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Sarah M. Dunnigan

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Sarah M. Dunnigan

Feminizing the Text, Feminizing the Reader?  
The Mirror of “Feminitie” in the *Testament of Cresseid*

Cresseid’s mirror-image constitutes one of the most important symbolic moments in Robert Henryson’s *Testament of Cresseid*, composed by the last decade of the fifteenth century, and is adopted as an emblem for the argument and theory of this essay. The “poleist glas”<sup>1</sup> which first appears at line 348 serves to crystallize the image of all women, yet also Cresseid’s limited individual identity and the potential for her self-creation; it is a threshold, a point of liminality in the poem. The image is both literal and metaphorical, representing the contours of visible signification, and evoking the potential for inner meaning, so that, ultimately, the “figour” (l. 448) of Cresseid possesses the possibility of deeper, figural interpretation. This borderline between the visible and the symbolic mirrors what might with justification be construed as the place of women or Woman<sup>2</sup>—as writers, readers, subjects—in medieval Scottish literature: spectral presences. The underlying aim of this reading is to suggest that there are interesting theoretical ramifications to be gained by rendering visible the figure of Woman, and the ideology of the feminine, in medieval Scottish texts; Henryson’s *Testament* is used as the emblem of such a process. It argues that the constructions of “feminitie” (l. 80) encountered in

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<sup>1</sup>References to the *Testament of Cresseid* are based on *Robert Henryson The Poems*, ed. Denton Fox (Oxford, 1987) and will appear by line number in the text. Henceforth Fox.

<sup>2</sup>The use of the nomenclature “Woman” is deliberate, seeking to imply an essentialist and abstract categorization which partly reflects medieval neo-Aristotelian belief.

this late medieval tragedy can be read against the critical grain, a largely unitary consensus that the poem remains ideologically circumscribed within the framework of an entrenched antifeminism. Susan Aronstein asserts that "Henryson, as he directs his narrative towards 'fair ladyis' and 'worthie wemen,' reduces Cresseid's story to its outline: she was beautiful, she sinned, she was punished, she died."<sup>3</sup> Felicity Riddy, deploying a rich and suggestive Kristevan model of abjection, proposes that the poem intellectually and morally depends upon the dereliction of the feminine, demonstrating its "struggle to constitute a stable masculine identity; its constant risk of dissolution; its relation to repression, law, and punishment; and above all, its need to exclude the feminine."<sup>4</sup>

In contrast, this essay suggests that "feminitie," and its literal and symbolic iconography, is interpretatively less stable or invariable than such cogent perceptions of its misogyny imply. Precisely in the concept of reading, it may be argued, is the poem's revisionary conceptualization of the "figour" of Cresseid, and of Woman herself, embodied. Not only does the *Testament* clearly feminize its subject by isolating the female subject from the established medieval romance binarism of "Troilus-Criseyde,"<sup>5</sup> it feminizes the reader by privileging women, explicitly on two occasions, as the intended discursive audience or readership of the poem (*ll.* 452-69; *ll.* 610-16). This reading explores the ironic implications of these feminine invocations and of the mirror topos which forms their defining visual image. Arguing that the concept of "feminitie" in the *Testament* is not confined to the purely corporeal, and hence to the misogynistic, it seeks to suggest that the subtle interpretative procedures inherent in the poem disclose other possibilities for reflection upon the feminine in general in the reception of medieval Scottish literature.

Henryson's poem is preoccupied with identities. The nature of literary identity, or even interpretative integrity, is rendered fragile by the querulous narrator: "Quha wait gif all that Chauceir wrait was trew?" (*l.* 64). Such textual doubt is an early instance of the process of unsettling the categories of

<sup>3</sup>Susan Aronstein, "Cresseid Reading Cresseid: Redemption and Translation in Henryson's *Testament*," *Scottish Literary Journal*, 21 (1994), 19. This article is especially useful in opening up the poem's interpretative and self-interpretative qualities. Henceforth Aronstein.

<sup>4</sup>Felicity Riddy, "'Abject odious': Feminine and Masculine in Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid*," *The Long Fifteenth Century*, eds. Sally Mapstone and Helen Cooper (Oxford, 1997), pp. 244, a sharply theoretical and culturally contextualized reading. Henceforth Riddy.

<sup>5</sup>Chaucer also creates narrative space for Criseyde but it is arguable that she still remains, at least morally in the position of Other; Troilus' final elevation above the "false worldes brotelnesse" (Book V, *l.* 1832) places Criseyde in the real of the temporal and flawed. In *The Legend of Good Women*, the god of Love rebukes the poet for his negative depiction of Criseyde.

interpretation per se. Allusion to the concept or construct not only of "feminitie" but of "womanheid" (l. 88) attests the text's other preoccupation with female identity. The prescriptions and limitations of courtly "feminitie" are witnessed in Cresseid's attempt to forge other female identities beyond its circumscribed moral and secular parameters. The literal and symbolic code (or institution), of "amour courtois" dictates Cresseid's first, seemingly authentic identity. Her planctus (ll. 407-69) adumbrates the literal and symbolic ornamentation characteristic of the orthodox female beloved in earlier and contemporary secular courtly literature; for example:

'Quhair is thy chalmer wantounlie besene,  
With burely bed and bankouris browderit bene (ll. 416-7)

'Quhair is thy garding with thir greissis gay  
And fresche flowris, quhilk the quene Floray  
Had paintit plesandly in euerie pane,  
Quhair thou was wont full merilye in May  
To walk and tak the dew be it was day,  
And heir the merle and mawis mony ane,  
With ladyis fair in carrolling to gane  
And se the royall rinkis in thair ray,  
In garmentis garnischit on euerie grane? (ll. 425-33)

Clearly, the careful rhetorical artifice of this particular moment in the planctus reproduces the conventional ideology of female courtliness: it aestheticizes the desirability of the beloved, or Cresseid, while the material lineaments of her courtly body and her courtly space symbolize, or ritualize, her sexuality. Here, Cresseid's preoccupation with, or rather elegy for, the courtly panoply of her existence may typify her as a conventional emblem of "vanitas." Yet the dense interweaving of courtly femininity, sexual desire, vanity and impermanence in the early part of the planctus may work in two contrasting ways. Certainly, it reiterates the orthodox identification between the feminine and the material realm (symbolic of carnality or fleshliness), a standard late medieval philosophical and theological topos. But this particular rhetorical instance in Cresseid's *ubi sunt* complaint may also act as an ironic revelation of the very ideological structures which compel Cresseid to articulate or conceive herself in this way. A double bind therefore characterizes the *Testament's* incarnation of "amour courtois" in the figure of Cresseid: the poem is both an enactment and indictment of its symbolic model of femininity. The *Testament* may be seen to explore critically and reflexively, rather than endorsing, how the female subject, in Althusserian terms, is interpellated by this system. The poem questions the literary construction of "amour courtois" and the "figour" of "womanheid" modeled in its image.

The nature of this incarnation is revealed in several ways. The grieving Troilus recreates such a version of Cresseid in memoriam at least twice: liter-

ally, in his inscribed epitaph, and symbolically, in alluding to the Cresseid, "sumtyme his awin darling" (l. 504). This latter Cresseid is defined imagistically or corporeally: the iconography of beauty which Cresseid herself had earlier invoked is summoned again by Troilus. The metamorphosis or translation of the "fair," "sweet," "gentill" Cresseid into the disfigured Cresseid, afflicted by the "bylis blak" (l. 395) of leprosy, significantly influences the poem's notions of "feminitie." Cresseid's Janus-faced identity, her twin incarnations of beauty and deformation, works as the visible manifestation of her apparent moral fallibility as a correspondence between exterior and interior is asserted. Her leprosy, of course, serves as cruelly appropriate stigmata, the physiological "sign" of her sexual sin.<sup>6</sup> This correspondence also mirrors the archetypal clerical and patristic trope of female dualism. Female moral duplicity is frequently figured as the power of transformation, opposition, reversal, or inversion. Accordingly, Cresseid's beauty is a fallacious exterior which lures and deceives: "woman is a two-faced creature: beauty and putrefaction combined."<sup>7</sup>

That the *Testament* at this point seems so explicitly to endorse the conventional misogynistic definition of the beautiful and fallen woman substantiates the arguments of Riddy and Aronstein. But Cresseid's possession of beauty may not simply serve to emblemize her vanity, hubris, or pride. The sheer fact of Cresseid's transformation—the irrevocable loss of the apparently defining, constitutive beauty—exposes the fragile and impossible essentialism of that female identity: an original, pristine state of beauty in which the narrator desires her to be preserved. Cresseid herself conceives of this sign of beauty in angry colloquy with the deities of erotic love as a divine right and inheritance contravened by Diomedes's desertion of her:

'Se gaue me anis ane deuine responsaill  
 That I suld be the flour of luif in Troy;  
 Now am I maid ane vnworthie outwaill,  
 And all in cair translatit is my ioy.  
 Quha sall me gyde? Quha sall me now conuoy,  
 Sen I fra Diomeid and nobill Troylus  
 Am clene excludit, as abiect odious?

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<sup>6</sup>There is a question, of course, of what Cresseid's supposed "sin" actually consists: whether infidelity, blasphemy or, in theological terms the most profound sin, pride, as it damaged the bonds of charity.

<sup>7</sup>Claude Thomasset, "The Nature of Woman" in Christine Klapisch-Zuber, ed., *Silences of the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, MA & London, 1992), p. 67. Vol. II of Georges Duby and Michelle Perrot, eds., *A History of Women in the West*.

O fals Cupide, is nane to wyte bot thow  
And thy mother, of lufe the blind goddes!  
Ye causit me always vnderstand and trow  
The seid of lufe was sawin in my face,  
And ay grew grene throw 3our supplie and grace.  
Bot now, allace, that seid with froist is slane,  
And I fra luifferis left, and all forlane' (ll. 127-40).

Cresseid's language here articulates a construct of female identity of selfhood which is located in passion. This coherent identity depends on her perpetual existence as the object of masculine desire which accords her recognition or visibility in both literal and symbolic terms. "The seid of lufe was sawin in my face": she acknowledges both that desire is engendered by the act of looking and, in the interesting grammatical inflexion of "in my face," that she herself has the power to perceive and be perceived. (Emphasis is already placed on the imagistic and the visual, anticipating the later mirror emblem.) Once that significant agent of desire and beauty is altered or desecrated, Cresseid symbolically ceases to exist. Such invisibility is illuminated by Elizabeth Castelli's insight:

The demand to renounce passion is...much more poignant when applied to women because passion has been located in the idea of female selfhood.... for a woman to participate in the institution which calls for the negation of the feminine is, on one level, of her to participate in a profound self-abnegation, self-denial, even self-destruction.<sup>8</sup>

Cresseid endures a loss of identity confirmed both by Troilus's misrecognition of the leprous Cresseid, and Cresseid's post-punishment desire, not to be desired, but to remain anonymous in her expulsion from that Edenic or prelapsarian realm of beauty.<sup>9</sup> That identity conceded to her by herself, her lovers and by her narrator (for whom Cresseid should be persistently fair), is purely material, confined to the morally and theologically flawed realm of the body.

Yet this seemingly unambiguous dereliction of the feminine in the *Testament* can be converted into the source of its defense or reclamation from accusations of conventional misogyny. Within the fabric of the poem itself is embedded an exposure of the moral limitations and consequences of such a conception of the female subject and of "feminitie." It is articulated in the second part of Cresseid's planctus:

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<sup>8</sup>Elizabeth Castelli, "Virginity and its Meaning for Women's Sexuality in Early Christianity," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 2 (1986), 88.

<sup>9</sup>The implicit female typology of the poem may also depict Cresseid as an Eve-like transgressor.

O ladyis fair of Troy and Grece, attend  
 My miserie, quhilk nane may comprehend,  
 My friuoll fortun, my infelicitie,  
 My greit mischief, quhilk na man can amend.  
 Be war in tyme, approchis neir the end,  
 And in your mynd ane mirrou mak of me:  
 As I am now, peradventure that 3e  
 For all 3our micht may cum to that same end,  
 Or ellis war, gif ony war may be.

Nocht is 3our fairnes bot ane faiding flour,  
 Nocht is 3our famous laud and hie honour  
 Bot wind inflat in vther mennis eiris,  
 3our roising red to rotting sall retour;  
 Exempill mak of me in 3our memour  
 Quhilk of sic thingis wofull witness beiris.  
 All welth in eird, away as wind it weiris;  
 Be war thairfoir, approchis neir your hour;  
 Fortoun is fikkill quhen scho beginnis and steiris (*ll.* 452-69).

The complaint commits itself to the defining essentialist terms of that female identity but also—in this specific address to a female community united by the attribute of fair beauty—discloses the precarious, and logically insubstantial, identity of Woman when founded on material constituents (which give rise to the possession of reputation, “hie honour”). This section is usually held to anticipate Cresseid’s later renunciation and her moral awakening. Yet arguably it might also be construed as a rejection of the precepts of courtly, or literary, love morality; a dialogic encounter with, and refutation of, the terms of female identity which orthodox misogyny condemns to the morally inferior term of gendered, dualistic constructions. Accordingly, Cresseid defines in a martyr-like way the ideological burden of “womanheid”: the necessity to be at once beautiful and self-containedly virtuous. The terms in which she is received (by Troilus, the narrator, the system of male exchange in which she exists) are inseparable from the terms of beauty and of corporeality which constitute Cresseid’s identity and that also of secular, courtly female identity.

The apostrophe to “ladyis fair,” then, performs a significant interpretative part in any revisionist reading of the poem’s apparent conservative misogyny. If hypothetically construed as a veiled appeal to female readers, or a female audience, the possibility of what might be called an identificatory, empathic reading is disclosed. Cresseid transgresses the moral and religious precept that woman must not seek to be an object of desire herself. She renders female beauty active rather than contemplative, beauty being equated with the state of being loved rather than actively loving. (Beauty and activity—as the inverse of passivity, woman as the recipient rather than the instigator of desire—are portrayed as incompatible.) In her enforced assumption of the role of the

sexually fallen woman, Cresseid might well be condemned by the text's arbiters of orthodox moral judgment (the mythological parliament, the narrator, Troilus). Yet her inevitable assumption of this role exposes, rather than endorses, the fallibility of a certain preconception of "feminitie" and "womanheid," embodied by the *sine qua non* that the desired woman be perfect, and that in her perfection she be self-enclosed, self-contained, self-sufficient; that, being desired, she herself should not possess sexual agency. Henryson's protagonist therefore acts in a way which violates the implied notion, upheld by both the narrator and Troilus, of female sexual sanctity, the state of passive moral and sexual grace from which Cresseid falls: "Sa giglotlike takand thy foull plesance!// I haue pietie thow suld fall sic mischance!" (ll. 83-4).

The *Testament* as Riddy argues, is a narrative which explores different forms of exile.<sup>10</sup> One such form is arguably Cresseid's symbolic exile from the masculine order of desire (prior to her literal, leprous one) through Diomedes's rejection: no longer an object of desire, she is no longer possessed of the valid identity which is declared to constitute permissible or sanctioned "womanheid." To be "expuls fra Diomeid" symbolizes expulsion from that identity by which she (and her lovers, father, narrator) can recognize herself. This trope of recognition and visibility is most fully expressed by the mirror conceit which, it may be argued, acts also as a literal signifier of the poem's interpretative crux:

....than rais scho vp and tuik  
Ane poleist glas, and hir schaddow culd luik;  
And quhen scho saw hir face sa deformait,  
Gif scho in hart was wa aneuch, God wait! (ll. 347-50).

The "poleist glas," returning a self-portrait or image (the liminal state between her beautiful and disfigured face) richly symbolizes the specular relationship which the poem has defined throughout between woman and desire.<sup>11</sup> In medieval art, mirrors conventionally appear as emblems both of female identity and of usually gendered *vanitas*, thus endorsing the expected parallels between the female and the sensory, the idolatrous artifice of images and woman. Yet this is not only a posture of misogynistic import. Cresseid's mir-

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<sup>10</sup>Riddy, p. 237. Cresseid's "excommunication" works on several different levels. Leprosy itself was considered a form of ritual death or exile since lepers exist outside society without personal property and deprived of sexual and familial bonds. See Saul Brody, *The Disease of the Soul: Leprosy in Medieval Literature* (Ithaca, 1974).

<sup>11</sup>The mirror recurs as a general trope in courtly love literature—see Danielle Régnier-Bohler, "Imagining the Self," in Georges Duby, ed., *A History of Private Life: Revelations of the Medieval World* (Cambridge, MA, 1988), pp. 391-3). Henceforth Régnier-Bohler.



ror functions as a *speculum*, the mirror turned to one's soul, and therefore an emblem of moral reflection and insight:

Be war in tyme, approchis neir the end,  
 And in your mynd ane mirroure mak of me:  
 As I am now, peradventure that ye  
 For all your might may cum to that same end,  
 Or ellis war, gif ony war may be (*ll.* 456-60).

Such knowledge works partly to condemn Cresseid; as an emblem of beauty she remains confined within its necessary temporality. The mirror emblem is deployed at the textual level; in her prior invocation to women ("O ladyis fair of Troy and Grece," *l.* 452), Cresseid offers herself as an exemplum; the image of her desecrated body therefore acts as a cautionary mirror into which women can read themselves and their fate. Yet it also represents the potential to become other than that—the punished or martyred female body. In contrast, it might be argued that Cresseid's revelation constitutes the first release from the corporeality, that fragile, material, bodily identity by which Cresseid is persistently figured. She may epitomize the type of the morally chastened woman who "must look [in a mirror]...for two reasons: to see her face and to see her conscience" (Régnier-Bohler, p. 391). Yet in the *Testament* the conceit of the glass turned onto the female subject's soul does not simply present a vision which denounces and constrains moral and sexual perception. Rather, it discloses a subtler vision of womanhood, and Cresseid's own potential to recreate or refashion another non-physical identity. It is precisely that physical conception or identity of Cresseid which Troilus cannot ultimately renounce: "as it [Cresseid's desirable self] was figurait" (*l.* 511). She signified only beauty of conventional "feminitie." If Troilus remains so wedded to the sensual impulse of his desire how, as both Aronstein and Riddy propose, does the *Testament* vitiate Troilus?<sup>12</sup> Indeed, Cresseid's representation is almost circular: she possesses an immaculate beauty at the outset according to the narrator's terms of *ll.* 78-84, a "feminitie" untainted by "filth" and "fleschlie lust" (*ll.* 80-81). Here beauty is the equivalent of moral virtue while it is Diomedes who is indicted by the empathic narrator for "appetyte...delyte" (*ll.* 71, 73). Only after Diomedes's desertion does her beauty endure a kind of moral prostitution. At the moment of the narrator's intrusion (*l.* 84) "feminitie" is

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<sup>12</sup>At line 501 ("Scho was in sic pyle he knew her nocht") Cresseid becomes for Troilus the object of desire recreated in absentia: the abstracted feminine ideal of the courtly love lyric. An Aristotelian explanation is usually invoked (Fox, p. 243), but Tatyana Moran explains Cresseid's own failure to identify Troilus as a sign of her moral introversion at this moment, she is "so far on her way to purgation that she is living in an inner world totally incompatible with the one in which she loved and betrayed Troilus," in "The Meeting of the Lovers in the *Testament of Cresseid*," *Notes and Queries*, 208 (1963), 11-12.

almost non-corporeal, and beauty or "fairnes" specifically aligned with "wisdom" (l. 88), conceivably the spiritual or intellectual virtue gained by Cresseid at the poem's end, and her own.

The other apostrophes contained in Cresseid's final declamation are also bound up in the thorny issue of gendered interpretation.

'Louers be war and tak gude heid about  
Quhome that 3e lufe, for quhome 3e suffer paine.  
I lat yow wit, thair is richt few thairout  
Quhome 3e may traist to haue trew lufe agane;  
Preif quhen 3e will, 3our labour is in vaine.  
Thairfoir I reid 3e tak thame as 3e find,  
For thay ar sad as widdercok in wind.

'Beacus I know the greit vnstabilnes,  
Brukill as glas, into my self, I say-  
Traisting in vther als greit vnfaithfulnes,  
Als vnconstant, and als vntrew of fay-  
Thocht sum be trew, I wait richt few ar thay;  
Quha findis treuth, lat him his lady ruse;  
Nane but my self as now I will accuse.' (ll. 561-74)

This is a delicate, contentious moment in the text where a slippage in pronoun impinges upon the poem's gendered weighting of moral insight. In this apostrophe (a counterpoint to that which purely concerned women, l. 452), Cresseid's suffering justifies her admonishment of a community of lovers; this community is at first anonymous with regard to gender, then defined as male (l. 573, "lat him his lady ruse"), apparently a masculine coterie of lovers who must beware women, and for whom Troilus is portrayed as exemplary. The divisive rhetoric of gender here anticipates Cresseid's later litany, "trew knight Troylus / fals Cresseid," which Riddy analyzes in detail as the absolute of the poem's gendered binarisms. Yet the implications of this apparent contradiction between Cresseid's genderless and gender-specific audience have relevance for the depiction of "feminitie" which Cresseid finally incarnates.

The salient fact that Cresseid has possession of an insight which is not gender specific—"Louers beware"—indicts love per se (that is, the system or institution of "amour courtois," if we accept the terms of Cresseid's planctus) and not desire which is specifically female and therefore corruptible. Momentarily, the feminine is made exemplary, as Lesley Johnson has suggested.<sup>13</sup> In that sense, a general revelation about the nature of human love (the poem's

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<sup>13</sup>Lesley Johnson, "Whatever Happened to Criseyde? Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid*," in Keith Busby and Erik Kooper, eds. *Courtly Literature: Culture and Context* (Amsterdam, 1990), pp. 539-48.

pivotal revelatory moment, akin to Troilus's elevated perspective at the end of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*) is distilled through the experience of the feminine, articulated in the female voice.<sup>14</sup> It begs the question if, in the poem's final movement, Cresseid finally accedes to the knowledge of what might be conceived as "caritas": a selfless, disinterested love which does not necessarily end in love of God but evokes a redeemed or unflawed human love. This vexed issue of what might be called Cresseid's redemption, whether secular or spiritual, Riddy calls the classic liberal humanist move; yet this simply circumvents this fragmentary but difficult moment when Cresseid disowns her status as emblem of a "cupiditas" conventionally gendered female (Riddy, p. 236).

If we retain this moment of genderless insight and combine its implications with the other argument which the poem permits about the limiting nature of prescribed "feminitie," then the *Testament's* end may be read different from the critical orthodoxy. By her deformation, Cresseid is ironically permitted to transcend the corporeal and sensual (that patristic, patriarchal concept of "femina" opposed to the non-corporeal rationality of "vir" /man).<sup>15</sup> By the poem's end, and by the end of Cresseid's own testament (in which she divests herself of her material possessions, the body which into "rotting reid" has dissolved, consecrates her spirit to Diane), the limiting, essentialist and exclusionary notion of "feminitie" and "womanheid" is discarded. The Diana invocation or analogy is interesting, suggesting that she imagines herself condemned to a kind of purgatory or limbo with the goddess "in waist woddis and wellis" (l. 588).<sup>16</sup> It may further suggest that Cresseid accedes in her non-gendered revelation about human love to the wisdom or intellectual power which the virtue of chastity theoretically confers on woman to render her equal to man. If the corporeal is by definition linked to "feminitie" (as Riddy argues), but Cresseid is ultimately deprived of it, then she is no longer desired but also

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<sup>14</sup>It is interesting to note that the stanza, "Louers be war...", ll. 561-67, was copied out in isolation from the rest of the poem in the *Book of the Dean of Lismore*, compiled in Scotland between 1512 and 1526.

<sup>15</sup>It might be considered a parallel to the end of Troilus and Cressida when Troilus gains a heavenly perspective on the world which constitutes "feminitie."

<sup>16</sup>See David J. Parkinson, "Henryson's Scottish Tragedy," *Chaucer Review*, 25 (1990-1), 360 for an interpretation of the reparative and purifying power of the Diana landscape, and Sabine Volk-Birke, "Sickness unto Death. Crime and Punishment in Henryson's *The Testament of Cresseid*," *Anglia*, 113.2 (1995), 180, on the probability of a contemporary allegorical reading of Diana as the Virgin Mary. If Cresseid's prefiguration of her resting-place is specifically interpreted in theological terms as purgatory, then the implications of her salvation or grace are rendered more complex.

freed from its association with the purely sensual. To renounce the flesh would appear to be to renounce the feminine also.

This might appear as an interpretative maneuver which returns the *Testament* to the literary enclosure which condemns Woman. It might be argued that the poem engages "feminitie" in another moral sphere, the realm of hagiography and the writing of feminine suffering. This is the paradoxical justification of Cresseid's suffering which is also at once its glorification. Therefore we see not a "harlot's progress," in Riddy's terms (pp. 239-40), but the life of a female saint, though one might also suggest that a secularized form of martyrdom is witnessed. Might such a reading not condemn the *Testament* to the invocation of the familiar medieval patriarchal narrative of the only good woman being a dead one? Yet what must be conceded is not simply the presentation of Cresseid as a saint, the reformed virgin offered, and offering herself to other women, as a paradigm, a conduct manual or exemplary book. Rather, her life, death and apotheosis expose the reasons—the ideology—for her cruel sainthood, inviting a parallel with the subtle and self-reflexive critique which Jocelyn Wogan-Browne perceives in the conventional literature of female saints' lives.<sup>17</sup> Such a perception of Cresseid's transformation, rooted not only in the body but the spirit, inevitably posits a Christian hermeneutics at the heart of the poem. It might be conceded at this point how feminist interpretations of the *Testament* frequently perceive its Christian dialectic—the existence of which is itself a topic of critical debate—in negative, condemnatory terms, and the association between the feminine and the theology of redemption rarely explored.

The possible contours of a resistant feminine or feminist reading of the *Testament* founded on the topoi of vision and signification, literal and figurative, and on the conceptualization of the feminine as moral or spiritual rather than purely corporeal, have been drawn. The poem's reclamation from the misogynistic enclosure also depends upon interpretation of the apostrophe to "ladyis fair of Troy and Grece" (l. 452) as a veiled appeal to female readers, or to a female interpretative community, which permits the possibility of what might be termed an identificatory, empathic reading. The female reading subject is endowed, as the work ends, with interpretative responsibility; instructed to create the ultimate significance of Cresseid.

Now, worthie wemen, in this ballet schort,  
Maid for 3our worschip and instructioun,  
Of cheritie, I monische and exhort,  
Ming not 3our lufe with fals deceptioun:  
Beir in 3our mynd this sore conclusioun

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<sup>17</sup>See her essay, "The Virgin's Tale," in Ruth Evans and Lesley Johnson, eds., *Feminist Readings in Middle English Literature* (London, 1994), pp. 165-98.

Of fair Cresseid, as I haue said befor.  
 Sen scho is deid I speik of hir no moir (ll. 610-16).

This final stanza is interpretatively ambiguous; it may or may not be delivered in the narratorial voice, and hence its fiction of authority may belong to Henryson as final *actor*. Its frequently observed rhetorical brevity and unequivocally offered *moralitas* seems to represent an absolute closure. Aronstein asserts that the envoi “teach[es] women to internalise this reading [that women’s love must not be deceitful like Cresseid’s], to ensure their modest silence” (p. 10); Riddy claims that it:

makes the moralists’s assumption...that once a woman has been unfaithful, then she will inevitably become promiscuous, contract a venereal disease and die. Because the sequence is presented as inevitable it forecloses the alternative ending [...] in which Cresseid might have ended up married to a Greek (Riddy, p. 240).

While its language might seem to anticipate the moral conduct book discourse which Juan Luis Vives’ *Instruction*, for example, canonized thirty years later, or to recapitulate inculcations of pious and moral female conduct, this final stanza does not necessarily need to be deprived of the interpretative irony which informs the *Testament* as a whole. Authoritative statements have been unsettled throughout the text so why must this final assertion be utterly authoritative?<sup>18</sup> Sally Mapstone has suggested that the Chaucerian-Henrysonian invention of Criseyde/Cresseid is part of the desire shared by both writers to depict interpretation as “a complex moral act.”<sup>19</sup>

The *Testament*’s enduring qualities of provocation depend upon the gendered moment of the reading encounter, that encounter embodied in explicit terms on several occasions in the poem in the apostrophes of both the narrator and Cresseid herself. It is difficult to grant that hypothetical readership historical actuality. Priscilla Bawcutt’s recent research on the subject of female book ownership in late medieval Scotland substantially deepens our understanding

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<sup>18</sup>Robert L. Kindrick perceives, though not in explicit terms and to a different conclusion, the reader-interpreter based significance for the exegesis of the final stanza: “The messages implied for the exegete then would relate to Cresseid’s earlier immaturity and her spiritual growth, the use of her example as a means to establish each reader’s personal salvation, and God’s mercy,” *Henryson and the Medieval Arts of Rhetoric* (New York, 1993), p.206. Malcolm Pittock mentions the hermeneutic ironies of the final stanza as Henryson “pretending that the whole poem has been a didactic anti-feminist piece,” in “The Complexity of Henryson’s *Testament of Cresseid*,” *Essays in Criticism*, 40 (1990), 209.

<sup>19</sup>Sally Mapstone, “The Origins of Criseyde” in Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, et al., eds., *Medieval Women: Texts and Contexts in Late Medieval Britain* (Turnhout, Belgium, 2000), p. 146.

of women's intellectual, cultural, and literary status and influence in fifteenth century Scotland. Yet precise knowledge regarding the extent of female reception of Henryson's work, if existence of that readerly community can be conceded, is limited. The question of differentiation in Henryson's audience and readership on the basis of gender and class has been addressed by John MacQueen,<sup>20</sup> and Matthew McDiarmid responded:

It has been suggested that Henryson wrote different kinds and styles of poetry for different audiences, the *Fabillis* for "a middle-class professional audience of private readers...predominantly masculine," the *Testament* for "a more courtly audience with more feminine interests." It is not a helpful suggestion. For which audience was *Orpheus* or *Robene and Makyne* intended? The distinction is modern and misleading in so far as it tends to define and limit the character and appeal of his verse. Plainly he wrote for himself and anyone who would read and listen, speaking out of a tradition that lived by verities that were at once its own and universal, perhaps best appreciated by "clerks" but substantially apprehended by man and woman, educated and uneducated Scot, alike.<sup>21</sup>

This is judicious yet also conservative. On the evidence of a range of medieval Scottish texts, it still appears theoretically justified to speculate about the community of reception, literal and symbolic, that such texts may have found, for it is in the context of their interpretative plurality that the question of gender frequently arises. Not only secular but devotional texts delineate an interpretative female space. The substantial fifteenth-century manuscript collection of saints' lives, apparently stemming from the North East, includes those of over twenty female saints (including Mary Magdalene and the Katherine legend) and directly solicits at least imagined or notional female community. Do their didactic apostrophes to "gud women," inculcating religious devotion through the affective power of hagiography to "mowe women / to lof god & thame-self kene" suggest a private and lay female readership?<sup>22</sup>

Although such apparent textual evidence of female presence may be an insufficient basis from which to infer women's historical or literal presence in any text's interpretation community, it is nevertheless important to register their presence.<sup>23</sup> In the context of the *Testament*, the symbolic influence of the

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<sup>20</sup>John MacQueen, "The Literature of Fifteenth-Century Scotland," in Jennifer M. Brown, ed., *Scottish Society of the Fifteenth Century* (London, 1970), p. 205.

<sup>21</sup>Matthew P. McDiarmid, *Robert Henryson* (Edinburgh, 1981), p. 41.

<sup>22</sup>"Legend of Eugenia" in *Legends of the Saints*, ed. W. M. Metcalfe, Scottish Text Society, 3 vols. (1887-96), 2, ll. 3-4.

<sup>23</sup>The first apostrophe occurs in Cresseid's formal "complaint," l. 452; the second is authorial or at least articulated by the narratorial voice in the final stanza, l. 610.

poem's female interlocutors, imagined or actual ("ladyis fair" and "worthie wemen") arguably contradicts Aronstein's contention that Henryson's poem demonstrates how medieval reading for women was proscriptive, limited and controlled, confined to "safe, unambiguous narratives" (Aronstein, p. 13). In contrast to this perception of the restricted affective and persuasive power of the medieval text for women, it may be suggested that the *Testament's* invocations to the female subject are part of the poem's process of unsettling, rather than authorizing or stabilizing, meaning. In a sense, the *Testament* sanctions creativity, a license represented by the creative process which binds both writer to text, and text to reader. This creative—specifically interpretative—bind between each participant in the process is both cause and effect of how reader and writer are gendered. Another version of Felicity Riddy's assertion that "'truth' is gendered" (Riddy, p. 244) in the poem might accordingly be offered; truth is at best uncertain and also feminized.

Thus Cresseid seeks to dismantle the authority of, and to reclaim according to a new paradigm of feminine interpretation, the "loci classici" of misogyny. Henryson's narrator seeks to disavow the received authority of the Cresseid narrative: "Quha wait gif all that Chaucer wrait was trew?" (l. 64). Aronstein argues that Cresseid learns to read herself "like a man": the correct—in other words, patriarchal—reading of herself (p. 9). Aronstein contends that Henryson's text seals off and delimits the apparent ambiguities of Chaucer. Yet the *Testament* is not a text which is circumscribed, closed off, or finite in its interpretative scope but rather one which constantly undermines its apparently authoritative stance. "Of his [Troilus] distress me neidis nocht rehers" confesses Henryson's narrator (l. 57); he chooses not to pursue the well-rehearsed male narrative but by contrast the unknown—the terrain of the feminine—and the unsafe, thus reversing Aronstein's terms. The early allusion to Chaucer exposes the fragility of "auctoritas."<sup>24</sup>

The *Testament* presents the image of the newly read book: "ane uther quair" is taken up after Chaucer is discarded in the *Testament*. Henryson is moved to commentary:

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 quhilk 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)

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<sup>24</sup>On this point, see Tim William Machan, "Textual Authority and the Works of Hoccleve, Lydgate, and Henryson," *Viator*, 23 (1992), 281-99.

Henryson's notoriously unreliable narrator, revealed as a partial and biased interpreter or reader and himself under the influence of Venus (suggesting that the alliance between the feminine and the planetary Venus is not entirely clear cut in the *Testament*) finds that male misogynistic writers are fuelled by their own flawed and inadequate sexuality. Ultimately the processes of (re)interpretation in the Henrysonian text are inextricable from the larger ironic impulse to rewrite. The mirror in which Cresseid urges women to perceive their reflection is the image of the beautiful, passive, and deathly femininity which defines their secular or earthly state. Cresseid's enforced abjection ends the relegation of the feminine to the corporeal, and introduces the possibility of the spiritual.

The *Testament* therefore creatively engages with and exploits the received construct of Woman—beautiful therefore desired rather than desiring, desired therefore beautiful—and thereby the cultural signification of woman in courtly love and other secular love discourse. In larger interpretative terms, Henryson's poem holds up a glass to an audience which is feminine, soliciting it to recognize and reject—as the exemplary Cresseid is compelled to—the limiting concept of the material feminine which both the narrator, and even Troilus, endorse in different ways. Henryson's poem manifestly makes room for the possibility that the reader will not necessarily be persuaded by what she or he reads, or that an interpretative position defined as feminine entails the dereliction of the intellectual by the sensual. That Woman can mean other than what she conventionally signifies is the possibility which this supposedly canonical patriarchal or misogynistic poem creatively bequeaths to its readers.<sup>25</sup>

Just as the figure of Cresseid serves as an exemplum, so the *Testament* itself works as an exemplary text in other ways. Two processes of interpretation underpin the present exploration of the poem: that of feminizing the text, seeking the reflection and representation of "feminitie," and of feminizing the reader, gendering the interpretative act of reading. The *Testament* is an exemplary text for any theoretical model by which to comprehend the late medieval construction of Woman and the feminine in a Scottish intellectual and cultural context. An analogue may be drawn with Christine de Pisan which suggests a framework for the *Testament* other than that of late medieval and early Renaissance misogyny.

From the outset, the *Testament's* act of male ventriloquism raises questions about the status of the inauthentic or impersonated female voice in general. Does the representation of the female voice in medieval Scottish texts always reinscribe, as Hansen asserts of Chaucer's female articulations, "patri-

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<sup>25</sup>Cresseid's voice becomes in the later sixteenth century a "locus classicus" of female amatory plaint; it is the Henrysonian, rather than Chaucerian, articulation which prevails. Aronstein argues that the *Testament* "domesticated Chaucer's text" for the sixteenth century in its apparent misogynist and antifeminist import (p.19).



archal privilege"?<sup>26</sup> Does Dunbar's "Tretis of the Tua Mariit Wemen and the Wedo," a trinitarian version of *The Wife of Bath*, bear witness to Roberta Krueger's persuasive contention that "precisely because historical woman is marginal to the structures of masculine power, the figure of 'woman' comes to represent opposition and subversion."<sup>27</sup> The act of reading itself, as portrayed in the "Tretis," is provocatively gendered: in the *envoi*, the male narrator dissolves the narrative framework to endorse a gender-divisive audience or readership ("Quhilk wald ze weill to 3our wif, gif ze suld wed one?")<sup>28</sup> This implies a willful act of interpretative male containment as if expressive of the desire to seal off, however playfully, the possibility of the poem's feminist hermeneutics. In the *Testament*, this fragile balance between an identificatory and exclusionary process of reading can also be perceived.

This essay began with the invocation of Woman as a spectral subject in the medieval Scottish literary canon. The supposition that the realm of the feminine remains relatively unexplored and undertheorized in this context can justly be maintained. Elizabeth Ewan and Maureen Meikle have opened up the field of women's cultural, historical, and creative agency in pre-Reformation Scotland as has Priscilla Bawcutt's work already cited on female book ownership. Louise Fradenburg has demonstrated an exceptionally fruitful and illuminating application of deconstructionist, feminist, and psychoanalytic readings of the literary and historical culture of the reigns of James III and IV. Evelyn Newlyn has offered a series of trenchantly politicized feminist interrogations of mid-sixteenth century Bannatyne manuscript.

Yet, despite such exceptional work, it might justly be proposed that the critical corpus of medieval Scottish literature remains theoretically innocent in comparison with the critically revisionist modes brought in the in last decade to medieval European vernacular studies. The substantial readings of gendered representation have not been mirrored to the same degree in the Scottish critical canon. This essay has proposed a methodology or conceptual ways by which both text and reader may be feminized. The first process seeks to analyze the figure of Woman, the trope(s) of femininity, and the symbolism or iconography of the feminine, the second to align this interpretative strategy with the reading position of "women," or the interpretative stance of "Woman," symbolic and actual, posited by the text. No effort or desire is im-

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<sup>26</sup>See Elaine Tuttle Hansen, *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender* (Berkeley, 1992).

<sup>27</sup>Roberta L. Krueger, "Double Jeopardy: The Appropriation of Women in Four Old Romances of the 'Cycle de la Gaguère,'" in Sheila Fisher and Janet E. Halley, eds., *Seeking the Woman in Late Medieval and Renaissance Writings* (Knoxville, 1989), p. 44.

<sup>28</sup>*The Poems of William Dunbar*, ed. Priscilla Bawcutt, 2 vols. (Glasgow, 1998), I, 55, l. 530.

plied to essentialize these strategies under any unified or homogeneous notion of feminist reading practice; the politics and multiplicity of such a practice are impossible to define as the most recent and influential of female-centered medieval readings suggest. Nor, of course, is there a singular concept or ideology of the feminine espoused by this text. Rather, in opposition to recent analyses of Henryson's poem which perceive a recalcitrant and rigorous misogyny in its construction of the fallen Cresseid, the readings offered here suggest the possibility of an ironic and redemptive reading of "feminitie." This feminine tragedy implies that the "poleist glas" mirroring Woman/women in the writings of medieval and early modern Scotland reflects images which are more complex than transparent.

*University of Edinburgh*