

Reading and Teaching Troilus Otherwise:

St Maure, Chaucer, Henryson

L.M. Findlay

Medieval studies has it *all*. At the end of the twentieth century, whatever one wishes to explore, one can find it adumbrated or more plainly available in the middle ages. Nor does one have to listen (as I have done with pleasure and profit over the years) to that committed teacher and scholar, Douglas Wurtele, in order to appreciate this. I was assured of that by Matthew P. MacDiarmid when I was an undergraduate at Aberdeen. When I went to Oxford as a graduate student, the endless potential and compelling actualities of medieval studies were even more palpable than at Aberdeen, especially for someone intending to work *in* the nineteenth century. However, the Aberdeen *all* proved to be different from the Oxford *all*, most notably in the place granted to the so-called Scottish Chaucerians in a decidedly Anglocentric scheme of things. And this conflicted sense of *all*—what it is and who gets to define it—helped open the door for me on what has in the last two decades been a site for some of the most important and intermittently-productive debates in literary studies and in the humanities more generally.¹

My early experience in two ancient universities, one reasserting its Scottishness and the other imperturbably English, as well as impressively international in its graduate student body, points to the fact that questions of canonicity derive from and frequently intensify the tensions, unsettlements, and partisanships which constitute the literary field *in principia*, although symptoms of difference are articulated in historically specific, contingent ways in different settings, in different versions of *the* field

established, traversed, and exceeded by the energies of incursion and entitlement. *In principia* indeed. The biblical distinction between the canonical and the apocryphal will always have *some* bearing on the understanding and academic management of the literary canon, though its precise bearing will change over time not only with the fluctuating authority of the Bible (and other sacred texts) but also in response to the imbricated, analogous distinctions between dialect and language, differing legal systems, contrasting gender politics and levels of cultural and economic development, and the place of the individual or original author in the production and preservation of a national literature and national imaginary.²

What I intend to do in this paper is to stage a return of sorts to some of those tensions I encountered in my student days, and to do so from the vantage-point of someone who has over the years taught Chaucer's and Shakespeare's works on the Troilus theme but never the one closest to my heart, namely Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid*. And I will make this return from the perspective of teaching, enlisting the desire of the teacher to experiment with a teachable text from an earlier period after my own long march through nineteenth-century studies and critical and cultural theory. The notion of the teachable text has the virtue of taking us directly to the centre of current debates about both teaching and textuality and I will now attempt a summary characterisation of teaching before testing my claims against the possibilities of teaching Troilus otherwise.

At each stage in what follows I will be guided by the complementary convictions that we better teach Troilus, *otherwise* those materials will fall into neglect; and if we do not teach Troilus *otherwise*, in new ways and new registers, then we will be teaching to virtually empty classrooms, with all the ominous implications that attend such enrolment patterns in the contemporary university.

Teachability

In my view, teachability begs to be connected not to some transhistorical, transculturally Socratic or priestly essence or gift but rather to the question of how university teaching is currently valued. In this regard one might point to three major factors that shape or threaten to shape what we understand and do in the name of teaching. First there is the concern, fuelled in significant measure by the 1991 Smith *Report*

commissioned by the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, that the reward structures of universities and the selfish inclinations of a careerist professoriate conspire to devalue teaching and privilege research (Findlay). Second, and more recently, the activity of university teaching in regional and national contexts has come under threat from transnational market forces drawing on the cult of celebrity so prominent in a numbingly presentist American culture and its global clones and surrogates. These forces are now acting in combination with new information technologies which have the ability to transform distance education and university access so that competitive advantage and a predominantly one-way brain drain can effectively complete a process of neo-colonialism by returning to colonised peoples commodified knowledge marketed as modernity, quality, and consumer freedom in order to enhance dependency and profit while avoiding exposure as cultural dumping and defoliation (Miller 97; Willinski 32-33; Ki-Zerbo). Third, the coercive and reductive agency of the free and rapidly-globalising market clearly entails the construction of the student as no citizen in the making but rather as a wired consumer surfing for the source, that ultimate expert on this or the other hot topic who has packaged something as legal academic tender, offering through spinoff companies and institutional development and university research offices vicarious or virtual mastery in self-contained units bearing an immediately-recognisable brand-name.³ Technohype about piping the *best* into the hinterland from Harvard or the University of California has made an impression even on Dr. Marc Renaud, President of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, who warned an academic audience recently that they must act creatively and decisively if they wish to avoid being made redundant or being reduced to technical facilitators for intellectual content originating elsewhere and designed to dominate Canadian and other foreign consumption of advanced knowledge. Such action, he held, involved a move from the ivory tower to the market square because today the market rules, and humanists and social scientists can and should adapt to that reality. Dr. Renaud's is not so much a counsel of despair as a necessary wake-up call. How can we do things differently, pushing adaptation away from servility and fatalism, and towards complexity and creativity and critique?

How teaching is perceived and practised in the humanities is particularly pertinent, linked as the humanities too often are to accusations of irrelevance or to the abductive agenda of narrow or coercive instrumentality. Academic humanists

generally do more teaching than their colleagues in the sciences and social sciences, and that teaching seems currently to be valued more as training than as an education that endures in ways all the more important for their relative indeterminacy and oblique or deferred payoff.⁴ Anyone teaching earlier historical periods will be regarded in some quarters as teaching that which is no longer teachable or worth teaching. At this juncture, the personal example of teacher-scholars like Douglas Wurtele, showing how a medievalist can be an inspiring teacher and academic leader, are invaluable and heartening. But we need to rely on more than individual examples to make a compelling humanist case, and I would like to offer here an illustration of the view that teaching is an appropriately labour-intensive process for instructors and students alike, a process with a place for the committed generalist as well as the specialist to wrest interactivity and critical adaptivity back, at least in part, from its new and often subtly sedative locations in electronic media, and to do so in the name of the kinds of reading and exchange that enhance economic agency while nourishing an engaged and critical citizenry. Aligning ourselves primarily—though not exclusively—with teaching seems the best way for humanists to talk about the social transfer of cultural knowledge. But what should we add to our teaching methods and range, and why?

Surviving (with) The Canon

As my opening remarks indicated and my subheading confirms, any canon is more a living site than a mausoleum where the only signs of change are the occasional addition of a newly-discovered work by one of the longtime residents, or the creeping patina of academic commentary evident on the surface of the objects or texts gathered and preserved there. The forms of life the literary canon promotes and nourishes connect intimately with cultural imperialism insofar as that imperialism represents a kind of hit-parade offering assurances of quality and hierarchy while connecting conveniently to that imperialist economy that seeks to manage civilisation in the interests of a small part of the so-called developed world (Tomlinson). Canonical status meant and continues to mean that something or someone is a part of that which is enduring and exportable: that whose value, in a word, can be counted on, invested in, and extended to new markets. How this reality is read and responded to is, of course, another matter.

One can see these determinations of literary and aesthetic value at work with something like the Troilus theme so suggestively treated in Piero Boitani's recent collection of essays. The title and introduction claim Troilus for European Tragedy, a move that helps locate these materials firmly in self-sustaining high culture before complicating the story in relation to gender, court culture, and national aspirations. Troilus' post-Homeric toehold in cultural memory is confirmed and dramatically extended when he acquires a new lease on life via his coupling with that Briseis-Cressida who springs—as if in parthenogenesis—from the freshly-fantatising cranium of Benoît de Sainte-Maure with the *Roman de Troie* of the second half of the twelfth century. As Roberto Antonelli argues, Troilus' transformation from military cipher and war fodder to an exemplar of romantic subjectivity requires the invention of Briseis, with the result that his new independence is also a new form of dependency (21). Even if, as Antonelli claims, courtly love is a vehicle for male narcissism, there is still the need of a reflective medium by which to complete the circuit of self-absorption and a doubling effect made available as source and reflection, origination and derivation, sun and moon, and so on. This reflective need marks a gap or interruption in a larger process of overdetermination wherein contradictions prove irreducible beyond a certain point and Briseis, in order to be the deserving object/conduit/return-to-itself of male desire, can be desired by other men as well as Troilus and can call on prudent behaviour (“sage contenment” *Roman* 5284; Antonelli 23) in negotiating the hazards of war and male possessiveness. This is a form of gendered *sagesse* that nonetheless fails to keep her from the appearance and reality of inconstancy.

The libidinal economy described by Benoît will strain for fixity and perfect equivalence but be obliged to accommodate change. This process expresses itself in a move repeated (though each time with important differences) by Chaucer, Henryson, and Shakespeare, and also by those who would freeze the literary canon.

Mout fu amee e mout amot,
 Mais sis corages li chanjot;
 E si ert el mout vergondose,
 Simple e ausmoniere e pitose.

[She was greatly loved, and she herself loved greatly, but her heart was not constant. Nonetheless she was very timid, modest, generous, and compassionate (translation by Antonelli 23).]

The poised reciprocity of the first line quoted—passive and then suddenly active, beloved and loving—is countered by the ominous qualification and quasi-passivity of the second where her “corages” seem to take on a life of their own somewhere between modern *coeur* and *courage*, the reflexive and the transitive.⁵ The jolt delivered by this line cannot be fully dispelled by the supplementary enumeration of apparent virtues, because the logic of the supplement functions to defer indefinitely precisely such restitution. I am not qualified to answer the question Antonelli sets himself after quoting these four lines of verse: “But *why* invent a story such as that of Troilus and Briseis? And why Benoît in particular?” However, as a self-entitled generalist, I would make the relationship and its various textual treatments all the more teachable because ultimately mysterious in origin and multiply conflicted over time.

Chaucer’s *Troilus* follows Benoît quite closely in describing Criseyde, but with crucial differences:

She sober was, *eeke simple, and wys withal*,
 The best ynorrished ek that myghte be,
 And *godly of hire speche in general*,
 Charitable, estatlich, lusty and free;
 Ne never-mo *ne lakked hire pite*;
 Tendre-herted, *slydynge of corage*;
 But trewely, I kan nat telle hir age. (V.820-26)⁶

We are here with the intertextual Cresseid, no doubt, but in the robust sense of that term which cannot be confined to deliberate echoes and demonstrable influences. Chaucer’s rendering of Benoît’s “Mais si corages li chanjoit” as “slydyng of corage” comes after many lines of brilliant complication of his heroine’s personality and predicament. He does not use Benoît’s prosodic tactics of reciprocity, disruption, and recovery. Instead, Chaucer points to her physical well-being before compressing the tensions between fidelity and fallibility into a single line whose second half looks in several directions at once: back in sound and suggestion of something surreptitious to Troilus “slynk[ing]” into his own bed after his first night spent with Criseyde (III.1525); and forward to the unsettling observation by the narrator, after Criseyde looks longingly back from the Greek camp to Troy and vows she will soon accompany Troilus where he wishes to go: “But god it wot, er fully monthe two, / She was ful fer fro that entencioun! / For both Troilus and Troie town / Shal knotteles

throughout hire herte *slide*" (V.766-69, emphasis added). So much for tugging on the heart strings! Chaucer seems to be playing on Latin *cor/cordis* and English "cord" as he predicts a knotless *dénouement* for his great poem: the hero and her former home are reduced to transient, smoothed-out sections on the thread of her life. As her "corage" had floated in the congested field of medieval possibilities (Robinson cites for "corage" in his glossary: "heart, mind; nature, disposition; desire, will, ardour; courage, encouragement"), so her sliding moves from inconstancy to a more encompassing lubricity in which her own physical movement is replicated in the movement of Criseyde's emotions and erstwhile attachments. Those feelings had, after all, been so "depe in-with my herte grave" (III.1508). One may note not only the ironic reversal signalled by the shift from the process of engraving to that of spinning or sowing, but also that unencumbered movement which she had earlier likened to the unencumbered flow of water in the river Simois through Troy and down to the sea (IV.1548-1554). Within a patriarchal economy, female protestations of fidelity undermine themselves always, creating an effect of sparsity or abundance but always with a worrisome excess or internal dissonance. The activity of reading (or being read to) brings out connections and crises in this love story, but can never finally fix Criseyde's motivations and responsibility inside or outside herself, or even in some stable mix of external circumstance and personal disposition. A harmonist hermeneutic, whether offered by the specialist or the generalist, can deal with Chaucer's poem only by doing violence to its contradictions, and hence doing disproportionate violence to its heroine.⁷

It might seem that Robert Henryson does what Benoît and Chaucer fail or refuse to do: namely, apportion blame to Cresseid on the basis of a confident and unflinching diagnosis of her character and state of mind. Henryson's decision to concentrate on the heroine, to the virtual exclusion of Troilus, may seem to accord her even more autonomy than Chaucer grants her, but this concentration is not a sign of enhanced respect for her so much as it is the grounding of tragedy in the protagonist's progressive isolation and self-examination on the way to a fuller moral accountability. In giving us something of a sequel or supplement to Chaucer's poem,⁸ Henryson positions the fictional text on which he claims to rely between the authoritative and the freshly fabricated. However, he emphasises the term "inventioun" (67) as distinguishing his source for Cresseid's "fatall destenie" (62), interestingly the first recorded use of this term in a literary sense in Scots (Jack and Rozendall 66).

This fresh application affords him the liberty to specify his eponymous heroine's fate in some detail beyond the limits of his sources, but this liberty of invention also puts the poet's discretion in question as unattractive, unduly severe, even wanton in its cruelty.⁹ The overdeterminations at play in the site of male narcissism represented by Briseis/Criseyde have been relocated in the psyche of the poet and in the surrogate maker of the book he purports (conventionally enough) to be reading from.

Henryson's Cresseid is never connected to "corage," sliding or otherwise; that term is employed here only to denote a diminished capacity or lack ("doif and deid") in the aged (32). Cresseid is favoured instead with the following remarkable treatment:

Quha wait gif all that Chaucer wrait was trew?
 Nor I wait nocht gif this narratioun
 Be authoreist, or fenyeit of the new
 Be sum poeit, throw his inventioun
 Maid to report the lamentatioun
 And wofull end of this lustie Cresseid,
 And quhat distres scho thoillit, and quhat deid. (64-70)

This is a wonderful moment in which the anxiety of influence causes the successor poet to place his own contribution under the double and seemingly contradictory protection of authoritative tradition *and* fresh innovation. A reasonable doubt about Chaucer's veracity creates the space for Henryson's poetic record of female suffering. The double burden of *invenire*—as the discovering of the pre-existent and the bringing into being of the hitherto non-existent—seems weighted more towards the latter sense, but imaginative autonomy is accompanied by accountability summoned swiftly to our judgment of the redactor/inventor of the following two stanzas:

Quhen Diomeid had all his appetyte,
 And mair, fulfillit of this fair ladie,
 Upon ane-uther he set his haill delyte,
 And send to hir ane lybell of repudie,
 And hir excludit fra his companie.
 Than desolait scho walkit up and down,
 And sum men sayis into the court commoun.

O fair Cresseid, the flour and *A per se*
 Of Troy and Greece, how was thow fortunait!
 To change in filth all thy feminitie,
 And be with fleschlie lust sa maculait,
 And go amang the Greikis air and lait
 Sa giglotlike, takand thy foull plesance!
 I have pietie thow suld fall sic mischance! (71-84)

Henryson moves his heroine in short order from pathetic dependency to promiscuous agency. The lady whom Diomeid had “Ressavit” (44) a few lines previously is now rejected formally and publicly, as the reader’s sympathy inclines towards Cresseid—while still being impeded in that movement by the detail of supersatiety (“and mair”). This note of excess implies both that it takes little time to exhaust what this woman has to offer and also that Diomeid showed a measure of restraint or even generosity in delaying the redirection of his sexual attentions longer than the situation warranted. The sense of Cresseid’s accelerating moral decline is held off for a moment by the softening of certainty into rumour (“sum men sayis”), but there is no mistaking the punitive zeal of what follows. The poet constructs his heroine as the only-too-compliant object of male desire and then as something even more reprehensible, a desiring subject in her own right taking her own pleasures, rather than being taken for the pleasure of a noble lover. What does a (fallen) woman want, one may ask? And after the underscoring of this version of *de casibus*, what credence can we give to the poet’s “pietie” for what she has somehow to endure as well as enjoy?

The authorised yet inventive space that Henryson has created for himself now fills with contradictions enough “and mair,” so much so that neither the later judgment of the gods nor the poet’s remarkably imaginative rendering of her last encounter with Troilus can rescue Cresseid fully from confusion:

Yit nevertheles, quhatever men deme or say
 In scornfull langage of thy brukkilnes,
 I sall excuse, als far furth as I may,
 Thy womanheid, thy wisdome and fairnes—
 The [quhilk] Fortoun hes put to sic distres
 As hir plesit, and nathing throw the gilt
 Of the, throw wickit langage to be spilt. (85-91)

Henryson's bitter apostrophe now turns to insisting on his own linguistic precision and moral fastidiousness. He positions himself between both loose talk of looseness and the implicit authority of an informed conscience, the explicit inclination of an implacable Fortune. And so, substantially pre-empted by both rumour and fate, what will the poet's conscience allow? What is this womanhood, wisdom, and fairness which he wishes still to "excuse"? How can all three be excusable and Cresseid still guilty? How can all three be culpable, whether through insufficiency or malfunction, except through the eyes of an aggravated misogyny which must translate a generalised womanhood immediately into parts of the female body and components of male desire? One form of feminised pleasure (Fortune's) overrides another (Cresseid's), but Fortune's pleasure has the puzzling effect of somehow absolving Cresseid of that "gilt" so firmly attributed to her earlier through such damning phrases as "takand thy foull pleasaunce."

The shift from changeable or sliding "corage" to "brukkilnes" points to a hardening of Cresseid's weakness and reactions to it, a hardness that Henryson wants both to invent and distance himself from. The ironies intensify and proliferate: Henryson's discarding of Chaucer's account for "ane-uther" (61) consorts uneasily with Diomeid's rejection of Cresseid for "ane-uther" (73), and one is given cause to wonder whether the result is preferable in either case, and for whom. From relying on literary invention, Henryson moves on through the alternating current of praise and censure to the key idea of translation. The series of impending reversals of fortune is captured in a particularly ironic, proleptic line of Cresseid's solitary railing against the gods of love: "And *all* in cair *translatit* is my joy" (160, emphasis added). Her bitterness emerges in a passive construction designed to keep responsibility at bay while directing self-pity to the completeness (cleanness) of her exclusion from the protection of "Diomeid and noble Troylus" (132). But her misery is as yet far from complete, and must itself await divine translation. Only too soon, the gods will translate her accusation against two of their own as unforgivable blasphemy and offer a more detailed interpretation of her conduct in the painstakingly privative *blazon* delivered by the transforming rod and sentence of Saturn, the ruthlessly specific "bill" read by Cynthia. The combined judgments of the highest and lowest gods implicate the other deities in a unanimous judgment in their own favour, a judgment somehow both "wraikfull" and "diffinityve." Their solidarity contrasts only too trenchantly with the pitiful isolation of Cresseid.

Cresseid's attempt to "returne" her sexual vagaries on Venus and Cupid leads to their being returned to her with interest in the hideous disfigurements of leprosy. This fact she confirms when she awakes from being "Ravischit in spreit" (142), and checks her appearance in a mirror (348): "And quhen scho saw hir face sa deformait, / Gif scho in hart was wa aneuch, God wait" (349-50). By this point, Henryson has both lamented the absence of grace in this judgment and insisted on its lawfulness in both Saturn's words and the legal document from which Cynthia completes the reading and execution of the gods' sentence.¹⁰ This episode of physical reflection has emotional consequences fully intelligible only to the gods but readily understandable in its essentials by her intimates and peers. Cresseid herself will be pushed by this visual translation into remorse and into becoming, in the course of her complaint, herself a "mirroure" (457) for "ladyis fair of Troy and Grece" (452). In a carefully crafted reflexive series, she has gone from being the visage in which men can read their own power and ambition reflected, to the first and most knowledgeable human witness of her new deformity, to an unwelcome reminder to a self-regarding father of *his* misfortune in living to see such a change in *his* daughter (375), and then even to an admonitory mirror for her sex of the constraints on sexual agency and assertive selfhood. In so moving, Cresseid will bring herself to internalise fully the "brukkilnes" attributed to her earlier (86): "Beacaus I know the greit unstabilnes, / *Brukkil* as glas, into myself, I say, / Traisting in *uther* als great unfaithfulnes" (568-70, emphasis added). However, this coming to rest in personal accountability implies the need for others to do, not otherwise, but likewise. And this includes the practitioners and interpreters of literary authority and invention, whoever they may be, and whatever their gender.

Coda

What do I think are the main implications of reading *Troilus* and the current contexts of the literary humanities in Canada? First, I would point to the need for specialists and generalists (and we all can be both, to some degree) to show common cause in defending the labour-intensive specificities of humanities teaching and scholarship. For this to happen, intensive study of whole works in careful detail must continue to occur, but this ought to be supplemented by an equally valued teaching of important issues such as gender politics and cultural imperialism through strategic gatherings of textual fragments and slivers. I am not suggesting a relation between

introductory and advanced study of samplings, then wholes, but specialist and generalist study that is always both introductory and advanced, focused and scattered, though in different ways. What I have in mind entails a double gesture towards the canon, both revering it and roughing it up. And this double gesture should be haunted but not intimidated by the double spectres of dehistoricising theory and chronological determinism.

Always medievalise, yes! But do so beyond the specialist fiefdom as well as within it. Medievalise, then, in a way that constantly reconstitutes relevance and utility rather than denying or disdaining them *a priori*. This means teaching both structure and agency, and recognising reading and teaching as themselves staging the tensions between those two categories. Learning to love learning, and learning to love literature, are inescapably implicated in the understanding of love as such and its asymmetrical impositions of fidelity. That reality requires and rewards passing and backhanded compliments across the curriculum as well as fullblown courtship *in situ*. Otherwise, if medievalists and other specialists are urged or even forbidden “to go among the [buikis] air and lait,” then all traditionalist or aggrieved talk of standards will also be affirming double standards of an only-too-venerable sort. All talk of purity will remain implicated in value structures shrewdly though sexistically captured by Marx in one of his many translations of the bonds connecting authority and invention: “However long a series of periodic reproductions and preceding accumulations the capital functioning today may have passed through, it always preserves its original virginity [*seine ursprüngliche Jungfraulichkeit*]” (733). To promise Troilus but deliver Cresseid otherwise, as I have done here, was designed to make that very point.

University of Saskatchewan

Notes

1 For a more detailed account of the tensions within and external resistances to a revival of Scottish literary studies, see R.D.S. Jack’s introduction to the *Mercat Anthology*.

2 For a lucid and compelling presentation of the case for such claims, and the demonstration of the pertinence of recent theory to the understanding of the Hebrew Bible, see David Jobling, especially his opening chapter.

3 For an endlessly suggestive—and alarming—investigation of the role of brand-names in constructing and managing culture, including academic culture, see the pioneering study by Rosemary J. Coombe.

4 In early June 1998, at a Breakfast on the Campus of Ottawa University organised as part of the public outreach of the new Congress of Learned Societies of Canada, the television journalist Ann Medina of the History Channel made a crucial humanist point with great directness. Referring to her graduate and undergraduate education in philosophy, she said that the focus on large and intractable questions had made her patient and undeterred when faced with obduracy and evil in locations around the world. What better preparation for the hubris of experts and the endless unpredictability of life, she asked, than serious study of humanities disciplines? Nothing could be more practical in its resolute linking of human accomplishment to human limitation.

5 Antonelli follows the English translation of the *Roman de Troie* in N. R. Haveley with slight modifications. Haveley follows R.K. Gordon's rendering of the crucial line about Briseis' constancy.

6 Here I follow for convenience G.C. Macaulay's 1895 italicising of borrowings from Benoît.

7 For effective recent work on the complex gender politics of Chaucer's poem, see, for example, Blamires, Margherita, and Stanbury.

8 See Budra and Schellenberg for a much needed and highly suggestive set of explorations of the temporal, repetitive, and defective components of common constructions of the sequel. For Henryson's poem as "an interpolation between lines 1804 and 1805 of Book five of Chaucer's poem," see Storm, "The Intertextual Cressida," p. 111.

9 The problem of accountability does not disappear if one aligns the poet's inventiveness with Mercury's (244-5). I therefore think Jill Mann too generous in discerning here an "adroit blandness" and "a humility before his creation" which Henryson shares with Chaucer (pp. 101-102).

10 For a fine account of the specifically testamentary textuality of Henryson's poem, see Julia Boffey.

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