The Testament of Cresseid: Are Christian Interpretations Valid?

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The Testament of Cresseid: Are Christian Interpretations Valid?

Most students of Robert Henryson's *The Testament of Cresseid* have argued or implied that the poem is Christian in one or more respects—in its moral presuppositions, its theological framework, or its cosmological scheme.¹ For instance, Marshall W. Stearns believes that the *Testament* "totals the wages of sin in no uncertain way." "...we have seen," Stearns continues, "the effect of the poet's orthodox morality on the characterization and plot of the Testament, and it is clear that the poem was composed from a recognizably moral point of view."² Tatyana Moran, whose treatment of Henryson as a moralist is quite harsh, says that Cresseid's leprosy is "a grim warning to women who use their beauty for immoral purposes...[Henryson] felt no sympathy, nor even the slightest compassion for his heroine, but only contempt and a kind of sadistic pleasure in describing her degradation."³ John MacQueen also regards the poem, on one level, as exemplifying Christian moral standards, arguing that the poet "treats the courtly love relationship, and the religion of love, as types or allegories of relationships which in themselves are seen and judged in terms of Christian morality."⁴

Doubtless the most thoroughgoing as well as influential essay of the Christian school is that of E. M. W. Tillyard, who believes that *The Testament of Cresseid* portrays how Cresseid is brought to repentance for her sins of pride and wrath, thereby achieving Christian salvation.⁵ Tillyard's influence is often apparent in the comments of other critics. For instance, Charles Elliott, in the introduction to his edition of Henryson's poems, says that the "leprous Cresseid, 'dead

1. This article is a revised version of a paper read on May 22, 1970, at the Fifth Biennial Conference on Medieval Studies, sponsored by the Medieval Institute of Western Michigan University.


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to the world, becomes 'alive again unto God.' Kurt Wittig believes that the Testament "holds out a promise of Christian redemption for Creseid, . . . She has violated the laws of love, and revolts against the planets as set on their courses by God, . . . she is saved by her love. Now her soul is redeemed." A. M. Kinghorn also reflects Tillyard's influence in his statement that "Creseid has broken the moral and the theological laws and her sin is punished by the physical affliction of leprosy, but through her eventual repentance and her testament relinquishing earthly things she is permitted to die in the purified state of an aspirant to the conventual life." And Edwin Muir implies that the poem is Christian in his statement, similar to Tillyard's closing remarks, that "the sense that all life . . . is a story and part of a greater story, is . . . one of the surviving virtues of Henryson's poetry. . . ." "He lived near the end of a great age of settlement . . . ; an agreement had been reached regarding the nature and meaning of human life, and the imagination could attain harmony and tranquility."

Even Douglas Duncan, who takes issue with Tillyard regarding the Testament's orthodoxy, thinks that the tension mirrored in the poem occurs within a Christian framework: " . . . The Testament is in many ways an anxious and uncomfortable poem, and . . . so far from reposing on orthodoxy, it questions the divine order quite peremptorily." Nevertheless, Duncan concludes, the story ends "on a note of Christian optimism."

A few scholars have questioned the Christian interpretations of the poem. A. C. Spearing believes that "it is difficult to agree with . . . the usual view of the Testament as a humane work, in which we see Creseid 'healed and repentant by the way of suffering. . . .' It is true that the encounter with Troilus enables Creseid to look behind her disproportionately severe punishment for blasphemy against Cupid and Venus, and to recognize in herself a deeper guilt—a sin which a Christian audience would recognize as such. She is repentant, certainly, but there is no suggestion of healing." Sydney Harth contends

that "one of Henryson’s contemporaries would have had no difficulty in realizing that the Christian God was not being represented in the poem. . . .") And E. Duncan Aswell, in an essentially mythical approach, argues that the planet-gods represent the natural forces of growth and decay: "... the narrator and Cresseid," he concludes, "both belong in a secular universe, not one in which Fortune is seen as an aspect of or partial and imperfect perspective upon divine providence. . . . Henryson’s planet-gods are immanent deities, natural forces, but their dominance is not shown to be counteracted through a belief in God."  

Although I am in agreement with the critics of the non-Christian school, I feel that the arguments for a Christian interpretation of the Testament have not been fully countered. No one who disputes the Christian view, for instance, discusses Cupid’s function in the poem to any extent, despite the fact that the god of love, a central character, figures significantly in Tillyard’s analysis. I shall consider Tillyard’s essay in some detail, therefore, arguing that the Testament portrays a fictional love universe, one which copies the medieval cosmological scheme but which is not symbolic of a Christian cosmos or of Christian spiritual realities. All the elements of the Testament are consistent with my contention that Henryson has created, for the purposes of this poem, a love universe which is both self-contained and eclectic. Its self-containment precludes a relationship to a larger, Christian world; its eclecticism gives the reader an intimation of the complexity of human life, an intimation which justifies one’s considering it a tragedy in a non-medieval sense.

Tillyard believes that The Testament of Cresseid exemplifies "the scheme of orthodox theology."  

Two codes operate within the poem, the code of Love and that of the Church. Although essentially at odds within medieval society, the two codes were complementary in that the fidelity practiced by a devotee of Love could prepare him for a "transfer of allegiance" to the Church’s code.  

As an example, Tillyard refers to Malory’s statement that Guenever "was a true lover, and therefore she had a good end" (that is, died a nun). In developing his thesis that this concept is relevant to Henryson’s poem, Tillyard argues

that "Cupid as creator and the planets with their influence . . . are parts of the general scheme of God's universe."17 Cupid, he says, "is in fact the Eros of Hesiod [,] Plato and Aristotle, oldest of the gods, the creator of order out of chaos, and hence in authority over the others."18 Henryson's "pagan gods are both ornamental . . . and operative in the way the medieval people really believed the planets to work."19 Cupid's statement that the gods "are all sevin delficait, / Participant of devyne sapience" (11.288-89),20 Tillyard believes, "could only bear a solemn theological meaning" to Henryson's medieval audience. As a result, "when Cresseid offends against them [Cupid and the pagan gods] she offends against God's holy laws." She commits the deadly sins of pride and wrath in that she "blames God for her misfortune instead of herself."21 The remainder of the poem tells how "through the working of God's will she was punished, brought to penitence, and ended by taking the blame on herself, in fact the story of her salvation according to the Christian scheme."22 Tillyard argues further that Cresseid's apostrophe concerning Fortune and her bequeathing of her corpse to worms and toads raise all the connotations of the contemptus mundi viewpoint.23 Finally, in dedicating her spirit to Diana, Cresseid "aspires, as far as she can, to the monastic life."24

It would appear that Tillyard's interpretation of Cupid is central to his argument; yet there is a certain ambiguity in his presentation of the god of love's role. Cupid offers a peculiar problem to the student of the poem because as king of the seven planet-gods he does not fit into any preformulated pattern, as do the planet-gods themselves, who are personifications of astrological forces as well as mythical deities. Cupid, however, is not a planet, and his position of authority over the planet-gods in the Testament is, to say the least, unusual. A Christian interpretation of the poem must explain his function. Does he symbolize God? Tillyard suggests this conclusion in his statement that Cupid "is in fact the Eros of Hesiod [,] Plato and Aristotle, oldest of the gods, the creator of order out of chaos," and in his assertion that Cresseid in her condemnation of Cupid and Venus is blaming "God for

17. Tillyard, p. 16.
18. Tillyard, pp. 15-16.
19. Tillyard, p.16.
21. Tillyard, p. 16.
22. Tillyard, p. 17.
her misfortune. . . ." One apparent follower of Tillyard, Charles Elliott, does closely identify Cupid with the Boethian God, stating that Cupid "is arranger and arraigner, superior in his one-ness to the manifoldness of the others. . . . Cupid’s function is analogous to that of Providence, whereby the Divine Intelligence conceives the universe as a timeless whole." Tillyard himself, however, backs away from a specific assertion that Cupid symbolizes the Christian deity, saying only that "Cupid as creator and the planets with their influence . . . are parts of the general scheme of God’s universe." Yet the question remains concerning how Cupid fits into any such “general scheme.”

In my opinion, there is no justification for associating Henryson’s Cupid with the cosmogonic Eros. According to Floyd A. Spencer, the Greeks portrayed Eros in two ways: as a young man or boy who rules over the affairs of love and as a cosmogonic deity, a creator who is master of all nature. Ordinarily, the cosmogonic Eros is represented as old and venerable. His origin is variously portrayed: Hesiod, for instance, characterizes him as “born without parents”; but the two concepts of the god are sometimes so “inextricably interwoven . . . [that] a writer occasionally gives Eros a double origin. . . . Though a boy, foolish and beardless in appearance, Eros is truly venerable, an old man who was a child before Cronus. . . .” The cosmogonic Eros, Spencer continues, is also portrayed in Greek literature as “the author of harmony,” who rules “not by force, but by gentle-voiced persuasion. . . .”

Henryson’s Cupid shares with the cosmogonic Eros only the one—though admittedly unusual—characteristic of his cosmic authority. He is not portrayed in the Testament as a creator, as old and venerable, or as one who rules by “gentle-voiced persuasion.” Furthermore, the presence of his mother among the assembled gods casts doubt on Tillyard’s assertion that Cupid is “oldest of the gods.” Although the cosmogonic Eros was sometimes assigned a double origin, it seems unlikely that if Henryson had known of this intriguing paradox he would have passed over it in silence. Edmund Spenser does not do so in his “An Hymne in Honovr of Love,” in which he speaks of the infant son of Venus as “elder” than “his owne natuittie” (1. 54). It appears, therefore, that Tillyard’s identification of Henryson’s god of love with the Greek Eros is highly questionable.

27. Spencer, p. 124.
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Furthermore, Tillyard certainly is making a wide ideological leap in asserting that Cupid's reference to the planet-gods as "all sevin deificait, / Participant of devyne sapience" "could only bear a solemn theological meaning" to Henryson's audience, and hence that Cresseid "offends against God's holy laws" when she does offense to Cupid and the planet-gods (that is, insults Cupid and Venus). The argument depends not only upon the identification of Cupid with the cosmogonic Eros but also upon the assumption that the planet-gods with their astrological influences were invariably perceived in medieval thought as agents of God's will: "Far from keeping God and the orthodox scheme of salvation in one department and the irrational workings of the stars in another," Tillyard says, "the Middle Ages looked on the stars as an organic part of God's creation and as the perpetual instruments and diffusers of his will." 28

Although in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries the Church did come to a cautious and limited acceptance of astrology, 29 Tillyard is overstating his case. Thomas Aquinas, while agreeing that the movements of the heavenly bodies have their source in divine providence and that the stars do exert influence over matter, denies that the human will is necessarily subject to this influence:

... acts of the free-will, which is the faculty of will and reason, escape the causality of heavenly bodies.

... man is able, by his reason, to act counter to the inclination of the heavenly bodies.

... a great number of men follow their bodily passions, so that their actions are for the most part disposed in accordance with the inclination of the heavenly bodies; while there are few, namely, the wise alone, who moderate these inclinations by reason. 30

Although Cresseid, of course, cannot be numbered among the wise, Aquinas' statement makes clear that resistance to the planets and their influence is not necessarily to be regarded as rebellion against God.

Essentially, the point at issue in Tillyard's analysis of the cosmology of the Testament is whether in fact the Middle Ages perceived a close relationship between "the orthodox scheme of salvation" and


the "workings of the stars." C. S. Lewis' comments about the relationship between medieval Christianity and the medieval picture of the universe (which he calls the "Model") are pertinent here:

Their cosmology and their religion were not such easy bedfellows as might be supposed. At first we may fail to notice this, for the cosmology appears to us, in its firmly theistic basis and its ready welcome to the supernatural, to be eminently religious. And so in one sense it is. But it is not eminently Christian. . . . Delighted contemplation of the Model and intense religious feeling of a specifically Christian character are seldom fused except in the work of Dante.\(^9\)

The second major argument of Tillyard's essay is that "the code of Love could in its way co-operate with the code of the Church, even preparing its devotees for a transfer of allegiance," and hence that Cresside's acknowledgment of her own fault is in reality a Christian repentance resulting in the salvation of her soul. I question whether the belief in a relationship between the two codes was as widespread among medieval writers as Tillyard suggests: Malory's comment about Guenever seems insufficient to establish the point. Furthermore, of what does Cresside repent in her final apostrophe? Of her falseness and fickleness, her failure to remain loyal to the love she had earlier pledged to Troilus:

All Faith and Lufe I promisit to the,
Was in the self fickill and frivolous:
O fals Cresside, and trew Knicht Troilus.
(ll. 551-53)

She does not repent of that original love, which by Christian standards was in itself sinful.

In addition, Cresside's earlier complaint against Fortune and her deathbed bequeathal of her body to toads and her spirit to Diana do not, when taken within the larger context of the poem, indicate that an "otherworldly morality"\(^{32}\) is at work in the Testament. The complaint represents the second stage in the progressive deepening and maturing of Cresside's character. She is first revealed, in her remarks to the gods, as a perulant, shallow woman concerned only with her own small world:

Ye causit me always understand and trow
The seid of lufe was sawin in my face,
And my grew grene throw your supplie and grace.

32. Tillyard, pp. 24-25.
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But now allace that seid with froist is slane,
And I fra luifferis left and all forlane.
(ll. 136-40)

After being afflicted with leprosy, Cresseid sees herself as a participant in the misery of all mankind—or more specifically here, womankind—subject to the dark and irrational workings of Fortune. Ordinarily one would expect such a complaint in a medieval poem to point toward an otherworldly view. But, again, in her final statement, when she lays the blame for what has happened upon herself, Cresseid in no way condemns the very worldly love which existed, and to a degree still exists, between her and Troilus. Her advice to (male) lovers is not that they reject all earthly love but rather that they be wary of fickle women:

Lovers be war and tak gude heid about
Quhome that ye lufe, for quhome ye suffer paine.
I lat yow wiz, thai is rilt few thairous
Quhome ye may traiost to have trew lufe agane.
Freif quhen ye will, your labour is in vaine.
Thairfoir, I reid, ye tak thame as ye find,
For thay ar sad as Widdercok in Wind,
Because I knew the greit unstabile
Brokkill as glas, into my sel I say,
Traistin in uther als greit unfaithfulnes:
Als unconstant, and als untrewe of fay.
Thocht sum be trew, I wait richt few ar thay,
Quha findis treuth lat him his Lady ruse:
None but my self as now I will accuse.
(ll. 561-74)

Within the context of the entire poem, therefore, Cresseid's complaint against Fortune is principally significant in terms of what it reveals about her growth in perception, not for any contemptus mundi orientation one might expect it to suggest. Similarly, her dedication of her body to toads and worms and of her spirit to Diana cannot, when viewed in context, indicate that the Testament proffers an "otherworldly morality." Instead, this act is an expression of her self-disgust, her revulsion against her own involvement in "Lustis Lecherous" (1. 559). Again, her praise of Troilus' fidelity indicates that Cresseid is condemning not all sexual love or even all sexual immorality, but rather her own promiscuity with Diomeid and other members of the Greek court. This is courtly love morality, not Christian.

33. Spearing (p. 141) rightly points out that "this moralizing does not propose any possible remedy for the whole situation, comparable with the turning from earthly to heavenly love at the end of Troilus and Criseyde."
Tillyard and most other scholars of both the Christian and non-Christian schools ignore or give insufficient attention to Cresseid's warning to lovers and to the moralitas appearing in the final stanza of the poem. Her warning (ll. 561-74, quoted above) is essentially anti-feminist, in that she castigates the all-too-common unfaithfulness of women. Though some are true, she says, they are right few; therefore, let him who finds a true lady praise her. This is a kind of courtly love anti-feminism. Similarly, the narrator's moralitas reveals a concern not with sexual immorality in the Christian sense but rather with the cardinal courtly love sin of infidelity, here specifically the infidelity of women to their lovers:

Now, worthie Wemen, in this Ballet schort,  
Made for your worship and Instructioun,  
Of Chretie, I monische and exhort,  
Ming not your lust with fals deception.  
(ll. 610-13)

This final, very explicit admonition, far from being perfunctory, pulls together the threads of the poem: lovers, beware, for women are fickle; women, beware, for Fortune is fickle and is not to be tempted.

One must conclude, I believe, that The Testament of Cresseid is from start to finish a poem built upon courtly love premises. This is to say nothing about Henryson's personal beliefs as a Christian. For the purposes of his poem he has created a make-believe love cosmos which contains several elements adapted from medieval thought—adapted from medieval thought, not symbolic of Christian spiritual realities. Sydney Harth is right in saying that "Henryson was a conscious artist whose aim in The Testament of Cresseid was to tell an old story anew." Harth is wrong, however, in his belief that Henryson is being ironic in describing his poem as a "tragedie" or that this is not "a particularly moving poem, or one which is unusually disturbing

34. Thus, Duncan says (p. 129): "The explanation of the moralitas that it was written for 'the worship and instructioun' of 'worthie women' satisfies no one . . . ." Stearns (pp. 54, 63) feels that both Cresseid's warning against infidelity and Henryson's concluding exhortation are consistent with the viewpoint of "orthodox morality" advanced in the poem. Although Stearns is right, of course, in his belief that Troilus' "chaste virtues" (p. 59) are contrasted with Cresseid's promiscuity, Henryson makes clear that Troilus' "chastity" is of a courtly love variety: "For lust, of me thou keipt gude contenance, Honest and chait in conversation" (ll. 554-55, my italics). Orthodox Christian morality was not served by the illicit relationship between Troilus and Cresseid. Aswell (pp. 482-83, 486-87) discusses with perception both Cresseid's comments on fickleness and the moralitas. I feel, however, that his interpretation of both passages as applying to all mankind, rather than specifically to women, somewhat dulls the edge of Henryson's story.

35. Harth, p. 479.
or profound." 36 The Testament of Cresseid is a moving poem because Henryson has endowed his fictional world with much of the complexity which makes real life moving and profound. Part of this complexity has been explored by Duncan Aswell and John MacQueen, whose analyses of the planet-gods as symbolic of the forces of growth and decay I consider not incompatible with my view of the poem. 37 The progressive deepening of Cresseid’s character, the reader’s growing awareness of the instability of human life, the narrator’s fine sense of balance whereby he portrays Cresseid both as a victim of circumstance and as a woman responsible for her own downfall—all contribute (and I agree in this respect with Tillyard) to make the Testament a poem which “through being truly tragic . . . takes itself right out of its medieval setting and allies itself to the tragic writings of all ages.” 38

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37. As I have indicated, however, I disagree with MacQueen’s view of the poem as basically a Christian moral allegory, and particularly with his application of the allegorical moralitas of Henryson’s Orpheus and Eurydice to the Testament.
38. Tillyard, p. 6.