

1985

## Cresseid Excused: A Re-reading of Henryson's Testament of Cresseid

Mairi Ann Cullen

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Cullen, Mairi Ann (1985) "Cresseid Excused: A Re-reading of Henryson's Testament of Cresseid," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 20: Iss. 1.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol20/iss1/11>

This Article is brought to you by the Scottish Literature Collections at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Studies in Scottish Literature by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact [digres@mailbox.sc.edu](mailto:digres@mailbox.sc.edu).

*Mairi Ann Cullen*

Cresseid Excused: A Re-reading of  
Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid*



In the thirteenth stanza of Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid* the narrator promises Cresseid:

I sall excuse, als far furth as I may,  
Thy womanheid, thy wisdome and fairness (II. 87-8)<sup>1</sup>

But the question of how far the *Testament* succeeds in this troubles critics of the poem. Clearly the poem is a beautiful work; emotionally moving and technically well made, and yet Henryson appears to have largely failed in what he set out to do—the *Testament*, surely, does not excuse but judge. Unless, that is, Cresseid's coming to self-knowledge of her unworthiness excuses her in the eyes of the world by showing her moral growth. This is what critics have tended to say, as much, one feels, to excuse Henryson's art as to excuse Cresseid of unfaithfulness and prostitution. While Cresseid's infidelity to Troilus cannot be passed over altogether (hence "excuse, als far furth as I may") Henryson sets out to excuse Cresseid's womanhood, wisdom and fairness—to argue that showing her

moral growth answers this very full claim is, I think, a little tenuous. What exactly does Cresseid's testament, the tangible expression of her self-knowledge, excuse her of? It is a self-reproaching; an atonement of her sins, not an excuse. Further, the emotional charging of the poem is too much in Cresseid's favour to suit this rather weak theory. The reader feels more emotionally involved with Cresseid than with Troilus, who hardly appears (although, admittedly, when he does the pictures are deeply emotive *ll.* 45-56, *ll.* 484-525, *ll.* 594-609)—it is, after all, the "tragedie" (*l.*4) of Cresseid Henryson is writing. So, has Henryson failed? Do his own claims and the emotional power of the work go against the statements of the poem which judge Cresseid "according to the standards of orthodox morality"<sup>2</sup>, or have too many assumptions been allowed to cloud our view of the poem? The question of how far Henryson does indeed excuse Cresseid seems to me to hinge on the interpretation of stanzas 6-14 of *The Testament*. In this essay I shall attempt to show how a re-reading of those stanzas affects our interpretation of Henryson's treatment of Cresseid by clarifying the limited view he had of her guilt in the first place.

In stanza six, the poet settles down by the fire with his drink and begins to read Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*. The part which he chooses to paraphrase in his own poem is one of the most heartrending in Chaucer's: the structurally ironic description of Troilus' deep love which keeps him trusting that Criseyde will return to him when, as readers, we are well aware that Criseyde has already been "ressavit" (taken in) by Diomeid. The use of "ressavit" (*l.*44) by Henryson is important for it mirrors exactly the sympathetic way in which Chaucer recounts the seeds of Criseyde's betrayal of Troilus,

And that she was allone and hadde nede  
Of frendes help; . . . (*ll.* 1026-7)

and Lines 1033-4,

So wel he [Diomedes] for hyselven spak and seyde  
That alle hire sikes soore adown he leyde.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time, though, this focus puts Cresseid in a bad light by reminding us of her unfaithfulness and the consequent misery

of Troilus with the result that our attention and sympathy is with him. But then Henryson breaks off and says,

Of his distres me neidis nocht reheirs, (l. 57)

because Chaucer has already done that very well. Henryson then takes up "aneuther quair" (l. 61) in which he reads,

the fatall destenie  
Of fair Cresseid, that endit wretchitlie. (ll. 62-3)

The first-time reader would not be unjustified in expecting Henryson to paraphrase some part of this poem which would focus attention on Cresseid. What he does instead is first write a stanza which has, in critical circles, been noted mainly for its contribution of the critical term "inventioun" (l. 67) to our language.<sup>4</sup> It seems to me that this stanza deserves a little more attention in its role as an integral part of *The Testament*.

Henryson first asks who can know if all that Chaucer wrote was true. Again, a first-time reader of the poem might then expect Henryson to develop this question along the lines of his defensive *Prolog* to the *Morall Fabillis* but again he surprises. He goes on to question the status of the second poem which he took up, whether it

Be authoreist, or fenyeit of the new  
Be sum poeit, throw his inventioun. . (ll. 66-7)

That, at least, is my reading of the stanza, though critics generally appear to regard the tale referred to as "this narratioun" as the poem Henryson himself wrote and called *The Testament of Cresseid*. Fox, for example, in his edition of Henryson's poems supports the unlikelihood of this other "quair" existing by reading "a mocking tone" into this stanza (a tone which is quite elusive if one reads the verse carefully) and suggests not only that Henryson's *Testament* is merely an expansion of lines 61-3, but also that the "parallel wording" of lines 40-3 to lines 61-3 supports his view that Henryson's *Testament* is a "parallel" to Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, particularly to Book 5.<sup>5</sup> This view can only be maintained if one makes two assumptions: firstly, that the other poem probably never existed and if it did

had no bearing of *The Testament* and, secondly, that the connection between *The Testament* and Chaucer's *Troilus* is the most useful one to make in critical terms. A careful analysis of the stanzas 6-14 will, I hope, prove both these assumptions to be misguided and show instead that the argument of Henryson's poem is primarily devoted to countering suggestions put forward in the other "quair", although, undoubtedly, there is a close and complex relationship between the Chaucer and Henryson poems. But the parallelism of wording which Fox cites is not used to stress a parallelism with Chaucer's poem, rather it is used here to build up to the argument of the next stanza for Henryson is following a logical pattern. First, he mentions Chaucer's tale (stanzas 6-8); then he mentions a second tale (stanza 9); then, in stanza 10, he questions the truth of Chaucer's (*l.* 64), then the truth of the second (*ll.* 65-70). It is my belief that after this stanza questioning the authority of the poems he has just read, and especially of the latter one, Henryson then returns to his pattern. As he did with Chaucer's tale, he now paraphrases part of the second tale "be sum poeit" in stanza 11. Again, this opinion goes against critical orthodoxy but it has, I think, several points to back up its validity.

The first of these is the logical pattern already mentioned. Chaucer's poem is introduced into *The Testament*, partially paraphrased to focus on Troilus and the great strength of his love, then dismissed because Chaucer has told that tale well enough. The second poem is mentioned, and, after a stanza questioning the "truth" of poetry, and especially the truth of this particular poem, is interjected, it is partially paraphrased to focus on Cresseid, showing her rejected by Diomeid and descended to prostitution. Henryson then stands back from his paraphrase and reflects on the contents of the poem, first, in a tone of pitying wonder (*ll.* 78-9), then in a tone of incredulous disbelief (*ll.* 80-3). On returning to his pattern in stanza 13 and dismissing this other "quair" his first reaction to it, "I have pietie thow suld fall sic mischance" (*l.* 84) hardens into resolute rejection, for Henryson does not agree, or at least does not wish to agree, with the tale. And he is at liberty to do this because

Quha wait . . . gif this narration  
Be authoreist, or fenyet of the new . . . (*ll.* 64-6)

secondly, research has shown that there was in existence around Henryson's time a tradition, however weak, which recounted this very tale of Cresseid's fall to prostitution and her sad end.

B.J. Whiting<sup>6</sup> came up with evidence for this when he noted the following lines in the *Spektakle of Luf* . . . from the Asloan Manuscript

Or how quhte cresseid hir' trew luffar troyelus his lang  
fservice in luf quhen scho forsuk him for dyomeid And  
yare efter went common amang ye grekis And syn deid in  
gret myfsere and pane (ll. 21-4, p. 279)<sup>7</sup>

He then suggested three possible relationships between these lines and Henryson's *Testament*: a) the latin writer had read Henryson; b) the Latin writer had taken his source from another, probably earlier work; or c) that Mr. G. Myll, the translator, had read Henryson and introduced this example into the catalogue of examples. The first of these seems to me as unlikely as anyone writing the *Spektakle of Luf* . . . in Henryson's day in Latin when we know that Mr. Myll translated it out of Latin in 1492 expressly so that its contents would be made known. The third option appears too obviously contrived in order to allow Henryson the glory of his "inventioun." J. Kinsley<sup>8</sup> agrees with this and suggests that Henryson read Mr. G. Myll's translation and there found the germinal idea for his *Testament*. J. Gray<sup>9</sup> went on to say that this possibility should not be ruled out but that it would be difficult to prove. Whiting's second suggestion is, then the most likely. The lines from the Asloan Manuscript do not, however, necessarily suggest a direct connection between them and Henryson, but their place in the *Spektakle* is interesting because it suggests the antiquity of the tradition. Each example in Part Three of the *Spektakle of Luf* . . . is either Biblical or classical. There is nothing to suggest that the Cresseid tale is not included in the description "famoufs historijs and noble examplis in tymes by passit" (p. 271, intro. to Part 3). The brevity of the reference and its syntactic association with the preceeding example of Helen of Troy both suggest the contrary, a suggestion given further credibility by the findings of Mieszkowski's monograph, *The Reputation of Criseyde 1155-1500*, which shows that Cresseid's reputation was in a bad way long before Henryson's *Testament*.<sup>10</sup> It is quite plausible then,

that it is the mere accident of survival, or lack of it, that has caused critics to doubt the truth of Henryson's claim that he took up "aneuther quair" in which he found

the fatall destenie  
Of fair Cresseid, that endit wretchitlie. (ll. 62-3)

Any evidence in support of the existence of such poems is naturally flimsy faced with the lack of manuscripts. However, I think it is more than coincidence that the episode from Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* paraphrased by Henryson is also mentioned in the *Spektakle*; that going among the Greeks is common to Henryson's paraphrase of the other quair and the *Spektakle*, as is the wretched end. Only the rejection by Diomeid and the tholing of death are extra in Henryson's paraphrase which, arguably, could suggest that Henryson did indeed read "aneuther quair" and not just the *Spektakle*. Perhaps the quair that Henryson read was a version of the tale "fenyait of the new" (l. 66) in recent years just as *Troilus and Criseyde* was "fenyait of the new" by Chaucer from a long tradition.

The third reason I would give in support of the view that stanza 11 is a paraphrase of "aneuther quair" is the internal evidence of the poem, i.e. the words of stanzas 12 and 13. Stanza 12 is particularly interesting. It is written in a highly rhetorical style and yet the tone changes markedly. The first two lines and the last line,

O fair Cresseid, the flour and A per se  
Of Troy and Grece, how was thow fortunait!<sup>11</sup>

. . .

I have pietie thow suld fall sic mischance

may be read with a tone of pitying wonder, with a tinge of irony on the phrase "how was thow fortunait!" thus contrasting sharply with the intervening four lines which are harsh and accentuated by forceful alliteration,

To change in filth all thy feminitie  
 And be with fleschellie lust sa maculait  
 And go amang the Greikis air and lait  
 Sa giglotlike, takand thy foull plesance!

This contrast is unfortunate for the accepted interpretation of this poem since it involved Henryson in something very close to hypocrisy. Either one can say, as Fox does, that this contrast is evidence of "a stupid and passionately involved narrator"<sup>12</sup> thus spoiling the consistency of moral standard which Stearns detects in the poem,<sup>13</sup> or one can, as I have already suggested, imagine Henryson while reflecting on the "other quair" bursting out these passionate words in a tone of incredulity. If stanza 12 is, then, the rhetorical reflection of Henryson's emotional reaction against what he read in the other quair, one must accept that this involves Henryson's rejection of the picture painted there of Cresseid as a whore—a rejection made explicit in the famous words of stanza 13:

Yit nevertheles, quhatever men deme or say  
 In scornfull langage of thy brukkilnes,  
 I sall excuse, als far furth as I may,  
 Thy womanheid, thy wisedome and fairnes—

From one of wonder and incredulity, the tone changes in these lines to one of absolute determination. Despite what other men say, Henryson deliberately stands apart from "such scornful langage" and says with resolution "*I sall excuse . . .*" He then begins to put his case for Cresseid forward by introducing, in opposition to the promiscuity theory of the "other quair," the two reasons he sees for her downfall, i.e. Fortune and "wicket langage" (*ll.* 89-91). In his own version of her story, (which I would argue he is only now about to present), he shows how this was true of Cresseid's fate in life but there is also the implication that those two reasons explain the fate of her reputation in literature as well. In support of this, the ambiguity of "fortunait" (controlled by fortune) (*l.* 79) and "sic mischance" (*l.* 84) may be noted. Both can quite plausibly refer to her fortune in literature as well as in life, especially since Henryson has just suggested in stanza 10 how the fortune of literary characters may be controlled by the caprices of the author. Similarly, ambiguity



may be noted in "wickit langage" (l.91) which can refer to the language of the other poem (i.e., fate in literature) or to the blasphemy against the gods of which Cresseid is later accused (i.e., fate in life). In each of these three cases, fortune's control is associated with both meanings. This is important, for if my interpretation is valid, one way in which Henryson will "excuse" Cresseid is through the role of Fortune in his version of her tale. He is going to use his "inventioun" to prove the truth of lines 88-91 against any other reasons suggested for Cresseid's downfall, by writing his own version of Cresseid's tale, which I would argue only begins properly in stanza fourteen.

Henryson's tale of Cresseid may start in stanza fourteen but he prepares his audience for the role of Fortune in it in the opening section of the poem with the twisted nature of the traditional Spring opening of a poem about love. His poem, he hints, is going to be a fitting one to write in "ane doolie sessoun" (l. 1) and according to the weather it certainly is a "doolie sessoun"—it is cold, windy and hailing. In line 39 the night is even described as a "winter nicht" and yet it ought to be Spring time; Aires is in the middle of Lent.<sup>14</sup> Worse, Venus is in opposition to Phebus (ll. 11-4), an astrological portent of ill. This wintry Spring and astrological disorder can be seen merely as a fitting setting for Henryson's "cairfull dyte" (l.1) but it also makes sense to relate it a little more specifically to the content of the poem: just as it is the chance of Fortune that the weather is like this in Spring when one can expect it to be better; so it is Fortune's chance that Cresseid, who can expect happiness in the Spring of her love, gets misery instead. This can be supported by astrological references within the tale of Cresseid proper. Phebus, as he appears in the parliament of gods, is described as the life-giver the "tender nureis and banischer of nicht" (l. 199) but more importantly for Cresseid, as the one

Without comfort of quhome, of force to nocht  
Must all ga die that in this warld is wrocht" (ll. 202-3)

His ominous position in the opening is clearly fitting, for Cresseid's tale does not have his benevolent force working on it and so we can expect that the love in her life will "die." It is no coincidence either that two of the gods associated with night in the poem (Venus l. 11 and Cynthia l. 256-9), and so opposite to

the light-giver, Phebus, are closely involved in Cresseid's judgment. Further, Saturn, another god directly involved in her judgment, is associated with frost (*l.* 63) connecting back both to the cold opening scene and to Cresseid's complaint that the seed of love "with froist is slane" (*l.* 139). The opening few stanzas (i.e. 1-5) teach us important lessons for Cresseid's story: the role of Fortune in our lives, and, that in the face of chance natural disorder, all we can do is acquiesce since its workings can change our hopes and plans quite dramatically. Hence the poet's sensible reaction, in lines 22-8, to the disorder around him,

For I traistit that Venus . . .  
 My faidit hart of lufe scho wald mak grene; . . .  
 Bot for greit cald as that I lattit was,  
 And in my chalmer to the fyre can pas.

I will argue that not understanding the importance of acquiescence before changing Fortune, a misunderstanding linked closely to the sin of pride, is one of Cresseid's main faults as Henryson portrays her and that this is the most important lesson she has to learn in *The Testament*.

If Cresseid's first complaint is juxtaposed to Henryson's description of Venus (i.e. *ll.* 127-40 with *ll.* 218-38), the lessons Cresseid must learn can be illustrated. The sole base of Cresseid's complaint is that her fortunes have changed and changed despite the "devine responsaill" (*l.* 127) given her by Cupid and Venus, and despite their having given her to understand that she would "alwaysis" (*l.* 136) have the seed of love which would "ay" (*l.* 138) grow green through their grace. Most critics would not agree with this analysis and would argue that Cresseid is over-reacting and claiming that the beauty of her face is already destroyed (*ll.* 133 and 139), when of course it is not, and that her punishment with disfiguring leprosy is ironic justice. This patterns nicely with her second complaint when she prays that she "wald nat be kenned" (*l.* 380) and with her second punishment when Troylus does actually not recognize her. However, it is not a necessary interpretation. Also valid, (and equally patternable) could be an interpretation by which Cresseid here realizes a truth about herself, for she is indeed "excludit" and "an abject odious" to Troylus because she has broken his trust. Arguably, then, there has been no claim to physical

change in her appearance, merely a factual assessment of her situation: in some way unknown to her, but which she assumes is caused by the gods of love breaking their promises to her, her face has lost the power to instigate love in the beholder. It is noteworthy, that at this point she is upset by her exclusion from her ex-lovers, not by a sense of fallen pride, but by a real sense of fear, "Quha sall me gyde? Quha sall me now convoy?" (*l.* 131). The punishment of leprosy which excludes her from all company, and not just that of Troylus and Diomede, is thus a "malitious" (*l.* 324) punishment by the gods—(the judgment of the gods will be discussed more fully below).

Further, by saying that the "seid [of lufe] with froist is slane" (*l.* 139), she is not necessarily over-reacting and perceiving a physical change where as yet there is none. She is again merely stating what she knows to be fact: if the "froist" which kills the seed of love can be equated with the god of the frost, Saturn ("ovirfret with froistis hoir" *l.* 163) and so with Time, then Time has indeed killed Diomede's love because through time he got bored with her, but Time has (or will) also kill the love in Troylus because in their separation she was untrue to him. Saturn, Time, is the god that "gave to Cupide [Love's instigator] littill reverence" (*l.* 152). What I would argue, then, is that Cresseid's first complaint is straightforward and honest, as far as she is aware of truth at that point, that is, that she expects constancy in her love god and in her fortune in love and that she has grounds for this in Venus's promises of "always" and "ay" as well as in the "devine responsaill." The echo from this complaint to Venus back to the poet's attitude to her in lines 22-8, especially

For I traistit that Venus, luifis quene . . .  
My faidit hart of lufe scho wald mak grene

is, I think, deliberate and on the one hand reinforces the justness of Cresseid's expectations, but on the other hand, "faidit" in association with "traistit" serves to remind us that the fortunes of love go up and down like everything else and that acceptance of this is the way to contentment. Cresseid has yet to learn both of these lessons.

She is young and her knowledge of Venus is limited to that which Venus has revealed to her (*ll.* 127, 136, 138). She believed

in the greenness of love and it has taken two witherings for her to learn that love is like life in this respect—first it grows and then it withers away. First, Fortune took her away from Troilus to the Greek camp where she was friendless and then, when once more she thought she had found enduring love,<sup>15</sup> Fortune again took it from her in the shape of another woman who was to Diomedes more beautiful than she. Her imperfect knowledge of the nature of Venus through her youth and naivety can be set against the poet's full knowledge and acceptance of it in the opening: "I am expert, for baith I have assaillit" (l. 35). Within the terms of the promises Venus gave to Cresseid (promises Venus, as a goddess of "all thing generabil" (l. 148), had no right to give) her complaint is therefore justified but she has to learn, by adjusting her hopes to her experience, the whole nature of her goddess and in learning and experiencing, to accept her own nature as well as that of Venus.

The description of Venus shows in a graphic manner the extent to which Cresseid's knowledge of the god she follows falls short. Venus is divided in two, in outward appearance and nature. She is half-green and half-black, i.e. half-favorable and half-unfavorable, (also the associations of green and gold together are faery). Far from being characterized by "ay" and "always," as she promised Cresseid, "variance," "inconstance," "dissimulait," "suddanely changit," "alterait" and "variant" are used of her, as well as the contrasts, "perfyte treuth," versus "inconstance," "smyling" and "provocative" versus "angrie" and "odious," and "lauch" versus "weip." The reason for her startling appearance is "in taikning" that all sensual love which is ruled by her is sometimes sweet, sometimes bitter, changeable, containing both "cairfull joy and fals plesance"

Now hait, now cauld, now blyith, now full of wo  
Now grene as leif, now widdir and ago (ll. 236-8).

Henryson clearly wishes us to notice that his Venus is characterized by Change, the quality normally associated with Fortune,<sup>16</sup> in order that we realize that love, too, is governed by Fortune and so, by extension, that Cresseid as a disciple of Venus will also be governed by her.

This extension of the nature of Fortune/Venus to the nature and fate of Cresseid is made explicit by close lexical and

conceptual links between the two.<sup>17</sup> Admittedly, lexical repetition is used too often by Henryson to mean very much in single instances, however, in this case, there are sufficient to make the point. Both Venus and Cresseid have "blenkis amorous" (*ll.* 226 and 503), both get angry (*ll.* 124 and 228), both are described as "odious" (Venus in word in line 229, Cresseid in nature in line 133). Further, like Venus, Cresseid becomes subject to change and is "alterait," while the love experience of Cresseid fits exactly the description of

all fleschelic paramour  
Quhilk Venus hes in reull and governance (*ll.* 232-3)

The line "Now grene as lief, now widderit and ago" (*l.* 238) specifically recalls Cresseid's complaint. Because of the very nature of Henryson's Venus (change) Cresseid has fallen out of her grace and so the seed of love withers—compare lines 138 and 238. Thus, by showing the nature and fate of Cresseid as so bound up with her being a disciple of Venus and thus governed by Fortune, Henryson strongly suggests to the mind of his reader that it is, as he claimed in lines 89-90, the caprices of his Fortune-Venus which are to blame for Cresseid's tale.

Bearing this in mind let us now analyze the charges Cupid brings against Cresseid. He accuses her of blasphemy because she blamed him and his mother for her change in fortune; of slander because she has called his mother blind; and of blaming him and his mother for her own "leving unclene and lecherous" (*l.* 285). The first accusation falls down immediately because we have seen that the nature of Venus changes, that she causes both the growing and the withering, so that for Cupid to accept the praise for the one (*l.* 279) but reject the blame for the other (*ll.* 281-2) is false and not just. The third accusation falls down almost as easily, for, if the interpretation has been accepted so far, not one word of Cresseid's complaint suggests anything like this—if anyone should be accused of falsely blaming here, it should be Cupid. The second charge is more notable though, for Cresseid does indeed call Venus blind (*l.* 135), while Henryson's description of her does not mention this. Of course Cresseid could simply be confusing or extending Cupid's own blindness but it is probably that there is a more telling association in her mind. Cresseid knows that change is the nature of blind

Fortune, not Venus, so she supposes that when Venus is seen to be changeable, she will also be blind. Thus, when Cresseid says that Venus is "of lufe the blind goddes" (*l.* 135) she seems to be putting in a nutshell the merging of the two figures, Venus and Fortune, which has taken place in the poem. In this context, Professor Patch's comment that when the two are thus linked they are usually "accused of causing trouble for lovers"<sup>18</sup> is important, for this is obviously what upsets Cupid so much. To call his mother "blind" is to suggest that she is not the kindly patron of love but a disinterested figure "blind" to the consequences of the force she controls. Though this defensive anger is understandable, this single valid charge hardly fits the description of "oppin and manifest" (*l.* 305) "dispyte" (*l.* 304) to Cupid and Venus. I would argue then that Henryson wants us to regard Cresseid as having been falsely accused on two charges and that her culpability in the third is grossly exaggerated, for the suggestion that the parliament of gods are conducting a sham trial extends into their choice of her judges and the judgment meted out to her.

Mercury, despite being "Richt eloquent and full of rethorie" (*l.* 240) gives no reason for the choice of Saturn and Cynthia as judges except that they are the highest and lowest planets (*ll.* 297-8). We have already noted, though, that the nature of Saturn, frosty Time, is malignant to Cresseid (it was he that destroyed the seed of love) and that Cynthia is the opposite of the benevolent, life-giving Phebus. Further, in the system of the four humors and the four elements Cresseid is hot and moist (*ll.* 318, 334) but is judged by gods of opposing qualities—Saturn is cold and dry and Cynthia's coldness is emphasized. The choice of Cynthia is especially sinister since in the poem this usually neutral planet is closely linked with Venus, the prosecuting party. Both are Change, both are associated with night (Venus *l.* 11, Cynthia *l.* 256) and both are opposed to the benevolent Phebus (Venus *l.* 13-4, Cynthia, by implication, *l.* 259). Moreover, as Fox points out, simply pairing this fickle planet with Saturn is enough to make her a malevolent force since she is "apt to take on the colour of the planet with which she is joined."<sup>19</sup> Thus by what appears to be an arbitrary decision, Cresseid is given over to the judgement of gods already ill-disposed towards her. This is further evidence that the trial is a set-up and the control of fortune behind it.

Some critics have, however, argued that the choice of judges is a just and fitting one, for Cresseid, in betraying her love for Troylus, has disrupted the laws of Saturn (Time) and Cynthia (Change) by changing in love before due time, thus thwarting the end of all the gods, generation (*l.* 148). If Henryson's attitude to Cresseid in *The Testament* is indeed one of "stern pity," as Stearns puts it,<sup>20</sup> this interpretation of the choice of judges as a kind of poetic justice is valid. However, it leads to problems with stanza 47 when the poet's voice intervenes. If he is so stern in his pity for Cresseid and is showing the parliament of gods meting out to her a fitting and just punishment, we have either to pass over this stanza as cruel irony, or we have, as with stanza 12, to say that the poet is being hypocritical, proving by his poem the justice of the sentence, while at the same time proclaiming its injustice through this dislocated poetic voice. If, however, the initial premise of this essay, that Henryson is going out of his way to excuse Cresseid, is accepted, this interpretation of the choice of gods is invalid and the problem it involves disappears. Henryson, having roused our sympathy and our sense of injustice by the travesty of a fair trial to which Cresseid is subjected, knows that when he, as narrator, bursts out with

O cruell Saturne, fraward and angrie,  
 Hard is thy dome and to malitious!  
 On fair Cresseid quhy hes thow na mercie,  
 Quhilk was sa sweit, gentill and amorous? (*ll.* 323-6)

we, as readers, are at one with his sentiment. It is noticeable that he confirms our feelings of injustice by allowing us, very shortly afterwards, an extremely touching little tabloid of the sweet, gentle, affectionate Cresseid (*ll.* 358-66) still present in her nature despite the judgment of the gods and its physical effect upon her.

But however unfair the trial and unjust the sentence, the poet is under no illusions about its finality. It may have been Fortune that caused Cresseid to be "spilt" (*l.* 91) but to pray for the sentence to be rescinded is useless as the poet knows. He may plead to Saturn "Withdraw thy sentence and be gracious" (*l.* 327) but he soon counters this with the world-weary words of acquiescence,

As thow was never; sa schawis thou thy deid  
Ane wraikfull sentence gevin on fair Cresseid (*ll.* 328-9)

for the nature of the punishment is indeed not just but "vengeful" and very much bound up with the nature of the judges rather than with the crime. He realizes that it is the unchangeable nature of Saturn (Time) to destroy "fairnes," "bewtie," "wantoun blude" and "goldin hair" (*ll.* 313-4). The other punishments given out by Saturn all involve change from good fortune to bad fortune, and so are obviously linked with Venus, but it is arguable also that the poet accepts these as part of Saturn's nature too because, as we saw in the opening stanzas, the poet has reached acceptance of change as an inevitable part of life measured in time. Cresseid must go on to learn this acceptance of the changes inherent in Time and Fortune. However, first, Cresseid's punishment must be looked at more closely, for it involves us in a problem of interpretation so far largely glossed over in this essay. Does Henryson portray, however indirectly, Cresseid as having been a prostitute?

Cynthia's fierce sentence of physical repugnancy and exclusion, i.e. leprosy, is very much a case of the judge inflicting her own worst attributes on Cresseid—Cynthia herself (*ll.* 253-63) is also physically repugnant, carries the symbol of her ability to prevent "ane churle" reaching "nar the hevin" (exclusion) and traditionally suffers from leprosy (suggested her by the use of "spottis blak" in both lines 260 and 339). But leprosy was also a part of Saturn since his cold, dry qualities gave rise to the melancholy humor thought to cause leprosy and particularly the incurable type with which Cresseid is inflicted.<sup>21</sup> If Saturn and Cynthia are so closely associated with leprosy it is no wonder that when Cresseid is given in to their control she becomes leprous, for the nature of the gods is reflected in those they control. Leprosy was also, however, associated with venereal disease. Fox backs up his idea that this fact is "important to the poem" almost solely from evidence in stanzas 11 and 12 which show Cresseid as a prostitute.<sup>22</sup> If it has been accepted that stanza 11 is a paraphrase of the "other quair" and that stanza 12 is Henryson's emotional reaction to, and rejection of, the tale told there, then Fox's argument is greatly weakened.

It is noticeable too that when Henryson launches into his



own account, he starts from the point where Cresseid is "destitute/of all comfort and consolatioun" (*ll.* 92-3), that is immediately after she has been repudiated by Diomedes, and that he sends her straight off to her father without leaving time for the rumor that she went "into the court commoun" (*l.* 77) to be true. However, Fox's argument cannot be swept aside lightly, for he also uses Cupid's words "hir leving unclene and lecherous" (*l.* 285) to back it up. Cupid's statement is given further weight when Cresseid herself in lines 558-9 agrees that she is lecherous and unclean. If, however, we remember that the nature of Henryson's Venus, who governs "fleschelic" love, is reflected in her disciple Cresseid both these accusations are explained. Cresseid actually confesses that even her love for Troilus was "fickill and frivolous" (*l.* 552) and that she "was inclynit" (*l.* 559) to "fleschelic foull affectioun" (*l.* 558)—a reflection of her mature knowledge of Venus, the goddess she had made her own, as goddess of fleshly love and not enduring love, as Cresseid had believed.

Yet Fox uses the idea of leprosy as a venereal disease as a reason for its infliction on Cresseid: he sees a connection between her "misuse of her flesh and the resulting corruption of her flesh, a connection which is moral as well as medical."<sup>23</sup> If we are successfully to "excuse" Cresseid of this charge of being a disease-ridden prostitute and back up our claim that there is no evidence in the poem for viewing her as a prostitute, some other textually coherent causation for the infliction of leprosy must be found. Fox himself actually provides it when he gives evidence that leprosy was also often thought to be a divine punishment for blasphemy.<sup>24</sup> This is the very charge brought against Cresseid at the parliament of gods. Fox argues that it is Cresseid's promiscuous life that constitutes blasphemy but I would argue that it is simply the "wicket langage" of her complaint against the gods that is blasphemy. If this is accepted, (it agrees with Henryson's claims in lines 88-91) then the argument that Cresseid's vision of the judgment of the gods is an allegorical representation of her degeneration among the Greeks can be disregarded as a misguided attempt to bolster the poor case for Cresseid as a prostitute in order to justify her punishment of leprosy. Surely Henryson meant us to take the poem as it reads: that one day Cresseid was suddenly struck with leprosy by outraged and malicious gods because she blasphemed against

them. This view correlates with the emotional charging of the poem in Cresseid's favor—the deliberate and detailed manner in which the judgement is pronounced on her sleeping figure; the moving little tabloid of Cresseid and the child, and the framing of the "uglye" judgment vision by the stoicism and hopefulness of Cresseid's father (who mainfests the true patience Cresseid must learn) all build up this effect, quite apart from any perception we may have of the lack of justice in the trial itself. In the middle ages diseases were thought to have three levels of causation: physical, (infection from a diseased person or unseasonable weather); astrological (the influence of the planets in malevolent conjunctions); and divine (as punishment for sin). Clearly Henryson provides these three levels of causation for Cresseid's leprosy but, in opposition of Fox,<sup>25</sup> I would argue that the physical cause is the unseasonable weather reflected in the poem's opening not infection; that the astrological cause is the malevolent conjunction of Saturn and Cynthia; and that the sin is blasphemy not promiscuity.<sup>26</sup> Henryson by rejecting the story in the "other quair" rejects that "fleschelic lust" has made Cresseid "maculait" (probably itself an allusion to leprosy) and rejects the implications of moral corruption which go with it. In his own version of Cresseid's story, he provides an alternative reason for her becoming physically "maculait"—the sin of blasphemy being punished in a recognized way by leprosy.

This argument can be supported by an analysis of how Henryson uses the affliction of leprosy firstly to bring Cresseid to an awareness of the pride and impatience which lay at the root of her blasphemy and, secondly, to teach her humility and patience, lessons rewarded by an understanding and an experience of the enduring love she craved so much. The first part of this process of coming to self-knowledge is learning patience (in the sense of bearing good and bad fortune with the same fortitude). It is true that the gods bring false charges against Cresseid, but she does have a besetting sin: pride. The reason that Cresseid makes for first complaint in "ane secreit orature" (l. 120) and not in "the kirk" (l. 117) is that she did not want anyone to know that she had been rejected by "Diomeid the king" (l. 99). She is very conscious of the high social position from which she has fallen and this is one of the reasons that she kicks against the workings of fortune, (who, of course, works most forcefully against those of high social position). Thus,

when she admits to "blaspheming" (*l.* 354) against the gods, though we have seen that her articulated blasphemy is very small (blind Venus), her moral sin was in questioning her fate and the pride this implies. As, once excluded from his presence, she had run away from Diomeid, so once struck with leprosy, she again runs away to where she will "not be kend" (*l.* 380).<sup>27</sup> Ironically, however, even the leper folk, who do not recognize her as an individual, recognize her nobility precisely because she has not yet reconciled herself to her fate,

Yit thay presumit, for hir hie regrait  
And still murning, scho was of nobill kin      (*ll.* 397-8)

A little of the power of social standing still surrounds her, "with better will thairfoir thay tuik hir in," serving to highlight further the prestige that has been taken from her.

In her second complaint she is still unreconciled to her fortune, indeed now blaming all the gods for it (*l.* 353), and her pride is such that she wishes she were dead rather than have anyone of Troy or Greece hear of her fate (possibly thinking in particular of Diomeid and Troylus) (*ll.* 414-5). The next four stanzas fit in to the "Fall of the Princes" tradition<sup>28</sup> and in Cresseid's case the fall is caused by two things. Firstly, her destiny is in the stars and out of her control: just as the opening Spring is reversed, as it were, to winter, so her "weird is welterit so" (*l.* 436). Her "fortoun is fikkil" (*l.* 469) and she imagines herself being used as an example to warn others not to put their trust in good looks or riches. It takes the "lipper-lady" (*l.* 474), however, to teach her that her fall has been made worse by her pride in resisting it. The gentle words (*ll.* 475-80) of one who has learned patience through long suffering are a turning point for Cresseid. After this, she goes with the other lepers "Fra place to place, quhill cauld and hounger sair/compellit hir to be ane rank beggair" and she becomes integrated with them. She is no longer distinguished by her proud rebellion against fortune—now she is truly one of them (*ll.* 527 and 534). It is significant that it is at this very stage, when outwardly Cresseid is at her lowest ebb but morally she is growing in stature, that Troylus once more steps in to her life. Only now, having learned the lesson of the leper-lady, is she ready to appreciate him properly.

In line 486 we are told that "throw jeopardie of weir" Troylus' garrison was returning, victorious, to Troy. The use of "jeopardie" is interesting for it indicates clearly the force of chance working in good fortune, and very graphically that one turn of fortune's wheel brings "greit tryumphe" (l. 488) on the one hand but on the other, strikes down (l. 485). But although Troylus' fortune in war contrasts sharply with Cresseid's situation as a "rank beggair" (l. 483), their fortune in love is similar—the "jeopardie" of love has vanquished Troylus too. The emphasis on change in lines 498–504 and the echoes of "amorous blenking" and "sumtyme," which resound off Venus as well as off Cresseid, show this. The echo of Venus continues into the next stanza where "idole," "fantasy," "deludis," and "appeiris" all suggest something false appearing as truth—see line 224—a suggestion very much in accordance with Aristotle's psychological theory of cognition.<sup>29</sup> Yet this verse and the following two serve also as a tremendous emotional peak in the poem, generating both a sense of the great depth of Troylus' love for Cresseid (he can now show "affectioun" even to a "lazarous" image of her) and a terrible sense of a missed opportunity, a lost salvation. It is no wonder that the incident in these verses is the force by which Cresseid is brought to complete self-knowledge.

Troylus' act of "knichtlie pietie" (l. 519) and love awakens in Cresseid a true sense of her own unworthiness. She recognizes her pride and falseness and confesses it,

Sa elevait I was in wantones  
 And clam upon the fickill quheill sa hie.  
 All faith and lufe I promissit to the  
 Was in the self fickill and frivolous (ll. 540–52)

For the first time she makes the connection between her own nature and that of her goddess, the fickle, lusty Venus/Fortune against whom she blasphemed. What Fortune has done to her she has, in a less physical way, done to Troylus. This realization is expressed in her final words before her testament:

Becaus I know the greit unstabilnes  
 Bruckill as glas, into myself, I say . . .  
 Nane but myself as now I will accuse (ll. 568–9; 574)

The attainment of self-knowledge which this acceptance of her own culpability entails can be further seen in the words of her testament. Her sense of her own worthlessness is evident,

Heir I beteiche my corps and carioun  
With wormis and with taidis to be rent (ll. 577-8);

her sense of gratitude to the lepers, among whom she learned the lesson of patience, is expressed in a tangible form (ll. 580-81); her lack of pride is there in "mak my cairful deid unto him kend" (l. 585); and, notable, her appreciation of spiritual love, as exemplified by Troylus, rather than fleshly love, is seen in the bequething of her spirit to Diane, the goddess of chastity, as well as in her self-reproaching exclamation addressed to Diomeid,

O Diomeid, thou hes baith broche and belt  
Quhilk Troylus gave me in takning  
Of his trew lufe! (ll. 589-91)

Thus Henryson has brought Cresseid to a complete self-knowledge which, since it involves her appreciation of Troylus' great love, also clears her of the last charge brought against her—ironically by Troylus himself—"Scho was untrew" (l. 602), for in her death, more than she ever was in her life, Cresseid is true to Troylus.

In this essay, then, I have accepted at face value Henryson's claim to have taken up "aneuther quair" and used this as the basis of my re-analysis of the crucial stanzas 6-14. I have suggested that stanza 11 is a paraphrase of the content of the other quair and that stanza 12 is Henryson's emotional reaction to and rejection of that quair, particularly his rejection of the picture it paints of Cresseid as a prostitute. Further, I have suggested that this rejection is what prompts Henryson to write his own version in order to vindicate Cresseid's "womanheid" by showing that her fate was caused, not by promiscuity, but by Fortune and "wicket langage," i.e. the blasphemy that is punished by leprosy. Through the suffering of leprosy, she learns the "wisdom" of patience and reaches a "fairness" of spiritual maturity despite being "maculait" in her outward appearance. Through leprosy too she learns to appreciate Troylus and is "excused" of her unfaithfulness to him in her life by her faithfulness in death.

This re-reading of *The Testament* allows us to accept that Henryson kept his promise to Cresseid in all the fulness of his claim:

I sall excuse, as far furth as I may  
Thy womanheid, thy wisdome and fairnes (ll. 87-8).

*Lincoln College, Oxford*

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>All *Testament* references are to the Clarendon edition: *Robert Henryson; Poems*, ed. C. Elliot (Oxford, 2nd edn, 1974).

<sup>2</sup>M.W. Stearns, *Robert Henryson* (New York, 1949), p. 54.

<sup>3</sup>F.N. Robinson, ed., *Chaucer: Complete Works* (Oxford, 1957, 2nd edn, 1976).

<sup>4</sup>J. MacQueen, *Robert Henryson: The Major Narrative Poems* (Oxford, 1967), p. 54.

<sup>5</sup>D. Fox, ed., *The Poems of Robert Henryson* (New York, 1981), "Introduction," p. lxxxiii.

<sup>6</sup>B.J. Whiting, "A Probable Allusion to Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid*," *Modern Language Review*, XL (1945), pp. 46-7.

<sup>7</sup>W. Craigie, ed., *The Asloan Manuscript* (Edinburgh, 1923-25)—all references to the *Spektacle of Luf* . . . are to this edition.

<sup>8</sup>J. Kinsley, "A Note on Henryson," *TLS* (14 Nov. 1952), p. 743.

<sup>9</sup>J. Gray, "A Note on Henryson," *TLS* (13 Mar. 1953), p. 176.

<sup>10</sup>C. Mieszkowskiz, "The Reputation of Crisseide, 1155-1500," *Transactions of the Connecticut Academy of Arts and*

*Sciences*, 43 (1971), pp. 71-153. Cited in Fox, *op cit*, p. lxxxiii.

<sup>11</sup>Fox in both his 1968 edition of the *Testament* alone and in his 1981 edition of *The Poems* does not place an exclamation mark after "fortunait"—this makes little difference to the tone I suggest for the line.

<sup>12</sup>D. Fox, ed., *Testament of Cresseid* (London, 1968), p. 23.

<sup>13</sup>Stearns, p. 54.

<sup>14</sup>There is some discussion about whether or not this suggests spring. However, the general consensus of opinion is in agreement that it does.

<sup>15</sup>So much is implied in Chaucer's version:

But syn I se ther is no bettre way,  
And that to late is now for me to rewe,  
To Diomedes algate I wol be trewe.

Robinson, p. 741, ll. 1069-71.

<sup>16</sup>This association was not altogether unusual—see Stearns, p. 90 for evidence.

<sup>17</sup>J. Seznec, *The Survival of the Pagan Gods* (New York, 1953) shows that such a connection between the planet/god and a human being was part of a tradition in both pagan and Christian times (see p. 41 and especially p. 48). "St. Thomas Aquinas admits that the stars determine individual character, at least in a physical sense, and since most men follow their passions—that is to say, their physical appetites—it is really by the stars that they are led into sin . . ."

<sup>18</sup>H.R. Patch, *The Goddess Fortuna in Medieval Literature* (Cambridge, 1927), pp. 90-98. Quoted in Stearns, p. 90.

<sup>19</sup>Fox, 1968, p. 32.

<sup>20</sup>Stearns, p. 7.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid*, p. 46.

<sup>22</sup>Fox, 1968, p. 30.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid*, p. 28.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid*, p. 35.

<sup>25</sup>Fox, 1981, p. lxxxviii.

<sup>26</sup>This in no way discounts Cresseid's being unfaithful to Troylus with Diomeid, but promiscuity is another matter, involving such acts repeated many times with different people.

<sup>27</sup>Stearns suggests (p. 46) that a desire to hide is a symptom of leprosy.

<sup>28</sup>McQueen, p. 87.

<sup>29</sup>See Fox, 1968, p. 46.

*Acknowledgements*

I have pleasure in acknowledging the encouragement and helpful criticism of Dr. Ronald D.S. Jack, University of Edinburgh, and the financial assistance of the Carnegie Trust Fund.