signified), but a way to explain reality and make human knowledge possible (Biard 55). I would like to argue that these important changes in the traditional thought, and above all the interpretation of problems of knowledge in terms of linguistic ones, provide the cultural context for the problematic attitude *Troilus and Criseyde* shows throughout.

The question now becomes: What does the "I" stand for (*supponit pro*)? When can we say that the reference changes and the first-person pronoun no longer indicates the narrator, but the apocryphal author who establishes a close relationship with the feigned source by amplify-



ing, reducing, commenting on the text he pretends to be translating? Sometimes the feigned source is explicitly mentioned; expressions such as “myn auctour” or “as Lollius seith” are frequent in the poem, and in this case the speaking voice is obviously that of the fictitious translator, who engages in the interpretation of the feigned Latin source (Cope-land, *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation in the Middle Ages* 184). But generally the identity of the speaking voice is not so clear; in reflecting on its relationship with the feigned authoritative text, sometimes the speaking voice develops a sort of metalanguage that transforms the linguistic sign from referential to reflexive and the function of the narrator changes to that of an apocryphal author. Whenever this occurs, the authority of the ancient text is challenged and the idea of authority is in itself discussed (Delany, *Chaucer’s “House of Fame”*). If the speaking voice is that of an apocryphal author, to establish a dialogue with an audience becomes more important than if it was that of a mere translator. This is why the I/you relationship is greatly emphasised throughout the poem and the audience is frequently directly addressed e.g. in such expressions as “er that I part fro ye” (I. 5) “have he my thonk, and myn be this travaille!” (I. 21). An interesting example of the insistence on the act of writing, of highlighting the moment when the text is produced, can be found at the very beginning of the poem: “Thesiphone, thow help me for t’ endite / Thise woful vers *that wepen as I write* (I. 6-7, italics mine).

Chaucer’s real source, Boccaccio’s *Filostrato* (I. 6), has “Il mio verso lagrimoso.” Barry Windeatt in his comment translates: “my tearful verses” and quotes Boece “Allas!, I wepyng am constreyned to bygynnen vers of sorwful matere” (I. 1; Windeatt, ed. Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde* 353). But Chaucer’s lines express an idea that is different in quite a subtle way. The verses are not said to cause tears in people who read them, but to weep *themselves* while they are being composed. Thus they are personified and declared to be the real agents of the poet for the communication of the tragedy of Troilus. The speaking voice transfers to the verses the emotions that the tragic events arouse and they become not only the vehicles, but the real protagonists of the feelings that are so strongly communicated. In this way the process of composition is emphasised and writing becomes, as it were, part of the story, something to reflect about and comment on. But here comes the second half of the verse: *as I write*. If verses weep and are signs of Troilus’s “double sorwe,” the opening stanza of the poem indirectly questions the role of the person who causes the lines to represent suffering so effectively. The picture now becomes clearer: the first-person pronoun, repeated six times in the first three stanzas, shows the speaking voice to be an active agent in the narrative and to take on the role of an apocryphal author. The fictitious ancient text is therefore a source not only of *dispositio*, but

of *inventio* as well, whereby the new work (the “translation” into the vernacular) becomes as authoritative as the feigned original. In the language of logic the first-person pronoun, *supponit pro*, stands for an apocryphal author. The fiction of the Latin source and of the vernacular translation implies that change, that is a re-elaboration of the ancient text, is not only acceptable but necessary. This is clearly expressed at the beginning of the second book. The insistence on the narrator’s personal inexperience in matters of love (“of no sentement I this endite”) is followed by remarks on the mutability of language:

Ye knowe ek that in forme of speche is chaunge  
 Withinne a thousand yeer, and wordes tho  
 That hadden pris, now wonder nyce and straunge  
 Us thinketh hem, and yet thei spake hem so,  
 And spedde as wel in love as men now do;  
 Ek for to wynnen love in sondry ages,  
 In sondry londes, sondry ben usages. (II. 22-28, italics mine)

The two statements, the lack of experience in love matters and the remarks on language, coming as they do one after the other, suggest that the kind of experience the narrator possesses does not concern the subject of the narration, but the construction of the narrative. His experience is that of a writer who reflects about the nature of language and is aware of its characteristics, among which change plays an essential role, especially when texts are compared, as it occurs in translation. The superiority of Latin – the fact that it does not change any more – is also its limit; as Dante had argued in *De vulgari eloquentia*, the various vernaculars can better account for the changes to which everything existing in nature is subject, which an immutable language would be inadequate to describe (Fyler 128-9). It is because of the consciousness that language is subject to change that – a few lines below – the usual statement that the Latin source will be followed closely takes a more doubtful form: “Myn auctour shal I folwen, *if I konne*” (II. 49, italics mine). Change is in the nature of things. Ideas on love and the behaviour of lovers change from place to place and with time. Therefore, the close imitation of an ancient source may no longer be possible and would in any case sharply contrast with the modernity of the vernacular.

I would, however, argue that this important line has a double meaning: “in forme of speche is chaunge” certainly shows a writer’s consciousness of changes in language, but it can also be interpreted in the sense that every change can only be known if it is in the form of speech, if a way can be found of putting it in words, of forming propositions out of it. This interpretation is possible because of the greater flexibility

in the construction of sentences that is typical of middle English dialects, where the respective positions of the parts of the proposition are freer than in the modern language – a freedom also enjoyed by poetry with respect to prose.

But the fact remains that, according to the interpretation we chose to adopt, the word “chaunge” refers to the mutability of linguistic expressions or to the possibility of expressing change and therefore of making it known, so that people can become aware of it. The object of knowledge – Robert Holkot maintains – is not the world, but the proposition. And William of Ockham states that even mental language is a language in its own right: no communication is possible between thought and thought (Biard). Again, the analogy with dreams is striking. No direct communication of the dream experience is possible except through narration. Therefore, only words can express change, and it is the writer’s task to convey new meanings out of an old text, an idea Chaucer expressed before the composition of his longer poem, in *The Parliament of Fowls*:

For out of olde felde, as men seith,  
Cometh al this newe corn fro yer to yere;  
And out of olde bokes, in good feith,  
Cometh al this newe science that men lere. (22-5)

Authorship is a question of re-elaboration, not of mere imitation. In *Troilus and Criseyde* the choice of what to say and what to omit is often justified by the speaking voice with the fact that he has decided to write about the love of Troilus for Criseyde and not about the war in which Troy was engaged, and sometimes he pretends to agree with his source in leaving out some details, e.g. the letters that the lovers exchanged:

For ther was som epistel hem bitwene  
That wolde, as seyth myn auctour, wel contene  
Neigh half this book, of which hym liste nought write.  
How sholde I thanne a lyne of it endite? (III. 501-4)

The “I” who agrees with the fictitious source is a voice that has taken on the function of an apocryphal author, who is anxious to give his text a structural balance. Sometimes he pretends to disagree with his feigned authority and to emphasise different aspects of the story or give different interpretations to its meanings. For example, even if he has to follow his fictitious source, he is interested in highlighting the tragic aspects of the story and is unwilling to insist too much on the episodes that do not emphasise the essentially dramatic quality of the narrative:



What myghte or may the sely larke seye  
 Whan that the sperhauk hat it in his foot?  
 I kan namore; but of this ilke tweye-  
 To whom this tale sucre be or soot-  
 Though that I tarie a yer, sometyme I moot  
 After myn auctour, tellen hire gladnesse  
 As wel as I have told hire hevynesse (III. 1191-7)

The speaking voice seems reluctant to insist too much on the happy aspects of the story, which are felt to be ephemeral: certainly, they cannot be completely overlooked, and the authority must be followed, but, as an apocryphal author, he wishes to claim that his understanding of the events is different from that of his source.

The apocryphal author's pessimistic view of love is perfectly consistent with a consideration of this passion that was undergoing a deep change and was gradually replacing the traditional theory of courtly love. In fact, between the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Guinizelli's *Dolce Stil Novo* (*Sweet New Style*) had gradually been replaced in Italy and in France by a more problematic idea of love, as Guido Cavalcanti's poetry and Dante's earlier work clearly show. The tragic and even foolish or meaningless aspects of love, which tends to destroy the noblest part of man's soul, his reason, are emphasised by these authors, who are more inclined to see the darker side of this passion. The tragic aspects of the story of Troilus seem to be better described by this more modern interpretation of the love passion.

The authorial "I" – we have seen – is necessarily dialogical. In an important stanza the apocryphal author asks his audience to do what he has done to the lines of his source: amplify, shorten, eliminate. In this way his work will continue to exist in the work of those who will come after him:

For mine words, here and every part,  
 I speke hem alle under correctioun  
 Of yow that felyng han in loves art,  
 And putte it al in youre discrecioun  
 To encresse or maken diminucioun  
 Of my langage, and that I yow biseche.  
 But now to purpose of my rather speche. (III. 1332-7)

When the turning point of the story comes, expressed in the traditional (and Boethian) image of the wheel of Fortune, emotions and feelings are once more entrusted to the instruments of writing, which alone can be the signs of this crucial transformation:

From Troilus she gan hire brighte face  
 Away to writhe, and tok of hym non heede,  
 But caste hym clene out of his lady grace  
 And on hire whiel she sette up Diomedé;  
 For which myn herte right now gynneth blede  
 And now *my penne*, alas, with which I write  
*Quaketh for drede* of that I moste endite. (IV. 8-14, italics mine)

When the pain is overwhelming, the pens take on themselves, so to speak, the burden of telling about it. This is strongly reminiscent of one of Guido Cavalcanti's sonnet (XVIII) where the poet is so upset that he cannot express his pain, and pens and scissors become the interpreters of the poet's voice:

Noi siamo le triste penne isbigotite,  
 Le cesoiuzze e 'l coltellin dolente

Ch'avemo scritte dolorosamente  
 Quelle parole che vo'avete udite.

Or vi diciam perché noi siàn partite  
 E a voi qui di presente siàn venute:  
 La man che ci movea dice che sente  
 Cose dubbiose nel core apparite;

Le quali hanno destrutto sì costui  
 Ed hannol posto sì presso a la morte  
 Ch'altro non è rimasto che sospiri

Or vi preghiàn quanto possiàn più forte  
 Che non sdegniate di tenerci noi  
 Tanto ch'un poco di pietà vi miri.

We are the sorry quills, bewildered, hurt,  
 The penknife and the little scissors too,

The petty instruments of sorrow who  
 Were used to write the words that you have heard.

Now we shall say what urged us to depart  
 From where we were and thus come here to you:  
 The hand that moved us spoke as if it knew  
 Of dreadful things appearing in the heart,

Which have undone him so he seems to be  
 Standing next door to death, a man who lives  
 With almost nothing left of him but sighs.

We pray you then, with all the strength we have:  
 Do not disdain to keep us till we see  
 At last some trace of pity in your eyes. (Trans. A. Mortimer)

In Cavalcanti's sonnet, however, the pens suppose for the lover who is too unhappy to give expression to his grief; in Chaucer they seem to guide the author's hand and take part in the expression of his feelings and emotions. But when the tragic end of the story draws nearer, even the device of making words the messengers of grief is insufficient: we have reached the realm of the inexpressible and the speaking voice addresses the readers directly to state that he cannot be asked to write about something his mind is too exhausted even to think of.

In terms of fourteenth-century logic, no proposition can be formed about anything unless a concept has first been in the mind:

Thow, redere, maist thiself ful wel devine  
 That swich a wo my wit kan nat diffyne;  
 On ydel for to wrote it sholde I swynke,  
 Whan that my wit is wery it to thynke. (V. 270-4)

Change – and here another aspect is considered – is not only diachronic and language does not only change with time, but differences exist in the various dialects and can make communication impossible. This is why, after praising the “volgare” as more flexible than Latin, Dante had to invent the idea of the “volgare illustre,” the language of poetry, the language the apocryphal author is anxious that should not be spoilt by an unskilled scribe:

And for ther is so gret diversite  
 In Englissh and in writyng of oure tonge,  
 So prey I God that non myswrite the  
 Ne themysmetre for defaute of tonge;  
 And red wherso thow be, or elles songe  
 That thow be understonde, God I biseche!  
 But yet to purpose of my rather speche. (V. 1793-9)

Although this sort of recommendation was common in poetry (Windeatt, ed. Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde* 465), at the end of the poem, it emphasises the fact that the (apocryphal) author, who has by now finished his pretended translation, has not only appropriated the imagined authority of the fictitious Latin source, but has also adopted a more modern view of love and full consciousness of the changes that have occurred in the consideration of this passion. Hence the vernacular, the frequent remarks on the authorial activity, the constant comparison with

a feigned source which is re-elaborated rather than imitated. All this comes before the last part of the story is told and before the last transformation in the poem is described, when, after his death, Troilus looks down on the human world from the eighth sphere, where time does not exist and change is no longer possible.

It can be argued that the eternal condition of Troilus is what the apocryphal author hopes for his book, that it will last forever and will always be understood. It is the wish to place his work beyond time and death that makes him indirectly compare the destiny of his work to the eternal existence of Troilus in the eighth sphere. It has been noticed that at the end of the poem:

(. . .) the Narrator has discovered the moral and philosophical implications of his "tragedye"; and he turns to the audience who can best judge these implications. Gower and Strode he invites to *consent* where there is need to correct: "vouchen sauf" is a curious locution, since it implies consultation and agreement, but also taking responsibility. (Shoaf 156)

The dedication to Gower and to Ralph Strode, the Oxford philosopher who had written on *consequentiae* and *obligationes*, at the end of the poem, when the story is over, shows a narrator that has now dismissed the garments of the translator, that can associate the word "book" with the authorial "I" and take full responsibility for what he feels to be his own original production.



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