# Chaucer’s Worthiest Knight: Heroic Identity in *Troilus and Criseyde*

**Natalie Hanna**

Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde* explores what it means to be a heroic and exemplary medieval man through reimagining the Trojan warriors as ‘worthy’ medieval knights. Troilus’s status as a worthy knight of Troy is emphasised throughout the poem, and yet it is in constant comparison with that of his older brother Hector. Chaucer repeats specific phrases in the descriptions of the two princes, encouraging the reader to think of Hector when Troilus carries out heroic deeds. Troilus is not only ‘worthi Ectour the secounde,’ he is also ‘next’ to Hector in ‘worthynesse,’ ‘the firste in armes […] *save Ector*,’ ‘withouten any peere […] *save Ectour*,’ ‘the worthieste […] *save only Ector*’ (II. 158, III. 644, 740, 1773-5, 1903-4, V. 1565).[[1]](#footnote-1) These comparisons, which do not appear in Chaucer’s source for the poem – Boccaccio’s *Il Filostrato –* lead the reader to question if they can be said to present Troilus as the next Hector, that is, as his equal, or if they position him as next to Hector, as a lesser figure. This question continues to divide critics, with those such as John Steadman, Sanford Meech and Gerald Morgan viewing Troilus as the equal of Hector, while others including Gayle Margherita, K.S. Kiernan and, more recently, Timothy D. Arner finds that he falls short of his legendary counterpart. While such studies examine Troilus’s position as a second Hector, they do not focus on the terminology used to denote the two men’s respective heroic status as knights. Yet this term ‘knyght’ and its surrounding associations are crucial for an understanding of the noble qualities that distinguish Troilus and Hector both from other men in the text, and from each other. In the light of this complexity, this article will examine the use of ‘knyght’ and the word’s frequent collocates in *Troilus and Criseyde* to show how Troilus and Hector are likened and differentiated. Moreover, it will argue that Chaucer’s descriptions of Troilus as a knight not only recall the character of Hector in the narrative, but also the legend of Hector from medieval literary and cultural sources. Gérard Genette, in his theories of transtextuality, has examined how texts interact with one another and the implicit and explicit ways in which this relationship might be expressed. According to Genette all texts are ‘hypertextual’ in that they always have a relationship with texts from the past; the newer text (the ‘hypertext’) transforms or reinterprets the older text (the ‘hypotext’). Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde* is a ‘hypertext,’ derived from Boccaccio’s *Il Filostrato*, and likely also informed by the numerous earlier works that depicted the Trojan War and were available during the Middle Ages, including for example, Benoît de Sainte-Maure’s *Roman de Troie*, and Latin translations of the accounts of Greek writers Dares Phyrigus and Dictys Cretensis. From the outset, the poem’s narrator encourages the reader to interpret his work in relation to past texts by acknowledging at the opening of Book I that the story of Troy is ‘well wist,’ and by referring to earlier writers of the Trojan War such as Homer, Dares, Dictys and his apparent Latin source for the story of Troilus – Lollius – whom the narrator acknowledges throughout the text (I. 57, 148, 395; see, for example, II. 502, III. 575, III. 1196, V. 1088).[[2]](#footnote-2) We may therefore read Chaucer’s depictions of Troilus and Hector as knights in light of earlier literary and pictorial works, and the informed reader, that is, the reader who is able to situate the text within this intertextual framework, will interpret Troilus’s worthiness in relation to the established worthiness of Hector.

The term ‘knyght’ is used throughout *Troilus and Criseyde* to denote directly Hector and Troilus, and in more generalized descriptions of the qualities of knights. The most frequently collocating adjective that qualifies the noun is ‘worthy,’ which appears four times in the text, with one further instance of it in superlative form, ‘worthieste,’ as demonstrated by the following examples:

(1) A worthi knyght to loven and cherice (I. 968).

(2) To Troilus, the worthieste knyght (III. 781).

(3) Ther ben so worthi knyghtes in this place (V. 169).

(4) Ye, God woot, and fro many a worthi knyght (V. 133).

(5) And thus this worthi knyght was brought of lyve (V. 1561).

The only words found as frequently with ‘knyght’ are the determiner ‘a’ (7 instances) and the pronoun ‘hire’ (5 instances), and these five repetitions make ‘worthy’ a distinct quality in determining the prowess of the knights in *Troilus and Criseyde*. This is reflective of a more widespread pattern in Chaucer’s works, as ‘worthy’ is the adjective used to qualify ‘knyght’ most frequently across his whole corpus of literature, as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1. The frequency of adjectives used to qualify ‘knight’ in Chaucer’s corpus, spanning two terms at either side of the noun, relative to the total use of the adjective in the corpus.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Adj | Total uses of adj to qualify ‘knight’ | Total uses of adj in Chaucer’s works | Relative frequency of adj / 100 words |
| Worthy | 18 | 216 | 8.3 |
| Lusty | 5 | 66 | 7.6 |
| Young | 6 | 140 | 4.3 |

The question of what constitutes a knight’s worthiness in Chaucer’s writing is something that has been discussed in a number of previous critical studies.[[3]](#footnote-3) Of particular note is Gerald Morgan’s ‘The Worthiness of Chaucer’s Worthy Knight,’ in which he examines Chaucer’s ‘worthy’ knights in light of the writer’s own military background, and knights he would have known and admired. Morgan explains that ‘worth’ embodies all that the person has achieved in terms of honour and chivalry through past actions, and that the repeated use of ‘worthy’ in relation to ‘knyght’ indicates that one of the attributes of a knight’s worthiness is that ‘this praise is a matter not of mere opinion or reputation, but of deeds done’ (154). Thus, to achieve this status a worthy knight must be shown to have carried out worthy deeds, something that is often demonstrated through skill and courage on the battlefield. Robert W. Jones, in his study of martial display on the medieval battlefield, has shown the importance of a medieval knight to be an active fighter, as his social standing was dependent upon his prowess and conduct in war. Jones refers to Chrétien de Troye’s *Erec and Enide* to attest to the commonality of this opinion in the medieval period, as in this romance the ‘idea that a knight had no standing unless he was active in battle’ forms the basis of the narrative (16). Indeed, the medieval French knight, Geffroi de Charny, outlines the conduct and virtues of ‘worthy’ knights in his *Livre de chevalerie*, in which, above all other virtues, de Charny values the knight’s skills at arms most highly.

In *Troilus and Criseyde*, Hector and Troilus are both active fighters, at times depicted in, and returning from, battle in the poem (see, for example, I. 470-83, II. 624-44). Chaucer’s depiction of the men as active protectors of the city recalls earlier works in which an aspect of Hector’s character that elevates him as the greatest Trojan hero is consistently shown in his fighting prowess, and his leadership of the Trojan army. Marcia Smith Marzec writes that in, for example, the “*Gest Hystoriale” of the Destruction of Troye*, a Middle English translation of Guido delle Colonne’s *Historia Destructionis Troiae*, that ‘Priam recognizes Hector’s superiority when he commissions him as the leader of the forces,’ and in Dictys’s chronicle of the war ‘Hector stands his ground when the other Trojans retreat’ (60). It is a quality that is also emphasised in Boccaccio’s *Il Filostrato*, where Hector is repeatedly mentioned in reference to his protection of the city and his leadership in battle (see IV 1. 2-3, IV. 31 5-6, VI. 17. 1-8). While there are other qualities that contribute to Hector’s depiction as a ‘worthy knight,’ to which I shall return, his fighting prowess is emphasised in all earlier sources. Chaucer’s depiction of Troilus and Hector as active warriors highlights this ability in both men, however, in evoking images of the men in battle, Chaucer’s audience might recall that Hector is time and time again depicted as Troy’s greatest protector.

Of the four uses of the phrase ‘worthi knight(es)’ in *Troilus and Criseyde*, two may be said to reference indirectly Troilus. Pandarus tells Troilus that it would suit Criseyde to love a ‘worthi knyght’ such as the prince, and later Criseyde tries to console Troilus about her departure to the Greek camp by telling him how ‘many a worthi knight’ has had to spend time apart from his lady (examples 1 and 4). The phrase is also uttered once by Diomede in a general reference he makes to the knights in the Greek camp (see example 3 above). The fourth and only direct use of the term in *Troilus and Criseyde* is to denote Hector in the narrator’s description of his death:

For which me thynketh euery manere wight  
That haunteth armes oughte to biwaille   
The deth of hym that was so noble a knyght;   
For as he drough a kyng by th’aventaille,   
Unwar of this, Achilles thorugh the maille   
And thorugh the body gan hym for to ryve;  
And thus the worthi knyght was brought of lyve. (V. 1555-61).

The reader is encouraged to lament the loss of such a great knight, with the narrator calling Hector both ‘noble’ and ‘worthy,’ and describing in detail the actual event of his death, over the course of three stanzas. Arner notes that this description is much longer than that of Troilus’s death, which is summed up in a single line: ‘Despitously hym slough the fierse Achille’ (V. 1806; Arner, 73). According to Arner, while Hector’s death is the ‘turning point’ of the Trojan War, Troilus’s death, ‘while tragic, is simply another loss leading to the ultimate destruction of Troy’ (72). Marzec goes so far as to say that in this description of Troilus’s death he is ‘upstaged’ by Hector, as just two lines before the narrator reminds the reader that Troilus was ‘withouten any peere | save Ector’ (Marzec, 70; V. 1803-4). The description of Hector’s death does not appear in Boccaccio’s text, and so in Chaucer’s poem the greater space given to it may be seen to highlight the great loss of Troy’s most distinguished protector and ‘worthy knight’. The resulting effect is that it places Troilus’s death second to Hector’s, both in the chronology of the poem, and in its significance to the eventual fall of the city.

Although Troilus is never directly called a ‘worthy knyght’ by any of the characters in the poem, Pandarus describes him as the ‘worthieste knyght’ while persuading Criseyde to accept Troilus as a lover. He refers to the young prince as ‘Troilus, the worthieste knight, | Oon of this world,’ stressing thereby his suitability for Criseyde (example 2). This description distinguishes Troilus from all other knights in Chaucer’s literature, as it is the only occasion in his work where the superlative form ‘worthieste’ is used to denote a knight.[[4]](#footnote-4) However, this compliment is attenuated for two reasons. Firstly, by the fact that it comes from Pandarus who frequently lies and exaggerates when coercing Criseyde into accepting Troilus; his use of superlatives is not surprising, then, as it is in line with his generally hyperbolic and false speech. Secondly, the compliment echoes a previous statement made by Criseyde, in which she too cites Troilus as ‘the worthieste,’ but claims that Hector is even better. This occurs in Book II, following Pandarus’s first revelation to Criseyde of Troilus’s love for her. Before Pandarus discloses this love, he attempts to broach the subject with Criseyde by implying Troilus is a suitable lover. Pandarus refers to him as ‘The wise, worthi Ector the secounde,’ and he continues to stress Hector’s ‘worthinesse’ in order to liken Troilus’s honour to that of his brother (II. 158):

Of Ector nedeth it namore for to telle  
In al this world ther nys a bettre knight  
Than he, that is of worthynesse welle;  
And he wel moore vertu hath than myght;  
This knoweth many a wis and worthi wight.  
The same pris of Troilus I seye; (II. 176-81).

Pandarus repeats himself using forms of the word ‘worth,’ calling him ‘Ector […] that is of worthynesse welle,’ and ‘a wis and worthi wight’ in quick succession, with the alliteration of ‘w’ in lines 178-80 highlighting Pandarus’s overzealous and emphatic description of this praiseworthy man. Notably, however, Pandarus’s praise is not for Troilus, but for Hector. Criseyde’s response reflects this as she reiterates, not Troilus’s worth, but Hector’s, explaining that she is already aware of his worthiness: ‘By God […] Of Ector that is sooth’ (II. 183). She explains that, whilst she has never seen Troilus’s honourable deeds herself, men tell her that he too is seen ‘in armes day by day so worthily,’ her statement confirming the importance of the ‘worthy’ knight as an active fighter (II. 186). Criseyde knows Hector’s ‘worthynesse,’ not only because of his reputation, but also because he has offered her his protection in Book I following her father’s defection to the Greek camp (a point to which I will return). Pandarus, therefore, attempts to persuade her of Troilus’s worth by comparison, but in doing so he furthers the idea that although Troilus may be ‘worthy,’ Hector is even better. Later, as Criseyde reflects upon Pandarus’s words, she notes that Troilus ‘For out and out he is the worthieste, | Save only Ector, which that is the beste’ (II. 740). Pandarus’s meddling thus encourages Criseyde – and the reader – to acknowledge that even if Troilus is the ‘worthieste’ knight, Hector is ‘the beste’ man, and it is the semantics of this latter phrasing that reveals the quality that distinguishes the two princes.

This possible distinction between the worthiest knight and the best man is something Charles Mitchell briefly noted in his study of the worthiness of Chaucer’s knight pilgrim in *The Canterbury Tales*, in which he explained that ‘To be a perfect knight, is not necessarily to be a perfect man’ (70). While the concept of knightly ‘worth’ has been revisited more recently by Kempton, Mitchell, and Morgan, what might qualify one as better than the worthiest knight in Chaucer’s works can be further considered. In his *Livre de chevalerie* Geffroi de Charny’s wrote that, while all men at arms are ‘worthy,’ some can do even better by, for example, acting loyally and serving God, and demonstrating true wisdom and good counsel by drawing upon their experience of their career at arms to successfully lead and advise in war (see pp. 80-91). An analysis of the qualities that make one ‘the beste knyght’ in contrast to one who is definitively referred to as ‘the beste’ in *Troilus and Criseyde* demonstrates that, in Chaucer’s language, this distinction relies on one particular deed, which may be revealed through a comparison of the actions of Troilus and Hector.

As well as being the ‘worthieste knyght,’ Troilus is referred to as ‘the beste’ four times in the text as follows:

(6) Founde oon the beste (I. 474).

(7) The thriftiest, and oon the beste knyght (I. 1081).

(8) Oon of the beste entecched creature (V. 832).

(9) His herte ay with the first and with the beste (V. 839).

In example 7 Troilus is called ‘the beste knyght,’ and like the phrase ‘the worthieste knyght’ discussed previously, this phrase is exclusively specific to *Troilus and Criseyde* in Chaucer’s corpus. The remaining examples in which ‘the beste’ is found inform the reader more specifically about Troilus’s knightly virtues. In Book I Troilus’s love for Criseyde encourages him to surround himself with the best people and become the best knight of his time (examples 6 and 7). He becomes the ‘thriftiest,’ the ‘gentileste,’ and the ‘friendliest’ knight, with the repeated use of the superlatives demonstrating how Troilus distinguishes himself above all other men (I. 1079-80). In Book V when the narrator refers to Troilus as ‘Oon of the beste entecched creature,’ he provides a list of qualities to demonstrate the prince’s ideal traits as: ‘young,’ ‘fresh,’ ‘strong,’ ‘trewe’ and ‘hardy as a lyoun’ (V. 830-2). This image of Troilus as the best knight there can be in this world is further associated with specific moral qualities because of the narrator’s reference to him here ‘as hardy as lyoun,’ with ‘hardy’ referring specifically to a person’s disposition in battle in Middle English.[[5]](#footnote-5) It may seem like a simile merely for emphasis, however, only twenty-eight lines previously Diomede is also described as ‘hardy,’ but without the comparison to a lion (V. 802). Troilus’s status as a knight is thus differentiated as being like that of a beast that evokes particular qualities in a medieval context, especially when it is associated with the role of a knight. The fact that Troilus is the only character in *Troilus and Criseyde* whose knightly qualities are like those of a lion tells us why he is the one of the ‘beste’ knights, implying as it does more than just his skill and courage in battle.

The lion was commonly found in heraldry and artwork of the medieval period: ‘the animal most often portrayed by the medieval artist’ (Benton, 112).[[6]](#footnote-6) It is an appropriate image to associate with Troilus, as the lion was considered to be both a regal creature, and courageous and accomplished in combat (Benton, 119). However, the lion was also believed to be symbolic of religious virtues, and this is particularly relevant when associated with the qualities of a knight. Janetta Rebold Benton in *The Workshop Bestiary* explains that in medieval bestiaries the lion came to be connected with qualities symbolic of Christ. According to the bestiary the lion has unique abilities to protect itself from hunters, remain vigilant by sleeping with its eyes open, and ‘resurrect’ lion cubs that were believed to be born dead, at which time the father brings them to life (Benton, 85). For these reasons the lion is like Christ, ‘who was hunted by the devil but was able to elude him,’ who was resurrected after death, and, ‘whose body was buried and slept while his Godhead remained awake’ (Benton, 85).[[7]](#footnote-7) The lion’s Christ-like virtues thus make the animal a symbol of faith, resurrection, and protection. The lion was not only associated with Christian virtues through bestiaries, but also through the religious and literary texts of the period.The lion appears as a companion to St. Jerome, after he removes a thorn from its paw, a story that ‘was widely disseminated in the late Middle Ages thanks to its inclusion in two of the most popular and influential books of the thirteenth century’ – Vincent of Beauvais’s *Speculum Historiale*, and Jacobus de Voragine’s *Legenda Aurea* (Salter, 12). As a result of this tale, the lion came to represent Christian faith, kindness and ‘the capacity of individuals to lead a virtuous life within human society’ (Salter, 22). The animal was further established as a symbol of knightly prowess as well as faith through literary texts, notably Chrétien de Troyes’ *Yvain, le Chevalier au Lion*. In this story the knight Yvain helps a lion escape an attack from a serpent, and the lion repays him by becoming his devoted companion, surrendering himself to Yvain and vowing never to leave him. The lion is thus a symbol of the best knightly virtues, including faith, courage and even marital devotion owing to the fact that the encounter with the lion helps Yvain refocus his actions on winning back the love of his wife Laudine. Indeed, Jones finds that the lion in this romance serves ‘as a metaphor for the perfect knightly vassal’ (30).

Chaucer may have had in mind this knight-lion when he wrote of Troilus’s virtuous qualities, as there have been tentative suggestions that Chaucer may have drawn upon *Yvain* when developing his structure for *Troilus and Criseyde*. More substantial arguments for his knowledge of the work are based on references in ‘The Legend of Philomena’and *The* *Canterbury Tales*.[[8]](#footnote-8) Moreover, a manuscript of a Middle English poem *Ywain and Gawain* based on *Yvain* and dating to the early fourteenth century, further suggests that the poem was in circulation in Chaucer’s age and may have been known to him (Eckhardt, 326). It is possible, then, that Chaucer’s description of Troilus’s knightly virtues ‘as lyoun,’ as well as repeated references to him being one of the best knights of this world could depict his faithfulness and the high moral values that he and Hector represent. Furthermore, both characters are associated with the vigilance of the lion, through their protection of the city in battle, and aspects of the resurrection are evoked through Troilus’s ascent to the sphere of the Fixed stars, shown at the end of the text.[[9]](#footnote-9)

In the poem it is Pandarus and the narrator who stress that Troilus is the worthiest and best knight. Of the four times the narrator depicts Troilus as the best he is ‘oon the beste’ (examples 6, 7), ‘oon of the beste’ (example 8) and ‘with the beste’ (example 9). ‘Oon the’ operates as an emphatic superlative signifying Troilus as the very best and, as shown earlier, the narrator employs an array of additional superlatives to highlight Troilus’s virtues (e.g. ‘thriftiest,’ ‘gentileste,’ ‘friendliest’).[[10]](#footnote-10) While he places Troilus ‘with the beste’ in Book V (example 9), the narrator is clear that Troilus is equal in greatness to any other knight: ‘His herte ay with the first and with the beste | Stood paregal, to durre don that hym leste.’ (V. 839-40). This description occurs during the narrator’s interjection where he differentiates Troilus’s lion-like prowess from Diomede’s, and it is at this point in the narrative when Diomede will begin to court Criseyde, leading to her eventual betrayal of Troilus. The narrator’s comments serve to remind the reader that Troilus is equal to the best knight and undeserving of Criseyde’s betrayal.

Tauno Mustanoja in *A Middle English Syntax* identifies the construction in which Troilus is called ‘oon of the beste’ (example 8) as a hybrid of the emphatic ‘oon the beste’ and the partitive ‘oon *of* the beste,’ and suggests that both meanings are present in this statement. Whether or not there is intended a partitive meaning here, there is in a sense a partitive quality to all of these statements about Troilus, because the reader is repeatedly reminded of Hector’s worth, or Hector’s prowess when Troilus is praised. As mentioned previously, Pandarus stresses Troilus’s worth by way of Hector’s in order to persuade Criseyde of Troilus’s good character, and the narrator’s language also creates ambiguity because he too reminds the reader of Hector’s worth at moments that appear to undercut his image of Troilus as ‘the beste’. In Book III, when depicting Troilus in battle, the narrator says that he is **‘**the firste in armes’ and the most dreaded foe **–** apart, that is, from his older brother**:** ‘And certeynly, but if the bokes erre, | *Save Ector* most ydred of any wight’ (III. 1773-5). The narrator’s description positions Hector as the exception to Troilus’s valour and, when he next recounts the war effort, it is on Hector alone he focuses as leader: ‘That Ector, with ful many a bold baroun, | Caste on a day with Grekes for to fighte’ and ‘Ector and many a worthi wight out wente’ (IV. 33-4, 39). If Troilus is present at these moments, he is among the group of many worthy men of which Hector is at the forefront. Following Troilus’s death, the narrator again compares him with Hector to acknowledge that Troilus was without any peer in his time ‘Save Ector’ – a comparison that is to Marzec ‘gratuitous’ at this point in the story (70, V. 1084). The narrator’s comments seek to elevate Troilus to Hector’s level. It can certainly be argued that Troilus should only be enhanced by comparison to his heroic brother-in-arms. However, the narrator places so much emphasis on Hector as the exemplary man, the leader of the Trojan army, the one who is already known in ‘the bokes’ to be the best, that, in a certain light, the juxtaposition can almost undermine the attempt to raise Troilus to the same level. The comparison sets up Troilus as a hero of the same type as Hector, while simultaneously hinting at a sense that he is nearly, but not quite, as good.

The narrator’s consistent use of superlatives to indicate Troilus’s worth mean that these statements can be construed as overzealous and perhaps even spurious. The effect, if not the intent, is to introduce doubt: even if the narrator’s view of Troilus is true, we cannot help but sometimes think he protests a little too much. Frans Diekstra has argued that the narrator’s tendency to use repetition together with a lack of supporting evidence for a number of these statements ‘undermines his credibility by the emptiness of protestations incessantly repeated’ (275). Laura Clark has furthered Diekstra’s reading in her stylistic study of the term ‘sooth’ in *Troilus and Criseyde,* and finds that the narrator (and Pandarus) overuse the phrase ‘sooth to seyne’ and its variants, an overuse that ‘reveals a lack of authenticity on the parts of these two speakers’ as they sometimes use the phrase as convenient filler, whereas other characters only use it when they are speaking that which they know to be true. The reader should, therefore, ‘be wary of taking the narrator’s *sooth* at face value’ (496). With regards to Troilus’s worthiness, Pandarus and the narrator’s emphasis of his virtue could seem similarly overstated, and thereby open to doubt, particularly given that Hector is referred to as ‘the beste’ without qualification or emphasis.

Closer attention to the use of this phrase throughout the poem reveals additional qualities that make one ‘the beste,’ which Hector exhibits more readily than Troilus. In Book V three female characters are depicted in this way: the narrator describes Criseyde as ‘The best ynorisshed,’ and Cassandra, in her interpretation of Troilus’s dream, refers to the maiden whom Meleager loved as ‘oon of this world the beste ypreysed,’ and Troilus calls Alceste – the legendary chaste-wife of classical mythology – ‘kyndest and the beste!’ (V. 821, 1473, 1529). While the first two instances denote the women as one of the best, or the best at something, when Troilus describes Alceste as ‘the beste’ he does not qualify his statement. Troilus says this when rebuking Cassandra for suggesting Criseyde has been unfaithful and unlike the previous examples, to him Alceste is absolutely ‘the beste,’ signifying that she is most excellent of all (V. 1527-9). Troilus goes on to explain how Alceste offered to die in place of her husband and refers to her mythological status as the epitome of the chaste and faithful wife (V. 1530-3; Walker-Pelkey, 20). In the Greek legend, Apollo aids Admetus in winning Alceste as his wife, but in return he forgets to make a sacrifice to Apollo. To appease the god, he obtains a promise from the Fates that anyone may offer to die in his place, but in the end it is only Alceste who offers to do so (Hornblower *et al*., 51). What makes Alceste ‘the beste’ is not only her faithfulness to her husband, but also her self-sacrificing action to protect him, as she speaks up when no one else will. This extends the qualities that make one ‘beste’ to one who effects a selfless action to defend and protect others, and it is this honourable quality that distinguishes the heroic identities of Hector and Troilus at particular points in the text. As noted, Hector is referred to as ‘the beste’ by Criseyde, who does so when considering Pandarus’s proposal, agreeing that Troilus is worthiest ‘Save only Ectour, which that is the beste’ (II. 740). Criseyde does not elaborate on her remark and there is no extended discussion in the poem of Hector’s character other than repeated acknowledgements that he is a worthy man. Like Alceste who protects her husband, however, Hector acts to protect Criseyde at points in the narrative when no one else will. Moreover, he does so without asking for anything in return from Criseyde, unlike Pandarus, Troilus and Diomede. This differentiates Hector from Troilus and may explain why he is granted the superior status.

The two scenes in which Hector takes such action are at the opening of Book I when Criseyde seeks his protection, and during the parliament scene in Book IV when it is decided that she should be exchanged for Antenor. In the first scene, Criseyde, fearing she will be held accountable for her father’s betrayal, seeks the aid of Hector. He consoles her about her father’s sin and grants her independence to come or go around Troy as she please, while also ensuring the men of the city treat her with ‘[h]onour’ and protect her body as far as he has knowledge of what is happening (I. 120). The second scene directly compares the virtues of the two knights because they are both present when the parliament is debating whether or not to exchange Criseyde. The parliament is quick to favour the trade of Criseyde for Antenor, with only Hector speaking out against the decision. Troilus reasons himself out of speaking by deciding to wait to hear Criseyde’s thoughts on the matter first, worried that she will become his ‘fo’ if his meddling reveals their secret love (IV. 166). Hector, on the other hand, publically chastises the men in an attempt to protect her. Though he is not part of the original debate he interrupts them to make his views clear, telling them:

I noot on yow who that this charge leyde,  
But, on my part, ye may eftsoone hem telle,  
We usen here no women for to selle. (IV. 180-2).

Hector is quick to advise the men that they do not sell women in Troy, whilst reminding them that she is not their prisoner to exchange. The parliament immediately protests at Hector’s attempt to ‘shi[e]ld this woman’ and overrules him with its majority even though he ‘‘nay’ ful ofte preyed’ in opposition (IV. 188, 214). Thus, the shield that Criseyde feels she has in Troilus in Book II when she calls him her ‘wal | Of stiel, and sheld from every displesaunce’ is not upheld here by Troilus, but by Hector (III. 479-80). Furthermore, Chaucer’s audience will be aware that Antenor, with whom Criseyde is to be exchanged, will betray Troy by opening the city gates to the Greeks – a point that the narrator encourages the reader to have in mind by interjecting that Antenor will be Troy’s ‘traitour’ (see IV. 204). Thus, Hector’s attempts to protect Criseyde are, albeit unbeknown to him, also protecting the city of Troy. As I discuss below, Troilus’s silence is a shield of a different kind. However, the narrator’s interjection might lead one to imagine that if Troilus also spoke up at this point, he could have helped save the city of Troy at the cost of the love of Criseyde. Roseanne Gasse argues that Hector seems in this moment ‘possessed with an uncanny sense of Troy’s best interests,’ and that Troilus’s silence finds a comparison in that of his other brother Deiphebus. Like Hector, Deiphebus offered Criseyde his protection earlier in the poem when she dines at this house in Book III, yet here ‘he is conspicuous either in his absence or his silence’ while Hector speaks up (432). Since Deiphebus of Virgil’s *Aeneid* dies having been betrayed by Helen while he is incapacitated in his bed, Gasse suggests that Chaucer’s inclusion of Deiphebus in *Troilus and Criseyde* serves as a reminder of the weaknesses of Troilus’s character as the inactive lover – not all of the time, but in moments like the parliament scene. Troilus has not realised his position as Criseyde’s lover does not prevent him from speaking up here as a prince and defender of Troy, and he therefore fails to protect Criseyde because he is unable to ‘keep distinct his private and public roles’ (Gasse, 436).

The scenes in Book I and IV where Hector offers Criseyde his protection do not appear in Boccaccio’s *Il Filostrato*, and by including them Chaucer invites the reader to compare Hector’s and Troilus’s actions. There have been a number of critical suggestions as to why Troilus does not speak up at the parliament. A. J. Minnis draws on the Boethian theme running through the poem, and has proposed that Troilus’s silence here reflects the fact that he does not comprehend his faculty of ‘free will,’ and that this is ultimately his ‘foolishness and great error’ (95). Marzec has found that Troilus’s depiction as a *courtly* hero impacts negatively upon his ability to act freely, as he is required as a lover to protect Criseyde’s reputation by remaining silent at this moment. Marzec suggests that when Hector speaks out and Troilus does not, Chaucer’s audience might recall an episode well known from the legend of the Trojan War in which Hector refuses to desist from battle at the request of his wife Andromache (69). This event is recounted in Dares’ *De excidio*, the *Gest Hystoriale*, and it is mentioned in the Nun’s Priest’s Tale (3134-37), so that it was certainly known to Chaucer himself. Marzec concludes that it is the illicit nature of Troilus and Criseyde’s courtly love that makes him inactive at this point, while Hector demonstrates greater wisdom than Troilus, and the other men, by not allowing himself to be restrained by the desires of others in order to act for the best interests of Troy and its inhabitants (63). Hector is, therefore, demonstrating additional chivalric qualities that constitute a ‘worthy knight,’ as outlined in Raymon Lull’s *Llibre qui es de l'ordre de cavalleria*and de Charny’s *Livre de chevalerie*, by offering true wisdom, good counsel, and his protection to vulnerable people, in this case Criseyde as she is a woman and a widow (Marzec, 63; de Charny, 89). To further clarify the differences between the two men, it is not only Hector’s ability to act freely that distinguishes him from Troilus, but also to do so selflessly, that is, because he gains nothing from Criseyde in offering her protection, and knights should not expect to gain from their good deeds (de Charny, 55, 96, 101). Of course, the situation is more complicated for Troilus than Hector; his inactiveness is not reflective of his inner turmoil at the parliament. As Morgan writes of Troilus,‘without a doubt he shares the noble ideals of his brother, Ector’ and because he refrains from acting impulsively or violently in response to the proposed exchange, he in fact ensures Criseyde’s safety ‘at the expense of his own humiliation as a knight and anguish as a lover’ (2005, 472, 474). Chaucer’s parliament scene demonstrates the complex personal and social factors that make it difficult – perhaps impossible – for Troilus as the courtly knight-lover to emulate Hector’s actions in this moment. The reader might judge Troilus for not following Hector’s lead, yet they will understand that he intends his silence to be for the best, and in this way the scene exposes how the worthiest of intentions do not always give rise to the desired outcome.

Hector’s virtues are differentiated by these comparisons, as well as by the repeated references to him as ‘worthy’ and by the depiction of him as the definitively ‘beste’ man, because they recall not only Hector’s superior character in the narrative, but also the legendary Hector from classical and medieval sources. The idea that Hector was a particularly exceptional pagan was established in medieval literary history by Jacques de Longuyon’s *Les voeux du paon*, composed between 1312 and 1313, which introduces the concept of ‘Nine Worthies.’ These were men who symbolized perfect virtues in their traditions, three of whom were ‘good Pagans,’ three of whom were ‘good Jews’ and three of whom were ‘good Christians.’ John Barbour in his fourteenth-century translation of Longuyon writes about the three ‘good Pagans’ of the ‘nyne best’:

Thir war Paganes that I of tald,  
And I dar suere, and for suith hald,  
That better than they was neuer borne,  
Efter that tyme na ȝit beforne. (9937-40).[[11]](#footnote-11)

Among these are three ‘good Pagans,’ namely Alexander the Great, Julius Cesar, and Hector; and Longuyon writes of Hector specifically:

Suith it is gude Hector was wicht  
And out of mesure mekill of mycht,  
For, as the poyet beris witnessing,  
Quhen Menelayus the mychty King  
Assegit in Troy the King Priant  
[…]  
Hector on him the gouerning  
Tuke of the toun, and the leding. (9897-906).

According to Longuyon, Hector’s worthiness is reflected not only in his abilities on the battlefield (as he ‘Of crouned Kingis he slew nynetene’), but also in his protection of the city (‘gouerning’ and ‘leding’ it), and in gathering his troops to defend it: ‘Into the half third ȝeir all anerly | That he loued throw cheualry’ (9908). As mentioned previously, Hector’s fighting prowess and his reputation as the leader of the army are highlighted in earlier narratives of the Trojan war, and it is a quality also stressed in Boccaccio’s *Il Filostrato* where Hector is described as having been entrusted specifically with protecting the city walls (see VIII. 1. 5-7). Hector is therefore the greatest defender of the city, above Troilus, his father and his brothers. Chaucer’s Hector demonstrates his ability to act as such both outside and inside the city walls, as both a worthy fighter on the battlefield, and as an active protector of the city’s inhabitants, as confirmed when he twice defends Criseyde.

The notion of the ‘nyne best’ was well embedded into medieval culture and literature, as Roger Sherman Loomis writes: ‘the popularity of the nine worthies in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance [was] a phenomenon which affected the fields of literature, heraldry, pageantry, and art’ (32). Though there could be some variation in the nine worthies, Hector was always included and in fact he ‘headed it, almost invariably, whether in painting, block print or poetic declamation’ (Loomis, 32). The popularity of this concept means it is likely that Chaucer and his audience knew of this aspect of Hector’s character that made him stand out from all other pagans.

An additional quality of Hector found in medieval sources also appears to have been drawn upon in Chaucer’s writing: the association of the perfect knightly virtues with the image of the lion in depictions of Hector in medieval and Renaissance artwork. Loomis explains that the banner of a lion holding a sword is one of the distinguishing features of Hector’s presentation in images of the nine worthies, as shown below in a late fourteenth-century manuscript illustration from the French romance *Le Chevalier Errant* (Loomis, 33).

**[INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE: BLACK/WHITE]**

**Figure 1. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, MSFr. 12559, fol 125. Miniature of the “nine worthies” and enlarged section of Hector’s banner (top right) depicting a lion holding a sword. Reproduced with permission from BnF.**

As Hector’s banner of a lion holding a sword was a recurrent image, the informed reader will be sensitive to the embedded allusion to the ‘nine worthies’ when Chaucer describes the ‘beste’ knightly virtues in Troilus himself ‘as lyoun.’If Troilus’s virtues are like those of a lion it suggests he has the potential to be as exemplary as Hector. Marzec argues that Troilus is not presented as being another Hector because even before his love for Criseyde ‘he has not achieved Hector’s renown’ (70). While it is certainly true that Troilus does not have the experience of Hector, the allusion of Troilus to a lion, together with references to Troilus as the ‘worthieste knyght’ and the ‘beste knyght,’ suggests that he holds the archetypal knightly virtues of Hector. Moreover, Troilus does ultimately die fighting in the defence of Troy, a noble act that might redeem him from his earlier inactivity at the parliament.

Throughout *Troilus and Criseyde*, therecurrent references back to a tradition of Trojan-war narratives –particularly the ‘bokes’ about Hector – highlight the complexities of adapting this earlier material to explore heroism and virtue in a medieval context. The narrator invites correction of his story in Book III when he explains that if he has diverted from his author Lollius and ‘in eched’ any words he has done so ‘for the beste,’ but that the text’s readers should draw on their own experience to interpret or correct him**:**

And putte it in al youre discrecioun  
To encresse or maken dymynuncioun  
Of my langage […] (III. 1334-36).

When reflecting upon the narrator’s language, we find that his repeated mentions of Hector in descriptions of Troilus’s heroic deeds act as verbal cues to remind the reader of the archetypal knightly values that Troilus does replicate. However, his frequent emphasis of Troilus’s worthiness might also encourage the reader to question his comparisons because he so often invites us to think of Hector’s iconic status while reflecting on Troilus’s actions. In doing so he calls attention to the ways that Troilus might be seen to fail to reach the same level of virtue in moments when he does not follow Hector’s lead. Like Troilus at the parliament, and indeed so many of the characters in *Troilus and Criseyde*, the narrator’s well-intentioned actions ‘for the beste’ sometimes work to the detriment of his desired effect.

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1. Italics are my own throughout. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Notably Chaucer does not acknowledge Boccaccio who is in fact his source for the story of Troilus. For further discussion on Lollius and Chaucer’s sources and allusions in Troilus and Criseyde see Benson, 2008 (1022). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See, for example, Mitchell, 1964; Kempton 1987; Morgan, 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. ‘Worthiest’ appears on ten instances in Chaucer’s corpus, see: Complaint to his Lady, 88; Complaint to Venus, 67; The Clerk’s Tale, 1131; Legend of Good Women, Prologue G, 317; Parliament of Fowls, 548; Troilus and Criseyde I.244; II.739; II, 761; III, 781; V, 1057. In no other instance is the term is used to denote directly a knight, though in Parliament of Fowls the Eagle refers hypothetically to one who is ‘the worthieste | of knyghthod’. All references to Chaucer’s works are made to Benson, 2008. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See *Middle English Dictionary*: ‘hardie’, adj., 1.a. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For discussion of the lion in medieval heraldry and as ‘the archetypal representation of the kingly state’ see Coss and Keen, 2002 (74), and at pp. 28-9, 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Carol Hicks further explains that the lion was well established as symbolic of Christian virtues at this time, in particular the resurrection. See 108 and 161. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See Gray, 96; for further discussion of Chrétien and Philomena see Benson, 1072; for a discussion of Chrétien de Troyes’ influence on *The Canterbury Tales* see Brewer, 255-59; Frankis, 46-47. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. For discussion on Troilus’s ascension see Morgan 2005, 662-71. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. For discussion on the use of ‘oon the’ see Benson, xxxiv and Mustanajo, 297-99. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See also 406 for reference to the ‘nyne best.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-11)