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THE TESTAMENT OF CRESSEID AND THE "HIGH CONCISE STYLE"

BY A. C. SPEARING

It would, I think, be generally agreed that Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid* possesses certain stylistic qualities which set it apart both from the rest of his own work and from most other mediaeval poetry in English and Scots — qualities which have been well summed up by a later Scottish poet, Edwin Muir, in the phrase "high concise style."¹ The reader of the poem is constantly being struck by passages which not only possess a deliberate simplicity capable of stirring up widening circles of suggestion but also compress much meaning into few words:

Ane spark of lufe than till his hart culd spring
And kendlit all his bodie in ane fyre. (512-513)²

Lo, fair Ladyis, Crisseid, of Troyis toun,
Sumtyme countit the flour of Womanheid,
Under this stane lait Lipper lvis deid. (607-609)

These examples and others will be familiar enough; but it has perhaps not been widely noticed that the poem itself contains some interesting evidence that Henryson's "high concise style" was produced on the basis of a conscious literary theory. It will be recalled that in *Cresseid*'s dream the gods choose Mercury as the speaker of their parliament; appropriately so, for, as the god of eloquence, he is

Richt Eloquent, and full of Rethorie,
With polite termis and delicious (240-241)

Henryson does not report what Mercury says in asking why the session has been convened, but simply comments on his speech as follows:

Quha had bene thair, and liken for to heir
His facound tounge, and termis exquisite,
Of Rethorick the prettick he nicht leir,
In breif Sermones ane pregnant sentence wryte. (267-270)

The orator's "facound tounge" and "termis exquisite" are predictable rhetorical ideals; but, as a mediaeval view of the aim of rhetoric, the concept offered in the final, summarizing line — weighty meaning in brief speech — may be somewhat surprising. It is true that the most widely-used mediaeval rhetorical treatises include sections on *abbreviatio*, but it is also true that, in the words of Faral, ". . . cette théorie ne paraît pas intéresser beaucoup la littérature en langue vulgaire, non seulement parce que tous les procédés qu'elle recommande n'y sont pas applicables, mais aussi parce que la brièveté n'y est pas souvent recherchée."³ The mediaeval rhetoricians may recognize *abbreviatio* as one of the processes of

¹ Edwin Muir, *Essays on Literature and Society* (London, 1949), p. 18.

² All Henryson quotations are taken from H. Harvey Wood, *The Poems and Fables of Robert Henryson*, second edition (Edinburgh and London, 1958). Figures in parentheses following verse quotations are the line numbers.

³ E. Faral, *Les arts poétiques du XII^e et du XIII^e siècle* (Paris, 1924), p. 85.

their art, but their attention is usually overwhelmingly concentrated on the opposite goal of *amplificatio* (about which indeed there is more to be said), and this fact is reflected in the diffuseness of most kinds of mediaeval poetry. The view of rhetoric put forward by Henryson is one which we would normally associate with a later period than the fifteenth century: it would seem to belong rather to the late sixteenth-century revival of the prose of Seneca and Tacitus, headed by Muretus and Lipsius, and not appearing in full strength in English until the 1590's. Thus in 1591 Anthony Bacon recommends the first English translation of Tacitus in the following terms: “For Tacitus I may say without partiality, that hee hath written the most matter with best conceyt in fewest wordes of anie Historiographer ancient or moderne.”⁴ In 1594 Lancelot Andrewes, in a sermon on the text “Remember Lot's wife,” says: “. . . it fareth with sentences as with coins: In coins, they that in smallest compass contain greatest value, are best esteemed: and in sentences, those that in fewest words comprise most matter, are most praised.”⁵ Notions of conciseness such as these continue to influence literary practice, especially in verse, throughout the seventeenth century and the Augustan period, and are summed up effectively towards the end of their era of predominance by Samuel Johnson under the title of “strength”: “The ‘strength of Denham,’ which Pope so emphatically mentions, is to be found in many lines and couplets, which convey much meaning in few words, and exhibit the sentiment with more weight than bulk.”⁶ This concept of “strength” coincides exactly with the ideal expressed in the *Testament*, and it is interesting that Henryson should thus, for the purposes of a particular poem, appear to step outside the predominant ideals of his age. What is equally interesting is that his theoretical statement should describe as well as it does his actual stylistic practice in the poem in which it occurs. The poet himself gives us a hint as to what he is doing in his poem, and I shall go on to suggest that the lines quoted can help us to an understanding of his style and also, through that, of the whole nature of his work. For in a successful poem the style is not in fact (whatever it may be in the theories of any particular age) something extraneous applied arbitrarily to the subject matter, but an expression of the vision of the world which pervades the whole artefact — or, to put it differently, of the qualities of the world which *is* the artefact. But first I wish to enquire to what extent Henryson's concept of conciseness does in fact lie outside the ideals of his age. The following paper thus falls into two parts: first a survey of the place held by conciseness in mediaeval literary theories, and second a critical discussion of the “dargestellte Wirklichkeit” — if it does not seem too pretentious to borrow Auerbach's phrase — found in *The Testament of Cresseid*.

⁴ Cited by George Williamson, “Senecan Style in the Seventeenth Century,” *Philological Quarterly*, xv (1936), 321-351; p. 327.

⁵ Cited by F. P. Wilson, *Elizabethan and Jacobean* (Oxford, 1945), p. 44.

⁶ *Life of Denham*, cited by Donald Davie, *Purity of Diction in English Verse* (London, 1952), p. 205. For discussion of the concept of “strength” see Appendix B of this work, and also the same author's *Articulate Energy* (London, 1955), esp. ch. vi; for a somewhat different view of the earlier use of the term see George Williamson, “Strong Lines,” *English Studies*, xviii (Amsterdam, 1936), 152-159.

I

The place of brevity in mediaeval thought about literature has been studied with great learning by E. R. Curtius in an excursus to his *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*.⁷ Curtius shows how in antique rhetoric brevity in the *narratio* of judicial oratory was recommended on functional grounds, but how "In the Middle Ages, on the contrary, *brevitas*-formulas were often used only to show that the author was familiar with the precepts of rhetoric — or else as a pretext for ending a poem." Among the mediaeval rhetoricians, "The essence of brevity as of prolixity was seen in the use of particular artifices"; they show some concern with brevity, and give directions, however scanty, for achieving it, but these involve only the minutiae of stylistic detail, and not any aesthetic principles which might lie behind these.⁸ Thus Geoffroi de Vinsauf tells us that where brevity is desired,

Vitanda sunt omnia illa quae prolixitatem inducant, scilicet descriptiones, circumlocutiones, et cetera quae praemissa sunt [i.e., in the preceding section on *amplificatio*]. Circumscriptis igitur omnibus istis circa residuum, id est circa purum corpus materiae, ita negotiandum est. Dicenda sunt enim sola illa in quibus consistit vis materiae et sine quibus intelligentia materiae haberi non potest.⁹

In brevity as a functional ideal — a means of avoiding inconvenience to the audience — we should expect, and find, a continuity from age to age. The influential pseudo-Ciceronian *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, after defining *brevitas* (that is, conciseness) as "res ipsis tantummodo verbis necessariis expedita," goes on, "Habet paucis comprehensa brevitas multarum rerum expeditionem. Quare adhibenda saepe est, cum aut res non egent longae orationis aut tempus non sinet commorari."¹⁰ In the twelfth century Johannes de Garlandia suggests that the concise style belongs to official rather than purely artistic writing — "Breve in curialibus negociis, prolixum in poetarum tractatibus"¹¹ — while Gervase of Canterbury offers brevity as the differentia of the genre of chronicle as opposed to that of history: history expresses "actus, mores vitamque" of its subject matter, but chronicle confines itself to a listing of events, and so "historicus diffuse et eleganter incedit, cronicus vero simpliciter graditur et breviter."¹² The recommendation of brevity as a quality of the literature of instruction (in a context where instruction, explicitly or by implication, is opposed to delight) goes at least as far back as Horace, who advises,

⁷ Trans. W. R. Trask (New York, 1953), pp. 487–494.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 487, 491.

⁹ Geoffroi de Vinsauf, *Documentum de modo et arte dictandi et versificandi*, ii.30, ed. Faral, *op. cit.*, p. 277. Geoffroi goes on to indicate some positive stylistic devices for compression: *emphasis*, *dissolutum*, the fusion of propositions by various syntactical devices, and finally — a practical direction for the learner — the preliminary collection of the "nomina rerum in quibus consistit vis materiae" (*ibid.*, ii.42, p. 279).

¹⁰ *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, ed. Harry Caplan (London, 1954), pp. 402, 404.

¹¹ Johannes de Garlandia, *Poetria*, ed. Giovanni Mari, *Romanische Forschungen*, XIII (1901–02), 883–965; p. 913.

¹² *The Historical Works of Gervase of Canterbury*, ed. William Stubbs, I (London, 1879), 87.

Quicquid praecipies esto brevis, ut cito dicta
Percipiant animi dociles teneantque fideles;
Omne supervacuum pleno de pectore manat.¹³

The Horatian precept is taken up by Guillaume de Lorris —

Or te vueil briement recorder
Ce que t'ai dit, por remembrer,
Car la parole moins engrieve
A retenir quant ele est briefe¹⁴

— and in turn by his English translator, who, ironically enough, amplifies the recommendation of brevity to twice its original length:

Now wol I shortly heere reherce,
Of that I have seid in verce,
Al the sentence by and by,
In wordis fewe compendiously,
That thou the better mayst on hem thynke,
Whether so it be thou wake or wynke.
For the wordis litel greve
A man to kepe, whanne it is breve.¹⁵

So practical an approach as this would have recommended itself particularly to the preacher, faced with a congregation in need of instruction but perhaps more likely to “wynke” than to “wake” through a long sermon; and thus Alanus de Insulis advises the intending preacher, “Sit autem sermo compendiosus, ne prolixitas pariat fastidium.”¹⁶ All this is eminently sensible, but it cannot be said to give conciseness the central place among the aims of rhetoric which it has in the lines from Henryson. It is true that Chaucer praises his Clerk of Oxenford in the following terms:

Noght o word spak he moore than was neede,
And that was seyde in forme and reverence,
And short and quyke and ful of hy sentence.¹⁷

Here indeed we seem to be nearer to the praise of conciseness for its own sake, and since a Chaucerian inspiration is clearly so fundamental a motive in the *Testament*, it might well be that in his praise of conciseness as in so much else Henryson is following in the footsteps of his English master. But still it seems to me that there is a crucial difference of emphasis between the two passages: the brevity of Chaucer’s Clerk appears in an essentially moral context — it is part of his general abstemiousness, a Christian plainness analogous to the avoidance

¹³ *Ars Poetica*, ll. 335–337.

¹⁴ *Roman de la Rose*, ed. E. Langlois (Paris, 1914–24), ll. 2225–28.

¹⁵ *Romaunt of the Rose*, ed. F. N. Robinson, *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1933 and 1957), ll. 2343–49.

¹⁶ Alanus de Insulis, *Summa de arte praedicatoria*, cap. i, ed. Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, ccx, 114. Cf. Curtius’s remarks on the “fastidium-formula” in which “the resolve to be brief is based upon fear of arousing the reader’s distaste (*taedium, fastidium*) by immoderate length” (*op. cit.*, p. 489). The formula goes back to Horace, *Satires*, 1.10, ll. 9 ff.

¹⁷ *Canterbury Tales*, ed. *cit.*, I (A), ll. 304–306. Cf. Caxton’s comment on the *Tales*, cited below, p. 213.

of "rhythorum melodias et consonantias metrorum" urged upon the preacher by Alanus de Insulis¹⁸ — while in Mercury's speech there is no suggestion of any such ethical constraint upon the aesthetic.

While, then, we can find in mediaeval writings on literary style the seeds of a theory of conciseness — and it would be an odd rhetoric in which conciseness played no part at all — we do not seem to find in them the idea which appears in Henryson's *Testament*, that the "prettick" of rhetoric can be summed up as weighty meaning in brief speech. It must be remembered, however, that, except for the lines from Chaucer, the mediaeval works so far quoted derive from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, while *The Testament of Cresseid*, though it has not been precisely dated, can probably be assigned to the last quarter of the fifteenth century. It is true that the earlier *artes poeticae* seem to have continued in use as schoolbooks throughout the later Middle Ages (until finally they were ousted by more Ciceronian rhetorics), so that in the fourteenth century Geoffroi de Vinsauf could still be Chaucer's "deere mayster soverayn," while the classroom teaching of Dame Rethoryke in the late fifteenth-century *Court of Sapience* appears to be along entirely traditional lines.¹⁹ Nevertheless, it seems improbable that men's ideas about literary style remained static throughout the Middle Ages, when literary style itself underwent undeniable changes. That the mediaeval fondness for the retention of traditional formulae does not necessarily reflect a lack of change in practice and in the ideas which must lie behind it is indicated, for instance, by the fact that in the fifteenth century even the most literal prose translations into English from foreign languages are often still prefaced with apologies for the freedom used by the translator.²⁰ So far as style is concerned, where the textbooks remain unaltered, it is to practical criticism that we should most naturally turn in order to follow the development of men's minds; but examples of practical criticism from the Middle Ages are, of course, somewhat rare, and those that exist tend to rely upon conventional appreciative phrasing. However, the later Middle Ages in England did produce a certain amount of descriptive criticism, much of which refers to Chaucer, who was widely recognized by his successors as the supreme English poet and frequently taken as a stylistic model. A study of the early references to Chaucer, which have been conveniently brought together by Caroline Spurgeon in her monumental collection of allusions,²¹ seems to indicate an interesting movement in ideas about literary style towards the end of the fifteenth century: a movement in the direction of a theory of conciseness. That Chaucer in fact is, compared with most of his contemporaries and imitators, a concise poet is almost irrelevant, since, as Dr Spurgeon herself points out, ". . . the characteristic qualities attributed to Chaucer from 1400

¹⁸ Migne, *P.L.*, ccx, 112.

¹⁹ *The Court of Sapience*, ed. Robert Spindler, *Beiträge z. englischen Philologie*, vi (Leipzig, 1927); see especially ll. 1900–11, and the discussion by W. S. Howell, *Logic and Rhetoric in England 1500–1700* (Princeton, 1956), pp. 120 ff.

²⁰ See S. K. Workman, *Fifteenth Century Translation as an Influence on English Prose*, Princeton Studies in English, xviii (Princeton, 1940), ch. iv *passim*.

²¹ *Five Hundred Years of Chaucer Criticism and Allusion 1357–1900* (Cambridge, England, 1925).

to 1800 are those in which the critics or men of letters of the time were themselves more especially interested.”²²

As early as the third decade of the fifteenth century we find Lydgate — no devotee of conciseness in his own writing — praising his master Chaucer for

Voyding the Chaf / sothly for to seyn,
 Enlumynyng / þe trewe piked greyn
 Be crafty writinge / of his sawes swete . . . ²³

and as one

Whos makynge was • so notable & enteer
 Ryght compendious • & notable in certeyn.²⁴

It seems likely enough, however, that Lydgate’s praise here refers to the selection of material rather than to style, and it is not until the last quarter of the century that we find clear examples of the praise of Chaucer’s writing as stylistically concise. The anonymous author of *The Boke of Curtesye*, published by Caxton about 1477, writes of Chaucer as follows:

Redith his werkis / ful of plesaunce
 Clere in sentence / in langage excellent
 Briefly to wryte / such was his suffysance
 Whateuer to saye / he toke in his entente
 His langage was so fayr and pertynente
 It semeth vnto mannys heerynge
 Not only the worde / but verely the thyng.²⁵

In the same period Caxton himself on two occasions praises Chaucer for avoiding prolixity and pursuing conciseness: in the Epilogue to *The Book of Fame* (about 1483) he claims that Chaucer “wrytteth no voyde wordes / but alle hys mater is ful of hye and quycke sentence. . . ,”²⁶ while in the *Prohemye* to the *Canterbury Tales* (about 1483) he writes (echoing even more closely Chaucer’s own words about the Clerk) that “. . . he comprehended hys maters in short / quyck and hye sentences / eschewyng prolyxyte / castyng away the chaf of superfluyte / and shewyng the pyked grayn of sentence / vttered by crafty and sugred eloquence. . . .”²⁷ In this last passage there are two further points of interest: the image of “pyked grayn,” used by Lydgate in the first passage quoted above to refer, as I have suggested, to the selection of matter, is now clearly applied to style proper; and the praise of Chaucer for his brevity is juxtaposed with a traditional conception of rhetoric as decorative, “sugred,” ornate. The two ideas are reconcilable, no doubt, but they have not been reconciled. A similar juxtaposition of opposed ideas is to be found somewhat later in Stephen Hawes’s *Pastime of Pleasure* (published 1509), where *elocutio* is described as follows:

Yet elocucyon / with the power of Mercury

²² *Ibid.*, I, c.

²³ *The Siege of Thebes* (1420–22), cited by Spurgeon, I, 23.

²⁴ *The Fall of Princes* (1430), cited *ibid.*, p. 42.

²⁵ Cited *ibid.*, p. 57.

²⁶ Cited *ibid.*, p. 61.

²⁷ Cited *ibid.*, p. 62.

The mater exorneth / ryght well facundyously
 In fewe wordes / swete and sentencyous
 Depaynted with golde / harde in construccyon
 To the artyke eres / swete and dylycyous²⁸

I would suggest that juxtapositions such as these can most naturally be seen as belonging to an age of transition in literary theory, and that there is some evidence for suggesting that the last quarter of the fifteenth century in England sees a hitherto undiscussed development in literary ideals, a development which involves making conciseness a primary goal of rhetoric. In this context we can more easily understand the nature of the eloquence which Henryson attributes to his Mercury and displays in his poem.

As has already been indicated, the origins of this development in stylistic theory can in part be traced back to the rhetorical treatises of the earlier Middle Ages. When, about 1527, Lawrence Andrew printed a third edition of Caxton's translation of *The Mirroure of the World* (first published in 1481), he added a passage on rhetoric:

And whan a man delatith his matter to long or that he vtter the effecte of his sentence, though it be neuer so well vtteryd, it shalbe tedyous vnto the herers; for euery man naturally that hereth a nother, desyret heste to know the effecte of his reason that tellyth the tale Therfor the pryncypall poynt of eloquens reityth [prestyth] euer in the quycke sentence. And therfor the lest poynt belonging to Rethorike is to take hede that the tale be quycke & sentenciuous.²⁹

Here the recommendation of brevity is based on the practical reasoning found in the earlier writers. But alongside this continuity in thought we seem also to be able to trace a connection between the late mediaeval emphasis on conciseness as an aesthetic quality and the new literary theories of the Italian Renaissance. That this could be so may at first appear unlikely, since the reforms in Latin style initiated by the fifteenth-century Italian Humanists were based on a return to Cicero, and an imitation of Ciceronian copiousness (whatever other differences it might lead to) could only tend to intensify mediaeval prolixity. Again, the later sixteenth-century admiration for conciseness in prose, to which reference has been made above, is associated with a reaction against Ciceronianism carried to excess. It must be remembered, however, that the pedantic imitation of Cicero in fashion in the first half of the fifteenth century later began to give way to a more discriminating Ciceronianism, for which brevity could be a stylistic goal as valid as copiousness. One of the most interesting examples of this reformed Ciceronianism is the *De duplici copia verborum ac rerum* of Erasmus (published in 1512; but an earlier version was written before the author's first visit to England in 1499). This work is devoted, as its title suggests, to teaching copiousness, but it includes the argument that a full knowledge of rhetorical devices is necessary as a means to the end of conciseness:

²⁸ *The Pastime of Pleasure*, ed. W. E. Mead, E.E.T.S., O.S. 173 (London, 1928), ll. 909-913.

²⁹ Cited by Elizabeth Sweeting, *Early Tudor Criticism* (Oxford, 1940), p. 110. This passage is erroneously stated by J. W. H. Atkins, *English Literary Criticism: the Renaissance* (London, 1947), p. 69, to occur in the first edition of the *Mirroure*.

Nam quantum ad verborum attinet brevitatem, quis constrictius dixerit, quam is cui promptum sit ex immenso verborum agmine, ex omni figurarum genere, statim deligere, quod sit ad brevitatem accommodatissimum? Rursum quantum ad sententiae brevitatem, cui magis in manu fuerit rem quam paucissimis expedire verbis, quam qui cognitum ac meditatam habeat, quae sint in causa praecipua, quasque columnae, quae proxima, quae locupletandi negotii gratia sint ascita? Nemo certe citius certiusque videbit, quid citra incommodum possit omitti, quam is qui quid quibus modi addi possit, viderit.³⁰

Erasmus goes on to put forward a concept of conciseness somewhat more mature than that of the earlier rhetoricians: “Brevitatis amator videat ne tantum hoc agat, ut pauca dicat, sed ut optima quam potest paucissimis. . . . Nam nihil aequae convenit brevilocutionis, quam verborum proprietatis et elegantiae.”³¹ Another Humanist, the Spaniard Juan Luis Vives, also discusses conciseness in some detail. In his *De ratione dicendi*, after referring us to the *De copia* of Erasmus for information about *dilatatio*, he continues as follows:

Ac quemadmodum artificii est orationem extendere, quum res postulat, et tamquam vela pandere secundo vento; ita eandem contrahere, quando admonet tempus, et orationem astringere, quod multum habet venustatis, sicut prius illud copiae ornat, et locupletat orationem, utrumque autem suas habet vires, et efficiam in sua occasione. Hujus generis quam multae sunt formae: est astricta, et succincta oratio, quum nihil omnino est, quod possis demere sine jactura Est alia oratio brevis, quae dedita opera magnas sententias in pauca verba confert, et tamquam infarcit, ac constipat, qualia sunt quae a Graecis nominantur Apophthegmata Est alia concisa, quae minus exprimit quam intelligentia requirat; sed usus ita loquendi adjuvat sensum, et supplet quod deest³²

It will be observed that Vives returns to expediency (“quando admonet tempus”) as the motive for brevity; but it is on aesthetic grounds that he goes on to praise conciseness (“quod multum habet venustatis”), particularly when it is combined with copiousness. Vives has succeeded in bringing the concepts of the copious and the concise together within a coherent aesthetic framework, where we have seen Caxton and Hawes merely juxtaposing the two, without any attempt at the synthesis which, as I shall argue, Henryson achieves in practice in *The Testament of Cresseid*. All that is known of the date of Henryson’s death is that it occurred before 1508,³³ and it is therefore just conceivable that in the *Testament* he was influenced by the ideas of the *De copia*; but I have no wish to claim any such direct influence. It seems more likely that Henryson, Erasmus, and Vives belong all three to a single movement of thought about literary style, and the question of priority remains open. On the one hand, Erasmus was preceded in his first visit to England by a variety of other Humanists, who, while they did not find the prolonged mediaevalism of Northern Europe greatly congenial, had no doubt some opportunity of disseminating their literary ideals.³⁴ On the other hand,

³⁰ *Op. cit.*, lib. I, col. 5, *Opera Omnia* (Leyden, 1703–06), I.

³¹ *Ibid.*, lib. II, col. 110.

³² *Op. cit.*, lib. I, cap. VI, *Opera Omnia* (Valencia, 1782–90), II, 113.

³³ 1508 is the date of publication of Dunbar’s *Lament for the Makaris*, which mentions Henryson as dead.

³⁴ See Roberto Weiss, *Humanism in England in the Fifteenth Century* (Oxford, 1941).

there is perhaps more continuity than has generally been recognized between the ideas about literature which we distinguish as "mediaeval" and "Renaissance."

II

It is now time to return to a critical examination of *The Testament of Cresseid* itself. A reading of the poem will suffice to show that the staple of its style is that in which we find "In breif Sermone ane pregnant sentence wryte," "magnae sententiae in pauca verba," "optima quam potest paucissimis"; but it also contains one or two rhetorical set pieces which are copious rather than concise — examples of "crafty and sugred eloquence" which permit us to see the poem as conforming to Vives' scheme of alternating conciseness and copiousness. And these more copious passages seem to have been generally felt by critics of the poem to be blemishes. Thus Sir Herbert Grierson has remarked that "There is a little over-elaboration in the aureate style, especially in the description of the gods,"³⁵ and more recently Mr John Speirs, referring to this description of the gods within Cresseid's dream and also to the heroine's "complaint," has written that ". . . in two passages Henryson does allow himself a certain 'literary' expansiveness. As a consequence they stand out from the rest of the poem as to some extent extraneous. And this must at once be admitted as a fault however justifiably they may claim, as they do, admiration for themselves."³⁶ The crucial case is likely to be that of the description of the gods, which takes up 125 lines (over one-fifth of the poem); Cresseid's "complaint" is only half as long and has a more obvious function within the poem — it is dramatically effective, and it also serves to clarify the moral pattern exemplified by the action up to that point. So far as the description of the gods is concerned, we must surely agree with Speirs as against Grierson that the passage can claim admiration for itself: the aureate diction is not used particularly thickly in the actual descriptions, and it is usually counter-pointed against the solid, unpretentious words of the vernacular. And where, a little later in the dream, there is an intensification of the aureate diction —

And sen ye ar all sevin deificait,
Participant of devyne sapience,
This greit Injurie done to our hie estait
Me think with pane we suld mak recompence . . . (288-291)

— the effect is not, as so often with the English Chaucerians,³⁷ of an attempt to heighten the tone and inflate the importance of something trivial in itself — in the complacent words of Hawes, "To make of nought reason sentencyous"³⁸ — but of an assured matching of the tone to the real importance of the subject. Here too the vernacular directness of "pane" (to which I shall return below) is given startling force by the dignified rhetorical context in which it is set. We have

³⁵ H. J. C. Grierson, "Robert Henryson," *Aberdeen University Review*, XXI (1933-34), 203-212; p. 208.

³⁶ John Speirs, *The Scots Literary Tradition* (London, 1940), p. 27.

³⁷ And sometimes elsewhere in Henryson himself: see for example the first stanza of the "Moralitas" of *The Tail of the Wolf and the Wedder*.

³⁸ Stephen Hawes, *op. cit.*, l. 711.

no reason, I think, to complain of an over-elaboration of the *style*. Henryson, here as in the opening stanzas of *Orpheus and Eurydice*, has the somber Latinate magnificence of the aureate style fully at command. It is rather the sheer bulk of the passage concerned which might, with apparent justification, be the subject of complaint. Its copiousness may be beautiful, but in it Henryson has surely indulged a characteristically mediaeval passion for exhaustiveness at the expense of the balance of the poem as a whole. It is true, certainly, that the encyclopaedic list is a common and sometimes tiresome convention of mediaeval poetry; but because it is a convention found in many different poems (and was no doubt often included by poets and enjoyed by their audiences simply *as a convention*, pleasing because familiar and decorous), it does not follow that it may not have a particular use in a particular poem. I believe that we shall only complain that the description of the gods stands out from the rest of the *Testament* as extraneous if we fail to notice the particular function it serves in the work's total economy.

The general intention of the procession of the seven planet-gods is to display their irresistible power, and to impress on us, sometimes by means of which we shall not necessarily be directly conscious in reading the poem, that this power is largely destructive and malicious. To show how this intention is carried out it will be necessary, at the risk of laboring the obvious, to examine the successive descriptions of the gods in some detail. Saturn, the oldest god, coming first, gives us our earliest impression of the powers whom Cresseid has offended. Henryson uses his harsh and vivid native vocabulary to build up by the accumulation of details (the method used in all these portraits) a brilliant grotesque: a type, and yet fully realized in its undignified particularity:

His face fronsit, his lyre was lyke the Leid,
His teith chatterit, and cheverit with the Chin,
His Ene drowpit, how sonkin in his heid,
Out of his Nois the Meldrop fast can rin,
With lippis bla and cheikis leine and thin (155-159)

He goes on to describe Saturn's weapons, the symbols of his cruel destructive power:

Ane busteous bow within his hand he boir,
Under his girdill ane flasche of felloun flanis,
Fedderit with Ice, and heidit with hailstanis. (166-168)

And this destructive power has penetrated even his physical appearance:

The Ieschoklis that fra his hair down hang
Was wonder greit, and *as ane speir als lang*. (160-161)

The second god, Jupiter, is “Fra his Father Saturne far different” (l. 172), and he is presented as an idealized type paralleling the grotesque type whom he succeeds:

His voice was cleir, as Cristall wer his Ene,
As goldin wyre sa glitterand was his hair;
His garmound and his gyis full gay of grene,
With golden listis gilt on everie gair (176-179)

But through the calm surface of this description can be felt the pull of a more sinister undercurrent: weapons are again used to hint at a destructive power latent in the "amiabill" outward form:

Ane burelie brand about his midill bair;
In his richt hand he had ane groundin speir,
Of his Father the wraith fra us to weir. (180-182)

It is not to consider too curiously, I think, to suggest that the earlier appearance of the spear in the description of Saturn, and the fact that it is not normally a defensive weapon, go some way towards undermining the protective effect of the last line. Third comes Mars; and here of course we should expect what we in fact find, an emphasis on ferocity and warlike weapons:

In hard Harnes, hewmond and Habirgeoun,
And on his hanche ane roustie fell Fachioun;
And in his hand he had ane roustie sword;
Wrything his face with mony angrie word,
Shaikand his sword . . . (186-190)

Lyke to ane Bair quhetting his Tuskis kene . . . (193)

After these three portraits, which repeatedly thrust upon us images of war and terror, comes that of Phoebus, on the whole attractive and mentioning no weapons. But even in the case of this life-giving planet — which, significantly, both at the beginning of the poem and on Cresseid's entrance into the lepers' house is mentioned as descending, giving way to less propitious forces — power is stressed in a reference to the intolerable brightness of the god's face and in a description of the four horses of the sun, and this power's destructive potential is glanced at with a reference to Phaeton. The fifth planet in the list is Venus, who is conventionally fickle; but here the malice of her disfavor is presented with unusual vigor:

Under smyling scho was dissimulait,
Provocative, with blenkis Amorous,
And suddanely changit and alterait,
Angrie as ony Serpent vennemous
Richt pungitive, with wordis odious. (225-229)

The image of the poisonous snake is striking, and lingers in the mind. Next, presented first as a poet and then as a doctor, is Mercury, towards whom Henryson's attitude may perhaps on a first reading appear to be entirely favourable. But further readings will disclose, I think, the presence of a cold Chaucerian irony in the concluding lines of the description:

Doctour in Phisick cled in ane Skarlot gown,
And furrit weill, as sic ane aucht to be,
Honest and gude, and not ane word culd le. (250-252)

A connection with Chaucer has been suggested by several commentators, who rightly see in Henryson's description the influence of the portrait of the Doctor of Physic in the General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*, and Mr M. W. Stearns comments, "The parallel to Henryson is close, from the general attitude of ap-

proval to the phrase ‘Doctour in Phisick’. . . .”³⁹ But the “general attitude of approval” attributed to Chaucer is not easily found in the closing lines of his portrait —

His studie was but litel on the Bible. . . .
 He kepte that he wan in pestilence.
 For gold in phisik is a cordial,
 Therefore he lovede gold in special.⁴⁰

— and there seems to be a Chaucerian protesting too much in Henryson’s “as sic ane aucht to be” and “not ane word.” In a matter of tone such as this it is well not to be dogmatic, particularly since a twentieth-century reader may be peculiarly liable to unearth ironies which a fifteenth-century poet would not have intended; but prosperous doctors are a favorite subject for satire in mediaeval poetry (Henryson himself parodies the pretensions of medical jargon in *Sum Practysis of Medecyne*), and the praise of Mercury as a doctor is likely to look somewhat pallid in the cold light of the horrifying and incurable disease with which he and his fellow deities are about to afflict Cresseid. This disease is again alluded to in the next and last of the seven portraits, that of Cynthia. Her appearance is sinister:

Of colour blak, buskit with hornis twa,
 And in the nicht scho listis best appeir.
 Haw as the Leid, of colour nathing cleir . . . (255–257)
 Hir gyse was gray, and ful of spottis blak. . . . (260)

The “spottis blak” suggest those of leprosy.

It will, I hope, be clear from this examination that the description of the gods in *The Testament of Cresseid* is by no means merely decorative or “literary,” in the presumably abusive sense in which Mr Speirs uses this epithet. The very length of the description will impress us with a sense of the gods’ overwhelming power, obtruded so forcibly upon the consciousness of the helpless Cresseid, while in its details there are continual hints from beneath the surface magnificence of the threatening, the destructive and the malicious — and this not only in the case of those gods whom we expect to be least propitious (two of whom, Saturn and Cynthia, are chosen as assessors of Cresseid’s punishment). To fail to attend to the specific literary effects achieved in the fulfilment of the convention will be to miss much of the point of Henryson’s poem.

If we return to consider the poem as a whole, we can now see that the conciseness of Henryson’s staple style — a conciseness which can include an *appropriate* copiousness — exists as a reflection of the compression of his story. We have seen something of the reasons for the expansion in the description of the gods and in Cresseid’s “complaint,” and we shall consider later the expansive introduction to the poem. Outside these passages, the tale is told with remarkable brevity. We are quickly informed of what has happened before the beginning of the poem: Cresseid has betrayed Troilus, been betrayed by Diomed, and turned prostitute.

³⁹ M. W. Stearns, *Robert Henryson* (New York, 1949), p. 94.

⁴⁰ Ed. cit., *Canterbury Tales*, I (A), ll. 438, 442–444.

She now joins her father in the temple, and at once, so far as the narrative is concerned, though apparently after some time — "at the last" (l. 112) — in the plot's "real" sequence of events, she makes her reproachful invocation of Venus and Cupid. Immediately, with none of the usual mediaeval preliminaries to a poetic dream (for Henryson was bound by convention only so far as he chose) the vision of the gods begins:

Quhen this was said, doun in ane extasie,
Ravischit in spreit, intill ane dreame scho fell. . . . (141-142)

Then comes the procession, and this is followed by the parliament, which is dealt with considerably more briefly than we should expect in an age which loved exhaustive disputations in literature — certainly more briefly than in Lydgate's *Assembly of Gods*, which has been brought forward as a possible source for this part of the *Testament*.⁴¹ Cupid's statement of the case is followed in quick and callous succession by the appointment of assessors, the passing of the sentence, and its execution. At once Cresseid awakens, and, taking a mirror, realizes what has happened to her; and so on. There would be little point in extending this summary of the story, which continues, except for the "complaint," to be disclosed in the same rapid manner. What must be noticed is that its presentation is an example of true conciseness, not mere simplicity: as with the poem's style, much is compressed into little.

If we ask how this compression is possible, and possible without any loss of clarity, we shall begin to approach the heart of the poem. Henryson takes as his starting point Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, perhaps (especially in its first four books) the most diffuse poem of the least diffuse of Middle English poets; and since Henryson's conciseness seems the very opposite of his model's prolixity, a comparison of the two poems may be helpful. The diffuseness of the *Troilus* is not a fortuitous stylistic quality, but is closely related to the action presented and the poet's attitude towards it. Chaucer is diffuse in order to maintain until the last moment a balance between a wide variety of possible attitudes towards his Criseyde and Troilus's love for her. He builds up an iridescent structure, showing a different light at every movement, and his story enables him to do this, for it is not until the end of the fifth book that Criseyde's treachery is made certain, and not until Troilus dies and looks down from the withdrawn distance of the eighth sphere that he realizes how absolutely he has been betrayed. Only then is there a reduction in the variety of possible attitudes towards the situation. In Henryson's poem we have the coldly objective vision of the eighth sphere transferred to the earth, and the reduction is present from the beginning. Henryson's narrator (not necessarily of course to be identified with Henryson himself) has, like Chaucer's Troilus, undergone the experience of human love and its decay —

To help be Phisike quhair that nature faillit
I am expert, for baith I have assailit (34-35)

— and then, by withdrawing from involvement in it, has been able to see it in

⁴¹ See Stearns, *op. cit.*, pp. 70-72.

clearer perspective. Troilus withdraws to the eighth sphere, the narrator of the *Testament* to the comfort of a private room. And it is made clear that this narrator’s withdrawal is only part of a more general withdrawal from youth into age, and that the cold of the winter night is also the cold of an old man’s blood:

Thocht lufe be hait, yit in ane man of age
It kendillis nocht sa sone as in youtheid. . . . (29–30)

The *Testament* is presented as the poem of an old man, free from the magnificently idealizing illusions of the young Troilus, and seeing in his story no complication of issues and attitudes, for

The Northin wind had purifyit the Air
And sched the miste cloudis fra the sky. . . . (17–18)

The “mistie cloudis” of Chaucer’s diffuseness have been swept away, and with them what they express: the variety of contradictory perspectives suspended in the mind of a garrulous and enigmatic narrator. At the beginning of Henryson’s poem Cresseid has already betrayed Troilus, been betrayed by Diomed, and become a prostitute, and thus the idealized view of the world which we can see through the eyes of Chaucer’s Troilus is no longer possible, except in looking back on a past which stands in ironic contrast with the present — that is to say, in Cresseid’s “complaint” and again briefly in the moment when Troilus, looking at the real Cresseid of the present, sees the Cresseid of the past, “fair Cresseid sumtyme his awin darling” (l. 504). It is this exclusion of the idealizing vision which enables a comprehensive description of the situation to be brief:

Fra Diomeid had gottin his desyre
He wox werie, and wald of me no moir. (101–102)

The Testament of Cresseid is a mediaeval “tragedie,” representing the downward turn of Fortune’s wheel. In substance it consists of a relentless accumulation of misfortunes for Cresseid: betrayal, prostitution, disease, bitter self-knowledge, death. And the aspect of these misfortunes which is stressed is not their purifying or redemptive power, but simply their factual quality, the inescapable factuality of physical and mental anguish. I have mentioned above how the word “pane” in Cupid’s speech stands out threateningly against its aureate background; and it is not by accident that this one word is several times echoed in that section of the poem. Cupid has earlier said that

. . . 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. (274–277)

Mercury proposes that Saturn and Cynthia should be chosen

The *pane* of Cresseid for to modifie, (299)

and their immediate decision is for Cresseid

In all hir lyfe with *pane* to be opprest,
And torment sair, with seiknes Incurabill,
And to all lovers be abhominabill. (306–308)

It is important that this "seiknes Incurabill" should be not only painful but also physically disgusting, and that its ugliness should be emphasized constantly and in detail. Thus Cynthia dwells lovingly on the physical results of leprosy:

Thy Cristall Ene minglit with blude I mak,
Thy voice sa cleir, unplesand hoir and hace,
Thy lustie lyre ouirsprede with spottis blak,
And lumpis haw appeirand in thy face. (337-340)

We are never allowed to forget these physical facts:

. . . scho was sa deformait,
With bylis blak ouirsprede in hir visage . . . (394-395)

My cleir voice, and courtlie carrolling,
Quhair I was wont with Ladyis for to sing,
Is rawk as Ruik, full hiddeous hoir and hace,
My plesand port all utheris precelling:
Of lustines I was hald maist condong.
Now is deformit the Figour of my face,
To luik on it, na Leid now lyking hes. . . . (443-449)

There is, too, a constant recurrence to the squalid details of the leper's existence, the cup, the clapper, and a reiteration of the very word "lipper." It is this insistence on the facts of physical suffering which makes possible the concise treatment of mental suffering —

And quhen scho saw hir face sa deformait
Gif scho in hart was wa aneuch God wait (349-350)

— and the concise summary of Cresseid's epitaph. Such is the pattern which the poem presents: a closed pattern of facts, which does not point to significances beyond itself.

It is true that mediaeval "tragedie" is usually presented as exemplary, and *The Testament of Cresseid* is no exception. Cresseid, in her "complaint," after she has established the tragic pattern of ironic reversal, goes on to address the "Ladyis fair of Troy and Grece" (l. 452), and to introduce the concepts of *speculum*⁴² — "in your mynd ane mirroure mak of me" (l. 457) — and *exemplum* — "Exempill mak of me in your Memoure" (l. 465). But it must be noticed that this moralizing does not propose any possible remedy for the whole situation; this indeed the "Lipper Lady" who overhears Cresseid points out, her own advice being severely practical — to descend from the high rhetoric of tragedy, to submit, to make a virtue of necessity,

To leir to clap thy Clapper to and fro,
And leif efter the Law of Lipper Leid. (479-480)⁴³

Chaucer, at the end of his poem, repudiating earthly love, offers the love of Christ as an alternative, and is able to do this because the love of Troilus and Criseyde

⁴² Cf. E. M. W. Tillyard, *Five Poems 1470-1870* (London, 1948), p. 27.

⁴³ I have adopted the emendation of "leif" for "leir" proposed by Bruce Dickins in his edition of *The Testament of Cresseid*, revised ed. (London, 1943), p. 39. I am indebted to Professor Dickins himself for calling my attention to this emendation.

has been presented as sharing the universal qualities of the love of God, so that a transition is possible from the one to the other. But in Henryson’s poem, by the very nature of his story, earthly love has no such qualities, and no positive alternative can be proposed. There is simply the grim warning — “Your roising reid to rotting sall retour” (l. 464) — and the casting off of illusion — “Be war thairfoir, appochis neir the hour” (l. 468). The pattern disclosed by the poem is in fact meaningless so far as any future action is concerned: from it can be deduced only that “Fortoun is fikkill, quhen scho beginnis & steiris” (l. 469). Thus the stylistic compression of Troilus’s comment —

I can no moir,
Scho was untrew, and wo is me thairfoir (601–602)

— and of Henryson’s last line —

Sen scho is deid, I speik of hir no moir⁴⁴

— results from the very nature of the fictional world which Henryson has opened to us: on such a view of reality, however strong the will to moralize, Cresseid’s treachery and her death, once they have themselves been recounted, do leave nothing more to say.

It may appear from what has been said so far that the view of life presented in *The Testament of Cresseid* is merely cruel, and that the conciseness of style which it renders possible would be better described as low than high. It is true that the view is pessimistic; but its pessimism is not felt as a simplification. The gods are malicious, and their punishment of Cresseid is presented not as justice but as arbitrary vengeance: Cupid says, “Thairfoir ga help to *revenge* I yow pray” (l. 294), and later the narrator refers to “the *vengeance* and the *wraik* / For hir trespas, Cupid on hir culd tak” (ll. 370–371). While not attempting to minimize Cresseid’s evil actions, Henryson invites us to offer her a compassion which will include those actions, an invitation displayed on a small scale in the movement of a single stanza:

O fair Creisseid, the flour and A per se
Of Troy and Grece, how was thou fortunait!
To change in filth all thy Femitie,
And be with fleschlie lust sa maculait,
And go amang the Greikis air and lait
Sa giglotlike, takand thy foull plesance!
I have pietie thou suld fall sic mischance. (78–84)

After the unqualified pity of the first two lines, which runs the risk of existing only in the mode of sentimentalizing rhetoric, the next four move in a different direction, away from the idea of misfortune towards that of moral culpability, which is felt particularly strongly in the relentlessness taken on by the conventional tag “air and lait,” and in the direct accusation of “takand thy foull plesance.” The stanza’s last line reverts to the attitude of its first two, but adds a new depth of meaning: the compassion remains, but it can now be seen that, if we are to use the concept of misfortune, it must include the sins which men *choose* to

⁴⁴ Compare the use of the phrase “no moir” in line 102, quoted above, p. 117.

commit — even the prostitute's "foull plesance" is a "mischance" which has befallen her. Again, the gods, for all their malice, are supremely powerful, and to offend them is foolish: thus in Cresseid's own comment on her punishment —

. . . Lo quhat it is . . .
 With fraward langage for to mufe and steir
 Our craibit Goddis. . . . (351-353)

— blame and justification are nicely balanced in "fraward" and "craibit." The situation is somewhat Euripidean: gods who are powerful and cruel are set against human beings who are impotent, foolish and wicked, but who yet, in being capable of suffering, demand our emotional involvement, our compassion. *The Testament of Cresseid* is a compassionate poem as well as a harsh one: there is the charity of Troilus, and there is the fine humanity of Calchas's "Welcum to me, thou art full deir ane Gest" (l. 105), spoken to his daughter when she returns to him, her reputation lost, alongside Cresseid's

Fra Diomeid had gottin his desyre
 He wox werie, and wald of me no moir.

Nevertheless, the compassion of the narrator does not blur the harshness of the universe as he sees it:

O cruell Saturne! fraward and angrie,
 Hard is thy dome, and to malitious;
 On fair Cresseid quhy hes thou na mercie,
 Quhilk was sa sweit, gentill, and amorous?
 Withdraw thy sentence and be gracious
 As thou was never; so schawis thow thy deid,
 Ane wraikfull sentence gevin on fair Cresseid. (323-329)

"As thou was never": the human protest is not allowed to interfere with the malice of the gods.

For this reason it is difficult to agree with Grierson's view of the *Testament* as a humane work, in which we see Cresseid "healed and repentant by the way of suffering, and we are left at peace with her as with Troilus."⁴⁵ It is true that the encounter with Troilus enables Cresseid to look behind her disproportionately severe punishment for blasphemy, and to recognize in herself a deeper guilt — a sin which a Christian audience would recognize as such. She is repentant, certainly, but there is no suggestion of healing; the facts of suffering cannot be so quickly overcome. Instead, Henryson makes her turn again to the uncomfortable moral application:

Lovers be war and tak gude heid about
 Quhome that ye lufe, for quhome ye suffer paine.
 I lat yow wit, thair is richt few thairout
 Quhome ye may traist to have trew lufe agane. (561-564)

⁴⁵ Grierson, *Aberdeen University Review*, xxi, 211. A somewhat similar view has more recently been expressed by Dr Kurt Wittig; see his *The Scottish Tradition in Literature* (Edinburgh and London, 1958), p. 49.

Against this dark background, the beautiful lines of the testament itself, in which the prostitute bequeathes her spirit to the goddess of chastity—

My Spreit I leif to Diane quhair scho dwellis,
To walk with hir in waist Woddis and Wellis (587-588)

— can communicate only a pathetic helplessness. Henryson's poem is compassionate, but it is consolatory only in the sense in which any great work of art is so, by its very existence.

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