

Overhearing Complaint and the Dialectic of Consolation in Chaucer's Verse

Catherine A. M. Clarke
St Hilda's College, Oxford

The act of overhearing is a recurrent motif throughout Chaucer's verse, frequently functioning to initiate action and to develop narrative. Despite the very different contexts of the many 'overhearing episodes' in Chaucer's verse, an overview of these instances does reveal striking similarities and a clear element of conventionality or formulaic usage. For the modern reader, these similarities present a series of important questions. What were the literary conventions and connotations of the act of overhearing for Chaucer and his contemporaries? How are the implications of overhearing different from those of hearing as the direct or intended addressee? And how can we develop an interpretative framework for understanding the concept of overhearing for medieval writers and audiences? This article will examine a range of overhearing episodes in Chaucer's verse, focusing particularly on examples of overheard complaint in *Troilus and Criseyde*, as well as *The Knight's Tale* and *The Book of the Duchess*. It will explore connections and similarities between these instances, developing a theory of the literary politics and conventions of overhearing for Chaucer and his audience. For Chaucer, it seems that overhearing is not an act which promotes compassion and empathy with the speaker, but rather a process of opposition and confrontation which places speaker and listener in dialectic relationship. In the context of lyric complaint, an understanding of the medieval politics of overhearing can also help us to refine our understanding of Chaucer's concept of consolation.

The first appearance of Pandarus in Book I of *Troilus and Criseyde* is in the context of his eavesdropping on Troilus' lengthy lament of love for Criseyde (who is as yet unnamed by Troilus). Troilus' speech is a fine set piece of lyric complaint, participating in the conventions of rhetorical high style and the romantic ideology of courtly love. As Troilus' complaint concludes, the disrupted syntax suggests language fractured by emotion – the complex word order representing, however, an assured and accomplished use of high rhetorical convention. Troilus pleads:

“But help now, god, and ye, swete, for whom
I pleyne, i-kaught, ye, neure wight so faste” (I, 533-4).¹

Troilus' repeated uses of *exclamatio* (for example, “O mercy, dere herte”, I, 535) contribute to the tone of conventional complaint, and the sophisticated use of *tradio* on ‘laste’ in lines 535-7 affirms the courtly high style of his rhetoric:

“O mercy, dere herte, and help me from
The deth, for I, while that my lyf may laste,
More than my self wol loue yow to my laste.”

Chaucer explicitly terms Troilus' speech here a ‘compleynte’ (I, 541), and Troilus uses the verb *pleynen* to refer to his own words (I, 534). However, after this speech concludes, the poem's narrative voice tells us that Troilus feels that his complaint has been foolish.

‘Al was for nought, she herde nat his pleynte.
And whan that he by-thought on that folie,
A thousand fold his wo gan multiplie.’ (I, 544-6)

Of course, Troilus' sense of folly here is ironic: conventional medieval lyric complaint is a form which does not necessarily require the presence of the subject. Troilus' complaint here, unheard as yet by Criseyde, is one of the conventional strategies of

deferral and delay which characterise the courtly romance of the early books of *Troilus and Criseyde*. Troilus has in fact presented us not with 'folie', but with a paradigmatic, polished example of medieval courtly complaint. Obviously, there is another irony here in Troilus' regret that he lacks a listener. Although Criseyde is not there to hear his words, Pandarus (like us, the poem's audience) is listening to his complaint.

Pandarus comes into the room to hear Troilus 'By-wayling... thus allone' (I, 547), and listens to his friend's complaint. On this occasion Pandarus' entrance is undetected: he

'Com oones in vnwar and herd hym groone,
 And say his frend in swich destresse and care:
 "Allas," quod he, "who causeth al this fare?
 O mercy, god, what vnhap may this meene?
 Han now thus soone Grekes maad yow lene?" (I, 549-53)

'Oones' in this passage is particularly intriguing in its ambiguity, suggesting either an isolated incident, or the possibility that Pandarus' covert voyeurism is commonplace. The fact that Pandarus *overhears* Troilus' love complaint, rather than that he is told as the direct addressee, is obviously significant. By allowing Troilus to be overheard, Chaucer avoids compromising the essential privacy and secrecy of courtly love: Troilus has not chosen to make his feelings public. The act of overhearing perhaps also suggests the possibility of encountering a greater authenticity in language. Later in this passage Chaucer goes on to explore the motives and rhetorical strategies behind Pandarus' response to his friend, highlighting the nature of language as a tool which can be exploited to manipulate and influence others. Despite the complex, sophisticated rhetoric of Troilus' complaint, his lack of an immediate listener perhaps suggests a greater emotional and rhetorical sincerity. Later in *Troilus and Criseyde* Pandarus certainly exploits this sense that speech overheard carries greater authenticity and sincerity. When he finally tells Criseyde of

Troilus' love for her, he invents an elaborate story in which he overhears Troilus lamenting his love whilst sleeping in the palace garden.

“...Tyl at the laste he seyde he wolde slepe,
And on the gres adoun he leyde hym tho;
And I afer gan romen to and fro,
Til that I herde, as that I welk alone,
How he bigan ful wofully to grone.” (II, 514-18)

This is an interesting example of how the transformation from ‘reality’ into conventionality – for example, the ‘paleis gardyn by a welle’ (II, 508) with its courtly romance connotations – can serve to authorise and authenticate a narrative. The act of overhearing love complaint is equally conventional, but draws on the conventions of emotional sincerity and truth. Although Troilus’ complaint in Book I is rhetorical and artful, the fact that it is overheard (rather than heard by a direct addressee) serves conventionally to affirm its authenticity.

After coming into the room and listening to the complaint, Pandarus’ immediate response, a humorously literal version of overhearing, amplifies and exaggerates Troilus’ high rhetorical style. The *exclamatio* “Allas” which announces Pandarus’ speech also announces that he will continue in the same high rhetorical idiom. The first stanza of Pandarus’ response ends in a series of rhetorical questions, the stanza break prompting our expectation that this is the conclusion of his speech. However, the next stanza picks up and continues the rhetorical display, intensifying the high rhetorical style with another lengthy, repetitious use of *interrogatio* and the sophisticated technical language of remorse and penance:

“Or hastow som remors of conscience,
And art now falle in som deuocioun,
And wailest for thi synne and thin offence,
And hast for ferde caught attricioun?” (I, 554-7)

Superficially, Pandarus engages with and continues in the same rhetorical idiom as Troilus, yet this becomes subversive imitation and shifts almost imperceptibly into a parodic participation in the high style of complaint and lament.

Crucially, although Pandarus overhears and understands Troilus' complaint, he assumes a rhetorical position of misunderstanding and opposition in order to rouse his friend from grief. The narrative tells us that:

‘Thise wordes seyde he for the nones alle,
That with swich thing he myght hym angry maken,
And with an angre don his wo to falle,
As for the tyme, and his corage awaken.’ (I, 561-5)

Chaucer makes clear Pandarus' opportunistic and calculated use of language here. Through overhearing Troilus' complaint, rather than listening as the intended addressee, it seems that Pandarus is able to assume an independent ideological and rhetorical position, uninfluenced by his friend. Rather than participate in Troilus' grief, Pandarus goes on to argue with him, asserting that “oon that excesse doth ful yuele fare” (I, 626) and persuading Troilus to abandon the self-indulgence of complaint for more productive action and pursuit. W.A. Davenport remarks on the structure of *Troilus and Criseyde* as a series of alternations between ‘complaint and debate’ or lyric and dialectic.² Pandarus' overhearing of Troilus initiates the first of these dialectic sections within the poem. The passage here does suggest the idea that overhearing rather than hearing as the direct or intended addressee can liberate the listener from the intentions and manipulations of the speaker. Overhearing here seems to imply the possibility of resistance, even opposition, to the intentions, emotions and ideologies of the speaker. I suggest that the literary convention of overhearing signals that the listener will engage with the speaker, but from an independent, oppositional perspective. Pandarus places himself in dialectic

relationship with Troilus, consoling him and coaxing him out of his grief through a series of rebuttals, contradictions and counter-assertions.

This passage from *Troilus and Criseyde* is particularly revealing, for Chaucer deliberately exposes the mechanisms of language and foregrounds the politics of communication. However, several other passages in Chaucer's works similarly exploit the literary expectations and conventions associated with the action of overhearing. In *The Knight's Tale*, Palamon's overhearing of Arcite's love complaint is the first action of opposition in a continuing process of conflict. Just as with Pandarus and Troilus, Palamon overhears Arcite by chance.

'Ther as by aventure this Palamoun
Was in a bussh, that no man myghte hym se,
For soore afered of his deth was he.' (ll. 1516-18)

At this point the narrative voice of the tale digresses for a moment to warn us of the possibilities of being overheard and the need for caution in speech. The advice is given proverbially:

'But sooth is seyde, go sithen many yeres,
That "feeld hath eyen and the wode hath eres."
It is ful fair a man to bere hym evene,
For al day meeteth men at unset stevene.' (ll. 1521-24)

This sententious caution suggests that responsibility for the conflict generated by overhearing must be shared by speaker and listener: the mistaken assumption of being alone may lead the speaker into culpable excess and lack of moderation in speech. Such failure to be 'evene' is certainly evident in Arcite's speech here, just as indulgence and excess characterise the complaint of Troilus overheard by Pandarus. After singing a roundel, Arcite laments his unrequited love for Emelye, articulating his misery through the intense and high rhetorical language of courtly complaint. His

speech ends with the conventional claim that he will die through unfulfilled love:

'Ye sleen me with youre eyen, Emelye!
Ye been the cause wherfore that I dye.' (ll. 1567-68)

Palamon, in his bush, overhears this complaint and

'...thoughte that thurgh his herte
He felte a coold swerd sodeynliche glyde,
For ire he quook; no lenger wolde he byde.' (ll. 1574-76)

Palamon's incipient hatred is represented in terms that recall the intensity of his initial feeling of love for Emelye ('as though he stongen were unto the herte', l. 1079). In many ways, this overhearing scene between Palamon and Arcite replays and distorts or, indeed, inverts aspects of the initial encounter with Emelye in the prison garden. Most obviously, this scene results in hatred rather than love. As with the earlier scene, the overhearing episode relies both on observation (here aural, rather than visual) without the subject's awareness, and an element of voyeurism, which opens interesting questions about the power balance between the participants. In this situation of overhearing, who is in the greater position of power: Arcite as speaker or Palamon as involuntary listener? It seems that, whereas it might be expected that the speaker, with his capacity for rhetorical persuasion and manipulation, might be in a dominant position over the listener, the act of overhearing redresses or even subverts this balance.

Palamon's response to overhearing Arcite is one of aggression and opposition. In contrast with their previous fraternal friendship he declares a new relationship:

'For I am Palamon, thy mortal foo.' (l. 1590)

The verbal aggression between Palamon and Arcite quickly develops into physical conflict and violence. Their argument here is not the skilful dialectic we see between Troilus and Pandarus, but rather a brutal statement of blunt opposition. What I suggest is so crucial here is that Pandarus' overhearing of Arcite does not *precede* conflict and confrontation, but is itself the first action which places the two knights in a relationship of difference and opposition. The conflict here is less delicate and rhetorical than the debate between Troilus and Pandarus. Palamon is moved not to console his friend, but to denounce him. However, the expectations raised by overhearing are similar in the two poems. An act of overhearing draws the lines for opposition and confrontation.

A far more gentle and delicate use of the overhearing convention forms the basis for Chaucer's early poem *The Book of the Duchess*. As with Troilus' lament of unrequited love in *Troilus and Criseyde*, the use of overhearing in *The Book of the Duchess* allows emotional anguish to be conveyed without any loss of decorum. The noble speaker (whatever his possible historical identity) is allowed to reveal his grief whilst still remaining emotionally restrained and continent: 'There ys nothyng myssayd nor do' (l. 528). The dreamer in *The Book of the Duchess* encounters a young knight alone in a wood, and observes him.

'I stalked even unto hys bak,
 And there I stood as stille as ought,
 That, soth to saye, he saw me nougt;
 For-why he heng hys hed adoun,
 And with a dedly sorwful soun
 He made of rym ten vers or twelve
 Of a compleynte to hymselfe –
 The most pitee, the most rowthe,
 That ever I herde...' (ll. 458-65)

As with Troilus, the complaint spoken here is not consciously communicative, but a reflexive act of emotional indulgence and

introspection ('a compleynte to hymselfe'). The language associated with the dreamer resonates with the woodland setting and the idea of hunting with its allegorical connotations of love, possession and power. The dreamer 'stalks' up to the knight, and then stands 'as stille as ought' in order not to disrupt the moment. We have a sense again of how overhearing allows the listener to encounter something natural and unaffected, but the vocabulary of the hunter may also allude to the privileged, powerful position of the overhearer. Ian Bishop refers to this scene in *The Book of the Duchess* as 'the innocent eavesdropping on the complaint of the Black Knight.'³ However, the charged language of the hunt suggests something more complex, and the action of overhearing in Chaucer is never 'innocent' or free from literary politics and expectations. Indeed, this example in *The Book of the Duchess* is true 'eavesdropping' rather than the more passive or unintentional overhearing in *Troilus and Criseyde* or *The Knight's Tale*. The wilful act of eavesdropping seems particularly relevant to Chaucer's dream vision narrator, with his insatiable appetite for books and his constant desire to encounter and appropriate stories.

With the intervention of the dreamer, the knight moves from interior conflict (he 'argued with his owne thought, / And in hys wyt disputed faste', ll. 504-5) to a dialectic dialogue that moves towards consolation. As with the passage in *Troilus and Criseyde* discussed earlier, this is not aggressive conflict and confrontation, but a delicate dialectic process, coaxing the speaker into a new emotional state. However, as in *Troilus and Criseyde*, or even with Palamon and Arcite in *The Knight's Tale*, the process is still one of opposition, and this oppositional relationship begins with the act of overhearing. Overhearing frees the listener to assume an independent ideological position, a different opinion. In the case of *The Book of the Duchess*, overhearing rather than being told has even more importance for the decorum of the poem. The dreamer's oppositional stance is not in response to learning of the knight's grief as the direct addressee. Difference in this circumstance might imply rebellion, disobedience or lack of proper deference on the

part of the listener. Overhearing allows the dreamer to grasp the plight of the knight – very likely his social superior and, quite possibly, the patron of the poem itself – and to adopt an independent position without undermining social hierarchy and decorum. In *The Book of the Duchess*, the dreamer's dialectic manoeuvres allow the dialogue to work towards consolation and affirmation of the ideal, reciprocated love which the knight has lost. For Chaucer, as is the case in his sources (including, most obviously, Boethius' *Philosophiae Consolationis*), consolation is a rigorous dialectic process of interrogation, rebuttal and ultimate affirmation.

This examination of three instances of overhearing in Chaucer's verse does indicate usage of shared convention and established connotation. However, it is striking that Chaucer does not use – or need – a specific verb 'to overhear'. Indeed, such a verb is not available to him in Middle English, the *Oxford English Dictionary* recording the first use of the verb *to overhear* with its modern meaning in a sermon by Latimer dated to 1549.⁴ Chaucer instead describes the particular circumstances of these acts of hearing, including the speaker's unawareness of an audience. In Modern English, the distinction between the verbs *to listen*, with the subject as agent, and *to hear* (or *to overhear*), with the subject as recipient, is crucial. This distinction parallels the differences between the verbs *herken* and *heren* (the verb selected by Chaucer in these passages) in Middle English. Perhaps, for Chaucer, 'overhearing' may not be an 'act', but rather an accident by which one is put in the position of involuntarily receiving information. This possibility would offer an alternative reading of the power balance between speaker and overhearer involved in these examples, stripping the listener of intention or choice and reducing the status of both participants to victims of accident and situation. We recall the ambiguity of Pandarus' initial entrance into Troilus' room 'unwar' – both undetected by the speaker and perhaps himself unsuspecting and innocent of any intention to listen. The element of chance and accident is clearly central to both *Troilus and Criseyde* and *The*

Knight's Tale, the instances of overhearing emphasising the protagonists' subjection to the arbitrariness of fortune and initiating a chain of unforeseen consequences. However, all three instances discussed in this study do include an element of implied intention. It is suggested that Pandarus may have entered Troilus' room unnoticed on previous occasions. Palamon has chosen to conceal himself from the approaching, singing stranger, even though 'no thyng ne knew he that it was Arcite' (l.1519). And the narrator of *The Book of the Duchess* covertly pursues and 'hunts' the lamenting knight. Even more strikingly, what unites these examples is the concealed listener's ongoing choice not to reveal himself fully to the speaker. Palamon remains physically concealed in the bush to hear Arcite's confession in full, Pandarus conceals his real response behind a facade of dissembling, calculating rhetoric, and – in a more benign way – so too does the narrator of *The Book of the Duchess*, who adopts oppositional arguments for the purpose of directing the knight towards consolation.

As we have seen, overhearing in Chaucer's verse is a motif that functions within clear literary conventions and raises clear narrative expectations. Whether act or accident, overhearing places speaker and listener in a dialectic relationship, which may be exaggerated to the level of violence (as with Palamon and Arcite), or stylised as intellectual debate (as with the dreamer and the knight in *The Book of the Duchess*). Through examining these examples, this article has attempted to recover the medieval literary politics of overhearing and the connotations of this complex communicative process.

NOTES

¹ All Chaucer quotations are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, general editor Larry D. Benson, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1987.

² W.A. Davenport, *Chaucer: Complaint and Narrative*, Cambridge, D.S. Brewer, 1988, p.130.

³ Ian Bishop, *Chaucer's Troilus and Criseyde: A Critical Study*, Bristol, University of Bristol Academic Publications, 1981, p.56.

⁴ The definition given is: 'To hear (speech or utterance) that is not intended to reach one's ears; to hear (a speaker) without his intention or knowledge'. *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1961, p.306.