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Author(s): Patrick Timmis

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Saturn and Soliloquy: Henryson's Conversation with Chaucerian Free Will

PATRICK TIMMIS

ABSTRACT: Chaucer's deep interest in Boethius inspired several poetic contemplations of free will's status in a technically pagan classical past. The prime example is *Troilus and Criseyde*, in which Troilus charges the gods with tyranny before eventually accepting his own responsibility for the poem's tragic events. This article argues that Robert Henryson grants to Cresseid this same maturation process as regards her view of Providence. Cresseid begins by cursing Cupid and Venus for making her beautiful and then condemning her to lose both lovers and status. The gods' punishment for this "blasphemy" is to take away her beauty and "heit," a response that draws an outcry from Cresseid, the poem's narrator, and the poem's critics. The punishments are, however, simply the physical manifestation of Cresseid's own decisions, received because of her refusal to accept personal responsibility for her actions, and overcome when she finally does accept that responsibility.

*O sop of sorrow, sonkin into cair,
O captive Cresseid, for now and ever mair
Gane is thy joy and all thy mirth in eird;
Of all blyithnes now art thou blaiknit bair;
Thair is na salve may saif the of thy sair!
Fell is thy fortoun, wickit is thy weird,*

*Thy blys is baneist, and thy ball on breird!
Under the earth, God gif I gravin wer,
Quhair nane of Grece nor yit of Troy nicht heird!*

—HENRYSON, *The Testament of Cresseid*, 407–15¹

Geoffrey Chaucer's deep interest in Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy* inspired several poetic contemplations of free will's status in a technically pagan classical past. The prime example (after Chaucer's own translation of Boethius) is Troilus's complaint against the arbitrary, all-conquering power of the gods who have wrenched Criseyde away from him:

“That foresight of divine purveyaunce
Hath seyn alwey me to forgon Criseyde,
Syn God seeth every thyng, out of doutaunce,
And hem disponyth, thorough his ordinaunce.”
(*Tr*, IV, 961–64)²

Unwittingly quoting Book V of the *Consolatio*, Troilus concludes that since God ordains everything, he must have ordained that Troilus would lose Criseyde. But if God ordains everything—or even if God only foresees everything—then man has no free will: “And this suffiseth right ynough, certeyn, / For to destruye oure fre chois every del” (IV, 1058–59). This conclusion, although it frustrates Troilus, also flatters him, as it implies that even the beginning of the affair must have been ordained, and thus absolves the couple from the disastrous decision to keep their relationship a *sub rosa* liaison. Troilus's Boethian attempt to cede his personal responsibility to divine intervention, however, indirectly invokes Lady Philosophy's Augustinian rebuke of that fatalism.

Augustine, who looms in Boethius' mind much like Boethius looms in Chaucer's, argues in *De civitate Dei* that the doctrine of Providence should not inspire fatalism, because the wills of men are included in the order of causes that God comprehends in his foreknowledge:

1. All references to Robert Henryson's *The Testament of Cresseid* are cited by line number from the TEAMS Middle English Text Series edition: *The Poems of Robert Henryson*, ed. Robert L. Kindrick (Kalamazoo, 1997).

2. All Chaucer quotations are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd edn. (Boston, 1987).

For the wills [*voluntates*] of men are causes of the deeds [*operum*] of men, and so He Who has foreseen the causes of all things clearly cannot have been ignorant of our wills among those causes, since he foresaw them to be the causes of our deeds.³

In other words, Providence does not kill free will. Rather, as Lady Philosophy explains in her closing words to Boethius, the two coexist harmoniously:

“And syn that thise thinges ben thus (that is to seyn, syn that necessite nis nat in thinges by the devyne prescience), thanne is ther fredom [*libertas*] of arbitrie, that duelleth hool and unwemmed to mortal men; ne the lawes ne purposen nat wikkidly medes and peynes to the willynges [*voluntatibus*] of men that ben unbownden and quyt of alle necessite.” (*Boece*, V.pr.6.286–93)⁴

Chaucer, in line with the Lady’s argument, demonstrates the faultiness of Troilus’s conclusions by immediately subverting the complaint. He has Troilus inconsistently conclude with a prayer:

Thanne seyde he thus, “Almyghty Jove in trone,
That woost of al thys thyng the sothfastnesse,
Rewe on my sorwe: or do me deyen sone,
Or bryng Criseyde and me fro this destresse!”
(IV, 1079–82)

Troilus’s fatalism has quickly turned to a sort of desperate faith that will in its turn give way to a celestial perspective, the full acceptance of personal responsibility and its consequences. This fatalism, however, has an afterlife of its own, as Robert Henryson takes up Chaucer’s fate-versus-freedom question to inspire his *Testament of Cresseid*.

The strong thematic resonance between Chaucer and Henryson’s poems goes deeper than simply recycling characters. Anne McKim writes that

3. Robert W. Dyson, ed., *Augustine: The City of God Against the Pagans* (Cambridge, U.K., 1998), V.9.

4. Latin glosses for Augustine and Boethius are taken respectively from the digital Jacques-Paul Migne edition maintained by Nuova Biblioteca Agostiniana at <http://www.augustinus.it/latino/index.htm>, and the digital James J. O’Donnell edition maintained by Georgetown University at http://faculty.georgetown.edu/jod/boethius/jkok/list_t.htm.

The testament has been seen as a continuation of Chaucer's poem; an alternative conclusion to it; a penetrating, sometimes ironical, commentary on it; and as bearing a relationship to it not unlike a *moralitas* to a fable.⁵

This is not mere imitation, but a masterfully crafted part two that completes Chaucer's story. Henryson relates how the "I" of the text, an aging but still sensitive servant of love, whiles away the time with *Troilus and Criseyde* and then picks up a second text:

Of his distres me neidis nocht reheirs,
 For worthie Chauceir in the samin buik,
 In gudelie termis and in joly veirs,
 Compylit hes his cairis, quha will luik.
 To brek my sleip ane uther quair I tuik,
 In quhilk I fand the fatall destenie
 Of fair Cresseid, that endit wretchitlie.

(57–63)

Ever since William Stephenson pointed out that the first letters of this stanza spell the acrostic "O Fictio," scholars have been fairly unanimous in assuming that this "uther quair" is fictional, and that Henryson is doing something uncommon and bold—not only is he breaking the tradition of retelling old source material, but he is also adding to the material left by Chaucer.⁶ Critics have seen the next line—"Quha wait gif all that Chauceir wrait was trew?" (64)—as a watershed moment: Henryson's declaration of himself as a Renaissance poet who may safely question the medievalized and thus fallible master.⁷ While there is undoubtedly truth to this claim, we should not overstate it. Henryson, while expanding on Chaucer, is not claiming superiority over him, as we see in his admission that his own work may not have complete accuracy:

5. Anne M. McKim, "Orpheus and Eurydice and *The Testament of Cresseid*: Robert Henryson's Fine Poetical Way," in Priscilla J. Bawcutt, ed., *A Companion to Medieval Scottish Poetry* (Cambridge, U.K., 2006), 105–17, at 112.

6. William Stephenson, "The Acrostic 'Fictio' in Robert Henryson's *The Testament of Cresseid* (Lines 58–63)," *Chaucer Review* 29 (1994): 163–65.

7. C. David Benson, "Critic and Poet: What Lydgate and Henryson Did to Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*," *Modern Language Quarterly* 53 (1992): 23–40.

Quha wait gif all that Chauceir wrait was trew?
 Nor I wait nocht gif this narratioun
 Be authoreist, or fenyeit of the new
 Be sum poeit, throw his inventioun
 Maid to report the lamentatioun
 And wofull end of this lustie Cresseid,
 And quhat distres scho thoillit, and quhat deid.
 (64–70)

If Chaucer's status has fallen, then, it is only insofar as the entire poetic project built around these Trojan characters has become not history but "inventioun." The "fictio" is the story itself, the "wofull end of this lustie Cresseid." Henryson is free to respectfully invent a sequel to Chaucer's poem, but he does so with sensitivity to Chaucer's central themes. Douglas Gray describes it as a "companion poem," and Derek Pearsall writes:

Henryson begins with Chaucer and what he perceives as Chaucer's failure to provide a satisfactory conclusion for the story of Criseyde. Chaucer refused to judge Criseyde, except by allowing her words and actions to speak for themselves.⁸

Chaucer left Criseyde at the moment she abandoned Troilus, choosing to relate only the hero's story and inner maturation up to and past the moment of his death. Henryson turns back the pages—to about line 1750 in Book V of *Troilus*—and gives Cresseid the opportunity to experience the same growth into moral responsibility that Chaucer granted to Troilus.

Most critics agree that Cresseid's maturation—from blaming others for her fall from grace to finally confessing her own faults—is the central arc of the poem. "The story that [Henryson] invented," Pearsall writes, "is a machine to educate Cresseid through suffering toward self-knowledge."⁹ But the nature of that education, of the world in which it takes place, and of the

8. Douglas Gray, *Robert Henryson* (Leiden, 1979), 170; Derek Pearsall, "'Quha wait gif all that Chauceir wrait was trew?': Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid*," in Susan Powell and Jeremy J. Smith, eds., *New Perspectives on Middle English Texts: A Festschrift for R. A. Waldron* (Cambridge, U.K., 2000), 169–82, at 174. For further discussion of the poems as "neighboring" texts, see George Edmondson, *The Neighboring Text: Chaucer, Boccaccio, Henryson* (Notre Dame, 2011).

9. Pearsall, "Quha wait," 174.

poem's final moral is a scholarly battleground.¹⁰ David Parkinson says that this is a pessimistic world in which "things go awry: justice is capricious, eloquence suspect, folly endemic."¹¹ In contrast, Denton Fox contends that Cresseid experiences a Christian repentance and salvation.¹² A. C. Spearing points out that the world of the poem has only pagan gods, making Fox's argument untenable.¹³ Lee Patterson, however, argues that while the gods, Cresseid, and the narrator himself are pagan, the redemption story itself remains Christian.¹⁴ C. David Benson writes that ambiguity is the point, that "Henryson seems less interested in delivering a didactic message than in involving his readers in a series of complex moral issues."¹⁵ Finally, Malcolm Pittock says that Henryson's poem is confusing because the poet is confused: "May it not be that *The Testament* has been interpreted so differently not because it is complex but because it is muddled?"¹⁶ Henryson is not muddled. *The Testament* is a subtle and complicated poem, but also an elegant and ordered one—ordered, I will argue, on the same tense question of free will and personal responsibility in the face of seemingly predetermined circumstances that Troilus wrestled with in his soliloquy.

The central disagreement within Henryson's poem (and the subsequent critical conversation) centers on whether Cresseid is a free actor in her own story or a passive victim caught up in the wills of gods and men. "Being spurned is the first thing to happen to Cresseid in the poem," Parkinson writes.¹⁷ This is untrue. The first action of Henryson's poem relating to Cresseid is a brief summary of Chaucer's climax:

And thair I fand, efter that Diomeid
 Ressavit had that lady bricht of hew,
 How Troilus neir out of wit abraid
 And weipit soir with visage pail of hew.

(43–46)

10. C. David Benson writes: "No two readers concur on the degree of her guilt or innocence, the justice of the punishment she receives from the gods, or the extent to which her suffering purifies and leads to self-knowledge" ("Troilus and Cresseid in Henryson's *Testament*," *Chaucer Review* 13 [1979]: 263–71, at 263).

11. David J. Parkinson, "Henryson's Scottish Tragedy," *Chaucer Review* (1991): 355–62, at 355.

12. Denton Fox, *Robert Henryson: The Poems* (Oxford, 1987): 54–56.

13. A. C. Spearing, *Medieval to Renaissance in English Poetry* (Cambridge, U.K., 1985), 164–86.

14. Lee W. Patterson, "Christian and Pagan in *The Testament of Cresseid*," *Philological Quarterly* 52 (1973): 696–714. See also Melvin Storm, "The Intertextual Cresseida: Chaucer's Henryson or Henryson's Chaucer?," *Studies in Scottish Literature* 28 (1993): 105–22, at 122.

15. Benson, "Critic and Poet," 38.

16. Malcolm Pittock, "The Complexity of Henryson's *The Testament of Cresseid*," *Essays in Criticism* 40 (1990): 198–221.

17. Parkinson, "Henryson's Scottish Tragedy," 356.

The first thing that happens to Cresseid can more accurately be said to *happen to Troilus*: Cresseid leaves him for Diomeid. Parkinson and others, perhaps influenced by recent feminist readings of the poem, desire to see Cresseid as the more or less innocent victim of gods and men.¹⁸ All readers must surely sympathize with these critics at some level. We like Cresseid even if she has abandoned Troilus, and even if, after satisfying Diomeid's lust "and mair" in the aftermath, she has become the "commoun" plaything of the Greek camp (72, 77). Henryson likes Cresseid as well, and the obvious sympathy of his narrator for the miserable woman does soften the otherwise stern justice of the poem. But justice it certainly is, despite the passive language that Cresseid, and at times even the narrator, uses when describing her actions.

The narrator passes immediately from Cresseid's betrayal of Troilus to a lament for her, charged with language both of fortune and personal responsibility:

O fair Creisseid, the flour and A per se
 Of Troy and Grece, how was thow fortunait
 To change in filth all thy feminitie,
 And be with fleschelic lust sa maculait,
 And go amang the Greikis air and lait,
 Sa giglotlike takand thy foull plesance!
 I have pietie thow suld fall sic mischance!

(78–84)

Our storyteller is very clear: Cresseid has changed her "feminitie" to filth, has gone among the Greikis" and "takand" varied and frequent sexual pleasure. Yet he calls it her fortune and "mischance" to have done so. The critical analysis that tends to be so kind to Cresseid has justified that leniency by attacking our old storyteller, calling him "besotted" and self-contradictory.¹⁹ He seems to me very human, slipping into language of fortune more to soften his tone than to contradict his condemnation of her actions:

Yit nevertheles, quhat ever men deme or say
 In scornfull langage of thy brukkilnes,
 I sall excuse als far furth as I may

18. See James Simpson, "And that was litel nede': Poetry's Need in Robert Henryson's *Fables and Testament of Cresseid*," in Christopher Cannon and Maura Nolan, eds., *Medieval Latin and Middle English Literature: Essays in Honour of Jill Mann* (Cambridge, U.K., 2011), 193–210; Susan Aronstein, "Cresseid Reading Cresseid: Redemption and Translation in Henryson's *Testament*," *Scottish Literary Journal* 21 (1994): 5–22; and Felicity Riddy, "Abject Odious': Feminine and Masculine in Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid*," in Derek Pearsall, ed., *Chaucer to Spenser: A Critical Reader* (Oxford, 1999), 280–96.

19. Fox, *Robert Henryson*, xi.

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!

(85–92)

This narrator is a kindly old servant of Venus, whom age has diminished yet made tenderer. But to call him an amorous old man, as Pearsall does, hypocritically scolding Cresseid while almost shaking with prurience and suppressed titillation, seems a liberty in interpretation.²⁰ Spearing has argued against the modern tendency to fracture the poetic voice by discrediting the narrator, and Kathryn Lynch recently applied his argument to Henryson's *Testament*, writing that Henryson's narrative "I" is necessitated by the poem's textuality, serving as the mediator between poet and poem.²¹ The narrator, in other words, cannot work *against* the poet, and the desire to see him as alienated from Henryson may reveal more about what some modern critics want the poem to say than about what Henryson actually said.²² Our narrator, like Henryson, sees Cresseid's faults, condemns them, but, like an indulgent grandfather, wants to excuse her as far as he is able. He, at least, will not speak scornfully of her "brukkilnes." The fact that Cresseid seeks to excuse herself in the same way is more problematic.

Wretched and destitute, Cresseid flees the Greek camp to the temple where her father Calchas is caretaker. Her explanation for the train of events that brings her to his doorstep is this: "Fra Diomeid had gottin his desyre / He wox werie and wald of me no moir" (101–2). Henryson is concise, writing in "breif sermone ane pregnant sentence" (270), but Cresseid's brevity verges on

20. Pearsall, "Quha wait," 174. I have already quoted Pearsall's excellent essay above, but here must take exception with his reading. I also think that Patterson's interpretation of the narrator's service to Venus as actual pagan worship, and his ensuing reading of the narrator as an "unabashed . . . pagan" bound to the poem's gods, takes the trope too literally. See Patterson, "Christian and Pagan," 713.

21. A. C. Spearing, *Textual Subjectivity: The Encoding of Subjectivity in Medieval Narratives and Lyrics* (Oxford, 2005), 187–90; and Kathryn L. Lynch, "Robert Henryson's 'Doolie Dreame' and the Late Medieval Dream Vision Tradition," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 109 (2010): 177–97, at 196–97.

22. Kindrick agrees with a more charitable reading of the narrator: "Henryson's narrator is a more central character and has greater importance in establishing the tone for the major part of the poem. He is portrayed in much more detail and he exists specifically in a Scottish setting. The 'doolie sessoun' (line 1) that he describes, for instance, has been identified as a bone-chilling Scottish April. He tells us that he stokes the fire, takes a drink, and reads to pass the time, even citing the specific volumes he examined. In addition, far from establishing this narrator as an ironic figure, Henryson seems to portray him as a kind and sympathetic person whom we are to take at his word" ("*The Testament of Cresseid*: Introduction," in *The Poems of Robert Henryson*, 147–55, at 148).

revisionism; in her version, she is a passive victim of unscrupulous lovers.²³ Calchas's assurance, then, that "Peraventure all cummis for the best" (104) relies on such incomplete information that his words must be empty. Cresseid herself finds his comfort empty, for her next action is to curse her patron gods, lamenting that she ever sacrificed to Venus and Cupid:

"Ye gave me anis ane devine responsaill
 That I suld be the flour of luif in Troy;
 Now am I maid ane unworthie outwaill,
 And all in cair translaitit is my joy.
 Quha sall me gyde? Quha sall me now convoy,
 Sen I fra Diomeid and nobill Troylus
 Am clene excludit, as abject odious?"

(127–33)

Again, Cresseid uses the passive voice here: "maid," "translaitit," "excludit." She continues:

"O fals Cupide, is nane to wyte bot thow
 And thy mother, of lufe the blind goddes!
 Ye causit me always 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 forlane."

(134–40)

Cresseid lashes out at Cupid and Venus because, after marking her as Troy's flower of love, they have abandoned her. Indeed, the implication seems to be that *because* they made her beautiful, all this has happened. No one, she says, is to blame but these two deities. Interestingly, she has dropped her complaint against Diomeid for waxing weary; the gods alone are responsible for her fall. Cupid is naturally angered by Cresseid's accusations, and calls together a parliament of gods to judge the offense. Cresseid falls into a swoon and has a vision of "The sevin planetis, descending fra thair spheris" (147).

Henryson's portrayal of these planetary gods closely follows that of Chaucer's other pagan Greek poem, the *Knight's Tale*, in which the kinsmen

23. Spearing sees Henryson as a master of concise accuracy (*Medieval to Renaissance*, 170).

Palamon and Arcite challenge one another to battle for the hand of the beautiful Emily. Around the tilting field are erected temples to the gods, and these gods suddenly loom threateningly as the tourney approaches. Chief among them, though he has no temple, is Saturn, who enters promising to find the right course for Palamon and Arcite:

“My cours, that hath so wyde for to turne,
 Hath moore power than woot any man.
 Myn is the drenchyng in the see so wan;
 Myn is the prison in the derke cote;
 Myn is the stranglyng and hangyng by the throte,
 The murmure and the cherles rebellyng,
 The groynynge and the pryvee empoysonyng;
 I do vengeance and pleyn correccioun,
 Whil I dwelle in the signe of the leoun.
 Myn is the ruyne of the hye halles,
 The fallynge of the toures and of the walles
 Upon the mynour or the carpenter.
 I slow Sampsoun, shakynge the piler;
 And myne be the maladyes colde,
 The derke tresons, and the castes olde;
 My lookyng is the fader of pestilence.”

(I 2454–69)

Saturn's very next line, “Now weep namoore” (I 2470), at first seems saturated with irony. His power is literally fatal, and his presentation of it could easily lead to fatalism (as could Henryson's description of Saturn, with his “face fronsit,” his “sonkin” head, his “lippis bla and cheikis leine and thin,” and his “busteous bow” [155–66]). As Theresa Tinkle points out, Saturn has the widest course of all the planets and thus exercises the most irresistible influence in the cosmology of “astral determinism.”²⁴ So we are back to Troilus's complaint that the gods destroy free will, but this time it is delivered by a cold and objective source rather than a mortal, limited, and inconsistent man. But Saturn, we must remember, is *reacting* to the prayers of the men, or at least taking their prayers into account as causes in his course's influence. Palamon has asked Venus to intervene on his behalf: “This is th'effect and

24. Theresa Tinkle, “Saturn of the Several Faces: A Survey of the Medieval Mythographic Traditions,” *Viator* 18 (1987): 289–308, at 295.

ende of my preyere: / Yif me my love, thow blisful lady deere" (I 2259–60). Arcite has likewise made a request to Mars: "Thanne help me, lord, tomorwe in my bataille" (I 2402). Palamon prays for love, Arcite prays for victory, and it seems that the gods cannot honor both their prayers. But pale Saturn, more powerful than Venus or Mars, intervenes to grant the requests of both men. In the end, Arcite defeats Palamon but is killed in an accident by the agency of Saturn. The battle has indeed been predetermined from the moment Mars heard Arcite's prayer, but the wills of the two heroes play a crucial role in that ordination. Saturn's fatal influence has caused Arcite's death, but only because Arcite explicitly asked for victory rather than for love. The stars, as instruments of Providence, may indeed be wrapped up in the chain of causes that precedes every one of the world's events, but so are the thoughts and desires and prayers of mankind, and the one does not violate the other.

Like Chaucer's gods in the *Knight's Tale*, Henryson's deities are astrologically powerful in their orbits but disclaim direct or deterministic responsibility for the actions of men. "Thus hir leving unclene and lecherous / Scho wald returne in me and my mother" (285–86), Cupid complains to the parliament.²⁵ Cupid's charge against Cresseid is that, in slandering one god, she slanders all:

"Lo," quod Cupide, "quha will blaspheme the name
Of his awin god, outhir in word or deid,
To all goddis he dois baith lak and schame,
And suld have bitter panis to his meid."

(274–77)

I do not believe, however, that blasphemy is truly the heart of the issue here. Rather, the crux of Cresseid's sin is the betrayal of a loved one, and, more importantly, the subsequent refusal to take responsibility for the consequences.

There are several reasons to see the charge of blasphemy as a broad and nontechnical condemnation of disorderly conduct.²⁶ First of all, Cupid's claim of "blaspheme one, blaspheme all" implies a level of unity that does not exist among these gods. Saturn gives "to Cupide litill reverence" (152). Jupiter holds a spear with which "Of his father the wraith fra us to weir" (182). Venus arrives, "Hir sonnys querrell for to defend" (219), implying that her son may need her support in this parliament. And Venus herself, in the poem's

25. See Spearing, *Medieval to Renaissance*, 174.

26. Pearsall notes that "in the RAF, in my day, it was called 'conduct prejudicial to good order and discipline'; the gods, naturally enough, call it 'blaspheming against the gods'" ("Quha wait," 175).

opening lines, is said to set “Hir goldin face, in oppositioun / Of god Phebus, direct discending down” (13–14). The gods come to agree on a sentence, but it is not on account of wounded camaraderie. Secondly, Chaucer’s Troilus himself curses the gods without divine retribution:

And there his sorwes that he spared hadde
 He yaf an issue large, and “Deth!” he criede;
 And in his throwes frenetik and madde
 He corseth Jove, Appollo, and ek Cupide;
 He corseth Ceres, Bacus, and Cipride,
 His burthe, hymself, his fate, and ek nature,
 And, save his lady, every creature.

(V, 204–10)

Unlike Cresseid, however, Troilus is no longer attempting to shift all responsibility onto someone else. He curses Jove, Apollo, and “ek Cupide,” but he also curses himself and, like Henryson’s narrator, reads Cresseid perhaps a little too charitably (“save his lady”). Thirdly, Venus, as described by the narrator, fits Cresseid’s “blasphemous” assessment of her rather closely:²⁷

Under smyling scho was dissimulait,
 Provocative with blenkis amorous,
 And suddanely changit and alterait,
 Angrie as ony serpent vennemous,
 Richt pungitive with wordis odious;
 Thus variant scho was, quha list tak keip:
 With ane eye lauch, and with the uther weip.

(225–31)

Venus’s smiles quickly “changit” and “alterait” to anger—the very fickleness of which Cresseid accuses her. Lest Cresseid be vindicated, however, this description also sounds a great deal like Cresseid herself. The dissimulation or doubleness—Venus is clothed “The ane half grene, the uther half sabill blak” (221)—obviously connects her to Cresseid, who has just complained that she is “excludit” (in passive voice) both “fra Diomeid and nobill Troylus,” as if the men were interchangeable. Venus, like Cresseid, is given to angry

27. Incidentally, the narrator here seems remarkably clear-sighted—for an “amorous dotard”—about the follies elicited by the goddess.

words, with the adjective “odious” a particular connection to the lady’s description of herself as “abject odious.” Troilus, finally, will later remember “The sweit visage and amorous blenking / Of fair Cresseid” (503–4), the same phrase used above to describe Venus. Cresseid’s complaint, then, rebounds on herself and sets the stage for the gods’ punishment. Saturn descends and lays on her “ane frostie wand,” separating her from her “greit fairnes” and all her “bewtie gay,” her “wantoun blude” and “goldin hair” (311–14). He further changes her “mirth into melancholy” and prophesies that she will “as ane beggar die” (316, 322).

The goddess Cynthia then approaches and deprives Cresseid of her “heit of bodie” (334) and her “voice sa cleir” (338), and repeats Saturn’s prediction about the woman’s miserable end. The scholarly response to this episode has ranged from outrage against the gods’ cruelty to a matter-of-fact approach that sees leprosy as a venereal disease brought on by promiscuity, and melancholy as the inevitable result.²⁸ The striking thing about this punishment, however, is that almost none of it is actually new, or, at least, it is merely the fulfillment of what Cresseid has already made practically the case by her actions. Saturn removes the beauty that made Cresseid the “flour of luiſ”—the same beauty that, as she complained in her attack on Cupid and Venus, had already effectually abandoned her. Cresseid first identifies herself as “abject odious” before the dream, not after it. Saturn turns the lady’s mirth into melancholy, but when did Cresseid last express merriment? She has for some time been spending her days alone in the temple: “To quhilk Cresseid, with baill aneuch in breist, / Usit to pas, hir prayeris for to say” (110–11). Cynthia’s punishments are similarly redundant: Cresseid’s sexual “heit”—Saturn calls it her “wantoun blude”—has been cold for some time, presumably since leaving the now “commoun” and stale pleasures of the Greek camp. Cresseid’s post-punishment flight from her father’s house, covered in “ane mantill and ane bawer hat” (386), merely replays her initial flight to Calchas’s house when she “Richt privelie, but fellowschip on fute, / Disagysit passit far out of the toun” (94–95). When Cresseid picks up the glass, then, at line 348, it is very much to turn the mirror upon herself and what she has become by her own decisions and her own actions.

28. See Holly Crocker, “As false as Cressid’: Virtue Trouble from Chaucer to Shakespeare,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 43 (2013): 303–34, at 269; Edwin D. Craun, “Blaspheming Her ‘Awin God’: Cresseid’s ‘Lamentatioun’ in Henryson’s *Testament*,” *Studies in Philology* (1985): 25–41, at 27; Spearing, *Medieval to Renaissance*, 174; Storm, “The Intertextual Cresseida,” 106; and Simpson, “And that was litel nede,” 209.

What are we to make, then, of the narrator's anguished outburst at Saturn's decree? Having been silent for some time, he interjects between the two gods' dooms:

O cruell Saturne, fraward and angrie,
 Hard is thy dome and to malitious!
 On fair Cresseid quhy hes thow na mercie
 Quhilk was sa sweit, gentill and amorous?
 Withdraw thy sentence and be gracious —
 As thow was never; sa schawis through thy deid,
 Ane wraikfull sentence gevin on fair Cresseid.
 (323–29)

These are, as I have already said, pagan gods. There is justice in this world, but not mercy, at least on the surface.²⁹ The narrator, however, is a Christian telling his story in fifteenth-century Europe. He can imagine a world that is both just and charitable, even if his pagan characters cannot. Chaucer rather clumsily attempted this by invoking Christ at the end of his poem—"So make us, Jesus, for thi mercy, digne" (V, 1868)—but Henryson's Christian narrator is more consistent. We have already seen his desire to be lenient to Cresseid. Scholars, it is true, have pointed out that Mercury, with "buik in hand," "polite termis and delicious," like "ane poeit of the auld fassoun" (239–45), is surely being connected to Henryson and his narrator.³⁰ But may not the poet, although "Honest and gude, and not ane word culd lie" (252), speak for both the gods and Cresseid without contradiction, at once affirming justice and longing for mercy? Is this not, in fact, what the poet does? But mercy, even if it were possible, requires repentance, and Cresseid is not ready to repent. She instead continues her complaints against external forces after her divine visitation: "Fell is thy fortoun, wickit is thy weird, / Thy blys is baneist, and thy ball on breird" (412–13). Her misery, she says, is incomprehensible, and she weeps again for her bedchamber "wantounlie besene" (416), for her old pleasures and her beautiful clothes. She does not achieve honesty with herself or take responsibility for her actions until she comes face to face with Troilus and, in a truly tragic scene, the two fail to recognize one another.³¹

29. See Larry M. Sklute, "Phoebus Descending: Rhetoric and Moral Vision in Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid*," *English Literary History* 44 (1977): 189–204, at 203.

30. McKim, "Orpheus and Eurydice," 115.

31. See Pearsall, "Quha wait," 177.

In that scene, confronted with Troilus's generosity to a poor leper woman (herself), Cresseid realizes that she alone is to blame because she is a free and responsible being:

“My mynd in fleschelic froull affectioun
 Was inclynit to lustis lecherous:
 Fy, fals Cresseid; O trew knicht Troylus!”
 (558–60)³²

Cresseid, in fact, has achieved something very like Troilus's heaven's-eye view of reality at the end of Chaucer's poem.³³ Her only shackles, she realizes, have been her own “lustis lecherous,” and she condemns them to become food for worms along with her body. “Nane but my self as now I will accuse” (574), Cresseid says, and though we don't know her final fate, she has grown up as a human being. Poignantly, her last act is to send her ring back to Troilus, who is finally free to mourn her before his own death: “Siching full sadlie, said, ‘I can no moir: / Scho was untrew, and wo is me thairfoir’” (601–2). Cresseid had been so “imprentit” on Troilus's “fantasy” (508) that her presence, despite his ignorance of her identity, caused him to swoon. With her passing and his cathartic grief, he is actually prepared at the end of Henryson's poem for the renunciation of earth and his own sins that Chaucer gives him in heaven:

And down from thennes faste he gan avyse
 This litel spot of erthe that with the se
 Embraced is, and fully gan despise

32. Patterson writes: “She has no reason to think that he did not recognize her, and judging from her past behavior we might expect her to protect herself by reproaching or envying him. Instead she draws only the best conclusions: ‘O fals Cresseid and trew knicht Troylus!’” (“Christian and Pagan,” 71).

33. Some critics have attacked Troilus's credibility in Henryson's poem in an attempt to defend Cresseid from the censure of readers. Benson describes Troilus as foolish and superficial, and writes that “Troilus' noble generosity near the end of the poem toward the begging lepers (including the unrecognized Criseyde) seems undercut by our knowledge that the secular aristocratic values he represents (reminiscent of Hector's ineffectual chivalry toward Criseyde in book 4 of *Troilus*) will soon be overwhelmed by the utter ruin of Troy” (“Critic and Poet,” 35). See also Benson, “Troilus and Cresseid in Henryson's *Testament*,” 263. But the “historical” context of the Troilus poems, the Trojan War, has never been the point. Even in Chaucer's tale, Troilus was remarkably unconcerned about politics; his military prowess was always about winning Criseyde, not winning the battle. As Pearsall writes, “Why the fate of this deceived and deluded young woman, who never even existed, should be more important than the fate of nations . . . is a mystery, but that's the way literature works and how Henryson makes it seem. Chaucer did the same, of course, and our sterner critics, historicist and new historicist, have not been entirely happy with such a state of affairs in relation to *Troilus and Criseyde*. They think that there is nothing more important than the fate of nations” (“Quha wait,” 170).

This wrecched world, and held al vanite
 To respect of the pleyn felicite
 That is in hevене above; and at the laste,
 There he was slayn his loking down he caste,

And in hymself he lough right at the wo
 Of hem that wepten for his deth so faste,
 And dampned al oure werk that foloweth so
 The blynde lust, the which that may nat laste,
 And sholden al oure herte on heven caste.

(V, 1814–25)

The blindness was not in fate; it was in Troilus's lustful eyes. Cresseid likewise dies, but not, contrary to Saturn's prediction, as a beggar. She dies giving: a ring to Troilus, her possessions to the lepers, and a written testament to the world. Her soul, Cresseid predicts, will be free: "My spreit I leif to Diane, quhair scho dwellis, / To walk with hir in waist woddis and wellis" (587–88). If Cresseid is right, and her soul may actually wander with the virgin goddess, then perhaps repentance can lead to a kind of mercy, even in this pagan world. But Henryson does not answer this "perhaps." The poem's closing line, "Sen scho is deid I speik of hir no moir" (616), gives us no neat conclusion on Cresseid's eternal state, because Henryson does not need to. The poet's interest has been in the decisions and maturation of living human beings, and as Cresseid has grown, the eternal gods have faded into the background. At the end, we have only a messy human story, brought to a sad but peaceful conclusion by responsible human beings.

Duke University
Durham, North Carolina
 (patrick.timmis@duke.edu)