

“Hevene” in *Criseyde*: Dante’s “Festa” and Chaucer’s “Feste”

Behind “the double sorwe of Troilus” there is also a double felicity of Troilus: one is “the pleyn felicite/That is in hevene above” towards the end of Book V (1818–19), to which his soul, after the completion of his “tragedye” on earth, is to make a cosmic journey and from which coign of vantage he laughs a “disembodied laughter,” and the other, exactly at the center of the whole book, is “this hevene” which Troilus ecstatically envisions in Criseyde’s body at the consummation of his love (III. 1252).¹ What I propose to do in what follows is simply a comparison of these two “hevenes” with Dante’s *Paradiso*, not, of course, in a unilateral fashion but in a way pertinent to such an oblique and ironic poem as *Troilus and Criseyde*.

By the curiosity of cultural dynamics which we call literary history *Troilus and Criseyde* demands a reference, at least twice, to Canto XIV of *Paradiso*, which in turn refers us back to *Troilus and Criseyde* again. One is that famous hymn in praise of the Trinity (“Quell’ uno e due e tre che sempre vive,/ e regna sempre in tre e’n due e’n uno,/ non circonscritto, e tutto circonscrive”: XIV. 28–30), which Chaucerians hardly need reminding of, except for its being sung by the spirits prior to the unfolding of the Christian mystery of glorified re-incarnation at the resurrection. Solomon assumes the task of revealing the truth in answer to Dante’s yet unspoken question, rendered articulate in the mouth of Beatrice, as to the possible darkening of spiritual vision by the re-investiture of flesh. The hymn, as we know, is translated and transferred, with little sense of

1. All quotations from Chaucer in this paper are from *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. F. N. Robinson (London, 1957). Quotations from Dante are from *The Divine Comedy*, ed. and trans. C. S. Singleton (N. J.: Princeton, 1970–75).

violence, into a prayer concluding *Troilus and Criseyde* (“Thow oon, and two, and thre, eterne on lyve,/That regnest ay in thre, and two, and oon, /Uncircumscript, and a1 maist circumscribe”: V. 1863–65). The non-narrative directness of the prayer and the textual transparency of translation are indicative of the nearness of presence with which Chaucer feels himself affiliated with Dante. And this direct and straightforward feel of affiliation quite naturally invites us to recall the Dantean context and its inevitable and concomitant associations: the hymn is sung joyfully in expectation of the glorious re-incarnation, whose truth is told by Solomon in a voice “perchance such as the Angel’s unto Mary” (“forse qua1 fu dall’angelo à Maria”: XIV. 36). In short, the hymn is strongly reminiscent of the joy and glory of re-incarnation as well as incarnation, and both, as it turns out in Chaucer’s context, ineluctably and significantly mark a sharp contrast to Troilus’ “disembodied laughter” in his felicity in “hevene above.” This sense of putting the apparently ultimate at some remove, abrupt as it may seem, is actually adumbrated in its description, which is ambiguous as to both its status as “the eighth sere”—a source of long standing scholarly controversy—and the specific whereabouts of Troilus (“And forth he wente, shortly for to telle,/ Ther as Mercurye sorted hym to dwelle”: V. 1826–27). The nearness of Dante’s felt presence here is, then, a measure of the eventual alienation of Troilus, whose heavenly felicity is differentiated and distanced as the penultimate from the ultimate Paradisal felicity presented by the Italian Christian poet.

The other cross-reference, or rather this time an occasion of cross-reference and not so evident and celebrated as the first, can be found in an outstanding metaphor for paradise or heaven. It appears quite casually in the mouth of Solomon at the beginning of his revelation:

Quanto fia lunga la festa
di Paradiso, tanto il nostro amore
si raggerà dintorno cotal vesta.
...
Come la carne gloriosa e santa
fia rivestita, la nostra persona
più grata fia per esser tutta quanta. (XIV. 3745)
 (“As long as the feast of Paradise shall be, so long our love shall radiate

around us such a garment... When the garment of the glorified and sainted flesh shall be resumed, our person shall be more acceptable by being all complete.”)

“La festa di Paradiso”: Heaven is characterized as feast. Casual as it is in its appearance, the metaphor is of crucial importance both in its contiguous connection with Dante’s paradise and in its ironical and inverted relationships with the Bakhtinian “carnival.”² That this heavenly feast is a carnival is indicated by its interest in and desire for the re-investiture of flesh (“carne”), but notably lacking are all the carnivalesque features fully explained and described by Bakhtin, such as “the laughter of the marketplace,” “hierarchical inversion,” “food images,” “the grotesque image of body,” and “the material bodily lower stratum.” In Dante’s picture of the world, these carnivalesque features are deprived of their regenerative, re-creative forces (i.e., “laughter” and “inversion”) and are relegated into the lowest bodily stratum, which is expressed by Lucifer’s triple jaws munching Judas, Brutus, and Cassius (*Inferno*, XXXIV. 61–69). Dante’s “festa di Paradiso” is a transcendent carnival, where regeneration is accomplished by the divine radiation of love-Solomon’s bodily substance (“sustanzia”) is a flowering radiance (“la luce, onde s’infiora [sua] sustanzia”: 13–14) and is to be finally transubstantiated, as it were, in the re-investiture of the eternal flower of the sanctified flesh-light. As would be expected, such a conception of “festa” is unique to Dante, and its uniqueness is corroborated by the entry of the word “festa” in the *Enciclopedia Dantesca*, where the author of the *voce* says that the word, being “assente nell’*Inferno*,” “indica la plena ed eterna beatitudine del *Paradiso*” (citing XIV. 37) and “sempre nel *Paradiso*, sta per semplice ‘manifestatione di gaudio’” (citing XII. 22: XX. 84). Setting aside the meaning of “a religious festival day” and an idiomatic usage “far festa a qualcuno” (to give a person a welcome: “maken feste” in ME), the “festa” in Dante serves as an exclusive sign for heaven, expressive of eternity, beatitude and joviality. It stands in contradistinction to the Bakhtinian feast of regenerative laughter and material bodily lower stratum. It is a sign Dante specifically selects for the joyful, transcendent reality and arguably forms a part of his systematic strategy in dealing with the inef-

2. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. H. Iswolsky (Mass.: Cambridge, 1968).

fable, i.e., the supralinguistic, divine signification.

While the “festa” in the *Commedia* is always all holy as if to imply that the word is essentially of divine and heavenly origin and while a this-worldly extension of its meaning, if any, would be intolerably false, the “feste” in the *Troilus*, on the other hand, is characteristically dual in its semantic figuration. Of all varieties of its senses, from festivity (religious, seasonal, and even funeral) to convivium, from carnal pleasure to spiritual bliss, the word “feste” is used, importantly, in its full duality—the duality between earthly joy and heavenly felicity, between sacred and profane, and between conceivable and inconceivable—in reference to the aforementioned “hevene” *Troilus* envisions in Criseyde. True, it would be difficult to find in the “feste” of the *Troilus* both a typical manifestation of the Bakhtinian idea of “the laughter of the marketplace” and “the material bodily lower stratum,” and an instance of the thoroughly transcendent beatitude of the Dantesque order; but approximations to these two extremes are there in the Chaucerian “feste,” which stands, as it were, in an equal distance from each of them. One exception, however, is the Dantean contiguity of “feast” with “heaven.” If this contiguity is a product and vestige of Dantesque affiliation, the duality of “feste” is a measure of Chaucerian outgrowth.

The passage to consummation *Troilus* undergoes with extraordinary imminence in the middle of Book III is expressed on the analogy of “the cosmic flight” and actually compared by both Pandarus and the narrator to “the ascent to heaven,” be it earthly or celestial. “Make the redy right anon,/ For thou shalt into hevene blisse wende,” says Pandarus to *Troilus* at the outset (III. 703–34) and at the fulfillment of the journey the narrator describes *Troilus*’ mental landscape as “this hevene” (III. 1251) and then the ecstasy of the lovers as “this hevene blisse” (III. 1322). This *rite de passage* of *Troilus*, I am fully aware, has been a source of learned controversy, and to do any kind of justice to previous scholarship is obviously beyond the capacity of the present discussion. Suffice it to say, at the moment, that the critical heritage on the issue seems to be in agreement in assuming varying degree of Chaucerian irony and parody in the “ascent” motif or topos. The irony and parody is detected almost throughout, beginning with its point of departure, “stewe” (III. 601), through the Purgatorial parallel, which has been recently suggested, albeit in passing, by Chauncey Wood and dealt with at length by

Winthrop Wetherbee,³ and ending with the famous allusion to St. Bernard’s prayer to the Blessed Virgin in the last canto of *Paradiso* (1261–67). But the critical heritage is as much in disagreement as to the “character criticism” of *Troilus* the hero, who is variously interpreted in the wide spectrum ranging from paragon of carnal lust to a case of spiritual sublimation. Again suffice it to say, for our present purposes, that the *Troilian* ascent to heaven is, indeed, full of irony, ambiguity and duality, and let us turn now to what the contiguity of “hevene” with “feste” has to say about it.

The “feste”-“hevene” complex occurs only twice in the *Troilian* Ascent (III. 1228; 1312) but one of the occurrences, at least, is vital not only because it relates to the problematic of narrative structure but also because it indicates an aspect of what seems to be Chaucer’s outgrowth from Dante. After the “this hevene” passage (III. 1251), which is followed by *Troilus*’ bookish prayer and Criseyde’s request to “falle away fro this matere” to the real business, the narrator, like a camera conscious of censorship, resorts to the indescribability topos:

Of hire delit, or joie soon the leeste,
Were impossible to my wit to seye;
But juggeth ye that han ben at the feste
Of swich gladnesse, if that hem liste pleye!
I kan namore, . . . (III. 1310–14, emphasis added)

and then

And lat hem in this hevene blisse dwelle,
That is so heigh that al ne kan I telle! (III. 1322–23)

The “hevene” *Troilus* has reached and envisioned in Criseyde’s body, which with its endemic irony and duality has occasioned critical controversy, is eventually relegated by the narrator to the readers who have been to such a “feste” of heaven. Responsibility is the reader’s to take for the meaning and implication of the word “feste” is a divine and heavenly-

3. Chauncey Wood, *The Elements of Chaucer’s “Troilus”* (N.C.: Durham, 1984), pp. 189: n.33; Winthrop Wetherbee, *Chaucer and the Poets: An Essay on Troilus and Criseyde* (N.Y.: Ithica, 1984), esp. pp. 145–78.

grounded signifier for the real transcendent heaven, Chaucer's "feste" at its best is a human and this-worldly-grounded medium (if it is not also ingrained in "the material bodily lower stratum") for incomprehensible joy and happiness, be it carnal or spiritual; medium between postlapsarian beings and God, between differing individual experiences in time and space, And as a medium, in the strong sense of the word, it is circumscribed, as it were, as *vide*, and there made impervious to any authorial/authoritative semantic fixture and left to the reader's responsibility for its fulfillment.⁴

Interestingly and ironically, Troilus, too, is not exempted from this responsibility; after all, "this hevene" and the subsequent bookish prayer are nothing but his own reading of/on Criseyde. That his reading of "hevene" is done, as is the case with the narrator, too, in the tradition of "festa di Paradiso" is also witnessed by his calling it "feste" in recollection. First, it occurs in the joyful remembrance of the things past, preceding the Boethian "*Canticus Troili*" (III. 1739). The second occurrence is in the anxious remembrance of the past for vicarious pleasure when Criseyde is away, supposedly temporarily ("For syn we yet may have namore feste": V. 524). By "vicarious pleasure" I mean the consolation Troilus finds in her empty house, the "hous of houses." And lastly, it presents itself in the woeful remembrance of the past *perdu* when he apparently projects his reading of "hevene" in/on Criseyde into her putative reading of/on Diomedes ("Of Diomedes have ye now a1 this feeste!": V. 1677).

It is to Chaucer's credit that Troilus' reading of "hevene" in Criseyde as "feste" is structurally transferred, through the narrative device of the indescribability topos, to the reader/audience, with its full duality intact. The text seems to imply that the "feste" at its best and at the most is a medium for the incomprehensible; Troilus, however, comes to appropriate and pre-empt the word for his own conception and use, fixing it in its absolute particularity. Feast is feast and, however absolutely precious and heavenly true it may look, it cannot be trusted for eternity; "feste" cannot be the Dantesque "festa" in the world of the *Troilus*—it can be only a convivium, which is included in the wider semantic field of "feste." That Troilus cannot and will not see this semantic field is ironically evident in

the fact that while the "feste" of Criseydean "hevene" is on his mind for vicarious pleasure in her supposedly temporal absence, it never occurs to him that there is any connection between this 'feste' and the magnificent "feste" (convivium) provided by Sarpedon. Troilus, in a sense, misreads into Criseyde the Dantesque "festa." But only in a sense. For, the semantic rigidity of Dante's "festa" derives from his systematic strategy of exposition in Paradise. This systematic strategy, in its turn, has a larger foundation in the tripartite differentiation of signification, which can be roughly described as the alteration of the signified from non-*esse*, through *posse*, to *esse* in God in the order of the ascent of the pilgrimage." It is precisely the favor of such larger design and systematic foundation that Troilus' semantic appropriation lacks.

The "feste" in the *Troilus* is at its best a structure of circumscribed openness (or *vide*) with its ample duality. It is an indication of narrative consciousness to determinedly stay on the this-worldly plane and let the burden of the ineffable, other-worldly vision be the visionary's share. This does not mean, however, that Chaucer is distrustful of Dante, the great visionary poet: on the contrary, his affiliational trust in him, as we have seen, seems to go so far as to overshadow the apparently ultimate vision of "hevene" Troilus has attained. Dante's vision is a vision of God, and as such is not unrelated to this world, here and now, as Troilus' disembodied one markedly is. As the Dantesque hymn in praise of the Trinity at the end of the *Troilus* shows, the same faith reverberates in the affiliational descent; it is only that Chaucer is more interested in seeing the varieties and mutability of the Creation where Dante is interested rather in envisioning its unity and eternity.

And here it is not irrelevant, I believe, to recall the Dantesque "festa" 's association with "flower." When Dante reaches the Empyrean there opens up before his eyes "le maggior feste dei fiori e delle faville" (XXX. 94–95). The "fiori (flowers)" here signify, as the *Enciclopedia Dantesca* tells us (*s.v.* "fiore"), the blessed, and, of course, they are the blessed eternally in bloom. In contrast, Chaucer's version of "feste dei fiori" is typically earth-bound, presenting itself in the form of "fair," "that passeth soone as floures faire" (V. 1840–41). "Fair" (*subst.*) stems, according to the *OED*, from the same root-complex, L. *feria-festus*, which gives us "festa"/"feste." "Fair of mutable flowers," then may he said to be a characteristically Chaucerian manifestation of the Dantesque "feste dei fiori eterni."

4. Cf. R. A. Shoaf, *Dante, Chaucer, and the Currency of the Word: Money, Images, and References in Late Medieval Poetry* (Oklahoma: Norman, 1983), pp. 21–100.