



Open Library of Humanities



Part of the Ubiquity  
Partner Network



Open Library of Humanities

---

## **New Approaches to Medieval Water Studies**

**How to Cite:** Kaempfer, L 2018 Drinking Sorrow and Bathing in Bliss: Liquid Emotions in Chaucer. *Open Library of Humanities*, 4(1): 29, pp.1–24, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.227>

**Published:** 07 June 2018

---

### **Peer Review:**

This article has been peer reviewed through the double-blind process of *Open Library of Humanities*, which is a journal published by the Open Library of Humanities.

### **Copyright:**

© 2018 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

### **Open Access:**

*Open Library of Humanities* is a peer-reviewed open access journal.

### **Digital Preservation:**

The Open Library of Humanities and all its journals are digitally preserved in the CLOCKSS scholarly archive service.

---

## NEW APPROACHES TO MEDIEVAL WATER STUDIES

# Drinking Sorrow and Bathing in Bliss: Liquid Emotions in Chaucer

Lucie Kaempfer

Lincoln College, Oxford University, GB

[lucie.kaempfer@lincoln.ox.ac.uk](mailto:lucie.kaempfer@lincoln.ox.ac.uk)

---

In medieval thought, emotions, as embodied and physiological processes, are often characterised as liquid. They are adjoined to the humours and occasion movements of the body's heat and vital spirit. Chaucer uses this medical discourse and emotion scholars have noted how emotions are often pathologised and embodied in his work. But the liquidity of emotions in Chaucer goes beyond humours and tears; it is as much literal as it is metaphorical, and it also contains joy—an emotion too often overlooked in the field. This paper explores the different uses of liquidity to represent emotions in Chaucer's writing, and especially in *Troilus and Criseyde*. The exploration uncovers the liquid imagery of emotions, from tears as ink to drinking sorrow and baths of bliss; and it shows how those different figurations are contingent on genre and gender. It also brings forward the interrelation of tears and words of complaint—the text of love poetry becoming itself material and liquid affect—and the subsequent struggle to find space for joy in a poem avowedly written in tears. Indeed, this study shows how employing a discourse of water in the writing of emotions creates separate discursive streams for sorrow and for joy—the waters of sorrow being somatic and fluid, those of joy external and still.

---

## Introduction

In medieval thought, emotions,<sup>1</sup> as embodied and physiological processes, are often characterised as liquid. Part of the reason for this is the close connection between emotions and the Galenic theory of bodily humours. While they do not belong directly to the humours, emotions are nonetheless associated with them. Cohen-Hanegbi (2009: 26) points out how both emotions and humours are defined and categorised through their qualities—wet or dry, hot or cold. Thus, for example, sorrow, which is defined as dry and cold, becomes associated with the melancholic humour, also dry and cold. The humoral fluid is therefore in direct correlation with the emotion; sorrow is linked to an excess of the melancholic humour. Moreover, in Constantinus Africanus' Latin compendium of Hellenistic and Islamic medicine, the *Pantegni*, emotions are described in the body in terms of heat and the vital spirit. Joy and anger are characterised as a movement of the vital spirit and heat from the heart to the outer parts of the body, while fear and distress would effect the opposite movement, towards the heart (Knuuttila, 2004: 214). Emotions are thus thought of in terms of fluidity, effecting and participating in the movements of the spirits and fluids of the body.

Chaucer knows and exploits this medicalised discourse on emotions.<sup>2</sup> It forms part of his own writing of the emotional individual. The most vivid example of this is his Black Knight from the *Book of the Duchess*. The Black Knight's grief is described in poetical yet physiological details: as his spirits grow dead, his blood has to flee to his

---

<sup>1</sup> While the term emotion is anachronistic—medieval thinkers talked of 'passions' and 'affections'—I choose to use it here for its neutral and encompassing qualities and to be in line with the emotions studies field. Emotional terminology is complex and there has been some debate in the field over it; Sarah McNamer (2007: 247), for example, has advocated the use of 'feeling' as a more appropriate term for medieval literary affectivity. As Trigg (2014: 3–6) surveys, there has also been a distinction made between 'affect' and 'emotion', where the former expresses a pre-discursive, embodied response. Without entering into affect studies, I will be using the medieval term 'affect' for its more embodied conception of emotion. I think it is especially interesting for the study of literature and how the textual medium mediates the bodily materiality of emotions. For further reading, emotion historian Barbara Rosenwein (2009) has written on the medieval terminology of emotion.

<sup>2</sup> In the General Prologue, for example, he characterises the Franklin as 'sangwyn' of complexion (333) and the Reeve as 'colerik' (587). Moreover, in his description of the Physician he cites a number of authorities in medicine by name, including Galen and Hippocrates (430–4).

heart to make it warm (488–99). This significant scene has been noticed by scholars working on emotions because of the very medicalised nature of this embodied representation of sorrow (McNamara, 2015). Scholars of emotions often focus on embodiment and somatisation: on the humoral body and the pathologisation of emotions and emotional states such as grief or lovesickness. Tears have also been of interest and linked to both medical and other scientific theories, for example as an element of rational contemplative practices (Carruthers, 2006).<sup>3</sup> The waters of emotion in Chaucer have therefore been observed in bodily and medical terms. But the liquidity of emotion brings about more than its physiological embodiment. Water and fluids constitute a prolific well of material to write emotions, literally and metaphorically.

This paper explores the different uses of liquidity to represent emotions in Chaucer's work, and especially *Troilus and Criseyde*. What this exploration shows is that water is not only the matter of emotion, its humours and tears, but also abounds in its metaphorical deployment: emotions can be drunk and bathed in. These liquid metaphors nonetheless offer a pre-eminently material conceptualisation of emotion. This is especially evident with the emotion of sorrow: sorrow flows in and out of bodies, out of the narrator's pen as out of his own eyes, the text itself becoming a material expression of sorrow. On the other hand, joy seems to escape this textual materiality. Its exteriorised liquidity allows it to reach other realms, realms that exist beyond the body and beyond the tearful, material text of life on earth. Before leaving for other realms, however, I shall start this investigation of the waters of emotion, inevitably, with tears.

---

<sup>3</sup> There are several studies of emotion in Middle English literature; Downes and McNamara (2016) have offered an initiatory exposé on this methodology. In the same journal issue, an article deals with embodied practice in personified emotions (Flannery, 2016) and a whole book has been dedicated to the study of emotions in Arthurian literature (Brandsma, Larrington, Saunders, 2015). Most of these studies, however, primarily focus on embodiment and do not consider the metaphorical writing of emotion.

## Ink as Tears

Tears are ubiquitous in Chaucer's oeuvre; they flow from the eyes of men and women equally, expressing different emotions, although they most often signify great sorrow. Grieving and lovesick characters shed endless tears, tears which are often contagious and hence also flow from the eyes of the witnesses of sorrow, markers of empathy. They are also a sign of truthfulness of feeling, of the heartfelt nature of emotion. The Parson explains that for a true confession, the first condition is sorrowful bitterness and one of the sure signs of bitterness is tears: 'The thridde signe is how that thy shrift sholde be ful of teeris' (994).<sup>4</sup> They are the outward appearance of genuine, inner emotion, the outward extension of affect. Chaucer uses tears repeatedly and hyperbolically in order to emphasize depth and integrity of feeling.

The flowing and liquid materiality of sorrow is so prevalent that it is embedded in the text itself and its own flowing materiality. The image of text and tears, poetry and sorrow being one and the same might have come to Chaucer through his translation of Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*. In the opening of the *Consolation*, the exiled Boethius composes a lyrical complaint dictated by the Muses of poetry. Chaucer translates this passage as follows: 'For lo, rendyngne muses of poetes enditen to me thynges to ben written, and drery vers of wretchidnesse weten my face with verry teres' (Boece, *metrum* 1, 4–6). Here the sorrowful verses not only provoke tears, as the subject of *weten*, they themselves become tears. This passage is crucial to understanding Chaucer's construction of emotion because it binds together the act of writing verse with that of shedding tears and therefore it physically links poetry with sorrow. Plaintive verses are equated to tears because they aim to be a similarly truthful and inartificial sign of sorrow; tears are the ink of the text, the outward projection of the individual's inner feelings.

Chaucer will use a variant of this figure as the opening for his tragic poem *Troilus and Criseyde*. In the famous opening, the author offers a vivid presentation of the materiality—and fluidity—of both text and sorrow. It introduces a tearful narrator who, after stating his intention to tell the 'double sorwe of Troilus', establishes his

---

<sup>4</sup> All references to Chaucer are to *The Riverside Chaucer* (1988), edited by Larry Dean Benson.

own melancholic onset: 'thise woful vers, that wepen as I write' (I, 7). Once again, the emotion and its somatic expression are 'displaced onto the verses themselves, drawing attention to the liquid materiality of the text' (Trigg, 2012: 31); affective subjectivity is effected through the act and the substance of writing. Indeed, grammar dissolves the boundary between the *woful vers* and the 'I'; the ink, the text itself, becomes tears, becomes a materialization of sorrow. As Rust (2013: 404) notes, 'Chaucer picks up on the potential in Boethius' *elegi fletibus* for verses that are tearful not only in the sense of being sad but also in the sense of being written in real tears'. The text thus turns into embodied affect and one which is exclusively sorrowful. In fact, when the liquid tool of the narrator—the ink made of his own tears—needs to express joy, it fails: 'this joie may nought writen be with inke' (III, 1693). While it is hyperbolic, the specific mention of ink in this statement implies that joy cannot be contained in the liquid materiality of the text—it will have to find its liquid expression elsewhere, as I shall later demonstrate.

Throughout the poem, sorrow is palpable, and this palpability is not only effected through the characters' swooning, weeping, fading bodies—both lovers faint and nearly die out of sadness (III, 1086ff. and IV, 1150ff.)—but also, crucially, through the conventional sorrowful words of lyrics, complaints and letters and their figured materiality. The liquid materiality of both sorrow and text converges most strikingly in the lovers' letters. As Troilus sets out to write his first love letter to Criseyde, the inexperienced lover is guided by Pandarus. Pandarus appears to be quite the expert at love writing and he instructs Troilus to write in a manner which is not 'scryvenyssh' nor 'craftyly' wrought (II, 1026). And to create such an honest and heartfelt letter, or rather, ironically, to create the visible appearance of it, he advises: 'biblotte it with thi teris ek a lite' (II, 1027). No words, no literary artifice will better express sorrow than the non-linguistic, material mark of tears—even when the creation of the mark of tears is itself artificial.<sup>5</sup> This is in fact made explicit in another of Troilus' letters to Criseyde. The context of that letter is quite different from the preceding: Troilus

---

<sup>5</sup> Bodily signs such as tears or blushes often raise important questions about the authenticity of emotion; Valerie Allen (2005) addresses these questions in an article on the ambivalence of blushing as a sign.

did convince Criseyde to take pity on him and the lovers have already consummated their love, but they are now separated by physical distance as Criseyde has been sent off to the Greek camp. However, while the context is changed, the intent of the letter is not; it is the linguistic and material embodiment of his sorrow that Troilus wishes to offer Criseyde.

For which to yow, with dredful herte trewe,  
 I write, as he that sorwe drifth to write,  
 My wo, that everich houre encresseth newe,  
 Compleynyng, as I dar or kan endite.  
 And that defaced is, that may ye wite  
 The teris which that fro myn eyen reyne,  
 That wolden speke, if that they koude, and pleyne. (V, 1331–37)

This passage blends together tears and complaint, as well as the page and the face. Troilus expresses the eloquence of tears as signs of sorrow. If they could speak, their complaint would be more convincing and truthful than any words. They take precedence over words: they blur the words on the page, they deface the text. The text is itself equated to the human face here, which is marred by marks of sorrow. Text and complaint become materialised, words becoming tears and the page the face on which tears rain. This brings us back to the poem's very beginning where the narrator explains that only a 'sory chere' befits a 'sorwful tale' (I, 14), drawing a parallel between the author's face and his text, tears painting sorrow on both. Criseyde, in her answer to Troilus' letter, aptly summarises this complex nexus of complaint as liquid materiality: 'Youre lettres ful, the papir al ypleynted .../I have ek seyn with teris al depeynted/Youre lettre' (V, 1597–600). Rather than the words, it is the paper itself which is 'ypleynted', that is 'filled with complaint' (MED 1.b). Again, the tears which stain the paper—but depeynten also means 'to depict' (MED 1.a)—are themselves the complaint. Tears are the embodied liquid sign of sorrow, the tool to express affect on faces and on paper. In *Troilus and Criseyde*, sorrow, more than any other emotion, is the very stuff of poetry, it runs in its ink and on its face.

### Drinking Woe and Tears of (Piteous) Joy

Tears as ink manifest emotion through a pouring out of liquid affect from the inner body for the outside world to see and read. But liquidity also comes to figure the need to repress and withstand sorrow; as the liquid the individual has to drink, sorrow is swallowed, ingested by the body rather than expressively let out. But the recurrent association of drink and emotion in *Troilus* first appears to represent love rather than sorrow in what many of the manuscripts call *Canticus Troili*, a lyric on the contradictory nature of love inspired by Petrarch's sonnet 132 'S'amor non è' (Bettarini, 2005: 641). Petrarch mentions the sweetness and bitterness of love and therefore brings forward the sense of taste in his imagery of emotion but it is Chaucer who adds the concept of love as a drink which does not quench thirst: 'For ay thurst I, the more that ich it drynke' (I, 406). The drink embodies love's contradiction: rather than satiation it creates more need, it inebriates rather than hydrates. Similarly, Criseyde thinks she must have been given an intoxicating drink after she sees the 'knightly sight' of Troilus coming back from the battlefield: 'to hireself she seyde, "Who yaf me drynke?"' (II, 651). The contradictory and intoxicating drink figures love as a potion with the unforeseen effects of dizziness, lack of control and even addiction. In contrast, the drink of sadness is presented as a bitter medicinal drink: it is drunk wilfully, with the expectation of relief. At the beginning of the consummation scene, the narrator interrupts the narrative to offer a consideration on the lovers' present happiness and what it owes to their past sorrows:

As of a fevre or other gret siknesse,  
 Men moste drynke, as men may ofte se,  
 Ful bittre drynke; and for to han gladnesse  
 Men drynken ofte peyne and gret distresse—  
 I mene it here, as for this aventure,  
 That thorough a peyne hath founden al his cure.  
 And now swetnesse semeth more swete,  
 That bitternesse assaied was byfor[n].] (III, 1213–20)



The narrator's theory is that pain and distress have to be drunk in order to have gladness. The liquid metaphor is associated with the unpleasantness of medicinal drink and therefore utilises taste as part of its emotional imagery. Sorrow is bitter and gladness is sweet, but even sweeter after having tasted bitterness. This passage also implies the materiality of sorrow against the more abstract quality of joy: only the negative emotions are explicitly materialised; pain and distress are drunk and *assaied*, while gladness is merely had as a result. The drinking metaphor eventually conveys the necessity of enduring pain willingly and courageously. The repetition of the word *men* in this passage helps present the concept as a proverb and make it universal. But it is mostly the male suffering of Troilus that the reader has been exposed to throughout most of the first two books. Moreover, Criseyde also uses the metaphor with relation to the male lover in her speech on the venom that is jealousy. She explains that as bad as jealousy is it can be excusable if it is 'with piety so wel repressed' and the jealous male lover: 'goodly drynketh up al his distresse—/ And that excuse I, for the gentillesse' (III, 1033–36). She associates the act of drinking up distress with nobility, with the noble act of restraint; the image thus seems to point towards the necessity for the male lover to withstand pain and sorrow. Drinking up one's sorrow, is a necessary and universal mode of experiencing negative and painful feelings in this image; it implies restraint and nobility and promises a sweet reward—a mode of feeling especially relevant to male and aristocratic lovers.

When women drink their sorrow, a very different pattern emerges, as one of Criseyde's famous citations illustrates. In the second book, Criseyde receives Troilus' pouring out of his sorrow through letters and is required to make a decision. She fears to lose both her security and her freedom in such a love affair, which would lead to a 'mooste stormy lyf' (II, 778), yet refusing him will avowedly engender his death. She thus finds herself in the typically wretched condition of women in matters of love: 'Therto we wrecched wommen nothing konne,/Whan us is wo, but wepe and sitte and thinke;/Oure wrecche is this, our owen wo to drynke' (II, 782–4). Louise O. Fradenburg (2006: 606) analyses this passage in a productive way:

'Criseyde's lines about women's woe hint at that narrative paradigm wherein the coincidence of rescuer and tormentor in the same person turns the feminine subject's affect into body: she is language-less, somatised, and figured as the source of her own unpleasure'.

Here the liquid materiality of woe figures the helplessness of women's affect in matters of love: as a woman and as the recipient of a man's love, she cannot exteriorize her distress, as the male lover does through tearful words of complaint. And, contrary to the manly drinking of sorrow, this is not a promise for sweetness, it is a curse rather than a medicine. So while the universal or manly mode of experiencing material, liquid sadness expresses restraint and nobility, women drink sadness as a mode of self-preservation.

The womanly condition of having to absorb one's own somatised affect is very well embodied in Griselda, the heroine of the *Clerk's Tale*, which presents a great example of a narrative where rescuer and tormentor coincide. However, Griselda is a wife and a mother rather than the lady in a courtly love story, and this different gendered status occasions a different emotional liquidity. Griselda is a young maiden of humble birth who is chosen by the powerful and rich Walter to be his wife. But Walter will then submit her to a series of cruel and sadistic tests in order to prove her womanly patience and wifely obedience. Griselda patiently endures each of those tests, swallowing her sorrow. Her face is always glad and her heart always humble. Her endurance in torments is characterised by dryness, by a restraint of the effusion of liquid affect. The narrator thus points out that her heart is bare of swollen thoughts (950); even the potentiality of somatisation and the effusion of fluids inherent in swelling is carefully precluded. Griselda's lack of somatic and liquid affect is continuously emphasised. As Walter takes away her daughter and Griselda thinks she will be killed, she does not cry nor sigh: 'but nathelees she neither weep ne syked' (545). Later in the tale, Walter dismisses her as his wife and she goes back to the house of her father, wearing only her old smock. In this scene of high pathos, her constant affective dryness is emphasised by the contrast of the folk weeping around her: 'the folk hire folwe, wepynge in hir weye,/And Fortune ay they cursen

as they goon;/But she fro wepyng kepte hire eyen dreye' (897–9). She keeps her eyes dry while the crowd following her as well as her father welcoming her ('sorrowfully wepyng', 914) cannot choke back their tears. This lack of watery affect is the expression of her steadfastness: her unchanging heart and face.

The end of the tale presents a powerful counterpoint to Griselda's dry affectivity. After several cruel tests, Walter is finally convinced by his wife's ever-steady countenance and decides to stop the torture. He confesses that he was testing her womanhood and brings back her children to her; the tale thus ends in effervescent joy:

Whan she this herde, aswowne doun she falleth  
 For pitous joye, and after hire swownyng  
 She bothe hire yonge children to hire calleth,  
 And in hire armes, pitously wepyng,  
 Embraceth hem, and tendrely kissyng  
 Ful lyk a mooder, with hire salte teeres  
 She bathed bothe hire visage and hire heeres. (1079–85)

This scene of heightened pathos is created by extreme signs of embodied emotion. Griselda passes out and then weeps profusely, her salty tears bathing her children's faces. Such an embodied and teary representation of joy is definitely unusual in Chaucer's writing. While his characters weep abundantly, they rarely do so out of joy. Spiritual feelings of gratitude and the acknowledgment of the working of divine grace can be accompanied by tears but joy is rather disembodied in Chaucer's writing.<sup>6</sup> And in fact, the emotion that occasions such swooning and weeping is

---

<sup>6</sup> At the end of the *Prioress' Tale*, when the child finally gives up the ghost, the Abbott and the whole convent weep and lie down at his incredible faith and the grace which awaits him. Tears in medieval religious culture were indeed perceived as a gift (Joy-Knight, 2011). Religious fervour and exultation can be an embodied and wet feeling, but the expression of joy is generally disembodied; for example, Chaucer often uses a pattern of collocating doublets with positive emotions in the *Canterbury Tales*. Thus in the *Man of Law's Tale* moments of joy are almost exclusively expressed in this manner: 'And thus in murthe and joye I lete hem dwelle' (410), 'And forth they ryde in joye and in gladnesse' (1102), 'In joye and blisse at mete I lete hem dwelle' (1119), 'That litel while in joye or in pleasance/Lasteth the blisse of Alla with Custance' (1141–2). In such expressions the emotion is presented as impersonal

not joy but what Chaucer calls 'pitous joye'. *Pitous* according to the *Middle English Dictionary* can mean 'compassionate' and 'full of pity for another's distress' (1.a) or it can define the state or person who arouses or deserves pity, its meaning extending to 'lamentable' and 'sorrowful' (2.a). But the dictionary indexes the *Clerk's Tale's* 'pitous joye' under definition 2.b, 'emotionally moving, affecting'. Indeed, directly after the above-quoted passage the narrator exclaims, as if he were witnessing the scene himself, seeing it and hearing it: 'O which a pitous thyng it was to se/Hir swownyng, and hire humble voys to heere!' (1086–7). The scene is in effect extremely moving. The word *pitous* is then transferred to the witnessing crowd: 'O many a teere on many a pitous face/Doun ran of hem that stoden hire bisyde' (1104–5). Griselda's tears of piteous joy seem to be contagious, as the vision of piteous joy itself engenders a tearful reaction. The word *pitous* in this phrase takes on its first meaning of 'full of pity for another's distress', except of course it is not distress that the piteous faces are witnessing here but joy. Piteous joy is an ambiguous feeling; it seems to be expressed as and to have the same effect on others as extreme sorrow. And, at least according to one meaning of the word, 'pitous joye' is 'sorrowful joy'. Griselda in fact calls herself a 'woful mooder' (1094) in this same passage.

In any case, the embodiment of this hybrid affect is extreme, and liquid. This liquid materiality of affect comes as a very sharp contrast to Griselda's emotionality throughout the tale. Whereas Griselda's 'glade cheere' and 'humble herte' implies constraint and control of affect, 'pitous joye' signifies a release of affect. This release is expressed through swooning and weeping: the body finally lets go. And this release is also a release of water; after the dryness of restraint and patience comes the effusion of emotions and fluids. The other important element of this scene though is its emphasis on Griselda's motherhood; her tender gestures towards her children are described as part of this piteous joy. She is piteously weeping and tenderly kissing 'ful lik a mooder' (1084). It would seem therefore that while her patient restraint and dryness represent the affective behaviour associated with the humble and obedient wife, the bodily and fluid effusion of piteous joy is the affect of motherhood, of the

---

and exterior to the self, losing any potential of embodiment by becoming an abstract place or condition.

union of mother and children.<sup>7</sup> The only other time the expression appears in the *Canterbury Tales*, it refers to Constance's reunion with her family in the *Man of Law's Tale*: 'Who kan the pitous joye tellen al/Bitwixe hem thre, syn they been thus ymette' (1114–5). But in this tale, tears of relief are shed both by the female protagonist and her husband Alla at the final reunion (1052 and 1059). Affectivity is gendered but it is also dictated by literary genres and conventions. Indeed, both tales play along the lines of the secular saint's life, which ends in a climax of affect and pathos.

The metaphorical liquidity of emotions is a gendered and generic figuration in Chaucer. While men drink pain to have gladness, as part of their service to their ladies, women drink their sorrows out of helplessness; they have no other choice than to materialise their woe and physically ingest it, making it a part of themselves. This injustice in the lives of many of Chaucer's women is compellingly represented in the figure of Griselda, who has swallowed her pain so well that no tears can come out of her eyes until the restitution of justice and the natural state—mother with children, wife with husband. Criseyde herself expresses this condition: as a courtly lady, she can only receive the lover's liquid expression of sorrow, but she has to swallow her uncertainty and her distress. These gendered emotional systems are also conditioned by literary genres: Griselda's steadfast dryness followed by the wet release of piteous joy belong to the pathos of the secular saint's life, while Criseyde's role as the lady lover in a courtly poem dictates her drinking of woe but also her subsequent drinking of love's drink, and the teary and effusive affectivity that ensues.

Finally, this generic and gendered use of liquid emotionality can be recognized in another tale of female exemplarity: the saint's life of the virgin martyr Cecilia. The heroine of the *Second Nun's Tale* is qualified three times by the phrase 'blisful faire mayden' (241, 293, 461). The heroine is therefore defined by her virginity, her beauty, but also her emotional state: she is full of bliss, joyful in her blessedness. Like Griselda's steadfastness, Cecilia's blissfulness is characterised by its dryness. While tears of spiritual recognition and gratitude are shed around her, Cecilia's eyes

---

<sup>7</sup> An interesting parallel to this womanly weeping can be seen in the figures of female mystics and anchoresses whose crying achieves union with Christ and God (Lynch, 1991: 46–50).

stay dry. The officer Maximus sheds 'piteous teeris' (401) as he witnesses the deaths of Valerian and his brother, before converting and dying as a martyr himself. Tears of pity may accompany the act of conversion, but there is nothing piteous about the virgin's blissful martyrdom. Indeed, contrary to the ending of the *Clerk's Tale* and the pathos of piteous joy, the climactic moment of the tale of blissful Cecilia is characterised by an absence of liquid and material affect. No swoons, no tears for the virgin, she transcends her own body: in a boiling bath, she does not even shed a drop of sweat: 'for al the fyr and eek the bathes heete/She sat al coold and feelede no wo./It made hire nat a drope for to sweete' (520–2). Bodily sensation and emotion are blended here, she is cold and feels no sorrow, both of those things result in the absence of sweating, the absence of bodily fluids. Her coldness in the heat and impassibility in torment is what defines her blissfulness—an inherent state of beatitude. Crucially, it is an anticipation of the bliss of heaven and, therefore, in a sense, it is the cold, tranquil state of death itself.

The deadly bath of Cecilia thus anticipates our trajectory towards the bath of bliss: in it, the blissful and dry body of Cecilia can reach heavenly joy. In contrast, the liquidity of negative and/or pathetic emotions either comes from or enters into the individual's inner body; it is a somatic liquidity that the body must produce or integrate through swallowing. This liquidity is hence also represented as highly fluid, figuring the moving process of emotion. Tears flow out of the body and move others, and, on the other hand, drinking sorrow figures the action of taking something in, to withstand sorrow. But the flowing waters of sorrow do stop, eventually standing still for the possibility of joy, or at least, repose. The second part of this paper looks precisely at this, at the waters of emotion becoming still and exterior.

### **Drowning in Tears**

While the waters of sorrow in Chaucer are somatic they become exterior through the crystallisation of tears onto the page. The liquid metaphor for complaint materialises words into water, equating them to the liquid and somatic expression of emotion. But while the image of ink as tears expresses depth of feeling, the same metaphorical precept can also communicate the ineffectuality and hopelessness of complaint. This

is best evidenced, in the *Troilus*, by the repeated hyperbolic image of characters crying so much they risk drowning in their own tears. Tears flow out until they become a deadly bath. This image is twofold in the poem; Pandarus and the narrator use it as a way to comment on the futility and the destructiveness of the lovers' wallowing in sorrow and complaint but Troilus, in the depth of his despair, sees it as the only possible respite from his pain.

In the first book of the poem, after Troilus falls, at first sight, inescapably in love with Criseyde, the lovesick lover languishes alone in his room and complains endlessly to himself. The narrator comments on his lonely bewailing and notes the uselessness of it:

Thise wordes, and ful many an other to,  
 He spak, and called evere in his compleynte  
 Hire name, for to tellen hire his wo,  
 Til neigh that he in salte teres dreynte.  
 Al was for nought: she herde nat his pleynte;  
 And whan that he bythought on that folie,  
 A thousand fold his wo gan multiplie. (I, 540–6)

This passage touches on what Lee Patterson (2010: 183) calls the 'programmatic uselessness' of the genre of the complaint. Complaint is the solitary expression of sorrow and desire which continuously addresses absence. In that way it nourishes the emotional distress of the solitary lover rather than extinguishing it. This uselessness and destructiveness is figured through a materialisation of the complaint. Indeed, in this passage, the author marks no transition between the linguistic expression of sorrow and the material one: Troilus speaks words of complaint until he nearly drowns in tears. They are one and the same, tears being the material and liquid manifestation of the plaintive words. Troilus drowns in his own words as he does in his salty tears. The complaint is, in some way, non-speech or at least non-communicative speech; it cannot achieve communication nor consolation but only more affect, more sorrow, and more tears. Complaint appears material rather than linguistic, its liquid words becoming the lover's own pool of death.

The narrator thus recognises the destructive nature of complaint and weeping and so does the pragmatic Pandarus. After having witnessed Troilus' grief and despair at the news of Criseyde's imminent departure, Pandarus finds his niece in a similar state of deadly sorrow. He urges her to cease her weeping and instead help provide a cure for both herself and her lover, before they both drown in their tears:

And shapeth yow his sorwe for to abregge,  
 And nought encesse, leve nece swete;  
 Beth rather to hym cause of flat than egge,  
 And with som wisdom ye his sorwe bete.  
 What helpeth it to wepen ful a strete,  
 Or though ye bothe in salte teeris dreynte?  
 Bet is a tyme of cure ay than of pleynte. (IV, 925–31)

The uselessness of the complaint and its materialisation into tears is here opposed to wisdom. Against the destructive flow of tears and plaintive words, Pandarus proposes wit and argumentation, reasoned communication. This consolatory rhetoric has some effect on Criseyde; she does try to reason with Troilus and offer a coherent and persuasive plan for them to be together again after she has left for the Greek camp. Reasoned, argumentative speech, however, is not part of Troilus' vocabulary. He is the courtly lovesick hero *par excellence* and the complaint, as useless and destructive as it is, is his main affective and discursive mode.<sup>8</sup> In his rhetoric, the deadly pool of tears becomes the only possible respite from his undying sorrow; death is itself the solution—literally dissolving sorrow. More than a cure for sorrow, death is equated to joy: 'Therto desir so brennyngly me assailleth,/That to be slayn it were a gretter joie/To me than kyng of Grece ben and Troye' (I, 607–9). There are indeed only two options for the sorrowful longing of the lover to stop: either in the attainment of the

---

<sup>8</sup> Troilus' lachrymose style has often been perceived negatively and 'as undermining his masculinity' (Meecham-Jones, 2015: 89). Meecham-Jones argues on the other hand that this mode of feeling is not necessarily to be seen as effeminate and that one needs to question whether Troilus' tears are in fact passive or rather 'an active expression of his desire' (90).



desired joy—sexual union with the beloved—or in death. Both options offer equal respite, they extinguish the inextinguishable fire of desire. Troilus is therefore not interested in Pandarus' conception of consolation through logical argumentation and wisdom:

Nay, God wot, nought worth is al thi red,  
 For which, for what that evere may byfalle,  
 Withouten wordes mo, I wol be ded.  
 O deth, that endere art of sorwes alle,  
 Com now, syn I so ofte after the calle,  
 For sely is that deeth, soth for to seyne,  
 That, ofte ycleped, cometh and endeth peyne.

Wel wot I, whil my lyf was in quyete,  
 Er thow me slowe, I wolde have yeven hire;  
 But now thi comynge is to me so swete,  
 That in this world I nothing so desire.  
 O deth, syn with this sorwe I am a-fyre,  
 Thou outhur do me anoon in teris drenche,  
 Or with thi colde strok myn hete quenche! (IV, 498–511)

For Troilus, it is Pandarus' 'red' which is useless, as the absoluteness of his sorrow knows no cure except for death—happy, 'sely' death. This is then expressed in highly material terms. Sorrow is fire and it can be either drowned in tears or quenched by the cold stroke of death. In any case, the hot and dry element of fire which figures sorrow needs the moist and cold element of water. Somewhat paradoxically, sorrow is presented simultaneously as a burning feeling and as tears in the poem; it is fire and water at the same time. Indeed, in the courtly poem, sorrow is alternatively, if not at once, a burning and longing desire and a passive, teary state.<sup>9</sup> Interestingly,

<sup>9</sup> This is part of a courtly tradition well exemplified in the *Knight's Tale* through the description of the walls in the temple of Venus, where are found 'The sacred teeris, and the waymentynge,/The firy strokes of the desiryng/That loves servantz in this lyf enduren' (1921–3).

in medieval medical theory those two states—dry, hot and active, and cold, wet and passive—are characteristics respectively of the male and the female gender.<sup>10</sup> The sorrowful lover is hence manly in his dry and hot desire but feminine in his wet, cold and passive complaint. It is in the feminine, and therefore in wetness and coldness, that the cure for manly sorrow can be found: it can be drowned in liquid tears, quenched by the cold of death or find its end in union with the female beloved. Moreover, sorrowful desire is movement, it is an emotion which tends towards something, it is the contrary of a life ‘in quyeté’. The image of sorrow as fire thus also figures restlessness. Death and joy, on the contrary, represent rest and quiet, wetness and coolness. And, in fact, the recurring image of drowning in tears figures exactly that: it is the exteriorisation of the liquidity of sorrow and the eventual stillness of the flow of tears. Tears become the still water in which the fire of sorrow is quenched. This bath of death is cold and quiet and joyful to the lovesick lover. It is, in a way, a bath of bliss.

### **Baths of Bliss**

The expression ‘bath of bliss’ or ‘to bathe in bliss’ appears three times in Chaucer, twice in *Troilus and Criseyde* and once in the *Wife of Bath’s Tale*.<sup>11</sup> In the tale, it is used to refer to the protagonist, the rather unwholesome rapist knight. As a punishment for his crime the knight has to find out what women most desire; he finds the answer—sovereignty over their husbands—thanks to an old hag who in return forces him to marry her. After she has secured sovereignty over him, she turns herself into a young beauty. At that the knight becomes overjoyed and his heart is said to bathe in a bath of bliss (1253). In this instance, the bath of bliss is internal and embodied. It might be interpreted as referring to the bodily spirits, which emotional arousal causes to move from and towards the heart—it would in this case appertain to medical discourse

<sup>10</sup> Gender was thought to be connected to the humoral system and, in short, men were hot and dry like yellow bile, linked with the choleric temperament, and women were cold and moist like phlegm, the temperamental characteristics of which are calmness and passivity. On this see for example Michelle M. Sauer (2015: 25).

<sup>11</sup> Archibald (2014) explores the rarity of this phrase in Middle English. She mentions its appearance in the Katherine Group and the relevance of this religious context for its study in Chaucer.

rather than metaphor. In *Troilus and Criseyde*, on the other hand, the whole body seems to enter into the water of bliss, which becomes exterior and still. In the first proem, the narrator asks the lovers who 'bathen in gladnesse' (I, 22) to have pity on Troilus' sorrowful case. This variation on the alliterative bath of bliss represents the rare and elevated joy of love. Indeed, in the poem, bathing in gladness or in bliss is the state experienced once lovers have attained love's paradise: 'love hem brynge in hevene to solas' (I, 31). The bath thus seems to represent the space where earthly love accesses heavenly bliss. Because of this metaphorical link to heaven, it is important to look at the few occurrences of the phrase in Middle English as they do seem to link it to both love and spirituality. A short survey will hence help bring out its resonances in Chaucer, and reveal the bath of bliss as a place of transition and transcendence.

The expression is not a very common one in Middle English. It is indexed in the *MED* under the fourth and fifth headings of, respectively, *bath* and *bathen*; these headings include the more metaphorical uses of the noun and verb. The phrase *bath of bliss* itself is defined as 'overflowing joy' (4.b). The dictionary only finds two examples of it, however, one being from Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale*. Similarly, under the verb's definition 5.a, 'to bask (in joy, wealth, etc.)', four of the seven examples come from Chaucer. One quotation from a Middle English love complaint offers a very similar context to the first occurrence in *Troilus*: the I-voice addresses 'ye that bathe in myrthe and plesaunce' and asks them to mind her who is not anymore.<sup>12</sup> But the other two, from Hoccleve's *Regiment of Princes*, are expressions of Fortune's prosperity. It is therefore probably Chaucer's invention to figure love's joy as a bath. The other definitions and quotations found under those headings rather associate bathing with religious experience. Bath is the site of rebirth and purity in baptism or penance, for example (*bath* 4.a), and of spiritual immersion (*bathen* 5.b). These baths figure a space of transition, a conduit between earthly sensations and heavenly love and spirituality. In fact, the only other example of the phrase 'bath of bliss' refers to a bath of death. The tribulations of the virgin martyr Saint Margaret, from the Katherine group, end with her being put to death in a boiling bath of water by the

---

<sup>12</sup> From the anonymous lyric 'Yit wulde I...' found in Robbins (1954).

pagan town governor Olibrius. But the saintly maiden prays to Christ to turn these hot waters into a bath of bliss:

This weater mote iwurthe me wunsum ant softe, ant lef me thet hit to me  
beo beath of blisse ant fulluht of font|stan, halhunge ant leome of echelich  
heale. 59. (2)

May this water become pleasant and mild, and agreeable to me and  
allow it to be a bath of bliss and baptism in the font, a hallowing and light  
of eternal salvation.<sup>13</sup>

After this prayer, the maiden comes out of the water safe and sound, and the pagan king has to order her to be beheaded. The 'bath of bliss' brings together martyrdom and baptism, death and rebirth: in this pleasant water she reaches salvation and her new life as the joyful bride of Christ. This recalls the boiling bath in which Chaucer's Cecilia, in her anticipatory blissfulness, does not shed a tear nor a drop of sweat. The phrase 'bath of bliss' in Middle English thus also possesses spiritual connotations. The bath is the place where the body is transcended, it is the space of transition between earthly torments and divine bliss.

Read through the lens of these religious cultural discourses, the image of bathing in bliss conveys the notion of spiritual immersion as conduit to a higher emotional realm. This reading is very relevant for the interpretation of its use in *Troilus and Criseyde*, a courtly secular poem which nonetheless posits the joy of love's consummation as an avenue to heavenly bliss. Through their union, the lovers access a place unbelievably high (III, 1271), they are in 'hevene blisse' (III, 704, 1322, 1657)—both the place and the emotion, which become one in this repeated compound. But while the virgin martyrs' deadly bath of bliss implied separation and the abnegation of the body, the lovers' bath of bliss is that of union and bodily pleasure. Crucially, the exteriorisation of its liquid materiality allows sensual joy to reach spiritual and disincarnate levels of ecstasy.

---

<sup>13</sup> Original text and translation both from Huber and Robertson (2016).

But this liquid figuration of bliss also needs to be analysed in relation to the broader imagery of the poem which figures emotions as places<sup>14</sup> and as steps in a continuous spatio-temporal progression. First of all, the phrase seems to represent joy as the temporary place of love's favours; happy lovers bathe in gladness (I, 22). And, as she begins to feel the joy of love, Criseyde expresses her gratitude to love's god: 'Whom shulde I thanken but yow, god of Love,/Of al this blisse, in which to bathe I gynne?' (II, 848–9). But then, at the beginning of book four, she loses that joy: 'Criseyde .../Shal now no lenger in hire blisse bathe' (IV, 208). The bathing metaphor thus constructs bliss as a place in which lovers remain as long as they are together and in love. But the fact that this place is liquid is of great importance. Firstly, because it puts it in parallel with the image of tears turning in a pool of death: the lovers' only respite from restless, sorrowful longing is the still and exterior waters of death, or of bliss. Secondly, because it removes love's joy from earthly progression.

In *Troilus and Criseyde*, life is presented as a constant progression from sorrow to joy and back again, and this progression is equated to spatial and temporal movement:

And next the valeye is the hil o-lofte;  
 And next the derke nyght the glade morwe;  
 And also joie is next the fyn of sorwe. (I, 950–2)

But within love's favours, the externality of joy's liquidity allows the body to be in water—or in the air. Indeed, another image advances the disembodied quality of joy in the poem: the metaphor of floating in joy. So at the beginning of the consummation scene: 'For out of wo in blisse now they flete;/Non swich they felten sithen they were born' (III, 1221–2). And later, Troilus feels his heart float in joy as he goes back to visit his beloved (III, 1671). Joy occasions a change of element for the characters: from earthly ground they are transported into water or air. And in these elements, earthly progression is interrupted—the lovers are as if suspended in time and space. The bath

---

<sup>14</sup> Emotions are often written as place in the poem: characters are said to be in gladness (I, 615; III, 1244; III, 1726) or in bliss (III, 1657), for example.

of bliss, the aerial joy, represents therefore an escape from earth's mutability, from the inevitable progress of time and land, and from the inevitable return of sorrow.

The sorrowful narrator hence finally makes space in his tearful text for the joy which 'may nought written be with inke' (III, 1693). But he writes it as an escape, as existing outside and beyond the material and flowing emotionality of text, earth and bodies. Similarly, the character Troilus, to whom was only promised a double sorrow, can temporarily escape himself and his ineluctable sorrowful fate in joy: 'where his spirit was, for joie he nyste' (III, 1351). The bath of bliss figures the suspension of time and movement, the interruption of the flow of sorrow's water, necessary to reach the metaphorical heaven of love's joy. It creates a realm outside of the embodiment of the text's sorrow. Here, liquidity is a place of transition, through the tranquil water of the bath, earthly bliss can become—albeit temporarily—heavenly bliss. Chaucer thus transposes the concept of spiritual bathing and immersion as a way to access divine love into the secular and sensual joy of earthly love.

## Conclusion

The language of liquid emotions in Chaucer is capacious, water providing a multifarious metaphor. It can be embedded in a medical and physiological discourse but also escapes this strict theoretical language into metaphorical figurations. Crucially, the liquid representation of emotions has the effect of materialising affect. By doing so, emotions can become more than a psychological and physiological process, more than an individual, subjective and internal event—they are externalised. Through this liquid materialisation, the concepts of the internalisation and exteriorisation of emotion become crucial to the construction of a gendered and generic affectivity. So the mode of feeling of wives and mothers implies internalisation and dryness of feeling in adversity but an exteriorised and wet affective release in justice and union. That of a virgin martyr on the other hand is a constant dry blissfulness, as the generic ending of such a tale does not require pathos. In the courtly and romantic genre, the exteriorisation of emotion reveals a disparity in the lovers' emotional experiences; while Troilus drinks his sorrow in order to have gladness, Criseyde drinks hers out of helplessness. She is the recipient of Troilus' liquid sorrow, rather than the creator.

In *Troilus and Criseyde*, the liquid exteriorisation of sorrow is the text: but it is only the narrator and the male lover who write complaints from their tears. The narrator therefore, entrapped as he is in a tear-written text, can only make space for joy by allowing the lovers, and the lovesick Troilus especially, to escape the text, themselves and earthly materiality. The carnal joy of sexual love and union is turned into an exterior emotion, a space of transition into an elevated, ethereal realm of heavenly bliss. Sexual joy thus transcends the body as well as the liquid materiality of the sorrowful text. The bathwaters of joy represent its tranquillity, its externality—it is not taken in the body but the body is taken into it—and ultimately its transcendence: it is heaven on earth or it is death.

Chaucer's materialisation and liquefaction of affect advances the fluidity of earthly emotions. The text of earthly life is, like that of *Troilus*, written in tears. It is a continuous somatic flow of pouring out and swallowing: from dry patience to wet release, from drinking love to tearful complaint. When the flow of affective water stops, it means death—or bliss. Waters at rest generate the blissful bath where Cecilia and Katherine can reach their heavenly abode, or the cold pool of tears where despairing lovers risk drowning, or finally, the transcendental, out-of-this-world experience of love's bliss. The use of water in the writing of emotions, rather than bringing in the same pool of conceptualisation all types of emotions, thus creates separate discursive streams for sorrow and for joy. Sorrow's flow is embedded in the body and in the ink of the text, while joy and respite are motion at rest and an escape from materiality.

### Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

### References

- Allen, V** 2005 Waxing Red: Shame and the Body, Shame and the Soul. In: Perfetti, L (Ed.), *The Representation of Women's Emotions in Medieval and Early Modern Culture*, pp. 191–210. Gainesville: University Press of Florida.
- Archibald, E** 2014 Baths of Bliss in the Middle Ages: Fact and Fiction. 27<sup>th</sup> February 2014. Available at: <https://www.dur.ac.uk/research/ils/videos1314/archibald/> (Last accessed 7 March 2018).

- Bettarini, R** (Ed.) 2005 *Canzoniere: Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*. Turin: Einaudi.
- Brandsma, F, Larrington, C and Saunders, C** (Eds.) 2015 *Emotions in Medieval Arthurian Literature: Body, Mind, Voice*. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer.
- Carruthers, M** 2006 On Affliction and Reading, Weeping and Argument: Chaucer's Lachrymose Troilus in Context. *Representations*, 93: 1–21. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/rep.2006.93.1.1>
- Chaucer, G** 1988 *The Riverside Chaucer*. In: Benson, L D (Ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cohen-Hanegbi, N** 2009 The Matter of Emotions: Priests and Physicians on the Movements of the Soul. *POETICA*, 72: 21–42.
- Downes, S and McNamara, R** 2016 The History of Emotions and Middle English Literature. *Literature Compass*, 13(6): 444–56. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/lic3.12318>
- Flannery, M C** 2016 Personification and Embodied Emotional Practice Middle English Literature. *Literature Compass*, 13(6): 351–61. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/lic3.12316>
- Fradenburg, L O** 2006 “Our owen wo to drynke”: Loss, Gender and Chivalry in *Troilus and Criseyde*. In: Barney, S A (Ed.), *Troilus and Criseyde*, pp. 589–606. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Huber, E R and Elizabeth, R** (Eds.) 2016 *The Katherine Group (MS Bodley 34)*. Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications.
- Joy-Knight, K** 2011 ‘Si Puose Calcina A’ Propi Occhi: The Importance of the Gift of Tears for Thirteenth-Century Religious Women and Their Hagiographers. In: Gertsman, E (Ed.), *Crying in the Middle Ages: Tears of History*, pp. 136–55. London: Routledge.
- Knuuttila, S** 2004 *Emotions in Ancient and Medieval Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/0199266387.001.0001>
- McNamara, R** 2015 Wearing your Heart on your Face: Reading Lovesickness and the Suicidal Impulse in Chaucer. *Literature and Medicine*, 33(2): 258–78. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/lm.2015.0018>
- McNamer, S** 2007 Feeling. In: Storhm, P (Ed.), *Oxford Twenty-First Century Approaches to Literature: Middle English*, pp. 241–57. Oxford: Oxford University Press.



- Meecham-Jones, S** 2015 "He in Salte Teres Dreynte": Understanding Troilus's Tears. In: Downes, S, Lynch, A and O'Loughlin, K (Eds.), *Emotions and War: Medieval to Romantic Literature*, pp. 77–97. London: Palgrave Macmillan. DOI: [https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137374073\\_5](https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137374073_5)
- Patterson, L** 2010 *Acts of Recognition: Essays on Medieval Culture*. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Robbins, R H** 1954 The Findern Anthology. *PMLA*, 69(3): 610–42. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/460075>
- Rosenwein, B** 2009 Emotion Words. In: Boquet, D and Nagy, P (Eds.), *Le sujet des émotions au Moyen-Age*, pp. 93–106. Paris: Beauchesne.
- Rust, M** 2013 Blood and Tears as Ink: Writing the Pictorial Sense of the Text. *The Chaucer Review*, 47(4): 390–415. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5325/chaucerrev.47.4.0390>
- Sauer, M M** 2015 *Gender in Medieval Culture*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Trigg, S** 2012 Langland's Tears: Poetry, Emotion, Mouvance. *The Yearbook of Langland Studies*, 26: 27–48. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1484/J.YLS.1.103203>
- Trigg, S** 2014 Emotional Histories: Beyond the Personalization of the Past and the Abstraction of Affect Theory. *Exemplaria*, 26(1): 3–15. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.179/1041257313Z.00000000043>

**How to cite this article:** Kaempfer, L 2018 Drinking Sorrow and Bathing in Bliss: Liquid Emotions in Chaucer. *Open Library of Humanities*, 4(1): 29, pp.1–24, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.227>

**Published:** 07 June 2018

**Copyright:** © 2018 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.



*Open Library of Humanities* is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Open Library of Humanities.

**OPEN ACCESS**