

ROBERT HENRYSON'S *TESTAMENT OF CRESSEID*

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Ane doolie sessoun to ane cairfull dyte
Suld correspond, and be equivalent.

“One dismal season” – showers of hail are falling as the poet is writing – “to a woeful poem should correspond, and be equivalent” – so begins Robert Henryson’s *Testament of Cresseid*¹, a sort of sequel to Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde* (hereafter, referred to as “T&C”). Not much is known about Henryson, a 15th century Scots poet and “Sculemaister,” except for his poetry². And the poetry is worth looking into: *The Testament of Cresseid* is a remarkable poem in its own right; a comparison to Chaucer, however, illuminates some of the manuscript’s rewarding complexities as a gloss on Chaucer’s version. I shall show how this correspondence forms a *cairfull* equivalence, as Henryson adds layers of meaning onto the tale; not as a pearl, but a hailstone.

Summary of the Poem

Henryson’s 616 line poem *The Testament of Cresseid*, like Chaucer’s epic, is composed mainly in 7-line verse royale. Henryson diverts from this pace at line 407, “The Complaint of Cresseid,” where he writes seven 9-line stanzas. At line 470, he resumes the 7-line stanzas until the end. These diversions in the verse indicate thematic breaks as well. The poem then is physically divided into three parts, with the “Complaint” in the center.

Thematically, it is made up of three basic parts, the prologue, tale, and epilogue. The first section, or prologue, begins with an account of the weather by the poet himself, who decides to pass the time on a miserable day by reading Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*. The author then decides to occupy himself by writing his own tale.

Line 71 begins this new story, the tale of Cresseid. Since her reunion with her father Calchas, Diomedes has tired of her. After having had his way with her, Diomedes leaves her to the troops. Cresseid has become a fallen woman on the Greek side. She bemoans her fate, and at the temple of Venus (presided over in this version by Calchas), she rails against the gods, blaspheming both Venus and her brat, Cupid.

1. The exact date of the composition is unknown. Henryson died in 1500.

2. While *The Testament of Cresseid* is his most famous poem, scholars have in recent years begun to rediscover his *Morall Fabillis*, a complex reworking of Aesop’s fables.

After this harangue, Cresseid falls into a swoon and dreams. Line 141 begins the next section, Cresseid's Dream – in which the seven planets, personified, decide her fate. This dream is the poem's longest sequence (29 stanzas).

At line 344, she awakes from her dream to find that it has come true, the judgment of the planets has come to pass: in her mirror the face of a leper looks back at her – her face. In this section, from line 344 until Cresseid's Complaint (line 408), Henryson writes 9 stanzas detailing her mental and physical journey from the house of Calchas to the leper house.

Next we find "The Complaint of Cresseid": the centerpiece of the tale, as well as the poem as the whole; thus, it assumes central importance to the poem, rather than Cresseid's actual "Testament." Cresseid's "Complaint" (line 408) consists of 7 stanzas of 9 lines each. Since leprosy was assumed to be a venereal disease, it is fitting that she would have received this judgment by blaspheming Venus. Similarly, it would have been an avoidable physical malady if chastity or fidelity were practised. Thus, Cresseid's complaint is a woe-is-me lament about her life, with a warning to Greek and Trojan women not to end up in a similar situation.

Following the "Complaint" (from line 470), there are 15 poignant stanzas – probably the best writing in the poem – the section describing her life as a leper, forced to beg for alms, culminating in her encounter with Troilus.

Then, finally, the "Testament," at line 575, 3 stanzas where Cresseid bequeaths her body to the toads and worms, and her royal ring to Troilus (once the token of their love). She dies.

The epilogue consists of 3 stanzas (lines 596–616) by the poet describing how Troilus reacts to the news, ending with the poet's admonition to the ladies who might hear this ballad, an elaboration and renovation of Cresseid's "Complaint."

A Palimpsest

Because Henryson's poem has a completely different outcome from Chaucer's (where Criseyde lives and Troilus dies), it is not properly a sequel. It is more a retelling, another tale, much like the Arthurian legends by Mallory and others. Similar to the Arthurian tales, the different details conflict in a way that adds complexity to the thematic elements. Henryson's version acts thus not only as a retelling, but also as a gloss or commentary on Chaucer's story. It can ably stand by itself; yet in conjunction with the original, it becomes more rewarding and intricate. This dual nature of the poem is made explicit by Henryson, for he begins the tale citing Chaucer by name, summarizing the ending of Chaucer's T&C until the point when Cresseid leaves Troy, at which point Henryson offers this intriguing disclaimer:

Quha wait gif all that Chauceir wrait was trew,
Nor I wait nocht gif this narratioun
Be authoreist or fenyeit of the new
Be sum Poeit, throw his Inventioun
Maid to report the Lamentatioun
And woful end of this lustie Cresseid,
And quhat distres scho thoillit, and quhat deid. (64–70)

And then he begins his story anew. Actually, he is not properly beginning a story, but ending one. Henryson writes over Chaucer's ending, creating a palimpsest of sorts. Like a palimpsest, the levels of authorship and authority are complicated. In Henryson's poem, this confusion is intentional. Malcolm Pittock, in a recent essay³, takes time to enumerate the "different" Henrysons of the *Testament*, finding poets A, B, C1, and C2. This is a little extreme – they are obviously all parts of the whole. But it is endemic of Henryson's posture in the poem: Chaucer is his master and he has learned his lesson well. If an author like Chaucer, notorious for his self-reflexion, is to be emulated and embellished upon, one would have to pull Lollius⁴ kinds of moves. Henryson is adept at this kind of evasion – taking credit for the composition while denying culpability.

Like Chaucer, Henryson's concern with composition extends to the characters in his poem. In one of the interesting twists in his tale, Henryson makes Cresseid the character most concerned with composition, as compared with Troilus in Chaucer's version. Cresseid makes first an oath against Venus (comparable to Troilus' Boecian overtures in Chaucer), her "Complaint" to Greek and Trojan women, and finally her last will and testament, for which the poem is named.

An important question is: why is this poem named "The *Testament* of Cresseid"? Cresseid's last will and testament is fairly incidental, at least in the amount of lines dedicated to it. The answer has to do with courtly love. The thematic element inherent in the will is that Cresseid has remained true to Troilus: she still has his ring, unlike the brooch in Chaucer's version. Symbolically, it demonstrates that she was true to him in heart, unlike Chaucer's version; also, it verifies Troilus'⁵ suspicions about her in a less physical way than had she either worn it at their re-encounter, or had he seen it on Diomedes, as in Chaucer. As a token of life after death, it would induce those visions of the living Cresseid which Troilus saw in the death-in-life leper, and so makes another neat bookend.

But (like all members of Calchas' family) the title is two-fold, for "testament" also means witness. Cresseid's complaint, the centerpiece of the poem, rewritten by the poet in his epilogue, is the other testament: her personal story as a witness – this happened to me, don't let it happen to you.

3. See Works Consulted.

4. "Lollius" is cited by Chaucer in *The House of Fame* (line 1467) as the source for all of Chaucer's stories of Troy. No such-named author existed.

5. Henryson spells it both ways, too.

A Phantom Limb

Leprosy is utilized by Henryson on one level as a venereal disease; a disease of Venus, and proof of Cresseid's infidelity. Of Henryson's treatment of leprosy, Stearns⁶ cites several scholars who state that Henryson's description is proof that there were lepers in 15th century Scotland. Perhaps, but there may be another more appropriate explanation for this detail, one more in keeping with the theme of the poem.

Certainly the description of Troilus and Cresseid's final meeting, with fairest-of-all Cresseid in the throes of leprosy, is the most enduring image of the poem. And, naturally, the other section of the poem meant to last in the audience's minds is the author's last words. Henryson's moral is ostensibly a higher one than Chaucer's. Chaucer, by the end of his tale, destroys *any* confidence the audience might have in courtly love. Henryson rearranges fate to suit his purposes: his Troilus lives, rather than dies, and his Cresseid dies due to her infidelity. "Ming not your lufe with fals deceioun" (613). The implication is that by following the Ten Commandments, one will live a decent life. While cautionary, this is an unsatisfactory ending. Cresseid, with three husbands, is still two shy of Chaucer's Wife of Bath. Why does she deserve such a horrendous and truncated fate?

I may be going out on a weak limb here, but I think that Henryson is making an off-handed commentary. There is another meaning to the word "Testament", and that is in a religious sense. The Ten Commandments are not good enough anymore: we have a New Testament. The leprous Cresseid is a witness, or testament, to the evils of fornication, but while leprosy is an incurable disease of Venus, there is one known cure since the heathen time of Cresseid and Troilus: Christ. Remember Chaucer's conclusion to T&C: "So make us, Jesus, for thi mercy digne,/ For love of mayde and moder thyn benigne." (1871-2). Chaucer replaces the faults of courtly love with Christian love. Henryson's poem has an *implied* Christian allegory, the miracle of Jesus' cure (Matthew 8:2). Just as today, those in Henryson's audience not familiar with leprosy in the flesh would be familiar with the Biblical miracle. What better allegory to demonstrate fleshly sins? And what is the only power capable of removing fleshly sins? Henryson's ending works where Chaucer's does not: Chaucer's moral seems to come out of the blue, while Henryson's isn't even stated: it comes to you as if of its own accord, and yet the seeds have been planted by Henryson all throughout his tale – you feel it while you cannot see it; a phantom limb.

6. See Works Consulted, Stearns, p. 40.

Venus and the Mirror

One of Henryson's changes was in transforming Calchas from a priest of Apollo to a priest of Venus⁷. Venus' symbol is the mirror. Cresseid, railing at Venus, falls into a dream. Dream vision is much more intense in Henryson than in Chaucer. The boar episode in Chaucer (a series of male images) where we learn of Troilus' fate from Cassandra has a hideous component in Cresseid's dream (a series of female images) in Henryson. Here, not only has Cresseid's mental image been transformed by the dream, but her physical self has been altered as well. It is a very nice touch on Henryson's part for Cresseid to realize Venus' judgment by looking into her icon, the mirror. It is a triple combination, another palimpsest of meanings: the mirror, the symbol of Venus, showing the judgment of Venus, which is leprosy, a Venereal disease: poetic justice, indeed. But Henryson does it even more justice – not content to leave it a mere detail, he wraps another layer of meaning around it, one which has implications beyond his poem.

In Cresseid's "Complaint," she begs of Greek and Trojan women: "And in your mynd ane mirroure make of me" (457). Cresseid's dream has become real in her mirror, and in complement, ladies are asked to make Cresseid's real (insofar as the tale goes, anyway) story a mental image. And consequently, since we know from the outset that this is a fictional tale of which the author cannot vouch for its veracity, the author through Cresseid makes a fiction into a moral tale, and so thus real women, women outside the poem, are supposed to take it seriously. Henryson certainly has learned his lesson from Chaucer as to making ambiguity an agent for complexity. Venus' symbol, indeed the symbol for all females, has been transformed by Henryson into a mirror which can show ugliness as well as beauty.

In Cresseid's face, Troilus sees the mirror-image of his true love, now ravaged by leprosy. It is the most annotated scene in Henryson's poem, lines 491–525. What could be more heart-rending than to see your lover in such a state? Yet Henryson does not play it for sentimentality. He uses the scene symbolically to express another dimension of his mirror metaphor. It works on many levels. First, it satisfies audience expectations to have the two meet again. Secondly, it furnishes Troilus with corporeal proof of Cresseid's infidelity. Thirdly, it adds a rich element of fate: another turn of Fortune's wheel. But it does still more. On a physical level, Troilus is not aware that it is Cresseid whom he sees. The realization is on a metaphoric level, akin to the dream of Cresseid being explained to her by the physical evidence in her mirror-image. It is the perfect complement to Cresseid's experience: the other side of the mirror.

7. While Pittock waxes eloquent about another one of Henryson's changes, his transformation of Calchas to that of a generous father, he misses an important subtlety. Initially, Calchas is the kind and understanding father – just what Cresseid needs at this point. Calchas promises to send Cresseid food and monetary support while she is in the leper retreat. He does this at first, but then we learn that she has to go begging to sustain herself – the plot mechanism for her meeting with Troilus. The implication is obvious, that Calchas isn't sending her food anymore. Thus Calchas is worse than his Chaucer self, and embodies the (Scotch?) principles of parsimony and acrimony, his love is as kind as the hailstones that beat at Henryson's windows.

In this scene Pittock points out a line festering with open interpretations:

Than to thair cry Nobill Troylus tuik heid,
Having pietie, neir by the place can pas
Quhair Cresseid sat, not witting quhat scho was. (495–7)

The last line is always modernized as Troilus not knowing *who* Cresseid was, but the word is clearly *what* she was, and because of the syntax, it's unclear as to whether Troilus was not witting, or Cresseid was not witting: both are at a loss. This is the perfect epitome for their state. It harkens to the scene in Chaucer's T&C – which Shakespeare borrowed for *The Most Lamentable Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet* – the death scene, where first Troilus thinks Criseyde is dead, and then Criseyde sees Troilus about to kill himself, and so she wants to be dead too. In Henryson's version, the contrast is between living Cresseid and dying Cresseid, living love and love lost: the difference between who and what is the difference between life and death, who is real and what is metaphoric.

And most importantly, Henryson's poem is Henryson holding a mirror to Chaucer. There is reflexion on Henryson's part, and the image of Troilus and Cressida Henryson sees is not the true story (as he so patently makes clear) but one of many possible: fiction is a true story of which there are many shades, shadows, mirror-images. When we hold the mirror to ourselves we see others in the glass; and when we are looking at others, we see ourselves.

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