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**Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies**

**Title**

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**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/90g5f8jw>

**Journal**

Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 3(1)

**ISSN**

0069-6412

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**Publication Date**

1972-10-01

Peer reviewed

## ROBERT HENRYSON'S "UTHER QUAIR"

The nature, indeed the very existence, of the "uther quair" in which Robert Henryson claimed to have found "the fatall destinee of fair Cresseid" recounted is a question of some complexity.<sup>1</sup> When B. J. Whiting suggested that Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid* might have been the source of the reference to Cresseid in the *Spektakle of Luf* which forms part of the Asloan manuscript,<sup>2</sup> James Kinsley retorted that it may very well have been the other way around, and proposed that the *Testament* be dated post-1492, the year in which G. Myll described himself as translating the *Spektakle* from a Latin original.<sup>3</sup> Neither of these hypotheses is absolutely necessary: if Myll is taken at his word, there is no reason not to explore the possibility that Henryson had access to the same document, and that it was this document which served as his "uther quair."

The pertinent text in *The Spektakle of Luf* reads as follows:

How quyte cresseid hir trew luffar troyelus his  
lang service In luf quhen scho forsuk him for  
diomeid And yare efter went common amang ye grekis  
And syn deid in great myssere & pyne.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, the comments of Denton Fox in his edition of *The Testament of Cresseid* (London, Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1968), pp. 17-18. [All quotations from the *Testament* will be taken from this edition.]

<sup>2</sup> "A Probable Allusion to Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid*," *Modern Language Review*, 40 (1945): 46-47.

<sup>3</sup> *London Times Literary Supplement* (14 November 1952), p. 793.

<sup>4</sup> W. A. Craigie, ed., *The Asloan Manuscript: A Miscellany in Prose and Verse written by John Asloan in the reign of James the Fifth*, 2 vols. (London, W. Blackwood and Sons, 1923-25), I, 279.

But it occurs in a long series of indictments, of the remainder of which ten are taken from the Vulgate Bible,<sup>5</sup> five from common classical tradition,<sup>6</sup> three from medieval popular tradition,<sup>7</sup> one from the legend of Thebes,<sup>8</sup> and two from the legend of Troy.<sup>9</sup> Those drawn from the Troy legend are told *in extenso* as compared with all the other items in the list, and the story of Cresseid is one of three which depart slightly from otherwise predictable sources.

If the *Spektakle* author was not translating from a Latin predecessor, Whiting must be considered to have the best of the argument: both Henryson and Myll must have been following the honorable tradition of Chaucer in crediting non-existent sources with their own inventions, and Henryson's own poem is most likely to be the original account of Cresseid's degradation and death. By way of comparison, the Troy and Thebes material in the *Spektakle* might have been similarly drawn from Lydgate's translations. The Lydgate hypothesis, however, presents difficulties.

In departing from the more conventional account of Amphiorax, whose wife was bribed by his friends to persuade him to accompany them to Thebes, Lydgate tells of her betraying his hiding-place to them but neglects to mention her name. In the *Spektakle* report she is correctly identified as Eriphyle, "yat revealit his consall to ye grekis." This idiosyncratic version, then, could scarcely have been derived directly from Lydgate's poem; it must have come from a *tertium quid* which furnished both the proper name and the circumstances of the betrayal (which is ambiguously alluded to in

<sup>5</sup> David and Bathsheba, Abner and Rizpah, Amnon and Tamar, the Levite's Wife (Judges 20), the Flood, Sodom and Gomorrah, Solomon, Adam and Eve, Judith and Holofernes, Samson and Delilah.

<sup>6</sup> Hercules and Dianeira, Procne and Tereus, Oedipus and Jocasta, Phyllis and Demophon, Pyramus and Thisbe.

<sup>7</sup> Aristotle and Phyllis, Virgil-in-the-basket, and a curious tale of an aphrodisiac (probably menstrual blood) administered by a group of Roman wives to their husbands.

<sup>8</sup> Amphibiaurax and Eriphyle.

<sup>9</sup> Paris and Helen, the death of Achilles.

the *Thebaid* of Statius and not mentioned at all in the Old French Roman de Thebes).<sup>10</sup>

The *Spektakle* author also concurs with Lydgate in his accounts of the meeting of Helen and Paris and the death of Achilles at every point but one: the name of the island on which Helen and Paris met (and here Lydgate is in agreement with every other known text).<sup>11</sup> Lydgate's works, then, furnish no supportive analogy for the assumption that Myll was paraphrasing Henryson's vernacular poem in the *Spektakle of Luf*.

Behind the Lydgate *Troy Book*, however, lies another version which, if postulated as one accessible to the *tertium quid* translated by Myll, could serve to illuminate the problem of Cresseid's punishment as interpreted by Henryson without raising the question of whether Henryson or the *Spektakle* pre-dates the other — the *Historia Destructionis Troiae* of Guido delle Colonne.<sup>12</sup> Guido follows his own source, Benoît de St.-Maure, in dating Briseida's actual surrender to Diomedes some two years after her departure from Troy, and in ascribing it to her remorse for Diomedes' suffering at her hands and to Troilus' public insult of them both. But when he discusses (Book 19) the exchange of Calchas' daughter (whom he describes here as "multe pulchritudinis et morum venustate conspicuam"), he adds, "Briseyda communi nominis vocabatur." She is thrown into paroxysms of grief at the thought of leaving Troilus, but rallies sufficiently to flirt mildly with Diomedes on the journey to the Greek camp. The final paragraph in Book 19 begins with the comment,

Nondum dies illa ad horas declinaverat verspertinas cum iam Briseyda suas recentes mutaverat voluntates et vetera proposita sui cordis, et iam magis sibi succedit at votum esse cum Grecis quam fuisse hactenas cum Troyanis.

<sup>10</sup> Compare Axel Erdmann, ed., *Lydgate's Siege of Thebes* (London, K. Paul, Trench, Trübner and Co., 1911), ll. 2819-2866; J. H. Mozeley, tr., *Thebaid* (Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1961), IV, 187-195; Leopold Constans, ed., *Le Roman de Thèbes* (Société des Anciennes Textes Français, Paris, F. Didot and Co., 1890).

<sup>11</sup> Henry Bergen, ed., *Lydgate's Troy Book 1412-20* (London, K. Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1935), ll. 3427-3526, 3151-3190.

<sup>12</sup> Nathaniel Griffin, ed., *Guido de Columnis Historia Destructionis Troiae* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1936), p. 161 ff.

The relationship with the *Spektakle* text in the vernacular is obvious: "yare efter [i. e., on the same day that she left Troy] went common among ye Grekis [i. e., went among the Greeks 'communi nominis' just as she formerly had done among the Trojans]." That Guido's *communi nominis* should have acquired connotations of possible sexual promiscuity for a fifteenth-century epitomizer is not surprising; the *Oxford English Dictionary* attests such usage in the *Gesta Romanorum* and elsewhere.<sup>13</sup> But that Henryson, finding such an epithet in a Latin *Spektakle*, accepted the interpretation as binding upon his own heroine is much to be doubted. His commiserations, as I read them, are in the conditional rather than the indicative mood:

Than desolait 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 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!<sup>14</sup>

(ll. 76-84, pp. 63-64)

And when his Cresseid returns to her father after receiving her "lybell of repudie,"<sup>15</sup> she refuses to attend public worship

For giuing of the pepill ony deming  
Of hir expuls fra Diomeid the king;

(ll. 118-119, p. 65)

—surely a strange concern to be expressed by a woman whose reputation for "foull plesance" could scarcely have escaped those people had it had any foundation.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> *O. E. D.*, II, s. v. "common" 6b.

<sup>14</sup> Variant manuscript readings give "was," "wast," and "were" in line 79; together with the "suld" of line 84, the "contrary to fact" nature of this verb is directly related to and literally consonant with the "sum men sayis" of the preceding stanza.

<sup>15</sup> Interestingly enough, the *O. E. D.* reports such a "libell" as a legal instrument for repudiating a wife, not a mistress (*O. E. D.*, VI, s. v. "libel" 2, and VIII, s. v. "repudy" sb. and v.).

<sup>16</sup> To be noted are the logistics of the poem. Cresseid's father lives "ane myle or twa" outside the town, yet he is unaware of the change in her circum-

Cresseid's dying "in great myssere & pyne" is yet to be accounted for outside Henryson's poem. However, the manner in which the *Spektakle's* sources can be manipulated for the sake of enhancing opprobrium can be seen in two other instances in the *Spektakle*. Procne is described as serving to Tereus his horrible feast "for displeisar scho had," the magnitude of the original offense against her being drastically mitigated in order to emphasize her own wickedness;<sup>17</sup> and Abner (II Samuel 3) is representing as being guilty of seducing Saul's concubine and so deserving of his subsequent death in battle, rather than the innocent victim of the suspicions of Isbo-seth.

What I propose, then, is that an anonymous fifteenth-century Scots zealot—our *tertium quid*—did indeed make free use of Guido delle Colonne's *Historia* among other works in compiling a moral treatise in Latin on the evils of sex, and that that treatise was not only read and translated into Scots by Myll, but also read in the original by Henryson, who, troubled by the implications of the reference to Cresseid as he understood it, composed his *Testament* in extenuation.

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stances until she herself tells him of it; sufficient time presumably elapses between her departure from the city and her disastrous encounter with Venus and Cupid for promiscuous encounters, but that time is spent in seclusion.

<sup>17</sup> The tradition drawn upon is probably that of Ovid and Apollodorus, in which Procne discovers the rape and mutilation of her sister by Tereus; however, even the alternate version, involving the mutilation and imprisonment of Procne herself, furnishes motivation for a more violent emotion than displeasure.