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"Teaching the *Testament of Cresseid*: Contemporary Issues in a Medieval Context"

by Barbara A. Goodman

Many instructors, when teaching *Troilus and Criseyde*, discuss the sources and analogues of the story, partly to enhance the students' understanding of Chaucer's choices in his narrative and partly to illustrate the evolution of this once popular, now obscure, story. When I introduce the students to Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid*, their expressions grow interested and their eyes gleam—sex, angry gods, and leprosy—it has it all. Its length makes it easily accessible to students who have trouble with lengthier Middle English texts and, while it is written in Middle Scottish, my students have not found that a hindrance to their understanding or enjoyment.^[1] Moreover, with a wide range of significant societal issues that are current today, such as gender and the role of women, class and the male hierarchy, and religion and the intrusion of gods, *Testament of Cresseid* is strong enough to stand on its own and to be a successful text for undergraduate English majors in Survey of Medieval Literature courses and other upper level medieval literature courses.^[2] My students' engagement with this text, as well as its multiplicity of meanings, helped me recognize that *Testament of Cresseid* is

worth exploring on its own behalf, not just as a supplemental text to Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*.

Due to its style, many scholars date *Testament of Cresseid* as one of Henryson's later works, near the end of the 1400s. *Testament of Cresseid* exposes students to events and issues in medieval Britain, but from a marginalized society's perspective rather than from the dominant society. As Marshall Stearns states in his book on Henryson, "Although the fifteenth century in Scotland was a golden age of Scottish culture, it was also an age of transition, of political turmoil and civil war, of unscrupulous violence and bloody treachery."^[3] The conflicts between the Scottish factions themselves and with the English are why this "[b]order society was battered and transformed in the later Middle Ages,"^[4] and why Henryson's work helps bring these issues to light. The Scottish royal family's close connections to France and other European powers demonstrate their concerns not only with Scottish politics but also Continental politics.^[5] An educated author, such as Henryson, would not limit his work's commentary, but illustrate his poem with issues that concerned all of Europe. Delving into them from a society on the margins of English culture gives more insight into how England, as well as Europe, perceived societal conflicts and disruptions. For students, many of whom can feel themselves outside mainstream society, exploring societal issues through a marginalized, border society gives them a bifurcated view of how socially the

marginalized perceive the powerful in society and historically how those outside of England viewed the English actions and aggressions.

In the text, Cresseid begins as an attractive woman whose despair and anger lead her to accuse Venus and Cupid of falseness and deceit. The gods view this accusation as a challenge to the established hierarchy. Robert Kindrick explains, “[I]n affronting the powers of the universe, she is also attacking a universal medieval principle of order, the hierarchical structure of the universe.”^[6] Henryson delineates this hierarchy of the gods early in the text when he catalogues the gods’ arrivals at court according to their degrees; the patriarchal hierarchy is recognized by the precise ordering that Henryson utilizes in describing the gods.^[7] At the beginning of his response to her words, Cupid indicates her offense to him, her personal god. But then he continues his tirade by linking her words to all the gods. He underscores how her blasphemous words injure all of them and that for this reason she must be punished:

“And sen ye ar all sevin deificait,
Participant of devyne sapience,
This greit injure done to our hie estait
Me think with pane we suld mak recompence;
Was never to goddes done sic violence:
As weill for yow as for my self I say,
Thairfoir ga help to revenge, I yow pray!” (ll. 288-294)^[8]

To question the hierarchy is both impious and dangerous. For a creature of the lower order, such as Cresseid, to challenge the gods, is to challenge the order of the universe and possibly bring that universe into chaos.^[9] Female defiance of the male patriarchy

leads to distortions and deformity. Females should not defy the hierarchy—they should submit to it.

This section challenging the established hierarchy precedes the section where Cresseid is cursed with leprosy.^[10] Cresseid's leprosy is depicted through Saturn and Cynthia's curses:

'Fra heit of bodie I the now depryve,
And to thy seiknes sal be na recure,
But in dolour thy dayis to indure.
'Thy cristall ene minglit with blude I mak
Thy voice sa cleir unpleasand, hoir, and hace,
Thy lustie lyre ovispred with spottis blak,
And lumpis haw appeirand in thy face: (ll. 334-340)

This elaboration of Cresseid's physical disfigurement becomes a reflection of her behavior sexually and politically. Yet, with this imposed disease and deformity from the pagan gods, the question becomes how Cresseid deals with the deformity. Is she defiant or is she repentant? And are her final actions Christian within the framework of the pagan society? Cresseid recognizes her loss of beauty and connects it to a bleak and hopeless fate. She uses her grim destiny as a way to warn other women of what could befall them if they do as she did:

"O ladyis fair of Troy and Grece, attend
My miserie, quhilk nane may comprehend,
.....
Be war in tyme, approchis neir the end,
And in in your mynd ane mirrour mak of me: (ll. 452-53; 456-57)

Cresseid's lengthy lament catalogues her losses and how they are the consequence of her actions. She views her treatment of Troilus as the cause for her leprosy, and as the skeletons do in *Three Living and Three Dead* works, Cresseid recognizes that all will someday suffer their own losses of beauty or youth. Then, as she prepares for death, Cresseid visualizes her dead body:

Heir I beteiche my corps and carioun
With wormis and with taidis to be rent; (ll. 577-578)

By visualizing her body with worms and toads tormenting it, she is accepting her fate of being condemned to everlasting torture. With Cresseid's acceptance of her fate as a consequence of her transgressive challenges, the text's perspective becomes supportive of the established hierarchy and illustrative of the instability that can occur in a person's life or within society itself that can be caused by defying the established hierarchy. Furthermore, with the description of a tormented dead body which Cresseid presents, Christian texts are evoked,^[11] serving as a reminder that while this text uses pagan gods it is a product of the medieval Christian hierarchy.^[12] Cresseid will suffer for her sins: sins of lust, of course, but even more seriously, sins of stepping outside her societal norms and questioning their worth.^[13] Yet the irony is that in her lament, Cresseid does not fully recognize that her true transgression is her hierarchical challenge, not her sexual promiscuity.

Viewing these societal concerns from a marginalized or border society gives those concerns an unusual piquancy. While Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* investigates

some of the same issues, such as Christian values illustrated through pagan gods in a pagan society, it does so from the framework of a politically prominent society. Moreover, Chaucer's emphasis on character and individual tensions has Chaucer's Criseyde concerned more with her personal failings and principles more than her defiance of the social hierarchy. She blames herself for her timidity and weakness for her situation, while Henryson's Cresseid blames the gods who created her social milieu and its hierarchical structure. Chaucer's Criseyde may undergo internal corruption or marring, but she is not physically marred and marked like Henryson's Cresseid is. Both Criseyde and Cresseid lament their conditions, but the causes of their conditions and thus the consequences of their actions are distinctive.

Through the *Testament of Cresseid*'s use of diseased female imagery, the weakened body politic becomes female and the traditionally male hierarchy becomes vulnerable. With these images of disintegrating societal standards and defying social hierarchies, the female body politic and diseased body forms transcend their cultural time period and speak to contemporary questions on shifting perceptions of gender, political institutions, and religion. Whether examining *Testament of Cresseid* within the parameters of Chaucer or, as I am advocating, on its own merits as an accessible text that has its roots in a marginalized society, *Testament of Cresseid* offers new insights into female roles and societal hierarchies. Its deformed female body politic depicts a state that is in disarray and that is disintegrating, and it illustrates what can happen to a

society which is challenged from within. These insights may or may not coincide with students' perspectives on these issues, but its engagement with them creates a text worth studying. *Testament of Cresseid* engages students with its storyline and its vivid narrative, and it challenges with its social issues. Indeed, in a lively and vivid text, Henryson explores important themes and societal concerns of late medieval society that are as germane today as they were in the 1400s.

Endnotes:

[1] The TEAMS edition of Henryson's works, available online and in print, is an accessible edition for undergraduate students. My students all found it a comparably straightforward read.

[2] *Testament of Cresseid* would also be effective in courses that cover medieval literature for the non-major, if a good Modern English text is available. Its themes and issues would appeal, but the language may be too challenging for the non-major who has barely been exposed to Chaucer's Middle English.

[3] Marshall W. Stearns, *Robert Henryson* (New York: Columbia UP, 1949) 14.

[4] Goodman, Anthony "Religion and Warfare in the Anglo-Scottish Marches." *Medieval Frontier Societies* Eds. Robert Bartlett and Angus MacKay (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989) 249.

[5] As Robert L. Kindrick stated in his introduction to the TEAMS edition of *The Poems of Robert Henryson*, "Disagreements with their neighbors to the South caused the Scots to form alliances with nations on the Continent. . . . It is not surprising that we find influences of Neoplatonism and Continental rhetoric and literary theory in the works of Henryson. . . ." (3).

[6] Robert L. Kindrick, *Robert Henryson* (Boston: Twayne P (G.K. Hall and Co., 1979) 127.

[7] Henryson starts with the one of highest rank, Saturn, then to Jupiter, Mars, Phebus, Venus, Mercury, and lastly down to Cynthia, the moon. The patriarchal hierarchy is recognized and extolled by the precise ordering which Henryson utilizes in developing the gods' ranks through the order in which they are described. Furthermore, each god or goddess is described in great detail, their appearances and natures evident from Henryson's elaborate itemizing

[8] All quotations from Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid* are from the TEAMS edition.

[9] Kindrick, *Robert Henryson* 127.

[10] Certainly, medieval authors who used leprosy in their texts understood its implications not only as a physical but also as a moral disease. See Nathaniel Brody's book on leprosy for further discussion.

[11] A text that uses similar imagery is a contemporary Middle English text, *Awntyrs off Arthure*, which also describes a dead body tormented with toads and serpents.

[12] A similar reminder is found earlier in the text when Cupid accuses Cresseid of blasphemy: "Lo, quod Cupide, quha will blasphem the name/Of his awin god" (ll. 274-275).

[13] The religious implications in *Testament of Cresseid* are not easily apprehended. Cresseid's finding salvation, as per a good Christian, might seem to occur when she finally blames herself for her fall: "nane but my self as now I accuse" (l. 574); however, this line comes at the end of Cresseid's lament over her falseness to Troilus. She does not lament her accusation to the hierarchy of the gods. Moreover, her remorse as expressed in her will continues to be over her falseness to Troilus, not her anger at the gods. Cresseid views her sexual behavior as her sinful transgressions, not her words to the gods. Certainly, there are warnings against sexual promiscuity, but her punishment of leprosy seems to be more for her challenge to the gods—why else would Cupid argue his case by warning the gods that an accusation against one is an accusation against all. Therefore, the ironic issue becomes, while Cresseid repents, is it not possible that she never truly understands her offense against the system? Her repentance in her eyes may be sincere, but in reality it is incidental because it is not what the real crime was.

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