

## CHAUCER'S USE OF SOLAS

Chaucer's attitude towards the language of the *courtois* literature is a complex preliminary problem in the interpretation of his works, especially the *Troilus and Criseyde*. Given the need for a systematic investigation of the terminology, rhetorical devices, and stylistic inlays which he uses as means of expressing such an attitude, the following note may be regarded as a single test: how Chaucer treats one highly characterized term of the courtly vocabulary, *solas*.<sup>1</sup>

The evolution of the Latin *solacium* into the "kernel" word *solata* of the Western medieval tradition is treated by Eugen Lerch in *Cultura Neolatina*.<sup>2</sup> He traces its development from the meaning "comfort" to the predominating meaning of "joy".<sup>3</sup> A line from the Kastellan de Coucy, one of the many examples from Spanish, French, German, Italian, etc. cited by Lerch, offers a demonstration of *solaz'* typical final position in the verse: "*Que puisse avoir de ma dolor solas*."<sup>4</sup> Such topological stress appears in each instance of Chaucer's use of the term cited here. Of these examples, two fully preserve the traditional meaning:

(1) That Love hem brynge in hevene to *solas* (*Troilus*, I, 31);

(2) From hennes rood my blisse and my *solas* (*Troilus*, V, 607).

Another use of *solas* occurs in Book II of *Troilus and Criseyde*. After Criseyde rebuffs Pandarus' attempt to tell her of Troilus' love, he threatens, in addition to the instantaneous death Troilus would suffer, to slay himself. Criseyde says to herself (II, 459-62):

And if this man sle here hymself, alas!

In my presence, it wol be no *solas*.

What men wolde of hit deme I kan nat seye:

It nedeth me ful sleightly for to pleie.

<sup>1</sup> Attesting to the use of the term is the following example from Ramon Lull: "Solaç est, amat, de solaç; per què en tu assolaç mos pensaments ab ton solaç, qui és solaç e confort de mos languiments e de mes tribulacions, qui són tribulades en ton solaç com no assolaces los innorants ab ton solaç e com los coneixents de ton solaç no enamores pus fortment a honrar tos honraments." Ramon Lull, "Blanquerna," lib. V (*De vida ermitana*) cap. 100, # 300. In *Obres Essencials* (Barcelona: Selecta, 1957), vol. I, p. 275.

<sup>2</sup> Eugen Lerch, "Troubadorsprache und religiöse Sprache," *Cultura Neolatina*, 22, (1943), 214-30.

<sup>3</sup> Among Lerch's notable remarks is that *solas* is sytematized in Andreas Capellanus, who describes it as having two parts: the *pars superior* for the upper half of the body, and the *pars inferior* for the lower half of the body (p. 219).

<sup>4</sup> Raynouard, *Lexique roman*, (Paris: 1836), Vol. 5, p. 252.

Lines 459-60 work by substituting one terminological plane for another. Objectively, the implications of Criseyde's phrase are that such a suicide at her house would be unpleasant, embarrassing, and damaging to her reputation, but her expression is modified by a note of irony in which vocabulary makes explicit the emotional flavor of the scene. On the objective plane, for the concluding term to correspond to the situation Criseyde should say, "if this man slays himself here, it would be *dreadful* (or an equivalent word)". Instead, Chaucer selects for her the formula of a negation plus the word *solas*, a term presupposing a characterized association: a lover's efforts crowned in a transport of bliss. This final term ("solas"), whose denotation is established in a different context, is thrust onto the first, objective situation (the threatened suicide), and achieves a striking incongruity. *Solas*, severed from its appropriate context is at the same time put in relief and devaluated: it is exposed as part of a jargon not too precious to be turned to irony.

In the virtuoso performance of language and style, whatever its intent,<sup>5</sup> which *Sir Thopas* presents, the word *solas* appears already at line 3 in the formal introduction. Despite the enforced brevity of Chaucer's own tale, the word appears yet again (71):

That doun he leyde him in that plas  
To make his steede some *solas*,  
And yaf him good forage.

Here the noble concept is applied to the horse's world, equating the bliss of love with fodder and representing an even more extreme severing of *solas* from its appropriate context.

These instances demonstrate three types of use of a traditional term, and each type seems intended as character-defining. Troilus embraces the traditional use of the term, Criseyde uses it ironically, and the narrator of *Sir Thopas* (Chaucer himself) misuses it. Taking the measure of where a particular character intersects with the *courtois* vocabulary appears to be part of Chaucer's method of stylistically defining the character.

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<sup>5</sup> The target of the irony in *Sir Thopas* is still under discussion: John M. Manly advanced that the satire is directed against the Flemish burghers, and not against the romance mode. John M. Manly, "Sir Thopas: A Satire," in *Essays and Studies by Members of the English Association*, 13 (1928), 52-73.