TROILUS AND CRISEYDE & TROUBADOUR POETRY

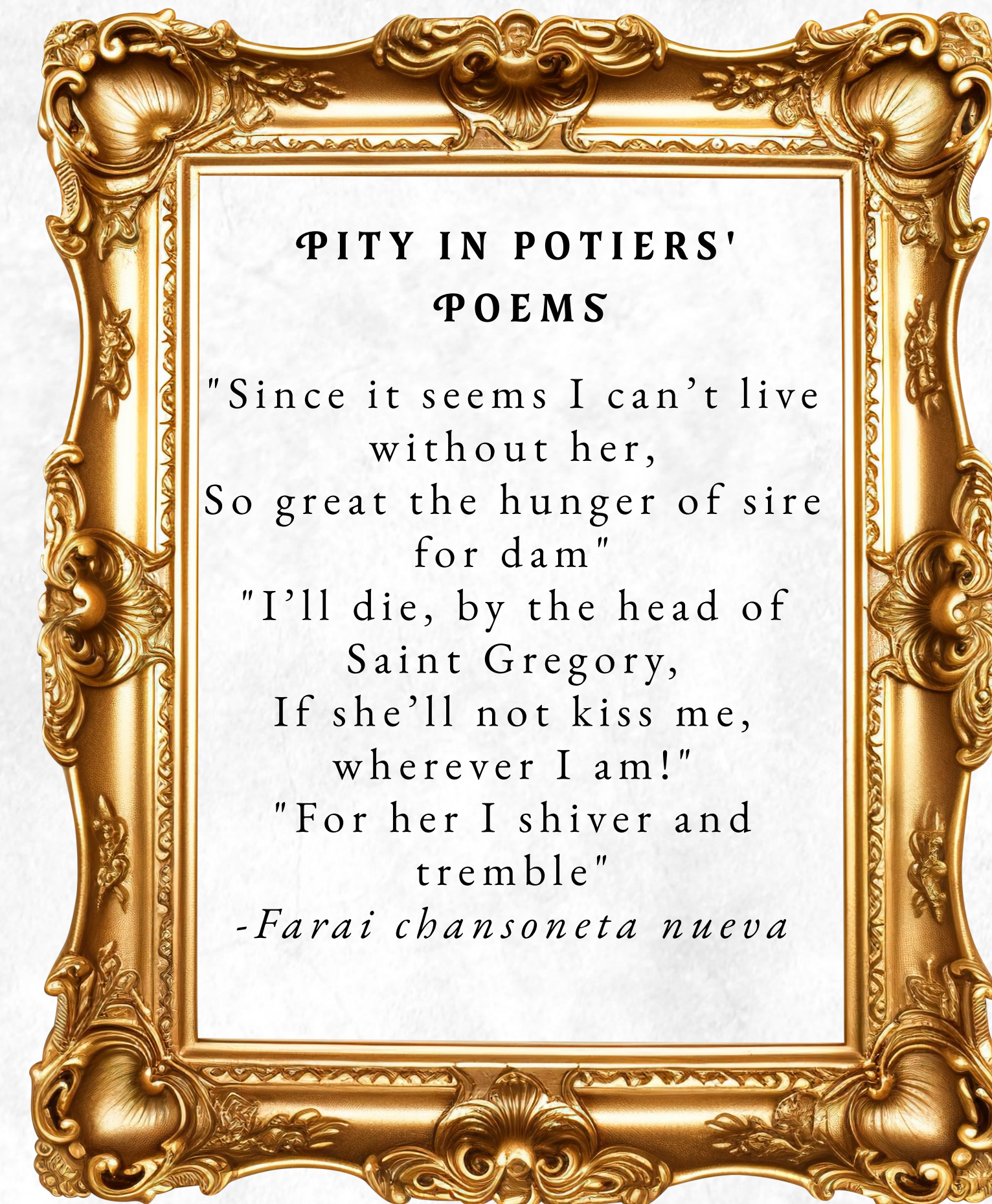VICTORIA DE JORIO-KOEGLER and LAURA BIAGI

ABSTRACT

- The different ways that authors portray pity over a roughly 250-year period, spanning early troubadour poetry by Guillaume de Poitiers at the beginning of the 12th century to Geoffrey Chaucer's Troilus and Criseyde in the late 14th century, demonstrates changing gender relations over time.
- Pity, a disposition of mercy that can describe a person or state, plays a huge role in the perception of the lady in troubadour poetry and Criseyde in Troilus and Criseyde. Troilus, off the bat, pities Criseyde for being an outcast as a widow due to her traitorous father that defected to the Greeks; she is dressed in black, alone, and perceived as a damsel in distress. The reader, meanwhile, pities Troilus for being so stricken by her beauty that he is lovesick for her.
- This is similar to the pity readers feel for the speakers in Guillaume de Poitiers's troubadour poetry, lovesick for the ladies in these poems.
- However, by Troilus and Criseyde's end, the most notable pity is demonstrated by Criseyde, transgressing gender roles and Troilus's power over her as both a man and knight, as she pities him for loving her and lusting for her so deeply. It leads to her completely leaving him alone in hopes that he will be able to move on from the lovesickness after she must join her father among the Greeks.
- Criseyde's greater pity gives her the power to act and improve the situation for herself and shows how over the 250-year span, women started to be portrayed with more power and agency.
- The results of my studies suggest that pity needs to be reevaluated in terms of its importance regarding the past and the future. A key takeaway from this study is that the evolving connotations and understandings of words illustrate how gender dynamics shift over time.

INTRO

- The portrayal of women in medieval romantic literature is a reflection of the complex intersection of gender roles, power dynamics, and emotional perceptions.
- Troubadour poetry, the medieval romantic poetry that first developed in the late 1000s and early 1100s and became the foundation for later medieval romantic literature like Troilus and Criseyde, presents women as objects of pity to justify men's desires.
- Guillaume de Poitiers was the first known troubadour. His lyrics display a relationship rooted in pity between lovers, exemplified through the male as pitiable to readers given his lovesickness for his female lover.
- Troilus and Criseyde by Geoffrey Chaucer is an epic poem about two lovers during the siege of Troy, written in Middle English in the mid-1380s.
  - Criseyde's role in the narrative is shaped by pity--both as the object of Troilus's pity in his initial attraction to her and, more radically, as the one pitying Troilus herself when she must leave him and chooses to move on from him out of compassion.
- Annalese Duprey-Henry describes pity within the era as a disposition of mercy that can describe a person or state in either position, both the pitier and the pitied, implying vulnerability both in another and in oneself.
- By analyzing both the poems of Guillaume de Poitiers and Geoffrey Chaucer's text, this study shows how men's pitying of women in early medieval works and readers' pitying of men's lovesickness portrayed limited perceptions of women's autonomy, but how the shift to women also pitying men in later medieval works portrayed expanded perceptions of women's autonomy.
- In addition, this research highlights the broader implications of pity as a literary device, encouraging contemporary audiences to reconsider the ways in which emotion is used to define and limit female agency in historical and modern narratives.
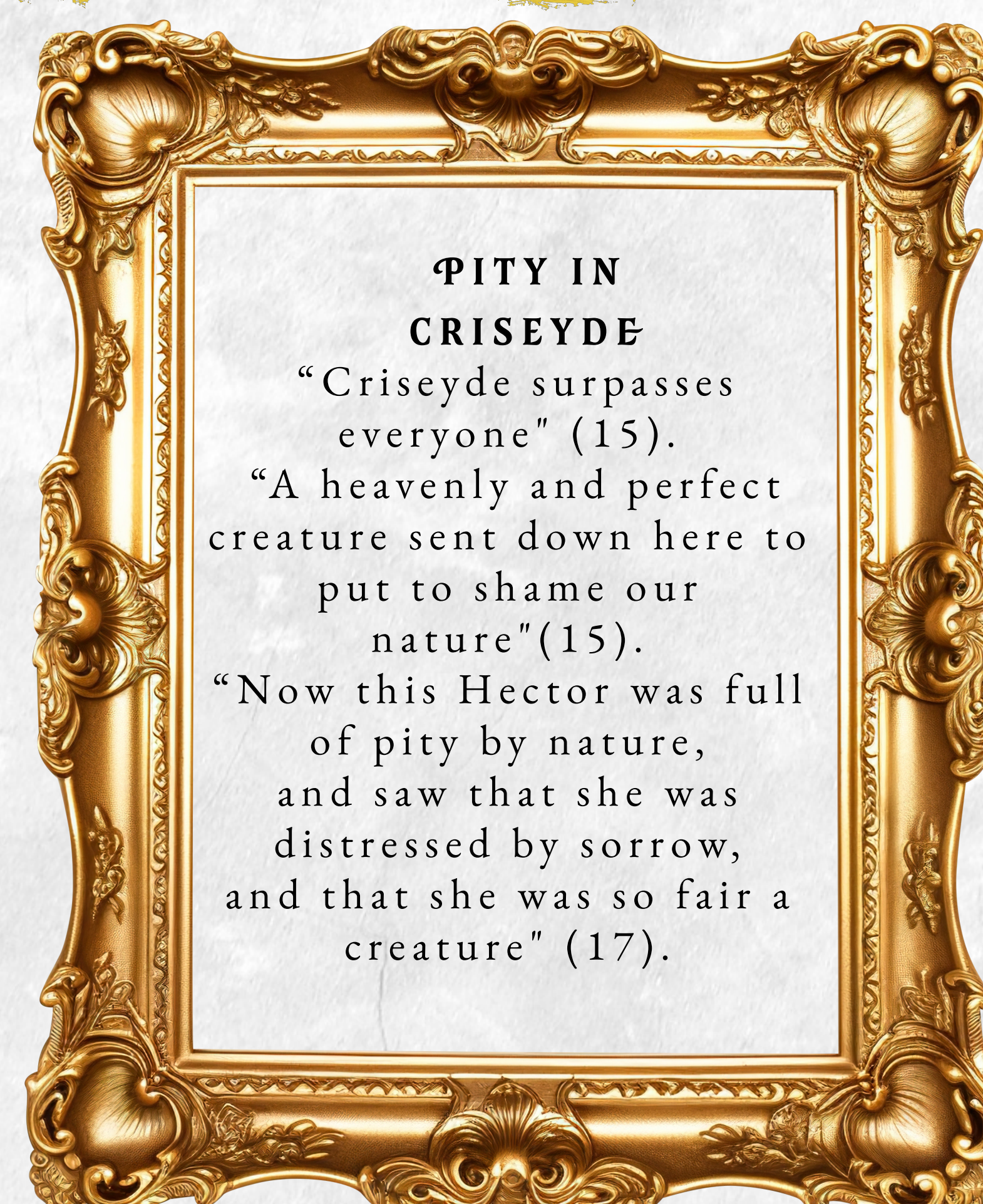
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PITY IN POTIERS' POEMS

"Since it seems I can't live without her,
So great the hunger of sire for dam"
"I'll die, by the head of Saint Gregory,
If she'll not kiss me, wherever I am!"
"For her I shiver and tremble"
-Farai chansoneta nueva

Troubadour On Horse

Guillaume de Potiers

Geoffrey Chaucer

PITY IN TROILUS

"My dear heart, alas!
My health, my beauty, my life is lost lest you take pity on me"(66).
"Even though she lacked pity: but all so cold in love towards thee your lady is as frost in winter moon,
and you consumed, as snow in fire is, soon." (75).
"Among all Greece take pity on this old wretch in distress,
since I bear for you all this heaviness!" (Seperation-6)

PITY IN CRISEYDE

"Criseyde surpasses everyone" (15).
"A heavenly and perfect creature sent down here to put to shame our nature"(15).
"Now this Hector was full of pity by nature, and saw that she was distressed by sorrow, and that she was so fair a creature" (17).

Troilus and Criseyde

METHODS

- During this project, I consolidated research through varied processes.
- First, I read peer-reviewed articles that allowed me to understand the background of troubadour and medieval romantic literature, medieval literary terminology, medieval literary themes, and important information on the socio-political happenings of the medieval era between 1050 and 1400.
- With each article, I identified the keywords, summarized the contents, discussed with Laura Biagi and Ms. Bailey Underwood, and finally analyzed the relevance to my research project. This process was integral to choosing the specific topics on which my project would focus.
- For my next step, I directed my attention to reading Troilus and Criseyde and closely analyzed the relationship between men and women.
- Using an article on pity by Annalese Duprey-Henry, I applied an analysis of the shifting pity between Troilus and Criseyde to its effects on their gender roles.
- This led me to compare and contrast these findings with pity in the first troubadour poetry written by Guillaume de Poitiers between 1071 and 1127 and pity's effects on gender roles.
- I carefully picked three representative poems from de Poitiers that depict changes from and continuities with Troilus and Criseyde nearly three hundred years later and analyzed each text to demonstrate the ways pity has evolved over time to portray shifting gender roles.

RESULTS

- Geoffrey Chaucer's Troilus and Criseyde in the late 14th century and the 12th-century troubadour poetry that influenced it both engage with the theme of pity as a defining factor in love, desire, and agency.
- While courtly love traditions often position women as passive objects of devotion, the role of pity complicates this framework by, as Jessica Hines argues, introducing questions of power, obligation, and emotional autonomy.
  - While early troubadour poetry often reinforced traditional courtly ideals—positioning women as distant, idealized figures whose affections dictated the emotional and even physical survival of their admirers—Chaucer's later work demonstrates an evolving dynamic where women, particularly Criseyde, wield pity as a tool of agency rather than mere passivity.
- In the lyrics of Guillaume de Poitiers, love is frequently framed as a form of suffering, with the male speaker portraying himself as wholly dependent on his beloved's beauty and disposition toward him.
- De Poitiers's poems, such as 'Farai chansoneta nueva' and 'Ab la dolchor del temps novel' emphasize the male speaker's longing, his submission to his beloved's beauty, and the overwhelming power of love, themes that became central to courtly love traditions.
  - Yet, in contrast to later, more rigid expressions of this ideal, Poitiers' work reflects a transitional phase—his women inspire devotion but cannot yet pity men themselves. Chaucer, writing centuries later, retains the motif of pity but subverts its function.
  - Annalese Duprey-Henry explains that while Troilus initially pities Criseyde as a vulnerable widow and readers pity his lovesickness, the power dynamic shifts as she ultimately pities him in return—not as a passive recipient of his suffering but as an active force who chooses to remove herself from their love to spare him greater pain. As David Aers states, "[Chaucer] returns romance to society and locates Criseyde firmly within it."
- This inversion of pity challenges medieval expectations of female agency, suggesting a shift in the literary portrayal of women from objects of desire to complex figures capable of shaping their own destinies.
- While in Guillaume de Poitiers's poetry in the 12th century pity initially reinforces traditional gender roles—casting women as objects of male desire and compassion—by the time Troilus and Criseyde was written in the 14th century, pity also serves as a disruptive force, allowing female characters to subvert expectations by exercising power through their own acts of pity.
- By reinterpreting pity not just as a passive emotion but as an active force that shapes relationships and societal norms, we gain a more nuanced view of medieval attitudes toward love, gender, and emotional agency.
- Ultimately, this study suggests that pity, rather than being a static or purely sentimental force, evolves as a literary and social tool that both reflects and challenges contemporary gender norms.
- By reassessing the function of pity in medieval literature, we gain a deeper understanding of how emotional expression shaped perceptions of gendered power and autonomy—both in the past and in the ways we interpret romantic works today.