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William A. Quinn

Henryson's "ballet schort":
A Virgin Reading of *The Testament of Cresseid*

In the final stanza of *The Testament of Cresseid*, Robert Henryson dedicates "this ballet schort" to "worthie wemen."¹ Not surprisingly, little interpretive significance has been attributed to these two almost after-the-fact remarks made in the *Testament* about the *Testament*. Henryson's dedicatory comments do document, however, his awareness of the *Testament* as a text to be read in a specific context. As a "ballet schort," *The Testament of Cresseid* was explicitly conceived to be a set of documents compiled and presented in a very formal and deliberate fashion for a very specific readership. A *compilatio*, as distinguished from a mere *collectio*, offers "an orderly arrangement of materials."² Clarifying Henryson's conception of the *Testament* as a compilation

¹*The Poems of Robert Henryson*, ed. Denton Fox (Oxford, 1981), line 610. Further references to Henryson will be from this edition and will be cited by line number in the text. Fox glosses "ballet" simply as "song, poem." In the commentary he notes (p. 383, l. 610) "In this context it is a deprecatory term."

²A. J. Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship*, 2nd edn. (Philadelphia, 1988), p. 97. Minnis offers an extended consideration of "Chaucer's Role as Lewd Compiler" (pp. 190-210). As a rhetorical pose, assuming the role of mere compositor allows the author to disavow responsibility for his readers' responses to the received *materia* (pp. 201-2). In the *Oxford Guides to Chaucer: The Shorter Poems* (Oxford, 1995), A. J. Minnis attributes a conventional detachment to Chaucer as *compiler* of the *Legend of Good Women* (pp. 399-411).

and his expectations regarding its first readers proves to be, therefore, essential to our understanding of its tone, theme and unity. It is imperative to read Henryson's libeling of Cresseid in terms of his chirographic self-consciousness regarding the *Testament* itself as a *libellus* because the presumptive misogyny of Henryson's masterpiece—whatever its formal merits—increasingly offends our current conception of its common readers.

After centuries of rebuking false Cresseid, a dominant concern among critics has been to generate a more ameliorative interpretation of the *Testament of Cresseid* so that Henryson can be said to share some of Chaucer's professed sympathy for Criseyde. Readers used to be able to maintain without apology that "Henryson goes beyond compassion to respect [for Cresseid]; he shows his heroine moving from self-pity to responsibility."³ But Henryson, in the process of displaying the transformation of "fair Cresseid, the flour and A per se/ Of Troy and Grece" (*ll.* 78-9) into a more pathetic victim of Amor, simultaneously makes the image of her inherited from *Troilus and Criseyde* far more contemptible. As a reader of *Chaucer*, Robert Henryson shared with this English contemporaries what Seth Lerer has recently described as the "pre-humanist manuscript culture that permits a certain fluidity among the author, scribe, and reader.... In contrast with the fixity of printed books, the medieval manuscript could circulate in constant stages of rescription."⁴ But the worthy women of Scotland whom Henryson addressed as a particular coterie of readers of both *Troilus and Criseyde* and the *Testament* comprise a quite different type of target audience than those who seem to comprise the normative readers of Chaucer in England.

At the *Testament's* conclusion, Henryson may have called his text a "ballet" simply because of its verse form. By acknowledging the shortness of the *Testament*, Henryson also confesses that he conceived this sequel to be a relatively diminished thing—a text much less ambitious and ambiguous, not to mention shorter than Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*. But Henryson's presentation of the *Testament* as an addendum to Chaucer's text anticipates a continuous reading sequence "as if they were unified work."⁵ Henryson's designation of the *Testament* as a "ballet," his squire-text to *Troilus and Criseyde*, also plays against the more courtly connotations of the "balade" pre-

³C. David Benson, "Critic and Poet: What Lydgate and Henryson did to Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*," *Modern Language Quarterly*, 53 (1992), 40.

⁴Seth Lerer, *Chaucer and His Readers* (Princeton, 1993), p. 12.

⁵Melvin Storm, "The Intertextual Cresseida: Chaucer's Henryson or Henryson's Chaucer?" *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 28 (1993), 108.

sented in Chaucer's own palinode in *The Legend of Good Women*.⁶ The conspicuous change in verse form that sets off Cresseid's lamentation in the *Testament* (ll. 407-69) likewise mirrors Chaucer's "balade."

As a sort of preface to the *Testament*, Henryson parrots the apology that Chaucer made near the end of his *Troilus*:

I haue pietie thow suld fall sic mischance!
 3it neuertheles, quhat ever men deme or say
 In scornfull langage of thy brukkilnes,
 I sall excuse als far furth as I may
 Thy womanheid, thy wisdom and fairnes,
 The quhilk fortoun hes put to sic distres
 As hir pleisit, and nathing throw the gilt
 Of the—throw wikkit langage to be spilt! (ll. 84-91).

Yet, nevertheless, the plot of the *Testament* proves to be heroically unforgiving. To Henryson, "pietie" could signify both "pity" and "piety," and the pun permits a response of either fuzzy compassion or righteous indignation to Cresseid's fragility.

It is paradoxically the very brevity and restricted focus of the *Testament* that often makes Henryson seem so much more hostile towards Cresseid than Chaucer had been towards Criseyde. Whereas Chaucer had finally renounced the "brotelnesse" of all the world (*T&C*, V, l. 1832), Henryson denounces only one woman's "brukkilnes." And if Henryson wrote primarily for male readers—whether Scottish nobility, England's New Men, medieval clerics or modern critics—then the *Testament* can still be read, as it long has been, as an inherently misogynist exemplum because hostile readers generate hostile readings. Conversely, sympathetic readers are tempted to gloss the narrative facts.

Because Robert Henryson was a cleric, all his compositions are vulnerable to allegorical interpretation. Several apologists have sought to justify the *Testament*'s more punitive portrait of Cresseid by deliteralizing Henryson's characterization and then reading her as a personification of the wayward human will. Such allegoresis may redeem the text from charges of misogyny, but such a reading through the surface of Henryson's poem also generates some remarkably heartless responses to the plot. Any reading of the text that defines Cresseid solely as an abstraction "misses," as John MacQueen observed, "the

⁶*The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd edn., ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston, 1987), F-Prologue, ll. 249-69. Further references to Chaucer will be from this edition and will be cited by line number in the text.

fullness of human reference" and the "immediacy" of Henryson's characterization.⁷

The intermittent, at times brutally laconic, at times strangely digressive, commentary of the narrator of the *Testament* precludes a completely abstract interpretation of Cresseid's personal degradation. There is, for example, no satisfactory way to erase the judgmental tone of Henryson's apostrophe:

how was thow fortunait,
To change in filth all thy feminitie,
And be with fleschelic lust sa maculait,
And go amang the Greikis air and lait,
Sa giglotlike takand thy foull plesance! (ll. 79-83).

Though surely invested with allegorical significance, the text of the *Testament* does not present Cresseid as if she were just another translation of Eurydice. The *Testament*, by virtue of Henryson's very ambivalence regarding his quasi-anchorite Cresseid as a heroine-victim, seems not so fully philosophical, nor completely satirical, not damning nor adequately sympathetic towards Cresseid; Critical discourse on the *Testament* similarly works through a polarity of judgment and sympathy,"⁸ according to Fradenburg.

An absolutely allegorized (i.e., degendered) interpretation of Cresseid *per se* risks dismissing both feminist objections and most modern interest in the poem at once. The extra-fictional direct address to worthy women in the *Testament*'s final stanza resists such neutering, however. To comprehend the tonality of the *Testament*, it is crucial to conceive Henryson's initial anticipation of a rather restricted audience of contemporary female readers. The text thus anticipates (or fabricates) an audience quite distinguishable from "we" the readers of *Orpheus and Eurydice* (ll. 628-33) with whom Henryson prays.

A widespread, but largely undocumented, assumption identifies the first female readers of the *Testament* with the ladies of court—Scottish, Greek, Trojan and (if we include the putative noblewomen to whom Chaucer had apologized) English alike. But it is difficult to imagine such women reading the more distasteful if not abusive implications of the *Testament* other than as Christine de Pizan read her copy of *The Lamentations* of Matheolus. Furthermore, since the *Testament* seems so emphatically "intended for a Christian audience" (Fox, p. 279), I would suggest that Henryson (though not intending to exclude pious noblewomen as well) targeted his darker portrayal of Cresseid primarily to female and religious and literate and theologically sophisticated

⁷John MacQueen, *Robert Henryson* (Oxford, 1967), p. 45.

⁸Louise O. Fradenburg, "Henryson Scholarship: The Recent Decades" in Robert F. Yeager, ed., *Fifteenth-Century Studies: Recent Essays* (Hamden, CT, 1984), p. 79.

and clean readers—that is, to nuns (perhaps sisters or merely bedswomen who actually ministered to lepers).

It is admittedly highly speculative to propose an original milieu for the proper interpretation of a composition whose author remains all but anonymous. And it remains impossible to name any one religious house or hospital of Scotland as the *Testament's* dedicatory site. At the very least, however, the minimal biographical data which do survive regarding Robert Henryson support the plausibility of my hypothesis that the *Testament* was originally intended for religious women rather better than the notion that he wrote it for the fair ladies of court. A convent of readers, who had already committed themselves to a life of chastity (like those whose investiture I believe Henryson celebrates in the "Garmont of Gud Ladies"), would have seemed truly worthy of the poet Henryson's magisterial ministry. Ironically, this more restricted conception of the *Testament's* original audience invites a more tonally satisfactory (if not a conventionally feminist) reading of the text. The critical consensus that Henryson intended to correct Chaucer's apparent laxity regarding Criseyde can be maintained. But a sororial predisposition towards Cresseid generates a less rigorist interpretation of Henryson's *compilatio*.

A number of architectonic analyses have been proposed for the *Testament's* series of sequential, but discrete and tonally discordant, scenes. John MacQueen, for example, divides the *Testament* into eight sections that alternate narrative episodes with "something of value to its understanding or interpretation."⁹ John McNamara has found the metalanguage of the *Testament's* commentaries and its self-consciousness regarding literary tradition more thematically significant than its narrative action. Jane Adamson reads the poem as consisting of an overture, three sections and a finale. Lois Ebin perceives the action of the *Testament* to be structured around three contrasts between the narrator's expansively rhetorical style and his compressed moralizing style. Malcolm Pittock orders the *Testament* around a dialectic of at least three fictive personae. Whatever schema is perceived or imposed on the whole, Henryson bridges the *Testament's* multiple segments with explicit references to various documents precisely defined as such—that is, as identifiable texts which Henryson himself has "Compylit" (l. 60) and here submits to readers as legal affidavits. Worthy women readers will judge Cresseid's case by this book. The very title of the *Testament* advertises Henryson's prevailing scribal/legal consciousness. The *Testament* subsequently delineates at each transition as at its

⁹John MacQueen, *op. cit.* p. 46. John McNamara, "Language as Action in Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid*" in Adam J. Aitken, Matthew P. McDiarmid and Derrick S. Thomson, eds., *Bards and Makars* (Glasgow, 1977), pp. 41-51. Jane Adamson, "Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid*: 'Fyre' and 'Cauld,'" *Chaucer Review*, 18 (1976), 39-60. Lois A. Ebin, *Illuminator, Makar, Vates* (Lincoln, NE, 1988), pp. 70-3. Malcolm Pittock, "The Complexity of Henryson's *The Testament of Cresseid*," *Essays in Criticism*, 49 (1990), 198-221.

conclusion the clerical consciousness that Henryson shared with its readers as a community of *litteratylae*.¹⁰

According to Fox, the "probably authorial" title of the *Testament* (p. civ) properly refers only to Cresseid's "legacie," not to her "lamentatioun" (l. 597). Unable to retrieve the brooch and belt which she had surrendered to Diomedes, Cresseid wills the ruby ring that Troilus had so recently given her with the *Testament* back to him. Cresseid swoons and dies in mid-line (l. 591), at the very moment when the act of writing this legal document reminds her of Troilus' gifts. Her legacy remains unfinished and—from a strictly legalistic point of view—should not have been initiated, because medieval lepers were not allowed to bequeath their property.¹¹ Nevertheless, Cresseid's last will is fulfilled by an unnamed fellow leper. This enigmatic, perhaps even incredible, keeping of her covenant pleads, but hardly guarantees, that an analogous hope may be held for the disposition of her penitent soul.

The medieval genre of literary testaments allows ready extension of Henryson's title to designate, by synecdoche, more than just the quoted text of lines 577-91, "though Henryson does not seem to be indebted to any of them" (Fox, p. civ). By metonymy, "Henryson's title can also denote the testimony of Cresseid's entire vita. Henryson's specific use of the term *testament* cannot, however, be disassociated from its scriptural applications. The *MED* documents use of the term *testament* as a title of the two principal divisions of the Bible as early as 1300.¹² Henryson's title suggests a certain highly conceited though not entirely serious analogy between his "ballet schort" and Holy Writ. Since the term was more commonly associated with the New *Testament* than with the Old,¹³ Henryson's ironic title implies this text's intention to correct¹⁴ any quasi-Pelagian expectations that his co-readers of *Troilus and Criseyde* might have brought to one of its sequels.

¹⁰Fox observes "the most obvious link, perhaps" that binds the *Testament of Cresseid*, the *Moral Fables* and *Orpheus and Eurydice* "is that they are all rather bookish" (p. 276). Alice S. Miskimin sees Henryson as writing primarily for manuscript readers (p. 206) in *The Renaissance Chaucer* (New Haven, 1975). John MacQueen, however, distinguishes the reading context of the *Moral Fables*, intended primarily for middle-class male readers, from that of the *Testament*, which he supposes to have been meant for female aristocrats despite its transparent anti-courtliness (p. 86).

¹¹Rotha Mary Clay, *The Mediaeval Hospitals of England* (London, 1909; rpt. 1966), p. 56.

¹²See *MED*. s.v. "testament" def. 5a, citing *Cursor Mundi*.

¹³See *MED*. def. 5b, citing Dunbar.

¹⁴"To vouchen sauf, ther nede is, to correcte," *Troilus and Criseyde*, V, l. 1858.

For both Robert Henryson and his readers, Geoffrey Chaucer had become a corpus of "all that Chauceir wrait" (l. 64). Opening a text of *Chaucer*, Henryson first describes the contextual ambiguities of his own status as its reader. The beauty of the night does not suit such a "cairfull dyte" (l. 1). Nor does the winter cold uplift such an old lover's nature, even if fortified by "phisike" (l. 34). From a schoolmaster of Dunfermline and student of Chaucer, the inherent bravado of such an amorous boast sounds both inappropriate and un-Chaucerian, unless deliberately absurd and comically subversive. Henryson's prefatory appreciation of the Evening Star and the moon, if read immediately after a reading of Chaucer's text, likewise sounds somewhat antithetically allusive. Henryson echoes the imagery but not the tone of the two stanzas that initiated the "Canticus Troili" (*T&C*, V, ll. 638, 645). This echo is much louder if read, as cued, immediately after Book V of the *Troilus*. The frost forces Henryson "aganis my will" (l. 21) indoors. Venus ascends in opposition to Apollo's descent, an "astronomically impossible but aesthetically necessary" proposition.¹⁵

In his own palinode to *Troilus and Criseyde*, Chaucer had gladly exclaimed "Farewel my book and my devocioun!" (*LGW*, F, l. 39). But at the start of his own book, Henryson re-enters the library ("oratur," l. 8; "chalmer," l. 28). The reader in the text then stokes the fire, pours a drink and critiques a text in hand. The first "quair" explicitly identified as such within the *Testament of Cresseid* is a manuscript of Book V of *Troilus and Criseyde*. As Chaucer had himself so often confessed to do, Henryson reads Chaucer primarily to distract himself. Book V of the *Troilus* itself presented its readers with a *liber* which Chaucer had compiled out of subtexts (i.e., the "Canticus Troili" and the *litterae* exchanged between Troilus and Criseyde). As its reviewer, Henryson sees the obvious discord between the *delit* of Chaucer's "joly veirs" and the *doctrine* of the "cairis" which the "Canticus Troili" in particular conveys. The "sport" (l. 40) of reading *Troilus and Criseyde* proves to be cold "comfort" (l. 37) at best.

Henryson opens "ane uther quair" (l. 61), and it is this unauthorized continuation of Chaucer's text that provides the truly problematic "narratioun" regarding Cresseid's subsequent crimes and punishment (ll. 65-6). The actual plot of Henryson's alternative testament begins when Diomedes dismisses Cresseid with a "lybell of repudie" (l. 74). The term *libel* here specifically denotes a bill of divorce. Malcolm Pittock, affirming that Cresseid has no legitimate claims on Diomedes, reads this preemptive legal maneuver as a "gratuitous piece of cruelty."¹⁶ In the tit-for-tat of the *lex talionis*, Cresseid

¹⁵Walter Scheps, "A Climatological Reading of Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid*," *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 15 (1980), 82.

¹⁶Pittock, *op. cit.*, p. 215.

responds to Diomedes's rejection by renouncing Cupid, who in turn denounces Cresseid. Cresseid's clean exclusion (*l.* 132) by both Diomedes and Cupid darkly anticipates the redemptive renunciation that the *Testament* will ultimately ask its worthy women readers to vow. But by submitting the text of Diomedes's *libel* in evidence, Henryson also lends some credence to the initial legitimacy of Cresseid's claim; the legal text itself documents Diomedes's anxiety regarding his contractual obligations to Cresseid "Per conubia nostra, per inceptos hymenaeos" (*Aeneid*, 4. 316).

Although it is neither necessary nor possible to imagine that Cresseid's subsequent suffering is not the punishment due her infidelity to Troilus, and although her possibly syphilitic leprosy seems to suit her alleged promiscuity (*ll.* 76-7), these more cruel and unusual libels—given the restricted testimony of the *Testament's* narrative—comprise only circumstantial charges, the result of interpreting Cresseid's case in terms of other quairs. Cupid will rebuke her for "leuing vnclene and lecherous" (*l.* 284), but he subpoenas Cresseid to his seemingly balanced planetary court primarily on a charge of apostasy (*l.* 274; see Fox, p. lxxxvi).

For the narrated fact of her very explicit blasphemy against a fictitious god, which as Scheps points out, "takes place not only within Venus's temple but on a day specifically devoted to her worship" (p. 84), Cresseid is then served with another *libellus*. Like Chaucer, who had Criseyde fear primarily the *prima facie* significance of "libel" (i.e., slander), Henryson has Cresseid herself dread "giuing...the pepill ony deming/ Of her expuls fra Diomeid" (*ll.* 118-9). In the *Testament*, her formal "reprufe" (*l.* 280) then manifests itself as the concrete text of this planetary court's accusatory libel. Fox glosses "lybell" as a "formal declaration" and notes its Biblical associations. The fact that Diomedes has his *repudium* "send to" Cresseid indicates Henryson's clear conception of this "lybell" as a written document.¹⁷ In medieval Latin, the term is used in several specifically legal applications including accusations, slanders, and confessions.¹⁸ With much ceremony but little deliberation, Cresseid is found guilty. Saturn takes "on hand" the sentence of Cupid's court (*l.* 309)—the physical document "Contening this sentence diffinityue" (*l.* 333), that is.

With compensatory vividness, Cresseid then suffers both physically and emotionally. And it is the very graphicness of her humiliation "sa deformait,/ With bylis blak" (*ll.* 394-5) that proves so tonally and thematically problematic. As court recorder, Henryson himself maintains the sang-froid of a lawyer-priest trying to act the fair and neutral witness of events. Within the fictional

¹⁷See *MED*, s.v. libel (le n. def. (a) "A formal written statement."

¹⁸See J. F. Niermeyer *Mediae Latinitatis Lexicon Minus* (Leiden, 1976), sv. *libellus*. Ironically, the term "libellus" had been used to designate the document that certified the willingness of early Christian apostates to offer pagan sacrifice and thus escape persecution; see *The New Catholic Encyclopedia* (Washington, D. C., 1989), sv. "libellatici."

confines of one episode, however, Father Calchas embodies this same clerical consciousness (*ll.* 106-7). And through Calchas, Henryson can imply his own futile compassion for Cresseid. He mourns with his daughter "full lang" (*l.* 379). He also provides her with daily alms (*l.* 392). But his paternal compassion is muted by both the paraphrase and the brevity of this scene in the *Testament*. Henryson's text does not quote and, therefore, neglects to reenact Calchas' lamentation. Calchas' corporal works of mercy provide Cresseid with some physical and emotional sustenance, but the pagan priest cannot heal her. Henryson translates Calchas, whom Chaucer had ordained a priest of Apollo, into a priest of Venus, as if he changed cults when he changed allegiances from Troy to Greece. I do not, however, think that Calchas fully "becomes the voice of a contrasting love, not eros but agape."¹⁹

Although some readers attribute a much more compassionate tone to the text for Calchas' sake, Henryson the reader-narrator maintains his own extratextual aloofness as a disciple of Mercury, "god of eloquence" (*Orpheus and Eurydice*, *l.* 213), who within the *Testament* is himself imaged, by a book-maintained convention, "With buik in hand" (*l.* 239). The *Testament's* explicit textuality thus comprises more than just a supplemental motif conjoining discrete episodes. Henryson's presentation of Cresseid's story as a compilation of documents cues its readers to pick up the *Testament* itself with comparable aloofness. Mercury himself personifies the inherent contrariness of the reader's relation to her texts.²⁰ As the groom of Philology and patron of rhetoric, Mercury guides the poet's compilation of witnessing documents. As psychopomp, however, Mercury will also escort Cresseid's ghost to hell (cf. *T&C*, V, *l.* 1827). As Alison of Bath once noted, "The children of Mercurie and of Venus/ Been in hir wirkyng ful contrarius" (*CT*, III, *ll.* 697-8).

In counterpoint to the *Testament's* assembling of written subtexts, certain interludes dramatize the alternative futility or the folly of the (mis)spoken word. Most notably, Cupid rigorously holds Cresseid to her oral contract. She is condemned for breaking one speech-act (her vow to Venus) with another (her blasphemy). Isolated from any audience within the text, Cresseid then moans aloud (*ll.* 405-6) Her complaint, formally excerptable as a rhetorical exercise composed in imitation of Ovid's *Heroides* or Chaucer's *Anelida and Arcite*, transforms itself into an admonitory text addressed to "ladyis fair" (*l.* 452). What Henryson designates as Cresseid's chiding against destiny (*l.* 470), what her sister-leper calls spurning against the wall (*l.* 475)—what Chaucer himself had repeatedly called "grucching" against necessity—brings Cresseid

¹⁹Pitcock, *op. cit.*, p. 212.

²⁰Jennifer Strauss sees an ironic analogy between the portrait of Mercury in the *Testament* and its narrator in "To Speak Once More of Cresseid: Henryson's *Testament* Reconsidered," *Scottish Literary Journal*, 4 (1977), 5-13.

to the threshold of redemption, to acknowledgment of "the law" as written (*l.* 480). And in this court, in this poem, all the talk of other men (*ll.* 85-6), all the characters' speeches, the pagan gods' several pronouncements, Cresseid's complaint, and even the narrator's own (though I think only metaphorical) claim to be speaking the *Testament* may be read as disquisitions regarding the more fixative implications of what has been written.

The encounter between a triumphant Troilus and his fully fallen Cresseid provides the dramatic climax and the single most moving scene of the entire *Testament*. Yet, the diction of this scene consistently underlines its illusory features.²¹ Henryson pays particular attention to the visual nature of Troilus' and Cresseid's mutual misapprehension:

Than vpon him scho kest vp baith *hir ene*,
And with ane *blenk* it com into his thoct
That he sumtime hir face befor had *sene*,
But scho was in sic plye he knew hir nocht;
3it than hir *luik* into his mind it brocht
The sweit *visage* and amorous *blenking*
Of fair Cresseid, sumtyme his awin darling (*ll.* 498-504).

Deformity and shame make it plausible that Cresseid's identity remains now hidden from Troilus, but her failure to recognize him poses an often-observed puzzle. Speculation that leprosy actually blinded Cresseid "will not hold water" (Fox, p. 378, *l.* 518) Whether plausible or not, this vignette does present a stark contrast to Henryson's equally remarkable scene in which Orpheus recognizes Eurydice despite the fact that she was so "Lene and dedelike, pitous and pale of hewe" (*Orpheus & Eurydice*, *l.* 349). Cresseid, however, has become as absent to Troilus as has the author Robert Henryson to his text's readers.

Cresseid has quite literally lost her identity in the eyes of Troilus whose imagination generates instead a surrogate illusion:

Na wonder was, suppois in mynd that he
Tuik hir figure sa sone, and lo, now quhy:
The idole of ane thing in cace may be
Sa deip imprentit in the fantasy
That it deludis the wittis outwardly,
And sa appeiris in forme and lyke estait
Within the mynd as it was figurait (*ll.* 505-11).

Cresseid has become a *speculum*, not just a reflective glass, but an *exemplum* and, as such, a didactic text that needs to be transcribed faithfully lest any idol

²¹Fox, pp. 177-8, *ll.* 505-11, *ll.* 505-6, *l.* 507, *l.* 508, and *l.* 518.

erratum be substituted for the imprint of her true *figura*.²²

Having succeeded in rivaling Chaucer's careful delight, Henryson continues the *Testament* for another hundred lines. If read solely as a melodrama, the text's denouement serves little affective purpose. For the sake of the *Testament*'s complete doctrine, however, three more documents need to be presented in evidence. After quoting Cresseid's self-recrimination (*ll.* 546, 569-74), when all "this was said," Henryson finally has her simply sit down and write "hir testament" on paper (*ll.* 575-6). Some would read this ultimate gesture by Cresseid, her penitential assumption of the scribe's role, as a redemptive act. But pauper Cresseid's disposal of all her worldly goods is written in a world without access to absolution. Strict, albeit lamentable, orthodoxy has Cresseid's soul dwell with the pagan damned (*l.* 587).

Henryson does have Cresseid commit herself to chaste Diana (*l.* 587). But Cresseid's desire for a chaste death records only one last futilely pagan gesture on her part. She prays to the same goddess in whose "oratorie" (*CT*, I, *l.* 1911-2) Emily's prayer in "The Knight's Tale" to remain "a mayden al my lyf" (*CT*, I, *l.* 2305) had been refused. Henryson cannot allow Cresseid to name the alternative dispensation offered by Christ "uncircumscrip" (*T&C*, V, *l.* 1865). *The Testament of Cresseid*, thus, irrefutably vindicates Chaucer's ultimate (though perhaps too tardy) contempt for "pagan corsed rites" (*T&C*, V, *l.* 1849)—with a vengeance.

The punishment of Cresseid actually seems to offer a dark parody of the disciplines freely accepted by nuns. Her final chastity has been enforced by quarantine. Her poverty (*l.* 598), not glad and willful (cf. Henryson's "Abbey Walk," *l.* 50), but imposed by law. Her silent humility has been mandated by death. Cresseid might have suffered into sainthood and hagiography had she lived later, but her penance within this short ballad's fictive boundaries re-

²²Fox notes that "imprentit" denotes to "fix in the mind," pp. 377-8, *l.* 508. The verb's text-producing denotation also seems intended here at least metaphorically. B. J. Whiting suggested that the Scottish translation of the *Spektakle of Luf* contained an allusion to the *Testament* in "A Probable Allusion to Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid*," *Modern Language Review*, 40 (1945), 46-7. Fox allows that the more derogatory "quair" which Henryson reads at the start of the *Testament* is probably an imaginary text (p. lxxxiii), but James Kinsley, in "A Note on Henryson," in *Times Literary Supplement* (14 November 1952), p. 743, and Eleanor R. Long in "Robert Henryson's 'Uther Quair,'" *Comitatus*, 3 (1972), 97-101, have both proposed that Henryson's supplement to Chaucer's text was in fact the *Spektakle*. Eugenie R. Freed reads the entire *Testament* as an analogous *spectacle* in "'Ane Mirour Mak of Me': Robert Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid* as a 'Mirour' of Mortality," *Unisa English Studies*, 25 (1987), 1-6. In "Henryson's 'Uther Quair' Again: A Possible Candidate and the Nature of the Tradition," *Chaucer Review*, 33 (1998), 190-220, Robert L. Kindrick details the significance of the *Historia de duobus amantibus* of Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini (Pope Pius II) as an alternative text which the *Testament* seems to engage in a sort of ongoing *querelle*.

mains fruitlessly entertaining to the false gods (from their victim's completely limited point of view).

Lois Ebin reads Henryson's very Chaucerian questioning of the poetic medium as a dominant concern of both the *Moral Fables* and *Orpheus and Eurydice*. "By directing attention away for the transitory and the ephemeral to enduring concerns and by teaching readers to distinguish true wisdom from its false imitation, poetry offers an antidote to human blindness."²³ *Mutatis mutandis*, so as to accommodate its proper audience, so does *The Testament of Cresseid*.

Whatever the specific disposition of Cresseid's late chaste soul, the *Testament* next records the hearsay ("Sum said...") that Troilus provided a gray tomb (l. 603) for her corpse. Henryson ends his short ballad with particular note being taken of the inscription written "In golden letteris" (ll. 604-6) on that blank stone. In fictional terms, this brutally brief (and perhaps even glibly alliterative) epitaph records the first vita of Cresseid—a single-sentence epitome of her "ressoun" to be remembered:

Lo! fair ladyis, Cresseid of Troyis toun,
Sumtyme countit the flour of womanheid,
Under this stane, late lipper, lysis deid! (ll. 607-9).

This citation of Cresseid's first testimonial, if indeed addressed to the secular flower of Scotland, perpetuates nothing but a critique of Cresseid's mundane *appetitiveness*—a *memento mori* not welcome as such to ancient, medieval or modern ladies. But if the worthy women to whom the *Testament* itself was originally addressed had already renounced Cupid and all his pomp, then this seemingly negative history of the apostate Cresseid does not gratuitously abuse all "womanheid." It should not be anthologized as an addendum to the book of Jankyn. Rather, it presents a just verdict, both honestly sympathetic and scrupulously honest, regarding Cresseid's unredeemed humanity.

So read, the *Testament* confirms an a priori renunciation of Cupid by documenting the tragedy of Cresseid's ex post facto reneging. Henryson celebrates, by antithesis, the abstention of celibates (whether female or male), who have freely retired to a truer oratory, who have not (like both Cresseid and the narrator) been forced to retreat under cold compulsion to sterile books. So read, the *Testament* harmonizes with moralized interpretations of such analogously short ballads as Ovid's *Epistles* which the medieval *accessus* had appropriated to exhort perseverance in the chaste life.

The last discrete text submitted as part of the composite *Testament* is its final stanza. The last seven lines, which label all the rest a "ballet schort," also function as an implied envoy. Here and now (l. 610), whether by actual recitation or by manuscript presentation, a more present voice addresses his readers.

²³Ebin, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

Henryson does not advise us (*l.* 612) to persevere in *amors fin*. Nor does he invite us to condemn Cresseid. Rather, the *Testament* upholds our conviction to renounce all mundane “deceptioun” (*l.* 613), including the very act of reading libellous texts.

Cresseid’s precedent texts, including the one in *Chaucer*, came to the library of Henryson’s worthy women as courtly entertainments, ludic redactions of a pagan and therefore passé tragedy. Henryson, however, has presented his synoptic *Testament*, including its commentary, to a readership of worthy women for their “worschip and instructioun,/ Of cheritie” (*ll.* 611-12). In the end, Henryson’s *Testament* renounces its component subtexts by calling for a virginal abstention from any such uncircumscribed ballad reading. As for Cresseid, the “lipper” encased in his *liber*, Henryson affects only once more the affectionate voice of Chaucer (Fox, p. 383, *ll.* 615-16) and then will “speik of hir no moir” (*l.* 616).

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