

1980

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Recommended Citation

Scheps, Walter (1980) "A Climatological Reading of Henryson's Testament if Cresseid," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 15: Iss. 1.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol15/iss1/7>

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Walter Scheps

A Climatological Reading of Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid*



When Chaucer's Parson says, with as much pride as pique, that he is "a Southren man" (I, 42),² and when John of Trevisa inserts into his translation of Higden's *Polychronicon* a characterization of Northern speech as consisting of sounds which no undeformed human mouth can utter,³ they support one position in a construct of regional bias which is still very much with us. Although both refer to the north of England, the same sort of attitude is also pervasive in Scotland; thus, Dunbar, for example, has Hell filled with "Erschemen"⁴--the devil, after all, supposedly had his habitation in the north--, and the animosity between lowlanders and highlanders was consistently exploited by the English in battle after battle, culminating in the tragedy of Culloden. When they turned their attention south of the Tweed, lowland writers were even more severe, Barbour and Harry for example condemning all those of Saxon blood as treacherous and brutal, characteristics which the English chroniclers had independently agreed served perfectly to describe the Scots. The Scottish attitude is perhaps best summarized by James III who, in noting the reluctance of his magnates to support the truce with England, concluded that the Scots were "so made they could not agree with the English." For their part, the English parliament in 1491 banished all Scots in England who refused to become English citi-

zens because, they said, the Scots always broke their treaties and thus could not be trusted as long as they retained Scottish citizenship.⁵ Considering the relationship between the two countries, one does not find such enmity surprising. What is surprising, from the Scottish perspective, is that none of it is directed against Chaucer in spite of his service to Edward III, a king whose actions in and with regard to Scotland made him there a figure only slightly less odious than his grandfather, the notorious "Hammer of Scotland." Yet the most gifted of Middle Scots poets, James, Henryson, Dunbar, and Douglas all pay homage to Chaucer and all acknowledge him as "maister." Although it is true that Douglas criticizes Chaucer's telling of the story of Dido and Aeneas, he nevertheless praises the English poet as "Hevylynly trumpat, orlege and reguler;"⁶ his opprobrium is largely reserved not for Chaucer but for Caxton. In fact only one of the Scottish Chaucerians attempts a sequel or specific response to a poem by Chaucer. That response, Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid* (hereafter *TC*), has not to my knowledge been systematically treated in terms of what it most obviously is, a Scottish extension of and reply to an English poem. Although Henryson's revisionist approach to his subject matter has been frequently remarked upon, no attempt has been made to explain his changes in terms of the overtly Caledonian setting in which the story of Cresseid's final days is told. These are the issues with which this essay will be concerned.

The *TC* begins with a climatological definition of decorum: "Ane doolie sessoun to ane cairfull dyte/Suld correspond and be equivalent" (1-2).⁷ But if such an equivalence is specifically stated, there are others no less obvious. Henryson's season is "Aries, in middis of the Lent" (5), a reference which recalls from the most famous passage in Middle English Chaucer's "Ram" which has "his halve cours yronne" (A, 8); however, instead of "shoures soote," Henryson describes "Schouris of hail" that "fra the north descend" (6). The reference to the north is significant. The arrival of Chaucer's April which kindles warmth and rebirth in England is replaced by a Caledonian spring of first extreme heat ("wedder richt feruent," 4) and then penetrating cold from which the narrator can scarcely protect himself (7). As the first sign of the Zodiac, Aries is an appropriate astrological reference for the beginning of a poem, but Henryson, with his conception of seasonal decorum, could hardly employ the reference as Chaucer had, in terms either of its meaning or the kind of poem in which it would be suitable.

Henryson's sense of decorum echoes, with the appropriate seasonal modification, Chaucer's attitude at the beginning of *Troilus and Criseyde* (hereafter *T&C*): "For wel sit it, the

sothe for to seyne,/A woful wight to han a drery feere,/ And to a sorwful tale, a sory chere" (I 12-14). Furthermore, Chaucer's Troilus first sees Criseyde in a mild April whose weather corresponds to the sudden awakening of love which he is about to feel for her:

And so bifel, whan comen was the tyme
Of Aperil, whan clothid is the mede
With newe grene, of lusty Veer the pryme,
And swote smellen floures white and rede,
In sondry wises shewed, as I rede,
The folk of Troie hir observaunces olde,
Palladiones feste for to holde (I 155-61).

It is not then that Chaucer and Henryson disagree about the nature or importance of seasonal decorum, but rather that the geographical displacement of Henryson and his poem forces him to view such decorum very differently from the way in which Chaucer perceived it. The difference is noted by, among others, Gabriel Harvey who lists without comment "Chaucer's" descriptions of spring but notes that the *Testament* presents what he calls "a winterlie springe."⁸

If Chaucer's April sun in the *General Prologue* is "yonge" (7), Henryson's is barely present at all as "Titan had his be-mis bricht/Withdrawin doun and sylit vnder cure" (9-10). The setting sun ushers in a bitterly cold night, and thus the natural warmth of Chaucer's April cannot be recaptured in the *Testament* except through artificial means: the fire to which the narrator is driven by the cold (27-28), contemplation of Venus ("Thocht lufe be hait, zit in ane man of age/It kendillis nocht sa sone as in youtheid," 29-30), the "drink," a kind of potable armor which protects him "weill fra the cauld thairout" (37-38), and finally the "quair" (40) "Writtin be worthie Chaucer glorious/Of fair Cresseid and worthy Troylus" (41-42). The cold, however, will prove to be inescapable. We are told that Venus is in astrological opposition to Phoebus (11-14), a situation which is astronomically impossible but aesthetically necessary since it not only anticipates the narrator's futile attempt to warm himself with thoughts of Venus after Phoebus has gone to rest but also explains the relative positions of the two planetary deities in Cresseid's vision of judgment. Finally, this opposition helps to account for Henryson's changing Calchas from a priest of Phoebus to a priest of Venus. Saturn, with the icicles hanging from his hair (160) will touch Cresseid with his "frostie wand" (311), and she will be stricken with leprosy, a disease which according to him and to medical theories of the time was caused by an excess of cold and dry-

ness (318). Although the spark of love will be briefly kindled in Troilus one last time (512-13), Cresseid's final resting place will be a cold "tomb of merbell gray" (603).

When we consider the changes Henryson makes in retelling the story of Cresseid, we can better understand his deliberate localization of it in what is for him a more suitable climate. The most significant of these changes are in the genre of the poem and in its focus. Chaucer, despite his reference to *T&C* as a "tragedye" (V 1786), is in fact writing a comedy in the manner of Dante, as the reference to "comedy" (1788) and the concluding stanza of the poem, taken from the *Paradiso*, make plain. Henryson too calls his poem a "tragedie" (4), but, unlike Chaucer, he provides us with neither a view from the eighth sphere nor a prolegomenon to a beatific vision. Instead, the *TC* ends with the same kind of explicit *moralitas* we find in his other major works. Henryson's poem is more down-to-earth than Chaucer's in the most literal sense, as well as in others; not only is Cresseid finally interred, but the deities who appear in her vision must descend from their respective spheres in order to judge her whereas Chaucer's Troilus has to travel in the opposite direction before Mercury can guide him to his final resting place. Ultimately, Chaucer's perspective is cosmic because his comedy is Troilus's; Henryson's tragedy, on the other hand, is Cresseid's, hence the mundane setting for the events in the *Testament*.

In his summary of *T&C*, a summary which deals only with Book V, Henryson regards the poem as other medieval readers did, i.e., as the "Book of Troilus." He tells us that he will not relate the "distres" of Troilus, "For worthie Chauceir in the samyn buik,/In gudelie termis and in ioly veirs,/Compylit hes his cairis, quha will luik" (58-60). He will instead report what he found in "ane vther quair" (61), namely "the fatall destenie/Of fair Cresseid, that endit wretchitlie" (62-63). Henryson next asks, "Quha wait gif all that Chauceir wrait was trew?" (64), a question he poses about the "vther quair" as well (65-70). The issue of veracity is an important one, for Henryson clearly does not believe that "all that Chauceir wrait was trew." His suspicions concerning Chaucer's reliability will cause him to follow the "vther quair" instead, and since there is no evidence that this source ever existed--Henryson seems to have understood perfectly Chaucer's references to Lollius--his poem becomes that source. Henryson says disingenuously, "Nor I wait nocht gif this narratioun/Be authoreist, or fenzeit of the new/Be sum poeit, throw his inuentioun" (65-67); this "poeit" is of course Henryson himself, and, by questioning his own authority as well as Chaucer's, he leaves the reader to decide between them. Such a decision will be neces-

sary precisely because the two poems differ in many important particulars, some of which at least are attributable to the story's removal to a more northerly, and less hospitable, climate.

Basically, the *TC* is a love vision *manqué*. The time of year is appropriate for such a poem, but as Denton Fox points out (pp. 49-58), the weather is not, being more suitable to the kind of *insomnium* which Chaucer in the *House of Fame*, Dunbar in the *Dance of the Sevin Deidly Sinnis* and Skelton in the *Bowge of Court* place in December, February, and "autumn" respectively. The first portion of the *Testament* (1-91) in which are described the narrator's discomfort, his age, and his reading as a means of making the night pass more swiftly, would be perfectly appropriate as the introduction to a dream or vision of love, and although a dream does indeed follow, it is Cresseid's, not the narrator's, and it deals with judgment rather than love.

Just as the action of *T&C* essentially begins with the scene in the temple of Athena (I 162 ff.), Henryson, after having Cresseid tell Calchas that Diomedes has cast her aside (92-105), describes the coming of the people to the temple of Venus on a holy day consecrated to that goddess (112 ff.). At precisely the same moment that prayers are offered to Venus within the temple proper, Cresseid, in "ane secreit orature" (120), curses both Venus and Cupid for having abandoned her (126 ff.). That Cresseid's blasphemy takes place not only within Venus's temple but on a day specifically devoted to her worship makes the sin serious indeed, what Cupid will call "This greit iniure don to our hie estait" (290); from his point of view, Cresseid's blasphemy is so heinous as to be unprecedented: "Was neuer to goddes done sic violence" (292).

Yet Cresseid's behavior in the *Testament* is perfectly in keeping with Chaucer's depiction of her. In *T&C* she ruefully laments her lack of prudence (V 744-49), and, more particularly, calls upon the gods to curse her if she betrays Troilus (IV 1534 ff.). And in the invocation to Venus at the beginning of Book III, Chaucer says, "...whoso stryvet with yow hath the werse" (38). Furthermore, Cresseid's blasphemy in the *Testament* is anticipated in *T&C* where she accuses the gods (actually she says she will so accuse them to her father) of telling twenty lies for one truth (IV 1407). In the *Testament*, her accusations end, appropriately enough, with:

3e causit me alwayis vnderstand and trow
The seid of lufe was sawin in my face,
And ay grew grenethrow 3our supplie and grace.
Bot now, allace, that seid with froist is slane,
And I fra luifferis left, and all forlane (136-40).

She immediately falls into "ane extasie" (141) in which she will see her metaphor become reality.

In the dream itself, Saturn personifies the weather described at the poem's outset, whereas Jupiter who, as in the *Knight's Tale*, has no voice in the proceedings, is specifically contrasted with him: "Fra his father...[he was] far different" (172). Mercury, Troilus's guide in Chaucer's poem, is chosen to be "foirspeikar" (266); Henryson's description emphasizes Mercury's skill in medicine (246-52), an ironically appropriate emphasis given the decision which the parliament of gods will reach. That decision is rendered by Saturn and Cynthia, the first of whom will change Cresseid's "moisture and thy heit in cald and dry" (318) and the second "Fra heit of bodie [here] I the depryue" (334). The archetypal instability of the moon not only makes her a suitable judge for the fickle Cresseid but also recalls both Henryson's description of an extremely ambivalent Venus who is, *inter alia*, "Now hait, now cauld" (237) and the changeable Scottish weather at the beginning of the poem.

With regard to Cresseid's leprosy, a recent book on medicine in medieval England tells us that this disease was especially common during the winter months, perhaps because of the scarcity of fresh vegetables and the heavy reliance on "incorrectly or carelessly cured" meat.⁹ John of Gaddesden, a standard authority, says in his *Rosa Anglica*, "No one is to be adjudged a leper and isolated from all of his fellows until the appearance and shape of his face be destroyed" (Rubin, p. 155); thus, Cresseid's statement, cited earlier, that frost has slain the "seed of love" in her face becomes, if one may use the term, chillingly appropriate. Appropriate too is the gods' choice of this particular disease as a means of punishing Cresseid. Of the various beliefs concerning leprosy in the Middle Ages, two of the most prevalent viewed it as a punishment for heresy and unrepentant sinfulness (thus Gregory and Isadore as well, of course, as the numerous Biblical references) and attributed its spread to "illicit sexual intercourse" (thus Tertullian and Prudentius).¹⁰ In his preacher's manual, Pierre de Bersuire notes that "just as four kinds of physical leprosy are matched with the four humours, so spiritual leprosy is associated with four sins: simony, pride, avarice, and sexual impurity" (Brody, p. 136). Since Cresseid is guilty of both pride (in her cursing the gods) and sexual impurity, she is appropriately stricken with an excess of two humors, cold and dry. Ironically, when Cresseid becomes a beggar, she does so, Henryson says, because of the cold, but at this point in the poem the word refers paronomastically to both the weather and her condition.

As we have seen, Cresseid's leprosy is, given her behavior and her removal to Caledonia, an entirely suitable punishment. If Chaucer does not treat her with equal severity, the reason is not that he is kinder than Henryson but rather that Criseyde and her fate are not his primary concerns. Like the cock and the fox in the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, Troilus and Criseyde can be expected to learn very different lessons from the same situation, but Chaucer is concerned ultimately only with Troilus, Henryson initially and throughout only with Cresseid, as each poem essentially ends with the death of its central character. Because Troilus, to paraphrase Pandarus, "dies a martyr and goes to heaven," Chaucer takes leave "of payens corsed olde rites" (V 1849); because Cresseid's fate is entirely sublunary, Henryson eschews any cosmic, or Christian, perspective in his poem, another indication of the importance decorum had for him. Much of what we see of Cresseid is based on elements in *T&C* which Chaucer, for aesthetic reasons, chose not to elaborate. There are only two major substantive contradictions in the two poems; Henryson's Troilus is still alive and Calchas is now a priest of Venus. Otherwise, Henryson simply continues Cresseid's story to its conclusion, a conclusion made inevitable, at least in part, by the story's unequivocally Scottish setting.

Although no period of Scottish history is devoid of intense nationalistic fervor, the end of the fifteenth century saw it somewhat muted as the result of Tudor policy which substituted political intrigue for the armed invasions which had become customary in previous reigns. Patriotic effusions like the *Bruce* and the *Wallace* which looked back to the Wars of Independence, while still popular, were no longer relevant to a changed political situation. Paralleling this situation, whether deliberately or not, Henryson's *Testament* modifies and reinterprets Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* in patently Scottish terms. Not only does Henryson question Chaucer's reliability and relocate the story northward, he specifically states his belief that a story should be consonant with its setting. Thus, he both establishes his independence of Chaucer and accounts for many of the most important features of his poem.

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NOTES

¹ I have not been able to see Jane Adamson, "Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid*: 'Fyre' and 'Cauld,'" *The Critical Review* (Melbourne; Sidney), 18 (1976), 39-60, and regret any inadvertent duplication of material.

² *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. F. N. Robinson, 2nd ed. (Boston, 1957). All references are to this edition.

³ *Polychronicon Ranulphi Higden, Monachi Cestrensis, Together with the English Translation of John Trevisa and of an Unknown Writer of the Fifteenth Century*, ed. C. Babington and J. R. Lumby, *Rolls Series* 41, II (London, 1865-86), pp. 156-62.

⁴ "Dance of the Sevin Deidly Synnes," *The Poems of William Dunbar*, ed. W. Mackay Mackenzie (London, 1966), ll. 109-20.

⁵ R. L. Mackie, *King James IV of Scotland: A Brief Survey of His Life and Times* (Edinburgh & London, 1958), pp. 29, 66.

⁶ "Prologue to Book I," *Virgil's "Aeneid" Translated into Scottish Verse by Gavin Douglas, Bishop of Dunkeld*, ed. D. F. C. Coldwell, *STS Third Series*, 25, 27, 28, 30 (Edinburgh & London, 1951-64), l. 340.

⁷ Robert Henryson, *Testament of Cresseid*, ed. Denton Fox (London, 1968). All references are to this edition.

⁸ This is noted from Spurgeon in Alice S. Miskimin, *The Renaissance Chaucer* (New Haven & London, 1975), p. 250.

⁹ Stanley Rubin, *Medieval English Medicine* (New York, 1974), p. 152.

¹⁰ Saul N. Brody, *The Disease of the Soul: Leprosy in Medieval Literature* (Ithaca, N.Y., & London, 1974), p. 56. See also pp. 173-77 and Fox, pp. 26-49.