Medieval English Metaphors of the Heart in Chaucer's Troilus and Criseyde

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Abstract:

Geoffrey Chaucer, in his passionate romantic tragedy *Troilus and Criseyde*, uses the Middle English word *herte* (heart) strikingly often, yet only thrice in its literal usage as an organ. Instead, Chaucer always uses "heart" metaphorically, similarly to common usage in Modern English. Each metaphor originates from an understanding of the heart in relation to those distinct properties it embodied to English people because of cultural origins. Examining these origins reveals the respective presuppositions that this culture, that of our forefathers, associated with the heart. Furthermore, these same metaphors Chaucer wrote have remained in our cultural memory and are still spoken today, speaking to their anciency. This paper organizes all of Chaucer's uses of *herte* in *Troilus* into eight distinct types, each with their own semantic origin; Only five of these definitions are presented in the Middle English Dictionary, and so this paper serves to fill in those missing gaps.

Geoffrey Chaucer, in his passionate romantic tragedy *Troilus and Criseyde*, uses the Middle English word *herte* (heart) strikingly often, yet only thrice in its literal usage as an organ of the body, all during Troilus' dream sequence in the story.[1] Instead, Chaucer always uses "heart" metaphorically, similarly to common usage in Modern English. Each metaphor originates from an understanding of the heart in relation to distinct properties it embodied to English people because of cultural or linguistic origins. So, examining those origins reveals the respective

[1] Geoffrey Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde*, ed. Stephen A. Barney (New York; London: W. W. Norton, 2006), 2.928-931.

presuppositions that this culture, that of our forefathers, associated with the heart. This paper organizes all of Chaucer's uses of *herte* in *Troilus* into eight distinct types, each with their own semantic origin; A, as a metaphor of movement; B, as a physical object with tactile properties; C, as a metaphor of container; D, as a body part that suffers various conditions; E, as a location of thinking and decision-making; F, as a metaphor of personification; G, as a term of endearment; and H, as the idiom "with all thy heart." Yet only five of these definitions are presented in the Middle English dictionary, leaving out these important markers of medieval thought. For brevity's sake, "Middle English" is abbreviated "ME" and the "Middle English Dictionary" as "MED," and translations of unclear Middle English quotes are in the corresponding footnotes.

Analyzing the various metaphors of only one concept in only one work of medieval literature, the heart in *Troilus*, may seem a mundane and pointless endeavor. Yet, this analysis, however simple, reveals far greater truths than appear on the surface. Metaphors are not just phrases; they are lasting vestiges that describe our collective human experience and the truths that cultures have thus linguistically inherited.[2] For example, to say that "my heart is shattered," is to connect those properties of glass — the substance which shatters — along with all the examples, experiences, and cultural crystallizations relating to its fragility to emotional impacts on the heart. Metaphor is symbolism made audible and, like symbols and art, allows mankind to process and examine deeply human abstract concepts.[3] People in each language and culture pass on those metaphors, like those artistic motifs and stories which they also feel are valuable, to express their desired meaning within their worldview. Thus, metaphors in English literature sound the depths of our Classical and Medieval cultural inheritance in the West. Examinations of metaphors in the works of Chaucer are especially fruitful because these texts are the part of the

[2] William E. W. Robinson, "Metaphor Theory," in *Metaphor, Morality, and the Spirit in Romans 8: 1–17*, 17–44 (Society of Biblical Literature: 2016), 25.
[3] Ibid., 30.

"Great Canon" of both English literature and Western Civilization. They are considered masterworks, widely read, and highly regarded over the centuries, incorporating what came before and shaping what came after. The metaphors and symbolism which this master employed were, like the works themselves, both reflective of past literary culture and formative of future literary culture. Like the Middle Ages itself, it is the temporal bridge between ancient and modern, the liminal era of synthesis, discovery, and renewal of truths. To study Chaucer is to study his era, worldview, and culture, with attention to the story of our origin, with which we as modern English speakers and inheritors of the Western tradition inherently connect. Yet, why examine *Troilus and Criseyde* specifically? The answer lies in the story: "In this world no creature lives, is worthy to live, or can endure living, without love."[4] Chaucer's retelling of the tale is an exploration into that profound thing named *love* that every creature knows, and which in Western Civilization is elevated to the highest lauds and is as crucial to our social and emotional consciousness as the heart is to sustaining life. Chaucer's *Troilus* took the inheritance of past romances and set the stage for later pinnacles of romance literature such as Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, and Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago*. And, most importantly, the same metaphors Chaucer wrote may seem hauntingly familiar to us, because they have remained in our cultural memory ever since, and are spoken, written, and sung by people even now.

The first of these eight metaphorical uses is a type of entity metaphor related to movement, in which the heart is like a vehicle that can be moved, steered, stopped, or altered in speed. This visualization views the heart as that which moves or carries a person in different emotional directions, like the winds carrying a ship in any direction, or a steed galloping toward

[4] Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde*, ed. Stephen A. Barney, 3.13-14. "*And in this world no lyves creature, with-outen love, is worth, or may endure"*

one's lover. Chaucer uses "herte" thus only thrice, and this use is not identified in the MED. The first example is spoken by the narrator, "against his will that his heart should be steered" referring to Troilus falling in love with Criseyde at first sight.[5] The heart is here an object steered by the forceful gales of love, just as strong winds overpower and steer a ship towards the direction that it naturally blows, in this case, Criseyde, or, during his lovesickness, "straight unto death my heart sails."[6] Again, as ship, the heart sails towards death charting a course of woe bearing Troilus as passenger. This reinforces Troilus' dramatic "conviction of his imminent death" in the courtly love tradition of love's deathly pains.[7] Pandarus also proclaims, "with a word you may steer his heart," suggesting that Criseyde's words of comfort may steer Troilus' heart like a current.[8] This metaphor suggests an understanding of the heart as something that moves independently of one's will, leaving everyone powerless passengers aboard a ship amidst a passionate storm beyond control: love.

Second is an entity metaphor, in which the heart is a physical object that can be broken, changed, engraved, carved, or bear material properties, such as heaviness, hardness, lightness, etc. These correspond to MED definition 5a, "the heart as physically affected by emotion," and 6, "(a) character, disposition, temperament, and (c) state of mind, temporary feeling, or mood" connected to the chosen properties or treatment.[9] Chaucer employs this commonly, 40 times in various versions, for instance, engraving a message on one's heart like a stone tablet, as in, "it was hard to engrave your heart," emphasizing the struggle to leave an emotional impression on

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[5] Ibid., 1.228 (*ayein his wil þat sholde his herte stiere)*.
[6] Ibid., 1.606 (*streyght unto the deth myn herte sailleth*).
[7] Lonnie J. Durham, "Love and Death in 'Troilus and Criseyde," *The Chaucer Review* 3, no. 1 (1968): 5.
[8] Geoffrey Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde*, 3.910 (*with o word ye may his herte steere*).
[9] Online edition in Middle English Compendium, *Middle English Dictionary*, ed. Frances McSparran, et al (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Library, 2000-2018).

someone.[10] The heart, embodying emotion or desires, can be written on or carved into when one gains a memory or feeling so profound that it becomes permanently "inscribed," like the feeling of sympathy, "for on a good heart it must imprint pity."[11] The opposite also appears, when a memory once engraved is erased through sorrow or failure, such as, "their love he will soon erase out of your heart."[12] Other instances involve possessing hearts as items able to be given or received, expressed by "your heart was all mine" and to "take heart," suggesting that whoever possesses one's heart holds that person's love, even if that person is oneself.[13] Also included is the visual idiom "to break one's heart," as Chaucer writes, "or it will break his heart," with the heart as fragile object that can break or be broken by the shock of sorrow.[14] Examples of physical properties are hardness in "a herte of stoon," tenderness in "your tender heart sustain this" and heaviness in "your heart and mine in heaviness."[15] The heart, representative of one's emotions and desires, can be a burden, or joy, expressed by tactile visualizations.

Third is, occurring 36 times, the heart acting as a container, meaning that the heart has interior space into which things can fall, enter, stay, or be put or locked. This expresses that the heart contains all emotions, love, desire, private thoughts, or beloved memories, meaning that new instances of these things can be added or existing ones taken away. The first example is when the memory of Criseyde's beauty "in the bottom of his heart began to stick," in which the memory sticks to the core of his container heart, expressing that it is the deepest and most treasured memory or love that can never be removed.[16] There is then mention of "the true private

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[10] Geoffrey Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde*, 2.1241 (*and hard was it yowr herte for to grave*).
[11] Ibid., 2.1371 (*for in good herte it moot sum routhe impresse*), further examples are 3.1488, 3.1499.
[12] Ibid., 3.1015 (*Ther Ioue hym soon oute of yowr herte arace*).
[13] Ibid., 3.993 and 4.617. *(your herte all myn was*, and, *tak herte*)
[14] Ibid., 3.907 (*or yt his herte breke*).
[15] Ibid., 3.114, 4.95 and 4.1140, 4.79 (*yowr tendre herte thys sustene*), and 3.1007 (*yowr herte and myn in heuynesse*).
[16] Ibid., 1.297 (*in his herte botme gan to sticken*).

space of the heart", visualizing that deepest, private, place in one's heart.[17] Memories, impressions, and feelings can also be consciously stored by oneself, such as when "al this gan Troilus in his herte caste," or when Criseyde lets her thoughts "so softe in hir herte synke," making Troilus' appearance sink into her heart to remain a vivid memory.[18] This same logic applies when a character tries to remember something deeply important, as in, "he wel koude in his herte fynde".[19] Since the heart contains all these important thoughts and feelings, they can also be taken out and shared, requiring one to open his heart, hence the metaphor when Criseyde "opened hir herte and tolde al hir entente."[20] The pleasantest example of this is when the narrator makes an appeal to Venus to "ye in my naked herte sentiment inhielde," referring to the concept of *tabula rasa*; that the heart, like the mind, is, without experience, empty, and so must be filled at the start of one's life.[21] The empty heart of the narrator, lacking worthy emotion, must be filled with sentiment and wisdom from Venus before he continues the story.

Fourth is another metaphor of entity in which the heart undergoes various organic conditions not normally experienced in reality, including growing, shrinking, suffering injury and sharp pain, growing cold or warm, swelling, bursting open, and bleeding. These conditions correspond to particular emotions since the heart is "the center or seat of human emotion" in the body, and so physical changes to the heart reflect emotional changes in a person.[22] The first example, out of this type's total 40, is a description of Troilus, that, "with a look, his herte wax a feere," expressing that a heart can grow or shrink, reflecting one's excitement or fear.[23] This is

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[17] Ibid., 2.1397 (*thi verray hertes privetee*).
[18] Ibid., 1.749, (all this Troilus began to cast into his heart), see also 2.650 and 2.902.
[19] Ibid., 1.367.
[20] Ibid., 3.1239.
[21] Ibid., 3.43 (pour sentiment into my naked heart).
[22] *Middle English Dictionary* definition 3a.
[23] Geoffrey Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde*, 1.229, (*with a look his heart grew out of fear*).

similar to a heart's swelling, which expresses joy and passion, because a larger heart, as the physical embodiment of emotion, equals more passion, such as when Troilus sees Criseyde for the first time and "his herte gan to sprede;" a release of sorrow and romantic longing. The heart is visualized as being filled with so much emotion (negative, in this case) without release, that it bursts under the pressure, and releases in an outburst. Temperature of the heart is another version of this metaphor, expressing one's level of emotional activity. A warm heart is active and filled with energy, as though it contains the "fire of life," whereas a cold heart is constrained and frozen still, emotionless. Criseyde is described as fickle, when Chaucer writes, "now was hir herte warm, now was it colde," since her heart is metaphorically switching back and forth from activity to restraint, from joy to doubt.[24] Other versions of this use are regarding the "freshness" of the heart, meaning the person is lively and blithe, and regarding a good or healthy heart that expresses that the person has a good morality and disposition, since the emotional-somatic function of the heart is working properly.[25]

Fifth is the heart serving as location in which, at a time of emotional depth, thinking and decision-making occurs, especially regarding morality, occurs or where memories are stored and processed; basically, all the conscious functions of the brain. This use corresponds to MED definition 4 of the heart as "(a) the mind, understanding, imagination, (b) moral consciousness, and (c) memory or remembrance."[26] This is a variation of the container metaphor but is distinct from type C in that the heart is here a location within which a person acts, not a container for objects. It occurs 11 times in the text, almost always referring to Troilus' thinking, except for the

[24] Ibid., 2.698.
[25] Ibid., 2.1096 and 3.144.
[26] *Middle English Dictionary.*

first instance when, “al this Pandare in his herte thought,” Pandarus listens to Troilus’ woes.[27] Other synonyms for “thought” in conjunction with the metaphor are “deemed” and “deigned,” in the lines, “that in his herte he demed,” “for in his herte he koude wel deuyne”, and “my Troilus shal in his herte deme.”[28] Troilus also recollects the image of Criseyde within his heart, “refiguring hire shap, hire wommanhede, withinne his herte,” offering an example of remembrance within one’s heart.[29]

The sixth metaphorical use is personification, treating the heart as a person that can act, be acted upon, or suffer human conditions. Besides the few idioms included in 3b, there is no definition pertaining to this type in the MED.[30] This type has widely varying examples, including, “it hath the cruel herte apesed,” depicting the heart as a cruel person that must be appeased through love.[31] The heart’s owner must then act, as when Troilus vows, “I shal myn herte ayein my lust constreyne,” restraining his heart like an enraged friend apt for violence.[32] Frequently the heart is owner of an object, such as “his deere hertes queen,” which depicts the heart as being a loyal servant to Criseyde, not Troilus himself.[33] This use rests on the premise that the heart, as center of emotions and passions, is a separate entity from the mind and soul, like an independent person, mirroring images of the Christian Trinity’s three Persons. The heart can also perform an action which corresponds to the mood or feeling that the actual person is feeling. Three prime examples are, “although his herte pleyde,” corresponding to happiness,

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[27] Geoffrey Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde*, 1.1070.
[28] Ibid., 3.1727, 5.288, and 5.697.
[29] Ibid., 5.474 (refiguring her shape, her womanhood, within his heart).
[30] *Middle English Dictionary.*
[31] Geoffrey Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde*, 1.250.
[32] Ibid., 2.476.
[33] Ibid., 1.817.

"myn herte Shryven," corresponding to revelation of hidden feelings, and "hir herte quaketh," corresponding to anxiety and trembling with fear.[34]

The seventh use is as a term of endearment, either "dear heart," "sweet heart," or "heart mine," equating one's beloved with one's own heart, the body's central organ that sustains life, as most medieval thought asserted.[35] This metaphor is used 58 times, predominantly by Criseyde when speaking to Troilus before she leaves Troy.[36] This metaphor is idiomatic in ME, as mentioned in MED definition 3b (e), yet metaphorically expresses definition 5a, "the center of life, vitality, or energy."[37] The first such use of "herte," is by Troilus when he is physically pained by unrequited love for Criseyde, followed by further uses when he feels physical distress when apart from her.[38] It is as if life's essence, the heart, is stolen when Criseyde is gone; exactly what the metaphor expresses. Sweet and dear, the two adjectives commonly accompanying "herte," express the satisfying, refreshing, lifeforces that only the other can provide, sweet pleasure and dear intimacy. When Criseyde leaves Troy, she doesn't write these epithets in her letters to Troilus, signifying that he no longer sustains her life. She learns to live without him, the devotion she had for him fades, and the reader can quickly sense at that point that Criseyde will soon exchange him for another lover.[39] This metaphor, so frequently employed, alludes to a still poignant narrative perspective of the sheer intensity of Troilus and Criseyde's love, which becomes unrequited once more by the tale's end.

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[34] Ibid., 1.1013 (*although his heart played*), 2.579 (*my heart confesses*), and 2.809.
[35] S. L. Clark and Julian N. Wasserman, "The Heart in 'Troilus and Criseyde:' The Eye of the Breast, the Mirror of the Mind, the Jewel in Its Setting," *The Chaucer Review* 18, no. 4 (1984): 320.
[36] Ibid.
[37] *Middle English Dictionary*.
[38] Geoffrey Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde*, 1.461.
[39] "The Heart in 'Troilus and Criseyde," 321.

The final use is regarding the idiom, "with all my/thy/his heart," suggesting that the undivided heart corresponds to all one's effort or desire towards a certain object or action. This metaphor is a common adverbial phrase in ME, identified in MED definition 2b (a) to emphasize fervency, sincerity, or lack of dissimulation.[40] In total, this use only occurs 11 times throughout, usually by Pandarus when asking Troilus or Crysede to do something; for example, to "thus sey with al thyn herte in good entente", to speak with all his heart in good conscience.[41] Pandarus here is asking Troilus to give all his effort and energy to reveal his woes, assuming that the heart is the central source of energy in the body and that one can consciously direct all its energy to a single purpose. This premise resembles type G in that the heart is the center of the body both physically and emotionally. Also significant is that the heart's energy/effort is controllable and directable, especially by the rational mind. These premises are opposite to those of metaphors of vehicle, since then the heart, as somatic crystallization of passion, can overtake and steer someone in any direction.

Overall, Chaucer's frequent metaphors of the heart in his *Troilus and Criseyde* denotes its strong symbolic value in medieval English language which has persevered into modern English. In each of eight distinct types; A, as vehicle in a metaphor of movement; B, as physical object with tactile properties; C, as metaphor of container; D, as organ that suffers various conditions; E, as location of interior discernment; F, As metaphor of personification; G, as term of endearment; and H, as the idiom "with all thy heart," the concept of heart lived within a set of presuppositions of Late Medieval people about emotion and passion as very present and physical phenomena. With an astonishing 335 uses of "herte" in his text, Chaucer undoubtedly considered

[40] *Middle English Dictionary*.
[41] Geoffrey Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde*, 1.935.

it a profound symbol perfectly poised to convey the intensity and passion of romance through literary metaphor.

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