

## **TROILUS AND CRESSIDA.**

[In several respects, the story of "Troilus and Cressida" may be regarded as Chaucer's noblest poem. Larger in scale than any other of his individual works -- numbering nearly half as many lines as *The Canterbury Tales* contain, without reckoning the two in prose -- the conception of the poem is yet so closely and harmoniously worked out, that all the parts are perfectly balanced, and from first to last scarcely a single line is superfluous or misplaced. The finish and beauty of the poem as a work of art, are not more conspicuous than the knowledge of human nature displayed in the portraits of the principal characters. The result is, that the poem is more modern, in form and in spirit, than almost any other work of its author; the chaste style and sedulous polish of the stanzas admit of easy change into the forms of speech now current in England; while the analytical and subjective character of the work gives it, for the nineteenth century reader, an interest of the same kind as that inspired, say, by George Eliot's wonderful study of character in "Romola." Then, above all, "Troilus and Cressida" is distinguished by a purity and elevation of moral tone, that may surprise those who judge of Chaucer only by the coarse traits of his time preserved in *The Canterbury Tales*, or who may expect to find here the Troilus, the Cressida, and the Pandarus of Shakspeare's play. It is to no trivial gallant, no woman of coarse mind and easy virtue, no malignantly subservient and utterly debased procurer, that Chaucer introduces us. His Troilus is a noble, sensitive, generous, pure-souled, manly, magnanimous hero, who is only confirmed and stimulated in all virtue by his love, who lives for his lady, and dies for her falsehood, in a lofty and chivalrous fashion. His Cressida is a stately, self-contained, virtuous, tender-hearted woman, who loves with all the pure strength and trustful abandonment of a generous and exalted nature, and who is driven to infidelity perhaps even less by pressure of circumstances, than by the sheer force of her love, which will go on loving -- loving what it can have, when that which it would rather have is for the time unattainable. His Pandarus is a gentleman, though a gentleman with a flaw in him; a man who, in his courtier-like good-nature, places the claims of comradeship above those of honour, and plots away the virtue of his niece, that he may appease the love-sorrow of his friend; all the time conscious that he is not acting as a gentleman should, and desirous that others should give him that justification which he can get but feebly and diffidently in himself. In fact, the "Troilus and Cressida" of Chaucer is the "Troilus and Cressida" of Shakespeare transfigured; the atmosphere, the colour, the spirit, are wholly different; the older poet presents us in the chief characters to noble natures, the younger to ignoble natures in all the characters; and

the poem with which we have now to do stands at this day among the noblest expositions of love's workings in the human heart and life. It is divided into five books, containing altogether 8246 lines. The First Book (1092 lines) tells how Calchas, priest of Apollo, quitting beleaguered Troy, left there his only daughter Cressida; how Troilus, the youngest brother of Hector and son of King Priam, fell in love with her at first sight, at a festival in the temple of Pallas, and sorrowed bitterly for her love; and how his friend, Cressida's uncle, Pandarus, comforted him by the promise of aid in his suit. The Second Book (1757 lines) relates the subtle manoeuvres of Pandarus to induce Cressida to return the love of Troilus; which he accomplishes mainly by touching at once the lady's admiration for his heroism, and her pity for his love-sorrow on her account. The Third Book (1827 lines) opens with an account of the first interview between the lovers; ere it closes, the skilful stratagems of Pandarus have placed the pair in each other's arms under his roof, and the lovers are happy in perfect enjoyment of each other's love and trust. In the Fourth Book (1701 lines) the course of true love ceases to run smooth; Cressida is compelled to quit the city, in ransom for Antenor, captured in a skirmish; and she sadly departs to the camp of the Greeks, vowing that she will make her escape, and return to Troy and Troilus within ten days. The Fifth Book (1869 lines) sets out by describing the court which Diomedes, appointed to escort her, pays to Cressida on the way to the camp; it traces her gradual progress from indifference to her new suitor, to incontinence with him, and it leaves the deserted Troilus dead on the field of battle, where he has sought an eternal refuge from the new grief provoked by clear proof of his mistress's infidelity. The polish, elegance, and power of the style, and the acuteness of insight into character, which mark the poem, seem to claim for it a date considerably later than that adopted by those who assign its composition to Chaucer's youth: and the literary allusions and proverbial expressions with which it abounds, give ample evidence that, if Chaucer really wrote it at an early age, his youth must have been precocious beyond all actual record. Throughout the poem there are repeated references to the old authors of Trojan histories who are named in "The House of Fame"; but Chaucer especially mentions one Lollius as the author from whom he takes the groundwork of the poem. Lydgate is responsible for the assertion that Lollius meant Boccaccio; and though there is no authority for supposing that the English really meant to designate the Italian poet under that name, there is abundant internal proof that the poem was really founded on the "Filostrato" of Boccaccio. But the tone of Chaucer's work is much higher than that of his Italian "auctour;" and while in some passages the imitation is very close, in all that is characteristic in "Troilus and Cressida," Chaucer has fairly thrust his models out of sight. In the present edition, it has been possible to give no more than about one-fourth of the poem -- 274 out of the

1178 seven-line stanzas that compose it; but pains have been taken to convey, in the connecting prose passages, a faithful idea of what is perforce omitted.]