THE TESTAMENT OF CRESSEID

A Sequel to Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*

by

Robert Henryson
(c.1425-1506)

Abridged and put into modern spelling

by

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from the original, written in Scottish English
THE TESTAMENT OF CRESSEID

Robert Henryson

Each of the first four stanzas here is given first in modern spelling, followed immediately by the original in medieval Scottish spelling.

1. A dooly season to a careful dyte
   Should correspond and be equivalent. ¹
   Right so it was when I began to write
   This tragedy; the weather right fervent
   When Aries, in middle of the Lent
   Showers of hail gan from the north descend
   That scantly from the cold I might defend.

   Ane dooly sesoun to ane cairfull dyte
   Suld correspond and be equivalent.
   Richit sa it wes quhen I began to wryte
   This tragedy; the wedder richt fervent
   Quhen Aries, in middis of the Lent
   Shouris of haill can fra the north discend
   That scantly fra the cauld I micht defend.

2. Yet ne'ertheless, within my orature
   I stood when Titan has his beamis bright ²
   Withdrawin down and ceiléd under cure
   And fair Venus, the beauty of the night,
   Uprose, and set unto the west full right

¹ 1-2: “A dreary season should correspond to a sad poem.” This opening contrasts with a more common medieval way of beginning a poem with a cheerful spring or summer, as in the The Canterbury Tales, for example, or Piers Plowman.

² beamis: beams: One feature of the original spelling has been fairly consistently retained for metrical reasons: the -i- in such words as beamis and withdrawin where Southern English would have had -e- and Modern English often nothing at all: beams, withdrawn. Where -it in the original represents -ed I have generally used the latter.
Her golden face in opposition
Of god Phoebus direct descending down.

Yet nevertheles, within myn orature
I stude quhen Tytan had his bemis bricht
Withdrawin doun and sylit under cure
And fair Venus, the bewty of the nicht,
Uprais, and set unto the west full richt
Hir goldin face in oppositioun
Of god Phebus direct discending doun.

3. Throughout the glass her beamis burst so fair
That I might see on every side me by
The northern wind had purified the air,
And shed the misty cloudis from the sky.
The frost freezèd, the blastis bitterly
From pole Arctic came whistling loud and shrill
And causéd me remove against my will.

Throwout the glas hir bemis brast sa fair
That I micht see on every syde me by
The northin wind had purifyit the air,
And shed the misty cloudis fra the sky.
The froist freisit, the blastis bitterly
Fra pole Artyk came quhisling loud and shill
And causit me remuf aganis my will

4. For I trusted that Venus, lovè's queen,
To whom sometime I het obedience,
My faded heart of love she would make green;
And thereupon, with humble reverence,
I thought to pray her high magnificence;
But for great cold as then I letted was
And in my chamber to the fire gan pass.

For I traistit that Venus, lufis quene,
To quhom sum-tyme I hecht obedience,
My faidit hart of luf showald mak grene;
And therupon, with humbil reverence,
I thocht to pray hir hy magnificence;
But for greit cald as than I lattit was
And in my chalmer to the fire can pass.
5. Though love be hot, yet in a man of age
   It kindles not so soon as in youthhead
   Of whom the blood is flowing in a rage,
   And in the old the courage douf and dead
   Of which the fire outward is best remed
   To help by physic where that Nature failed
   I am expert, for both I have assailed.

6. I mended the fire and bakèd (?) me about, ¹
   Then took a drink my spirits to comfórt,
   And armed me well from the cold thereout.
   To cut the winter night and make it short
   I took a quire (and left all other sport),
   Written by worthy Chaucer glorious,
   Of fair Cresseid and lusty Troilus.

7. And there I found that after Diomed
   Receivèd had that lady bright of hue
   How Troilus near out of his wit abraid
   And weepèd sore with visage pale of hue
   For which wanhope his tears gan renew
   While esperance rejoicèd him again.
   Thus while in joy he livèd, while in pain.

8. Of her behest he had great comforting,
   Trusting to Troy that she should make retour,
   Which he desirèd most of earthly thing,
   Forwhy she was his only paramour.
   But when he saw passèd both day and hour
   Of her 'gaincome, then sorrows gan oppress
   His woeful heart in care and heaviness.

9. Of his distress me needs not to rehearse,
   For worthy Chaucer in the same book,
   In goodly terms and in jolly verse
   Compilèd has his cares, whoe'er will look.
   To break my sleep another quire I took

¹ Beiket me about seems to mean that he warmed himself at the fire, turning around to warm (bake?) himself behind.
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In which I found the fatal destiny
Of fair Cresseid that ended wretchedly.

10. Who wot if all that Chaucer wrote was true? Nor I wot not if this narration
Be authorized or feignèd of the new
By some poet through his invention
Made to report the lamentation
And woeful end of this lusty Cresseid,
And what distress she tholèd, and what deid.

11. When Diomed had all his appetite
And more fulfillèd of this fair lady,
Upon another he set his whole delight,
And sent to her a libel of repudy,
And her excluded from his company.
Then desolate she walkèd up and down,
And -- some men say -- into the court common.

12. O fair Cresseid, the flower and A per se
Of Troy and Greece, how wast thou fortunate
To change in filth all thy femininity
And be with fleshly lust so maculate
And go among the Greeks early and late
So gigolo-like, taking thy foul pleasânce.
I have pity thee should fall such mischance.

13. Yet, ne'ertheless, whate'er men deem or say
In scornful language of thy brittleness,
I shall excuse, as far forth as I may,
Thy womanhood, thy wisdom and fairness
The which Fortûne has put in such distress
As her pleased, and nothing through the guilt
Of thee, through wicked language to be spilt.

14. This fair lady, in this wise destitute
Of all comfórt and consolation
Right privîly, but fellowship, on foot,
Disguisèd, passèd far out of the town
A mile or two unto a mansîon
Buildèd full gay, where her father Calchas
Who then among the Greekis dwelling was.
15. When he her saw, the cause he gan enquire
Of her coming. She said, sighing full sore:
"From Diomed had gotten his desire,
He waxed weary, and would of me no more."
Quod Calchas: "Daughter, weep thou not therefor;
Peráventure, all comis for the best.
Welcome to me! Thou art full dear a guest."

16. This old Calchas, after the law was tho,
Was keeper of the temple as a priest
In which Venus and her son Cupido
Were honored, and his chamber was them next.
To which Crisseid with bale enough in breast
Usèd to pass her prayers for to say.
Till at the last upon a solemn day

17. As custom was, the people far and near
Before the noon unto the temple went
With sacrifice devout in their manner.
But still Cresseid, heavy in her intent
Into the kirk would not herself present
For giving to the people any deeming
Of her expulse from Diomede the king,

18. But passed into a secret orature
Where she might weep her woeful destiny.
Behind her back she closèd fast the door
And on her knees bare fell down in hee.
Upon Cupid and Venus angrily
She crièd out, and said in this same wise:
"Alas that ever I made you sacrifice.

19. "You gave me once a divine rôsponsail
That I should be the flower of love in Troy;
Now am I made an unworthy outwail,
And all to care translated is my joy.
Who shall me guide? Who shall me now convoy
Since I from Diomed and noble Troilus
Am clean excluded as abject odious?

20. "O false Cupid, is none to wite but thou
And thy mother, of love the blind goddess.
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You caused me always understand and trow
The seed of love was sown in my face
And ay grew green through your supply and grace.
But now, alas, that seed with frost is slain
And I by lovers left, and all forlain.”

21. When this was said, down in an ecstasy
Ravished in spirit, into a dream she fell,
And by appearance heard, where she did lie,
Cupid the king ringing a silver bell
Which men might hear from heaven into hell
At whose sound, before Cupid appears
The seven planets descending from their spheres.¹

22. Venus was there present, that goddess gay,
Her son's quarrel for to defend, and make
Her own complaint, clad in a nice array
The one half green, the other half sable black,
White hair as gold, combed and shed aback
But in her face seem'd great variance:
While perfect truth, and whiles inconstance.

23. Under smiling she was dissimulate
Provocative with blenkis amorous,
And suddenly changed and alterate,
Angry as any serpent venomous,
Right pungitive with wordis odious.
Thus variant was she, who list take keep,
With one eye laughs, and with the other weeps

24. In tokening that all fleshly paramour,
Which Venus has in rule and governance,
Is sometimes sweet, sometimes bitter and sour,
Right unstable and full of variance,
Mingled with careful joy and false pleasance,
Now hot, now cold, now blithe, now full of woe,
Now green as leaf, now withered and ago.

¹ 21.6: appears can be used correctly with a plural subject in this dialect. After 21.7 and again after 24.7 several stanzas of the original are omitted, a rather tedious catalogue of the appearance and attributes of other gods/planets: Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, Phoebus, Mercury and the Moon.
25. "Lo," quod Cupid, "who will blaspheme the name Of his own god, either in word or deed, To all [the] gods he does both lak and shame, And should have bitter painsis to his meed. I say this by yonder wretch Cresseid The which through me was sometime flower of love Me and my mother starkly gan reprove, ¹

26. Saying, of her great infelicity I was the cause; and my mother Venus A blind goddess her called, that might not see, With slander and defame injurious. Thus her living unclean and lecherous She would return on me and on my mother To whom I show my grace above all other. ²

27. And since you are all seven deificate Participants of divine sapience, This great injury done to our high estate Methink with pain we should make recompense. Was never to gods done such violence; As well for you as for myself I say. Therefore, go help to revenge, I you pray." ²

28. Mercurius to Cupid gave answer ² And said: "Sir king, my counsel is that ye Refer you to the highest planet here And take to him the lowest of degree The pain of Cresseid for to modify: As god Saturn with him take Cynthia." "I am content," quod he, "to take they twa." ³

29. Then thus proceeded Saturn and the Moon When they the matter ripely had digest For the despite to Cupid she had done And to Venus, open and manifest,

¹ The syntax is [And who] harshly did reprove me and my mother.

² Mercury’s suggestion is this: that the highest planet (Saturn) take the lowest (Cynthia, the Moon) and let these two decide Cresseid’s punishment.

³ The pain of Cresseid for to modify.
In all her life with pain to be oppressed
And torment sore, with sickness incurable
And to all lovers be abominable.

30. This doleful sentence Saturn took in hand,
And passed down where careful Cressid lay
care-filled
And on her head he laid a frosty wand,
Then lawfully in this wise gan he say:
like a judge
"Thy great fairness and all thy beauty gay,
Thy wanton blood and eke thy golden hair
Here I exclude from thee for evermore.

31. I change thy mirth into meláncholy,
Which is the mother of all pensiveness;
Thy moisture and thy heat in cold and dry;
to
Thine insolence, thy play and wantonness
Into
to
To great dis-ease; thy pomp and thy riches
In mortal need. And great penurity
Into
Thou suffer shall, and as a beggar die."

32. O cruel Saturn, froward and angry,
perverse
Hard is thy doom, and too malicious.
judgement
On fair Cresseid why hast thou no mercy,
Who was so sweet, gentle and amorous!
Withdraw thy sentence and be gracious
As thou wast never; so showest through thy deed
A vengeful sentence given on fair Cresseid. 2

33. Then Cynthia, when Saturn passed away,
went away
Out of her seat descended down belive
quickly
And read a bill on Cresseid where she lay
document to
Containing this sentence definitive:
cure
"From health of body I thee now deprive
And to thy sickness shall be no recure
But in doloúr thy dayis to endure.
sorrow

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1 The sentence is that “for her whole life she shall be oppressed with severe pain and torment, with incurable sickness, and that she be repulsive to all lovers.”

2 Saturn is known as the planet or god of cruelty and destructiveness, as shown even by his sentence on Cresseid. Knowing this, the poet professes to ask for mercy for Cresseid from one who has never been known to show mercy (be gracious as thou wast never)
34. "Thy crystal eyes mingled with blood I make, 
Thy voice so clear—unpleasant, hoarse and hace 
Thy lusty lyre o'erspread with spots black 
And lumpis haw appearing on thy face. 
Where thou com'st, each man shall flee the place. 
Thus shalt thou go begging from house to house 
With cup and clapper like a leper."

35. This dooly dream, this ugly visïon 
Brought to an end, Cresseid from it awoke, 
And all that court and convocation 
Vanished away. Then rose she up and took 
A polished glass, and her shadow could look, 
And when she saw her face so deformate, 
If she in heart was woe enough, God wate!

36. Weeping full sore: "Lo, what it is," quod she, 
"With froward language for to move and stir 
Our crabbèd gods, and so is seen in me. 
My blaspheming now have I bought full dear. 
All earthly joy and mirth I set a-rear. 
Alas this day. Alas this woeful tide, 
When I began with my goddis to chide!"

37. By this was said, a child came from the hall 
To warn Cresseid that supper was ready, 
First knockèd at the door, and then could call: 
"Madame, your father bids you come in hee. 
He has marvèl so long on gruff you lie, 
And says, 'Your beadis be too long somdeal. 
The goddis wot all your intent full well.' "

39. Quod she: "Fair child, go to my father dear, 
And pray him come to speak with me anon." 
And so he did, and said: "Daughter, what cheer?" 
"Alas," quod she, "father, my mirth is gone." 
"How so," quod he, and she gan all expone 
As I have told, the vengeance and the wrack 
For her trespass Cupid on her could take.

39. He lookèd on her ugly leper face
The which before was white as lily flower.
Wringing his hands, oft-times he said Alas!
That he had lived to see that woeful hour.
For he knew well that there was no succour help
To her sickness, and that doubled his pain.
Thus was there care enough betwixt them twain. trouble / two

40. When they together mourned had full long,
Quod Cresseid: "Father, I would not be kenned. recognized
Therefore, in secret wise you let me gang go
To yon hospital at the town's end,
And thither some meat for charity me send food
To live upon, for all mirth on this eard earth
Is from me gone. Such is my wicked wierd. fate

41. Then in a mantle and a beaver hat,
With cup and clapper, wonder privily very secretly
He opened a secret gate, and out thereat
Conveyed her that no man should espy,
Unto a village half a mile thereby,
Delivered her in at the spittal house, hospital
And daily sent her part of his almous. alms

42. Some knew her well, and some had no knowledge
Of her because she was so deformèd from her deep grief
With boils black o'erspread in her visage quiet or constant
And her fair color faded and alterèd.
Yet they presumèd for her high regret
And still mourning, she was of noble kin.
With better will, therefore, they took her in.

43. The day passèd, and Phoebus went to rest, God knows
The clouds black o'erswhelmed all the sky. coarse food & shelter
God wot if Cressid was a sorrowful guest Without food / prepared
Seeing that uncouth fare and harbory.
But meat or drink she dressèd her to lie
In a dark corner of the house alone,
And in this wise weeping she made her moan:
44. "O sop of sorrow sunken into care, steeped in O caitiff Cresseid, now and evermore, outcast Gone is thy joy and all thy mirth on earth joy / totally stripped Of all blitheness now art thou blackened bare. medicine There is no salve may save thee of thy sore. Fell is thy fortune, wicked is thy weird Bad / fate Thy bliss is banished, and thy bale on breard. thy grief grows Under the earth, God, if I graven were, would that I were buried Where none of Greece nor yet of Troy might hear. 1

45. “Where is thy chamber, wantonly beseen, luxuriously decorated With burly bed and bankours 'broidered bene,' lovely / covers / embroidered well Spices and wines to thy collation, food The cups all of gold and silver sheen, bright The sweeté meatis served on platis clean Thy gay garments, with many a goodly gown, Thy pleasant lawn pinned with golden preen? All is a-rear, thy great royal renown. pretty linen / brooch behind

46. "Where is thy garden, with the grasses gay beautiful And freshé flowers which the queen Flora goddess of flowers Had painted pleasantly in every pane flower bed Where thou wast wont full merrily in May when To walk and take the dew by it was day, blackbird & thrush And hear the merle and mavis many a one; With ladies fair in carrolling to go singing To see the royal renks in their array people In garments gay garnished in every grane? decorated in e. way

47 "Thy great triumphant fame and high honoúr people Where thou wast called of earthly wights the flower, fate is changed All is decayed, thy weird is weltered so

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1 Cresseid’s lament is expressed in nine-line stanzas different from the seven-line rhyme royal of the narrative part of the poem. Beginning with stanza 45 the lament takes the form of the “Ubi sunt” theme, a trope common in the Middle Ages, commenting on the transience of worldly pleasures, and the mortality of great rulers and great beauties. It derives from the phrase “Ubi sunt qui ante nos fuerunt?: Where are those who went before us?” Its best known modern representative is Rosetti’s “Ballad of Dead Ladies” and its refrain “But where are the snows of yesteryear?” a version of a poem by the medieval French poet Francois Villon.

2 With lovely bed and covers embroidered well". 
Thy high estate is turned in darkness dour.
Thy leper lodge take for thy burly bower,
And for thy bed take now a bunch of straw.
For waled wine and meatis thou haddest tho
Take moulded bread, perry and cider sour.
But cup and clapper, now is all ago.

48. My clear voice and my courtly carolling
Where I was wont with ladies for to sing,
Is rauc as rook, ful hideous, hoarse and hace.
My pleasant port all others precelling
Of lustiness I was held most conding,
Now is deformed the figure of my face
To look on it no lede now liking has.
Soppèd in site I say with sore sighing,
Lodged among the leper lede: "Alas,

49. O ladies fair of Troy and Greece, attend
My misery, which none may comprehend,
My frivol fortune, my infelicity,
My great mischief, which no man can amend.
Beware in time; approaches near the end,
And in your mind a mirror make of me.
As I am now, peradventure that ye,
For all your might, may come to that same end,
Or else worse, if any worse may be.

50. Naught is your fairness but a fading flower,
Naught is your famous laud and high honôur
But wind inflate in other menn's ears;
Your rosy red to rotting shall return.
Example make of me in your memoûr,
Who of such things woeful witness bears,
All wealth in earth away as wind it wears.
Beware therefore; approaches near the hour.
Fortune is fickle when she begins and steers."

51. Thus chiding with her dreary destiny,
Weeping she woke the night from end to end,
But all in vain. Her dool, her care-ful cry
Might not remede, not yet her mourning mend.
A leper lady rose, and to her went
And said: "Why spurnest thou against the wall
To slay thyself and mend nothing at all?

52. Since that thy weeping doubles but thy woe,
I counsel thee, make virtue of a need.
Go learn to clap thy clapper to and fro
And live after the law of leper lede."
There was no boot, but forth with them she yede
From place to place, while cold and hunger sore
Compellèd her to be a rank beggar.

53. That samè time of Troy the garrison
Which had to chieftain worthy Troilus,
Through jeopardy of war had stricken down
Knights of Greece in number marvelous.
With great triumphant and laud victorious
Again to Troy right royally they rode
The way where Cresseid with the lepers bode.

54. Seeing that company come, all with one steven
They gave a cry and shook [their] cups good speed,
Said: "Worthy lords, for Godè's love of heaven,
To us lepers part of your almis deeds."
Then to their cry noble Troilus took heed,
Having pity, near by the place gan pass
Where Cressid sat, not witting what she was.

55. Then upon him she cast up both her een,
And with a blink it came into his thought
That he sometime her face before had seen,
But she was in such plight he knew her not.
Yet then her look into his mind it brought
The sweet visage and amorous blinking
Of fair Cresseid, sometime his own darling.

56. A spark of love that to his heart could spring
And kindled all his body in a fire
With hot fever; a sweat and trembling
Him took while he was ready to expire.
To bear his shield his breast began to tire.
Within a while he changéd many a hue,  
And ne'ertheless, not one another knew.

57. For knightly pity, and memorial  
Of fair Cresseid, a girdle gan he take,  
A purse of gold and many a gay jewell,  
And in the skirt of Cressid down gan swake.  
Then rode away, and not a word he spake,  
Pensive in heart while he came to the town  
And for great care oftsithes almost fell down.

58. The leper folk to Cressid then gan draw  
To see the equal distribution  
Of the alms, but when the gold they saw  
Each one to other privily gan roun,  
And said: "Yon lord has more affection  
Howe'er it be, unto yon lazaress  
Than to us all. We know by his almess."

59. "What lord is yon?" quod she, "Have you no fell  
Has done to us such great humanity?"  
"Yes," quod a leper man. "I know him well.  
Sir Troilus it is, gentle and free."  
When Cressid understood that it was he,  
Stiffer than steel there start a bitter stound  
Throughout her heart, and fell down to the ground.

60. When she o'ercame, with sighing sore and sad,  
With many a care-ful cry she called: "Ochone!  
Now is my breast with stormy stoundis stad,  
Wrappéd in woe, a wretch full will of won"  
Then swooned she oft ere she could refrain,  
And ever in her swooning cried she thus:  
"O false Cresseid, and true knight Troilus.

61. "Thy love, thy loyalty, and thy gentleness  
I counted small in my prosperity,  
So efflate was I in my wantonness,  
And climbed upon the fickle wheel so high.  
All faith and love I promiséd to thee  
Was in itself fickle and frivolous.  
O false Cresseid, and true knight Troilus.

62. “For love of me thou kept good continence,
Honest and chaste in conversation,
Of all women protector and defence
Thou wast, and helped their opinion.
My mind, in fleshly foul affection
Was inclinèd to lustis lecherous.
Fie! False Cresseid, and true knight Troilus.

63. When this was said, with paper she sat down,
And in this manner made her testament:
"Here I beteach my corpse and carrion
With wormis and with toadis to be rent.
My cup and clapper and my ornaments
And all my gold the leper folk shall have
When I am dead, to bury me in grave.

64. "This royal ring, set with this ruby red
Which Troilus in drury to me sent
To him again I leave it when I'm dead
To make my care-ful death unto him kend.
Thus I conclude shortly and make an end.
My spirit I leave to Diane where she dwells
To walk with her in waste woods and wells.

65. "O Diomed, thou hast both brooch and belt
Which Troilus me gave in tokening
Of his true love." And with that word she swelt.
And some one leper-man took off the ring,
Syn buried her withouten tarrying.
To Troilus forthwith the ring he bare,
And of Cresseid the death he gan declare.

66. When he had heard her great infirmity,
Her legacy and lamentation,
And how she ended in such poverty,
He swelt for woe, and fell down in a swoon.
For great sorrow his heart to burst was bound.
Sighing full sadly said: "I can no more.
She was untrue, and woe is me therefore."

67. Some said he made a tomb of marble gray
And wrote her name and superscription,
And laid it on her grave where that she lay,
In golden letters, containing this reason:
"Lo, fair ladies, Cresseid of Troy town,
Sometime counted the flower of womanhead,
Under this stone, late leper, she lies dead."
68. Now, worthy women, in this ballad short
Made for your worship and instruction
Of charity I ’monish and exhort:
Ming not your love with false deception.
Bear in your mind this short conclusion
Of fair Cresseid as I have said before.
Since she is dead I speak of her no more.

Here ends
The Testament of Cresseid