

One Flew Over the Trojan Wall

Setsuko HARUTA

In the contemporary world with its airplanes and satellite broadcasting systems, the wall still maintains its symbolic functions; in some parts of the world, people are rejoicing at the breaking down of border walls, while in some other parts of the world, other people are busy building new walls.

The functions of the wall are multiple. I would like to concentrate here on what I consider to be the two major roles of the wall: the wall as a boundary, and the wall as an enclosure.

The wall as a boundary separates territories by setting a visible and material obstacle to prevent transgression, and hopefully serves as a warning for those who may want to intrude from the other side of it. The examples in England are Hadrian's Wall, Offa's Dyke, and such. We, of course, still want to encircle our private territories with hedges and stone walls.

The wall as a boundary is constructed on the assumption that the groups of people separated by it are different entities. Each group maintains its identity, and its members presumably act on the basis of the same value system and emotions. They are also ready to share the same fate, and are expected to act unanimously at a critical moment. When the wall collapses, the unity of the group is dissolved in most cases.

The wall as a binding force has inevitable negative sides to it. If an individual does not share the common interest and feelings of the group, he/she is alienated from the tightly-knit society within the wall and is in danger of becoming a scapegoat and target of persecution.

Another more obvious drawback is that the wall separates a person from another on the other side of it. A classic example is the legend of Pyramus and Thisbe, which Chaucer retells in *The Legend of Good Women* and Shakespeare makes much fun of in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The wall both separates the lovers physically and, at the same time, symbolizes the difficulty in consummating their erotic relationship; if you dare plan to ignore the obstacle, a lion is waiting for you.

For Chaucer and his contemporaries, the main function of the wall was that of an enclosure, to protect people inside from the expected intrusion of their enemies outside. The history of city and castle walls seems to go back to prehistoric times. In the epic of *Gilgamesh*, the protagonist is introduced as the mighty king who "ordered built the walls of Uruk . . . which no work can equal," and Tablet Number 11 ends with his boasting words about the same walls.¹⁾ The importance of city walls continued into the ancient Mediterranean world, where Thebes and Troy were famous for their legendary walls, and well into that of medieval Europe.

Chaucer lived through the early part of the Hundred Years' War, and probably witnessed, and even participated, in the sieges laid to some cities on the Continent. We also know that he was right within the wall of London when, in the so-called "peasants' revolt," the mobs penetrated into the city, which some people loved to call "the new Troye."²⁾ Chaucer and the contemporary authors, when they retold the ancient tales of Thebes and of Troy, were acutely conscious of the significance of the city wall, that the lives of the besieged citizens depended on the secure existence of the protective wall.

Medieval authors, who knew much more about life under siege than we do, were also aware of the negative side of the defensive function of the wall, that it brings about confinement as well as protection. We sense the claustrophobic desire for freedom, in both factual and symbolic contexts, in many medieval literary works. My favorite example would be Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Palzival*, Book IV, where the inconveniences of the besieged people are portrayed in realistic detail.

Among Chaucer's works, *Troilus and Criseyde* and *The Knight's Tale* have this confinement/freedom ambivalence of the wall as a major theme. Both were composed in Chaucer's so-called "Italian period," are based on Giovanni Boccaccio's works — *Troilus and Criseyde* on *Il Filostrato* and *The Knight's Tale* on *Teseida, delle Nozze d'Emilia* — and both go back, *via romans antiques*, ultimately to the ancient Greek matters of Thebes and of the Trojan War. They also show influences of Boethius' *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, written right within the prison wall.

Chaucer interrelates the two works offstage, as it were. In Book II of *Troilus and Criseyde*, the heroine listens to "the geste / Of the siege of Thebes".³⁾ She has

a niece called Antigone and, toward the end of the narrative, she accepts Diomedes as her lover, who is descended from the Theban royal family. Conversely, Arcite in *The Knight's Tale* uses "Filostrato" as his pseudonym, by which Boccaccio meant Troilo. Finally, the English poet transfers Alcida's posthumous flight to the eighth sphere to Troilus' afterlife, a point I hope to come back to toward the end of this paper.

In *The Knight's Tale*, one of the first things Theseus does after he has conquered Thebes is to have the city walls completely destroyed: "by assaut he wan the citee . . . / And rente adoun bothe wall and sparre and rafter" (989-90). The wall failed to protect the inhabitants "gret or smal" (as Chaucer would put it).

The Trojan wall, on the other hand, proved to be a superior means of defense; it withstood the siege for no less than ten years, before it was finally penetrated by means of the trick of the wooden horse. The ultimate fate of the city is predicted by the priest-prophet Calchas, whose knowledge, of course, is shared by the narrator and the audience of the poem. Calchas traverses the wall, which he knows to be ineffective, and flees to the Greek camp, leaving his widowed daughter Criseyde.

The narrator of the poem introduces the heroine on stage, before the entrance of Troilus, and under threatening circumstances; as the deserter's daughter, she finds herself as a target of persecution among the enraged and vengeful Trojans. C. S. Lewis makes much of Criseyde's fear, patronizingly referring to her as "the poor child" and "the unhappy creature,"⁴) but anybody with a keen perception, in Criseyde's situation, would feel as if she were confined in a cage with a pack of wolves, with another pack surrounding outside.

Thus, in Criseyde's case, the protective function of the wall is ambivalent from the outset; it presumably keeps away the danger outside but, at the same time, exposes her as a ready prey to the threat within. Throughout the poem, we see Criseyde making a series of efforts and decisions in her desperate quest for protection, that is, a substitute wall.⁵) Her notorious "slydyng of corage" (V, 825) reflects the lack of stability of her own position in the society.

The first image of the heroine, in a kneeling posture before Hector, pleading to him in tears to protect her, is perhaps intended to shock the contemporary audience, which was familiar with the scene in which a knight kneels before a

lady, pleading for mercy, and not the other way round. Hector "gladede hire" (I, 116), but he does not bother to take any public action to defend her, which may have been what Criseyde really expected him to do.

When Pandarus tells her of Troilus' infatuation, Criseyde fears that she may evoke another danger by offending the king's son, but later comes to regard him, a Trojan prince firmly established in the society, as an effective means of defense: "a wal / Of stiel, and sheld from every displeaunce" (III, 479-80). After all, Troilus is repeatedly referred to in the poem as "Ector the secounde".⁶⁾

Troilus, however, fails to defend Criseyde, and somehow chooses to miss every chance to protect her. Even Hector makes a half-minded attempt to dissuade the Trojans from bartering the lady, by saying, "Syres, she nys no prisonere . . . / We usen here no wommen for to selle" (IV, 179-82), but Troilus does not even second his brother's opinion from a neutral position. The fact is that both walls, the material walls of Troy and the symbolic wall Troilus, fail to serve Criseyde, and prove to be mere illusions. The lady is finally forced to step across the Trojan wall.

After Criseyde's departure, the wall reveals its negative functions to those who are left inside it. In his attempt to persuade Criseyde, Diomedes emphasizes the predictable fall of Troy, with the obvious implication that those who choose to stay inside the city wall are doomed. And he speaks true. Troilus is later killed in a skirmish and, although the narrator does not follow Pandarus' life to its end, we know that his days, too, are numbered, from *The Iliad* (V), and other works. Had Criseyde returned to Troy to stay with Troilus, her later history is easily surmised from the fates of the Trojan women as Euripides depicts them, and that of Cassandra in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*.

Troilus suffers most from the negative functions of the wall, namely, separation and confinement. Unlike Shakespeare's Troilus, who visits the Greek camp during a truce to confront the reality of Cressida's betrayal, Chaucer's Troilus is obsessed with keeping the boundary, and never steps outside toward the object of his desire.

Thus we have the tableau of Troilus and Pandarus fixed on the Trojan wall, waiting, in Vladimir and Estragon fashion, for the never-appearing Criseyde. The image involves the second reversal of gender roles in that it is usually assigned to the ladies to remain inside the castle wall and wait for their knights to return from

their adventurous journeys in the world outside.⁷⁾ As early as in Homer's *Iliad*, the Trojan women watch the military action performed outside, themselves located safely on the city wall. In Boccaccio's *Teseida*, Emilia stands on the balcony to see Arcita off, who is expelled from Athens and will travel extensively before he will return to the city incognito.⁸⁾

The static picture of Troilus on the wall counterbalances the reversal of gender roles in the opening part of the poem: Criseyde kneeling before Hector. They seem to suggest that the boundary of gender roles, too, fail to function in this poem, with the lady making decisions and the man remaining passive in their relationship. The reversal is reinforced when, in the epilogue, the narrator suddenly changes the direction of his argument, in the Clerk's fashion, and warns the ladies against deceitful men (V, 1835 ff.).

Troilus is not only physically confined by the wall of Troy; his emotions are also bound by his obsessive attachment to Criseyde. When finally convinced of her "slydyng of corage," Pandarus can hate her promptly: "What sholde I seyen? I hate, ywis, Cryseyde; / And, God woot, I wol hate hire evermore !" (V, 1732-33). Troilus, however, cannot free himself: "I ne kan nor may, / For al this world, withinne myn herte fynde / To unloven yow a quarter of a day" (V, 1696-98). He has to wait till death finally releases his soul from "this foule prisoun of this lyf," as Theseus puts it in *The Knight's Tale* (3061), and allows it to transcend all walls, physical or metaphysical, by flying upward, in the Platonic fashion, to the eighth sphere. Only then can he laugh at the commotions on the earth from his birds-eye point of view.

With Troilus thus inactive and passive in the matter of love, and Criseyde preoccupied by self-preservation, the romance between the two is promoted largely by Pandarus, Troilus' friend and Criseyde's uncle. Shuttling back and forth between them and staging ingenious *rendez-vous*, he encourages the intimidated Troilus to approach the lady, and persuades the quasi-reluctant Criseyde to accept her admirer.

The narrator, however, leaves his audience somewhat in the dark as to Pandarus' motivation. Are all his voluntary efforts prompted by his good will, friendship, or self-satisfaction? Is "Only connect!" Pandarus' motto? Pandarus clearly enjoys the process of uniting the pair, and insists on regarding himself as an imperative member of the esoteric group of the three, thus creating a sort of

hortus conclusus of courtly love tradition.

The human bond between the three members, however, proves too fragile to sustain the community, once it experiences the outside pressures. Consisting of members of entirely different mentality and background, the group cannot offer a single determined resistance to the opposing forces. Finally, all the efforts that Pandarus has put into uniting the lovers only result in increasing their pain; both Troilus and Criseyde would have suffered less, had they not consummated their love.

Once his niece has failed to keep the deadline to rejoin them, Pandarus realizes that she will never return. Standing on the wall to keep Troilus' company, he secretly laughs a bitter laugh and says to himself: "From haselwode, there joly Robyn pleyde, / Shal come al that that thow abidest here. / Ye, fare wel al the snow of ferne yere!" (V, 1174-76). He realizes his failure in establishing a firm and lasting bond among the three people, that the wall he imagined to have created around themselves was an illusion. His last words to Troilus show the extent of his powerlessness before the dissolution of the community: "I may do the namore. / What sholde I seyen? . . . I kan namore seye" (V, 1731-43).

The ultimate location, or dislocation, of the lovers indicate that the wall has ceased to operate for them. After her desperate and futile quest for a protective wall, Criseyde traverses the city wall, never to return. Her movement is horizontal.

Troilus is betrayed by the false sense of security based on Criseyde's promise. He is emancipated only after his death, in Arcita's fashion, in the passage which Chaucer borrows from *Teseida*. Troilus' movement is vertical. Chaucer's appropriation is right in the sense that it helps to visualize the ultimate separation of the lovers. They have traversed the wall on different dimensions, and will never be united again physically, emotionally or spiritually. Finally, Pandarus is left alone in the doomed city of Troy.

By using the wall as a concrete image and as a symbol, in both positive and negative ways, Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* portrays the process of binding and unbinding, formation and dissolution, of an esoteric human community. The poem ends with a pious Christian prayer in which the poet skillfully incorporates some key words and ideas of the poem.

The final stanza begins with an invocation to the Christian Trinity, in the

manner of Dante:⁹⁾ "Thow oon, and two, and thre, eterne on lyve, / That regnest ay in thre, and two, and oon" (V, 1863-64). The numerical progression of 1 to 2 to 3, and then 3 to 2 to 1, recapitulates the process of binding and disbanding of the three main characters: in order of appearance, Criseyde, plus Troilus, plus Pandarus, and then in order of exit, minus Criseyde, minus Troilus, and finally Pandarus alone.

The poet proceeds to apply other key ideas, freedom/confinement, to the Christian deity, "uncircumscrip, and al maist circumscribe" (V, 1865), that is, an almighty binding force, but Himself boundless.¹⁰⁾ Finally, the prayer closes with a plea for protection: "Us from visible and invisible foon / Defende" (V, 1866-67). The Christian poet identifies all humanity with the characters in the poem, in its futile attempts to find stability and protection in earthly things, such as walls, in world which, we hear, is prevailed by entropy and quantum dynamics.

Notes

This essay is based on the paper presented orally at New Chaucer Conference in Glasgow, 2004.

- ¹⁾ *Gilgamesh*, tr. John Gardner and John Maier (New York: Vintage Books, 1984), pp. 57 and 250.
- ²⁾ See Barry Windeatt, *Troilus and Criseyde* (Oxford Guides to Chaucer series; Oxford: University Press, 1992), p. 8. Referring to an incident in Peasants' Revolt, Marion Turner discusses the penetration of the defensive wall by means of treachery and the unreliability of fellowship ("*Troilus and Criseyde* and the "Treasonous Aldermen (of 1382: Tales of the City in Late Fourteenth-Century London" in *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 25 [2003], pp. 225-257).
- ³⁾ *The Riverside Chaucer* (Larry D. Benson, ed., 3rd ed. [Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987]), *Troilus and Criseyde*, Book II, lines 83-84. In this paper, all quotations of Chaucer's works are taken from this edition.
- ⁴⁾ C.S. Lewis, *Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition* (New York: Galaxy Book, 1936), pp. 187 and 189.
- ⁵⁾ In the first chapter of *Conquering the Reign of Femeny: Gender and Genre in Chaucer's Romance* (Chaucer Studies XXII; Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1995, pp. 21-49), Angela Jane Weisl discusses Criseyde's helpless position in the male-created society and literary genres.
- ⁶⁾ *Troilus and Criseyde*, Book II, line 158. See also Book III, line 1775.
- ⁷⁾ Jill Mann discusses Troilus' feminine position in *Feminizing Chaucer* (1991; new ed. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2002), pp. 131-32.
- ⁸⁾ Giovanni Boccaccio, *Teseida, delle Nozze d'Emilia*, Book III, strophe 83.
- ⁹⁾ Dante, *Paradiso*, Book XIV, lines 28-29.