

Criseyde's Secrets and Her Letters in Geoffrey Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde**

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| I. Introduction |
| II. Criseyde's First Letter That Would "Fayn" |
| III. <i>Litera Criseydis</i> and Her Secrets |
| IV. Conclusion |

I. Introduction

Geoffrey Chaucer's late fourteenth-century rendition of Boccaccio's *Il Filostrato*, *Troilus and Criseyde* presents in the second and fifth books bodies of letters communicated between the tragic couple Troilus and Criseyde. In the fifth book, Criseyde concludes her letter with the statement that "Th'entente is al, and nat the letters space" (1630).¹⁾ 'What matters is the content, not the length of a letter.' This is what Criseyde has to say in attempts to excuse the shortness of the letter that she wrote as a reply to the long letters from her by-now ex-boyfriend Troilus. In

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1) All references to *Troilus and Criseyde* are from the Riverside Chaucer edition and will be given in parentheses with line numbers in parentheses.

order to make this self-excuse more convincing, she establishes a rationale in the previous line that great men keep their letters short, too: “Ek gret effect men write in place lite” (1629). Indeed, the medieval letter-writing formula called the *ars dictaminis* emphasizes the importance of the brevity of the epistle (Constable 15), though in reality not all great men wrote their letters concisely, as directed. But, as readers we may already know, what should really be at stake with Criseyde saying this particular line is not that she wants to practice how to write a letter briefly, as the medieval *dictamen*, teachers of letter-writing, instruct. By keeping her letter brief, she instead strives to conceal her secrets, the gist of which may be that she has recently accepted a Greek man Diomedes in place of the Trojan prince and, as a consequence, she would not be able to keep her long-delayed promise that she would return to Troy soon.

The length of the letter is just one of many possible ways in which the materiality of the letter can be substantiated, and the material aspects of the letter are supposed to suggest the internal state or untold reality of the writer and of his or her relationship with the recipient. The belief in the epistolary materiality, as Gary Schneider rightly notes (124–25), has resulted in the implicit agreement among epistolary correspondents that for instance, frequent and long letters are equated with intimacy and affection, whereas delayed and short letters with distance and disregard. My principal concern with this paper is to investigate the ways in which epistolary materiality manifests in Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*. Since the letters of the male protagonist Troilus are already examined closely elsewhere (Yoon), I want to focus on the letters of Criseyde in this paper. My claim is that the ways that Criseyde’s letters are articulated and (re-)presented manifest her complex realities that she most likely wants to conceal from the recipient Troilus. The reason why her letters constantly feel guarded, ambiguous, evasive, or prevaricating may be

inseparable from the precarious circumstances that go beyond her control but she must still navigate through with utmost prudence and deliberation so as to sustain the values that she has been concerned about as a young widow, as often illustrated by her as social status, honor, name, freedom, etc. Of all the characters in the poem, it is Criseyde who most overtly disproves Pandarus's conviction that writing in the form of the letter is meant to convey the genuine affects and truth of the author.

II. Criseyde's First Letter That Would "Fayn"

In the second book of *Troilus and Criseyde*, Troilus confides his secret love of Criseyde to Pandarus and at Pandarus's pressure he writes a letter in order to let her know that he feels miserable due to his love toward her and to beseech her for pity (II. 106–07). In the presence of Troilus's letter delivered by Pandarus in person, Criseyde at first becomes furious but soon rushes to her chamber, reads the letter eagerly and privately, and thinks that the prince wrote a "good" letter (II. 1176) on the whole. Persuaded by Pandarus's request that she should repay Troilus well (II. 1200) with a letter in which she should "thonketh hym ... Of his good wille, and doth hymn at to deye" (II. 1205–09), Criseyde again retreats to her chamber alone and begins to write what she claims her first letter ever written to a man in person (II. 1213–18). Unlike Boccaccio who in *Il Filostrato* details verbatim Criseida's first letter to Troilo in fifty–six lines in seven stanzas²⁾ (Camargo 53; McKinnell 82), Chaucer renders Criseyde's first letter to Troilus in a short summary of five lines:

2) For a full English translation of Criseida's first letter in *Il Filostrato*, see Griffin Myrick 38–39.

Th'effect...
 She thanked hym of al that he wel mente
 Towardes hire, but holden hym in honed
 She nolde nought, ner make hireselven bonde
 In love; but as his suster, hym to plese,
 She wolde *layn* to doon his herte an ese. (II. 1220–25;
 italics mine).

Quite contrary to the letter of Boccaccio's heroine which is "a mixture of flattery of Troilo, self-deprecation, lip-service to chastity and discretion" and which also hints that the prince may "hope to find more specific favour in the not too distant future,"³⁾ Criseyde's letter to Troilus, as McKinnell keenly observes, is "candour itself" (82). Now that she begins her letter by expressing her gratitude to Troilus for thinking well of her (II. 1221–22), Criseyde seems to listen to what Pandarus has just counseled her to do, but soon it turns out otherwise. Though a moment ago Pandarus pleaded with her not to let Troilus die out of despair but to comfort him with tender words, Criseyde explicitly states in the following lines that she can neither cajole him with false or empty hopes nor bind herself to him in

3) The following excerpted from Criseida's letter may well illustrate the flattering, ambiguous rhetoric that she deploys in her letter: "To thee, discreet and powerful friend, whom Love greatly infatuated for me, as a unduly enamored of me, Cressida ... sendeth greeting, and thereafter humbly recommendeth herself to thy high worthiness, being anxious to please thee provided my honor and chastity be safe ... But so great is the virtue which I perceive in thee that I know thou wilt see clearly what is proper for me, and that thou wilt be satisfied with my reply, and wilt moderate thy severe grief, which greatly displeaseth and troubleth my heart. In truth, if it were not unbecoming, willingly would I do what would please thee ... I would wish that it might bring thee more pleasure but what is wished can do but little good. The power to do will perhaps sometime take the place of good intentions... And me indeed, though of little worth, thou couldst and canst have for thine even more than a thousand times, an the cruel fire do not burn me, which I am certain thou wouldst not wish. I say no more, save to pray the gods to satisfy thy desire and mine" (*Filostrato*, Book II. stanzas 121–27).

love (II.1222–24). In concluding her letter, she apparently offers him sisterly intimacy only (II.1224–25).

As he drastically edited the letter to more than one tenth of the original length, Chaucer may also have altered the general feelings of the original letter. Nonetheless, as opposed to the claim that Chaucer's summary "removes the letter's ambiguity," Criseyde's letter reiterates the same cautious and ambiguous tone that Cressida in *Il Filostrato* is found to adopt deliberately (Camargo 63). Indeed, the syntax of Criseyde's letter runs lucidly up to the penultimate line (II. 1224), but the lucidity of the letter all of a sudden recedes into indeterminate ambiguity in the last line with the employment of the word "fayn" (II. 1225). According to *Middle English Dictionary*, "fayn" [fain] as adverb usually means "gladly, joyfully; willingly, eagerly, often with wolde" ("fain," def.). If we take this definition of "fayn," then the last line of Criseyde's letter should be straightforward in syntax, insofar as it is meant to express her eagerness or willingness to please Troilus. Modern editions of the poem, including the Riverside ("Glossary" 1245) and Warrington's (95), as well as reader's guides of the poem (Nuttall 59) are shown to rather too readily endorse this perspective and facilitate the interpretation that Criseyde would eagerly offer Troilus sisterly affection in hopes to ease his troubled heart. However, if what the last line of her letter means was indeed as plain and direct as such, then it is difficult to explain Troilus's reaction where he thinks that her language in the letter is all guarded—"Al covered she tho words under sheld" (II. 1327). He should not vacillate, either, between the opposite sentiments, as he reads her letter, like this:

But ofte gan the herte glade and quake
 Of Troilus, whil that he gan it rede,
 So as the words yave hym hope or drede. (II. 1321–23)

A more likely explanation of Troilus's emotional fluctuations is suggested by taking another observation of the word "fayn." According to *Middle English Dictionary*, "fayn" as a variant of the verb "feinen" or "fainen" may mean to "disguise" (def. 3.a), to "make false pretenses" (def. 6), and to "pretend or suppose" (def. 7.c). If we take "fayn" as verb and apply these definitions to the last line of Criseyde's letter, then we will end up with a completely different, or even almost opposite, meaning to the first because the line should be read that she would "pretend" to relieve Troilus's pain, perhaps because she has been forced by the messenger Pandarus. Obviously, as John McKinnell astutely points out, Criseyde is playing "a sinister pun" on "fayn" (82). Depending upon what meaning of "fayn" is taken, therefore, Criseyde's letter may sound either sympathetic or rejecting to the recipient. Troilus seems to grasp this discursive device that Criseyde has deliberately deployed in her letter. This may well explain why Troilus feels that the language of her letter is under guard and why he feels simultaneously glad and worried, hopeful and dreadful after reading the letter.

It will be interesting to note the specific milieu where Criseyde produces her letter. Unlike Troilus who wrote his letter in a sort of open space as he let Pandarus watch him writing, Criseyde goes to her own chamber so as to write her letter all by herself (II. 1216). Despite Pandarus's generous offer to save her from the labor of folding and sewing her letter as he volunteers to do so (II. 1204), she herself seals the letter before she gives it to Pandarus (II. 1226). And as she gives the letter to her uncle, Criseyde adds that "I nevere dide thing with more peyne /Than written this, to which ye me constreyne" (II.1231-32). We, the audience, may agree that Pandarus has constrained the unwilling Criseyde to write a letter to Troilus, even though she has repeatedly protested that she has no idea of what to say to the prince (II. 1206), and that she has never

written a letter to a man before, either all or in part (II.1213–14). By writing such an ambivalent letter, Criseyde may have wanted to take revenge on the interfering Pandarus who has made her act against her will. Perhaps because she did not want the quick-witted Pandarus to recognize that she deliberately wrote an ambiguous letter, she was determined to write the letter alone and to labor to sew and seal it in person, so that she could protect the content of the letter from being exposed to him. Critics note that Criseyde's emphasis upon the unprecedented difficulty of having written her letter should be a conventional exaggeration and thus "cannot possibly be taken seriously" (McKinnell 82). However, she may not be necessarily adopting the conventional gesture if she indeed made great efforts to implant the mine of "fayn" in her letter.

Considering the fact that, after all, Criseyde's letter targets Troilus, not Pandarus, taking revenge on the meddling Pandarus may not be the principal or ultimate reason why she created a highly obscure letter. In fact, the deliberate ambiguity of Criseyde's letter can be already anticipated from the lines where the narrator notes that she begins to unfetter her heart in her letter, but only a little—she "gan hire herte unfetter /Out of desdaynes prisoun but a lite" (II. 1216–17). These lines suggest that in her letter, instead of simply stating the truth that she, too, has recently fallen in love with the prince (II. 596–931), Criseyde carefully controls the information and deliberately obscures it and, as a result, the tone of her letter sounds confusing, as both encouraging and discouraging as Troilus senses.

Then, we may wonder why, unlike Troilus who in his letter lavishly pours his amatory emotion out to Criseyde (II. 1065–85), she is not (or cannot be) honest with Troilus and what would prevent her from revealing her true sentiment to him in her letter. One might say that it is perhaps because her feelings for Troilus are not as spontaneous, genuine, and

strong as his are for her. It is true that she develops her amorous sentiment towards Troilus after she learns from Pandarus that the prince has fallen in love with her. Hence, perhaps she has been influenced by Pandarus's report about Troilus. But this does not necessarily mean that her affection itself has to be subject to suspicion, as less real and less voluntary. Conversely, it seems natural and realistic, too, that a woman develops interest in the man who is reported to be in love with her. Though Criseyde certainly believes Hector to be the best warrior (II. 158), it is Troilus, neither Hector nor any other powerful man, with whom she admits she has fallen in love with. She intently observes Troilus, who looks so young, fresh, vigorous, triumphantly riding by like a reincarnation of Mars, the god of war. While the Trojan citizens loudly hail him as their hero (II. 610–86), she lets the sight of him softly sink in her heart. And, as Nutall well elaborates, feeling “intoxicated or refreshed” with the vision of him, she blushes and wonders who has given her such a potent potion of love (II. 648–51). In fact, the way that Criseyde falls in love with Troilus is very much like the way that Troilus fell in love with her before (I. 267–301). To both of them, love begins with vision and then it descends to the heart and becomes imprinted there.⁴⁾ As the narrator comments, if her love to Troilus has to be doubted as “a sodeyn love” (II. 667), then so must Troilus's (I. 230–31). Nonetheless, Troilus's affection for Criseyde has been barely questioned by readers primarily because he remains steadfast until death. It would be unfair to Criseyde if one might regard at this stage his love as superior to her love, simply based on the fact that she later accepts Diomedes. It is extremely hard to determine whether she really accepts and loves the Greek knight in the same way that she has loved Troilus. Rather, she may need Diomedes much more desperately than she needed Troilus in order to survive the new circumstances in Greece

4) Ioana Balgradean follows the process in which Troilus's love for Criseyde starts with vision, descends to the heart, and becomes firmly fixed there (87–89).

where she possesses almost nothing to identify herself with and subsequently becomes much more isolated and marginalized. As will be discussed soon, holding an intimate relationship with the Trojan prince would be beneficial to Criseyde, but she does not need it desperately because she has the support system in Troy and more so because the crown prince Hector, the elder brother of Troilus, already guaranteed her safety and secured her right to all her properties despite her father's treason. Hence, it is superficial to argue, as some critics do, that Criseyde's "attraction to Troilus is a selfish one," that "she is only in love with being loved, and thus any decent knight will suffice, as long as he validates her" (Marzec 65).

Instead, I would suggest that Criseyde's careful control of her emotions in her letter is reflective of her complicated material and psychological conditions that do not allow her to be thoroughly herself and instead make her constantly defensive against people, especially to men, even including her uncle Pandarus.⁵⁾ Immediately after she realizes that she has fallen in love with Troilus, Criseyde's mind becomes busy intensely contemplating what course she will have to take next to deal with Troilus. As Nuttall holds, the audience is granted special access to her "most private feelings, the moment of self-regard that she would prefer that no one else knew" (50). It is obvious in general that her mind is jam-packed with predicting and measuring both advantages and disadvantages that she would get by developing a relationship with the prince. First, she thinks that, though it might not be in the form of love proper, it would still be an honor to treat the prince amicably (II. 703-06). Of course, she never excludes the possibility, either, that because he is the son of the Trojan king, with his power and influence, Troilus somehow might find a way to put her in

5) Angela J. Weisl, David Aers, and Barry Windeatt are among the critics who took into account Criseyde's complex circumstances in their discussion of her characterization.

perilous condition if she attempts to keep shunning his affection and to flee away from his sight, though that possibility is very low, considering his usual morals and good sense (II. 708–12).

As Criseyde's self-debate progresses, she seems to lean toward accepting Troilus's affection because she convinces herself that, being not a nun, it would do her "no shame" to set her heart at rest upon the worthiest knight (II.757–63). However, her thought appears to take another turn as her self-discussion arrives at the issues of autonomy and unfaithfulness of men. She asks herself if it would be wise for her to jeopardize all the security and liberty that her widowhood has granted her, by loving a man again (II. 771–77). She is also concerned about the "tresoun" that men frequently commit to women, as they tend to withdraw their affection from the current love, once their lust is gratified, and transfer it to a new love. Once this happens, she goes on, there is nothing that the "wrecched women" can do but weep (II.780–98). As this summary of Criseyde's long self-debate may suggest, which continues in more than one hundred lines, Criseyde's own experience and the experience of other women about life and about intimate relationship with men compel her to speculate upon and be prepared for all likelihoods that would occur to her if she decides to further ripen her affection to Troilus. Though both Troilus and Criseyde are in love, because she is a single woman of inferior social status, her position is in essence very distinct from his. Given this, it is of little surprise that she cannot disclose fully how she feels toward Troilus, despite the truth that her love to Troilus has already settled at ease within her heart (II.900–03) by the time she writes a letter back to him. As she is thinking to herself after she is informed that Troilus has fallen in love with her, Criseyde is smart enough to know that she will need to maneuver shrewdly through the circumstances where she is just thrown into—"It nedeth me ful sleightly for

to pleie"(II. 462), if she does not want to share the wretched fate of the abandoned women. Indeed, in terms of the ways that she copes with people and affairs throughout the poem, Criseyde, as Barry Windeatt claims, "shows every sign both of intelligence and of a kind of shrewd prudence"(282). Her first letter where her guarded language deliberately plays around in both sympathy and rejection may be comprehended as an ample manifestation of her intelligence and prudence. Basically, the same dynamism seems to continue to operate in Criseyde's last letter. If her primary goal with the first letter may understandably be to tantalize Troilus in the way of befuddling the syntax with the word "fayn," of which the meaning itself is ambivalent, her utmost desire with the last short letter seems to conceal her real external and internal affairs, so that he may be unable to figure out based on her letter what has been really going on with her inside and outside.

III. *Litera Criseydis* and Her Secrets

While he presents brief accounts of the letters of Troilus and Criseyde in his second book, Chaucer renders two of their last letters verbatim in the last book. As the fifteen-stanza *Litera Troili* (V. 1317-1421) is shown to have been adapted from Troilo's long letter in *Il Filostrato*, the short *Litera Criseydis* (V. 1590-1631) has no immediate source and thus is believed to be Chaucer's own invention (McKinnell 80, 87). To be precise, as Camargo points out (79), *Litera Criseydis* is not the response to *Litera Troili per se*, but to a host of his last letters. It is said that out of great pity Troilus Criseyde wrote back to him as a reply to *Litera Troili*, and Chaucer renders it in a brief summary, as in *Il Filostrato* (Camargo 79):

Ful pitously she wroot ayeyn, and seyde,
 That also sone as that she myghte, ywys,
 She wolde come, and mende al that was mys.
 And fynaly she wroot and seyde hym thenne,
 She wolde come, ye, but she nyste whenne.

But in hire letter made she swich festes
 That wonder was, and swerth she loveth hym best,
 Of which he fond but *botmeles bihestes*.
 (V.1424–31; italics mine)

In *Litera Troili*, Troilus beseeches Criseyde to quickly come back to him, as she promised, and, if she cannot, at least to relate how she has been doing in Greece and what prevents her from returning to Troy. According to this summary, however, instead of conveying the information that he has been dying to know, she seems to prevaricate, only repeating the words that she would definitely come back but not know when. Besides, strangely enough, she makes such a fuss over him with many endearments, swearing that she loves him most, that Troilus finds her words all groundless promises (“botmeles bihestes”). As Camargo keenly observes, and as we will get to it soon, at least in terms of the “affective” dimension, *Litera Criseydis* is found to be very similiar to this response to *Litera Troili*, in that in the last letter she again makes him perplexed and confused with “botmeles bihestes” as in this account, or with “empty assurances,” in Camargo’s terms (79).

Criseyde’s evasive language imbuing her last letters may be explained well if we take into account the affairs that, by the time she receives *Litera Troili* and writes back to Troilus, she has already decided not to return to Troy (V. 1028–29) and has accepted Diomedes as a “friend,” denying the presence of Troilus as her Trojan love (V. 977–78) and

giving Diomedes back the steed that he had won from Troilus in a battle and the brooch, too, that Troilus gave her as a token (V. 1038–41). Though she accepts Diomedes's courtship, nonetheless, it seems extremely hard for her heart to let go of Troilus and, expectedly, her good reputation as well. The narrator presents us with her intense, tearful regret, in which she laments that she has betrayed the noblest knight Troilus, and subsequently her good name as a faithful woman has been ruined completely and forever. Finally, she addresses the absent Troilus and bids him farewell, with the words that she will never hate him but always love him as a "friend" (V. 1054–87). Indeed, Troilus is ignorant of these details when, again goaded by Pandarus, he decides to write *Litera Troili*. The epistolary materiality of her last letters manifested in the forms of style, rhetoric, language, length, etc. indicates that she wants to keep those secrets from him, though it is doubtful whether she successfully does so. The narrator refuses to help us speculate upon how much the relationship of Criseyde and Diomedes has progressed by the time she responds to *Litera Troili* and to his other last letters, and also whether or not Criseyde still loves Troilus (V. 1086–90). The narrator is very reluctant, too, to chastise her harshly because he thinks that she has already repented that she "falsed" the devoted Troilus (V. 1053, 1093–99).

Criseyde writes her final letter *Litera Criseydis* out of pity ("for routhe," V. 1287) after Troilus has continued to beseech her in frequent letters that "she wol come ayeyn" and relate her "truthe" candidly to him (V. 1583–86). Like *Litera Troili*, as McKinnell (87–88) and Camargo (80–81) well outline, *Litera Criseydis* seems to generally observe the medieval letter-writing formula (the *ars dictaminis*) of the five parts that may include *salutatio*, *benevolentiae captatio*, *narratio*, *petitio*, and *conclusio*.⁶ More specifically, the letter opens with a merged *salutatio* and

benevolentiae captatio (V.1590–1631), in which she greets Troilus with fine cliché-like apostrophes but immediately gives a twist to the *benevolentiae captatio* convention, as she states that she, who is disheartened, sick, and in distress, cannot command her heart and health to him. Then follows the long *narratio* (V.1597–1620), in which she alternates between self-excuses and accusations of Troilus. In the *peticio* (V.1621–6), she asks friendship of Troilus and also asks him to take no offence at the brevity of her letter, about which she makes excuses in the following second *benevolentiae captatio*, using the telling *sententiae* (McKinnell87) that: “The’entente is al, and nat the lettres space”(V. 1627–30). And she ends the letter with a short conclusion (V.1631).

What Criseyde is expected to do with this letter is to account for her delay and to narrate her truth honestly to him, because after all it is what Troilus has kept begging her to do in his multiple letters. But in general it seems that she is “determined at all costs to avoid saying anything substantial”(Camargo 83). In the *narratio*, a couple of times she takes

6) Based on the accounts of the medieval letter-writing convention(79–80) by Giles Constable, John McKinnell, and Norman Davis, Yoon comes up with a good summary of the content or function of each of the steps: “salutatio is ‘the greeting’ wherein the ‘style should be appropriate to the rank of the person to whom the letter is sent,’ the sender is to express his name humbly, and it should come after the name of the recipient; *benevolentiae captatio*, or *exordium*, is the part where the sender attempts to ‘gain the sympathies of the recipient, by praising him and/or expressing one’s own humility, invoking a special relationship, or making some offer.’ This second step is very often found to be merged into *salutatio*. *Narratio* is ‘an explanation of something done, being done, or about to be done, or of a state of affairs.’ *Peticio* is a request whose tones are varied, such as ‘pleading,’ ‘instructing,’ ‘threatening,’ ‘exhorting,’ ‘encouraging or inciting,’ ‘warning,’ ‘advising,’ and ‘chiding.’ And *conclusio* is conclusion in either ‘a logical conclusion or a summary.’ Depending on the purpose of the letter, some of these five parts may be ignored. For instance, the first two steps may be omitted if ‘one wishes to insult or is afraid of having the letter intercepted,’ and the *peticio* is dropped when ‘one does not wish to ask for anything.’ Yet every letter is supposed to have either a *narratio* or a *peticio*”(79–80).

gestures of explicating the reasons for her prolonged delay: "But why, lest that this letter founden were,/ No mencioune ne make I now, for feere"(V.1602-03); "For that I tarie is al for wikked speche"(V. 1610). But each time she stops short and abruptly diverts attention to an argument where she scolds Troilus. First, she accuses him of being selfish and impatient, thinking only about his "plesaunce"(V.1608). Then she brings in the rumor, according to which he has been only trifling with and deceiving her: "I have ek understonde / How ye ne do but holden me in honde"(V.1614-15). But the audience as well as Troilus himself cannot be fully convinced by these arguments. Criseyde herself seems to realize that her arguments are too strained because she tempers each of these accusations with the apologetic request: "beth nat wroth"(V. 1609, 1614).

Then, in the *peticio* she once again adopts the bearing of apology or self-excuse, as she addresses the shortness of her letter: "Yet preye ich yow, on yvel ye ne take /That it is short which that I to yow write"(V.1625-26). Indeed, there exists an explicit disproportion between Troilus's letters and Criseyde's letters in light of length and, perhaps, frequency, too. Overall, it seems that, ever since the first exchange of their letters, Troilus has written much longer letters more often than Criseyde has. As the two verbatim letters *Litera Troili*, which runs in fifteen stanzas, and *Litera Criseydis*, which runs only in six stanzas, may well exemplify, her letters tend to be much shorter than his letters, often even one third of his letters. In the second book, Troilus is said to have written a letter almost every day (II. 1342-44), and in the fifth book, Criseyde writes *Litera Criseydis* back to him only after he has beseeched her with multiple letters (V. 1583-86). As Schneider points out, since the "mechanics of material exchange" are implicated in "exchange of intimate emotion," correspondents believe that the materiality of the letter which the length and frequency of the letter often represent can be equaled with

love and affection (124). Subsequently, short and delayed letters often create anxiety because they tend to be associated with lack of affection and even insult. This is why writers conventionally employ what Schneider terms “epistolary apologies” if their letters are shorter and less frequent (125). They know that they have not paid due tribute to the principle of “reciprocity” underlying in the epistolary communication and thus become in “debt” (Schneider 125–26). When Criseyde attempts to apologize for the brevity of her letter in the second *benevolentiae captatio*, she seems to pay customary respect to this epistolary decorum. However, the sincerity of her apparent apology is undermined when she adds the *sententiae*, of which the main semantics is that the content of a letter is more important than the length. Just as the repeated “beth nat wroth” apology does, this *sententiae* more or less discloses Criseyde’s anxiety or “sense of guilt”(Camargo 83–84), as she strives to hide the very “entente” (V. 1630) that she claims is what defines a great letter. It is therefore a big irony, or an error even, that, as opposed to what she argues with the conventional *sententiae*, her letter itself does not convey any solid content but repeats in a much less affectionate manner the smoke that filled her initial response to *Litera Troili*.

Not only the short length but also the style, rhetoric, and language of *Litera Criseydis*, which, as critics also observe, are overall very “contrived” (McKinnell 87), “disingenuous”(McAlpine 210–12), and “dispassionate” (Camargo 81), suggest Criseyde’s deliberate effort made not to divulge what Troilus wants to know. The letter, as the German sociologist Georg Simmel states, “gives, in principle, only the pure, objective content of our momentary ideational life, while being silent concerning what one is unable, or does not wish, to say”(353). However, Simmel goes on, “the recipient does not usually content himself with the purely logical sense of the words which the letter surely transmits much less ambiguously than

speech”(354). Instead, in reality, “more than the logical sense is required” in order to comprehend the meaning of the letter, especially so when the secret of the writer is concerned, because the letter is “more ambiguous” than speech where “the secret of the other” is the issue (Simmel 354–55). Criseyde may have been aware of this dynamism of the letter and believed that she could successfully hold her secrets back from Troilus because of the peculiar epistolary semiotics. However, the materiality of her letter, which is represented in short length and in the other linguistic and formal problems, seems to betray her intention and make the thus-far “best-disposed reader”(Camargo 80) Troilus critically suspicious of her sincerity. It is said that from *Litera Criseydis*, which is “straunge,” unkind, and aloof, does Troilus read undeniable signs of her change (“*a kalendes of change*”), which make him conclude that “al is lost that he hath ben aboute” (V. 1639–45). Of course, his suspicion will soon be confirmed as reality once he witnesses on the collar of Diomedes’s tunic, ripped off by Deiphebus, the very brooch that he gave Criseyde in the morning of her departure (V.1650–66).

IV. Conclusion

I would like to wrap up this paper about Criseyde’s letters by answering a general yet fundamental question regarding writing letters: Why do people write letters? At least in western culture, one likely answer seems to have a strong connection to the belief that can be traced back to Plato’s *Phaedrus* and still is in currency nowadays: “Writing is nothing but the representation of speech”(Spearing 5). Medieval intellectuals, such as St. Ambrose in the fourth century and John of Salisbury in the twelfth century, stand among many advocates of the belief in the “representative

capacity” of writing (Yoon 134). They believed that letters were devised because “the absent may converse with those far away”(Saint Ambrose 484), and because letters in one particular form of writing would “speak voicelessly the utterances of the absent” (Spearing 211).

As a literary son of these medieval elites, Pandarus in *Troilus and Criseyde* pushes this conviction even further and theorizes that the very act of writing a letter should guarantee the truth of the writer. He convinces Troilus to write *Litera Troili*, claiming that if Criseyde has remained faithful to the prince, then she shall write back to him, and if she does, then she will relate her truth(“soth”) to him (V. 1293–309). As discussed in this paper, however, Criseyde too easily undermines Pandarus’s postulation about the connection between writing letters and truth. Though she has changed her mind, she still writes back to Troilus. Indeed, how much she has changed and whether she still loves Troilus, albeit not in the same degree and intensity, remain as all mysteries. And, as she writes back, she deliberately refuses to relate her truths to the recipient. In fact, elaborating on how Criseyde controls the amount of information in her letters, Chaucer as a writer seems to argue that writing is an invention and has little relation to truth in essence.

Then, one may wonder why Criseyde bothers to write back to Troilus at all if she is determined not to resolve his doubts and worries. As Camargo wonders (83), is it one of her last attempts to save face? She is silent about her true motive. Still, we may obtain a glimpse of her intention when in the *peticio* she expresses her desire to sustain Troilus’s “good word” and “friendship”(V.1622). However unrealistic and selfish she may sound to us and to Troilus in particular, she is honest at least with this desire, in that being able to love him as a friend was what she wished in her secret farewell ceremony.

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Abstract

Criseyde's Secrets and Her Letters in Geoffrey Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*

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Troilus and Criseyde is Geoffrey Chaucer's re-rendering of Boccaccio's *Il Filostrato*. In the second and fifth books of this poem, Chaucer presents either in summary or verbatim bodies of letters that are communicated between Troilus and Criseyde. My principal concern with this paper is to investigate the ways in which epistolary materiality is manifested in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, focusing on the letters of Criseyde. My claim is that the ways that Criseyde's letters are articulated and (re-)presented manifest her complex material and affective realities that she most likely wants to conceal from the recipient Troilus. The reason why her letters constantly feel guarded, ambiguous, evasive, or prevaricating may be inseparable from the precarious circumstances that are beyond her control but she must still navigate through with utmost prudence and deliberation so as to sustain the values that she has been concerned about as a young widow. For the theoretical devices for my argument, I will draw on Gary's Schneider's epistolary materiality and Georg Simmel's account on the peculiarities of the letter as a mode of writing.

Key Words: Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde*, Letter, epistolary materiality,
Litera Criseydis

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