

## Genre-Queer: Chaucer's Use of Ovid's *Heroides* in *Troilus and Criseyde*

Scholars have established that Chaucer's references to Ovid's *Heroides* invert the genders of his protagonists in *Troilus and Criseyde* by comparing Troilus to figures such as Penelope, Briseis, and Oenone, and Criseyde to Paris (Fumo 2003, Hagedorn 2004, McInerney 1998). Scholarship on Chaucer's reception of the *Heroides*, however, has not reckoned with the narrative and cultural significance of these gender inversions, particularly as regards Criseyde. In her analysis of Chaucer's use of other Ovidian texts, McInerney (1998) claims that Troilus acts as a generic interloper, a courtly hero stuck in Ovid's *Ars Amatoria*, and that this is the source of his "unmanly" behavior in *Troilus and Criseyde*. The cultural conceptions of how people should perform gender do not align in the genres of courtly romance and Roman elegiac poetry, and so Troilus's performance of courtly masculinity renders him feminine in an Ovidian frame of reference (Lindheim 2003, Fulkerson 2005 on gender in Ovid's *Heroides*). Drawing on this generic reading along with Butler's (2011) work on gender performativity and Halberstam's (2020) ideas of queer illegibility and failure, I argue that the conflicting gender roles of the genres of courtly romance and Ovid's *Heroides* result in scenes where the protagonists' performances of gender become "illegible," that is, uncategorizable according to dominant systems of binary gender. This illegibility highlights the instability of constructed gender roles by showcasing the differences between performance of masculinity and femininity in different genres and eras.

This reading opens up many avenues for queering this Medieval poem. Readers could understand Criseyde as a failed Ovidian heroine and courtly lover, but might also view her as a *successful* Heroidean hero. At 4.1553-54 of *Troilus and Criseyde*, Criseyde swears that, if she abandons Troilus, the Simois should "retorne bakwarde to thy welle, / and I with body and soule sinke in helle!" This references Paris' oath to Oenone in *Heroides V*, who swears, *cum Paris Oenone poterit spirare relictā, / ad fontem Xanthi versa recurret aqua* (29-30). Criseyde is well-read on mythological topics, as seen in her study of the siege of Thebes (2.80-81). She is aware of

her Ovidian reference's context and thus knows that she is acting like Paris, who will abandon his lover as she will hers. She is not behaving as a courtly heroine who undertakes any peril to ensure her lover's return or an abandoned Ovidian heroine who writes to her lover wishing for his arrival. By failing to perform the role of heroine in these overlapping generic systems, she succeeds at being a Heroidean hero. Troilus, in his acceptance of Criseyde's oath, assumes a position like Oenone's, thus failing as an Ovidian hero, and his unsuccessful attempts to retain Criseyde's affection render him a failed courtly hero, but "successful" as a heroine in the *Heroides*.

By examining Chaucer's use of Ovid's *Heroides I, III, V, and VII* through a queer lens, this paper will open new avenues to examine the queer afterlife of an Ovidian text that has in the past been derided for its flat, unvarying, and stereotypical portrayals of women.

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