

Another Look at Chaucer's "Trophee"

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At both the worldes endes, seith Trophee,
In stide of bundes he a pileer sette.¹

The present essay can make no claim definitively to establish the identity of Chaucer's mysterious informant; instead, it presents new circumstantial evidence to refine a solution advanced long ago by G. L. Kittredge through a reconsideration of the text he brought forward that may better answer certain well-taken objections raised against his theory by R.A. Pratt.² Kittredge, we remember, had argued that the name *Trophee* represents Chaucer's transmogrification of an inaccurate text of a passage such as is found in the Latin *Epistola Alexandri ad Aristotelem* wherein the writer refers to the pillars that Hercules is said to have constructed in the Orient:

Ast et ad Herculis Liberique trophaea me deduxit in orientis ultimis oris;
aurea utraque deorum constituerat simulacra. Quae an solida essent, ego
scire cupiens omnia iussi perforari, et id ipsum cum vedissem solida esse,
simili metallo complevi et Herculem Liberumque deiectis simulacris vic-
timis complacavi.³

Kittredge speculated that in these lines (reproduced almost verbatim by Vincent of Beauvais in his *Speculum historiale*)⁴ difficulty arose for Chaucer from the use of a form of the unfamiliar word *tropaeum*; had the text instead shown *columnas*, his argument implies, we might never have had to encounter "Trophee." But Professor Pratt shrewdly noted that in references such as these, "if the word *tropea* comes to stand for a person, it can no longer indicate monuments, and we are left without an Oriental structure to match the Occidental Pillars."⁵

That Chaucer meant "Trophee" to refer to a person we can have little doubt, for the spelling represents the poet's usual practice of word-formation from Latin names in *-us*. The curious marginal gloss in the Hengrwt and Ellesmere MSS, *Ille vates Chaldeorum Tropheus*, cannot,

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however, shed any light on who Chaucer thought this particular individual was; for Pratt, in refining a suggestion of Tupper, has shown that this gloss as it now stands is nothing more than a mistaken conflation of two glosses originally separate: *vates Chaldeorum*, to the story of Daniel in the Nabugodonosor section of the Monk's Tale; and *Tropheus*, to the lines of the Hercules section here in question.⁶ It is possible that Ellesmere's glosses stem ultimately from Chaucer himself; but certainly whatever the poet thought he knew of this Tropheus cannot be said per se to undermine credibility in Kittredge's reconstruction of Chaucer's misreading or misconstruing of the object *tropaeum* as a person. If such a misreading can be accounted for, the anglicized form that Chaucer employs and the Latin gloss he may in fact have added both follow naturally.

Latin *tropaeum* (postclassical *trophaeum*, medieval *tropheum*; cf. OF *trophee*), a treetrunk, afterwards a pillar or other monument decorated as a memorial of victory, proved, perhaps because of its various meanings, notoriously difficult for translators. The Old English version of the *Epistola* omits the word in two of its three occurrences, and elsewhere renders the phrase *cum sublimibus trophaeis* as *mid hean sigum*. The Icelandic translation of the Latin text avoids translating *trophaea*, and the Italian version nonsensically refers to the "trionfo d'Hercole" when it is describing the monuments, or pillars, which he set up. To these we should add the curious, albeit not wholly incorrect, gloss which Boccaccio supplies on his own use of the word in *Teseida* 2.10.3 — a gloss, however, probably unknown to Chaucer.⁷ Even more telling evidence on the difficulty the Latin word caused translators comes from the Middle English translation of the *Epistola*, a unique text preserved in a MS of the third quarter of the fifteenth century, the language of which MS suggests a contemporaneous, or nearly contemporaneous, date of composition.⁸ This text, which like others in the same MS may be a translation drafted to aid those whose knowledge of Latin was weak, demonstrates that long after the composition of the Monk's Tale a writer engaged on a complete text treating the medieval Alexander legend (and not, as perhaps in the case of Chaucer, dependent merely on excerpted material) could regularly misunderstand and misconstrue a well-known classical allusion. First let us consider the lines from the *Epistola* which Kittredge surmised were indirectly responsible for Chaucer's "Trophee." The Middle English translator who, as I have determined, was dependent on a version of the *Epistola* represented by MSS Camb., Univ. Lib. 2434; B.M., Royal 15.C.VI; and Royal 12.C.IV, saw this passage in his exemplar as:

et me ad Herculis Liberique trophea deduxi. In orientis autem ultimis horis aurea utrorumque deorum constituta erant simulacra.

He translated the passage thus:

and the Macedoynes and me and Hercules my sone the spuyles bien brought. In the est forsoth in the last parties wern ordeigned simulacres of gold of either or both goddis.⁹

Because he has misconstrued *Liberi* (gen. sing. of *Liber* 'Dionysus/Bacchus') as *liber* 'child', he has completely obscured the fact that in these lines Porus brings Alexander to the *trophea*, the Pillars of Hercules at the eastern end of the world. In his translation, Hercules has become the son of Alexander and the Pillars have been misconstrued as spoils which Alexander has gained from his victory over Porus.

The second occurrence of *tropaeum* in the *Epistola* is in the lines

Supplex orabam numina, ut me regem totius orbis terrarum cum sublimibus tropheis triumphantem in Macedoniam Olympiadi matri meae remitterent.

The Middle English translator renders the passage thus:

So also therfor mekely I praied the names as me kyng of al the londis of the world with the spuyles of victory overcomen in Macedony to Olimpi that is my Moder the thyng shyne or be shewed,

with *numina* of the source text apparently misread or misconstrued as *nomina*, and the purposive nature of the following *ut*-clause unrecognized.¹⁰

Granted that *tropaeum* proved a stumbling block for translators before and after Chaucer, as perhaps it did to Chaucer himself; we are left with Professor Pratt's objection that if Chaucer had misconstrued *tropaeum* for *Tropheus*, the thing for the person, there would be no way to account for its indicating a monument, the "pileer" which, "seith Trophee," Hercules constructed "at bothe the worldes endes." What we need is a passage that allows for the word to be misconstrued while still explicitly pointing to the oriental pillar or pillars. Such a passage, I submit, is found near the end of the *Epistola*, at a point in the narrative where Alexander relates to Aristotle his desire for everlasting fame. In the MSS of the family on which the Middle English translator was dependent, these lines read:

Ibique legato meo precepi, quem presidem preposueram, nomine Alanen, ut preciperet Persis et Babyloniis ut pilas solidas aureas duas pedem vigenum quinum altitudine habentes fecissent preciperetque ut his omnia gesta mea

scriberent posuissentque eas in ultima India ultra Liberi et Herculis tro-
phea, quorum centum erant quaedam in diversis regionibus. Ibi itaque
meas aureas pilas eis posteriores quinis pedibus statuere imperavi, quae
miraculo futura forent, carissime michi preceptor Aristoteles, posteris
seculis, non enim parva admiratione admirandum.

The passage is thus rendered by the translator:

Ther to my legat I comaunded that and whiche precident I proposed and
bifore sette, in name Alenen, as that he comaunde and bidde the Perses and
the Babiloynes as of .v. feete thei don to be made; and also he comaunded
as of al these my deedis and doynge bien writen and put. And sette
theym in the last and uttermost Ynde biyonde the sones and chieldren of
Hercules victory of the whiche .c. sum weren in divers regiouns. Ther also
my golden ballis biyonde theym of .v. feete to be statute and ordeigned I
have comaunded; to the whiche myracles or mervailles in tymes to come
wern nat a litel to be received of the same Alexander and of this
felawshipes or hostis, my most diere comaundor Aristotil, in to worldis
hereafter, forsoth, nat with a litel wondryng to be woundred.¹¹

As is customary with the translator, the passage shows the infelicitous attempt to render the Latin *verbum a verbo*; what is particularly noteworthy here is the mistranslation of *pīla* 'column, pillar,' as *pīla* 'ball.' But had the writer correctly rendered the relatively simple phrase *aureas pilas*, his misconstruing in the following sentence of the problematic *trophea* (which he mistakes in rendering for the first time in English as 'victory') would show how a misreading of the passage might yield both a correct rendering, *pileer*, and the transmogrification of *trophea* into something else. We may suppose that Chaucer, seeing this passage in a copy of *Epistola* or in the *Speculum historiale* where it was excerpted, had no trouble divining the right sense of the common word *pilas*, but, like others before and after him, was thrown by *trophea*.¹²

The phenomenon of calling personal and place names into being from sources misunderstood or misconstrued is surprisingly common in the Middle Ages. Elsewhere in the Middle English *Letter* the clause *tum ergo continuo citos apud universos milites meos, ut Porum et Fasiacen ex reponso peteremus admoui, et quod nobis faustum felizque esset futurum* ("Then I forthwith warned all the excited soldiers that we seek out Porus and Fasiacen according to the reply of the priest, for that would be fortunate and blessed for us") is rendered, "Than I anon incontynent cited al my knightis as Porrus and ffasiacen of the aunswere we aske to have mon-issed and warned and that of vs faustum and ffelix bien to come," with these two common adjectives transmogrified into personal names.

Chaucer's "authority" on the Trojan War, Lollius, almost certainly owes his existence to a misunderstanding of a vocative in an epistle of Horace, while the denotation of the common substantive *sybylla* 'female prophetess' has obviously accounted for the substitution of the name *Sibille* in the *Troilus* and Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, among other sources. And of similarly contrived proper names in Malory we might cite, among others, *Abblasowre* (Malory's coinage from Fr *vavasour*); *Elyce his sonne* (a character invented through misunderstanding of the genitive *Elyses*); *Gotelake* (manufactured from [rare] ME *guyte* 'child' plus Malory's "favorite" suffix, *-lake*); *Hervyn, the ladyes newew off* (from *la veve dame de laiencz*, apparently misunderstood as *neveu dame de Hervins*); *Mon-drames* (a misreading of *Mordrains* i.e. Evalac, and hence treated as a separate character); and *Perys de Foreste Savage* (coined by Malory from the nameless *chevalier qui chi pres est manans en ceste forest*).¹³

Two problems remain, which can be dealt with quickly. The first, and least troublesome, concerns the fact that in no passage from the *Epistola* yet brought forward for consideration are the western Pillars of Hercules explicitly mentioned, only the edifices in the Orient. Since Chaucer explicitly alludes to the pillars at both ends of the world, there may be some inclination among researchers to come up with a passage in which the two sets of pillars are mentioned. But surely it need not be assumed that Chaucer based his knowledge of the western pillars on any specific text; for almost anyone in medieval England associated with trade and commerce, as was Chaucer, could be expected to be familiar with the pillars reputed to have been constructed by Hercules at the narrow point between Africa and Europe. Chaucer himself had traveled in Spain, and the Knight, as we learn in the General Prologue, had fought at Algesiras, just a stone's throw from the famous Pillars; moreover, in an addition which Chaucer makes to his source of the Man of Law's Tale, Constance travels "thurghout the narwe mouth/ of Jubaltare and Septe," the Strait of Gibraltar itself.¹⁴ Coming upon the curious lines from the *Epistola* referring to the pillars at the other end of the world might naturally have made Chaucer think of the more familiar structures. Indeed, Chaucer may intend the phrase "at bothe the worldes endes" to mean "both in the west, and in the east"; nor can we deny the possibility that in the final lines of the *Epistola* quoted above Chaucer construed the phrase *in diversis regionibus* literally to refer to regions at opposite ends, or in different directions, of the known world.

A second possible objection involves in general the nature of the evidence brought forward in this essay; for by the argument here advanced, the

reference to "Trophee" in the section of the Monk's Tale dealing with Hercules ultimately stems from an account of Alexander which, though it mentions Hercules frequently, refers to him only tangentially. Moreover, in the Monk's treatment of Alexander there is no mention of any pillars Alexander was thought to have erected in the east. Such a reference might seem not only natural, but almost expected, if the poet had been influenced by the *Epistola*. But for Chaucer to develop an oblique reference to Hercules in a text of the Alexander story is hardly surprising when we consider that the association of these two heroes was a classical commonplace, and that elsewhere in his poetry Chaucer emphasizes their similarities and likenesses. Although the historical Alexander began his conquests with Achilles as his hero, he soon adopted Hercules as his model, as he came to see himself as *cosmocrator*: it was Hercules, not Achilles, who appeared to Alexander at the siege of Tyre; Hercules, whose name Alexander supposedly gave to his own son by Barsine; and it was emulation of this same hero which prompted Alexander, according to Arrian, to seek acknowledgement of his sonship to Ammon.¹⁵ Kittredge reminds us that many writers related the fact that Alexander consciously attempted to match, even to surpass, the legendary exploits of Hercules in India: such was Alexander's motivation in storming the rock Aornus, which had supposedly resisted Hercules' attempts to climb it, and, as we have seen in the *Epistola*, in constructing the eastern pillars ... *ultra Liberi et Herculi trophea*. Indeed, it would seem that the pillars at the two ends of the world came very specifically to represent Alexander's emulation of Hercules; for as related by Arrian, the speech Alexander delivered to his mutinous troops at the Hyphasis declared his intention to conquer what was left of India — he thought this would take him to the edge of Ocean at the world's end — and then to complete his conquest of the world by sending a fleet to the Pillars of Hercules off the coast of Africa.¹⁶

Chaucer most directly indicates his knowledge of the special relationship of Alexander and Hercules in the *House of Fame*, where "th'armes and the name" of the two heroes are displayed together (somewhat like a trophy!) on the shoulders of the Goddess Fame.¹⁷ But even in the Monk's Tale, where he treats the heroes separately, Chaucer elaborates on their similarities. He describes both as great conquerors, each of whose domain encompassed the entire world, right to its "ende." Both heroes, moreover, displayed similar humane virtues, as well as extraordinary martial prowess: Hercules was known for his "heigh bountee," and Alexander was "of kynghthod and of fredom flour."¹⁸ Yet in even one more respect did Chaucer see fit to link the heroes: for each had been deceived by a

woman. The Monk, we remember, explicitly alludes to Deianira's deception of Hercules; likewise, beneath the general observation on Alexander that "save wyn and wommen, no thyng mighte aswage/ His hye entente in arme armes and labour," lies the story of Alexander's deception by Candace, to whom Chaucer elsewhere alludes more pointedly.¹⁹ Although we may never be able definitely to explain why the Monk did see fit to mention Alexander's Pillars explicitly, the particular similarities of the careers of these two heroes and their association in Chaucer's mind make more understandable the route from the *Epistola* to Chaucer's "Trophee."

Notes

¹F.N. Robinson, ed., *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957), Monk's Tale 2117-18. All quotations of Chaucer's works are from this edition.

²G.L. Kittredge, "The Pillars of Hercules and Chaucer's 'Trophee,'" *Putnam Anniversary Volume* (Cedar Rapids, IA: Torch Press, 1909), 545-66; Robert A. Pratt, "Chaucer and the Pillars of Hercules," *Studies in Honor of Ullman*, ed. Lillian B. Lawler, Dorothy M. Robathon, and William C. Korfmacher (St. Louis: Classical Bulletin, 1960), 118-25. Professor Pratt would direct the attention of scholars towards medieval accounts of the Labors of Hercules for the secret of Chaucer's Trophee.

³"And, moreover, [Porus] led me to the trophies of Hercules and Liber in the furthest eastern boundaries; he had constructed golden images of each of the gods. And I, desirous to know whether they were solid, ordered all to be punctured; and when I had seen that it was solid, I filled them with a like metal and placated with offerings Hercules and Liber for the idols which had been toppled." Cf. the critical edition of W. Walther Boer, *Epistola Alexandri ad Aristotelem ad Codicum Fidem Edidit et Commentario Critico Instruit*, *Beitrag zur klassischen Philologie*, Band 50 (Meisenheim am Glan: Verlag Anton Hain, 1973), 26-27.

⁴Kittredge, 559-69; cf. Vincent of Beauvais, *Speculum historiale*, Douai, 1624 (Graz, Austria: Akademische Druck-u. Verlagsanstalt, 1965), Book 4, Chapter 55, 132.

⁵Pratt, 119.

⁶Frederick Tupper, "Chaucer and Trophee," *MLN* 31 (1916), 142-46. This article met with objections from F.N. Robinson, *Works*, p. 854; but cf. Pratt, 121-23.

⁷See *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "tropaeum," "trophy"; *A Latin Dictionary*, ed. Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), s.v. "tropaeum"; *Revised Medieval Latin Word-List from British and Irish Sources*, ed. R.E. Latham (London: British Academy, 1965), s.v. "tropheum"; O. F. Emerson, "Seith Trophee," in *Chaucer Essays and Studies* (Cleveland: Western Reserve University Press, 1929), 263-70; and Kittredge, 561. Boccaccio's gloss is printed in *Tutte le opere di Giovanni Boccaccio*, vol. 2: *Teseida delle nozze di Emelia*, ed. Alberto Limentani (Milan: Mondadori, 1964), 299-300. I cannot accept the contention of Piero Boitani (*Chaucer and Boccaccio*, Oxford: Medium Aevum

Monographs, n.s. 8, 1977, 190-97) that Chaucer knew Boccaccio's glosses to the poem; see Robert A. Pratt, "Conjectures Regarding Chaucer's Manuscript of the *Teseida*," *SP* 42 (1945), 745-63. The identification, by both Tupper and Emerson (following a suggestion of W. W. Skeat, *Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 2, liv-lvi), of Trophee with Guido de Colonne, perhaps known to Chaucer as Guido de Columpna, may safely be disregarded; see Kittredge, 565-66, and Robinson, *Works*, 748.

⁸For the text, see *The Middle English Letter of Alexander to Aristotle*, ed. Vincent DiMarco and Leslie Perelman (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1978), as well as the edition by Thomas Hahn, MS 41 (1979), 106-60. A.I. Doyle's comment ("An Unrecognized Piece of Piers the Ploughman's Creed and Other Work by Its Scribe," *Speculum* 34 [1959], 428-36), that the translations of various devotional and ecclesiastical treatises in Worcester Cathedral Library MS F.172 are done so literally as to suggest that they are cribs which depend on the originals for their intelligibility, seems equally true of the translation of the *Epistola*, as the passages quoted in this essay may suggest.

⁹DiMarco and Perelman, ll. 458-62; Hahn, ll. 293-96.

¹⁰DiMarco and Perelman, ll. 602-05; Hahn, ll. 384-87, who suggests that the scribe saw, or misread, *re niterent*.

¹¹DiMarco and Perelman, ll. 875-91; Hahn, ll. 565-75.

¹²*Speculum historiale*, Book 4, Chapter 60, 133. In precisely what fashion Chaucer, or his source, may have misconstrued the Latin can remain only a matter of speculation. My colleague Ernest Gallo plausibly suggests that it was perhaps confusion over the phrase *Liber et Herculis trophea quorum centum erant* which, in the context of recording deeds in writing, may have precipitated the error. The phrase *trophea quorum centum erant* might well have appeared in a MS Chaucer saw as *trophea q^o 2^l c^m erat*; if the abbreviation 2 (*rum*) were not carefully formed, and appeared to a reader as if it were connected to the letter following, rather than to that preceding, it could well have been misread as *q^o 2c*. And if the mark signaling omission of the "n" in *erāt* were invisible or omitted, the reading might well have appeared *trophea q^o 2c^m erat*, or *trophea quo dictum erat*, "trophea, by whom it was spoken." This requires no more a suspension of disbelief than that the mark of abbreviation (Ϸ (*rum*)) appeared or was construed as ʒ (*d*) or ʒ (*di*).

¹³See DiMarco and Perelman, ll. 828-30 (Hahn, ll. 534-36); Robert A. Pratt, "A Note on Chaucer's Lollius," *MLN* 65 (1950), 183-87; for *Sibille*, the note to Troilus 5.1450 in the edition of Robert Kilburn Root (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1926), 552-53, and *Confessio Amantis*, ed. G. C. Macaulay, 2, E.E.T.S. e.s. 82, 5.7451-52; for citations from Malory, *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, ed. Eugene Vinaver, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967), "Index of Proper Names," vol. 3, 1665-701.

¹⁴See *Chaucer Life-Records*, ed. Martin M. Crow and Clair C. Olson (Oxford: Clarendon, 1966), 64-65; Albert C. Baugh, "The Background of Chaucer's Mission to Spain," in *Chaucer und seine Zeit: Symposium fur Walter F. Schirmer*, ed. Arno Esch (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1968), pp. 55-71; General Prologue 57; and Man of Law's Tale 946-47.

¹⁵See Andrew Runni Anderson, "Heracles and His Successors," *Harvard Studies in Classical*

Philology 39 (1928), 12-17. The existence of the child has been doubted by W. W. Tarn, "Heracles Son of Barsine," *JHS* 41 (1921), 18-28.

¹⁶Kittredge, 522-24. For a translation of Alexander's speech, see Arrian, *The Campaigns of Alexander*, trans. Aubrey de Sélincourt (Hammondsworth, England: Penguin, 1961), 292-95. Alexander's knowledge of the Ganges, on which the authenticity of this speech rests, is discussed by W. W. Tarn, *Alexander the Great* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1948) 2, 275-88.

¹⁷House of Fame 3. 14411.

¹⁸Monk's Tale 2117, 2638; 2114, 2642.

¹⁹For Deianira's deception, see Monk's Tale 2120; see also *House of Fame* 1. 402-04; Intro Man of Law's Tale 66; Wife of Bath's Prologue 775; for that of Candace, Monk's Tale 2644-45; *Parliament of Fowls* 288; and *Against Women Unconstant* 16.

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