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Froward Language and Wanton Play: The "Commoun" Text of Henryson's Testament of Cresseid

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In the *Testament of Cresseid,* Henryson's treatment of Chaucer's Criseyde is mediated textually by a voice that is itself a participant in the text; the *Testament* narrator may be read as both narrative voice and literary character, the former existing discursively, as a rhetorical construct, and the latter as mimetic reality, having an imagined history and psychology. The narrator embodies Henryson's reading of Chaucer's text as the protagonist of sequences in which he re-reads and re-writes the story of Cresseid's "woefull end." As well, the narrator's central character, Cresseid, further embodies these layers of reading and writing, and thus problematic and compelling parallels exist between the narrator and his construct. Cresseid, we shall see, incorporates the errant text of both the narrator's reading of the "quair[s]" and Henryson's own reading of Chaucer.

What will become apparent also is that the *Testament* is a text obsessed with errancy, and, as such, it is a text obsessed with decorum. As the text attends to demarcations of propriety—sexual, discursive—it locates scenes of transgression, places where illusory borders of ideological confinement are confronted. Sexual and discursive errancies, which are manifest thematically in the *Testament*'s treatments of lust, blasphemy, and punishment, coincide with metaphorized representations of gender. These discursive configurations call attention to the narrative's own sense of errancy, its metatextual attention to itself as froward language, as discourse that engages its own "errant notions."[1]

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[1]Mark C. Taylor, in *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology* (Chicago, 1984) discusses "errant

Apropos the text's representations of sexual and discursive errancies, my goal in this essay is to reassess Henryson's treatment of cultural and literary decorum in relation to gender.

Cresseid is introduced by the *Testament* narrator as a figure of sexual errancy, an abandoned woman, scorned owing to sexual improprieties, who, as a result of that disdain, further errs:

> Than desolait scho walkit vp and doun,
> And sum men sayis, into the court, commoun.[2]

The phrase "walkit vp and doun" evokes the aimlessness and uncertainty of errancy (*errare*, to wander); Cresseid belongs nowhere and has no place properly of her own. She has been excluded from proper social order owing to violations of decorum, for by becoming the property of everyone she has become the property of no one. Within the immediate context of the story as informed by Chaucer's *Troilus*, Cresseid is left to fend for herself; her body being her only asset, she participates in its exploitation, making it "commoun."[3]

Contextually, the narrative's treatment of Cresseid's sexual errancy in the *Testament* is informed by antifeminist traditions, made evident in part by the narrator's reified sexual perspective: that the feminine is repulsive. Widowed and celibate, Cresseid is described as "fair," a figure of beauty and virtue, but once sexually active, she is described by the narrator as filthy, foul, and tarnished:

> O fair Cresseid, the flour and A per se
> Of Troy and Grece, how was thou fortunait
> To change in filth all thy feminitie,
> And be with fleschelie lust sa maculait,
> And go amang the Greikis air and lait,
> Sa giglotlike takand thy foull plesance! (*ll.* 78-83)

In medieval Christian theology's antifeminist tenets, "feminine" and "carnal" are linked; all that is perceived as negative and threatening about carnality is as-

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notions" and supplies a lengthy list of the concepts included under this rubric, e.g., transgression, impropriety, subversion, desire (pp. 11-13); I would add to his list promiscuity, which intersects these other notions.

[2]Robert Henryson, *The Testament of Cresseid*, ed. Denton Fox (London, 1968), *ll.* 76-7. All subsequent quotations are from this edition; line numbers will be given in the text.

[3]Fox glosses "commoun" as "promiscuous" in his edition of the *Testament* (77n). Ridley argues that Henryson's purpose is to reveal the "wrongness" of promiscuity as "violating the natural laws [of God]" a position challenged by the present essay. See Florence H. Ridley, "A Plea for the Middle Scots," in *The Learned and the Lewd: Studies in Chaucer and Medieval Literature*, ed. Larry D. Benson (Cambridge, MA, 1974), p. 183.

cribed to the feminine: feminine = flesh = corruption, sin, filth. Hence the *Testament* narrator, following Christian anti-feminist decorums, links the feminine with the carnal/filth even before Cresseid's leprous transformation: "in filth all thy feminitie," "fleschelie lust sa maculait," "[s]a giglotlike takand thy foull plesance." Indeed the oxymoronic euphemism "foull plesance" is quite telling in the narrator's denigration of the feminine.

And Cresseid *is* her female body; it represents her public identity and, accordingly, her "commoun" subjectivity. By defining her in this way, the text associates the concepts of promiscuity and errancy thematically; both identify gestures of deviation from some prescribed set of behaviors. The narrator calls attention to Cresseid's "womanheid" first as she represents proper adherence to masculine decorum, and then as a figure of subversive impropriety. The celibate Cresseid represents the feminine carnal subject to masculine control; the "commoun" Cresseid suggests the threat of unleashed carnality, the potential of the feminine to corrupt inherently vulnerable patriarchal decorums. Furthermore, while the *Troilus* narrator has likened Criseyde to the letter "A" by a simile of prioritization—"Right as oure first lettre is now an A" (*I.* 170)—the *Testament* narrator equates the two: Cresseid *is* the Letter, not merely likened to it in primacy. As well, she is the Carnal, with all its negative feminine associations played out in the narrative. For the "carnal" is "literal" in Pauline theology, and hence the feminine, as carnal, is literal; in effect, Woman is Letter, and the Letter is Death. Cresseid, the "A per se," is representative of a twofold feminine threat to Christianity's spiritual man: the carnal Letter and hence carnal Death.[4]

But within the Aristotelian antifeminist tradition, the feminine is "unlimited" as well, and, as such, is always *more than* carnal, always *more than* the letter. According to the Aristotelian/Pythagorean paradigm,[5] epistemological duals—including male and female, one and plural, limited and unlimited—define and schematize meaning. Howard Bloch comments:

> This association translates into what might be thought of as a medieval metaphysics of number, according to which, under the Platonic and Pythagorean schema, all created things express either the principle of self-identity (*principium ejusdem*) or of continuous self-alteration (*principium alterius*). The first is associated with unity, the monad; the second with multiplicity, dyadic structures. Also they are specifically gendered, the monad being male, the dyad female.[6]

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[4]The association of "carnal" and "literal" derives from St. Paul, esp. 2 Cor. 3.6 and Rom. 8.6.

[5]Aristotle, *Metaphysics; Selected Works*, ed. & trans. Hippocrates G. Apostle & Lloyd P. Gerson (Grinnell, IA, 1982), A. 5.

[6]R. Howard Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love* (Chicago, 1991), p. 26.

The ancient association of the feminine and the unlimited suggests a complex, unpredictable, and mutable feminine nature.[7] Further, as Shari Benstock notes of the feminine, when "[a]ppropriated as a signifier of difference, [it] has been commonly understood to mark difference from a masculine universal."[8] Thus this gendered epistemology contrasts feminine mutability, errancy, and plurality with the stability, consistency, and certainty implied by a masculine universal. Cresseid, "the flour . . . Of Troy *and* Grece" (my emphasis), is mutable and unstable, belonging to neither and yet associated with both.

By unremittingly inscribing anything culturally construed as negative to be feminine, early Christian and medieval patriarchal discourses ensured that the negativity of the feminine would be patristically authorized and culturally perpetual, which was further exacerbated by patronizing assertions of compassion and respect. The negativeness accorded the feminine is manifest in the hierarchical value structure attached to conventional ideologies of gender difference, for the asymmetrical value structure of gendered ideology has conventionally devalued the feminine. Indeed, Toril Moi notes, "It doesn't matter which 'couple' one chooses to highlight: the male/female opposition and its inevitable positive/negative evaluation can always be traced as the underlying paradigm."[9] Medieval antifeminism may indeed be traced to the paradigm of contraries—further distorted by Christianity's applications—and the influence of the underlying antifeminist male/female, superior/inferior paradigm is ubiquitous in the Middle Ages. As Caroline Bynum notes: "*Male* and *female* were contrasted and asymmetrically valued as intellect/body, active/passive, rational/irrational, reason/emotion, self-control/lust, judgment/mercy, and order/disorder."[10] The irreducible difference of masculine and feminine finds the feminine associated with negativeness in both theological and epistemological representations. Both use the feminine to privilege the masculine, though theology pretends, by trumpeting the virtues of virginity, to valorize the feminine by denying what makes the feminine feminine, sexuality. And, as Karma Lochrie argues,

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[7]This epistemology is articulated in contemporary theory by Irigaray in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, (Ithaca, 1985), pp. 23-33 and 205-18. My analysis of the textual feminine corresponds not to an internal privileging of an *écriture féminine* but to a medieval epistemological metaphor of paradigmatic distinction.

[8]Shari Benstock, *Textualizing the Feminine: On the Limits of Genre* (Norman, OK, 1991), p. xvi.

[9]Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (London, 1985), p. 104.

[10]Carolina Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York, 1991), p . 151.

> When virgins are then instructed not to break that which seals them together with God and with themselves, they are being called to enclosure at many levels. The unbroken flesh ultimately means bodily closure and silence.[11]

Hence theological rationales are used to castigate feminine sexuality, just as feminine sexuality fuels patristic exclusion and condemnation—hence, too, codes of decorum are designed to valorize non-sexuality (virginity) and to condemn those who resist constraint.[12]

The contradictory directions in which gender is understood and represented in medieval thought resist reconciliation, and this resistance enables the text to dictate its gendering through conventional, though conflicting, associations and patterns. In evoking a twofold tradition through metaphorized representations of flesh and mutability, Henryson exploits the discrepancies between the two components in relation to language. Cresseid is representative of not only the carnal—the feminine flesh from which further meaning might be conceived—but also the potential multiplicity of meaning that gives rise to the polysemy necessary if language is to transcend literal constraints. This relationship of the feminine to language is articulated in conjunction with a medieval poetics that identifies language in terms of property and decorum. Figurative meaning is imposed, "improper"; such meanings are not the literal, "proper" (*proprium*, one's own) definitions of words (to the extent that a truly literal or proper sense can exist) but rather they are extra-literal, additions that are neither property nor proper; they are, in effect, "commoun." While the *signum proprium* represents proper association, the *signum translatum* suggests improper, erring senses effected by usurpative, transgressive, and arbitrary transfer.[13] The narrator's description of Cresseid as "A" means that the property of "A"—the first character of the alphabet, the glyph that denotes the capital letter—is transferred to and imposed upon "Cresseid" reflexively, improperly describing her as both primary and literal, and by extension identifying Woman as Letter, as Carnal. As the carnal flesh, the feminine is limited; but as the unlimited *translatio*, the feminine sense of language is its errancy, its extraliteral, improper senses. The feminine *translatio* inscribes the capacity of signification to transcend—or violate—proper decorum in order that multiple senses obtain. The feminine *signa*, as improper, are "commoun"—they are, in effect, promiscuous (mixed,

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[11]Karma Lochrie, *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh* (Philadelphia, 1991), p. 25.

[12]See Bloch, pp. 93-112. Shulamith Shahar notes, "In [homiletic and didactic] literature sexual chastity is considered woman's most important quality, together with obedience to her husband." *The Fourth Estate: A History of Women in the Middle Ages*, trans. Chaya Galai (New York, 1990), p. 109.

[13]See Augustine, *Contra mendacium* 10.24.

confused, indiscriminate), for they resist constraint and challenge masculine insistence upon ordered decorum.

Cresseid, then, is the errant text, the "commoun" feminine that resists the limitedness of proper masculine stability and inherently challenges the oppressive rigidity of patriarchal propriety. She recuperates the potential of multiplicity to defy decorum and hence to resist control, for the sense of plurality associated with the epistemological feminine finds thematic representation in the errancy/promiscuity alignment attributed to Cresseid by the narrator and his text. There is no *usurpata translatio* without impropriety, and accordingly the "improper" woman is shown to be the subject of masculine scorn. Thus the correspondence of the feminine to language, problematized by the inhering contradiction of theological and epistemological origins, is itself figurative, and hence metaphorized feminine representations are both unstable and destabilizing, for even as the narrator's portrait of Cresseid's feminine promiscuity might arguably reify the patriarchal order that has both created and appropriated prostitutes, the narrator's construction of Cresseid's identity ultimately transgresses his narrative control. But while the female association with "unlimitedness" is largely negative owing to the positive/negative valuation of the pairings, in medieval poetics, with its emphasis on the polysemy of "improper" signification, the unlimitedness of the feminine may be understood as representative of polysemy and hence of poetic language itself, with all its ambiguities and uncertainties and with all its capacity to facilitate the construction of meaning in its necessary errancy. The narrative's emphasis on "commoun" subjectivity and its conjunctive insistence upon sexual errancy as a trope of affronted patriarchal decorum underscore Henryson's attention to his own "feminine" poetics.

The *Testament* elucidates the interconnectedness of the feminine and the "commoun" in its treatment of Cresseid's offenses and punishments. Cresseid's overt discursive errancy—her blasphemy—corresponds to her insinuated sexual errancy; both are presented as promiscuous behaviors within patriarchal parameters, and hence both challenge decorum. Just as Cresseid's alleged sexual errancy problematically confronts a patriarchal order, so, too, her blasphemous language both participates in and destabilizes a patriarchal decorum of appropriate language, in effect both validating the existence of the patriarchally constructed metaphysical hierarchy of the gods and yet destabilizing that very hegemony by exposing its underlying ideology. Cresseid's offense of blasphemy is described as froward language, a discourse of errancy that violates boundaries of decorum:

> . . . "Lo, quhat it is," quod sche,
> "With fraward langage for to mufe and steir
> Our craibit goddis; and sa is sene on me!
> My blaspheming now haue I bocht full deir." (*ll.* 351-4)

Cresseid is actually shown to be punished in the *Testament* for blasphemy, not for her alleged betrayal of Troilus, though a connection between word and deed is implied:

> "Lo," quod Cupide, "quha will blaspheme the name
> Of his awen god, outher in word [or] deid,
> To all goddis he dois baith lak and schame,
> And suld haue bitter panis to his meid." (*ll.* 274-7)

Blasphemy, in the context of the narrative, represents Cresseid's unwillingness to accept the consequences of her so-called "fleschelie lust"; that is, her blasphemy articulates her anguish and frustration at finding herself occupying the stigmatized space of the undesired, uncoupled in a social context that recognizes the validity of the feminine only in relation to the superior masculine.[14] In addition, her sexual errancy perhaps qualifies as the "deid" to which Cupid alludes; although Cresseid identifies only her "fraward langage" as the "blaspheming [she has] bocht full deir," the "word" is perhaps prompted by her "deid," that is, her "commoun" behavior. In challenging masculine decorum—in transgressing the boundaries of proper, pious behavior—Cresseid's blaspheming rejects propriety at tremendous personal cost. Blasphemy is treated as a feminine abuse of language that corresponds to a masculine perception of a feminine abuse of sexuality, and hence the punishment is sexualized: "to all louers [Cresseid will] be abhominabill" (*l.* 308).

Sexual and discursive errancy further coincide in the text's emphasis on the interconnectedness of mutability and substitution. Cresseid, feminine *translatio*, has herself been subject to exchange; once transferred to the Greeks, she is proper to them—their property—and yet improper as well, having been purchased, in effect, usurped. Cresseid is shown to be unfixed, mutable, and the *Testament* narrator equates mutability and promiscuity. Cresseid substitutes Diomeid for Troilus and validates the exchange through a transfer of emblems—"O Diomeid, thou hes baith broche and belt / Quhilk Troylus gaue me in takning / Of his trew lufe!" (*ll.* 589-91)—but thematically, the circumstances are governed by a decorum of gender: Chaucer's Criseyde has herself been betrayed by the Trojans in their handing her over to the Greeks, but the *Testament* narrator suggests that feminine change or feminine agency is, regardless of circumstance and by definition of moral absolutes, negative or wrong. Thus Cresseid is held accountable for the exchange of which she herself is a victim, and she is accordingly scorned by men for her "brukkilnes," her daring to acclimate herself to the alien culture into which she has been sold. Mutability is

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[14]Cupid's subject is "he" who would blaspheme the name of "his awin" god; it is curious that Cupid uses the convention of a masculine pronoun sufficing for gender-neutral—which gives a false sense of inclusiveness—when he is in fact speaking of an instance of abuse perpetrated by a woman, whose punishment will be sexualized and therefore gender-specific.

equated discursively with promiscuity; to confront decorum is to privilege impropriety, to flaunt violations of propriety in a demonstration of "commoun" subjectivity.

Cresseid further substitutes the appropriated yet inappropriate language of blasphemy for the authoritative language of prayer, using a metaphor of mutability—errant change/replacement—as the core of her blasphemous outburst:

> O fals Cupide, is nane to wyte bot thow
> And thy mother, of lufe the blind goddes!
> ȝe causit me alwayis vnderstand and trow
> The seid of lufe was sawin in my face,
> And ay grew grene throw ȝour supplie and grace.
> Bot now, allace, that seid with froist is slane,
> And I fra luifferis left, and all forlane. (*ll.* 134-40)

The sexualized imagery of seeds and sowing—one of the ubiquitous medieval fertility images that corresponds to both eros and language, akin to "facound toung" and "pregnant sentence" (*ll.* 268, 270), for instance—describes Cresseid's acknowledgment of divine give-and-take. The sexual gesture of dispensation, "sawin in my face," foreshadows Troilus's sexualized gesture of charity—"And in the skirt of Cresseid doun can swak" (*l.* 522)—and emphasizes the prominent role of exchange in this text. The "seid of lufe," once freely sown and fertile, has given way to sterility—in the sense of wasted potential—and hence Cresseid is "fra luifferis left." Her blasphemy identifies change as the origin of her plaint, and it is this change for which the narrator holds her responsible; undesired change, the narrator asserts, is the fault of women, for replacement entails plurality, and plurality is negatively construed as feminine. Within the textual parameters, then, promiscuity is marked as feminine; it represents the unwillingness of the feminine to respect the proper masculine limits of decorum both sexually and discursively.

The narrative attests that mutability—ideologically inscribed as feminine—not only elicits a fear of the unknown, but provokes a concomitant frustration owing to incapability, ineffectuality, and impotence in response to a lack of control. The anxiety inhering in the text's concern with change is therefore connected to a fear of the feminine Other. (Indeed, the text of Cresseid is the "*vther* quair.") The sense of difference construed as Other adheres to ideological convention in its associations of gender: the feminine Other represents a negative alterity. Images of difference articulated as exchange or replacement may thus be read as narrative indictments of feminine Otherness. Hence the punishment described by Saturn—"I change thy mirth into melancholy, / Quhilk is the mother of all pensiuenes . . . " (*ll.* 316-7)—is articulated in a lexicon of contraries which evokes the Aristotelian/Pythagorean paradigm and suggests that change is itself punishment for change, for feminine errancy/mutability. Hence Cynthia—the Moon, representative of change—has the last word, inflict-

ing illness—"And to thy seiknes sall be na recure / Bot in dolour thy dayis to indure"(*ll.* 335-6)—and mutilation.

As a conventional and ubiquitous feminine representation, the Moon clearly suggests change in her cyclical patterns, instability, and conjunctiveness.[15] Indeed, acting "quhen Saturne past away, / Out of hir sait" (*ll.* 330-31), Cynthia's sadistic punishments effectively illustrate antifeminist conventions of feminine mutability and duplicitousness at their most negative, far more even than the narrator's description of Venus in the same nightmare[16]—"dissimulait," "prouocative," "suddanely changit and alterait," "pungitiue with wordis odious" (225-30). The leprosy itself corresponds metaphorically to Cresseid's twofold feminine crime of errancy; conventionally, leprosy is associated with moral punishment for blasphemy and for sexual wantonness and, as has been well demonstrated, the *Testament* clearly draws from conventional etiology in the implicit association of Cresseid's blasphemous or errant behavior/language with her disease. The words of Cynthia ensure that Cresseid will indeed "to all louers be abhominabill" as punishment for her twofold errancy, thereby depriving Cresseid of objectivity in relation to masculine desire in atonement for her violating masculine decorum through sexual and discursive promiscuity.

But that which is "commoun" here defies constraint and instead asserts its discursive promiscuity. Cresseid is not rendered sterile despite being "to all louers abhominabill," "fra all luifferis left," for the errant text is a fertile text, and it insists upon the capaciousness of its *signa translata*. Promiscuity is thus used by Henryson as an unstable and destabilizing erratic metaphor, and through textual occasions of sexual and discursive promiscuity, Henryson challenges the narrative/normative presuppositions of decorum. There is an ambivalence inhering in the text's treatment of promiscuity, a sense of inevitable failure in attempting to limit the feminine *signa* coupled with an anxious impulse to pursue the fantasy of umitigated subjection. Henryson's ambivalence apropos the promiscuity of discourse is manifest in the narrative's obvious misogyny, a connection that invites further scrutiny.

In the narrator's initial description of Cresseid, coinciding with Cresseid's suggested sexual errancy is narrative errancy. Each exposes its own subjectivity in relation to violations of decorum, sexual and discursive. With regard to the specific detail of Cresseid's continued sexual errancy, for example, the narrator

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[15]Chaucer's Criseyde has pledged loyalty to Troilus by Cynthia (4.1606-10). Henryson follows Chaucer in using *both* Cynthia and Diana, the former overtly identified with the moon, the latter ambiguously aligned with women. It seems appropriate given the texts' concern with mutability and gender that feminine change should be manifest in double(d) representation.

[16]The *Testament* is a poem that contains a dream episode rather than a "dream poem" proper. Cresseid's dream would not be considered a formal nightmare (*insomnium*) in medieval dream theory deriving from Macrobius.

displaces authority—"sum men sayis"—thereby insinuating that his report is gossip.[17] But the narrator's affected modesty is betrayed as his text unfolds, for while he may claim to abhor gossip, he of course perpetuates it through his own repetition. Hence his profession of concern—

> 3it neuertheles, quhat euer men deme or say
> In scornefull langage of thy brukkilnes,
> I sall excuse als far furth as I may
> Thy womanheid, thy wisdome and fairnes,
> The quhi[l]k Fortoun hes put to sic distres
> As hir pleisit, and nathing throw the gilt
> Of the—throw wickit langage to be spilt! (*ll.* 85-91)

—is undermined by the narrative that contains it. It is with stunning hypocrisy that "sum men sayis" she is "commoun" and that "men deme or say / In scornefull language of [her] brukkilness," for if indeed Cresseid is "commoun" it is because "men" have made her so: she is subject to men's sexual exploitation and, consequently, to their "scornefull langage." By recording the subject of men's language in his own narrative, the narrator implicates himself as the most egregious slanderer of all, for, participating in her condemnation and scorn, the narrator shows himself to be her violator, not her protector. Hence his claim to "excuse als far furth [he] may / [her] womanheid" demonstrates instead arrogant condescension and limitedness; the narrator's introductory remarks suggest that he is not at all prepared to "excuse" her sexual errancy even as he purports to excuse her "womanheid."[18]

Cresseid's textual reality is constructed and manipulated by a narrative voice that seems at once to desire and to detest her.[19] Indeed, the infliction of

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[17]"Men seyn—I not—that she yaf hym hire herte"; note also the irony of V, 804, where the narrator repeats the men's gossiping about Diomede's being free with his tongue. Criseyde predicts such gossip: "O, rolled shal I ben on many a tonge! / Thorughout the world my belle shal be ronge" (V, 1061-2), though she arguably misjudges gender: "wommen moost wol haten me of alle" (V, 1063), a prediction reiterated in C. S. Lewis's condescending and sexist remark that "[t]here have always been those who dislike her; and as more and more women take up the study of English literature she is likely to find ever less mercy," *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition* (Oxford, 1936), p. 182.

[18]The narrator, then, is willing to excuse her for *being* a woman, but not for *acting* like one; Cullen's argument that Henryson's purpose in writing the *Testament* is "to vindicate Cresseid's 'womanheid' by showing that her fate was caused, not by promiscuity, but by Fortune and 'wickit langage,' i.e., the blasphemy punished by leprosy" (156) overlooks the narrator's zealous interest in sexual matters. "Cresseid Excused: A Re-reading of Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid*," *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 20 (1985), 137-59.

[19]My thinking here has been informed in part by Hansen's chapter on the Wife of Bath—

punishment is described in lingering detail by the narrator, who feigns outrage even as it is his own text that obsesses over Cresseid's sexualized punishment with an incongruous relish. Further, narrative inconsistencies betray the narrator's futile striving for decorum and show decorum to be betrayed, particularly by way of the narrator's arguably misogynistic voice. Every aspect of Cresseid is condemned by the narrator, even her nightmare, which is described in erotic language as "ane extasie," and Cresseid as "[r]auischit in spreit" (*ll.* 141, 142). In using the language of erotic mystical experience the narrator would seem to be oblivious to the undesirable, unerotic particulars that he is about to describe, but he has already stated that the narrative will "report the lamentatioun / And wofull end of this lustie Cresseid" (*ll.* 68-9), thereby precluding the plausibility of curiousity at specific events as they unfold (hence the after-the-fact labels of "doolie dream" and "uglye visoun" (*l.* 344) serve to maintain narrative illusion).[20] Throughout the narrative Cresseid is subjected to control from both the characters within the story and, more important, from the narrator without; though she is presented as a reality within the parameters of the fiction, she is no more self-determined than any other literary character.

It seems that Henryson uses narrative inconsistency to challenge the illusion of narrative control; just as Cresseid is the narrator's, so the narrator is Henryson's, a textual instrument that reflexively dissects its own processes. Through the construction of narrative voice Henryson betrays the narrative's ideological underpinnings, destabilizing the effect of his own narrative method. For example, the fiction of an inclusive audience—as implied by the first person account of the framing stanzas—is necessarily betrayed by the narrator's *moralitas*, which overtly and directly targets only women:

> Now, *worthie wemen*, in this ballet schort,
> Maid for *ȝour* worschip and instructioun,
> Of cheritie, I monische and exhort,
> Ming not *ȝour* lufe with fals deceptioun.
> Beir in *ȝour* mynd this sor[e] conclusioun
> Of fair Cresseid, as I haue said befoir.
> Sen scho is deid I speik of hir no moir. (*ll.* 610-16, my emphasis)

"The Wife of Bath and the Mark of Adam"—which interrogates the majority view of the Wife as "agent, speaker, and, most recently, reader" (26); Hansen argues that while poet and character are similar in their telling of stories, the analogy breaks down because "the Wife's performance demonstrates that Chaucer's Woman . . . disarm[s] the very threat of women's silence and unrepresentability that the poet acknowledges, appropriates, and strategically counters" (39). *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender* (Berkeley, 1992).

[20]See Alicia K. Nitecki, "'Fenȝeit of the New': Authority in *The Testament of Cresseid*," in *Journal of Narrative Technique*, 15 (1985), 120-32.

While the *Troilus* narrator addresses his final remarks to an overtly gendered and inclusive audience: "O yonge, fresshe folkes, he or she"[21] the *Testament* narrator's platitudinous instruction that only women need use Cresseid's "commoun" example as motivation to observe patriarchal dictates of behavior is problematic. Despite his self-deprecating identification of his text as "ballet schort," the narrator's patronizing identifications of his audience as "worthie wemen" and Cresseid as "fair Cresseid"—even as he condemns feminine sexuality—divert attention away from Cresseid and back to her critic. Indeed, as the narrator purports to assert more and more control over the text of Cresseid, he reveals further the text's refusal to submit to such constraint. The narrator's pretense of respect and closure in the final line likewise calls attention to his inevitable failure, both in its transparent insincerity and in the *reductio ad absurdum* of the deceased body of Woman; the dead Cresseid is not a proper subject of narrative, the narrator insists (though obviously the narrator knows of her death before recounting the text). The narrator shows Cresseid ventriloquizing this misogynistic narrative voice in her articulation of commonplaces: "O ladyis fair of Troy and Greece, attend / My miserie . . . And in ȝour mynd ane mirrour mak of me" (*ll.* 452-3, 457). Cresseid's lines here are similar in their platitudinous didacticism to the narrator's own *moralitas*, thereby making her an apparent conspirator in her own misogynistic victimization, and she ostensibly addresses a wholly female audience as well, thereby exposing her own "commoun" subjectivity. But as a textual construct, existing as a reality only within the parameters of an idiosyncratic narrative, Cresseid's words are not only mediated by the narrative voice but produced by it as well. Cresseid and the narrator share a "commoun" voice. As such she seems to lose her "own" voice as the narrative progresses, becoming more and more coincidental with the sanctimonious narrative voice and the limiting postures expressed therein.

For example, Cresseid's absurd descriptions of herself and Troilus after the implausible non-recognition scene work in tandem with the narrative commentary to create the illusion of a redeemed character, who has come to appreciate the narrator's sense of decorum in her apparent privileging of misogynistic fantasy:

> For lufe of me thow keipt continence,
> Honest and chaist in conuersatioun.
> Of all wemen protectour and defence
> Thou was, and helpit thair opinioun;
> My mynd in fleschelie foull affectioun

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[21]Geoffrey Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde* (V, 1835) in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd edn. (Boston, 1987), p. 584. Subsequent reference will be to this edition; book and line number will be given in the text.

> Was inclynit to lustis lecherous:
> Fy, fals Cresseid; O trew knicht Troylus! (*ll.* 554-60)

Indeed Cresseid seems to advocate the repression of the feminine, to deny the feminine both body and voice; her words underscore the coincidence of the sexual and discursive—"Honest and chaist in conuersation"—but privilege a masculine decorum in their desire for feminine chastity (celibacy and silence). These virtues are attributed to Troilus by Cresseid—coincidental with the narrative voice—in order to enhance the narrative's juxtaposition of Good Troilus, Bad Cresseid; Troilus represents all that is masculine and good, Cresseid all that is feminine and bad. The paradigmatic simplicity of the distinction corroborates the text's earlier evocations of antifeminist binary epistemology, and underscores Cresseid's own sexual and discursive errancies, her promiscuous affronts to patriarchal decorum. Otherwise one must wonder at the logic of Cresseid's ascribing to Troilus the label "[o]f all wemen protectour," for *this* is Cresseid's tragedy—Troilus's failure becomes her blame, and she is scorned for his own ineffectuality. Hence Troilus reiterates this misogynistic conspiracy most egregiously in the superscription—"Lo, fair ladyis . . ." (*l.* 607)—which follows his utterly selfish deflection of blame: "Scho was vntrew and wo is me thairfoir" (*l.* 602).

Returning full circle to the narrator's introduction of the character and her "womanheid," Cresseid's "own" testament echoes the narrator's misogynistic discourse in its disdain for the feminine flesh:

> Heir I beteiche my corps and carioun
> With wormis and with taidis to be rent;
> My cop and clapper and myne ornament,
> And all my gold the lipper folk sall haue
> Quhen I am deid, to burie me in graue. (*ll.* 577-81)

Images of filth, debasement, degradation, and passivity are again associated with the feminine as flesh; her body is to be "rent" by "wormis and with taidis," corrupted and violated. The odious sexual metaphor reiterates Cresseid's having been corrupted and violated by men as well; she has been an object of their lust and, accordingly, is a subject of their scorn. Thus while Cresseid's body and language die together—"And with that word scho swelt" (*l.* 591)—the narrative continues; Cresseid's "own" voice is silenced not by death, but by a narrative line that excludes her even as it purports to tell her story. Her testament serves to corroborate a distorted history, for her perceived transgressions are validated by language that vivifies them; her history, in effect, becomes "commoun," taking on a life distinct from the woman who is supposed to have occasioned it.

But there is perhaps a liberating irony in her conclusion, for although Cresseid has no voice of her own, she is depicted as articulating her own wishes via her own testament, and thus the narrative, in effect, gives her the illusion of

voice. The broken and dejected Cresseid, then, wills her soul to a place wholly of women—"My spreit I leif to Diane quhair scho dwellis / To walk with hir in waist woddis and wellis" (*ll.* 587-8)—and thus her intended final dwelling place is "waist," uninhabited by "men [who] sayis . . . commoun," and those who "deme or say / In scornefull langage of [her] brukkilness." (77, 85-86)[22] Cresseid's final act of defiance provides the text with a definitive final moment of discursive promiscuity. Cresseid, the embodiment of engendered *translatio*, not only resists narrative constraint but foregrounds that very resistance, thereby insisting upon the value of the (much maligned) feminine in textual poetics and reinforcing Henryson's insistence that the more one strives to control and to purify language through decorum, the more language will foreground its own resistance to that control and show itself to be promiscuous. Throughout the *Testament* the narrator is exposed as attempting to restrict, reduce, and repress the feminine through conventional tropes of misogyny. He rejects the body of the feminine, yet desires it; he resents his own dependency, and punishes the feminine because his desire cannot be satisfied without her. The narrator's treatment of feminine sexuality in the text corresponds to Henryson's treatment of language; through the narrator, Henryson argues that decorum cannot purify language, that—like Cresseid (the feminine text)—discourse is indeed "commoun."

Metatextual attention to such difference informs the *Testament*'s relationship to Chaucer's *Troilus*. Henryson's "vther quair" is not a sequel but a supplement, an overlapping version of the story's conclusion which presupposes familiarity with the Chaucerian text ("me neidis nocht reheirs" [*l.* 57]). As such, the *Testament* corresponds—or speaks—to the *Troilus*; indeed, a theme of correspondence is framed by the opening lines: "Ane doolie sessoun to ane cairfull dyte / Suld correspond and be equiualent" (*ll.* 1-2), which not only evoke a decorum of association but also foreground the *Testament* as a text both compared and comparing, a text not only of "double sorwes" but of *doubled*—or paired—sorrows. The *Testament* further associates itself with Chaucer through overt comparison:

> Quha wait gif all that Chauceir wrait was trew?
> Nor I wait nocht gif this narratioun
> Be authoreist, or fenȝit of the new
> Be sum poeit, throw his inuentioun
> Maid to report the lamentatioun . . . (*ll.* 64-68)

In effect the *Testament* competes with the conclusion of the *Troilus*, fulfilling in part the *Troilus* narrator's naive fear that the *Troilus* will itself be corrupted by

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[22]I am not suggesting that the *Testament* advocates a feminist utopia, but it is, I believe, fitting that a woman who has been so abused by men would seek solace in a place uninhabited by them.

feminine instrumentality, subject to mutability ("So preye I god that none myswrite the" [V, 1795]). Henryson's handling of the Troilus/Cresseid story demonstrates, through narrative manipulation, the necessary errancy of narrative and text, which will necessarily transgress its own parameters of decorum, and will, in effect, become promiscuous. Indeed, Henryson's appropriation of Chaucer's text demonstrates Henryson's awareness of literary promiscuity; he has made the *Troilus* "commoun," subject and subjective.

Disfigurement operates for Henryson as a destabilizing metaphor of narrative method, a self-referential critique of literary promiscuity manifest in representations of behavior and decorum. And through its images of defacement and infliction, the *Testament* recovers the cruelty and suffering of human existence largely absent from Chaucer's romance. Chaucer's *Troilus* does contain depictions of fear, disappointment, and anguish, and, as Louise Fradenburg has recently demonstrated, the *Troilus* "both participates in, and analyzes, cultural practices of violence in the later fourteenth century."[23] But the *Troilus* privileges the sentiment and nostalgia of romance, and it is primarily through this kind of attention that the *Troilus* articulates its own metatextuality, its awareness of itself as poetry and romance, as a critique of the language of poetry and romance. The *Testament* does not wholly reject the sentimentality of Chaucer's romance, but complicates it, looking at the world of romance with ambivalence and suspicion—"with ane eye lauch, and with the vther weip" (*l.* 231).

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[23]Louise Olga Fradenburg, "'Our owen wo to drynke': Loss, Gender and Chivalry in *Troilus and Criseyde*," in *Chaucer's Troilus and Criseyde "Subgit to alle poesye": Essays in Criticism*, ed. R. A. Shoaf and Catherine S. Cox (Binghamton, NY, 1992), p. 88.