Divine Justice in Henryson's Testament of Cresseid

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Divine Justice in Henryson's
Testament of Cresseid

The central problem in Henryson's Testament of Cresseid is the question of divine justice. After Diomede abandons her and she descends to the "Court commoun," Cresseid blames her misery on the gods. They reply by punishing her with leprosy. Appalled by such severity, the narrator complains that it exceeds the measure of divine justice. Even when Cresseid later grows in moral understanding and repents her sins, she is not redeemed for eternal salvation. Given these facts, some critics argue that Cresseid's punishment is unjust, even that she suffers in a world ruled only by capricious demonstrations of divine power. Others reply that she does achieve some kind of "salvation," thus vindicating the gods' action. Neither of these views is entirely satisfactory. The one ignores Cresseid's genuine moral growth, prompted by divine punishment, while the other implies some eternal reward for which there is no evidence in the poem. Yet this disagreement can be instructive because it reflects a conflict within the poem, though the nature of this conflict has not been clearly defined.

The narrator and his audience view the action with the grace of Christian faith, but Cresseid and her contemporaries, living before the time of Christ, must seek what truth they can with a limited and imperfect theology. This duality first appears in the description of Calchas and his temple:

1. Line 77. This and all subsequent quotations are from H. Harvey Wood, ed., The Poems and Tales of Robert Henryson. 2nd ed. (Edinburgh and London: Oliver and Boyd, 1958).


This auld Calchas, after the Law was tho,
Was keiper of the Tempill, as ane Preist,
In quhilk Venus and hir Sone Cupido
War honourit, and his Chalmer was thame neist.
(106-9)

St. Paul had distinguished the Jews of the Old Law and the Christians of the New Law from the pagan gentiles who lived "after the Law was tho," and St. Augustine and other Church Fathers gradually worked out the doctrine that these pagans had always been governed by divine providence. God had revealed himself through his creation to all men, and this natural revelation constituted a natural law which they were bound to obey. The Fathers often referred to Cain and Job as men outside the Judao-Christian revelation who behaved, and were judged, according to this natural law, and it was not long before the same standards were applied to pagan Greeks and Romans as well.

Even the pagan gods played their part in God's providential design. Although at first the Christian apologists denounced the pagan gods, the Church soon learned ways of incorporating them into its own theology. Tertullian, for example, admitted that the astral divinities had some influence on human history until the coming of Christ, and the later Fathers explained this by making the pagan gods "intermediaries" through whom the Christian God might act. Once the pagan gods had been restored to a place of some dignity, though always carefully subordinated to the Christian God, medieval mythographers and allegorists began to interpret the old gods in radical new ways.

4. See especially Romans 2: 14-16, where St. Paul clearly distinguishes the revealed law from the law "written in the hearts" of gentiles.

5. St. Augustine's statement of the matter is both typical and concise: "God can never be believed to have left the kingdoms of men, their dominations and servitudes, outside the laws of his providence" (De civ. Dei 5.11); translation by Marcus Bodds (New York: Modern Library, 1950), p. 158.

6. See Augustine, De civ. Dei 18.47, and Gregory the Great, Moralium (esp. PL, 76, 119f.).

7. In De civ. Dei 8.5, Augustine concedes that some pagan thinkers, especially the Platonists, had become aware of the true God through natural reason. Through the influence of such writers as Orosius and Isidore, it became commonplace to consider the worth of classical figures alongside that of biblical figures in universal histories.


By the thirteenth century, Cupid could be equated with the Angel of
Annunciation and Minerva with the Blessed Virgin. And no less an
authority than Alexander Neckham "read" the planetary gods as the
gifts of the Holy Spirit, contending that these gods helped to teach
the very virtues that prepared men to accept Christian wisdom.
Eventually, some late medieval humanists made at least a nominal
equation between pagan divinities and the Christian God, as when
God in Everyman is called "the hyest Supyter of all."

Still, no medieval writers actually confused pagan religion with the
Christian faith. Medieval theologians typically followed St. Augustine's
view that God extended grace to all men, making them restless for
something beyond their material surroundings in order to draw them
to him. When pagans responded to this impulse, they did recognize
divine power governing the universe, but they mistakenly divided this
power among several gods and goddesses. The point is not simply that
these pagans developed false theologies, but that they were struggling,
unwittingly, toward the Christian God who had not yet revealed him-
self to them in the Incarnation. A medieval Christian could therefore
respect the limited role the pagan gods had served, under divine
providence, in the universal order of salvation history. But orthodox
theologians took care to avoid Pelagianism by defining a rigorous
doctrine of grace and merit.

Pagans might well achieve high levels of moral perfection by fulfilling the laws of nature, but they could not thereby merit eternal salvation. From the time when St. Augustine thundered against the Pelagians until the later middle ages when, under threat of reviving Pelagianism, such theologians as Bradwardine and Wyclif reaffirmed his teaching, the Church officially proclaimed that pagans could not merit the sanctifying grace necessary for salvation. There were, of course, celebrated cases of righteous pagans who were,

10. Szemec, p. 105.
12. The virtues referred to here are discussed by St. Augustine, De
doctrina Christiana 2.7.
Englische Dramen. vol. 4 (Louvain: A Uyspuyys, 1904).
15. Augustine explains this as a nearly forgotten memory of God, which
moves good pagans to theological speculation; see his De Trinitate (PL
42.1049, 1052).
15a. See J. Riviere, "Merite," Dictionnaire de Theologie Catholique, 10
(Paris, 1928), and related articles.
according to popular legends, granted special gifts of sanctifying grace—usually, as with Trajan, through the intercession of a great saint. But the Church generally regarded attempts to venture beyond prescribed limits with great suspicion, and most writers carefully adhered to the Augustinian position.

Applying all of this to Henryson’s Testament, I would like to offer two preliminary observations: (1) since the pagan gods could be regarded by medieval writers as imperfect representations of the true God, any action by a pagan against his gods would imply an action against the Christian God; (2) since good behavior on the part of a pagan, even a very pious pagan, could not merit sanctifying grace, a Christian poet could not conduct him to eternal salvation. With these observations in mind, I now propose to examine the question of divine justice in Henryson’s poem.

Since this question arises only in connection with Cresseid’s sins, we must first examine the nature of those sins. As in Chaucer’s Troilus and Criseyde, her most obvious sin is her infidelity to Troilus. Henryson goes beyond Chaucer, however, to relate Cresseid’s moral disintegration after she is “divorced” by Diomede:

Than desolat scho walkit up and doun,
And sum men sayis into the Court commoun.

O fair Cresseid, the flour and A per se
Of Troy and Grece, how was thou fortunat!
To change in filth al thy feminitic,
And be with fleschlie lust sa maculair,
And go amang the Greikis air and lait
Sa gigolitike, takand thy foulp plesance!
(76-83)

At this point, Cresseid does not even recognize the sinfulness of her actions. She rails against Cupid and Venus, claiming that they have broken faith with her because she has not had more success in her sexual escapades. Cresseid is not Chaucer’s heroine, whose worst failing was in being "slydying of corage"; she is rather a willful, self-centered woman who uses promises of divine favor as an excuse for amorality. She has not understood that Cupid and Venus did fulfill their "devyn responsaill" by giving her Troilus. They never promised that she might be a "flour of luif" in the hurly-burly of the "Court common." Thus her accusation is unjust:

"O fals Cupide, it nane to wyte bot thow,  
And thy Mother, of lufe, the blind Goddes!  
Ye causst me alwayis understand and trow  
The seid of lufe was sawin in my face,  
And ay grew grene throw your supplie and grace.  
Bot now allace that seid with froist is slane,  
And I fra luifferis left and all forlanc.

(134-40)

Yet there is some ambiquity here. The gods had not made clear to Cresseid that her sexual sins would bring unhappiness, and her initial success with Diomeded and, we may suppose, with others after him evidently led her to assume that Cupid and Venus sanctioned all her affairs. Henryson could have pointed out that her behavior violated natural law, but he focusses instead on the more clear-cut sin of blasphemy.

Cupid responds to her criticism of divine justice by convening a court of gods, and then he states the case against her:

"Lo!" (quod Cupide), "qua will blasphemte the name  
Of his awin God, outhur in word or deid,  
To all Godis he dois baith lak and schame,  
And sulde have bitter panis to his meid.  
I say this by yone wretchit Cresseid,  
The quilk throw me was sum ryme flour of lufe,  
Me and my Mother starklie can repute.

"Saying of hir greit Infelicite  
I was the caus, and my Mother Venus,  
And blind Goddes, hir caid, that micht not se,  
With scander and defame Injurious;  
Thus hir leving unclene and Lecherous  
Scho wald returne on me and my Mother,  
To quhome I schew my grace abone all uther."

(247-87)

The sinfulness of Cresseid’s "unclene" life is not at issue here. Cupid argues that she chose this life for herself and must now accept its consequences without impugning divine justice. Cresseid’s sexual sins have hurt Troilus, perhaps some of her lovers, and now herself, but her blasphemy attacks the gods and could, if unchecked, undermine faith in all divine justice. Thus her sins against men call for human punishment: Cresseid is now scorned as an "unworthie outwaill" (129). But her defiance of the gods requires divine retribution. There is no question here about the justice of such retribution: the nature of blasphemy itself justifies its punishment.

Since a Christian poet could, as we have seen, interpret actions against the pagan gods in the context of his own theology, we may
turn to Henryson's contemporaries in order to learn more about the way in which they regarded such blasphemy as Cresseid's. In explaining the relations between God and creation, late medieval theology laid great stress on God's omnipotence in order to explain his absolute freedom.37 William of Ockham, for example, argued that God's power is limited only by the principle of contradiction. In his view, God could, theoretically, overturn his ordinances and will a man to steal or commit adultery, and the fact that God instigated such actions would make them good.18 But God could not order a man not to love him since, in the very act of turning from God, the man would be loving God.40 Therefore, blasphemy, with its vocal rejection of God, could not without contradiction be instigated by God. Now it is not necessary to prove that Henryson had Ockham's works at hand when he wrote the Testament because Ockham's argument had become a commonplace in late medieval thought.20 The important point for us is that the argument helps to explain Henryson's use of the gods to punish Cresseid only for her blasphemy. She had claimed, however speciously, that the gods tacitly encouraged her promiscuity, and the poem gives no indication that she would have admitted culpability for her unhappiness. But her blasphemy, which could not have been instigated by the gods, clearly justifies the punishment that eventually leads to her moral regeneration.

17. After being ignored for several centuries, late medieval theology has just begun to attract modern scholars. Some of the best studies are Gordon Leff, Bradwardine and the Pelagians (Cambridge Univ. Press, 1957); Heiko A. Oberman, The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1968), and Forerunners of the Reformation: The Shape of Late Medieval Thought Illustrated by Key Documents (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966); J. A. Robson, Wyclif and the Oxford Schools (Cambridge Univ. Press, 1961).

18. 2 Sent., 19, 0. I am following the only full edition of Ockham, the Opera Plurima (Lyon, 1494-96; rpt. in facsimile, London: Gregg Press, 1962).


20. Marshall W. Stearns, in Robert Henryson (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1949), claims that Henryson probably held a Master of Arts degree (pp. 10-11), and it is likely that he studied at the University of Paris (p. 11). Leff, Oberman and Robson have shown that Ockhamist thought was the center of raging controversies at Oxford, Paris and elsewhere in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. It therefore seems highly improbable that a university-educated man would not be familiar with at least the major tenets of Ockham's theology, but since the point is not necessary to my argument I shall not insist on it here.
Accordingly, Saturn passes judgment on Cresseid, but his harshness provokes an emotional outburst from the narrator:

O cruel Satyrne! traitr and angrie,
Hard is thy dome, and to malitious;
On fair Cresseid quyhe hes thou na mercie,
Qhilik was sa sweit, gentill and amorous?
Withdraw thy sentence and be gracious
As thou was never; so schawis thou thy deid,
Ane wraikfull sentence gevin on faire Cresseid.

(323-29)

The narrator does not object to Saturn’s right to sentence Cresseid; his outburst appears to be motivated solely by a sentimental sympathy for a woman “sa sweit, gentill and amorous.” His complaint is silenced when Cynthia, who had been introduced by Mercury as a moderate judge (296-300), supports Saturn’s judgment and describes in gruesome detail how leprosy will destroy Cresseid’s beauty (334-43). The narrator never again questions the gods’ justice. Nor does Cresseid. She complains at first about the loss of her beauty, but she does not question the justice of her punishment:

"My blaspheming now have I bocht full deir.
All eirdlie joy and mirth I set arei.
Allace this day, allace this wofull ryle,
Quhen I began with my Goddis for to Clyde."

(334-57)

This is the first time that Cresseid has admitted any fault of her own or taken responsibility for the consequences of her behavior. But her moral regeneration is slow in coming.

Cresseid indulges, initially, in self-pity and bitterness against Fortune. Nowhere are we more aware of the limits of her view of life than in her “Complaint.” It is thoroughly stoic in its insistence on mutability and contempt of Fortune, but there is no higher scale of values to give meaning to her suffering. She uses the familiar ubi sunt motif, contrasting past glories with present decay, to argue that life is essentially tragic, and she asks the ladies of Troy and Greece to see in the “mirrour” of her life the capriciousness of Fortune. Cresseid has evidently discarded her naive assumption that life is, or could be, a continuous enjoyment of love, but she now adopts a cynical and, in its own way, equally naive pessimism that offers a new way of escaping moral responsibility. She abandons her admission that her blasphemy brought about her present state, blaming her unhappiness entirely on Fortune, which is “fikkill, quhen scho beginnis & steirls” (469). Even when the Lipper Lady counsels her to “mak vertew of ane neid” (478),
Cresseid resigns herself to her new life only because she has no other choice:

Thair was na buit, but furth with thame scho yeid,
Fra place to place, quhili cauld and hounyer sair
Compellit hir to be ane rank beggar.

(481-83)

Nevertheless, we should bear in mind that Cresseid’s limitations are not entirely her fault since, unlike Chaucer’s Griselda, she has no Christian theology to motivate patient suffering as a means to salvation.

But the poem does not leave us with this melancholy observation. In the next scene, Cresseid meets Troilus and, although she does not recognize him as the piteous knight until later, this meeting is the moral turning point in her life. For the first time, Cresseid admits her guilt in being unfaithful to Troilus:

"My mynd in fleschlie foull afectioun
Was Inclynit to Lustis Lecherous;
Fy fals Cresseid, O trew Knicht Troylus."

(558-60)

She does qualify this self-accusation somewhat by noting that she, in her instability, is no worse than most lovers, but she no longer tries to evade her own guilt: "Nane but my self as now I will accuse" (574). Cresseid has come as far as she may without the light of Christian faith. Not only has she faced the fact of her infidelity, but she has finally accepted its consequences. More positively, Cresseid now understands the value of "trew lufe" (591), and in her testament she wills her soul to Diana:

"My Spreit I leif to Diane quhair scho dwellis,
To walk with hir in waist Woddis and Wellis."

(587-88)

Leaving her soul to the goddess of chastity is, apparently the best Cresseid can do with her non-Christian eschatology. She recognizes the need for a transcendental, eternal scale of values, but she is not at all clear about what that might be. After all, Diana is merely a divine representative of what Cresseid lost in life. Following Diana into some vague afterlife ("quhair scho dwellis") hardly amounts to salvation. Nor is there any evidence that Cresseid is, in fact, received by Diana into "waist Woddis and Wellis."

Nevertheless, the gods of Cresseid’s theology are vindicated because, as we have seen, their punishment is just and does lead to her moral regeneration. Cresseid and, by implication, the narrator learn to accept
divine justice even when they cannot fully understand it. The narrator’s understanding is somewhat greater than hers, however, because he is a Christian who sees the value of “Cheritie” (612). Yet there remains a disquieting sense that the problem has not been completely resolved. We see that Cresseid’s theology, from a Christian perspective, is severely limited; yet when we turn to the narrator, we fail to learn much more about the workings of God’s justice. What does happen to Cresseid after death? Dante, Langland and the author of St. Erkenwald ventured to admit righteous pagans to paradise who had received special gifts of sanctifying grace from God. Chaucer was somewhat more cautious, dispatching Archite and Troilus to pagan “heavens.” Henryson is more cautious still. While never confirming it, the poem also never denies the possibility that Cresseid may be saved. Such ambiguity is characteristic of much late medieval theology, which claimed that God could use his absolute power to suspend the ordinary law and accept a sinner from the Church. Henryson thus leaves God’s options open, implying an unconditional acceptance of divine justice. Readers who remain dissatisfied with this conclusion should not fault Henryson for failing to resolve all the questions his poem raises. Such readers should take their quarrel beyond the poem to the theological tradition it implies. The poem itself suggests simply that (1) divine justice has been vindicated in the actions of the pagan gods, (2) the Christian God whom they represent must, by implication, also be just, and (3) whatever God may choose as the ultimate resting place for Cresseid’s soul will therefore be just. But since this justice, though itself reasonable, transcends human reason, it must be accepted on faith.

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