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HENRYSON'S SCOTTISH TRAGEDY

by David J. Parkinson

... glengoir missaell leper carles geit scho wes, trocht the quhilk hir fader behuiffit to be stollin all nycht of the towne, and . . . thrie elnis of lynnyng vald nocht fyll the holis was in hir leggis of the lipper.¹

[“syphilitic leprous leper churl’s offspring she was, because of which her father had to have her spirited from the town during the night—and three ells of linen would not fill the holes that had formed in her legs because of the leprosy”; insult by Christan Nykquene, an Inverness woman (1575)]

Henryson’s *Testament of Cresseid* may be “a medieval tragedy in the Senecan mode,” as well as “unmistakably Chaucerian”; in its attention to debasement and expulsion, though, it is a quintessentially Scottish poem.² Here as often elsewhere in Middle Scots poetry, sudden, even violent change dominates: youth into age, honor into shame, spring into winter, the paradisaical into the hellish.³ Rhetorical set pieces herald transitions in which style plummets from the most ornate to the plainest.⁴ Without warning or explanation, the protagonist is ejected into painful and disgraceful exile.⁵ Things go awry: justice is capricious, eloquence suspect, folly endemic. Given such pessimism, it is the more remarkable that Henryson’s protagonist Cresseid should at last aspire towards a haunting vision, however qualified, of hope.

Modern commentators have praised both the vigor and the discipline of Middle Scots verse.⁶ There may seem to be a tension between the Scottish poet’s ambition to prove mastery of the proper forms and techniques—to claim a central place in the community of polite letters—and the confidence to employ this mastery in a range of topics and genres beyond that of, say, English courtly verse of the period.⁷ Scottish poets frequently test the limits of style and genre. On occasion they seem to break rudely free from the restrictions accepted by that larger community of courtly making.⁸ It is appropriate, then, that the narrative and imagery of exile (with their noble antecedents in Old and Middle English poetry) play a crucial part in Middle Scots

poetry. In its fascination with boundaries the younger tradition takes strength and claims independence.

Henryson had an abiding interest in the solitary complainer within the desolate wintry scene: his Orpheus, his tardy lover Robin, as well as the Swallow and the fleeced Sheep of his *Fables*, all come to play this role. Nowhere, however, is Henryson so deeply concerned with the course and consequence of punitive suffering as in the *Testament*. This is a poem which is almost too articulate about degrees of exclusion.

Even before narration starts, progress has been thwarted, the aged narrator's springtime world having reverted into winter. There is precedent for taking this as a portent: downturns in the weather often signal the onset of a monitory, even macabre vision.⁹ In a topic of medieval art and literature called *The Three Living and Three Dead*, for instance, young princes devoted to pleasure meet their forebears' revenant corpses in a suddenly wintry forest:

The wood of the hunt is . . . at first a cheerful, perfectly mappable place, as the world characteristically is to those in the Pride of Life. . . . With the appearance of the anti-vision, this familiar landscape alters dramatically to a place which, in more senses than one, resembles Dante's *selva oscura*—a state of mind, a landscape of the soul, terrain, in any event, no longer chartable.¹⁰

Striving to be comfortable despite the cold outside, Henryson's narrator comes upon a "winter's tale" which he proceeds to relate.¹¹ Despite the horrors outside the window and within the book, he does not seem much disposed toward uncomfortable thoughts about his own mortality: he is a self-indulgent old fellow who is, after all, merely reading and telling this tale to pass time. There is no indication that his wintry experiences will spur him to change his own life.¹²

In the tale itself, the outer world does not revert suddenly from spring to winter. For much of the time, setting is focused upon interiors (the court, the secret oratory, the leper's hospice), within each of which the excluded protagonist Cresseid hides (and is either exclaimed over by the narrator or complains at length herself), and from each of which she must perforce depart. The upset of season in the narrator's preamble corresponds to the moral and then the physical overthrow of the protagonist. In this tale, the forest does not go hoary, the protagonist does.

Being spurned is the first thing to happen to Cresseid in the poem. Having finished with her, Diomedes dismisses her; and "than desolait scho walkit vp and down" (76).¹³ At once, the narrator breaks in:

how was thow fortunait
 To change in filth all thy feminitie,
 And be with fleschelic lust sa maculait.

(79–81)

He will not indulge in “scornefull” or “wicket” language, he insists (86, 91)—having already glanced at her “sa giglotlike takand thy foull plesance!” (83). The level of diction shifting perceptibly, the narrator locates the initial turn from pleasant place to repulsive wilderness inside Cresseid. Alluding to the pollution her behavior brings and to the shunning it earns her from courtly society, the narrator fixes upon Cresseid as a trespasser and rule breaker. The further she goes, the more obvious the danger she poses and the greater the need for further expulsion.

On the other hand, the more obviously polluted Cresseid gets, the more completely she may be purged—a process described by the anthropologist Mary Douglas:

The attitude to rejected bits and pieces goes through two stages. First they are recognisably out of place, a threat to good order, and so are regarded as objectionable and vigorously brushed away. . . . This is the stage at which they are dangerous; their half-identity still clings to them and the clarity of the scene in which they obtrude is impaired by their presence. But a long process of pulverizing, dissolving and rotting awaits any physical things that have been recognized as dirt.¹⁴

“Pulverizing, dissolving and rotting” is a fair description of what Henryson has in store for Cresseid. On her path down and outwards, she leaves a trail of the pleasures and advantages her community had allowed her; much later, at the lepers’ hospice, her complaint includes a list of these lost things (416–51): *ubi sunt* chamber, bed, cushions, spice and wine, gold and silver cups, saffron sauce, garments, gowns, linen, garden (with all the amenities of springtime; 425–33), fame and honor, singing voice, gracefulness, beauty? For now, though, faded merely from the attentions of the Greek court, Cresseid cannot foresee how far the loss will extend.

Decidedly “destitute” of “comfort and consolatioun”, “fellowship or refute,” Cresseid quits the Greeks in disguise and secrecy (92–94). She seeks shelter from disgrace beyond the city walls, at the residence of her father Calchas (here a priest of Venus). Her father’s house does not turn out to be a refuge, however; it is instead a way station, the scene of her repudiation of and condemnation by her divine patrons.

“Excludit” by Diomedes (75, 133), Cresseid compares her hateful

unattached state to the reversion of spring into winter. She casts this reproach particularly at Cupid—her male patron as well as the god “of all thing generabil” (148)—and only secondarily at Venus (to whom Cresseid ascribes Cupid’s blindness):

O fals Cupide, is nane to wyte bot thow
 And thy mother, of lufe the blind goddes!
 3e causit me always vnderstand and trow
 The seid of lufe was sawin in my face,
 And ay grew grene throw 3our supplie and grace.
 Bot now, allace, that seid with froist is slane,
 And I fra luifferis left, and all forlane.

(134–40)

The metaphor of seasonal reversion refers to what has already befallen Cresseid; she finds in it no warning of harsher lessons to come. When the planetary deities in their “court and conuocatioun” (346) pass judgement on Cresseid’s repudiation of Cupid and Venus, however, they take this metaphor as literally predictive. Giving substance to her bitter rhetoric (and to her stained reputation), they punish her with leprosy, a disease they oppose to youth, beauty, and honor (313–40). If Cresseid must lay blame upon her patrons, let her discover what coldness, dryness, and blackness can mean.

The pattern of events here resembles that of the Scottish poet Richard Holland’s *Buke of the Howlat* (c. 1450), in which a parliament of birds despoils the overweening owl of their earlier gift of fine feathers and cast him into his ordained solitude in the wilderness.¹⁵ Likewise, the punishment of an intrusive complainer by the deities of love occupies the center of Part One of Gavin Douglas’s *Palice of Honour* (1501).¹⁶ Both Holland’s *Howlat* and Douglas’s dreamer suffer disfigurement (limited in the case of the latter to a comic staining, despite threats of a direr metamorphosis) because of their rebellious behavior.¹⁷ So does the allegorical personage Reason in William Dunbar’s *The Goldyn Targe: Venus’s servant Presence* (“physical closeness”)

kest a pulder in his ene,
 And than as drunkyn man he all forvayit.
 Quhen he was blynd, the fule wyth hym they playit
 And banyst hym among the bewis grene.

(203–06)¹⁸

Henryson’s arrangement of events at the center of the *Testament* would thus seem to contribute to a recurrent topic in Middle Scots poetry, one concerned less with motivation or morality than with the sudden marking out of a troublesome interloper at court.¹⁹

Like the dreamer of Dunbar's *Goldyn Targe*, Cresseid had assumed that the enclosed garden of polite behavior was paradise; as in *The Goldyn Targe* and *The Palice of Honour*, that garden has revealed itself to be a barren wilderness. Although the imagery of paradise and hell is less explicitly worked out here than in the later poems, Cresseid may still be seen to proceed towards understanding of the hellish consequences of romantic love as she moves further from the heart of her community.²⁰ Defaced by leprosy now, she again assumes disguise for another departure, this time from her father's house: in "secreit wyse", shrouded in "ane mantill and ane bawer hat," she leaves by "ane secreit zet," and goes "wnto ane village half ane myle thairby" (381, 386, 388, 390). As Cresseid discovers new levels to her isolation, she submits to her necessary removal further and further from the center.²¹

What starts out sweetly ends roughly, Cresseid's progress from court to mansion to village "spittail hous" (391) towards the grave is marked by various losses: love, reputation and courtly company; health, beauty, youth, and the security of kinship; soon, individuality itself.²² In a florid complaint (as mentioned above), Cresseid itemizes the various properties she has left and is leaving behind; the shallowness of her concern falls into view when, Cresseid herself in full cry of lament,

Ane lipper lady rais and till hir wend,
And said, "Quhy spurnis thow aganis the wall
To sla thy self and mend naething at all?"

(474–76)

Once again, the presence of the macabre may be felt: like a preaching corpse, the leprous Cresseid alludes to the imminent falls of those fine ladies still exalted in beauty and love (452–69); her appearance and sentiments recall those of the corpse-queen in the northern alliterative romance *The Awntyrs off Arthure*; and yet, despite all this, circumstances do not permit Cresseid her wished-for impressive effect.²³ As the protagonist is called to face stark necessity, so is the reader. Courtliness gives way to bluntness, as it does again when ("for knichtlie pietie" [519]) a homeward-bound Troilus takes jewels and gold "and in the skirt of Cresseid down can swak; / Than raid away and not ane word he spak" (522–23).²⁴ Polite consolations and sentiments are now irrelevant. What matters is that Cresseid pass with growing understanding towards her death.

Soon, in her brief testament, Cresseid will name her last few divestitures: her body ("with wormis and with taidis to be rent" [578]); her remaining possessions—an odd conjunction of leper's things ("cop

and clapper" [579]) and relics of court (ornaments, gold, a love token [579–83]); and finally her soul, which she commends "to Diane, quhair scho dwellis, / To walk with hir in waist woddis and wellis" (587–88). The outward and downward journey would seem to be proceeding to its expected goal. Cresseid has consigned her body to a hellish but conventional manner of consumption, and exiled her soul to a wilderness.

Seeing that wilderness as the preserve of Diana (not Mars or Saturn), however, Cresseid envisions a chaste refuge for her soul. Diana's forest may not be quite as civilized as the pleasant if shady grove of Elysian myrtle into which Virgil's Dido flits to rejoin her Sychaeus; it will nevertheless be a place of clean exertion and unchanging greenness.²⁵ At the point Henryson took up her story, Cresseid was walking up and down, desolate. Now she imagines walking (and staying) with a steadfast female protector. Accompaniment, security: with her physical self about to achieve its "true indiscriminable character," Cresseid seeks an end to the polluting forces of memory, emotion, change, and desire.²⁶ To be amongst those woods and cleansing wells and not to be alone may in Cresseid's dying, reaching vision seem rather like being in heaven.²⁷

"Quha wait gif all that Chauceir wrait was trew?" (64), the narrator had asked upon taking up this story. When the poem draws to its conclusion, truth remains in doubt: "we have almost a picture of the poet as liar."²⁸ Still, one discovery has been wrung out of experience—by the protagonist if not the narrator. Cresseid has found the source to the "greit vnstabilnes" of her life within herself; "Nane but my self as now I will accuse" (568, 574). This is no "gentle, kind" perception, but one that is disillusioned, even austere.²⁹ Without this accusing self-awareness, such moralizing as the narrator's warning to ladies to "Ming not 3our lufe with fals deceptioun" (613) is ignorant and worse than useless. Seeking truth, the poet must proceed tersely, ironically; one can only hope for surer understanding beyond this world.

The Middle Scots poets wrote so keenly about disfigurement and exile because these experiences revealed an arbitrary foundation to worldly life. Loss, winter, and old age are to be considered more lasting and substantial than happiness, youth, and spring. Gorgeous style and the pleasant topics to which it is applied (in secular poetry, at least) exist on the surface of this poetry, as pleasure exists on the surface of life; and even the courtliest of these poems contains some reference to the rudeness and roughness about to jut out from beneath the shiny surface.³⁰ For Henryson and his immediate successors, this awareness presents a dilemma: given its basic inconsistency,

how can even the most disciplined and polished of their secular poems speak with moral authority? By placing this dilemma at the center of a courtly lady's frivolous existence, Henryson attempts to confront it. His narrator tears layer after layer of belonging from Cresseid's life; this savage process manifests a deep pessimism, and has troubled many readers.³¹ Still, Henryson has thus gone further than any other Middle Scots poet to liberate his protagonist and his poem from inconsistency. Cresseid's dying aspiration challenged the Middle Scots tradition to take the outcast seriously; it continues to challenge.³²

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1. *Records of Inverness*, vol. I: *Burgh Court Books 1555–86*, ed. William Mackay and Herbert C. Boyd (Aberdeen, 1906), 243.
2. Douglas Gray, *Robert Henryson* (Leiden, 1979), 166; A. C. Spearing, *Medieval to Renaissance in English Poetry* (Cambridge, Engl., 1985), 168.
3. Priscilla Bawcutt, *Gavin Douglas: A Critical Study* (Edinburgh, 1976), 53; the subject merits further attention.
4. G. Gregory Smith, *Scottish Literature: Character and Influence* (London, 1919), 34–35; A. J. Aitken, "The Language of Scots Poetry", *Scotland and the Lowland Tongue: Studies in the Language and Literature of Lowland Scotland in Honour of David D. Murison*, ed. J. Derrick McClure (Aberdeen, 1983), 46–48; for comparison of this stylistic tendency to aspects of court life in sixteenth-century Scotland, see Jean Hughes and W. S. Ramson, *Poetry of the Stewart Court* (Canberra, 1982), 116–17.
5. Douglas Gray, "Rough Music: Some Early Invectives and Flytings," *English Satire and the Satiric Tradition*, ed. Claude Rawson and Jenny Mezcziems (Oxford, 1984), 24–25, 37.
6. See, for instance, C. S. Lewis, "The Close of the Middle Ages in Scotland," *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century Excluding Drama*, vol. 3 of *The Oxford History of English Literature*, ed. Bonamy Dobree and Norman Davis (Oxford, 1954), 68–76; also Denton Fox, "The Scottish Chaucerians," *Chaucer and Chaucerians*, ed. D. S. Brewer (London, 1966), 170, 171, 186; and Wilhelm F. H. Nicolaisen, "Line and Sentence in Dunbar's Poetry," *Bards and Makars: Scottish Language and Literature, Medieval and Renaissance*, ed. A. J. Aitken, Matthew P. MacDiarmid, and Derik S. Thomson (Glasgow, 1977), 65–67.
7. Gregory Kratzmann, *Anglo-Scottish Literary Relations 1430–1550* (Cambridge, Engl., 1980), 17–23, 238.
8. Gregory Smith, 53.
9. Elizabeth Salter and Derek Pearsall, *Landscapes and Seasons of the Medieval World* (London, 1973), 133, 152, 167–68.
10. Philippa Tristram, *Figures of Life and Death in Medieval English Literature* (London, 1976), 165.
11. I do not propose to reopen the question of relations between *Troilus and Criseyde* and Henryson's "vther quair"; this question is summarized in Louise O. Fradenburg, "Henryson Scholarship: The Recent Decades," *Fifteenth-Century Studies: Recent Essays*, ed. Robert F. Yeager (Hamden, Conn., 1984), 70–72.
12. The significance of the unregenerate narratorial stance is discussed in Ian Jameson, "Some Attitudes to Poetry in Late Fifteenth-Century Scotland," *Studies in Scottish Literature* 15 (1980): 28–42; see also Alicia K. Nitecki, "'Fenzeit of the New': Authority in *The Testament of Cresseid*," *Journal of Narrative Technique* 15 (1985): 124–30.

13. In the present essay, all quotations from the *Testament* are drawn from *The Poems of Robert Henryson*, ed. Denton Fox (Oxford, 1981).
14. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (1966; New York, 1970), 160.
15. For the relevant passage in the most recent edition of the poem, see *Longer Scottish Poems*, vol. 1: 1375–1650, ed. Priscilla Bawcutt and Felicity Riddy (Edinburgh, 1987), 52–79. See also Felicity Riddy, "The Alliterative Revival," *The History of Scottish Literature*, vol. 1: *Origins to 1660 (Medieval and Renaissance)*, ed. R. D. S. Jack, gen. ed. Cairns Craig (Aberdeen, 1988), 44–45.
16. For the relevant passage in *The Palice of Honour*, see *The Shorter Poems of Gavin Douglas*, ed. Priscilla Bawcutt, Scottish Text Society, 4th ser., 3 (1967), 46–51.
17. David J. Parkinson, "Mobbing Scenes in Middle Scots Verse," *JEGP* 99 (1986): 494–509.
18. *The Poems of William Dunbar*, ed. James Kinsley (Oxford, 1979), 35.
19. There is a more overt interest in this "marking out" in Dunbar's court satires and his *Flying with Walter Kennedy*.
20. See *The Palice of Honour*, line 2094, and *The Goldyn Targe*, line 215; see also Alicia K. Nitecki, "Gavin Douglas's Yelling Fish: *The Palice of Honour*, Lines 146–48," *N&Q* 28 [226], 2 (April 1981): 118–19.
21. See Robert Muchembled, *Popular Culture and Elite Culture in France 1400–1750*, trans. Lydia Cochrane (1978; Baton Rouge, 1985), 112.
22. For a more explicit comparison of the *Testament* to *Everyman*, see John MacQueen, *Robert Henryson: A Study of the Major Poems* (Oxford, 1967), 88.
23. See Spearing, 183.
24. J. A. W. Bennett, "Henryson's *Testament*: A Flawed Masterpiece," *Scottish Literary Journal*, 1; 1 (1974): 14; also Nitecki, 129.
25. See Derek Pearsall's discussion of the properties of Diana's forest in his edition of *The Flower and the Leafe* and *The Assembly of Ladies* (London, 1962), 32; also MacQueen, 86, 90.
26. Mary Douglas, 161.
27. Denton Fox, "The Coherence of Henryson's Work," *Fifteenth-Century Studies*, 278.
28. *Ibid.*
29. See Götz Schmitz, "Cresseid's Trial: A Revision. Fame and Defamation in Henryson's 'Testament of Cresseid,'" *Essays and Studies*, 32 (1979), 56.
30. Edmund Reiss, "The Ironic Art of William Dunbar," *Fifteenth-Century Studies*, 328.
31. For example, Tatyana Moran, "*The Testament of Cresseid* and the *Book of Troylus*," *Literra*, 6 (1959): 23.
32. For discussion of some sixteenth-century responses to *The Testament of Cresseid*, see Helena Mennie Shire, *Song, Dance and Poetry of the Court of Scotland under King James VI* (Cambridge, Engl., 1969), 199–200; also R. D. S. Jack, *Alexander Montgomerie* (Edinburgh, 1985), 102–03. The late Denton Fox commented on an early draft of the present essay; like many others, its author shall miss the warmth of his encouragement and the keenness of his advice.