



DOMINIKA RUSZKIEWICZ

Jesuit University Ignatianum in Kraków

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7809-587X>

Joyce Carol Oates's *Carthage* as a Modern Troilus and Cressida Story

ABSTRACT: Both Geoffrey Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* and Joyce Carol Oates's *Carthage* are set in times of war, the Trojan War and the Iraq War, respectively, and both are associated with love on the one hand, and loss on the other. In fact, *Carthage* contains many echoes of the past, with the main characters of the novel, Juliet and Cressida Mayfield, bringing connotations with Chaucer's and Shakespeare's works, their father compared to an old Roman general, and Corporal Brett Kincaid likened to the hero of chivalric romances. The aim of this article is to argue that Oates's *Carthage* may be seen as a modern Troilus and Cressida story in that it presents aspects of medieval reality in a modern guise, with the most poignant and recurrent association being that between the "war on terror" and medieval crusades and the emotion dominating the characters' reactions being rage, an emotion which occurs in relation to the fires of passion and war in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*, and Joyce Carol Oates's *Carthage*.

KEYWORDS: Geoffrey Chaucer, William Shakespeare, Joyce Carol Oates, medievalism, rage, Juliet, Cressida, war, 9/11, American society

Both Carthage and Troy are associated with passionate love, raging war, and imminent destruction. The latter was the site of the Trojan War and the setting for the story of Cressida's betrayal of Troilus, most famously narrated by Geoffrey Chaucer, Robert Henryson, and William Shakespeare.¹ The former is likewise known for the pairing of legend and romance through the story of its Queen, Dido, and her betrayal by Aeneas. It is also through the story of Saint Augustine's life that Carthage is associated with the consuming fires of passion, for it was on arrival in Carthage, a city in North Africa, that he

¹ For the development of the Troilus and Cressida story, see: *The European Tragedy of Troilus* (Boitani, 1989).

came to hear “a cauldron of unholy loves” and – being in love with the mere idea of love – felt a desperate need to fall into the snares of love (St Augustine, 1853: 29). It is the destructive ravages of passion which comes from love, grief and anger that this article is going to be concerned with, as described in Joyce Carol Oates’s *Carthage* and earlier renditions of the Troilus and Cressida story.

Set in Carthage in upstate New York, the action of Oates’s novel concentrates around the Mayfield family, the two Mayfield sisters in particular: Juliet, who is engaged to Corporal Brett Kincaid – a war veteran, recently returned from the Iraq War – and Cressida, who disappears under mysterious circumstances, casting suspicion on Brett. The names of the Mayfield sisters bring immediate connotations of love (Juliet) and betrayal (Cressida), as dramatized by William Shakespeare.² The Mayfields’ firstborn child, Juliet, is presented as a twenty-two-year-old bride-to-be, while Cressida, three years her junior, as a lost girl, her mysterious disappearance in the vast expanse of the Nautauga State Forest Preserve propelling the action of the novel. The elder sister’s iconic beauty contrasts markedly with the younger’s androgynous appearance and comportment. The opening chapters of the novel construe Juliet as a fairy-tale heroine, filled with excitement and enthusiasm at the thought of the approaching wedding as she describes in detail the design of her bridal gown: “Ivory silk. Ivory lace. One-shoulder neckline with a sheer lace back. The pleated bodice is ‘fitted’ and the skirt ‘flared.’ The veil is gossamer chiffon. The train is three feet long” (Oates, 2014: 18). In contrast, Cressida is her direct opposite: she rejects the accoutrements of femininity as she does those of religious ritual, which is why she eschews any kind of engagement in her sister’s nuptials. “She has refused to be my maid of honor,” Juliet confesses, “she was scornful saying she hasn’t worn anything like a dress or a skirt since she’d been a baby and wasn’t going to start now. She laughed saying *weddings are rituals in an extinct religion in which I don’t believe*” (Oates, 2014: 24). Associated through her name with instant and intense passion, Oates’s Juliet is a sincere and avid worshipper of the religion of love, as well as of the Christian religion, her pre-marriage vow to her fiancé partaking of them both: “I pledge to you to be *your loving wife forever & ever Amen*. I pledge to you as to Jesus our Savior *forever & ever Amen*,” she says (Oates, 2014: 17). Associated with betrayal through Chaucer’s and Shakespeare’s stories of faithful Troilus and unfaithful Criseyde/Cressida, Oates’s Cressida too is not destined to find solace in the arms of her

² In *American Chaucers*, Candace Barrington notes the priority given to Shakespeare over Chaucer when it comes to the reception of English literature in modern American culture (Barrington, 2007: 1).

beloved.³ Neither does she find solace in the Christian faith; instead, she dismisses religion as “a pastime for ‘weak-minded’ people” (Oates, 2014: 43).

The stark contrast between the two Mayfield sisters is underlined from the very beginning of the novel through the antonymic pairs of expressions used to define them. It is on numerous occasions that “beautiful Juliet” is contrasted with “cruel Cressida” (Oates, 2014: 44). While Juliet is “*the beautiful one*,” Cressida is “*the smart one*” (Oates, 2014: 37). The elder sister is “always unfailingly courteous, and sweet” (Oates, 2014: 45), whereas the younger is resentful and “steeped in the ink of irony as if in the womb” (Oates, 2014: 36). From the perspective of their parents, Juliet is a bright and happy child, while Cressida is dark and twisty (Oates, 2014: 37). Their father, Zeno Mayfield, the fifty-three-year-old former mayor of Carthage, refers to the elder daughter as “his sweet honeybunch Juliet” (Oates, 2014: 40); Cressida, in contrast, is “a challenge to love” (Oates, 2014: 36). In an interview, Oates acknowledged her intention to create a fairy-tale situation in the novel through polarizing the main female characters into “beautiful” and “smart,”⁴ and, in fact, both Juliet and Cressida are compared to “the daughters of a fairy-tale king” early in the novel (Oates, 2014: 36). This shows that Oates’s medievalism creates a binarized view of the world, based on clear-cut oppositions, only to dismantle the binaries and re-create the world anew.

The first distinction created in the novel is that between the two Mayfield sisters and it echoes the twofold dimension of life as problematized in medieval romances: the idealistic and romantic vs the realistic and tragic. On the one hand, there is a taste of medieval romanticism in the description of Brett’s instantaneous passion for Juliet (Oates, 2014: 140) and in the description of Juliet’s growing love for Brett, which brings to mind the allegory of the *Roman de la Rose*: “Like a flower she’d opened to him. One of those roses with many petals wrapped around one another, enclosed in a tight little bud and then, who knows why, the warmth of the sun maybe, the petals begin to open, and open” (Oates, 2014: 141). On the other, there is a taste of medieval tragedy in Cressida’s deep, secret, and unreciprocated attachment to Brett and her alienation from her family.⁵ Another binarized distinction is drawn between “us and them,” applying to the differences between religions, nations, and civilizations, differences that we

³ The convention of spelling the heroine’s name is Criseyde for Chaucer’s and Cressida for Shakespeare’s characters. I follow the convention while writing about a particular work, either Chaucer’s or Shakespeare’s; in other instances (i.e. when the heroine appears as a byword for inconstancy), I use the more common Cressida.

⁴ An interview: Joyce Carol Oates discusses *Carthage* with Isaac Fitzgerald. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VgN_GjAh3lg.

⁵ Among other ancient and medieval echoes in the novel, there is a comparison between Juliet and the Unicorn of medieval Christian legend, between Zeno Mayfield – the father of the Mayfield sisters – and an old Roman general (Oates, 2014: 422), and between Brett Kincaid – Juliet’s fiancé – and a “heraldic figure in an ancient frieze” (Oates, 2014: 368).

are “invited” to see by those politicians who – in the aftermath of the September 11th attacks – tend to deploy the analogy between the “war on terror” and medieval crusades. Bruce Holsinger addresses the question of why the attacks provoked such an immediate and deliberate appropriation of the crusading rhetoric in the following way: “the medievalism of 9/11 conspires with the white-hat–black-hat rhetoric of the war on terrorism by simplifying the complexities and binarizing the multiplicities that in reality subtend geopolitics” (2008: 471). The resulting dualism mobilizes the later medieval trope of *translatio imperii*, which Holsinger defines as “the translation or carrying-over of the Roman empire and its culture into a Christian guise” (Holsinger, 2008: 481), and turns it into the modern trope of the “clash of civilizations,” staging a collective trauma (Bid-dick, 2017: 252).

In *Carthage*, Oates acknowledges the persistence of crusader medievalism and shows how the tendency to romanticize the reason behind the American engagement in the Iraq War is used in war propaganda and disseminated through the media.⁶ Captured into a novelistic account, the aftermath of the attacks on the World Trade Center is presented in the following way:

Since the terrorist bombings of 9/11 the media had been filled with propaganda speeches by politicians, news of “weapons of mass destruction” hidden in Iraq, the horrific dictatorship of Saddam Hussein who’d seemed to be mocking his American enemies, daring them to declare war and invade. On TV Cressida had seen newsreel footage of President George W. Bush declaring to his American viewers that the terrorist enemy that had struck the Twin Towers on September 11, 2001, was part of a vast fundamentalist-Muslim army determined to destroy our *American way of life*; gazing into the TV camera as if he were addressing very slow-witted and credulous individuals, the President said, deadpan: “They want to come into your home and kill you and your family” (Oates, 2014: 368).

Presented as inevitable and defensive, the war on terror – as described in the novel – draws thousands of young recruits, who join the army on the wave of patriotic fever.⁷ Enlisting twelve days after 9/11, Brett Kincaid, Juliet’s fiancé, is among the first soldiers to join the army (Oates, 2014: 146). Together with his fellow soldiers, Corporal Kincaid finds himself “in the land of the dead,” which is the expression Oates uses in the title of Chapter Six, in which the atrocities

⁶ Horswell defines crusader medievalism as “the use and memory of the crusades and crusading rhetoric and imagery in the modern period” (Horswell, 2018).

⁷ On how medieval and ancient history has been used to lead people into war, see: Amy S. Kaufman and Paul B. Sturtevant, *The Devil’s Historians. How Modern Extremists Abuse the Medieval Past* (Kaufman and Sturtevant, 2020). The rhetoric of the crusades in the context of the war on terrorism is discussed in the section “Medieval 9/11” (Kaufman and Sturtevant, 2020: 64–67).

of war are described (Oates, 2014: 130–171), and is repeatedly reminded by his commanders of his almost religious duty to save Christianity:

The fight against terror is a fight against the enemies of U.S. morality – Christian faith. Somewhere in this God-forsaken place were the *imams* of the Al Qaeda terrorists who'd blown up the World Trade Center. Out of a pure hateful wish to destroy the Christian American democracy like the pagans of antiquity had hoped to do, centuries before. Ancient imperial Rome in the time of the gladiators – you would be required to die for your faith. It had been explained to them by their chaplain – this is a crusade to save Christianity. General Powell had declared there can be no choice, the U.S. will never compromise with evil. No choice but to send in troops before the *weapons of mass destruction* are loosed by the crazed dictator Saddam – nuclear bombs, gas and germ warfare. (Oates, 2014: 132)

As described by Oates, ideals such as “*Loyalty. Duty. Respect. / Service. Honor. Integrity. / Personal Courage*” (Oates, 2014: 303) prove nothing more than mere propaganda clichés or covers for privileged violence, which was perpetrated by medieval and modern “crusaders” alike. Writing about “the privileged practice of violence” in the Middle Ages, Richard W. Kaeuper provides historical and literary examples of barbaric actions committed by the crusaders (Kaeuper, 2006: 141, 147) and asks the provocative question if the medieval “army of God” should be referred to as *militia* or rather *malitia* (Kaeuper, 2006: 64)? He notes the prescriptive rather than descriptive nature of the chivalric ideals, such as prowess, generosity, helping the weak and poor, and argues that such high ideals were often drowned in the rage of the battle, which left seas of blood in its wake (Kaeuper, 2006: 145). Similarly, in his account of the historical precedents of Chaucer’s Knight, Terry Jones refers to the crusaders as the angels of death, merciless and efficient killers, responsible for horrifying massacres (Jones, 1994: 87).

In *Carthage*, the dark side of modern crusading is revealed through Brett Kincaid’s memories which are too vivid to erase, for they contain images of savage assaults on women – “Jesus! What they’d done. What they’d done *was*. Held her down. Jammed a rag into her screaming mouth. Taking turns with her. Grunting, yelping like dogs” (Oates, 2014: 130), children – “The girl was just a child not a teenaged girl like they’d been expecting, of which so many had been speaking *A girl! Sexy babe!* [...] In the culvert they dragged her about one hundred feet from the end of the village road and tried to bury her beneath mud-chunks and rocks and slats of a broken fence. One more God-damned task to be done once the high was over” (Oates, 2014: 135), as well as dead bodies – “From one of the (dead, blasted) insurgents they’d taken trophies: eyes, thumbs, ears. Entire faces sliced off though rarely in one place” (Oates, 2014: 133).

The war on terror, as experienced by American soldiers and described by Oates, creates “an army of the walking wounded” (Oates, 2014: 404), disabled veterans who are unable to return to the world of the living, for it is not possible for them to draw the line between the present and the past. Presented as cruel perpetrators of violence while in combat, they return from their “mission” with wounded bodies and souls. As revealed in the scraps of conversation between him and his wife-to-be Juliet, Brett Kincaid suffers from impairment of neurological function – “The doctor – neurologist – says it is a matter of *neuron-recruiting*. It is a matter of *new brain cells learning to take over from the damaged cells*. It is *neurogenesis*” (Oates, 2014: 21), as well as sexual – “We will do it. We will surprise them. In the rehab they have promised – the older doctor said, to me – *If you love your future husband and will not give up but persevere a pregnancy is not impossible*” (Oates, 2014: 22). His physiognomy is changed and his facial features may only be restored through multiple reconstructive surgeries – “the ears, the scalp, the forehead, the lids of the eyes. The throat beneath the jaw, on your right side. Except in bright light you would think it was an ordinary burn – burns” (Oates, 2014: 19). Moreover, injuries sustained during military operations leave him with a limp – “*You do not limp*. Only just – sometimes – you seem to lose your balance – you make that sudden jerking movement with your legs like in a dream” (Oates, 2014: 21). Inasmuch as they undermine Brett’s self-image, physical injuries, however, are not as damaging as the post-traumatic stress disorder, from which he suffers and which is one of the social concerns that Oates addresses through her medievalism.

By incorporating the idea of the soldier crusader in *Carthage*, the American novelist may be drawing on a similar “cultural capital” that inspired medieval and early modern accounts of love and war, and yet in her narrative Oates does not appropriate Chaucer’s and Shakespeare’s storylines. Instead, she makes references to medieval characters and places them in a uniquely American context, “illustrating the adaptability of Chaucerian narratives and characters to key features of American ideology” (Barrington, 2007: 2). In the previously mentioned interview with Isaac Fitzgerald, Oates recalls how – while staying in a small town in West Virginia – she was emotionally moved by the sight of a number of young men in wheelchairs or on crutches and decided to model the character of Brett on such young war veterans, to whom she pays tribute in the following section of the novel:⁸

Veterans: the country was filling up with them. In obscure rural areas of Appalachia, in Hispanic communities in the West and the Southwest, in the Great Plains states as in western and upstate New York veterans of the crusade against terror: the barely-walking-wounded, the (visibly, invisibly) maimed,

⁸ An interview: Joyce Carol Oates discusses *Carthage* with Isaac Fitzgerald. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VgN_GjAh3lg.

'disabled.' Driving along the river and into the city and through the working-class neighborhoods of west Carthage he [Zeno] saw them ever more frequently, young men, old-young men, on crutches, in wheelchairs. Dark-skinned, white-skinned. Casualties of war. Now that the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were winding down, the veterans would be returned to civilian life, litter on a beach when the great tide has gone out. (Oates, 2014: 459)

In the same interview, the novelist also evokes Nina Berman's disturbing portraits of returned veterans, *Marine Wedding* in particular,⁹ even though the wedding Oates refers to in her novel does not eventually take place, the engagement between Juliet and Brett Kincaid being broken off. Thus, if *Carthage* may be understood as a modern *Troilus and Cressida* story, it is in the sense of evoking the effect of war on the main characters and the repercussions of violence on the society. Oates addresses problems and concerns that are well familiar to the American audience, such as patriotism, sacrifice, and national duty. She explores the relationship between violence and masculinity, but does not fail to reflect on the notion of femininity either. In fact, Oates's medievalism relies on an attempt to recreate the traditional gender roles that were upheld in medieval romances, an attempt which again reveals a strong binarizing tendency.

Writing about nineteenth-century American medievalism, Amy S. Kaufman observes a tendency to imagine the medieval era as "a pristine space in which whiteness and masculinity assume a prevalence naturalized by the soft focus of medievalism's pseudo-historical lens" (Kaufman, 2017: 199). This kind of medievalism enforces rigid gender roles which are constructed in a very traditional way with heroes fighting to prove their manhood and heroines "remaining sheltered in their homes and serving as moral and spiritual centers of the family in order to enable the nobler sensibilities and chivalrous instincts of their sons and husbands" (Kaufman, 2017: 202). Kaufman notes that this fantasy of the Middle Ages, based as it is on male authority and female submission, is evoked to remedy society's ills and anxieties, such as the precarious status of masculinity and the threats to female purity, among others (Kaufman, 2017: 204). In fact, Oates's medievalism works to expose such anxieties and the danger of social classifications that assign meanings and roles to individuals and may lead to stigmatization, including self-stigmatization. In the novel, the Mayfields with their privileged place in the social system are construed as those who embody the spirit of superiority, which is denounced by those whom they disparage as "worse," such as Brett Kincaid: "*The Mayfields are snooty people living up there on the hill. They will look down on you like a dog – trained little mongrel-puppy,*" his mother warns him (Oates, 2014: 136). It is Zeno Mayfield in particular who is characterized by what his daughter Cressida refers to as "delusions of grandeur"

⁹ See Nina Berman's *Photography*, *Marine Wedding*, at: <https://www.ninaberman.com/marine-wedding>.

(Oates, 2014: 38), which also motivated his choice of her unusual name. And yet, as will be shown below, Zeno himself – however powerful he likes to see himself – proves much more fragile than his wife when faced with the disappearance of their daughter.

Also the story of Juliet and Brett reveals how the romantic dream of a future life together collapses under the weight of post-war reality, with their pre-war identities compromised. From the beginning of the novel Juliet identifies her primary role as that of a wife and – even though she hopes to find fulfilment in a teaching profession (Oates, 2014: 27, 45) – it is planning her wedding to Corporal Kincaid that is referred to as “the consuming passion of her life” (Oates, 2014: 45). She refers to sexual purity before the wedding (Oates, 2014: 18) and is prepared to play the role of the “angel in the house.” What this means in reality, however, is being victimized by male violence – “*Don’t – please*” (Oates, 2014: 20) – and excusing it in front of others: “What did I tell them, I told them the truth – it was an accident. I slipped and fell and struck the door – so silly” (Oates, 2014: 23). Cast in the role of a soldier crusader, Corporal Brett Kincaid is no Romeo. Neither is he a knight clad in a shining armor whose male authority is asserted through military actions against the enemy, but is instead a stress-disordered war veteran, prone to gratuitous violence against his beloved: “He could not comprehend, why he’d hurt her, then. [...] First, knocked her away from him. A sharp little cry like an animal kicked. And her jaw bruised, dislocated” (Oates, 2014: 141). When seen from this perspective, the previously mentioned description of Juliet’s wedding dress, with its aura of romance and magic, may evoke nostalgia for the “unspoiled” past, for the period of innocence which had been irrevocably lost. It is the experience of loss, which generates feelings of disappointment, grief and frustration, that is the catalyzer of events in the novel and it is feelings which reach the extremes such as rage that represent the reaction to the social concerns addressed in the novel. The initial words of the novel, “*Didn’t love me enough. Why I vanished,*” reveal that Cressida’s rage grows out of a sense of rejection, which has been in fact inscribed in her unusual, but very telling name:

Reporting to her parents, incensed: “‘Cressida’ – or ‘Criseyde’ – isn’t nice at all. She’s ‘faithless’ – that’s how people thought of her in the Middle Ages. Chaucer wrote about her, and then Shakespeare. First she was in love with a soldier named Troilus – then she was in love with another man – and when that ended, she had no one. And no one loved her, or cared about her – that was Cressida’s fate.” (Oates, 2014: 38)

Feeling inferior to her sister Juliet, “*the beautiful one,*” Cressida – “*the smart one*” – is overcome with a sense of injustice: “Why should her sister have so many friends, even these shallow, silly friends, while Cressida had so

few friends? – it was unjust” (Oates, 2014: 358). Cressida’s feeling of alienation brings her closer to Brett, with whom she identifies, referring to both of them as “*misfits, freaks*” (Oates, 2014: 171). When she follows him to the Roebuck Inn and reveals her feelings only to be rejected, this marks the beginning of the catastrophe. As Oates says in an interview: “I wanted to write about a really serious and complex relationship that’s basically one-sided – how much he means to her, and how he’s almost like a lifeline. She sees him from a distance, and then at some misguided point in her life she approaches him, and that precipitates a catastrophe” (Labrise, 2014). In a later part of the novel, Cressida experiences another disappointment when she attends a university course and tries to attract Professor’s Eddinger’s attention – “*He is aware of me. He knows me*” (Oates, 2014: 372) – but is devastated when she does not obtain a passing grade for failure to meet the deadline (Oates, 2014: 375). Rather than grievance against the professor, she feels self-loathing and – running out of his office – hears a voice of disapproval in her head: “*Run run run you are so stupid, so ugly*” (Oates, 2014: 375). Unable to forgive herself for not being able to measure up to her own standards, Cressida longs for self-annihilation: “*Because the project is late it must be penalized. / Better for you to die. Never to have been born*” (Oates, 2014: 376). This shows that Cressida’s rage is inwardly directed and may be described as a kind of “agitation that exists within” (Crabb, 1818: 654), which is characteristic of a soul in anguish and which grows out of resentment and intensifies with each disappointment that Cressida experiences. When she reveals her feelings to Brett – “*Brett please I know this: no one can love you like I can*” (Oates, 2014: 171) – only to be pushed away, she says: “*Never the one loved. Never the one adored. Better, then. Better to be carried away in the river like trash, and gone*” (Oates, 2014: 304).

Oates’s description of Cressida’s feelings brings to one’s mind Chaucer’s and Shakespeare’s renditions of female rage which in Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde* is related primarily to grief – this is shown in Criseyde’s reaction to the news about her forthcoming exchange. On learning about the decision of the Trojan Parliament, Criseyde decides to wear black clothes as a sign that she no longer belongs to this world (*TC*, IV, 778–780) and she makes a bequest of her heart and “woful goost” (*TC*, IV, 785) the way a dying person disposes of his/her possessions – and in Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida* to personal disappointment with the beloved person and a feeling of being rejected.¹⁰ While Chaucer’s Troilus tries to find a way of resisting the decision of the Trojan Parliament and even considers creating uproar in Troy, killing Diomedes and stealing Criseyde away (*TC*, V, 43–49), in Shakespeare’s play Cressida’s beloved makes no such attempts, which leaves the heroine devastated. “I have forgot my father. / I know

¹⁰ Quotations from *Troilus and Criseyde* come from Larry D. Benson, ed., *The Riverside Chaucer*.

no touch of consanguinity; / No kin, no love, no blood, no soul so near me / As the sweet Troilus” (*Troilus*, IV, ii. 97–100), she says, unable to believe that her beloved is giving her up without a fight.¹¹ Not only that, but he also starts questioning her sense of loyalty and truth. His repetitive and almost mantra-like reiteration of “Be thou true” (*Troilus*, IV, iv. 58–67; 74), which she finds offensive – “O heavens, ‘Be true’ again?” (*Troilus*, IV, iv. 74), leads straight to the culmination of Cressida’s rage and frustration, as seen in her bitterly accusatory “O heavens! You love me not” (*Troilus*, IV, iv. 82). This construes Cressida’s rage as a reaction to feeling doubly betrayed, first by Troilus’s inaction against her exchange, and secondly by his doubts concerning her loyalty.

It is the sense of multiple betrayal and rejection that has been inscribed in the name “Cressida” that Oates assigns to her heroine, together with the feeling of rage against it. Inasmuch as the modern Cressida succeeds in escaping from home – albeit to be later reunited with her family – she cannot escape her doomed reputation, for – paradoxical as this might sound – in her attempt to reject the associations implied in her name, she proves to embody them all. Thinking of herself as betrayed and unloved, she finds it difficult to realize that she is in fact a betrayer herself, with her decision to abandon her family being an act of utter selfishness. As Cressida runs away from her life, she leaves behind “a river of grief” (Oates, 2014: 474) and a desperate search for her begins, which generates extreme emotions. When Cressida’s father, Zeno Mayfield, spots a shape that resembles a girl lying motionlessly on the bank of the stream, he breaks into a heedless run that takes him to the carcass of a partly decomposed deer. In his breathless run, Zeno is like a wild beast: “Rivulets of sweat ran into the father’s eyes burning like acid. He was running clumsily downhill, sharp pains between his shoulder blades and in his legs. A great ungainly beast on its hind legs, staggering” (Oates, 2014: 14). On seeing the hideous carcass, Zeno cries out in horror and collapses under the weight of his rage and grief: “It is a terrible thing how swiftly a man’s strength can drain from him, like his pride” (Oates, 2014: 15). One of the witnesses of his collapse explains to Zeno’s wife the dramatic physiological changes that come with an onslaught of violent passion: “Zeno had gotten overheated. Over-tired. Dehydrated” (Oates, 2014: 33).

In her account of Zeno’s emotions and states of mind after his daughter’s disappearance, Oates may be drawing upon her own experience of bereavement, which she describes in *A Widow’s Story: A Memoir*, written in memory of the novelist’s deceased husband, Raymond Smith, and published three years before *Carthage*. Describing the raging despair she felt after her husband’s death of complications following pneumonia, Oates refers to herself as “shivering in a rage of futility” (Oates, 2011: 108), a rage which is also directed at

¹¹ Quotations from Shakespeare’s play, referred to in parenthesis as *Troilus*, have been taken from David Bevington, ed., *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*.

her late husband himself, whom she reprimands for being careless with his life. She conceives grief as an emotion of epic proportions, requiring “the strength of an Olympic athlete” (Oates, 2011: 119) and likens her bout of fury to an animalistic rage. This is how Oates describes her feelings after an incoherent conversation with her doctor, in which he suggests that Raymond Smith was too tired to fight off the infection and gave up to die: “Then suddenly, I am so angry. I am so very angry, I am furious. I am sick with fury, like a wounded animal. A kick of adrenaline to the heart, my heart begins thudding rapid and furious as a fist slamming against an obdurate surface – a locked door, a wall” (Oates, 2011: 159).

The novelist may also have been inspired by medieval and early modern accounts of violent emotional outbursts, which were often presented in animalistic terms, the animals most frequently evoked in this context being lions, wolves, bears, boars, and bulls (*OED*, 1989: 116).¹² Chaucer's Troilus, for instance, having learned about Criseyde's imminent departure, hurries home, locks himself in his chamber and rages like a wild bull pierced by a spear: he roars in lamentation about his fate, flings himself around the room, beats his breast with his fists and – in an attempt to destroy himself – repeatedly pounds his head against the wall. In “the furie and al the rage” (*TC*, IV, 253), the lover resembles a wild beast. The carefulness with which he barricades himself against the outside world might testify to the intensity of his pent-up feelings, but it also demonstrates his selfishness and inadequacy of his response. After all, it is a time of war and people are dying. Would it not be more appropriate for Troilus, the son of Priam, King of Troy, to assume responsibility for the city and his people (Turner, 2019: 273)? While it is true that the rush of energy that comes with rage leads Troilus on a battlefield and he is indeed described as mad in arms (*TC*, I, 479), his fighting fervor is short-lived. Inspired by a desire to impress the lady rather than to protect the town against the Greeks, Troilus fights only “[t]o liken [please] hire the bet [better] for his renown” (*TC*, I, 481). Other than that, he neglects his knightly duties and discounts all responsibility (*TC*, I, 444). When Pandarus visits his

¹² Such a conceptualization of rage is based on a belief, commonly held in the Middle Ages, that the human passions arise in the irrational or appetitive part of the soul, which belongs to non-rational animals and is by definition indifferent to reason (Plato, 1973: 130). And even though emotions should be ruled by reason in the same way as a good horse obeys the charioteer in Plato's famous parable, often they are not. While Plato described rage as “the upshot of the charioteer of Reason losing control of the spirited white horse of the passions” (Hacker, 2018: 260), modern psychologists talk about emotions “hijacking” our rational thinking processes (Goleman, 1995: 13–29). In both medieval and modern literature, men experiencing outbursts of rage or any other sudden, explosive discharges or psychic tension are described in animalistic terms, drawing upon Plato's idea that when reason is asleep, “then the wild beast within us [...] starts up and having shaken off sleep, goes forth to satisfy his desires; and there is no conceivable folly or crime [...] which at such a time, when he has parted company with all shame and sense, a man may not be ready to commit” (Plato, 1973: 264).

lovesick friend, for instance, he finds him lying in his chamber “as style as he ded were” (*TC*, I, 723). His rage, therefore, can be seen as a repetitive, albeit episodic, phenomenon. It appears as an immediate and direct response to occurring events and is channeled into short-lived action.

As presented in *Carthage*, rage is triggered by events that threaten the Mayfield family’s safety and directed against those who are said to be associated with these events, such as Corporal Brett Kincaid, in whose company Cressida was last seen, as well as Brett’s mother, Ethel Kincaid, with the most emotionally reactive person being Zeno Mayfield. As he approaches Ethel Kincaid to receive information about Brett’s whereabouts, Zeno feels “pent-up fury” (Oates, 2014: 81–83) and in fact, his rage against the Kincaids never abates. He feels it when Brett is suspected of Cressida’s murder, when he confesses, and finally when he finds out that his wife has been diagnosed with cancer: “Zeno was sick with fury anew, at Kincaid. Who’d killed his daughter, and now was killing his wife” (Oates, 2014: 439). Furthermore, Zeno’s rage turns against anyone who might try to excuse Brett, including his own wife, Arlette, whose attitude towards Kincaid is much more forgiving. Her words “He’s sick – he’s a victim, too. [...] We must try to forgive him” pierce him through and he blunders out of the room (Oates, 2014: 433). “A wounded bear on its hind legs baited and blinded beyond endurance, desperate to escape but where to escape?” (Oates, 2014: 433–434). Zeno’s rage against his wife turns into hatred, for he cannot forgive Arlette for “forgiving” their daughter’s suspected murderer (Oates, 2014: 453) and likewise he cannot forgive himself for being too weak to take revenge, even though he cannot erase his vengeful feelings: “the feeling of outrage, the wish to exact blood-revenge, is not easily quelled” (Oates, 2014: 454).

Similarly to Chaucer’s Troilus, Zeno Mayfield is described as particularly prone to excess – “Zeno Mayfield was a man who had to be prevented from pushing himself too hard. As if he had no natural sense of restraint, of normal limits” (Oates, 2014: 35) – including excessive feelings which “rose in him like bile” (Oates, 2014: 62), giving him a primitive, animalistic appearance. His reaction to the account of Brett Kincaid’s testimony at the Sheriff’s Department is described in the following way: “Zeno was trembling with rage, indignation. His hands clenched and unclenched like the claws of spastic sea-creatures” (Oates, 2014: 105). Interestingly, he can only justify such intense, disproportionate feelings in himself, but not in others, especially not in his wife, in whom they amount to catastrophizing, hysterical alarms (Oates, 2014: 74). Zeno’s propensity for strong feelings in reaction to unforeseeable occurrences is described as resulting from his meticulousness and desire to control and oversee things (Oates, 2014: 12). That is why his rage is immediately channeled into action; it provides the energy needed to overcome a sense of helplessness that comes with loss. While he likes to think of himself as strong and protective (Oates, 2014: 12), Zeno’s greatest worry is that he will not be able to safeguard the welfare of his family (Oates,

2014: 31), while the truth is that it is his wife who is like a fortress with her arms offering him protection against the outside world, as well as against his own self-destructive impulses: “Indignant and belligerent in public, Zeno was susceptible to weakness and trembling in the privacy of his home, in his wife’s consoling arms” (Oates, 2014: 107). It is Arlette that heals his wounds, for Zeno is often described like a wounded animal (Oates, 2014: 109, 114), and filters information that may reach him: “I didn’t want to wake Zeno, you know how excitable he is ...,” she tells Juliet when she finds her sister Cressida missing (Oates, 2014: 72); “*You must prepare Zeno. He will not be able to prepare himself;*” she tells herself after she learns of Brett Kincaid’s testimony (Oates, 2014: 182); “I didn’t want to worry you, Zeno. You’ve been so – you have a tendency to be so –,” Arlette explains why she did not share the cancer diagnosis with him (Oates, 2014: 439).

Through the example of Zeno’s emotional outbursts, Oates also shows the propensity of rage to blind the eye of judgement when he wrongfully assumes that his daughter had been murdered by Brett:

As a political person, as a liberal, Zeno Mayfield was sympathetic with their [the veterans’] lot. He knew, the federal government could never begin to repay the veterans for all they’d sacrificed in the naivete of their patriotism. Yet, as a father, he felt an unreasonable rage. They’d learned to kill in the wars and they’d brought their killing-appetite home with them and his daughter had been murdered by one of them, a killing machine gone amok. (Oates, 2014: 459)

Even though Brett Kincaid confesses to having perpetrated the crime, giving what is referred to as “a long disjointed candid and self-incriminating confession” (Oates, 2014: 459), he does so because his disordered mind produces fake images of killing Cressida – “Must’ve been a dream he had buried her alive. Mouth filled with earth but trying to scream. He woke screaming in terror struck at her with the shovel” (Oates, 2014: 155) – images which, when interlaced with the memories of atrocities he actually witnessed in Iraq, are situated on the same plane of reference and taken for real.

The story of Corporal Brett Kincaid’s rage slowly unfolds itself through third-person accounts, such as the already mentioned scraps of conversation between him and his wife-to-be, Juliet, as well as through the reports of his behavior while being detained – “he’d been ‘agitated’ and ‘belligerent’ and tried to fight the deputy who restrained him” (Oates, 2014: 85) – and interviewed at the police headquarters: “His behavior was ‘erratic.’ Several times he broke down sobbing. Several times he flew into a rage” (Oates, 2014: 103). His is a clinical kind of rage diagnosed in patients with post-traumatic stress disorder:

The victim of the stress disorder often tends to react with rage and guilt. The rage exists simultaneously at many levels. It is partly the result of the narcissistic injury at contemporarily being an incompetent individual. [...] Behaviorally, the rage almost seems to take the form of a need for revenge, i.e., to reverse feelings of helplessness and impotence so that another is now the victim. (DeFazio, 2012: 39)

Related to stress disorder, Brett's rage is directed at anyone who, albeit unintentionally, implies his limitations or inadequacies, be it his fiancée, Juliet, or her sister Cressida, who comes to the Preserve with him, uninvited and unwanted: "Laying a hand on his arm, rousing him to desire. The angry desire of the cripple, whose potency is fury charged hotly in the throat" (Oates, 2014: 178).

Seen as a consequence of his war experiences, Kincaid's outbursts of rage are momentary and out of character for him. In the Clinton Correctional Facility at Dannemora, where he serves his sentence, he is liked and trusted, regarded as "cooperative" (Oates, 2014: 404), which is why "[f]irst time anyone saw him in a rage – cell mate, fellow inmates, COs who'd come to trust and to like him – was astonished, disbelieving. *Kincaid? Him?*" (Oates, 2014: 403). While there is not enough evidence in the novel to show that Brett had what the specialists refer to as a premorbid personality that "predisposes them to developing post-traumatic stress disorder" (Austrian, 2005: 15), we learn of his sense of instability – "[w]ithout both parents you don't feel confident you know what *normal* is. Like walking on a tilting floor but you can't gauge in which direction the floor is tilting" (Oates, 2014: 137), and deference or inferiority with respect to the Mayfield family, which might have enhanced his resentment of them.

Through the story of Brett Kincaid's military engagement in Iraq and later guiltless imprisonment, Oates raises important social issues when she describes how Cressida, during her absence from home, visits a Death Row at the Maximum Security Correctional Facility for Men at Orion, Florida. Accompanying the Investigator, as Professor Cornelius Hinton is known, Cressida, now under the name of Sabbath McSwain, serves as his assistant on a project whose aim is to end capital punishment through exposing the inhumanity of botched executions and creating "intellectual outrage" (Oates, 2014: 249). Fighting for social justice on behalf of Hinton, Cressida realizes the injustice of Brett's incarceration for the crime he had never perpetrated. The experience of the execution chamber, which she is made to visit, has a transformative effect on her, resembling a symbolic death and resurrection: "Since having entered the execution chamber at Orion, she was beginning to see differently. She was beginning to wonder if her behavior had been a primitive sort of revenge for their failure to love her" (Oates, 2014: 328). By the time Cressida returns home, however, her family has dissolved, for her parents have separated and her sister Juliet has left behind her life with Brett and moved away to be married to another man.

If the Mayfield family may be seen as a microcosm of the society, their family problems represent ills that beset society, with the central weakness being lack of love. “Encrypted in Oates’s narrative is perhaps a warning of the decline of America and the West’s own empire. The lost child reveals (or ‘betrays’) the vacuum within this empire: an absence of love that generates deceit and betrayal, and ultimately violence and death,” as Froud notes (2017: 98). Accordingly, if *Carthage* may be seen as a version of the Troilus and Cressida story, it captures a self-destructive impulse which may be observed in both cities, the ancient Troy and the modern Carthage, New York. In her analysis of Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*, Marion Turner conceives Troy as a deeply divided city, reminiscent of Chaucer’s London, in which individual allegiances were as complicated as in ancient Troy, and the gap between the surface and the underlying reality equally pronounced. She says: “Throughout *Troilus and Criseyde*, Chaucer goes out of his way to emphasize the negative aspects of Troy, focusing much more attention than Boccaccio does on Troy as a city that is internally divided and responsible for its own destruction, and insistently reminding us of the Trojans’ wilful ignoring of the ominous example of Thebes and its fall” (Turner, 2019: 271). A similar point has been made about Oates’s *Carthage*. Referring to the connotations that the title of the novel carries, Robert A. Douglas writes about the salt that the Romans ploughed into the fields of ancient Carthage so that nothing could grow on them and compares the Roman destruction of Carthage with the impact of war on the modern American town described by Oates. The story “is about the damage individuals inflict on one another and the toxic repercussions of war in a small American town,” he says. “The individuals most affected are either forcibly relocated or move away so that they can get on with their lives. Metaphorically, Carthage has become covered with salt” (Douglas, 2014).

Oates’s *Carthage* is a place, in which the horrors of war, albeit hidden behind the propagandist clichés, affect not only the soldiers, but their families too and, in a broader sense, the whole American society. War, even if fought in a good name, produces multiple casualties and a confusion of moral categories, with the boundary between the betrayer and the betrayed or the victim and victimized becoming less and less clear. To a larger extent than Chaucer, Oates focuses on a collective rather than individual trauma and exposes the distance between high ideals in the service of a moral cause and the awful actuality of war, with lives sacrificed in the fulfilment of these ideals. By situating modern warfare in the context of medieval crusading, the novelist universalizes the problem of violence and asks the question if evil will ever end. From one perspective, evil is inscribed in the history of man in a similar manner that the idea of destruction has been inscribed in the *loci* of Chaucer’s and Oates’s stories, for it is perhaps not coincidental that Carthage rhymes with breakage and wreckage while Troy with destroy and that the concept of rage is encrypted in the title of the modern novel (c-a-R-t-h-A-G-E). From another perspective, Oates does highlight

the transformative and therefore redeeming potential of extreme experiences in making Cressida return home a changed person, even if she had to be “murdered” in order to be born again. Thus, there are no partial measures when it comes to repairing wrongs, Oates seems to be saying, and a complete renewal is not possible without a prior and complete destruction.

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Bio-bibliographical Note

Dominika Ruskiewicz (PhD) is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Literature Studies at the Jesuit University Ignatianum in Krakow. Her main field of study is Middle English and Middle Scots poetry, with particular focus on Geoffrey Chaucer and his Scottish followers. She is the author of a book *Love and Virtue in Middle English and Middle Scots Poetry* (Peter Lang, 2021) and articles on the modern renditions of the Troilus and Cressida story, which have appeared in *Studia Neophilologica* and in *Medievalism in English Canadian Literature: From Richardson to Atwood*, eds. M. J. Toswell and Anna Czarnowus (D. S. Brewer, 2020).

(dominika.ruskiewicz@ignatianum.edu.pl)