

The (Un)Healing Leprosy of Cresseid in Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid*

Henryson'un *Testament of Cresseid* Eserinde Cresseid Karakterinin Cüzzam Hastalığı

Burçin Erol  0000-0003-4928-7842
Hacettepe University

ABSTRACT

Robert Henryson, the medieval Scottish poet, wrote the *Testament of Cresseid* as a sequel to Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*. Chaucer treated the disloyalty of Criseyde to Troilus with respect to the circumstances that did not put all the blame on her. Henryson, however, depicts Cresseid as an arrogant, lustful and disloyal character who behaves disrespectfully against Eros and Venus. She is punished for her sins by contracting leprosy and at the end of the poem, she is disfigured and when she begs for alms from Troilus he does not even recognize her. In the Middle Ages it was believed that moral depravity and spiritual corruption were the reasons for leprosy. It was strongly associated with pride and lustfulness. Hence, Cresseid's pride and arrogance lead her to insult the gods and she was punished by leprosy. Her leprosy caused her disfigurement, that is, her bodily beauty, and her pride and arrogance were tamed when she had to beg for alms. Finally, at the end of the poem, which is specified to be a tragedy, she came to the realization of her fault and sins. Leprosy in the Middle Ages was also regarded as a divine favor, as it purified the soul and although the leper suffered bodily in this world s/he would win her/his wealth in the other world. In this poem, Henryson presents leprosy not only as an illness but employing medieval medical knowledge and myths turns the illness into a healing agent in the recognition and spiritual growth and perhaps salvation of Cresseid.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 23 Feb 2025
Accepted 10 May 2025


KEYWORDS

Henryson, Testament
of Cresseid, leprosy,
spiritual healing

Robert Henryson, the medieval Scottish poet, wrote the *Testament of Cresseid* as his version of the Troy story in a way to deal with the aspects that both overlap with Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* and present the fate of Cresseid that Chaucer did not deal with in his work. Henryson introduces further elements to the story and presents a different treatment to make it into a more complex narrative. Chaucer's story deals in detail with how the Trojan Prince Troilus who is inexperienced in love falls in love with Criseyde, the daughter of Calchas who is a traitor and has gone over to the Greek side during the Trojan war. Although Criseyde is hesitant in the beginning, fearing for her reputation and feeling insecure because of her position as the daughter of a traitor, with the help and machinations of Pandarus the two lovers are brought together and they consummate their love. After a short period of bliss, the Greek war prisoner Antenor is exchanged with Criseyde at which point the lovers think that she will be able to come back. However, there is no return for her and in the Greek camp Diomedes takes interest in Criseyde and she eventually becomes his

CONTACT Burçin Erol, Prof. Dr., Dept. of English Language and Literature, Hacettepe University, Türkiye | burc@hacettepe.edu.tr; ORCID# 0000-0003-4928-7842; <https://doi.org/10.47777/cankujhss>.

CUJHSS (e-ISSN 3062-0112) Published by Çankaya University. © 2025 The Author(s).

 This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0. <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which enables reusers to distribute, remix, adapt, and build upon the material in any medium or format, so long as attribution is given to the creator.

mistress. On the other hand, Troilus loses hope of her return and realizes her unfaithfulness. Chaucer when narrating the story ended the unhappy separation of Troilus and Criseyde and the liaison of Criseyde with Diomedes in the Greek camp. The death of Troilus is stated very briefly at the end where the narrator seems to sum up the ending. This section is followed by Troilus's soul ascending to the heavens and his moralizing comment on the pettiness of all earthly things. Although in comparison to Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid* is very short, its plot includes various details that do not exist in Chaucer's version, and he deals with the tragic story of Cresseid, leading up to her death which was not given in the former work. MacQueen commenting on this difference very aptly points out that "In the most Chaucerian of his works, Henryson is not the disciple, rather he regards himself with some justification as a fellow innovator with Chaucer" (55). Henryson's narrative begins with a very swift depiction of Cresseid in the Greek camp, and how her relationship with Diomedes is very short lived and how he deserted her in a short time. The flow of the narrative is very speedy; the developments are given very briefly sparing all the details. Henryson's narrator describes Cresseid's life after her desertion by Diomedes where she seeks solace in the companionship of other men and depicts her anger at the gods whom she holds responsible for her unhappiness in love. In this aspect of the portrayal of Cresseid she is cast in a very different light than Chaucer's Criseyde. Chaucer constantly stresses Criseyde's awareness of her act of disloyalty to "true" Troilus and her utterances expressing her disloyalty and her sorrow in committing this act (Book V, 1051-85). However, Henryson does not dwell on Cresseid's thoughts or emotions about her disloyalty to Troilus, moreover she seems to be unaware of her own act of betrayal, but she appears more concerned with her own earthly happiness. When she is disillusioned in love, she blames the gods for her unhappiness with total disregard of her own actions and responsibility. Upon this disrespectful behavior of Cresseid towards the gods, a council of the gods is called to assembly by Cupid whereupon they decide that she should be punished for her blasphemy with the "incurable sickness." As Stearns points out, it was Henryson who "added the leprosy element and it continued with other writers" such as Shakespeare and Dryden (265) who also produced their own versions of the story. Both Beryl Rowland (176) and Hudson (151) argue that Cresseid's illness was not leprosy but syphilis, basing their opinion on the symptoms described by Henryson. On the other hand, Richards states that syphilis was unknown in medieval Europe (159), Nikiforuk also asserts that syphilis came to the Old World from the New World after the discovery and the increasing relations between the two (122 ff.). In the Middle Ages both syphilis and leprosy were believed to be contracted by sexual promiscuity, a loose life and morals, and were incurable. Both illnesses could be functional in indicating the immoral life that Criseyde led. However, as mentioned earlier, leprosy is more appropriate both historically and for the morals and the ending of the poem in that, this specific illness had a long history and was associated with both earlier and Biblical traditions with characters who would be blessed by the salvation of their souls after the purgatory their bodies suffered in this world, being inflicted with his disease. Hence, the poem functions as a tragedy and concludes meaningfully because Cresseid's incurable leprosy is essential in her recognition of her disloyalty and true perception of both herself and Troilus leading to the cure of her vanity and pride, thus making her soul's healing and salvation possible. Syphilis, lacking this Biblical aspect would not have functioned in a similar way.

The addition of the sickness of Cresseid to the narrative is highly significant in relation to the genre, the message and the moral of Henryson's work. Criseyde, the daughter of Calchas was sent back to her father at the Greek camp in exchange for the warrior Antenor. She had to leave Troy and also her lover Troilus due to the political arrangement of the two warring sides. Although her position at Troy was a precarious one, being the daughter of a traitor who had defected to the enemy's side, she had the protection of both Pandarus and eventually her lover Troilus, the gem of a hero, the son of Priam and Hecuba. In the beginning, not realizing the true circumstances that surrounded

her, she thought she could come back in a very short time, but it proved to be impossible for her to do so. Chaucer treated the disloyalty of Criseyde to Troilus with respect to the circumstances that did not put all the blame on her and in his famous phrase he defined her with "a sliding corage" in his work *Troilus and Criseyde*. Chaucer's Criseyde, under difficult circumstances, finds herself in a relationship with Diomedes. Although the story line in Henryson's work may give the impression that he was writing a sequel to Chaucer's narrative, his approach and treatment, especially of Cresseid, is in a completely different vein and takes a different direction. First of all, as the title of the work indicates, Henryson is focusing on Cresseid and her trials and tribulations. While Chaucer's Criseyde is depicted in full detail with her hesitation and doubts when she is realizing the impossibility of her return to Troy and Troilus, and her realization of her betrayal of Troilus, Henryson, depicts Cresseid as an arrogant, lustful, disloyal, fallen character who behaves disrespectfully against Cupid and Venus, choosing to blame the gods for her present unhappy state rather than accepting responsibility for her actions. Consequently, she is punished for her sins and her blasphemy against the gods by being struck with leprosy. She is disfigured with the sickness, displaying all the symptoms. Eventually she becomes a beggar begging for alms trying to survive as an outcast of the society. When she is begging at the town gates where she is allowed by custom and law to fulfill such an activity, she encounters Troilus who is returning victoriously from the battlefield. During this encounter, although Troilus feels strangely and is reminded of his disloyal beloved, he does not even recognize her. However, the poem ends with the self-recognition and death of Cresseid.

Henryson's treatment of the story might seem to be unmerciful and harsh towards Cresseid at first sight, but on close examination it reveals the fact that the poet making use of medieval and biblical traditions provides salvation for Cresseid. She is shown to contract the unhealing sickness of leprosy but through suffering and finally gaining self-knowledge this illness becomes a healing agent for her arrogant and sinful soul. Ironically her illness becomes her cure.

The issue of the genre of the work and the leprosy of Cresseid are inseparably entwined. There have been many different approaches to the poem and views relating to its genre as Gray briefly summarizes (162-64). However, in relation to the genre of the poem the poet's narrator makes various comments. Henryson, in the opening of the poem explicitly states his choice of genre, leaving no doubt about it and perhaps implies his intention. Following the conventions, he begins the poem by giving the seasonal and psychological setting and says: "Ane doolie sessoun to ane cairfull dyte/ Suld correspond and be equivalent:/ Richt sa it wes quhen I began to wryte/ This tragedie;" (*Testament* ll. 1-4). In keeping with the principles of decorum, he states that he is going to narrate a tragedy in the time of the year which is not cheerful itself. As MacQueen points out "the time intended is not winter but spring; the passage is a variation on the traditional spring opening" however "the season is a spring which has been blasted until it is almost undistinguishable from winter" (51, 52). Parkinson also draws attention to the significance of this specific seasonal reference and indicates that it is ill foreboding (356). The unusual seasonal setting is in keeping with Cresseid's love life which was thwarted before it could bloom.

In the Middle Ages various dramatic forms which were written in line with the classical definitions and that were performed on stage did not exist except for a few examples where the classical examples of dramatic works were adapted to medieval themes in the continent such as the plays of Hroswitha. Although tragedy and comedy did not exist as fully staged dramatic forms, the concepts retained their existence in narrative form (Hartnoll 32-33). Moreover, as Wickham emphasizes, "the triumph of Latin as the universal language of the new Church and the new Europe" and the use in learning and teaching of the works of the classical writers and preservation of these works contributed to the survival of earlier dramatic traditions. Especially the libraries of monasteries contained some of the writings of Aristotle, Seneca, Terence and Horace (Wickham

22-23). Chaucer in the beginning of his Monk's Tale, through the mouth of his narrator, gives the medieval definition of tragedy as a form. The Monk enumerates the characteristics of tragedy before he sets out to narrate his string of tales that bear the same characteristics as follows:

I wol bewaile, in mannere of tragedie,
The harm of hem that stode in heigh degree,
And fillen so that ther nas no remedie
To brynge hem out of hir adversitee.
For certain, whan that Fortune list to flee,
Ther may no man the cours of hire witholde. (Monk's Tale ll. 1991-96)

As can be seen in the words of the Monk, following the precepts of Aristotle, the tragic hero is a person of high status, and experiences a reversal of fortune the outcome of which is loss of happiness and misery. In keeping with this approach, in a similar fashion Chaucer at the end of *Troilus and Criseyde*, in the dedication section refers to his work as a tragedy: "litel myn tragedye" (ll. 1786). Although, neither the Monk's definition as given in the *Canterbury Tales* nor Henryson's definition include the tragic hero/heroine's contribution to his/her fall, Henryson depicts the tragic flaw of Cresseid as the major cause of her fall. Brody emphasizes this aspect and says that "She sins, and because she sins, she is punished by the gods with leprosy" (174).

Henryson, when narrating his version of the story, deals with the events which Chaucer did not include in his version, that is, he focuses on the life of Cresseid in the Greek camp. She has been disloyal to her love Troilus, entering a relationship with Diomedes. Henryson does not elaborate on how she drifted away from Troilus and was attracted to Diomedes who is a prominent character and strong warrior on the Greek side. Her betrayal of her true love is not dealt with. The earlier part of the story is narrated very swiftly by Henryson, and in a very short space disregarding the details of the relationship, he states that Diomedes has cast her off:

Quhen Diomeid had all his appetyte,
And mair, fulfillit of this fair ladie,
Vpon ane vther he set his haill delyte,
And sent to hir ane lybell of repudie,
And hir excludit fra his companie.
Than desolait scho walkit vp and down,
And sum men sayis, into court, common. (Testament ll. 71-77)

Although as Brody underlines "Cresseid is still a beautiful woman and still a person of rank, but the corruption of her soul which culminates in the corruption of her body is under way" (174). Henryson depicts Cresseid as physically beautiful but her morals have decayed. She is no longer a character of noble behavior, and after Diomedes banishes her from his presence, she leads the life of a fallen woman. The love of Diomedes and Cresseid is not noble like the love of Troilus, and as Henryson clearly expresses, it is carnal. When Diomedes's lust is satisfied, he turns his back on Cresseid. Cresseid becomes a fallen woman and she is worldly, sensuous and lustful as she chooses to satisfy these needs with other men. Henryson's narrator, in an apostrophe addressed to her, says:

O fair Creisseid, the flour and A per se
Of Troy and Grece, how was thow fortunait
To change in filth all thy feminitie,
And be with fleschlie lust sa maculait,
And go among the Greikis air and lait,
Sa gigolotlike takand thy foull plesance!
I haue pietie thow suld fall sic mischance! (Testament ll. 78-84)

Cresseid, as Godman argues, is vain and self-centered both before and after she is struck by the disease (297). She is committing the sins of pride and lechery. She has no true knowledge of her actions and chooses to blame both Cupid and her mother Venus for her unhappy love life and her desertion by her lovers. By this action she commits blasphemy against these two gods. In her frustration, while she is praying in her own chamber, she expresses her regret that she ever worshipped them and even accuses them of misleading her:

Vpon Venus and Cupide angerly
Scho cryit out, and said on this same wyse:
'Allace, that euer I maid 3ow sacrifice!

'3e gaue me anis ane deuine responsaill
That I suld be the flour of luif in Troy;
Now am I maid ane vnworthie outwaill,
And all in cair translatit is my joy. (*Testament* ll. 124-130)

'O fals Cupide, is nane to wyte bot thow
And thy mother, of lufe the blind goddess!
3e causit me alwayis vnderstand and throw
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 is left, and all forlane' (*Testament* ll. 134-140)

She feels betrayed by the gods and she states that when love was going to bloom, with frost it was all thwarted. In her statement, it is evident that she fails to see her own fault in the change of her fortune.

Cupid swiftly calls the gods to assembly; Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, Phoebus, Venus, Mercury and Cynthia appear. Cupid states the necessity of the punishment of those who commit blasphemy against the gods and says: "Thus hir levuing vnclene and lecherous/ Scho wald retorte in me and my mother" (*Testament* ll. 285-86). Cresseid blames the gods for her loose morals and life. On the decision of Saturn and Cynthia, who themselves are depicted in the poem with physical reflections very reminiscent of leprosy, and who are related by the humours theory and astrological texts to the illness (Parr 488), Cresseid is punished. The shared verdict of Saturn and Cynthia is that "In all hir lyfe with pane to be opprest,/And torment sair with seikness incurabill" (*Testament* ll. 306-307). Saturn decrees that she will lose her physical beauty and "cheer," she will also suffer both physical depravity and loss of health. Saturn enumerates the aspects of his punishment as follows, and says:

'Thy greit fairness and all thy bewtie gay,
Thy wantoun blude, and eik thy golden hair,
Heir I exclude fra the for euermair.

'I change thy mirth into melancholy,
Quhilk is the mother of all pensiuenes;
Thy moisture and thy heit in cald and dry;
Thyne insolence,thy play and wantones,
Togreit diseis; thy pomp and thy riches
In mortall neid; and greit penuritie
Thow suffer sall, and as ane beggar die.' (*Testament* ll. 313-22)

Saturn decrees her to lose her good looks and joy, golden hair, to be in a melancholic state and die a poor beggar. All these aspects, as illustrated by a number of critics, are in keeping with the allegorical character of Saturn. Cynthia adds her own punishment:

“They cristall ene mingit with blude I mak,
Thy voice sa cleir, vnplesand, hoir and hace,
Thy lustie lyre ouirsprede with spottis blak,
And lumpis haw appeirand in thy face:
Quhair thow cummis, ilk man sall fle the place.
This sall thow go begging fra hous to hous
With cop and clapper lyke ane Lazarous.” (*Testament* ll. 337-43)

The most frequent adjective used to describe Cresseid in the *Testament* is “fair” and this is the quality she loses by the decree of the gods. She belonged to the respectable society and mixed with the upper class, now she is condemned to marginalization, isolation and being an outcast, without any protector; she is shunned by all except the other lepers. As Parr points out, “description of leprosy was found in almost all medical works of the fourteenth and fifteenth century” (489). In keeping with these descriptions, Cresseid’s clear bright eyes become bloodshot, her clear voice becomes hoarse, her complexion is marred with black spots and ulcerations (Parr 490). Stearns states that the sickness was widespread in England and Scotland; in England it almost died out by the fifteenth century but in Scotland it lasted till the end of the eighteenth century (265). Stearns is of the opinion that Henryson was also informed of the illness and the symptoms from his personal observations (266) however most of the critics do not agree with Stearns’ assertion that his firsthand observations provided him with such detailed information about the symptoms of the disease because the disease was well known and its descriptions were provided in medical handbooks. The symptoms that are described in the *Testament* are detailed and accurate. In Henryson’s time leprosy was classified in four types. Cresseid’s illness can be identified as *elephantiasis* which was believed to be incurable (Stearns 268). The leper immediately became a social outcast, who was forced to reside in isolated villages or leper houses located outside the towns. Stearns also points out the desire of the person who suffered from leprosy to avoid society to be a frequently-noted symptom. Cresseid follows a similar path when she discovers that she has been struck by the disease; she expresses her wish to secretly depart from her father’s mansion and to live in a leper house. The lepers were allowed limited access to certain parts of the town for limited periods, they had to beg for their food and alms at town gates (Brody 60 ff). Since they were deemed to be a threat to society and were accepted as carriers of contagion, the society felt the need to take protective measures (Brody 79, Stearns 266, Richards 153-56). In 1427 the Scottish Parliament announced decrees strictly regulating the movement of the lepers and outlining where and when they could beg (Stearns 266). On similar moral grounds, in England in “1346 Edward III had issued a royal mandate excluding lepers from London” (Brody 96). The leper had to announce his presence warning the community of his approach with his clapper, the bell or the horn he carried (Richards 154-55). He would collect the alms in the bowl he carried. Similar to some other distinctive marginalized groups of the Middle Ages, the lepers were also segregated by means of specific dress and items of costume (Richards 154-55). Henryson does not include any reference to the specific costume in the depiction of Cresseid but he refers to the clapper and the begging bowl. These two items were the immediate symbols of the begging leper which the gods decree Cresseid to carry. Cresseid waking up from her dream where she was punished, checks her face in a mirror and sees her face disfigured beyond recognition. She weeps bitterly and admits that she has deserved this end because of her sin against the gods, she says: “My blaspheming now haue I bocht full deir” (*Testament* l. 354). In relation to the sin, she commits detailed information is provided for the medieval audience in one of the works of religious instruction. The author of *The Acrene Riwe* in his book of instructions for three anchorites presents a very systematic description

of all the sins in the "Temptations" section. Here he presents an allegorized depiction of the Seven Deadly Sins, assigning each a symbolic beast and comments on the off-springs of these beasts to specify the subdivisions of the specific sin. The Lion of Pride is said to have many cubs and the seventh cub is stated to be Blasphemy. The author says: "This cub is nourished by the man who swears great oaths, or curses bitterly, or speaks in an evil way about God or about His saints on account of some suffering that he has, or something he sees or hears" (86-87). The story of Troilus and Criseyde belongs to the Matter of Rome, and although it is a story set in pagan times Christian beliefs and dogma is being appropriated and employed in this ancient story. Henryson's Cresseid recognizes her misconduct against the gods, but her recognition is not fully achieved. She realizes that she was blaming the gods whereas her attitude should have been one of acceptance and obedience. *The Acrene Riwe* also comments on the sin of Lechery and describes it as the Scorpion of Lechery. Various forms of it are enumerated as its off-springs and Fornication which Cresseid commits is also mentioned (91). Within this systematic classification, Cresseid has committed the spiritual sin of Pride and the bodily sin of Lechery (*Acrene Riwe* 85). As Richards also points out, the link between leprosy and sin was established as early as the Hebrew commentators of the bible and had later been taken on into Christianity (159). Cresseid still cannot fully grasp her situation and fails to see her immoral behavior as the other important reason she has been punished with leprosy. However, since she is aware that everyone will be able to recognize her sin associated with her illness, she asks her father to help her in going to a leper house secretly where she is unrecognized. As she comes from a noble family she is accepted (*Testament* ll. 352-57, 345-51).

At this point Cresseid's first lament is given. The lament follows the well-established form of the *ubi sunt* tradition, lamenting the loss she is to endure. She laments for the loss of all the earthly pleasures, goods and luxury items she enjoyed in her healthy days enumerating luxurious chambers, textiles, gold cups, and rich food (*Testament* ll. 368-85). These are followed by her lament of the loss of enjoyable stroll of the May gardens and the joyful days. She laments her loss saying where are they? The wheel of fortune has turned and as befits the tragic hero/heroine, she has lost all that she enjoyed formerly, never to be recovered again. She says referring to her state:

Thy greit triumphand fame and hie honour,
 Quhair thou was callit of erdlye wichtis flour,
 All is decayit, thy weir is weltreit so;
 Thy hie estait is turnit in darknes dour." (*Testament* ll. 386-89)

However, at this point she still cannot perceive her true situation. In the words of Godman in this lament "self-pity, regret for lost elegance and erstwhile honour, and despair prevail; what is wholly lacking is remorse" (296). She is still vain and self-centered. When in an address to the ladies of Troy and Greece, showing her fall as a warning, she still blames the fickleness of Fortune (*Testament* l. 404). The only moral she can grasp at this stage at the most can be a warning against devotion to worldly values and pleasures.

Upon the chiding of a fellow leper woman and the demands of necessity, Cresseid not being supported by anyone has to go begging for her survival. The woman says: "Go leir to clap thy clapper to and fro/ And leif efter the law of lipper leid." (*Testament* ll. 431-32). Since there is no help, she in the end has to go out begging, forced by cold and hunger. Meanwhile, Troilus is coming back from the battlefield where he was victorious and the paths of the former lovers cross. When the beggars approach him in their normal begging area by the town gates Troilus is overcome by pity and gives generously to the leper woman whom he fails to recognize as Cresseid. Although Cresseid is disfigured beyond recognition, something reminds Troilus of her and out of pity and remembrance of Cresseid, he gives his girdle and purse of gold to this woman. When Cresseid recognizes Troilus, she faints. When she comes round, it is the moment of true recognition of Cresseid in the poem. As Godman puts it, she "understands the deepest source of her suffering to

be neither leprosy nor the enmity of Fortune but her own infidelity to and loss of Troilus" (298). She reproaches herself by repeatedly saying "O fals Cresseid and trew knicht Troilus!" (*Testament* l. 497). She also sees the reality that she is solely responsible for what has become of her, she says: "Nane but myself as now I will accuse" (*Testament* l. 525). She then prepares her testament in which she sends the ruby ring which had been given by Troilus to her to inform him of her death. According to medieval lapidary lore the ruby is a sign of virtue and lordship over others, making all men show respect to the bearer (Evans and Serjeantson 41,110), thus she acknowledges Troilus's worth once more in humility. She also commends her soul to Diana, which is of significance, as she is singled out with her properties of the chaste goddess of the wilderness and woods, as Parkinson points out "Cresseid envisions a chaste refuge for her soul" (360). Hence, it seems that Cresseid has been reformed and wishes for her soul to be chaste.

Medieval convention supported that moral depravity and spiritual corruption were the reasons for leprosy. Rawcliffe states that "With varying degrees of sophistication, poets and storytellers further elaborated the theme of leprosy as a punishment for crime or depravity, especially of a sexual nature" (*Medicine and Society* 15, *Leprosy* 53ff) and she further specifically comments on Cresseid and says: "How appropriate that the lovely Cresseid, who is not only vain, blasphemous and proud but also little more than a harlot with 'wantoun blude', should be condemned to end her days in the dirt and penury of a 'spittail-hous'" (*Medicine and Society* 15). It was strongly associated with pride and lustfulness. Hence, Cresseid's pride and arrogance lead her to insult the gods and she was punished by leprosy. Her leprosy caused her disfigurement, that is, her bodily beauty was lost, and her pride and arrogance were tamed when she had to beg for alms.

On the other hand, the disease was also accepted as a special grace of God, hence the leper was specially chosen by God for salvation (Brody 101, Rawcliffe *Leprosy* 47). In general illness was believed to have a sanctifying effect. In *The Acrene Riwe* there is a special reference to the attitude and function of illness in general which is relevant to Cresseid's situation. The author elaborates on the topic as follows:

Illness is a fire of which we must endure the heat, but nothing purifies gold so well as illness cleanses the soul.

Illness which is sent by God, and not caught by some through their own foolishness, does these six things: washes away sins previously committed; protects against those that were threatening; tests our patience; keeps us humble; increases our reward; puts the patient sufferer on a level with the martyrs. Thus bodily illness is the health of the soul, salve for its wounds, a shield against further wounds, which God sees it would receive did not prevent it. Illness causes man to understand what he is, to know himself, and like a good master it chastises us, in order to teach us how powerful God is, how precarious worldly happiness. Illness is your goldsmith who in the happiness of heaven is gilding your crown. The greater the illness, the busier the goldsmith, and the longer it lasts, the more he burnishes the crown. What greater grace could there be, for those who have deserved the tortures of hell, world without end, than to become, through an adversity which soon passes, equal with the martyrs? (80)

The religious authorities tried to comfort the lepers by stating that this illness was the salvation of the soul and that the illness would be the purgatory of their soul (Brody 103, Rawcliffe *Medicine and Society* 16). Leprosy in the Middle Ages was also regarded as a divine favor, as it purified the soul and although the leper suffered bodily in this world s/he would win her/his wealth in the other world. In *The Testament of Cresseid* Henryson presents leprosy not only as an illness but employing medieval medical knowledge and myths turns the illness into a healing agent in the recognition and spiritual growth and perhaps salvation of Cresseid. Cresseid was vain, proud of her beauty, and fond of worldly and fleshly pleasures. When she contracted leprosy she realized

the transitoriness of all worldly beauty and possessions. With the final encounter with Troilus she realized her infidelity and the true noble love and character of Troilus. As the best example of tragic heroes, she does not only experience a reversal of fortune, but she also achieves recognition of her sins and gains wisdom through this self-recognition.

It would not be wrong to say that her horrible incurable "unhealing" physical illness enables Cresseid to gain wisdom through the recognition of her vanity and pride, and results in the healing of her soul. Her incurable leprosy which cannot heal itself is instrumental in healing her sinful character and saving her soul. Her incurable leprosy which cannot be healed itself is instrumental in healing her sinful character and saves her soul.

In conclusion, it can be said that Henryson in *The Testament of Cresseid* takes up the unhappy love story of Troilus and Cresseid and focuses on Cresseid's fortunes on the Greek side living with her father. Henryson introduces the theme of the illness of leprosy contracted by Cresseid to the narrative and following medieval beliefs and theories writes a tragedy. The poet portrays her not as a victim of fortune but as a proud, arrogant and lecherous figure who commits the sin of blasphemy against the gods blaming them for her unhappy love life. As a result of her sins, following medieval medical beliefs, she is struck by leprosy which was specifically associated with the Christian sins of pride and lechery. She loses all her worldly assets; once a beautiful woman with a high status in the society, she is disfigured beyond recognition. Even Troilus her former lover cannot recognize her. Due to her incurable illness she has become a social outcast because she has to live away from the society, limited to the leper's quarters and she has to beg for alms for her sustenance. Although the sickness was believed to be an incurable punishment of loose life and morals following medieval biblical tradition, it was also deemed to be a divine favor and blessing sent by God. It was a purgatory on earth but it led to salvation. Also following the tradition of tragedy, Henryson depicts Cresseid experiencing a fall that is caused by her flawed character and sins, but through the fall she gains self-recognition and repents. Hence, ironically the unhealing physical sickness cures and heals her soul.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s)

References

- Acrene Riwe. (1955). *The Acrene Riwe* (M. B. Salu, Trans.). Burns and Oates.
- Brody, S. N. (1974). *The disease of the soul: Leprosy in medieval literature*. Cornell University Press.
- Chaucer, G. (1988). *The Canterbury tales*. In *The Riverside Chaucer* (3rd ed., pp. 23–328). Oxford University Press.
- Chaucer, G. (1988). *Troilus and Criseyde*. In *The Riverside Chaucer* (3rd ed., pp. 473–585). Oxford University Press.
- Evans, J., & Serjeantson, M. S. (1933). *English medieval lapidaries*. Oxford University Press, (EETS).
- Godman, P. (1984). Henryson's masterpiece. *The Review of English Studies*, 35(139), 291–300. <https://doi.org/10.1093/res/XXXV.139.291>.
- Gray, D. (1979). *Robert Henryson*. Brill.
- Hartnoll, P. (1968). *A concise history of the theatre*. Thames and Hudson.
- Henryson, R. (1987). *Testament of Cresseid*. In D. Fox (Ed.), *The poems* (pp. 111–131). Clarendon.

- Hudson, E. H. (1972). Diagnosing a case of venereal disease in fifteenth century Scotland. *British Journal of Venereal Disease*, 48, 146–153.
- MacQueen, J. (1967). *Robert Henryson: A study of the major narrative poems*. Oxford University Press.
- Nikiforuk, A. (2000). *Mahşerin dördüncü atlısı: Salgın ve bulaşıcı hastalıklar tarihi* (S. Erkanlı, Trans.). İletişim. (Original work published as *The Fourth Horseman: A Short History of Plagues, Scourges and Emerging Viruses*).
- Parkinson, D. J. (1991). Henryson's Scottish tragedy. *The Chaucer Review*, 25(4), 355–362.
- Parr, J. (1945). Cresseid's leprosy again. *Modern Language Notes*, 60(7), 487–491.
- Rawcliffe, C. (1995). *Medicine and society in later medieval England*. Allon Sutton Publishing.
- Rawcliffe, C. (2006). *Leprosy in medieval England*. Boydell.
- Richards, J. (1990). *Sex, dissidence and damnation: Minority groups in the Middle Ages*. Routledge.
- Rowland, B. (1963–1964). The “seiknes incurabill” in Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid*. *English Language Notes*, 1, 175–177.
- Stearns, W. M. (1944). Robert Henryson and the lepper Cresseid. *Modern Language Notes*, 59(4), 265–269.
- Wickham, G. (1974). *The medieval theatre*. Weidenfeld and Nicolson.