

Chaucer's Twitter: The Human-bird Interface as Emotional Practice in *Troilus and Criseyde*



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This article concerns the human reception of and interaction with birds in Chaucer's Troilus and Criseyde as an emotional practice that promotes self-reflection and emotional regulation. It aims to contribute to the field of the History of Emotions a new understanding of the role of animals as signifiers in medieval emotional narratives, which have hitherto largely been interpreted as static and separate from the human psyche. This article aims to elucidate the human-bird interface in Troilus as an example of how the animal as signifier can be consciously engaged with by characters within a text as an emotional practice, as, in the case of Troilus, one of self-reflection resulting in emotional regulation. The two instances of the human-bird interface are first measured against Monique Sheer's criteria for emotional practice, and then examined in the context of comparison with Gower's Tale of Philomene, which is itself directly referenced in Troilus. Additional context for reading of the birds themselves is then gleaned by the reading of their entries in medieval bestiaries. Ultimately, this research presents a thorough case study of the human-bird interface in Troilus as an example of how animals can operate as signifiers within the context of an emotional practice, and how, in this text, it presents as a psychological ritual of self-reflection and emotional regulation.

In Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, the human reception of birds becomes a method in which emotions can be reflected, interpreted, and modulated, thus implying a connection between the human-bird interface and the interior self. This positions the human-bird interface as method of emotional practice, which Monique Sheer

proposes are: 'habits, rituals, and everyday pastimes that aid us in achieving a certain emotional state. This includes the striving for a desired feeling as well as the modifying of one that is not desirable.'¹ These qualities can be observed in the two instances of the human-bird interface in *Troilus*, as Pandarus and Criseyde engage with the swallow and the nightingale, respectively, in order to modify their emotional state. In addition to reading these characters' interpretations of their avian visitors, further understanding of the emotional context of the swallow and the nightingale can be gleaned from their appearance in Gower's *Tale of Philomene*, which is itself directly referenced in *Troilus*. Additional context to inform the reading of the symbolic and emotional function of these birds in the human-bird interface may also be gleaned from their entries within medieval bestiaries. Through careful study of the human reception of the swallow and the nightingale, in tandem with the contexts provided by their intertextual relationships, this essay will determine the function of these specific birds in their episodes of the human-bird interface. This will, in turn, inform the primary study of this essay in which the human-bird interface, as experienced by Pandarus and Criseyde, can be observed as an emotional practice engaged in order to modulate emotion, thereby presenting a method in which medieval texts may represent the interior self.

A close reading of *Troilus's* two episodes of the human-bird interface reveals that emotional modulation is achieved through the human ascribing meaning to the

¹ Monique Scheer, 'Are Emotions a Kind of Practice (and is that what makes them have a history)? A Bourdieuan Approach to Understanding Emotion', *History and Theory*, 51 (2012), 193–220 (p. 209).

bird, then either accepting or rejecting that meaning in order to mitigate internal conflict. In the human-bird interface, the bird sings a message to be decoded by the human listener, a process that is unavoidably influenced by the state of the human's interior self. As Weisel observes, the human-bird interface in medieval texts 'creates the potential for the singing of birds to be an articulate language [...] that Chaucer exploits in his interactions between speaking birds and human listeners.'² Through showcasing the episodes of human-bird interface as a means of affective modulation, Chaucer presents a way in which the interior lives of characters can be reflected in medieval narratives.

For Pandarus, the human-bird interface becomes a method by which he can recognise and modulate feelings of guilt into passive acceptance. Playing mediator for Troilus's romantic pursuit of his niece clearly creates an emotional conflict within Pandarus, as evidenced by the sleepless night he endures in which he 'made, er it was day, ful many a wente'³ before meeting with Criseyde the following morning. His troubled sleep is finally disturbed in full when he awakens to hear the swallow's 'sorrowful lay | [...] hir waymentynge' (ll. 64–65). This could be read as the climax of Pandarus's internal struggle, as conflicting feelings of guilt and obligation have built up overnight and, unable to be ignored any longer, are projected onto an external figure so that Pandarus may at least wake up and acknowledge them. In Pandarus

² A.J. Weisel, 'In Briddes Wise: Chaucer's Avian Poetics', in *Animal Languages in the Middle Ages: Representations of Interspecies Communication*, ed. by Alison Langdon (Cham: Springer Nature, 2018), pp. 113–32 (p. 118).

³ Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde*, ed. by Stephen A. Barney (London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), l. 63.

recognising the swallow as Progne, Weisel suggests that the swallow's song 'makes clear the inevitable painful outcome of the love affair while simultaneously suggesting that it cannot change its course.'⁴ By attaching the warning of the swallow to the myth of *Philomene and Tereus*, Pandarus utilises the human-bird interface to alleviate his feelings of guilt by framing his narrative in a mythological context. As Mudruck notes: 'his looming treachery to Criseyde [...] the universal poignance of the myth dims somewhat and makes more endurable.'⁵ In this manner, Pandarus is able to absolve himself of the responsibility for the outcome of his intended actions by simply accepting that outcome as an inevitable universal truth. From this, we can observe that Pandarus's engagement in the human-bird interface allows him to address his guilt and absolve himself of it, thereby using it as a tool to aid internal conflict resolution and, through this, emotional modulation.

Criseyde's engagement in the human-bird interface is also a complex affective experience which affords emotional modulation through the human interpretation of birdsong. Before the appearance of the nightingale, Criseyde appears to be mentally and emotionally overwhelmed and exhausted by the subject of love. Her abrupt evasion of Antigone's questions on the matter: 'Ywys, it wol be nyght as faste,' (ll. 898) reads as a gentle plea of fatigue to excuse herself from commenting. However, the following line: 'but every word which that she of hire herde | she gan to prenten in hire herte faste,' (ll. 899) implies that Criseyde may be becoming overwhelmed with

⁴ Weisel, 'In Briddes Wise: Chaucer's Avian Poetics', p. 122.

⁵ Marvin Mudrick, 'Chaucer's Nightingales', *The Hudson Review*, 10 (1957), 113–32 (p. 91).

the emotional subject matter. Indeed, she is so mentally and emotionally overwhelmed by the topic of love that, like Pandarus, it interferes with her ability to sleep: 'whan al was hust, than lay she stille and thoughte | of all this thing; the manere and the wise.' (II. 915–916). From this, we can observe Criseyde as experiencing an emotional inconvenience in need of correcting. Given her immediate mental fixation on love, it comes as little surprise that, when the nightingale makes its presence known, Criseyde interprets the birdsong as a 'lay | of love' (II. 921–922). The implications of this particular reading of the nightingale will be further explored later as what is important here is the function that the human-bird interface performs. Understanding her need to modulate her emotional state so that she may achieve rest, Criseyde consciously engages with the nightingale: 'herkened she so longe in good entente' (II. 923). The intent here is clear: in order to be soothed to sleep, order must be brought to the chaos of Criseyde's internal self, and such order may be afforded by the musical quality of birdsong. As Weisel notes, the nightingale's 'lay of love' operates as 'not an articulated text but a meaningful emotion that creates a human text, audible and meaningful to Criseyde.'⁶ By interpreting the nightingale's song as a 'lay of love,' Criseyde grants it the status of music; the literal organisation of otherwise unrelated notes into a coherent melody. Music makes meaning out of chaos, and in this manner, the birdsong of the nightingale can be observed as creating emotional meaning for Criseyde. In recognising the nightingale's song as a 'lay of love,' Criseyde

⁶ Weisel, 'In Briddes Wise: Chaucer's Avian Poetics', p123.

is able to use music as a blueprint to organise and understand her own internal chaos, and so, is able modulate herself from being alert and overly contemplative, to 'fresh and gay' (II. 922). From this, we may observe that Criseyde consciously utilises the human-bird interface to modulate her emotional state, as the 'lay of love' operates to organise her internal chaos and allow for tranquillity and rest.

As signifiers in love narratives, the swallow and the nightingale bear heavy intertextual connotations that may have implications for these initial readings of the human-bird interface. Both birds appear as unequivocally tragic figures in Gower's *Tale of Philomene and Tereus*, and the text even provides direct translations of the birds' songs which can be compared with Pandarus and Criseyde's interpretations. This additional context may provide further insight into how Pandarus and Criseyde receive their avian visitors, and further inform the reading of their emotional engagement in the human-bird interface.

For Pandarus, the direct reference to Gower's *Tale* strengthens the initial reading of his engagement with human-bird interface as a mitigation of guilt. Chaucer's omniscient narrator sees Pandarus interpret his avian visitor as Proigne, who 'made hir cheterynge | how Tereus gan forth hire suster take' (II. 68–69). This translation of the swallow's 'cheterynge' closely reflects Gower's: 'to chide | and chitreth out in hir langage | what falsehood is in marriage.'⁷ However, it can be observed that Pandarus has slightly misinterpreted Progne's message. In the Gower

⁷ *The Tale of Philomene and Tereus*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt. (London: W.W. Norton, 2018), pp. 465–7.

text, Progne's birdsong is a warning for married women of 'the falshood of hir housbonde [...] for ther been many untrewē of tho,'⁸ which concentrates condemnation on Tereus' 'spousebrech,'⁹ rather than his raping of her sister. As Weisel notes, this slight error in communication is due to the bird's message being 'filtered through human interpretation,'¹⁰ and this provides further insight into how Pandarus emotionally engages in the human-bird interface. In Gower's text, Progne only mentions the rape of her sister when, before her avian transformation, she expresses guilt over her involvement in the events that lead to Tereus' crime: 'I therefore in al the world shal bere a blame | of that my suster hath a shame | that Tereus to hire I sente.'¹¹ In conflating Progne's birdsong with the guilt she expressed in human form, Pandarus reinterprets her 'chiterynge' warning meant for married women as one meant for him. The parallel between himself and Progne as intermediaries can then be recognised, and from this, Pandarus can infer the implications for his niece. This positions the swallow in this human-bird interface as an ominous figure intent upon diverting Pandarus from his course, lest he and those he seeks to aid suffer similarly disastrous consequences. However, as previously discussed, the application of the mythological context allows Pandarus to mitigate his sense of guilt, thereby allowing him to ignore the swallow's warning. Though Pandarus ignoring the advisory sentiment of Progne's message is problematic, it can

⁸ *The Tale of Philomene and Tereus*, p. 476.

⁹ *The Tale of Philomene and Tereus*, p. 469.

¹⁰ Weisel, 'In Briddes Wise: Chaucer's Avian Poetics,' p. 121.

¹¹ *The Tale of Philomene and Tereus*, pp. 306–8.

at least be observed that he does, indeed, receive this warning.

Unlike Pandarus, Criseyde appears to be completely ignorant of the ominous connotations that the nightingale carries from the myth of *Tereus and Philomene*, particularly for women in romantic contexts. This complicates Criseyde's position in the human-bird interface, as it calls into question the accuracy of her own reading of the nightingale. Chaucer's earlier reference to Gower's *Tale* during Pandarus's human-bird interface prompts the reader to similarly consider Criseyde's nightingale in the context of this work. Gower provides the song of nightingale with a literal translation: 'o why | oh why ne were I yit a maide? [...] Ha, now I am a brid [...] though I have lost my maidenhede | shal noman see my cheekes rede.'¹² Informed by Gower's text, the nightingale becomes a signifier of feminine sexual shame, and this conflicts with Criseyde's comforting reading of her avian visitor. Weisel argues that Chaucer's choosing of the nightingale as the avian half of the human-bird interface is made more appropriate for the context of Gower's *Tale*: 'because Philomene is another trans-avian, she embodies a series of meanings that allow her sound to be translated into human terms.'¹³ Following from this, if Criseyde was able to successfully translate Philomene's message from the nightingale, a significant alteration must be made to the reading of her usage of the human-bird interface as a tool of affective modulation. Criseyde's misinterpretation of the nightingale's lay of 'loves maladye,'¹⁴ as a simple

¹² *The Tale of Philomene and Tereus*, pp. 433–44.

¹³ Weisel, 'In Briddes Wise: Chaucer's Avian Poetics,' p. 112.

¹⁴ *The Tale of Philomene and Tereus*, p. 446.

'lay of love,' implies a wilful denial which then allows the human-bird interface to reinforce her sense of emotional security in her romance with Troilus. Mudrick argues that the interpretation of the nightingale is naturally coloured by Criseyde's emotional state, as it is received 'not out of the myth it shares with its sister the swallow (where, in a less comfortable mood of Criseyde's, it might belong).'¹⁵ This would imply that Criseyde was already enjoying some level of emotional security in her romance with Troilus; however, that she did misinterpret Philomene's message would also imply that aware or otherwise, she still felt the need to reinforce that emotional security. From this, we can observe that the human-bird interface is used by Criseyde to reinforce emotional security, as her wilful ignorance allows her to enjoy the simple 'lay of love' whilst blissfully ignoring Philomene's warning against taking men as lovers.

Further context for understanding the roles of the swallow and the nightingale during their episodes of the human-bird interface in *Troilus* may also be gleaned from their respective entries in medieval bestiaries. These texts consciously engage in and encourage symbolic reading of animals, as Houwen notes: 'the *Physiologus* and its derivatives provided the foundation for the later use of animals and their symbolism; this was further developed in the twelfth century and later with the bestiaries.'¹⁶ This makes the medieval bestiary a highly appropriate source to further inform reading of

¹⁵ Mudrick, 'Chaucer's Nightingales,' p. 91.

¹⁶ L.A.J.R. Houwen, 'Animal Parallelism in Medieval Literature and the Bestiaries: A Preliminary Investigation', *Neophilologus*, 78 (1994), 483–96 (p. 484).

the significance of the swallow and the nightingale, and provide further context for reading their roles in their respective episodes of the human-bird interface.

The swallow described in medieval bestiaries can be read as a messenger of caution, as it is able to heal impaired vision and even predict future events, thus complimenting the earlier reading of the swallow as warning Pandarus against his intended actions. The *M.S. Bodley 764* notes the swallow's 'outstanding cleverness of its intelligence and observation,'¹⁷ as does White's *Book of Beasts*, which comments on the bird's 'uncommonly devout state of mind, heedful to all sorts of things.'¹⁸ Additionally, the *Aberdeen Bestiary* states that the swallow 'lets you know when buildings are about to fall by refusing to nest on their tops.'¹⁹ From this, we may infer that the swallow itself not only signifies caution and awareness, but that it can also be read as self-aware of its role in the human-bird interface as a messenger of caution. Additionally, the swallow's reported healing ability related specifically to vision impairment strengthens its role as a corrector of perception. As the *MS Bodley 764* states, if a swallow's chicks are born with vision impairment, 'it possesses a means of healing by which their vision can be restored,'²⁰ which the *Aberdeen Bestiary* also notes as 'a kind of healing power with which it can restore their vision.'²¹ The ability of

¹⁷ Richard W. Barber, *Bestiary: Being an English Version of the Bodleian Library, Oxford M.S. Bodley 764: With All the Original Miniatures Reproduced in Facsimile* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1993), p. 166.

¹⁸ T.H. White, *The Book of Beasts: Being a Translation from a Latin Bestiary of the Twelfth Century* (London: Cape, 1954) p. 147.

¹⁹ University of Aberdeen, fol. 47v, in *The Aberdeen Bestiary Project – MS 24*, <<https://www.abdn.ac.uk/bestiary/>> [accessed 13 November 2021].

²⁰ Barber, *Bestiary*, 166.

²¹ Fol. 48r, in *The Aberdeen Bestiary Project*.

foresight, in tandem with being corrector of impaired vision, compliments the earlier reading of the swallow as a messenger of caution, as it emphasises a concern for enabling perception and itself perceives the future. This places additional value on Pandarus's ignoring of the swallow's message, as it implicates him in a conscious refusal to have his perception corrected, which the swallow's presence indicates the requirement of. Read in this context, the swallow's song in the human-bird interface becomes a warning for Pandarus of dangers that he is not yet aware of, and his reception of it would imply that he would rather remain unaware and take comfort in that ignorance.

The *Aberdeen Bestiary* also determines the swallow as a signifier of repentance, which supports the initial reading of Pandarus's engagement with the human-bird interface as an affective experience related to the recognition and mitigation of guilt. *The Aberdeen's* claim that 'the cry of the swallow, it signifies, unless I am mistaken, the lament of the penitent soul'²² echoes the sentiment of Gower's Progne who claims to 'bere a blame'²³ for sending her sister to Tereus. Though this lament was expressed by Progne in human form in Gower's *Tale*, the *Aberdeen's* statement supports the reading of Pandarus's interpretation of the swallow's song as Progne's admission of guilt. This in turn strengthens the reading of the swallow in the human-bird interface as a means by which Pandarus can recognise his own guilty conscience before mitigating it.

²² Fol. 48^v, in *The Aberdeen Bestiary Project*.

²³ *The Tale of Philomene and Tereus*, p. 306.

In a similar manner to the swallow, the nightingale also often embodies ominous themes of caution and watchfulness that supports the earlier intertextual reading of the bird's song as a warning for women, and naturally clashes with Criseyde's interpretation of it. As the *M.S. Bodley 764* states, the nightingale is a 'very alert watchman,'²⁴ embodying motherly devotion and specifically nocturnal caution. This is supported by the *Aberdeen Bestiary*, which offers that 'it is an ever-watchful sentinel, warming its eggs in a hollow of its body, relieving the sleepless effort of the long night with the sweetness of its song.'²⁵ These positions the nightingale as a particularly maternal bird, concerned with tending to its young whilst guarding them against nocturnal dangers. From this, we may infer a parallel between the nightingale singing to its chicks to protect them from nocturnal danger, and its singing to Criseyde a warning of the potential for a different kind of nocturnal danger, such as might be found with a new lover. This compliments the earlier intertextual reading of the nightingale as an ominous figure that cautions women against the taking lovers due to the potential risk of sexual violence.

The nightingale in medieval bestiary tradition also carries a connotation with the sunrise, and so, can be inferred as an emblem of transition into new beginnings, which both complicates and compliments the previous reading of the nightingale as a harbinger of romantic strife. The *Aberdeen Bestiary* states that the nightingale is 'so

²⁴ Barber, *Bestiary*, p.158.

²⁵ Fol. 52^v, in *The Aberdeen Bestiary Project*.

called because it signals with its song the dawn of the new day.²⁶ This sentiment of new beginnings can certainly be gleaned from Criseyde's second encounter of the nightingale; 'as the newe abaysed nyghtyngale | that stynteth first whan she bygynneth to synge [...] Right so Criseyde, whan hir drede stente | Oped hire herte and tolde hym hir entente' (III. 1233–1239). Chaucer's use of the nightingale as a metaphor for Criseyde's emotional transition between hesitation and action appropriately compliments a heroine renowned for her 'slydyng of corage' (V. 825). This connotation could infer the nightingale as endorsing Criseyde's new relationship with Troilus. However, given the previous reading, it makes more sense if this connotation is read in the nightingale's song as a wish for Criseyde's 'slydyng of courage' to become a means of proactive feminine agency. As Johnston notes, Criseyde possesses 'the emotional gliding or sliding that enables the female protagonist [...] to leave the embrace of Troilus for the arms of Diomedes, just as the circumstances may require.'²⁷ The encouragement of new beginnings being interpreted through the human-bird interface would provide Criseyde some comfort on her sleepless night, as she may interpret the nightingale's song as encouragement to commence her romance with Troilus. However, it would appear more likely that the nightingale's endorsement of transition was meant as an encouragement for

²⁶ Fol. 52v, in *The Aberdeen Bestiary Project*.

²⁷ Andrew James Johnston, 'Gendered Books: Reading, Space and Intimacy in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*,' in *Love, History and Emotion in Chaucer and Shakespeare: Troilus and Criseyde and Troilus and Cressida*, ed. by Andrew James Johnston, Russell West-Pavlov, and Elisabeth Kempf (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), pp. 172–88 (p. 180).

Criseyde to act in her own best interest, and possibly a pre-emptive support of her leaving Troilus.

The human-bird interface, as exhibited in *Troilus and Criseyde*, provides a complex method of interior representation in a medieval text. In addition to being interpreted as signifiers in their own right, the nightingale and the swallow can both be observed as engaging in the human-bird interface as deliverers of specific messages for their human counterparts. How Pandarus and Criseyde receive, interpret, and react to these messages can be seen to reveal their interior conflicts, and reflects how each character addresses and resolves them. In these actions, both characters can be observed as engaging with the human-bird interface as a method of affective modulation. Criseyde purposely misinterprets the song of the nightingale in order to avoid the confrontation of her own fears regarding Troilus, thereby keeping emotional turmoil at bay and allowing herself to be soothed to sleep. Pandarus similarly eases his internal conflict by using the human-bird interface to interpret his guilt through a mythological lens and reframe the potentially disastrous outcome of his actions as a simple universal truth. Additionally comforted by the wilful ignorance of any warning that would imply that he is wrong to do so, Pandarus is able to commence his role in Troilus's courting of Criseyde without feeling emotionally compromised. From this, we may infer that, in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, the human-bird interface operates as an emotional practice in which characters can engage in order to resolve internal conflict, for better or worse.



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