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C. W. JENTOFT

Henryson as Authentic "Chaucerian":
Narrator, Character, and Courtly Love in
The Testament of Cresseid

Most of those who have recently considered the relationship between Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* and Robert Henryson's *The Testament of Cresseid* have wisely gone beyond the obvious similarities between the two poems to point out contrasts which weaken the validity of the "Scottish Chaucerian" label traditionally attached to Henryson.¹ However, their desire to demonstrate differences has resulted in its own kind of misinterpretation, for it ignores an essential affinity of spirit between the *Troilus* and *The Testament* which itself transcends the superficial resemblances. On one level, of course, Henryson's poem is an extended epilogue to Chaucer's, documenting the punishment of the faithless heroine by Diomedes's desertion and her relegation to the "court common," following that with further punishment for her sacrilegious curse on Venus and Cupid by leprosy, which so disfigures her that Troilus (whom Henryson has brought back down to earth) fails to recognize her, and finally recording her pathetic, inevitable death.² An enlightening, if incidental, example of the more intimate connection between the two poems can be observed in Henryson's treatment of Criseyde's prophetic lament near the end of the *Troilus*, "O, rolled shal I ben on many a tonge! / Throughout the world my bell shal be ronge!"³ Henryson clearly has these lines in mind when he mentions two different bells in his poem: Cupid's "silver bell" (1.44), which he used to

1. Among the studies which, in varying degrees, emphasize the contrast are the following: Marshall Stearns, *Robert Henryson* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1949); Edwin Muir, "Robert Henryson," *Essays in Literature and Society* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1949), Ch. 1; Kurt Wittig, *The Scottish Tradition in Literature* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1958); and James Kinsley, *Scottish Poetry: A Critical Survey* (London: Cassell, 1955).

2. My text is *Robert Henryson, Poems*, ed. Charles Elliot (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1963); all references to *The Testament* will be taken from this edition and will be cited by line number in the text.

3. V, 1061-62; my text for the *Troilus* is *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. F. N. Robinson, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957); all references to the poem will be taken from this edition and will be cited by book and line number in the text.

summon the planets together for Cresseid's blasphemy trial, and Cresseid's own "clapper" (1.343), which, with the begging cup, was part of the leper's paraphernalia. To read Criseyde's prophecy with the events of the later poem in mind is to impose subtle irony upon it; and to understand the irony is to begin to understand the extent of Henryson's familiarity with the *Troilus*.

More significant than particular links such as the echo of Criseyde's bell in *The Testament* is the consistent similarity between the artistic poses of Chaucer and Henryson as narrators. In the prologue to Book II of the *Troilus*, Chaucer calls upon Clio, the muse of history, for inspiration, with the obvious purpose of objectifying his own part in his story; he goes further in this attempt by ascribing the "facts" of the story itself to the mysterious "Latyn" from whence it came, and thus is able to abdicate responsibility for them: "Disblameth me, if any word be lame, / For as myn auctour seyde, so sey I" (II, 17-18). The fact that Henryson adopts the ironically detached point of view that is, perhaps, more distantly "Chaucerian" than anything else in Chaucer suggests his debt: "To break my sleip" after reading Chaucer's poem, he says,

ane-uther quair I tuik,
In quilk I fand the fatal destenie
Of fair Cresseid, that endit wretchitlie.

(ll. 61-63)

By establishing the existence of their mythical "sources," both authors are able to use them later to avoid condemning their heroine with their own pens. Chaucer can say, "Men seyn — I not — that she yaf hym [Diomedé] hire harte" (V, 1050), and Henryson can report that "sum men sayis [scho walkit] into the court commoun" (1.77).

Henryson's portrait of his narrator also shows that he had learned from Chaucer the art of balancing the ironic detachment of his point of view with equally ironic glimpses at the personality of the storyteller himself. The narrator of *The Testament* says in his prologue that he wanted to pray to Venus, that she would "make grene" his "faidit hart of lufe" to aid him in telling his story, but he is discouraged from doing so because it was too cold, and also because

Thocht lufe be hait, yit in ane man of age
It kendillis nocht sa sone as in youtheid,
Of quhome the blude is flowing in ane rage.

(ll. 29-31)

Marshall Stearns suggests that in this passage "Henryson seems to be referring, with some humorous self-disparagement, to his own difficulties

with love at an advanced age,"⁴ an interpretation which is sensitive to the obvious humor of the passage but which fails to see the source of the humor: the narrator of *The Testament* is as authentic a comic character as Polonius or Touchstone; seeing him as Henryson himself is the same as equating with Chaucer the naive bumpkin who narrates the General Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales* and bores his fellow-pilgrims with the absurd "Tale of Sir Thopas." Henryson's narrator is so completely Chaucerian, in fact, that it is difficult to avoid identifying him with the comic narrator of the *Troilus*, who also doubts his ability to tell a story about love:

For I, that God of Loves servantz serve,
Ne dar to Love, for myn unliklynesse,
Preyen for speed, al sholde I therfore sterve,
So fer am I from his help in derknesse.

(I, 15-18)

One of the more intriguing qualities in Chaucer's poetry is the ambivalence which results from the ironic distance between poet and narrator. I suggest that Henryson was sufficiently sensitive to Chaucer's delicate wit to create the same irony in his poem. The similarity helps to explain, I should think, the readiness of sixteenth-century readers to ascribe the poem to Chaucer himself;⁵ they might have done so even if Henryson had not claimed that his poem itself was taken from "ane quair . . . / Writtin be worthie Chaucer glorious" (ll. 40-41).

The degree to which the Scottish poem followed its progenitor (model) is clearly shown in its characters as well. Henryson's portraits of Diomeid and Troilus are perfectly consistent with Chaucer's. Diomeid is the same rake who in Chaucer ascribes to the proverb, "He is a fool that wole foryete hymselfe" (V, 98), the same "sodeyn Diomede" who does exactly what everyone who has read Chaucer's poem expects him to do:

Quhen Diomeid had all his apperyte,
And mair, fulfillit of this fair ladie,
Upon ane-uther he set his haill delyte
And send to hir ane lybell of repudie,
And hir excludit fra his companie.

(II, 71-75)

4. *Robert Henryson*, p. 65; further references to Stearns will appear in the text by page number.

5. For a study of the references to, and versions of, the *Troilus* story in the sixteenth century, see Hyder E. Rollins, "The Troilus-Cressida Story from Chaucer to Shakespeare," *PMLA*, XXXII (1917), 383-429.

The qualities of Troilus are also those we came to know well in Chaucer: "trew" (ll. 546, 553), "nobill" (ll. 132, 495), "worthi" (l. 485), "gentill and fre" (l. 536). And he behaves as nobly toward Cresseid the leper as he did toward Criseyde the beautiful widow of Troy.

In one respect, Henryson's portrayal of Calchas is the only real change he makes in his characters. He becomes less despicable, certainly, than Chaucer's "calkulynge" fair-weather father and citizen. When Cresseid comes to him after being deserted by Diomeid, for example, he comforts her (ll. 103-5); and when she comes to him later as a leper, "wringand his hands oftymes he said: allace / That he had levit to se that wofull hour!" (ll. 374-75). However, Henryson does not go so far from Chaucer as to make the father "mutually sympathetic" with the daughter, as Stearns suggests (p. 50); there is, after all, a hint of self-pity in his sorrow at having seen "that wofull hour," and he did send Cresseid (however reluctantly) to the leper-colony. Furthermore, the fact that he is a priest of Venus rather than Apollo, as he had been in Chaucer, almost suggests an oblique responsibility on his part for his daughter's punishment by the goddess that he serves. If this is valid reasoning, then the change draws him closer to the Calchas of the *Troilus*, who was indirectly to blame for her misfortunes in that story.

But there is another side to the Calchas of *The Testament* as well: he takes the place of Pandarus in the dramatic framework of the poem. It is obvious that the need for Pandarus as a significant actor in Chaucer's poem vanished once Troilus and Criseyde separated. After Troilus' final lament at the inescapable fact that Criseyde was gone forever,

This Pandarus, that al thise thinges herde,
And wiste wel he seyde a soth of this,
He nought a word ayen to hym answerde.

He is speechless ("As stille as ston; a word ne kowde he say" [V, 1723-25, 1729]) because there is nothing for him to do, no more "pandering," as it were. With his purpose lost, he disappears from the poem. Henryson certainly could have brought him back had he desired (he did not hesitate to bring Troilus back from the eighth sphere), but he understood that Pandarus had no more function as a go-between, again demonstrating his sensitivity to Chaucer's characters. However, there was one function of Pandarus which was still needed: his role as a vehicle for comic relief, reason, and common sense in the romance. Henryson, obviously recognizing this need, simply transfers that role to Calchas. Thus the delightful practicality voiced by Pandarus in Chaucer's poem appears again in Henryson's, as, for example, in the maid's message from

Calchas to his daughter while Cresseid stood staring at her leprous face in the mirror:

"Madame, your father bids you cum in hy;
He hes mervell sa lang an grouf ye ly,
And sayis your prayers bene to lang sumdeill,
The goddis wait all your intent full weill."

(ll. 361-64)

The light blasphemy of the practical Calchas removes, for a moment, the horror of Cresseid's recognition of her punishment. Equally reasonable — and Pandarus-like — is his advice to his daughter after Diomeid's desertion of her: "'Douchter, weip thow not thairfoir; / Peraventure all cummis for the best'" (ll. 103-4), which is almost a repetition of Pandarus' advice to the deserted Troilus: "'And forthi put thyn herte a while in reste, / And hold thi purpos, for it is the beste'" (IV, 1119-20). The good-natured, rationalizing Pandarus was more than a simple instrument of mediation in Chaucer's story, and Henryson recognizes that fact so clearly that he finds it necessary to replace him.

The question of whether or not Criseyde is the main character in Chaucer's poem is perhaps too speculative, but if she is not, she is certainly the most complex and interesting. She has the makings of a true tragic heroine (complete with flaw: "slydyng of corage"), and Chaucer's digression in Book V provides a hint, perhaps, of his own bias: in presenting formal portraits of the three participants in the love-triangle, he gives his heroine three stanzas to Diomedes' one and Troilus' two (ll. 799-840). The character of Criseyde in Chaucer's poem, then, provides the very *raison d'être* for Henryson's: *The Testament of Cresseid* is the *dénouement* in the tragic history of the woman Henryson considered, perhaps correctly, to be the major figure in the *Troilus*. And in bringing her story to its conclusion, he carefully preserves the qualities given her by Chaucer. Stearns is correct in saying that Henryson's picture is simpler than Chaucer's (p. 52), but it is necessary to understand that the simplification includes a change not in character but in situation: Cresseid is more acted upon than acting; the poem is about her punishment, not the crime that brought on the punishment, and not the personal flaw[s] that caused the crime. Furthermore, when she does act, something of her Chaucerian character reappears: her response to her initial punishment (desertion and life in the "court commoun") is not the expected plea but a magnificent, almost heroic curse upon the gods. It is this act which causes the more cruel punishment; it is also this act which makes Henryson's poem more than an epilogue to Chaucer's. At the same time, however, it recovers

the complexity of Chaucer's *Criseyde*, thus providing another parallel to the earlier poem.

Henryson also shares Chaucer's sympathy for his heroine. Nowhere is the similarity between the two narrators more evident than in their attempts to avoid condemnation of *Criseyde-Cresseid* for her errors. Chaucer refuses to judge her for running off with Diomedes, and suggests to his readers that "Hire name, alas! is punysshed so wide, / That for hir gilt it oughte ynough suffise" (V, 1095-96); as for himself, he says, "I wolde excuse hire yet for routhe" (V, 1099). Henryson goes one step beyond pity, laying the whole blame at the feet of fickle fate:

Yit nevertheles, quatever men deme or say
 In scornfull langage of thy brukkilness,
 I sall excuse, als far furth as I may,
 Thy womanheid, thy wisdome and fairnes —
 The quhilk Fortoun hes put to sic distress
 As hir plesit, and nothing throw the gilt
 Of the, throw wicked langage to be split.

(ll. 85-91)

This complete exoneration of *Cresseid* marks what Edwin Muir calls the keynote to the whole poem;⁶ *The Testament's* theme is judgement, yet sympathy is demanded of the reader not only from Henryson's intrusions, but from the whole narrative: in the recognition scene, where *Troilus* is struck by *Cresseid's* horrible eyes and feels that he knows her; in *Cresseid's* realization upon awakening from her dream that she is truly a leper ("my blaspheming now have I bocht full deir; / All eirdlie joy and mirth I set areir" [ll. 354-55]); in the picture of the former "flour of . . . lufe in Troy" sitting in "an dark corner of the [spittaill] hous alone" (l. 405); in her sardonic *ubi sunt* Complaint, in which she asks herself, "Quhair is thy chalmer wantounlie besene . . . Quhair is thy garding with thir greissis gay?" (ll. 416, 425); in her warning to women to "exempill mak of me in your memour" (l. 465); in her condemnation of herself after her encounter with *Troilus* (l. 546); and finally, in the epitaph on her tombstone:

Lo, fair ladyis! *Cresseid* of Troyis toun,
 Sumtyme countit the flour of womanheid,
 Under this stone, lait lipper, lysis deid,

which, irony of ironies, is written in gold (ll. 607-9). It is correct, I think, that Henryson, in subjecting *Cresseid* to more cruel misfortunes than any other writer, succeeded in making the total effect of his poem the loudest argument in her defence, and suggests that the sixteenth-

6. *Essays in Literature and Society*, pp. 18, 19.

century view which used "Cresseid's kind" as a euphemism for "harlot"⁷ was the result of later misinterpretations of Henryson, not of Henryson's misinterpretation of Chaucer.

The influence of Chaucer on Henryson is, then, demonstrated in both the similarity between their narrative poses and in the common qualities of their characters. But the most convincing argument for my belief that *The Testament* sustains the Chaucerian spirit lies in the role of *amour courtois* in the poem. The arguments over the significance of the tradition to the *Troilus* have evolved into a debate between those who contend that Christian morality dominates the poem and those who consider the courtly code the most important influence.⁸ The latter is the more persuasive contention, I believe, particularly when one considers the poet's reluctance to blame Criseyde and the difficulty of explaining why a Christian poet would take it upon himself to excuse a religious transgression. Criseyde's sin is courtly, not Christian. The problem seems to be more complex, however, for critics of *The Testament* — even for those who apparently see courtly morality operating in Chaucer's poem. Stearns, for instance, believes that "the key to Henryson's variations upon Chaucer's characterizations . . . seems to be the Scot's inability or refusal to adopt the elements of courtly morality in Chaucer" (p. 63). And T. F. Henderson, who calls *The Testament* "an imperfect amalgam of Chaucer and Henryson," speaks of "the very strenuousness of [*The Testament's*] morality,"⁹ a view repeated by James Kinsley, who refers to Henryson as "a practical moralist with a strongly legal bent", and calls the poem "a corrective sequel to Chaucer's *Troilus*."¹⁰ We are to believe from this that *The Testament* is an exemplum illustrating the wages of lust, that Cresseid is punished because she committed one of the Seven Deadly Sins. This is simply not so. Her sin is explicitly dramatized in her "prayer" to Venus and Cupid; in the "oratory," or temple, of her father, who is, after all, a priest of Venus, not Catholic God, she complains to the god

7. Rollins, p. 423.

8. Several important studies on the subject are the following: Alexander Denomy, "The Two Moralities of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*," *Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada*, Vol. XLIV, Ser. III, sec. 2 (June, 1950), pp. 35-46; D. W. Robertson, "The Subject of the *De amore* of Andreas Capellanus," *MP*, L (1952-53), 145-61; James Lyndon Shanley, "The *Troilus* and Christian Love," *ELH*, VI (1939), 271-81; and Theodore Silverstein, "Andreas, Plato, and the Arabs: Remarks on Some Recent Accounts of Courtly Love," *MP*, XLVII (1949-50), 117-26.

9. Henderson (p. 124) refers to the poem's "grimly forbidding atmosphere, and adds, "a strenuous morality has extruded not merely adequate emotional pathos, but even true poetic art; and apart from the repulsiveness little remains but wearisome didactic prosing."

10. *Scottish Poetry: A Critical Survey*, p. 21.

and goddess of love in language explicitly religious: "Allace that ever I maid you sacrifice" (l. 126), after which she chastizes them for breaking their "devine responsaill" to make her the "flour of luif in Troy" (ll. 127-28), and calls Cupid "fals" and Venus blind. Her sin is clearly blasphemy against the deities of love, which is exactly what Cupid calls it during the trial before the planets (l. 275).

Courtly morality is also the criterion for her several punishments. The first of them is harlotry, a result of Diomeid's fickleness — and thus indirectly a result of her desertion of Troilus, which was a violation of the commandments of courtly love. After she becomes a leper and has had her encounter with Troilus, she suffers the punishment of the recognition of her crimes; she is overcome with grief at her mistreatment of Troilus, and in her lament repeats, at the end of three consecutive stanzas, the refrain "fals Cresseid and trew knicht Troilus!" (ll. 546, 553, 560), which epitomizes her recognition of both her own sins and Troilus' courtly sainthood. The scene establishes that this particular punishment is also a result of her *courtly* sin against Troilus. It is a scene of expiation; indeed, the viciousness with which she attacks herself amounts to verbal flagellation, and is suspiciously similar to an act of public contrition. But the very fact that she is repentant at this point presupposes Christian forgiveness; Cresseid has performed the act of contrition, and thus the reader greets her death, which follows soon after, with the suspicion that she has, in specifically religious terms, gained salvation. If we are to believe with Stearns that Henryson's morality in the poem is orthodox rather than courtly, we must consign her to Hell, for she has not asked forgiveness of the Christian God. If, as I believe, we are not here witnessing a devout schoolmaster's rigid morality, but a crime against the laws of courtly love and the offender's punishment for it, then Cresseid's contrition is sufficient to save her. (It is illuminating to note that Henryson is the "scholemaister of Dunfermeling" in the *Fables* also, but it is difficult to take the *moralitas* at the end of each tale very seriously immediately after observing the very warm, Chaucerian delight he takes with his animal-characters.)

The specific punishment which Cresseid suffers for her blasphemy is the leprosy itself. It is this punishment which is a result of her one sin in Henryson's poem, and it is that sin from which there is no release: contrition can ease the pain of a tormented soul, but not of a tormented body. While leprosy can be considered a punishment for religious sin, it is more reasonable here, I think, to separate impurity of body from impurity of soul; poor Lazarus, after all, came to rest in Abraham's bosom; and in Paul Claudel's *L'Annonce faite à Marie*, the diseased Violaine

can respond to the question, "Qui aimerait une lepreuse?" by making the essential distinction: "Mon coeur est pur! (III, iii). No such distinction can be made in *The Testament*; Cresseid's leprosy is tragic because it is punishment not for the Christian sins of Pride and Anger, as suggested by Charles Elliot,¹¹ but for Pride and Anger directed blasphemously against Venus and Cupid, the divine arbiters of a different moral system. And the tragic irony which informs the poem is dependent upon two well-established traditions in courtly-love literature, the incomparable beauty of the lady and the necessity of secrecy to preserve her reputation. Poetic justice is served in the poem because the punishment fits the crime: leprosy destroys Cresseid's beauty, and the fact that "sum knew her weill" at the lazer-house (l. 393) ruins her reputation.

One last point of Stearns' which must be dealt with is his explanation for the contention that Henryson's poem is not based on courtly morality: "much of the complex ritual of courtly love had apparently fallen of its own irrelevant and unintelligible weight in Henryson's time" (p. 65). I counter this with Johan Huizinga's statement that the conventions and formalities of courtly love were far from dead in the fifteenth century — indeed, that "the solemn or graceful game of the faithful knight or the amorous shepherd, the fine imagery of the courtly allegories . . . never lost their charm nor their moral value."¹² If, then, we can assume that courtly morality was part of Henryson's age as well as Chaucer's, we have even less reason to read *The Testament of Cresseid* as a Christian exemplum. In fact, the sticky problem that we encounter when trying to square Chaucer's Christian epilogue with his courtly romance-tragedy need not concern us when we come to Henryson's one-stanza sermon at the end of his poem: while Chaucer warns the "yonge, fresshe folkes" to leave the vanity of young love for the higher love of God, Henryson simply advises "worthie wemen" against "fals deceptioun."

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11. *Robert Henryson: Poems*, p. xiii.

12. *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (London: E. Arnold & Co., 1924), p. 114.