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CRESSEID AND THE PROVIDENTIAL UNDERSTANDING

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The *Testament of Cresseid* was published by Robert Henryson about one century after Chaucer finished his *Troilus and Criseyde*, yet Henryson intended it as a deliberate supplement to Chaucer. It is composed in the same rhyme royal meter as Chaucer's *Troilus*. The narrator speaks of looking at a book "writtin be worthie Chaucer glorious / Of fair Cresseid and worthie Troilus," (41-42)¹ then of taking another book from the shelf in which he finds the fatal destiny of fair Cresseid. Henryson's narrator also seems closely aligned with Chaucer's narrator when he maintains the same detached, yet sympathetic attitude towards his characters, and when he continues the pose of an older man who has formerly served Venus.²

By the sixteenth century *The Testament* began to appear, unsigned, in editions of Chaucer's collected works, and some readers actually believed that *The Testament* was book six of Chaucer's poem.³ Henryson would have been pleased to have been mistaken for Chaucer, but would the master have been pleased with his disciple's treatment of Cresseid?⁴ The punishment of leprosy is entirely Henryson's idea,⁵ and many modern readers believe the kindly Chaucer would never have subjected his heroine to such an unjust fate.⁶

Medieval readers, however, were familiar with the ideas expressed in *De Consolatione Philosophiae* by Boethius, a work described by Bernard L. Jefferson as the "golden book" of the Middle Ages.⁷ In this book Boethius addresses the question of how a just God can allow essentially good people to suffer. The real purpose of suffering, Boethius finally realizes, is to allow a person to develop spiritually through adversity until he is able to be reconciled with God.

Chaucer translated *De Consolatione Philosophiae* and was very much influenced in his own writing by the ideas of Boethius.⁸ Henryson in turn paid tribute to Chaucer by developing the plot of *The Testament* in a Boethian manner. Boethius himself was a political prisoner who suffered in prison, found comfort in a philosophy of the Providential universe, and was ultimately executed. Cresseid was tried and unjustly sentenced by an assembly of the gods

who punished her with leprosy and social ostracism. She finally accepted responsibility for her own sins and atoned for them before she died.

In the *Consolation* Boethius is visited in prison by Lady Philosophy, who in the course of disentangling the confusion between predestination and free will, considers in some detail the proper relationship of man to the Providential Universe. Lady Philosophy explains that "God disponeth in his purvyauce, syngulerly and stablely, the thinges that ben to done, but he amynystreth in many maneres and in dyverse tymes by destine thilke same thynges that he hath desponed." (Boethius, IV, 87-92)⁹

Destiny was the chief agent, therefore, in a hierarchy of powers all serving a benevolent, omniscient Providence: "Thanne, wheyther that destyne be exercysed owther by some dyvyne spyrits, servaunts to the devyne purvyauce, or elles by som sowle, or elles by alle nature servinge to God, or elles by the celestial moevinges of sterres, or elles by the vertu of angeles, or elles by the diverse subtylyte of develes, or elles by any of hem, or elles by hem alle, the destinal ordynaunce is ywoven and acomplyssed." (Boethius, IV, 93-102)

It is not necessary for men to understand the actions and interactions of God's agents; however, men should understand that through these agents Providence uses both good and evil to instruct mankind. Properly understood, adverse fortune merits neither sorrow nor anger, but should lead to spiritual progression.

When Diomede rejects Cresseid at the beginning of Henryson's poem, it is understandable that readers might feel more satisfaction than pity. Cresseid had, after all, previously betrayed Troylus, so her own betrayal seems justified as a fitting punishment. In her sorrow, however, Cresseid angrily cries out against Cupid and Venus: in her dream Cupid summons the seven planets from their spheres and grimly announces, "Me think with pane we suld mak recompence" (Henryson, 291). Few readers can fail to sympathize when the gods have passed their sentence and the narrator cries, "O cruell Saturne, fraward and angrie, / Hard is thy dome, and to malitious" (Henryson, 323-24).

" . . . By substituting astrological qualities for the mythological qualities of the ancient gods, Chaucer had pioneered and made poetic capital of the astrological magic in which his age had come to believe. Writing nearly a century later, Henryson took full advantage of this fact."¹⁰

Like the planets, the goddess Fortuna was an agent of destiny. She was commonly used as an allegorical explanation of the sudden ups and downs experienced by people of the Middle Ages. Boethius envisioned Fortuna as whirling a wheel by which she was "glad to chaungen the lowest to the heyest,

and the heyest to the lowest" (Boethius, II, 53-56). For her the changing estate of men was a mere game. "Thus she pleyeth, end thus she proeveth hir strengthes, and sheweth a grete wonder to alle hir servauntes, yif that a wiht is seyn weleful and overthrowe in an houre" (Boethius, II, 14-18).

Fortune is undeniably significant throughout the stories of both Chaucer and Henryson. Fortune's influences fall on Trojans and Greeks alike, and specifically affect the lives of Troilus and Cresseid. Because of Fortune, a heavy, smoky rain falls the night Cresseid visits Pandarus, and the scene is set for the consummation of the lovers. For a time Fortune leads these young people in joy; then, true to her mutability, she decrees that Cresseid love Diomedes, "the sone of Tydeus, / And Troilus mot wepe in cares colde" (Chaucer, V, 1746-47). Fortune will not even allow Troilus the satisfaction of killing Diomedes or of being killed by his hand. Nor will Fortune allow Cresseid to fulfill her vow to be true, at least, to Diomedes. The Greek warrior rejects her for another concubine, and the narrator is moved to pity Cresseid "The quihilk fortoun hes put to sic distres/ As hir pleisit . . ." (Henryson, 89-90).

Although Fortune may appear to control what happens in the plot, Troilus and Cresseid do have the option of free choice in deciding how they wish to respond to circumstances. Troilus himself "tok . . . purpos loves craft to suwe" (Chaucer, I, 379), and "he gan fully assente / Criseyde for to love, and nought repente" (Chaucer, I, 391-92). Troilus must suffer because he places his temporal love for Cresseid above all else, including the siege of Troy and even his own salvation (Chaucer, I, 444 & 463-64). Those critics who focus their attention upon Troilus sometimes regard Cresseid as simply the means by which Troilus learns the vanity of placing faith in earthly pursuits. D. W. Robertson, for example, forgets that Cresseid is a complex character, and instead sees her as merely the instrument of Fortune. In his opinion, she "takes the easiest path." She drifts in the world's winds, 'a gilded butterfly.' Her beauty is sensuous beauty of the world and her fickleness is the fickleness of Fortune. Neither Criseyde nor Diomedes is capable of the idolatry of which Troilus is guilty, of the depths to which Troilus descends."¹²

Rose Zimbardo goes even further. She believes that Cresseid "is not to be blamed for betraying Troilus any more than nature is to be blamed for betraying summer to winter," for Cresseid is "nature itself, capable of sustaining for a while the form impressed upon her, but always and primarily subject to the law of mutability. She is an almost perfect emblem of the Ancients' triple-crowned goddess of mutability; her beauty first lures the hero, then satisfies him, and finally unwittingly conspires with his enemy, his dark counterpart, to bring the hero down."¹³

If Zimbardo does not understand that Fortune, not Nature, is the "triple-

crowned goddess of mutability," it is hardly surprising that she fails to appreciate the human qualities of Cresseid. If Cresseid were to be understood as a natural force, or even as a mere instrument of Fortune, then "it would have been a matter of the greatest simplicity, in the very passage in which he writes her defense, to say that she was really the victim of circumstances."¹⁴ Instead, Chaucer clearly speaks of Cresseid's guilt upon two occasions,¹⁵ and Henryson, who understood Cresseid's human qualities and saw her as a potentially tragic heroine, composed a sequel in which he tells of Cresseid's tragic downfall and punishment.¹⁶

Cresseid exercises free will from the beginning of the story when she decides to seek the help of Hector and when she carefully weighs her decision to love Troylus. Cresseid's attitude towards Fortune is revealed in the emotional scene after she learns that Parliament has decided that she must leave Troy.

Cresseid's first reaction to the news does seem deterministic: "'Allas,' quod she, 'out of this regioun / I, woful wrecche and infortuned wight, / And born in corsed constellacioun, / Mot gon, and thus departen fro my knyght' " (Chaucer, IV, 743-46). Then Pandarus enters the room, and she complains to him that she is a "woful wrecche, . . . / That myself hate and ay my birthe accorse, / Felynge alwey fro wikke I go to worse" (IV, 838-40).

Certainly Cresseid is steeped in self-pity in this scene, yet she never actually blames Fortune for her plight, in contrast to Troylus who had reacted to Parliament's decree with a vehement tirade against the unfairness of Fortune whom he professes to have honored above the other gods all his life.

When Troylus first seeks Cresseid after he has learned that she must go to the Greek camp, Cresseid does not reinforce his willingness to blame Fortune. Instead, she counsels him not to be a mere pawn:

Thus maketh vertu of necessite
By pacience, and think that lord is he
Of Fortune ay, that nought wole of hire recche;
And she ne daunteth no wight but a wrecche.

(Chaucer, IV, 1586-89)

Cresseid then goes on to say that no "remuable Fortune" will ever deface her own love for Troylus!

The irony of Cresseid's remarks lies in the fact that the reader knows from the beginning of Chaucer's poem that Cresseid "forsok hym [Troylus] er she deyde" (Chaucer, I, 56). Our knowledge of Cresseid's fate, however, does not affect her own free will. Cresseid chooses to betray Troylus and is, as a consequence, in a position to be rejected by Diomedes. When that occurs, Cresseid forgets her own advice to Troylus concerning patience and making a

virtue of necessity. Instead, she impatiently blames Venus and Cupid for her own unhappiness. When the gods refuse to accept blame and revenge themselves through the punishment of leprosy, Cresseid's initial response is to express even greater self-pity. She bitterly laments her lost beauty and worldly pleasures. Still unable to acknowledge her own wrongdoing, she then blames her "fell fortun" and her "wickit weird" (Henryson, 412).

The reader understands that Cresseid must suffer adverse fortune before she will be in a position to grow spiritually. Initially her suffering is emotional. Cresseid does not want to leave Troilus and go to live in the Greek camp: "Ther made nevere woman more wo" when she betrays Troilus (Chaucer, V, 1052). She is "destitute / Of all comfourt and consolatioun" when Diomedes excludes her from his company (Henryson, 92-93). Her physical punishment of leprosy is unjustly harsh; yet, in a sense, Cresseid is responsible, for her self-pity brings about the petulant accusations of the gods and the melancholic temperament which was thought to manifest itself in physical diseases.

Cresseid's physical suffering in itself does not make her admirable. As her body weakens through the destructive ravages of leprosy, however, her spiritual strength increases, and it is Cresseid's spiritual strength in the face of adversity which brings pleasure to the reader.

The turning point occurs when a leper lady hears Cresseid's lament, pities her, and offers advice:

. . . Quhy spurnis thow aganis the wall
 To sla thy self and mend nathing at all?
 Sen thy weiping dowbillis bot thy wo,
 I counsall the mak vertew of ane neid;
 Go leir to clap thy clapper to and fro,
 And leif efter the law of lipper leid.

(Henryson, 475-480)

The leper lady has echoed Cresseid's own advice to Troilus. The narrator does not say that Cresseid heeds the lady and decides to "maketh vertu of necessite/ By pacience" (Chaucer, IV, 1586-87), but he does immediately state "Thair was na buit, bot furth with thame scho yeid / Fra place to place . . ." (Henryson, 481-82).

Cresseid's initial attempts at begging are not motivated by a desire to be a responsible, contributing member of the group. It is "cauld and hounger sair" which "Compellit hir to be ane rank beggair" (Henryson, 482-83). Yet it is important to note that Cresseid goes "furth with thame," for this is the first time since Diomedes's rejection that Cresseid has not avoided human companionship. From the time that she agreed to obey the decision of Parliament, her

own choices caused her to become increasingly isolated. First she was separated from Troy and from Troylus, then from Diomedes, and finally from society itself. Even at the leper house, among other social outcasts, she initially chose to retire to a small, dark corner where she could lament alone. So her decision to join the other lepers is an important one, for it is Cresseid's first step towards self-understanding and spiritual growth.

After Cresseid has been with the lepers for a time, she and her companions meet Troylus one day as he rides back to Troy with his fellow knights after a victorious day on the battlefield. There is no recognition between them, but something in Cresseid's eyes reminds Troylus of his former love. And "For knightlie pietie and memoriall / Of fair Cresseid," he throws a purse of gold and jewels into her lap (Henryson, 519-20).

That Troylus does not recognize Cresseid is not surprising, for Troylus was unaware that Cresseid had become a leper. Cresseid had taken pains to leave town secretly that none might guess her fate. She had been hideously deformed by her disease, so Troylus would not have recognized her features. Nor would Troylus have recognized her voice, for it had become "rawk as ruik, full hiddeous, hoir and hace" (Henryson, 445). Actually, Cresseid does not speak to Troylus, except to join in the general cry for alms. Her silence is understandable, for medieval lepers were not allowed to speak directly to healthy people except in response to a question, and then only after they had "gone off the road to leeward" so that they would not injure people by the contagion of their polluted breath.¹⁷ Troylus does not recognize Cresseid, nor does he speak to her.

That Cresseid does not recognize Troylus is probably due, at least in part, to the advanced stage of her leprosy. A horribly disfigured face and a rough and hoarse voice are signs of the third and most advanced stage of leprosy.¹⁸ "Many with leprosy became completely blind,"¹⁹ and the narrator indicates that Cresseid's eyes are no longer clear. Love, which formerly "hadde his dwellynge / Withinne the subtile stremes of hire eyen" (Chaucer, I, 304-05), had forsaken her, and her "cristal ene" have now become "mingit with blude" (Henryson, 337).

As Cresseid receives charity from Troylus, she is for the first time in either poem looking up, rather than casting her eyes downward. Tatyana Moran has interpreted this to mean that Cresseid "has already advanced so far on her way to purgation that she is living in an inner world totally incompatible with the one in which she loved and betrayed Troylus."²⁰

Moran, unfortunately, does not give any reasons for her opinion. There was a medieval belief that leprosy was the sign of special grace by God. This belief coincided with (and also contradicted) the belief that leprosy was an affliction

bestowed upon sinners for their moral failures.²¹ It seems to have developed when returning Crusaders substantially increased the number of lepers in western Europe. The Church could not very well state that those who had fought in holy Crusades were guilty of moral sinfulness, so "in the official formula drawn up for the examination of lepers, the physician was instructed to give some words of encouragement and consolation to the patient, and show that this disease is the salvation of his soul, and that Christ has not despised such, although the world may shun them."²² Should the examination determine that the patient did indeed have leprosy, then he was officially made a social outcast when the priest read a "Burial Service over the Living Leper." The only humane aspect of this incredibly cruel rite occurred when the priest addressed the leper "with wholesome words, and setting before him and admonishing him that by this bodily weakness he can surely hope for the salvation of his soul, and for his eternal home, if he bless and praise God, and bear his ill patiently."²³

After Troylus rides on, Cresseid immediately inquires of the other lepers, "Quhat lord is yone . . . / Hes done to vs so greit humanitie?" (Henryson, 533-34). Cresseid is now no longer simply going forth to beg in order to assuage her own cold and hunger. She considers herself one of the group, and as one of the group, she participates in the leper custom of equal distribution of alms. Although Troylus had thrown the purse into her lap, Cresseid never even considers keeping it for herself. She perceives that this charitable act has not been directed towards herself as an individual, but towards the lepers as a group ("to us").

In discovering the identity of Troylus, Cresseid also realizes and accepts full responsibility for betraying her knight. She does not bemoan her lost worldly pleasures as she had done when she first arrived at the leper house. Instead, she praises the virtues of Troylus and laments her own "fickle and frivolous" nature and her mind which "in fleschelic foull affection / Was inclynit to lustis lecherous" and which cased her to "countit small in [her] prosperitie" the "lufe," "lawtie," and "gentilness" of Troylus. "Stiffer than steill thair stert ane bitter stound / Throwout her hart, . . . / And euer in hir swouning cryit scho thus, / 'O fals Cresseid and trew knicht Troylus . . . / Nane but my self as now I will accuse'" (Henryson, 538-39; 545-46; 574).

Having recognized and confessed that she alone is responsible for her sins, Cresseid's final act is the composition of her will. The charitable act of leaving her worldly goods to her friends the leper folk must be understood in proper perspective, for medieval lepers were required, upon admittance to a hospital, to make a will bequeathing all or part of their worldly possessions to the hospital.²⁴ However, it is important to notice that Cresseid does not make her

will when she first arrives at the leper house, but after she has learned to love the lepers, after she has accepted responsibility for her sins, and after she has repented.

Surely the unusual timing of Cresseid's will is intended to draw attention to the fact that Cresseid is not merely performing a duty. Instead, her decision that "My cop and clapper, and myne ornament, / And all my gold the lipper folk sall haue" is a decision based upon feelings of genuine love and charity (Henryson, 579-80). Cresseid sends Troylus a ruby red ring, which Troylus had originally given her, in order "To mak my cairfull deid wnto him kend" (Henryson, 585), and she rightfully leaves her spirit to Diana, the goddess to whom ancient peoples traditionally made atonement for incest and other sexual crimes.²⁵

Cresseid's story ends with her death. Yet the pity felt by the reader for the unjust punishment of this essentially good and noble woman and the fear that the reader himself might possibly suffer a similar fate is superseded by feelings of pleasure and admiration for the manner in which Cresseid triumphs in her adversity. At the moment of Cresseid's deepest despair, in the dark corner of the leper house, she is made aware of the possibility of realizing the greatest good. The reader is reminded of Boethius weeping in his own prison as he suffers from premature age and misfortune. Just as Boethius is consoled by Lady Philosophy, Cresseid is consoled by an unnamed leper woman. Cresseid learns to accept responsibility for and to repent of her sins; she learns to love her fellow lepers and to give charity to them; and she makes atonement when she wills her spirit to Diana. Thus, even though Cresseid is by necessity a pagan, her spiritual progression is in harmony with the Christian understanding of God's providential plan.

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NOTES

1. Robert Henryson, *The Testament of Cresseid in The Poems of Robert Henryson*, ed. Denton Fox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), p. 112. All quotations of Henryson are from this edition and are documented by line numbers.

2. See both Geoffrey Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde* in *The Complete Poetry and Prose of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. John H. Fisher (New York: Holt, 1977) p. 403, I, 15 and Henryson, 22-23. All quotations of Chaucer are from this edition and are documented by line numbers.

3. Hyder Rollins says, "Most readers took *The Testament* for Chaucer's own work." Joseph Graydon more cautiously and, I believe, more accurately states that the misconception was made by "the careless reader and by many who never read Chaucer's poem at all." See Hyder E. Rollins, "The Troilus-Cressida Story from Chaucer to Shakespeare," *PMLA*, 32 (1917), 399, and Joseph S. Graydon, "Defense of Criseyde," *PMLA*, 44 (1929), 141.

4. In order to lessen confusion, in this essay I have chosen the spelling "Cresseid" to refer to this single, unified character.

5. See Douglas Duncan, "Henryson's 'Testament of Cresseid,'" *Essays in Criticism*, 11 (1961), 129, and Marshall W. Stearns, *Robert Henryson* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1949), p. 53.

6. E.M.W. Tillyard notes that "People often contrast the kindness and humanity of Chaucer in *Troilus and Criseyde* with Henryson's harshness and legality in the *Testament of Cresseid*." Tillyard's own position, however, is that "Henryson is as kind to his Cresseid as he was free to be within the scheme of orthodox theology." See E.M.W. Tillyard, *Poetry and Its Background, Illustrated by Five Poems 1470-1870* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1961, pp. 12-13.

7. Bernard L. Jefferson, *Chaucer and the Consolation of Philosophy of Boethius* (1917 rpt. New York: Haskell, 1965), p. 47.

8. This is the theme of Jefferson's book. See p. 48.

9. See *Boece* in *The Complete Poetry and Prose of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. John H. Fisher (New York: Holt, 1977) p. 882. All quotations of Boethius are from this edition and are documented by line numbers.

10. Stearns, pp. 72-73.

11. Speaking of Chaucer's Criseyde, James Lyndon Shanley says, "Forces and events completely beyond the lovers' control affect their lives greatly. But the story does not depend on destined events alone, nor is the final unhappiness of either owing only to fate. They are free to choose what they wish, and as they choose they determine their lot." in *Chaucer Criticism: Troilus and Criseyde and the Minor Poems*, ed. Richard J. Schoeck and Jerome Taylor, II (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1961), p. 140. Sydney Harth argues that Henryson's Cresseid does make choices, but "She invariably chose poorly, and her fate resulted from these choices, not from the flighty ways of Fortune." See Sydney Harth, "Henryson reinterpreted," *Essays in Criticism*, 11 (1961), 477.

12. D. W. Robertson, Jr., "Chaucerian Tragedy," in Schoeck and Taylor, pp. 115-116.

13. Rose A. Zimbardo, "Creator and Created: The Generic Perspective of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*," *The Chaucer Review*, (1977), 291.

14. Howard R. Patch, "Troilus on Determinism," in Schoeck and Taylor, p. 80.

15. See Chaucer, V, lines 1096 ("That for hire gilt it oughte ynow suffice") and 1775-76 ("That for that gylt she be nat wroth with me— / Ye may hire gilte in other bokes se.")

16. Tragedy here refers to the Boethian definition of a sudden reversal of fortune from high to low estate: "What other thing bywaylen the crynges of tragedyes but only the dedes of Fortune, that with an unwar stroke overtorneth realmes of grete noblye? (*Glose. Tragedye is to seyn, a dite of a prosperite for a tyme that endeth in wrecchednesse.*) Boethius, II, 69-74.

17. From the "Office at the Seclusion of a Leper," in Rotha Mary Clay, *The Medieval Hospitals of England* (London: Methuen & Co., 1909); p. 275.

18. Peter Richards, *The Medieval Leper and His Northern Heirs* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer Ltd., 1977) p. 98.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 102.

20. See Tatyana Moran, "The Meeting of the Lovers in the 'Testament of Cresseid,'" *Notes & Queries*, 208 (1963), 12. Moran also points out some interesting parallels between the meetings of the lovers in Chaucer and in Henryson. In both stories Troilus is filled with fire as he rides by Cresseid. In Chaucer, he casts down his eyes, whereas in Henryson Cresseid casts up her eyes. After Troilus rides by the first time, Cresseid asks who gave her a love potion. After the final meeting, Cresseid [in Henryson] inquires who gave her the purse.

21. Saul Nathaniel Brody, *The Disease of the Soul, Leprosy in Medieval Literature* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell Univ. Press, 1974), pp. 100-101.

22. Anthony Weymouth, *Through the Leper-Squint, A Study of Leprosy from Pre-Christian Times to the Present Day* (London: Selwyn & Blount, 1938), p. 109.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

24. Richards, p. 7. Speaking of Cresseid, Richards says "One of her first acts in the hospital, prompted doubtless by the rules of the house, was to compose her last will and testament." Actually it is Cresseid's final act, but the point is that lepers were required to leave wills. Richards later says, "In England, the rule that a leper must bequeath part of his property to the institution which sheltered him continued into the fifteenth century at least" (p. 63).

25. Sir James Frazier has observed that Romans, and many other ancient peoples as well, made atonement at the sanctuary of Diana for sexual crimes such as incest. It was a widespread and very ancient belief that sexual immorality had the power "to blast the fruits both of the earth and of the womb," and Diana was believed to be the goddess of fertility in general and of the fruitfulness of women in particular. See Sir James George Frazier, *The Magic Art and the Evolution of Kings*, II (London: Macmillan, 1911), p. 115.