

## Background of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* \*

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The following is a brief literary history of Troy's fall (Troy="Ilion," hence *Iliad*) with the story of *Troilus and Criseyde* (or *Cressida*, if you are reading Shakespeare's version). If you have not read the *Iliad*, you might want to look at it, or at least read a synopsis of it.

- 1200 BCE      The historical event itself takes place: the "Greeks" besiege and destroy Troy.
- c. 800 BCE     The earliest known version of the written tale: Homer and the *Iliad*.
- 1138 CE       Geoffrey of Monmouth, in his *Historia Regum Britanniae* (History of the Kings of Britain), states that the city of London was founded by the grandson of Ascanius, who was in turn the son of Aeneas, a Trojan prince. Thus, the belief spreads that the people of England are Trojan in descent. In 1380s, this belief leads to talk of renaming London "Troynovante" (New Troy).
- c. 1160 CE     Benoit de Sainte Maure's *Roman de Troie* gives us the story of Calchas as the turncoat prophet, and of the long-time lovers Troilus and Criseyde who have one last night of love after Priam decides to exchange Criseyde for a captured Trojan warrior.
- c. 1340 CE     Boccaccio's *Il Filostrato* gives us the first Pandarus, "Pandaro," a cousin to Criseyde and thus presumably the same age as the two lovers.
- c. 1375        Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* makes Pandarus Criseyde's rather sleazy uncle and transforms the conclusion into a work of Boethian grandeur.
- 1555          Lydgate's *Troy Book* (first printed in 1512) refers its readers to Chaucer for the story.
- 1596          Caxton's *Recuyell of the Historyes of Troye* (first translated from the French in 1471, published in 1474). Thought to be, along with Chaucer, Shakespeare's major source of the story. Caxton's book incidentally, is the first work ever printed in English other than the Bible.
- 1601-02       Shakespeare writes his dramatic work *Troilus and Cressida* (published 1609), chopping out Chaucer's Boethian ending.

**Death scenes:** In most versions of Troilus's story wherein the author describes his death, Troilus is ignominiously killed by Achilles's Mymidons; they catch Troilus without his armor, capture him, and execute him. Hector's subsequent death at Achilles's hands, while not the noblest event, lacks the dishonor of killing an unarmed man. Only Shakespeare conflates the two episodes into one, making the death of Hector utterly unredeemed.

**The story of Calchas:** Calchas is Criseyde's father and a Trojan; he had been sent by the Trojans to journey to Apollo's oracle to discover who would win the war. The oracle told Calchas that the Trojans would *lose* the war; the oracle then ordered Calchas to give this prophecy to the Greeks. The Trojan Calchas obeyed the oracle's command. Once he had delivered the oracle's prediction to the Greeks, naturally enough, he decided to stay with the eventual victors (adapted from the *Roman de Troie*, c. 1160).

The story of the Trojan War was particularly interesting to the English in the medieval and Renaissance periods. Following Geoffrey of Monmouth's lead in linking the Trojans and the British, some Renaissance writers took up the earlier medieval habit of calling London "New Troy." They saw themselves as the descendants of the Trojan race, much as earlier Virgil depicted his own country of Rome as the inheritors of the Trojan tradition.

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\*Parts of the handout are taken from material donated by Professor Louise Bishop at the University of Oregon.