

“BE WAR IN TYME, APPROCHIS NEIR THE END”:  
THE SENSE OF AN ENDING IN *THE TESTAMENT OF CRESSEID*\*

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ABSTRACT

The story of Troilus and Criseyde – whether in Chaucer’s or Henryson’s renditions – is not a story about a new beginning, but a story about an end: the end of love, of hope, and finally – the end of life: Troilus’s life in Chaucer’s poem and Cresseid’s life in Henryson’s. The Scottish version of the story, however, not only evokes the end of an individual life, but also the end of the world. The purpose of this paper is to situate Henryson’s poem in the context of apocalyptic fiction – fiction which is concerned with loss, decay and the finality of things. My contention that the poem belongs to the apocalyptic genre is based on a number of its features, such as the elegiac mood and imagery, the contrast between the past and the present, as well as the pattern of sin-redemption-preparation for death, which applies to Cresseid’s life, but also invites reflection on our own.

Keywords: apocalypse, dying in the Middle Ages, Robert Henryson, *Testament of Cresseid*, *Troilus and Criseyde*, Saturn, poetic closure

It is a well-known fact that Henryson’s *Testament of Cresseid* is based on Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*, a poem which – despite its neat five-book division – has been perceived as lacking a definite ending, and thus incomplete.<sup>1</sup> The poem centres on Troilus, his death and ascent to the eighth

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\* I wish to thank the anonymous reviewers, who provided suggestions for improving the article, especially its final part, for – as Chaucer says – “th’ende is every tales strengthe” (*TC*, II. 260). If this is not so in the present case, the responsibility lies with me.

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<sup>1</sup> The inconclusiveness of Chaucer’s poetry, and of *Troilus and Criseyde* in particular, has often been emphasized by the critics. See Margaret Bridges (1984: 81–96) and Rosemarie

sphere, but Criseyde, according to some critics, “lacks an apocalyptic ending” – an ending that she would be assigned by Robert Henryson in his famous *Testament of Cresseid* (Higl 2010: 175).

The article addresses the problem of temporality and finality with reference to Henryson’s *Testament of Cresseid* – a poem whose spirit is dominated by what Frank Kermode called “the sense of an ending”. My purpose is to show that *The Testament of Cresseid* displays what can be called an “apocalyptic mentality” – a mentality based on a characteristic attitude towards time adopted in medieval apocalyptic fiction. As Kermode (2000: 7) has demonstrated, this kind of fiction usually adopts a linear approach to time and often conveys it through the idea of pilgrimage. Born “into the midst” of his life pilgrimage, man moves towards the end of his days when he is to meet his judgment, just like fiction starts *in medias res* and moves towards the critical moment of resolution. It is the ending that gives meaning to the whole, as Kermode has observed, whether of our life or of a fictional creation. We need fiction with its narrative concords, Kermode (2000: 52) maintains, to satisfy our “insatiable interest in the future” and to make sense of time.

In order to make sense of time, man has to find himself in a moment of crisis. Deprived of all the earthly joys of the past, he is suspended in the meaningless present and has to face the imminent future, which will bring destruction of a personal or a more general kind. Implied in this type of mentality is the perception of apocalypse as “that critical moment of resolution when good would be rewarded and evil punished” with people reduced to morality types and with martyr as the supreme ideal of exemplary action (Straw 2000: 21). To a significant extent, apocalyptic imagination informs Robert Henryson’s concerns in *The Testament of Cresseid*. The Scottish poem contains elements characteristic of apocalyptic writing, previously employed in Old English elegies, among other poems, as discussed by Martin Green.<sup>2</sup> It shares with other apocalyptic writings “the concern for the ultimate passing of things” and underlines throughout the contrast between the glorious past and the miserable present (Green 1975: 502). Most significantly of all, it documents a moment of crisis in the life of an individual, but instead of focusing on “the plight of man in time”, to use Green’s phrase, the Scottish poet is concerned with “the plight of *woman* in time”, *her* frustrated expectations and *her* “wofull

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P. McGerr (1998: 96–118). The idea of poetic closure has been dealt with extensively by Barbara Herrnstein Smith (1968).

<sup>2</sup> The conventions of the apocalyptic paradigm were applied to various medieval works and have been discussed by Morton W. Bloomfield (1962); Richard Kenneth Emmerson & Ronald B. Herzman (1992: 76–103, 145–181); and Martin Green (1975: 502–518). To the last article I am greatly indebted as it provided the initial impetus for mine. Some of the terminology used in my description of Cresseid’s plight is Green’s.

end” (*Testament*, l. 69; my emphasis),<sup>3</sup> making judgment the central theme of his poem (Jentoft 1972: 99).

The context for Cresseid’s tragedy is established by the narrator, whose description of the wintry weather sets the apocalyptic mood of the poem. Even though it is early spring, the wind is so strong and the frost so biting that the narrator is forced to retire from the window of his study to his bedchamber: “Schouris [showers] of haill gart fra the north discend, / That scantlie fra the cauld I micht defend”, he says (*Testament*, ll. 6–7). Hail, which figures prominently in the opening lines of the *Testament*, was perceived as one of the signs that pointed menacingly towards the end of the world in the Book of Revelation<sup>4</sup> and in a number of medieval apocalyptic treatises, which associated hail – together with other portents, such as earthquakes, rains of fire, snakes, and toads – with the onset of the plague.<sup>5</sup>

Whether Henryson’s aim in the opening paragraphs was to point to the end of time, or just describe a bad run of weather, he was certainly careful to observe the principles of poetic decorum. He begins his poem with an account of dismal weather, for a summer setting would not correspond to the “cairfull [sorrowful] dyte” (*Testament*, l. 1) that he is about to tell us, just like a young narrator would be at odds with the gloomy spirit of a poem concerned with the finality of things. Therefore, the story is told in the season of Lent – “penitential, antagonistic to the body” (Tambling 2004: 149) and Henryson’s narrator is “ane man of age” (*Testament*, l. 29) – a helpless victim of the pressure of time, whose age parallels that of the world with its barren winter landscape and freezing cold. The wintry weather corresponds to his frame of mind and his failing nature (*Testament*, ll. 32–34) anticipates Cresseid’s physical decay. Having reached “the Saturnine stage in his own life” (Cherniss 1987: 220), he bears witness to Cresseid’s fall, which happens as a result of her blasphemy against the planetary gods, and is largely orchestrated by Saturn.

In Henryson’s poem, the planets descend from the sky to strike Cresseid with leprosy in a similar way that the hail descended from the sky to strike the narrator

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<sup>3</sup> All references to and quotations from Henryson’s poems come from *The Makars: The Poems of Henryson, Dunbar and Douglas* (1999). *The Testament of Cresseid* is referred to in brackets as *Testament*.

<sup>4</sup> “Then the angel took the censer, filled it with fire from the altar, and threw it to the earth. And there were noises, thunderings, lightnings, and an earthquake. So the seven angels who had the seven trumpets prepared themselves to sound. The first angel sounded: and hail and fire followed, mingled with blood, and they were thrown to earth” (*Revelation* 8: 5–7).

<sup>5</sup> See Laura A. Smoller (2000: 156–187). Smoller describes how medieval apocalyptic treatises approached the issue of causation. The crux of the debate was whether the end of days will result from natural or supernatural causes. As the author argues, from the fifteenth century onwards, the natural explanations were more confidently employed, relying on astrology to herald the advent of Antichrist.

with cold in the initial stanzas of the poem. The poet's repetition of the verb "descend" in the early part of the poem creates an interesting effect. In the first stanza the poet refers to the "[s]chouris of hail", descending from the North (*Testament*, l. 6); likewise, in the second stanza he describes the approaching evening in terms of the descent of the sun (*Testament*, l. 14). The appearance of the planetary deities also happens as a result of their descent "fra thair spheiris" (*Testament*, l. 147), which creates the effect of the universe closing in on Cresseid (Mann 1990: 96). In this respect, Henryson's handling of the astrological allegory differs markedly from Chaucer's. In *Troilus and Criseyde*, Chaucer's Troilus, liberated by death from earthly concerns, ascends to "the holughnesse of the eighthe spere" (*TC*, V. 1809).<sup>6</sup> This upwards and outwards movement is reversed in Henryson's poem, where the seven planets – Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, Phoebus, Mercury, Cynthia, and Venus – step down from their spheres to the sublunary world, which – unlike them – is subject to change (Rawcliffe 2009: 96). While in the English poem the cosmological resonances lead to the "opening-out of perspective", as Jill Mann has demonstrated, in Henryson's poem they contribute to "a sinister effect of claustrophobia" (Mann 1990: 96).

The downward movement of the planets and the role they play in the poem indicate the nearness of the end, signalled as it was in apocalyptic writings by the appearance of implacable forces beyond human control (Green 1975: 513).<sup>7</sup> The poet also points to the evil conjunction made by the planets Saturn and Jupiter, which was seen by medieval astrologers as an indication of the approaching end,<sup>8</sup> and makes use of apocalyptic imagery, especially in the description of Saturn, whose frosted hair, tattered clothes fluttering in the wind, and a sheaf of arrows feathered with ice and tipped with hailstones (*Testament*, ll. 163–168) carry further the wintry imagery evoked in the initial lines of the poem.

Described by Chaucer as "the fader of pestilence" ("Knight's Tale", l. 2469), Saturn was traditionally seen as the most malignant and also the oldest of the planets, notorious for his power to bring death and infirmities on those born on

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<sup>6</sup> For citations from Geoffrey Chaucer's poems I use *The Riverside Chaucer* (1988), edited by Larry D. Benson. *Troilus and Criseyde* has been abbreviated to *TC*.

<sup>7</sup> The nature of the universe presided over by the planetary gods has long been a subject of critical discussion. Some critics argue that it is essentially pagan, others agree that it is set within a non-Christian eschatology, but nevertheless see the pagan gods as representations of the true God (McNamara 1973: 102), and there are those who argue that "Henryson's poem is thoroughly and deliberately Christian" and as such it allows Cresseid "to move from the objective pagan world of crime to the subjective world of sin and repentance" (Patterson 1973: 703). Whichever the case, the fact is that the pagan gods and the Christian God coexisted in medieval imagination and "medieval Church never questioned the power wielded by celestial forces over human affairs" (Rawcliffe 2009: 102).

<sup>8</sup> Based on the Saturn-Jupiter conjunction, in 1444 an astrologer called Jean de Bruges predicted that the end of the world would take place in 1765 (Smoller 2000: 185).

earth. He was responsible for what Chaucer calls “maladyes colde” (“Knight’s Tale”, l. 2467), such as “all impediments of the right ear, teeth, all quartan agues proceeding of cold, dry, and melancholy distempers, leprosy, rheums, consumptions, black jaundies, palsies, tremblings, vain fears, fantasies” and other diseases enumerated by medieval astrologers (Curry 1926: 130). “Having been himself held captive, according to Greek myth” – as Carole Rawcliffe notes – “Saturn was also the patron of prisoners, whether in the literal sense or metaphorically with regard to those whose age, mental incapacity or illness chained them to a decaying body or failing mind” (Rawcliffe 2009: 99).

In Henryson’s poem, Saturn’s role is to effect change in Cresseid’s health and beauty by striking her with leprosy. In one of the most moving scenes of the poem, the planetary god lies a frosty wand on Cresseid’s head and pronounces “[a]ne wraikfull sentence” (*Testament*, l. 329) on her: “Thy greit fairnes and all thy bewtie gay, / Thy wantoun blude [blood], and eik [also] thy goldin hair, / Heir [here] I exclude [remove] fra the for evermair” (*Testament*, ll. 313–315), he announces. Cresseid learns that she shall suffer “greit penuritie [poverty]” and “as ane beggar die” (*Testament*, ll. 321–322). Like the narrator before her, Cresseid grows old, testifying to what some critics call Henryson’s “resentment of youth”.<sup>9</sup> Both the narrator and Cresseid become excluded from the garden of courtly love – the former by age, the latter by leprosy and poverty.<sup>10</sup> More than that, both of them seem virtually dead. Deprived of her beauty, Cresseid loses her courtly identity, which was, to a large extent, based on her being perceived as the object of masculine desire (Dunnigan 2004: 111). Similarly, the narrator’s desire is “doif [dull] and deid [dead]” (*Testament*, l. 32) and the only remedy for that, according to Henryson, is external heat.

The transformations of Cresseid and the narrator are not described without references to their past youth and beauty. The narrator used to be a fervent devotee of Venus, to whom “*sum tyme* [he] hecht [vowed] obedience” (*Testament*, l. 23; emphasis mine). Cresseid was “*sum tyme* flour of lufe” and will be remembered as “Cresseid of Troyis toun, / *Sumtym* countit [considered] the flour of womanheid” (*Testament*, ll. 607–608; emphasis mine), as the inscription on her grave reads. The poet’s repetition of “*sum tyme*” points to his

<sup>9</sup> Tambling (2004: 149) argues that Henryson’s “partially unconscious resentment against ‘youthid’ may have grown out of Chaucer’s ending of his *Troilus and Criseyde*, where the English poet encourages ‘yonge fresshe folkes’ to ‘[r]epeyreth hom fro worldly vanyte’” (*TC*, V. 1835–1837). A similar sentiment is expressed in Henryson’s other poems, such as *The Praise of Age* or *The Ressoning betwix Aige and Yowth*.

<sup>10</sup> Old Age and Poverty figure prominently among other personifications of those excluded from the garden of love in *The Romance of the Rose* (pp. 7–9). A similar sentiment finds expression in Villon’s *Le Testament*, where the poet states: “Laide viellesse amour n’impestre / Ne que monnoye c’on descrye” (“Love shuns the old and ugly, so / Their coin’s no longer legal tender”) (ll. 555–556).

focus on the contrast between the past and the present, characteristic of apocalyptic fiction, and further emphasized in Cresseid's *ubi sunt* lament, in which she summons up elegiac remembrances of things past:

Quhair is thy chalmer wantounlie besene, *chamber; luxuriously furnished*  
 With burely bed and bankouris browderit bene? *fine; coverings;*  
*embroidered beautifully*  
 Spycis and wyne to thy collatioun, *supper*  
 The cowpis all of gold and silven schene; *cups; bright*  
 The sweit meitis, servit in plaittis clene, *delicacies; plates*  
 With saipheron sals of ane gude sessoun? *saffron sauce; flavour*  
 Thy gay garmentis with mony gudely gown, *fine dress*  
 Thy plesand lawn pinnit with goldin prene? *linen; brooch*  
 All is areir, thy greit royall renoun! *gone, reputation*

(*Testament*, ll. 416–424)

Having mourned her physical decay before, she now bemoans the loss of material prosperity in a fragment that is strikingly similar to those found in Anglo-Saxon elegies, both in terms of its content and form (Storm 1993: 116). Also, similarly to the heroes of Old English elegies, Cresseid soon turns to the future to announce that “the time is at hand” (*Revelation* 1: 3).

Addressing “ladyis fair of Troy and Grece” (*Testament*, l. 452), she advises them to take heed of her plight and amend their ways before they find themselves where she is now, i.e. at the end of time. “Be war in tyme, approchis neir the end” (*Testament*, l. 456), “Be war thairfoir, approchis neir the hour” (*Testament*, l. 468) – she warns them twice, bringing to mind the assertion of Jesus: “the hour is coming and is now” (*John* 4: 23), which, in Green’s phrase, “sums up the apocalyptic sense of the urgent present” (Green 1975: 505). Recalling her “greit mischief” (*Testament*, l. 455), she looks back on her past, links it with the present, and the present with the future in the message she conveys to other ladies:

Nocht is your fairnes bot ane faiding flour,  
 Nocht is your famous laud and hie honour *glory*  
 Bot wind inflat in uther mennis eiris; *puffed; ears*  
 Your roising reid to rotting sall retour [...]. *rosy complexion; decomposed*  
*matter, return*

(*Testament*, ll. 461–464)

She has reached a point that can be called “an apocalyptic moment, a moment in which the past and the future are felt to impinge relentlessly, and, perhaps more important, a moment when the future is felt to be fulfilled in the present” (Green 1975: 505). It is at this point that she becomes aware of the law of nature – the law of growth and decay. Her earlier arrogance and ignorance brought her to

this very moment, for the planetary gods which deprived Cresseid of her youth and beauty appeared not out of their own volition, but in response to her lament.

Paul Strohm has demonstrated how in Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde* character and propensity for action were bound up with the attitude towards time. Impractical in his disregard for time and change, Troilus was oriented towards the world of timeless values. Criseyde, on the other hand, was able to accommodate herself to the altered circumstances. For Troilus, change was “neither desirable nor even possible” (Strohm 1989: 104) and from the eighth sphere he condemned “the which that may nat laste” (*TC*, V. 1824). For his beloved, change was inscribed in the pattern of temporal succession and was not to be denied. Henryson’s Cresseid, on the other hand, cannot come to terms with the vicissitudes of earthly time. She utters a lament – a form of narration, which, in Strohm’s words, is “suited to a consideration of humanity’s relation to the spiritual or transcendent, to divine order beyond apparent disorder, to the consideration of what Paul Ricoeur calls ‘cosmic pathos’” (Strohm 1989: 110). In Chaucer’s narrative, extratemporal narratives such as laments and meditations belonged to the idealizing Troilus, for they require “the perspective of *aeternitas*, in which all is perceived to occur at once” (Strohm 1989: 110). In Henryson’s poem, it is Cresseid that laments the loss of beauty and her love, accusing gods of denying her what she was granted:

Ye causit me alwayis understand and trow *made me believe*  
 The seid of lufe was sawin in my face, *seed; sown*  
 And ay grew grene throw your supplie and grace. *help; favour*  
 Bot now, allace, that seid with froist is slane, *alas; frost*  
 And I fra luifferis left and all forlane! *from; lovers; forgotten*  
(*Testament*, ll. 136–140)

In the lament, Cresseid reveals herself as “a petulant, shallow woman concerned only with her own small world” (Noll 1971: 22). Not realizing her place in the cosmic scheme of things, she is made aware of it by the planetary deities – the forces “[q]uhilk hes power of all thing generabill [created], / To reull and steir [rule and govern] be thair greit influence / Wedder [weather] and wind and coursis variabill [course of fortune]” (*Testament*, ll. 148–150). The gods, which are equivalent to Fortune, “exemplify the workings of time and change in the widest comic perspective” and point to the forces of decay at work (Cherniss 1987: 217). As agents of change, they make Cresseid realize that time is relentless, love changeful and beauty “could easily become a poisoned chalice, brimming over with the sins of pride, lust and avarice” (Rawcliffe 2009: 55).

In his poem, Henryson makes a straight connection between sin and punishment, for leprosy was associated with vice and called “the disease of the soul” (Brody 1974: 147–148), the relationship between sin and the disease

being very intimate (Rawcliffe 2009: 47). Cresseid sins against the code of courtly love in that she first deserts and betrays Troilus (which happens in Chaucer's poem), then goes into "the court commoun" (*Testament*, l. 77),<sup>11</sup> and finally in that she blames her fate on the gods, cursing Venus and Cupid for the change in her fortune. Punished with leprosy, she soon dies or she dies to face the final judgment, as one would be tempted to add. What is interesting in Henryson's poem, however, is that Cresseid faces the judgement of celestial forces *before* and not *after* her death, which may reflect a late medieval tendency to "suppress the eschatological time between death and the end of the world" and to "situate the judgment in space [not] at the Second Coming, but in the bedchamber, around the deathbed" (Ariès 2009: 33). Discussing the changing attitudes towards death in the Middle Ages, Ariès observes the tendency to see the fate of an individual in the context of the collective destiny of the species with the judgment taking place at the end of each life, i.e. at the moment of death (Ariès 2009: 28).

As reflected in visual and textual renditions of the fifteenth-century *ars moriendi*, the moment of death was represented by a great gathering of supernatural beings (the celestial court vs. the satanic army), which only the dying man could see. In late medieval iconography, God no longer appears as a judge, but as an observer, as one who watches man's conduct during a trial he must undergo before death:

This test consists of a final temptation. The dying man will see his entire life as it is contained in the book, and he will be tempted either by despair over his sins, by the "vainglory" of his good deeds, or by the passionate love for things and persons. His attitude during this fleeting moment will erase at once all the sins of his life if he wards off temptation or, on the contrary, will cancel out all his good deeds if he gives way. The final test has replaced the Last Judgment.

(Ariès 2009: 36–37)

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<sup>11</sup> Critics have been arguing whether this phrase of Henryson's is an indication of Cresseid becoming a prostitute. That lepers provoked sexual appetites is testified to in medieval literature. Carole Rawcliffe quotes from *The Romance of Tristan* by the French poet, Bérout, who recounts how a band of those "burning with lust" approach King Mark to ask him for his wife, the adulterous Yseut:

Give us Yseut, so that we can share her *in common*. No lady ever endured such an end. Sire, we burn with so much lust! There is no lady in the world who could survive our embraces, not even for a single day. Our ragged clothes stick to our bodies; with you she was accustomed to luxury, to beautiful fur and pleasures... . If you give her to us lepers, when she sees our squalid hovels and shares our dishes, and has to sleep with us, and when, instead of your fine food, Sire, she has only the scraps and crumbs that are given to us at the gates ... when she sees *our court*, with all its discomforts, she would rather be dead than alive.

(quoted in Rawcliffe 2009: 10; emphasis mine)



How does Henryson’s leprous Cresseid react when her whole life flashes before her eyes during the final test?<sup>12</sup> Her farewell to the world begins with a complaint, in which she enumerates the luxuries of her past life: her beautifully furnished chamber, a garden with flowers, delicacies of food, fine dresses, as well as her beauty, high estate, and “triumphand fame and hie honour” (*Testament*, l. 434). In other words, Cresseid expresses an “unreasoning, visceral love for *temporalia*”, a love of life which is only natural in a man of the Middle Ages, who would live in constant fear of death (Ariès 2009: 45). After a while, though, she comes to a realisation that she herself is to be blamed for her sins and that “Fortoun is fikkill quhen scho beginnis and steiris [stirs]” (*Testament*, l. 469). It is this moment that gives her biography its final meaning (Ariès 2009: 38); she now has time to reflect upon her life before death takes her. Ariès observes that a sudden death was not a welcome scene in medieval romances, in which the knights “did not die without having had time to realize that they were going to die”; they were forewarned and had time to repent (Ariès 2009: 3). This is what happens to Cresseid: before death takes hold of her, she is given enough time to atone for her sins and even be redeemed, the opportunity for redemption being provided by leprosy.

Associated with physical torments, leprosy came to be seen in the Middle Ages as a purgatory on earth. “Purgation *before* death began to seem more like a privilege or mark of divine favour than a curse”, as Rawcliffe notes, with lepers being called “the flowers of paradise” and “the lucent pearls in the crown of the eternal king”, as described by St Hugh of Lincoln (2009: 59). In medieval literature, the leper is not only a “figure of sinful humanity”, redeemed by God (Calin 2013: 34), but becomes capable of redeeming others, like *Christus quasi leprosus* (Rawcliffe 2009: 64). Seen in this light, Cresseid becomes a Christ figure – she not only earns her redemption through “torment sair with seiknes [sickness] incurabill [incurable]” (*Testament*, l. 307), but also contributes to ours. She warns other lovers against putting too much trust in earthly concerns, saying “all your micht [sterngh] micht cum to that same end” (*Testament*, l. 459).

Even though Henryson devotes a lot of attention to man’s moral depravity, it seems that his main concern in the poem is man’s place in the flow of time, which brings his poem close to an existential romance. For Henryson, like for Baruch, “man is not inherently evil; rather, man’s nature is defined by his transitoriness and his fleetingness on the scene of history, an existential situation that reduces every human action to meaninglessness” (Green 1975: 508). The concern with the finality of things is characteristic of Henryson’s other poems and fables: the poet often takes up the theme of existential exclusion that leads to a solitary complaint.

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<sup>12</sup> For the association of leprosy with a test see Rawcliffe (2009: 54).

Orpheus, for instance, lamenting the loss of Eurydice, utters a lament, in which he bids farewell to joy and welcome to plaintive sorrow. He exchanges his palace for wild woods and disposes of his royal robe, rich garments and crown, changing them for “rude russet [rough cloth] of gray” and “a hate [hat] of hair” (*Orpheus and Eurydice*, ll. 158–159). The rejection of his courtly identity brings to mind a similar transformation of Cresseid’s, who also underwent a physical change, not unlike that experienced by Orpheus’s beloved. On seeing Eurydice, Orpheus says in an *ubi sunt* tone: “Quhair is your rude as ros [rosy complexion] with cheikis [cheeks] quhyte [white], / Your cristell ene [eyes] with blenkis [glances] amorus, / Your lippis reid to kiss delicious?” (*Orpheus and Eurydice*, ll. 354–356). Similarly, Henryson’s fables, which are not typically centred around lovers’ complaints, are nevertheless often infused with sorrow and a feeling of impending doom. In “The Preaching of the Swallow”, to give one example, the titular bird goes to great lengths to convince other fowls of an imminent danger, evoking the “fynall end” of all things – a good end if one has sufficient foresight to recognize peril, and a bad end if one does not (“Preaching”, l. 1760). “Wo is him can not bewar in tyme” (“Preaching”, l. 1789) – with these words begins the swallow’s cry of desperate appeal to the birds: they are admonished to take heed of the flax which – when turned into nets – will be their undoing:

O, blind birdis and full of negligence,  
 Unmyndfull of your awin prosperitie, *good*  
 Lift up your sicht and tak gude advertence; *eyes; heed*  
 Luke to the lint that growis on yone le. *flax; meadow*

(“Preaching”, ll. 1790–1793)

The moralizing tone of the passage invites comparison with the warning Cresseid gives to the ladies of Greece and Troy. In the case of the fable, the warning remains unheeded, and the sense of inevitability is here reinforced by the poet’s references to changing seasons that dominate the beginning of the fable, setting the scene for a further examination of the inescapable contingencies of life.

The concern with the finality of things was characteristic of the fifteenth-century zeitgeist and since Death was a frequent visitor in medieval Europe, the preparations for afterlife dominated medieval discourse. Parkinson (1991: 360) notes that Scottish poets, even to a greater extent than English, favoured imagery evoking the fear of dying and a sense of personal sinfulness. The fact that they considered loss, winter, and old age as more lasting and substantial than happiness, youth, and spring may be linked with the reality of daily life in medieval Scotland. As described by Audrey-Beth Fitch: “From 1480 to 1560, Scotland experienced devastating military invasions, repeated outbreaks of

plague, the daily dangers associated with agriculture and common illness, and the ever-present threat of famine” (Fitch 2009: 9).

Moral and penitential lyrics which mirror the existential anxiety constitute a significant portion of Middle Scots poetry. Their wisdom can be connected with Anglo-Saxon proverbial lore (Gillespie 2005: 68–69), but in terms of scope, they seem concerned with the fate of man in general rather than one particular wanderer or seafarer. They often take the form of meditations on the vanity of life, sinner’s laments and reasoning between age and youth. Poems such as Dunbar’s *Lament for the Makars* frequently borrow from the Office of the Dead and tend to voice communal emotion. Henryson’s *Testament of Cresseid*, by contrast, offers a more individualized approach to mortality: it presents a case study of an individual facing the collapse of her own dreams and ambitions, brought about by her own deeds. In that, it shows the poet’s genuine interest in the plight of a particular individual rather than man in general. What happens to Cresseid is a ‘moral’ or ‘individual’ end of the world and her apocalyptic punishment is leprosy.

The association between leprosy and divine punishment has already been mentioned. Affected with leprosy, either directly or indirectly, Henryson’s contemporaries thought that God was punishing them for their sins, “the first human response to an epidemic [being] apocalyptic” (Grigsby 2003: 102). Even though leprosy was regarded as “a sort of aristocrat among diseases”, it was not the only condition associated with punitive suffering in the Middle Ages (Rawcliffe 2009: 1). “Plague and pox were alike regarded as heavy artillery in the ongoing *bellum Dei contra homines*”, Rawcliffe notes, adding that they were thought of as greater curses than leprosy (Rawcliffe 2009: 53). The “advantage” leprosy had over the other diseases was that it was connected with individual rather than collective retribution, which is why it may have been selected by Henryson. Since it was a disease which corrupted the body, not the mind, leprosy did not seem the ultimate penalty for sin. It attacked “only” the body; madness corrupted rational faculties and was seen as the greatest of divine punishments (Rawcliffe 2009: 53). Cresseid does not suffer bouts of insanity, but declines slowly, losing one bodily function or capacity after another. This overwhelmingly physical aspect of the disease becomes the ultimate expression of Henryson’s interest in the concept of finality.

The poet’s contemporaries, reading or listening to Saturn’s “doleful [sorrowful] sentence” (*Testament*, l. 309), which describes Cresseid’s physical collapse, might have in mind words such as the following: “When þi hed whaketh / *memento*; / When þi lippys blaken / *confessio*; / When thy brest pantis / *contricio* ...”.<sup>13</sup> Each time Saturn’s wand touches Cresseid, they might

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<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Person (1953: 20).

respond with a Latin expression evoking a different stage of the ritual connected with the preparation for death. In this symbolic way, each sign of physical death brings the soul closer to salvation. Even though leprosy offers the possibility of salvation, as has been mentioned before, Henryson does not seem to be concerned with the fate of Cresseid's soul after death. His apocalyptic annihilation is the be-all, and the end-all. Unlike Chaucer's Troilus, who ascends to heaven after death, Henryson's Cresseid has no afterlife, at least not in his poetry, which is a final indication of the poet's concern with the end – the final end. Henryson does not linger on stage once Cresseid is dead. His “[s]en scho is deid, I speik of hir no moir” (*Testament*, l. 616) brings to mind Kermode's statement: “It is one of the great charms of books that they have to end” (Kermode 2000: 23). And perhaps the same can be applied to their various interpretations.

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