

Criseyde – A Feminist Opera

by Alice Shields

In 2006 Nancy Dean, former professor of medieval studies at Hunter College and medievalist specializing in Chaucer, commissioned me to write an opera based on Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, one of the greatest of the medieval romances. A similar story was told earlier by Boccaccio, and later by Shakespeare. It is a tale of love and supposed betrayal that takes place during the Trojan War between Troy and Greece.

My opera *Criseyde* is in two acts, for five solo singers, ensemble of three singers, and fourteen instruments, and is two hours long. The roles are: Criseyde, a young widow, a noble lady of Troy (soprano); Troilus, Prince of Troy (lyric baritone), Cassandra, a psychic oracle, sister to Troilus (mezzo-soprano); Pandar, uncle to Criseyde and subordinate of Troilus (basso cantante), who also plays Calkas, the father of Criseyde; and Diomedes, a Greek prince (baritone). The Three Ladies, who sing as an ensemble, are nieces and companions to Criseyde (soprano and two mezzo-sopranos). The orchestra consists of flute/piccolo, oboe, english horn, bassoon, horn, trumpet, trombone, harp, piano, violin 1, violin 2, viola, cello, and contrabass.

For those who need a quick refresher, I am providing just the bare outline of Chaucer's plot. Troilus falls in love with Criseyde (Cressida). Her uncle, Pandar, who in the absence of her father controls her economically and socially, forces her to let his boss Troilus visit her. Despite her misgivings, she falls deeply in love with him. They consummate their love and vow to be true to each other in a secret relationship, but soon the parliament of Troy decides to exchange Criseyde for a valuable Trojan prisoner held by the Greeks. Criseyde, heartbroken, is taken to the Greek camp, after promising Troilus she will come back to Troy. But once she is imprisoned within the camp, she cannot leave, and Diomedes, a Greek prince in the camp, claims her. Back in Troy, Pandar and Troilus excoriate Criseyde's name, calling her false. When Troilus learns that Criseyde is Diomedes's lover, he goes into battle to kill himself. That's the essence of Chaucer's plot, aspects of which I've changed in my opera.

Before beginning work on the opera, Dean and I met once a week for about a year to read parts of Chaucer's poem aloud. She tutored me on issues of pronunciation, interpretation, and details of the medieval concept of courtly love relevant to Chaucer's work. I am composer and dramatist for the opera, and Nancy is the librettist for the new Middle English text, based on Chaucer's romance. I also studied the Boccaccio version and realized that Chaucer omitted some vital lines from his *Troilus and Criseyde*, which is largely a translation he made of Boccaccio's story. As a result, I restored them and included the text in medieval Italian.

Regarding the language, in performance supertitles can be used, and/or a libretto can be handed out with the program. The libretto has the Middle English (or occasionally Boccaccio's medieval Italian) on the left and the modern English translation on the right, so the audience can follow along easily. Example 1 below illustrates a scene early in the opera when Pandar pressures his niece Criseyde to let Troilus visit her.

Libretto excerpt from the opera *Criseyde* (Act One Scene 2)

PANDAR: (*pressuring her still further*)

“Er that age the devoure,
devoure thi beautee,
retourne his love!”

(*spoken*)

“Go love; for olde,
ther wol no wight of the!”

“Before age devours you,
devours your beauty,
return his love!”

“Go love, for when you’re old,
no one will want you!”

CRISEYDE: (*resisting*)

“What sholden straunge to me doon,
when he, that for my beste frende I wende,
ret me to love?”

“What would a stranger do to me,
when he that I believed to be my best friend,
advises me to love?”

PANDAR:

“Retourne his love.”

“Return his love.”

*Criseyde turns away from her uncle and struggles with her thoughts,
knowing that in the absence of her father, in the end she must obey him.*

Criseyde Submits To Power

CRISEYDE: (*lamenting*) [ARIETTA]

“Alas, if I hadde loved,
loved hym or any mannes creature,
ye nolde han had no mercy ne mesure,
no mercy on me,
but alwey had me in repreve.”

“Alas, if I had loved,
loved him or any other man,
you would have had no mercy on me,
no mercy on me,
but would always have had contempt for me.”

PANDAR: (*spoken softly, repeating his most effective ploy*)

“I aske oonly that ye make hym better chiere
so that hys lyf be saved.
But if ye late hyme deye,
bet were I mysyveln slow.”

“I just ask you to act a little friendly toward
him so that his life is saved.
But if you cause him to die,
it would be better if I killed myself.”

CRISEYDE: (*speaking, she turns to face him*)

“And if this man sle here hym self, allas,
in my presence, it wol be no solas.
And ek myn Emes lif
is in balaunce.”

“If this man kills himself
here in front of me, it will be no solace to me.
And even my Uncle’s life
hangs in the balance!”

(she continues seamlessly, speaking in rhythm, and then in pitch as well.)

“But natheles, with goddes governaunce,
myn honour shal I kepe, and ek his lif.
Ye seyn ye nothyng elles me requere?”

“But nonetheless, with God’s help,
I will keep my honor, and he his life.
You say you require nothing else of me?”

LADIES: (*echoing Criseyde*)

“...me requere?”

“... else of me?”

PANDAR: (*now relaxed and casual*)

“No, myn owen Nece dere.”

“No, my own niece, dear.”

(she exclaims, with barely suppressed anger:)

CRISEYDE:

“Ne love a man ne kan I naught
ne may ayeins my wyl!”

“I will not, may not, cannot love a man
against my will!”

LADIES: (*echoing Criseyde*)

“...yl.”

“...ill.”

Criseyde curtseys sharply to Pandar as he exits.

The main difference between the sounds of Chaucer's Middle English and modern English is in the pronunciation of the vowels. This is called the Great Vowel Shift, which occurred after Chaucer and before Shakespeare. In Chaucer's time, vowels were pronounced largely as in modern continental European languages such as French or Italian. After that, the vowels in English migrated, so to speak, towards the front of the mouth. For example, a common word such as "lady" in Chaucer's time was pronounced "lah-dy." Without supertitles or a libretto, the modern English-speaking audience can miss some of the words but can easily understand many others.

Scenes from *Criseyde* have been performed so far by the New York City Opera at its VOX Festival of contemporary American operas in 2008, by the American Virtuosi Opera Theater at the City University of New York Graduate Center in 2008, and by the Feminist Theory and Musicology 10 Symposium at the University of North Carolina-Greensboro in May 2009. I have now (in 2010) completed the opera.

As I read Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* over and over with Nancy Dean, I was increasingly outraged at how Chaucer was treating his female character, at the abuses he heaped upon her, later to be reflected in Shakespeare's own *Cressida*. In Chaucer's story, Criseyde, like most women throughout history and even today, bargains for her economic status and physical safety with her young woman's body, her only asset. I have taken Chaucer's story and changed it to reflect Criseyde's conscious struggles for survival, autonomy, self-respect, and love within the patriarchal culture into which she was born. In the opera, she emerges as a heroine, in a dramatic retelling of Chaucer's tale from a woman's perspective.

In creating the opera, I kept searching to find my own version of the emotional truth of all the characters as they emerged, to let them take on their own life from my psyche. I sought answers from Professor Dean and from the work of other scholars as to why Chaucer's Criseyde was—in my opinion—so vacuous and indistinct in personality and so inscrutable in some of her actions.

The character of Criseyde has been much maligned over the centuries. One reason for this might be that Chaucer hardly sketched out the motivations of his female character, in contrast to the sheer quantity of thoughts and exquisite sensitivities he attributed to his male character. We hear much of Prince Troilus' sufferings and highly nuanced feelings and perceptions, but we hear hardly anything of Criseyde's thoughts or feelings. What accounts for this discrepancy between Chaucer's many and rich descriptions of Troilus' inner life and his infrequent and rather bland descriptions of Criseyde's inner life?

Chaucer, who died in 1400, translated much of his tale word for word from his older contemporary Giovanni Boccaccio's *Il Filostrato* (He Who Is Prostrated by Love). However, in his translation Chaucer chose to leave out many actions and speeches that make Boccaccio's Criseida a strong and distinct personality. An earlier version of the Troilus and Criseyde story by medieval French author Benoit de Sainte Maure (d.1173), and even a precursor by Homer in the *Iliad*, contain strong images and speeches by the Criseyde character that are not present in Chaucer's *Criseyde*.

By omitting many of Boccaccio's lines about Criseyde, Chaucer made his Criseyde character more opaque, irrational, and trivial. I have therefore re-inserted some of Criseyde's speeches and actions in Boccaccio's medieval Italian. By doing so, I hope to give the audience a fuller understanding of my character's motivations. The following is an excerpt from the libretto which includes some of these speeches in Boccaccio's medieval Italian.

excerpt from CRISEYDE ACT ONE SCENE 5

PANDAR:	[MIDDLE ENGLISH]	
But ye writ hym, he and I wollen deye.		Unless you write him, he <u>and</u> I will die.
CRISEYDE: <i>(spoken; astonished and outraged)</i>	[BOCCACCIO]	
O! Chi dee aver di me piacere intero se già non divenisse mio marito?		Oh! Who should heave his pleasure of me, unless he first became my husband?
PANDAR:	[MIDDLE ENGLISH]	
I sey, writ hym in retourne.		I say, write him in return.
CRISEYDE: <i>(spoken)</i>	[BOCCACCIO]	
Ma come tu conoscer chiaro dei, che or vaghezze si trovano spesse chente egli ha ora, e quattro di o sei durano, e passan poscia di leggero. ---A me honesta si convien di stare.		But as you know, such desires as he now has are common things, and last four days or six and then lightly pass. --- It befits me to remain virtuous.
PANDAR: <i>(spoken)</i>		
Troiolo vale cosa maggiore assai che non sarebbe il tuo amore.		Troilus is of greater worth than thy love would be.
CRISEYDE: <i>(spoken, in anger)</i>	[MIDDLE ENGLISH]	
To myn estat have more regard, I preye, than to his lust!		To my well-being have more regard, I ask, than for his lust!
PANDAR:		
I sey, writ hym in retourne.		I say, write him in return.
CRISEYDE:		
No!		No!
PANDAR:		
Writ hym in retourne.		Write him in return.

Example 2: Criseyde fights back, in Italian! -- CRISEYDE Act I sc.5

But why did Chaucer choose to do this, to omit these strong lines about Criseyde? Why did he not defend her from injustice? Why did he ---often by faint praise--- condemn her as faithless, despite her not being permitted to make decisions on her fate that differed from what her male relatives wanted?

Professor David R. Carlson of the University of Ottawa is author of *Chaucer's Jobs* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004). His publisher provides the following summary:

Geoffrey Chaucer was not a writer, primarily, but a privileged official place-holder. Prone to violence, including rape, assault, and extortion, the poet was employed first at domestic personal service and subsequently at police work of various sorts, protecting the established order during a period of massive social upset. Chaucer's Jobs shows that the servile and disciplinary nature of the daily work Chaucer did was repeated in his poetry, which by turns flatters his aristocratic betters and deals out discipline to malcontent others. Carlson contends that it was this social and political quality of Chaucer's writings, rather than artistic merit, that made him the "Father of English Poetry."

This, it seems to me, is likely the reason why Chaucer condemned his female character Criseyde and made her motivations seem small-minded, inscrutable, and amoral: Chaucer's worldly success depended on surviving through multiple violent autocratic changes of government, and this survival required kissing up to persons of power, supporting the oppressive power structure, and not rocking the boat to defend the less powerful and the oppressed, such as women, who must be kept in line and completely controlled by whatever autocrat was in power.

Thus Chaucer paints a beautiful portrait of the crazily noble Troilus and his exquisite feelings and nuanced thoughts in contrast to the—I have to say—marginally human intelligence of his Criseyde character. The message is: men must maintain absolute power over females, and even when a female does not have the capability or power to fulfill that man's desires, and is under threat of violence and forced to do something else, she is still held responsible for not fulfilling the man's needs and desires.

This is, of course, outrageous when seen through my twenty-first-century woman's eyes. So my Criseyde resists to the extent she can. And my Troilus goes against the grain of patriarchy and, knowing she is not responsible for being incarcerated in a Greek military camp, attempts her rescue. He and Criseyde kill her oppressors, although he dies in the process.

Given that my story focuses on Criseyde, and not primarily on Troilus, I have used Dean's adaptation of Chaucer's Middle English where I could, and here and there asked her for new lines in Middle English in Chaucer's own dialect to flesh out Criseyde's feelings and thoughts. Chaucer, like other men of his time, did not seem to attribute refined feelings and thoughts to women, however magnificent his consciousness and writing was in other respects. So I sought out language to express Criseyde's thoughts.

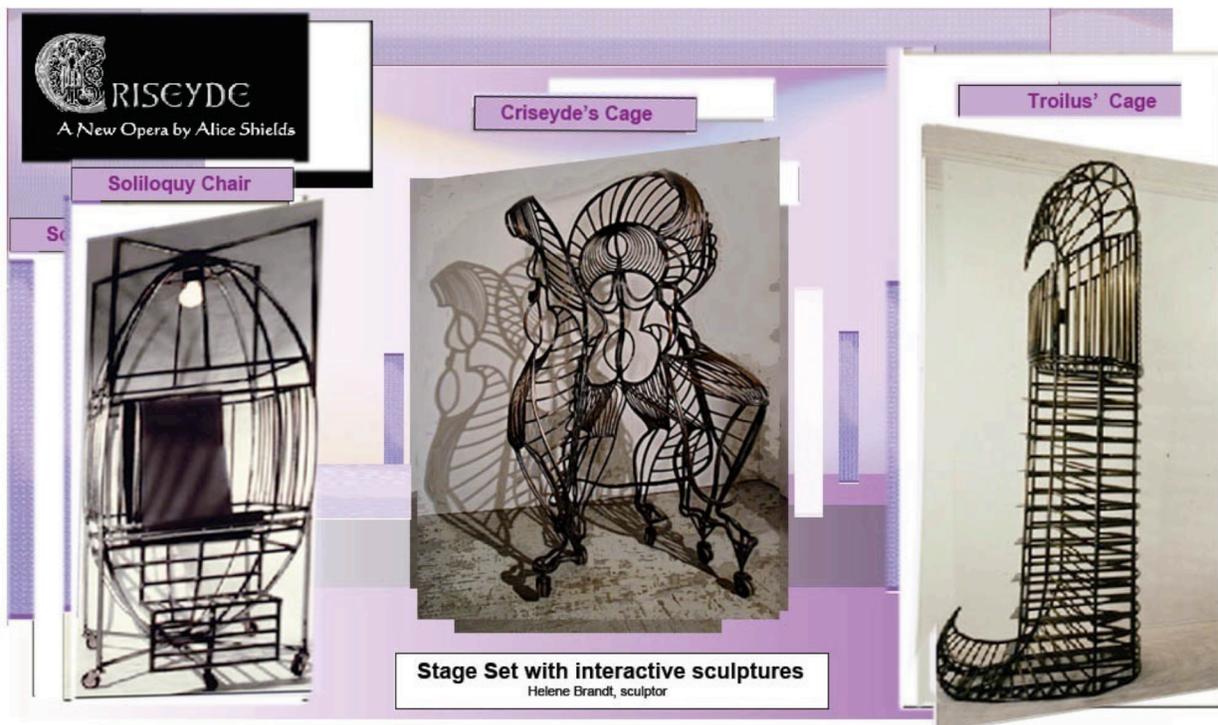
I made no attempt to keep the scansion of Chaucer's poetry, which he composed in rime royal, a seven-line stanza rhyming ababbcc. His subtle, elegant use (some say invention) of this poetic form throughout his long poem, were it set to musical rhythm, would turn a subtle background poetic effect into a tedious foreground musical effect. Besides which, the opera uses excerpts from Chaucer's work, often not whole stanzas. And of course, when words are set to the singing voice, the duration of each word or phrase is much longer than when the same line is spoken. So no poetic metre can be effectively maintained in music, unless the expressivity of the melodic line is radically constrained by rhythm.

That would be perhaps Spoken Word, a form that is word- and rhythm-based, rather than Opera, which, in my view, is a form that is emotion- and melody-based, and requires the melodic techniques, power, and range of the Western classical singing voice.

Regarding the stage setting and costumes I envision for *Criseyde*, my concept is Space-Age Meets Medieval, in a World of Shadows. The time portrayed can morph between the fourteenth century, the present, and the future. Costumes can be medieval bodices, gloves, and armor, in space-age metallic and transparent materials, reflecting the social and psychological cages each one of us is born into. Multimedia technology can be used to project the light patterns cast off by the cage-like structures with which the singers interact.

I am collaborating with sculptor Helene Brandt and computer artist-electrical engineer Spencer Russell to design the multimedia onstage effects that can be offered to opera companies as options to consider. In the next presentation of new music from *Criseyde* I hope to display for the first time Brandt's cage sculptures with Russell's computer lighting effects. Three of Brandt's theatrical cage sculptures, "Olympia," "Throne," and "Condor," all of black welded steel, can be used onstage. There need be little scenery other than the curved and straight bars of these ominous black steel cages, dramatically lit, which are entered and used by the performers in various ways in the course of the drama. The computer-controlled and manipulated light patterns cast by the cages respond to the music in real time. This technology, being invented by Russell, is brand new and will be offered as open-source technology to the theater world.

If used by the singers onstage during *Criseyde*, Helene Brandt's cages represent the societal roles which restrict women's freedom, as well as the refuge, shelter, and protection from utter degradation that these restricted roles offer women. In my opera, the character Criseyde struggles between trying to maintain the shelter of the restrictive role assigned by her culture, while simultaneously trying to act in secret outside of that restrictive role. Example 3 illustrates what the stage set might look like with Brandt's sculptures.



Example 3: CRISEYDE - optional stage set with sculptures

(sculptures © copyright 2009 Helene Brandt).

Visually and musically, the opera bridges different times and cultures, combining European classical music with Indian classical music, medieval language with new digital technology and steel sculpture, welded into a work of art about the ongoing need for the empowerment and emancipation of women. I am interested in the visuals also evoking through costume present-day cultures that heavily oppress women—Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan come to mind and various countries in Africa.

Criseyde contains Gregorian chant, quotes from Monteverdi, a Hildegard von Bingen chant, raga techniques adapted for Western notation, and actual settings of some Hindustani melodies I learned during the 1990s while I was studying and performing Indian classical music. The flow of melodic change in the opera is gradual, from modal to raga, from chromatic harmony to atonality and back in different scenes, depending upon the emotion and mood needed by the progress of the drama. As an example of the influence of medieval music on the opera, I modeled Criseyde's recurring Arietta, a lament which occurs three times in the opera, directly on Hildegard's O Virtus Sapientiae (see Example 4).

Criseyde is intensely lyrical, due in part to the influence of the melodies of North India, along with the influence of Western medieval chant and opera. I have tried to combine the austere beauty of medieval chant and the vocal techniques of Western opera with the elegant melodies of Hindustani classical vocal music. I was drawn to the study of Indian classical music primarily because of the amazing structure and expressivity of its melodies. Western art music no longer has a developed expressive use of melody, and I have felt this to be a great deficit in contemporary music. I was thus drawn to Indian music to learn from their melodic raga system as well as their rhythmic tala system, which are far more developed and systematically codified than melody or rhythm ever was in Western art music.

In terms of Indian music, most intriguing to me was Bharata Natyam, sacred South Indian classical Indian dance-drama. In ancient times (circa 500-250 B.C.E.), Sanskrit treatises say that the dancers in this ancient form actually sang. No doubt they were able to sing and dance at the same time because they sang simpler music and danced simpler dance than evolved in Bharata Natyam in India over the next two thousand years.

I spent the 1990s studying and performing Bharata Natyam with Ms. Swati Bhise and her Bharata Natyam troupe of Indian musicians and dancers. After a few years of study, during which Ms. Bhise put me on stage as a dancer-actor playing the parts that were too tall for many of the usually female Indian dancers, like the Dying King in the *Mahabharata* ("trouser" roles like those I sang as a mezzo-soprano in opera). I learned enough of the music to perform with her musicians doing *Nattuvangam*—rhythmic recitation of the choreographic syllables for the drummer and the lead dancer. I then studied North Indian (Hindustani) raga singing with the Bangladeshi singer Marina Ahmed Alam, a senior disciple of the world-renowned Pandit Jasraj. For the next ten years I struggled to notate some of the melodic beauty of Hindustani ragas with enough simplicity so that Western musicians could read them and not be turned off by the very complex notation required to actually represent Hindustani melodic phrases.

With *Criseyde*, I feel I have found a way to notate enough of the raga elements to preserve some of the suppleness of Hindustani melody and its ornaments, without overburdening the Western professional instrumentalist or singer. I was pleased when the New York City Opera orchestra, in their rehearsal for the VOX performance of scenes from *Criseyde*, read the music well. I felt then that I had at least partially succeeded in bridging the cultural gap back into Western classical music.

from *O Virtus Sapientiae*

--Hildegard von Bingen

partial transcription by Alice Shields

O Vir - - - - tus

Sa - pi - en - - - - ti - - - - ae, quae cir - cu - i - ens cir - cu - is - ti

com - pre - hen - den - do om - ni - - a in u - - na vi - a, quae ha - bet vi - tam.

from *Criseyde's Lament* (CRISEYDE Act 1, scene 2)

--Alice Shields

Middle English text by Geoffrey Chaucer

mf A - - - - las, if
A - - - - las, if

mf *mp* *espressivo* I had - - - - de loved loved, loved hym or a - ny man-nes cre - a - ture, loved him or a - ny man at all,

mf *mp* ye nol - de han had no mer - - - - cy ne me - - - - sure, you would have had no mer - - - - cy on me,

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Example No.4: Hildegard, and Criseyde's Lament, CRISEYDE Act I sc.2

Regarding structural elements in the opera *Criseyde*, I refer back to Bharata Natyam, which has three distinct dramatic categories: *natya*, *nritya*, and *nritya*. These categories were helpful to me in sorting through the different ways in which vocal music, instrumental music, text, movement, and visual elements can be contrasted and combined onstage and written into the dramatic progression and impact of an opera.

In the three categories of Bharata Natyam, *Natya* is a traditional story with actors using speech, along with music and movement. *Nritya* is mime, interpretative movement performed without rhythm, along with song and music. This is dance which is related to feeling (*rasa*) and psychological states (*bhaava*). *Nritya* is pure movement performed rhythmically, in which the movements of the body do not convey any mood or meaning, but create beauty through pattern and line, along with song and music. It is basic in Bharata Natyam to know whether a scene is *nritya* or *nritya*. I appreciate the ancient tendency of Indian cultures to categorize and organize and theorize about such things. Similarly, it seems important when creating an opera to know what dramatic or vocal or visual or movement category you are using at a particular point, and to keep the others out at all costs, lest the dramatic impact be watered down.

To that end, in constructing *Criseyde* I have used forms of vocal production as structural units. These range from full classical singing, *arioso*, recitative, speaking on pitch, speaking in rhythm, and straight speech, in addition to sighs. I reserve straight speech, as in traditional opera, to relay only plot-clarifying text that must be clearly heard by the audience.

In *Criseyde*, for example, I have inserted Boccaccio's words often as straight speech, framing these words with silence or sustained sound, so that the audience will clearly hear the shift from medieval English to medieval Italian, and even without supertitles or a libretto be aware that something supportive of *Criseyde* is at that moment being presented. For example, at the end of *Criseyde*'s aria in Act One, I inserted a speech in medieval Italian from Boccaccio's character *Criseida* to show *Criseyde*'s excitement and passion. By contrast, in the first, Middle English, lines of the libretto excerpt you may sense the tone of Chaucer's character, who is more cautious and timid.

Chaucer in Middle English:

*"--Al dredde I first to love hym to bigynne,
now woot I wel, ther is no peril inne!"*

Modern English translation:

*Although I first feared to begin loving him,
now I understand well there is no danger in it!*

Boccaccio in medieval Italian:

*"Adunque vigorosa ricevi il dolce amore,
il qual venuto,
t'è fermamente mandandolo Iddio
e soddifisa al suo caldo disimo!"*

Modern English translation:

*Therefore eagerly welcome your sweet lover
whose coming has surely
been ordained for you by God,
and satisfy his hot desire!*

In the following excerpt from earlier in *Criseyde*'s aria, she is not speaking but singing in soft *bel canto* line, which means highly focused but gentle and gradual release of breath. Here her words in Middle English show another side of her character: gentle and loving. Note that the words themselves, if merely spoken, would not necessarily come over as gentle and loving, but at least to me, appear somewhat unclear as to what her emotional state actually is. The words are Chaucer's, and he is masterful to be able to get across his somewhat dim, weak and confused character by such subtle means. But the way I set those same words, in high register, soft, sustained, further bring out or identify her emotional state. Also, she is singing my variation on a peaceful classical Hindustani song which Marina Alam taught me: "Sumirana kareley." In addition to the range, slow tempo, and soft volume I set the voice in, the use of such a melody for these words offers some emotional clarity which is not there in the words alone (see Example 5).

from Criseyde's Aria (CRISEYDE Act One Scene 3 No.2)
(partly based on Hindustani melody "Sumirana kareley")

$\text{♩} = 102$ *p*

CRISEYDE

It _____ were ho - - - - - nour,
 It _____ would be an ho - - - - - nor,

(winds, harp,
piano, strings)

p

with _____ pleye, _____ and with glad - - - - - nesse,
 with _____ a - mus-ment, _____ and with en - joy - - ment, _____

p *mp*

Example 5: from Criseyde's Aria, CRISEYDE Act I sc.3 No.2

Other than Criseyde herself, I have changed Chaucer's other characters in significant ways. Troilus threatens suicide many times during the opera; I somewhat enlarged this tendency in Chaucer's character and put back into the story Boccaccio's exciting scene in which his Troilo really does try to kill himself, and Pandar struggles with him and finally takes the knife away from him. This violent suicide attempt occurs in *Criseyde* in Act I, Scene 6, No.1; the mirror version of this scene occurs symmetrically in Act II, Scene 6, No.1 at the end of the Tent Scene, with the violent sword fight which results in the death of all the men on stage. (Note that in contrast to many operas, in which the lead woman dies at the end, in *Criseyde* all the men die and all the women are left alive. This wasn't deliberate on my part, but nevertheless I did it.)

Chaucer's character Pandar is a charmer, a sociopath who commits abuse while he tells jokes. In order to see what was actually going on in Chaucer's beautiful and—to me—disturbingly flawed story, I took out the humor, and just left in the actual deeds Chaucer had Pandar commit. Plus I hiked up his envy and voyeurism and put a spotlight on his inappropriate touching and incestuous behavior and shocking indifference to Criseyde's welfare. Chaucer has Pandar stay in the room while Troilus and Criseyde are making love, pretending to go to sleep; I have him pull a chair right up to the bed and watch. At dawn, after Troilus has left their first love-making and Criseyde lies nude, Pandar approaches the bed. She hides her body and face under the covers, and Chaucer has Pandar (scholars argue about the meaning of this scene) presumably "peer" under the sheet and kiss her. I have Pandar ripping the sheet off Criseyde's nude body and kissing her.

Chaucer's character Cassandra, Troilus' sister, is the seer described by the ancient Greek playwrights: a beautiful princess who can see the future, and when she warns people, they don't believe her. Chaucer has Troilus verbally abuse his sister, whom he has just asked to interpret his dream; she leaves the scene without a word. In my opera, I have increased her presence and impact: Cassandra appears locked in a jail onstage, and is brought out of her jail at various points by members of the cast when they need advice. Her body and her long blond hair are covered with blood, as she was in Aeschylus' *Oresteia* when she was murdered by Clytemnestra as her husband Agamemnon's enslaved concubine after the Greeks sacked Troy. In my opera, Cassandra interprets Criseyde's dream of love in the first act, and Troilus' dream of betrayal in the second act. She accompanies Criseyde, and tries to defend her from harm. She is everpresent on stage as a symbol of the way women's minds and bodies were and frequently still are brutalized.

Chaucer somewhat satirizes his character Prince Diomedes as being "of loud voice and square limbs." I have intensified his crudeness in my opera, in order to clarify what Criseyde, incarcerated in the Greek military camp, has lost in the noble and sensitive Troilus, and her powerlessness to reject Diomedes.

And finally, in the opera, I have created my Three Ladies as constant companions to Criseyde, who react to all that happens to her, and reflect on Criseyde's decisions and emotions. They are based on the theatrically useful Three Ladies in Mozart's *The Magic Flute*. In Chaucer's story, they occasionally appear in the background in Criseyde's parlor or garden; in the opera, they are very active, opening and closing scenes, serving as a kind of Greek chorus, etc.

I have structured the entire opera in what I call situational modules of both music and text. These are larger units than Wagner's *Leitmotiven*; in fact, they are often full musical scenes that may reappear later in the opera with quite different results. Each situational module can be, to some extent, rotated separately. That is, the music can repeat with different, contrasting text, or the text can be sung in repeated musical scenes by a different character with a very different dramatic and emotional result.

Each of the opera's two acts consists of seven scenes. Act One closes with the Consummation Scene, in which Criseyde and Troilus make love for the first time, full of passion and delight. Very similar music (i.e. a module) is heard at the end of Act Two. This is the Tent Scene, in which Criseyde has been exiled to a Greek military camp and is being threatened by rape. The music begins similarly to the module in the Consummation Scene, with the evocation of sensuality—but the speeches begin to be inverted and used in different contexts, which eventually become frightening instead of sexy and joyful. The line that Troilus as lover sang in the Consummation Scene is now sung in weird intervals by two men together: the Greek Prince Diomedes and Calkas, Criseyde's father (played by her uncle Pandar). The denouement occurs at the climax of the Tent Scene, when, at the last moment, Troilus enters and saves Criseyde from violation, although he dies in the process. Troilus' entry music here is the same module as his earlier music in the opera, in which he again attempts heroic solutions, when, as earlier, he believes Criseyde to have died, but this time fully sacrifices himself.

The Opera is written in three parts. Parts 1 and 2 are in Act One, and Part 3 is Act Two. In each of the three parts there is a typical progression of the scenes; for example, the first scene in each part is a soliloquy for one of the three main characters: Pandar in part 1, Troilus in part 2, and Criseyde in part 3. Or, as another example, in the second scene of each of the three parts of the opera, Criseyde is being forced to do something.

All this is to say that there are layers upon layers of cross-referencing, interacting drama, and music in this piece. Part of the influence for this kind of organization comes, as I have said, from my experience of performing Bharata Nayam dance-drama and being exposed to Sanskrit and other Indian poetry, in which several poems, completely different, are going on at the same time. Another influence is literature, particularly Flann O'Brien's *The Third Policeman* and *At Swim-Two-Birds*.

I have asked myself why I wrote the opera in this fiendishly organized way, with such structural tie-ins. It's because the story, when I read it in Chaucer, deeply touched me, and intense emotions need carefully constructed electrical cords to flow through, or the lights don't turn on—particularly over the flow of two hours.

I loved working on this piece and am seeking its premiere. I thank Nancy Dean for approaching me to write the work. More information on the opera Criseyde can be found on www.aliceshields.com or www.criseyde.com.

Bio - Alice Shields

One of the first woman composers in electronic music, Alice Shields received the Doctor of Musical Arts degree in composition from Columbia University in 1975, studying primarily with Vladimir Ussachevsky and Jack Beeson. She has been Director of Development of the Columbia University Computer Music Center and Associate Director of the Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Center, has taught the psychology of music at NYU and Rutgers, and has lectured on nonverbal communication in sound for the Santa Fe Opera, CUNY Center for Developmental Neuroscience, International Society for Research on Emotion, and the National Association for the Advancement of Psychoanalysis. Recent compositions include *Kyrielle* (2005) for violin and "tape" for violinist Airi Yoshioka, and *The River of Memory* (2008) and *Mioritza - Requiem for Rachel Corrie* (2004) for trombone and tape for trombonist Monique Buzzarté. The computer piece *Dust* (2001) for Dance Alloy of Pittsburgh and the Arangham Dance Theatre of Madras, India premiered in Pittsburgh and

toured India in 2002. Shields' other operas include Apocalypse (1994, New World Records), Mass for the Dead (1993, American Chamber Opera Co.), Shaman (1987, American Chamber Opera Co.), and Shivatanz (1993, Akademie der Künste, Berlin). Her compositions are recorded on Koch International Classics, New World, CRI and Albany Records.

Shields sang operatic roles at the New York City Opera (Monteverdi), Washington National Opera (Wagner), Clarion Opera Society in Italy (Cavalli), Connecticut Grand Opera (Wagner), Wolf Trap Opera (Mozart), Rochester Opera (Verdi), and Yale-at-Norfolk Festival (R. Strauss). Performances in contemporary operas included David Amram's Twelfth Night, Richard Foreman/Stanley Silverman's Elephant Steps, Eric Stokes' Horspfa!, Bernstein's Trouble in Tahiti; and Maurice Ohana's Syllabaire Pour Phedre and Thomson's Four Saints in Three Acts at the Metropolitan Opera-at-the-Forum.

All Shields' compositions since 1993 reflect her immersion in raga, tala, and the formal structures of Indian classical music and dance.

For more information please see www.aliceshields.com.

A personal note: "Some of the roles I sang in operas have been very influential in my own compositions. One of them was the role of "Medea" which I sang in Cavalli's "Giasone" with the Clarion Opera Society in 17th century princely opera houses around Venice, after Yale musicologist and Cavalli expert Ellen Rosand created an edition of the score in 1976. Until then, it had not been performed since the 17th century."

--- A.S.