Dialogic Henryson

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We owe a lot to Professor Robert Kindrick. Bob was a tireless organizer and administrator, and to scholars of medieval Scottish literature like myself, his scholarly contributions on the fifteenth-century poet Robert Henryson rank high on the must read list. Though some have called Henryson a "Scottish Chaucerian," the term fits only to a limited extent, and one might wonder what impact this label has had on critics of Henryson's works and how it might limit their appreciation of his poetry. As Professor Kindrick's succinct and masterful chapter "Henryson and Literary Tradition" so clearly points out, Henryson had indeed read Chaucer, and closely at that, but Henryson was no slave to Chaucerian convention (Henryson 28-56). Unlike John Lydgate, who seems to have idolized Chaucer, Henryson actually strove to find his own voice, breaking away from the Chaucerian tradition while still paying homage to it. In this paper, therefore, with Professor Kindrick's work on Henryson as my inspiration, I will look at Henryson's position in relation to his predecessors, Chaucer and Lydgate, and offer my own appreciation of his poetic artistry.

Henryson was the first writer in English to use the word "invention (as a rhetorical term)" (MacQueen 22), and it is irresistible to speculate what exactly he meant by it. In the Testament of Cresseid, "inuentioun" (67) seems to imply making something new out of something old (in that case reworking Chaucer's Troilus) both commenting on Chaucer's brilliance and supplementing it with his own. In essence, Henryson engages in dialogue with authors from the past and takes his own place in the ranks of great authors. An examination of Henryson's Morall Fabillis reveals Henryson's brilliant poetic "inuention" within the beast fable genre. He realized the potential of this genre, in contrast to his predecessors (Lydgate in particular) who either fell short of the mark or did not fully explore the potential he saw in the genre. Henryson's Morall Fabillis are dialogic.
That is, they create dialogue. As Professor Kindrick pointed out, the schoolmaster Henryson knew the medieval arts of rhetoric inside and out and utilized many medieval rhetorical structures in his poetry (Henryson and the Medieval Arts of Rhetoric 201). Henryson's *Morall Fabillis* create dialogue about the expectations of what an Aesopian fable is supposed to be. They can be seen as a dialogue with Aesop, Chaucer, Lydgate, and Gualterus, writers whom Henryson read and commented on in his poetry.

Even more subtly, Henryson's *Morall Fabillis* create a dialogue, or, better yet, perhaps, a polyphony, intermingling narrative and interpretive modes of writing and reading. Authors and editors often mark the boundary between the fable and the moral in some way, suggesting their separateness and presumably signaling a need for us as readers or hearers of the fable to make our own adjustment from narrative to interpretive mode. Robert Henryson notes these two modes in the first few lines of his prologue to the *Morall Fabillis*:

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Thocht feinyeit fabils o household poetre,
Be not al grunded vpon truth yit than,
Thair polite termes o sweit rhetore
Richt plesand ar vnto the eir of man,
And als the caus quhy thay first began,
Wes to repreifthe ofthi misleuing,
O man be figure of ane vther thing. (1-7)
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Fables are fictions. They are narratives designed to "reprove" men for their "misliving," which suggests that they have more than just a narrative purpose and must be interpreted on a moral level as well. This bi-modal quality of the fable genre is commented on further when the dreaming narrator in the fable of "The Lion and the Mouse" converses with Aesop about his "fenyeit fabillis" full of "prudence and moralitie." It is clear from the conversation that Henryson reveres Aesop and the genre the "poet lawriate" is credited with creating. It is also clear that Henryson thoroughly understands the potential of the genre and knows that truths may be discussed through the medium of a fictitious fable with accompanying moral interpretation:

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O maister esope poet lawriate,
God wait ye ar full deir welcum to me.
Ar ye not he that all thi fabillis wrote,
Qhilik in effect suppois thay fenyeit be,
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Ar full off prudence and moralitie?
Fair sone said he i am the samin man.
God wait gif that my hert wes merie than.
I said, esope my maister venerabill,
I yow beseik hartlie for cheritie,
Ye wald dedene to tell ane prettie fabill,
Concludand with ane gude moralitie.
Schaikand his heid, he said, my sone lat be,
For quhat is it worth to tell ane fenyeit taill,
Quhen haly preiching may na thing auail?
Now in this warld me think richt few or nane,
To goddis word that hes deuotioun.
The eir is deif, the hart is hard as stane.
Now oppin sin without correctioun.
The e inclynand to the cirth ay doun.
Sa roustit is the warld with canker blak,
That now my taillis may lytill succour mak.
Yit gentill schir said i for my requeist,
Not to displeis your fatherheid, i pray,
Vnder the figure off ane brutall beist,
Ane morall fabill ye wald denye to say.
Quha wait, nor i may leir and beir away
Sum thing thairby heirefter may auail? (1370-96)

The moral following the fable is natural and typical of the genre. Once this fable has been told, there is a pause. The dreaming narrator asks Aesop to supply the necessary moral for his fable, and Aesop replies in his own Scots dialect:

Quod i maister is thair ane moralitie
In this fabill? yea sone he said rich gude.
I pray yow schir quod i ye wald conclude.
Quhen this wes said quod esope my fair child,
Perswaid the kirkmen ythandly to pray,
That tressoun of this cuntrie be exyld,
And iustice regne, and lordis keip thair fay
Vnto thair souerane lord baith nycht and day.
And with that word he vanist, and i woke. (1563-1613)
In Henryson's *Moral Fabillis*, however, the boundary between the interpretive mode and the narrative mode often does not directly correlate with the boundary of fable and moral so clearly marked by editors. Henryson's prologue states his intent to essentially force the readers of his fables to read with more attention and diligence and awareness, to begin to process the fable and begin making judgments and interpretations as they go and not wait for the *moralitas* at the end. This is hard work, Henryson argues, yet worth the pain:

The nuttis schell thought it be hard, and teuch,
Haldis the kirenell, sueit and delectabill.
Sa lyis thair ane doctrine wyse aneuich,
And full of frute, vnder ane fenyeit fabill.
And clerkis sayis, it is richt profitabill,
Amanis ernist to ming ane merie fabill,
To blyth the spreit, and gar the tyme be schort.
For as we se ane bow that is ay bent,
Worthis vnsmart, and dullis on the string,
Sa dois the mynd that is ay diligent,
In ernistfull thochtis, and in studying,
With sad materis sum merines to ming.
Accordis weill thus esope said i wis,
Dulcius arrident seria picta iociis. (15-28)

As C. David Benson remarks, "Henryson makes clear that his moral art is not simple . . . the reader . . . must struggle with poetry whose complexity is insisted upon ("subtell dyte") in order to make it yield the flower and corn of 'ane morall swett sentence" (217-18). For careful readers, fables, like the "hard and teuch" "nuttis schell," contain "delectabill" "kirmills" of meaning, if only the reader will engage in close reading.

Henryson seems not only to be trying to impress upon his readers this idea of how dynamic the fable genre can be, but also to be addressing his predecessors here, those poets who may have missed their chance to draw out the most from the genre. We can see a good example of how Henryson clearly surpasses Lydgate, for instance, in his version of "'The Tail of the Cok and the Jasp.' Lydgate admires the cock for knowing his place in society and not longing after material riches:

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Suche as God sent, eche man take at gre,
Nat prowde with ryches nor gorse with pouer.
The worldly man laboreth for rychesse,
And on be worlde he set all hys intent.
The vertuos man to auoyde all ydelnesse
with suffisaunce hold hymself content. (216-21)

Henryson, on the other hand, criticizes the cock for rejecting the jasp which he claims represents knowledge. Many scholars have criticized Henryson's *moralitas* in this fable especially as arbitrary or incongruous with the fable, but, as Professor Kindrick pointed out, it is not really all that far-fetched an interpretation (*Robert Henryson* 71). It is certainly not as trite as Lydgate's reading. The shock of being given an interpretation for which we are not prepared may be unnerving, in part because there seems to be a competition among different interpretations. Is this a bad thing? I think not, and I think Henryson himself would agree that we need to allow for multiple interpretations of the same fable. They are ultimately full of potential. Did he perhaps get this idea from Chaucer's *Nun's Priest's Tale* with its several *moralitates*?

Henryson's moralizing is also not limited to the *moralitas* appended to each fable. In the "Cock and the Jasp," for instance, already in the first few lines of the narrative itself Henryson begins to moralize, slipping into interpretative mode within the narrative itself. He only criticizes the cock's rejecting the precious jasp later in the *moralitas* of the tale, but what he seems primarily concerned with at first are the people who "tak na tent":

As damisellis wantoun and insolent
That fane wald play and on the streit be sene,
To swoping of the hous thay tak na tent;
Thay cair nathing swa that the flure be clene. . . . (71-74)

Though these girls are in one sense doing their job well in sweeping the floors clean, they are also negligent. We are forced to read their negligent sweeping allegorically well before we come to the moral. Likewise, readers who sweep over the lines and "tak na tent" of what they are reading may miss something of value, as Lydgate arguably does in his own reading of the fable. Henryson addresses his readers directly in the last stanza of the *moralitas*:
He admonishes readers for not reading carefully, for sweeping the textual floor without paying attention to the details and knowledge therein. Moreover, his use of the pronoun “we” might suggest he is addressing a community of poets and readers who make allegorical readings and interpretations which do not quite penetrate all of the possible meanings of the fable—Lydgate here in all likelihood. To echo line 64 of Henryson’s Testament of Cresseid, which questions if Chaucer’s authority can be trusted, Henryson might well also ask, “Quha wait gif all that Lydgate wrait wes trewe?”

The fact that Henryson’s morals often defy the initial expectations of readers and perhaps even come as something of a shock to some (as in “The Cock and the Jasp” for instance) seems to indicate that Henryson intended it this way. Perhaps he wanted to shock readers out of their expectations and to introduce an element of hard-hitting realism into his treatment of the fantastic genre of the beast fable. George Clark sees Henryson’s moral in “The Cock and the Jasp” as “profounder and darker” since it suggests that man, like the cock, “willfully disregards the wisdom that could secure him all the possible benefits of this and the next world” (10). There is precious little evidence now, however, to support Burrow’s claim in 1975 that “most present-day readers of Henryson’s Fables find his Moralitates at best unpleasing and at worst confusing” (35). In fact, if anything, critics and twenty-first-century readers can appreciate Henryson’s questioning of fable traditions and exploring multiple meanings within narrative. The amount of ink scholars have spent appreciating Henryson’s mastery in delivering ingenious morals which we might not have expected suggests readers can and do appreciate Henryson’s overly intrusive narrator whose personality and outbursts make up just as much of the pleasure of reading the Morall Fabillis as the quaint beast stories.

We have seen how, in “The Cock and the Jasp,” Henryson begins his moralizing interpretation of the fable before the moral is supposed to begin, and numerous other instances of this intrusion of the
interpretive mode within the narrative can be cited. In "The Cock and the Fox" for instance, when the fox has played upon the cock's pride in order to trick him into closing his eyes and singing so that he can grab him by the neck, Henryson's narration breaks off, and the moralizing sneaks in:

The cok, inflate with wind and fals vane gloir,
That mony puttis vnto confusioun . . . (474-80)

The hens' speeches also become vehicles for the interpretive mode to intrude upon the narrative, as they comment on the cock's promiscuity:

Prydefull he wes, and ioyit off his sin
Thairfoir it is the verray hand off God
That causit him to be werryit with the tod. (537-43)

Henryson works all of this "mode shifting" into his fable, and the effect is one of continual commentary in dialogue with the fable it is commenting on. While the *moralitas* appended to each fable offers Henryson an explicit opportunity to shift from a highly narrative mode to a highly interpretive mode, thereby presenting his readers with a model of how Henryson himself read and interpreted and used literature, he does not seem at all capable of waiting until the separate *moralitas* portion of the fable to explain the moral lessons he wants us to learn from the fables.

While Gray calls the tendency of Henryson's narrator to intrude on the narrative "digression" (123), and even suggests that Henryson's narrator is guilty of "carefully deluding us" (122), in "The Trial of the Fox" Henryson's narrator begins the fable by moralizing even before he gets to the plot of the fable:

It followis weill be ressoun naturally
And gre be gre off richt comparisoun,
Off euill cummis war, off war cummis wertest of all;
Off wrangus get cummis wrang successioun. (803-06)

A little later he breaks in with "Fy, couetice, vnkynde and venemose!" (817). And a little later still, amidst the narrative, Henryson indulges himself once more with an entire stanza of moralizing about "fulische
man! Plungit in wardlynes” (831). All this intrudes before we even get to the moral at the end of the tale. But simply to see these intrusions as “digressions” or manipulative or “deluding” ignores to some degree the dialogic quality we learn to expect from Henryson’s *Morall Fabillis*. Henryson makes us aware of his narrator. McKenna, for one, sees “the narrative persona” whom Henryson creates “as a choric voice” (113). Like the chorus in a Greek tragedy, McKenna points out that Henryson’s narrator “interposes himself between the action and the audience,” and “gets in the last word,” which we might concede, as McKenna does, “can tend to dominate interpretation if his perspectives are not taken into consideration” (113). Henryson’s narrator, his attitude and moral opinions, part of what we might call the interpretive mode of the fable genre, break in upon the narrative mode of the fables rather than holding off until we reach the *moralitas* which supposedly marks the ending of a given fable.

Henryson’s “The Sheep and the Dog” offers us an excellent example of both modes, the narrative and the interpretive, overlapping once again significantly. In the narrative section, even in the first stanza, the wolf is already marked as a “fraudfull” judge (1150), while later the entire court are seen to pursue the case against the sheep “Thocht it wes fals” because “thay had na conscience” (1180). But it is in “The Sheep and the Dog” that we see the reverse occur with the narrative mode invading the *moralitas*, when amidst the interpretation of what each beast signifies and what morals we are to take from the fable, Henryson shifts gears once more and tells us about what happened to the sheep after he sold his wool and lay shivering and dying in the cold (1281-82). We then get to hear the sheep’s "sair lamentation" (1285) for the remainder of the *moralitas* section. “This moralitas,” as Rosemary Greentree points out, “differs from all others in continuing the tale it expounds by including the speech of the shorn sheep, overheard by the Narrator, just as he later overhears the conversations of the birds of ‘The Preaching of the Swallow’” (42). Henryson, it seems, plays upon our generic expectations by allowing a character, a sheep, to disclose part of the morality he wants us to understand. The sheep is a sympathetic character, and the audience, if not Henryson himself, identifies with its desperation. “Henryson not only champions the poor,” according to Stearns, “but also specifically identifies himself with the poor. . . . Henryson speaks in the first person of ‘we poor people’ and expands the moral into a direct personal plea for the poor” (124). Henryson’s *moralitas* on this sheep’s and
human kind's inability to escape the cruelties of the world and harsh physical realities reveals his sympathy for human beings.  

Moral interpretation and questioning encroaches on the narrative in "The Taill of the Paddock and the Mous" as well, a fable in which Henryson offers up yet another engaging fable and moralitas. The story, much altered from the versions Lydgate and Gualterus tell, is simple enough: a mouse wants to cross the river to get to food on the other side and a toad, deceitfully offering to help her, tries to drown her half-way across before both are snatched up by a kite and eaten. But the interpretive mode enters curiously into the narrative through the voice of the mouse herself, as it had in the "Cock and the Fox" in the voices of the hens. Once the toad has offered to help her across the river, she takes a good look at his face and judges he "hes sumpart off false and inuy" about him:

For clerkis sayis the inclinatioun  
Off mannis thoocht proceidis commounly  
Efter the corporall complexioun  
To gude or euill, as nature will apply. (2826-29)

The toad replies, "Thaw suld not iuge ane man efter his face" (2839). Here we are presented with opposing interpretations. Whom are we to believe? Henryson's moralitas presents the reader with a fairly straightforward allegorical interpretation: the mouse is man's soul, the toad man's body, the kite death, the river the boundary between this world and the afterlife (much like the river in the English alliterative poem Pearl). Henryson warns his readers to mind the company they keep and concentrate on what's good for the soul. But things are not that simple. Henryson's tone is rather bleak and despairing and he seems to advocate that seclusion might be better for humans than society. As Henryson reveals, the toad, representing man's body, is completely under the control of Fortune—though Henryson does not use her name, the characteristics of mutability are certainly evoked in the passage—and the mouse, representing the soul of man, being tied to the body by a string, is nearly drowned in the tribulations of the world. Henryson urges the readers to

Be vigilant thairfoir, and ay reddie,  
For mannis lyfe is brukill, and ay mortall.  
My freind thairfoir, mak the ane strang castell,
Of gud deidis: for deith will the assay:
Thow wait not quhen, euin, morrow, or midday. (2957-61)

In Lydgate's version of the tale, we get much of the same, but Lydgate's mouse goes free while the toad is eaten by the kite. Lydgate offers us a quaint lesson:

The frosshe deuouryd because of hys fatnes.
The threde to-brake, þe mowse fell on þe grene,
Fro de þe escapyd: þe frosshe for hys falsnes
Gwerdon receueþ of vnkyndenes. (499-502)

As we can see, Henryson's version comes off as more cruel and harsh, and yet, perhaps, his is also the more real, the more instructive, the more human. His "Quhat is mair dirk than blind prosperitie?" (2228) suggests that human understanding and expectations are flawed. McDiarmid notices Henryson's grimness too, and even suggests that this moral fable reveals Henryson's own feelings concerning the absurdity of even telling moral fables since humans are irrevocably flawed and can never heed the advice fables contain. "Vainly," as McDiarmid argues, "does Henryson tell us that the mouse is man's soul, the toad his body... the kite death. ... What keeps a serious meaning for reader and poet alike is the tale's conveyance of the irrationality and menace of this demanding world of Fortune" (85). Questions about why bad things happen to good people are ultimately beyond human understanding. Man does not always get what he deserves in this world, this life is not always fair, and the good Christian should guard his soul against the evils of the world and look forward to his heavenly reward.

Ultimately, George Clark sees Henryson "representing rather than harshly reproving mankind" in his Morall Fabillis (17), and one might argue he was doing the same in his Testament of Cresseid. This leaves open, nevertheless, the possibility that Henryson's seemingly more realistic representation of human nature was in and of itself a sort of criticism of Lydgate's (and Chaucer's) own representations. Henryson's own narrator of the Morall Fabillis does, after all, say that fables are meant "to repreif the of thi misleuing" (6), and, even if sympathy is intermingled with criticism, the Morall Fabillis can still achieve this goal.

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Henryson thus transforms the beast fable into something new through his own poetic invention, and when we turn to his Testament of Cresseid, we see Henryson’s innovative story-telling and interpretations of Chaucer’s great work producing something new and Henrysonian as well. Despite the fact that the Testament was often appended to the Troilus and attributed to Chaucer in many early editions, Henryson’s Testament is not a sequel to Chaucer’s Troilus. Gray notices rightly that Henryson's poem “begins ‘in the fifth act’, already in lacrimis . . . ” (171). Troilus is not dead yet for one thing. For another, Troilus never learns of the death of Criseyde in Chaucer’s poem. Henryson might have inserted his poem before line 1100 of Book V of the Troilus:

Ne me list this sely womman chyde
Forther than the story wol devyse.
Hire name, allas! is punysshed so wide,
That for hire gilt it oughte ynough suffise. (V.1093-96)

Henryson noticed this gap in Chaucer's story and filled it, and in doing so he could not help but alter his primary source story. Henryson the active reader and critic of Chaucer's poem has become Henryson the co-author of the story, bringing a completeness to the work and changing it as well. Apart from being a diligent and admiring reader of Chaucer, Henryson became his equal, an author of equal merit, an author who has "fixed" a bit in a previous text which needed some fixing. Seen cynically, Chaucer's name becomes almost a commodity which Henryson exploits to his own benefit, in a way picking out a heavyweight to contend with and picking up some of the glory in the effort. Almost cheekily, the narrator describes reading Chaucer's Troilus as somniferous, and so "To brek my sleip ane vther quair I tuik" (61). This "vther quair" is of course Henryson's own poem which we are about to have narrated to us and which he seems to consider just as authoritative, "authoreist" (66), as Chaucer's own because both are products of poetic "inuentioun" (67), remarking coyly, "Quha wait gif all that Chauceir wrait was trew?" (64). Henryson was not a disciple of Chaucer's in the strictest sense of the word, therefore, but rather a fellow innovator, not a slave to the Chaucerian tradition though he uses traditional material as a launching pad for his own significant contribution.
The opening lines of *The Testament of Cresseid* betray Henryson's willingness to reconfigure traditional materials: "Ane doolie sessoun to ane cairfull dyte / Suld correspond and be equiualent. . ." (1-2). He proceeds to tell us that normal springlike weather has become "richt feruent" (4), while "Schouris of haill gart fra the north discend, / That scantlie fra the cauld I micht defend" (6-7)—obviously quite different from the usually fertile, happy, spring opening "Whan that Aprill with hise shoures soote" from Chaucer's *General Prologue*. The aging narrator's fading sexual gusto and the bad weather seem to go hand in hand as it were. Indeed, if the bad weather and the poetry to be written "should correspond and be equivalent," there seems to be ugly work ahead for the author (the opening lines somewhat echoed by line 344: "This doolie dream, this vgly visioun.": a sexually frustrated aging male with a drink of whisky and a book about a faithless woman is almost inevitably bound to lead to some sort of misogynistic rant. And indeed, who better to rant about than Cresseid? Cresseid becomes the subject of (and subject to) the writings of various men (Boccaccio, Chaucer, Henryson) who pass her from one to the next "sa giglotlike" (83), a textual whore as it were, each inserting his own slant "In scornefull langage" (86), each adding his own details to her direpute, "throw wickit langage" (91). This, anyway, is what she is afraid of in Chaucer's *Troilus*:

"Alias! of me, unto the worldes ende,
Shal neyther ben ywriten nor ysonge.
No good word, for thise bokes wol me shende.
O, rolled shal I ben on many a tonge!
Thoroughout the world my belle shal be ronge!" (V.1058-62)

And indeed, Henryson has "ane siluer bell" (144) rung by Cupid to call the planetary gods to pass judgment on Cresseid. Men seem to be drawn to her and repulsed by her, an "abject odious" (133) over whom to assert their authority and afterwards discard as Diomede has done. Henryson, with an arrogance that places him in a peculiarly adversarial relation to Chaucer, seems to want to drive the final nail in her coffin, to settle the matter of Cresseid once and for all in his concise manner, to get in the final say, and to get right the details which Chaucer messed up. So the narrator's question "Quha wait gif all that Chauceir wrait was trew?" (64) really seems to be questioning if Chaucer got her story right at all.
Henryson's narrator and Chaucer's narrator are quite different as well. Chaucer's narrator leaves us guessing, refusing to tell us what happened to Criseyde, whom he pities, after she left Troilus and attached herself to Diomede:

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\begin{align*}
\text{Ne me list this sely womman chyde} \\
\text{Forther than the story wol devyse.} \\
\text{Hire name, ala! is punysshed so wide,} \\
\text{That for hire gilt it oughte enough suffise.} \\
\text{And if I myghte excuse her any wise,} \\
\text{for she so sory was for hire untrouthe,} \\
\text{Iwis, I wolde excuse hire yet for routhe. (V.1093-99)}
\end{align*}
\]

But here Chaucer stops, as I noted above, and refuses to pursue Criseyde's story any further. In doing so, his narrator, according to Henryson's narrator, refuses to tell the whole truth. At the same time Henryson's narrator says that he will "excuse" her and he clarifies the statement with "als far furth as I may" (87). The seemingly sympathetic narrator then proceeds to tell the tale of the "vther quair," and when he is done, when he has struck her down with leprosy and had her buried beneath a tombstone with an epitaph declaring how she once was the flower of Troy who died as a disgusting leper, he declares, "Sen scho is deid I speik of her no moir" (616), assuming that there will be no need to add to her story in the future or, possibly, that Cresseid has said enough to put herself down for good.

Henryson's narrator may seem more aggressive and negative than Chaucer's, and it is obvious that he is not the lovable, humorous, Chaucerian type, "rounde of shape." In fact, there seems something ominous and even vicious about him. He, like Mercury ("Doctour in phisick . . . Honest and gude, and not ane word culd lie" [250-52]) in the vision of the gods, is a poet and a physician ("To help be phisike quhair that nature faillit / I am expert . . . " [34-35]). This of course brings to mind Chaucer's somewhat sinister Doctour of Phisik who makes his fortune from others' sufferings during times of plague. The picture we get of Henryson's narrator is much more stern and grim, similar to the narrator of the Morall Fabillis, and the wary reader does not sense any earnest plea when he asks "cruell Saturne, fraward and angrie" (323) to "Withdraw thy sentence and be gracious— / As thow was neuer" (327-28).
But this sinister view and condemnation of Criseyde is there to be seen in Chaucer's work as well, and Henryson detected it. When Criseyde, for instance, breaks the news to Troilus that she will soon be leaving for the Greek camp rather than eloping with him, she likens Troilus and herself to Orpheus and Eurydice:

For though in erthe ytwynned be we tweyne,
Yet in the feld of pite, out of peyne,
That highte Elisos, shal we ben yfeere,
As Orpheus and Euridice, his feere. (IV.788-91)

This suggests an ending of their earthly relationship, for we know that, though Orpheus attempted to regain his slain bride using the power of his music to persuade the gods of the underworld to allow Eurydice to return to earth with Orpheus, Orpheus's looking back at Eurydice just before they exited the underworld, an act prohibited by Minos and Proserpina, consigns her to the nether region once again. It seems as if Chaucer's Criseyde understands that her separation from Troilus in the hostage exchange will endure until after their deaths. Troilus himself seems to realize this too, though he might not want to admit the truth to himself:

The deth may wel out of my brest departe
The lif, so longe may this sorwe myne,
But fro my soule shal Criseydes darte
Out nevere mo; but down with Proserpyne,
When I am ded, I wol go wone in peyne,
And ther I wol eternaly compleyne
My wo, and how that twynned be we tweyne. (IV.470-76)

The last line is echoed in Book V (line 679) and seems to encapsulate the absurdity of Troilus's situation. His thoughts and perception of things at this point in his earthly life are governed solely by the law of love of which Boethius speaks: "Quis legem det amantibus? / Maior lex amor est sibi" (III.m.xii.47-48). "Who could give to lovers a law? / Love is itself a greater law." Troilus is a pagan prince we remember and does not know about the consolation of an afterlife which the Christian Boethius argues lies in store for those who suffer in this
world. Though Troilus might eternally complain, he will not regain Criseyde in this world or the next but, having based all of his worldly happiness on one woman, it seems to him at this moment that all is lost. Yet as Troilus ascends into the eighth sphere after he dies in Book V, the harmony of the heavenly spheres and the divine order of the Christian God's universe are revealed to him.

Nevertheless, this harmonious ending for Troilus himself is undermined by the fact that Criseyde will be condemned to the absurd consequences of gossip, rumor, and discord, especially after Henryson's Testament of Cresseid is written. Unlike Orpheus and Eurydice, Troilus and Criseyde will not wind up together in Elysium, and Criseyde's ending will not be anywhere near as happy as Troilus's. Henryson understood this. Having penned his own version of the Orpheus story, with an exegesis based primarily on Boethius's, Henryson, I believe, picks up on Chaucer's dark references. As McDiarmid points out, in his Morall Fabillis "Henryson has set God's omniscience against man's ignorance and sacrifice of everything to a present need . . . (79), but the same can be said of his understanding of Chaucer's allusions to the Orpheus story in his Troilus. Having recognized Chaucer's dark reference, Henryson chose to drive an even greater wedge between Troilus and Cresseid in the Testament, condemning leper Cresseid to even greater earthly suffering, pitting her against the cruelties of the pagan gods, while Troilus, as we know from the ending of Chaucer's poem, will ascend into the heavenly spheres.

Henryson seems to take Chaucer's text as the starting point for his own work, which always goes one step farther than Chaucer's did. It could be argued, then, that Henryson's goal was to distinguish himself from Chaucer as an author. Even on the simplest level of poetic style, even in his vocabulary, Henryson shows a tendency to break away from the Chaucerian vein. There are many words Henryson introduced in writing to the English language, and this may be in part a result of his education possibly at a continental university like Bologna, or partly in keeping with his status as a lecturer in law at the University of Glasgow or his later distinguished position as schoolmaster at Dunfermline which, far from being a backwoods of culture, John MacQueen dubbed the "Scottish Westminster" (16-17). Actually, alongside his introduction of appropriate new words, Henryson's "Scotch-ness," or his word-pinching concision is one of the striking features of his poetry, as scholars have pointed out. When Cresseid wakes from her "doolie dreame," her "ugly visioun," for instance, Henryson remarks in
passing. "And quhen scho saw hir face sa deformait, / Gif scho in hart was wa aneuch, God wait" (349-50). This is understated, indeed, without lingering too long on the subject. And, of course, his final line seems to sum his attitude up: "Sen scho is deid I speik of her no moir" (616). If we expand our examination of his concision to the level of the overall structure of the poem, we can see at times that the narrator has his finger on the fast-forward button, while at others he allows us to focus, via "set-pieces" in which the pace of the action slows somewhat, on the important bits, the portrait of the planetary gods for instance.

Others have noted Henryson's frequent use of alliteration which, though not of the strict traditional style of Langland or the Gawain Poet, is noticeably un-Chaucerian as well. Henryson was a northern man who knew how to "rum, ram, ruf by lettre," unlike Chaucer's Parson. But his alliterative flourishes, whether influenced by the lingering northern English alliterative tradition or else by what some consider the "harsh" character of Scots dialect, do seem to be employed to effect. In lines 78-84, for instance, Henryson hits the "f" on "fair," "flour," "fortunait," which change to "filth," "feminitie," "fleschlie," and "foull," the poetic effect of which, as MacQueen points out, places "emphasis . . . on change" (62-63). True enough, Henryson's style can be very Chaucerian at times, but the differences point to a well-read poet in command of his own refined style, drawing on more than one author for inspiration.

As I mentioned briefly above, the structure of Henryson's poem forces us to focus on the portraits of the planetary gods by presenting us with a set-piece. Here Henryson's attitude towards the planetary gods goes further in establishing his independence from Chaucer. Chaucer, despite his scientific approach and serious manner, at one point admits in his Treatise on the Astrolabe that "these ben observaunces of judicial matere and rytes of payens, in whiche my spirite hath no feith" (II.4), and yet curiously he seems at least partially to believe in the influences of astrology on human affairs. Though tongue-in-cheek, his "L'Envoy de Chaucer a Scogan" seems to suggest that one man, through his refusal to play the courtly-love games and persevere in his attempts to win the woman of his desires regardless of her repeated rejections, has committed "blaspheme of the goddis" (15) and has in some way caused a cataclysm in the heavens. It need not be said Chaucer's tone is comic here, but to cite this as parallel to Cresseid's situation in Henryson's poem would perhaps be straining the connection a bit. Cresseid calls her offense "my blaspheming" (354), as does Cupid who is the
blasphemed god along with his mother Venus (274), but how are we to interpret Henryson's attitude towards Cresseid's offense? Does he believe, for instance, that the planetary gods have any real influence on human beings?

To answer these questions, we should first try to understand Henryson's concept of allegory. The opening lines of the prologue to Henryson's *Morall Fabillis*, we have seen, partly reveal his keen sense of the function of allegory in poetry:

```
Thocht feynyeit fabils of ald poetre
Be not al grounded vpon truth, yit than,
Thair polite termes of sweit rhetore
Richt plesand ar vnto the eir of man;
And als the caus quby thay first began
Wes to repreif the of thi misleuing,
O man, be figure of ane vther thing. (1-7)
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The "Quha wait if all that Chauceir wrait was trew" sentiment might almost be re-stated as "Who cares whether what he wrote was true because being true is not the most important function of poetry--poetic invention is." Poetic invention for Henryson involves being able to utilize metaphor and allegory in order to reveal some truth through this figuration, this "figure of ane vther thing." And this is how we should read Henryson's poetic use of the planetary gods in the *Testament*, as "figures of other things." Mercury (god of poetry and probably representative of Henryson the poet) elects Saturn (Kronos or time) and Cynthia (the waxing and waning moon or change) to pass judgment on Cresseid and decide her fate. As MacQueen points out, Cresseid may be more guilty of blaspheming the natural order of things than of any offense against astrological gods (68). While Stearns suggests the portraits of the planetary gods draw heavily on Lydgate's *Assembly of Gods* (70-72), MacQueen argues that Henryson uses the planetary gods to "represent one aspect of the moral, but also, and perhaps primarily, the physical law of the universe" (70). They are, according to MacQueen, "neither friendly nor hostile; they are the indifferent laws of the universe" (70). Time and change inevitably influence human beings' lives, and human beings cannot do anything about it. Cresseid's offense is that she seems unwilling to accept the loss of her beauty through aging. She curses Venus and Cupid (124-140) but Henryson's portrait of Venus in lines 218-38 is curiously conflated with

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the traditional image of Lady Fortune. Half her garment is green/alive, the other half black/dead; one eye is laughing, the other weeping; she is at once sweet and sour, unstable, full of variance, changing, hot, cold, blithe, and full of woe.

This kind of specific allegory is rarely to be found in Chaucer's planetary gods in either the *Troilus* or the *Knight's Tale*. Just glancing at the *Troilus* (Book III lines 617-28), the astrological "influences of thise hevenes hye," become like "Fortune, executrice of wierdes":

\[
\text{Soth is, that under God ye ben our hierdes,}
\text{Though to us bestes ben the causez wrie.}
\]

Criseyde is prevented "al bisyde hire leve" from returning home after dinner at her uncle Pandarus's house by the "reyne," the result of a convenient planetary conjunction:

\[
\text{The bente moone with hire homes pale,}
\text{Saturne, and Jove, in Cancro joyned were . . . .}
\]

Here, the allegory of Saturn/time and Cynthia/change is not really brought to the fore as it is in Henryson's poem, and pretty much the same point could be made for the function of the gods in the *Knight's Tale*. Sure, the timing of the storm's arrival and the change in weather are a prelude to the rest of the action of the story (the tryst, the separation, et cetera), but Chaucer does not seem to think of these gods as anything other than characters and astrological influences and much less in the allegorical way as Henryson uses them.

Cresseid's last will and testament also reveal Henryson's desire to correct that which Chaucer had gotten wrong. Henryson purposefully sets the final meeting of the two lovers in his poem in opposition to the scene in Chaucer's *Troilus* (II.610-51) of Troilus riding through the gate of Dardanus fresh from the battle in his battered armor and all his manliness, in which Criseyde, looking down from her window, actually begins to fall in love with the young Troilus. "Who yaf me drynke?" (II.651) she asks intoxicated with love. Henryson on the other hand, has Cresseid wallowing in the dirt with the lepers, looking up to Troilus as he rides in the gate from battle, and the two do not recognize each other (484-534). When Cresseid is told that Troilus was the noble knight who has tossed her the purse of gold, she decides to die, and she draws up her will (577-91), leaving to the lepers the gold, to Troilus the ring
which he had given her, to Diana her soul (curious since Cynthia/Diana is one of her punishers). She has nothing to leave Diomede since he already has her brooch and belt, yet her last word before she dies is "lufe", and with that word scho swell" (591). Cresseid, it could be argued, in Henryson's poem gives her "lufe" to Diomede. So, Henryson has read Chaucer's line 1050 in Book V of the Troilus ("Men seyn—I not—that she yaf him hire heart") and decided to put things right where Chaucer had been less than decisive.

So, Henryson seems to take from Chaucer the impetus for a story of his own, and in filling in the gaps and commenting on Chaucer's poem with a poem of his own, he has transformed and reflected Chaucer in very much the same way as Cresseid is reflected and yet transformed in the mirror scene in lines 348-50. Mirrors, however, in their reflecting an image of the present nevertheless recall the past and remind us of time's ravages. Cresseid's complaint beginning in line 407 is striking in that she addresses herself in the third person (until line 443 when she switches over to first person) as an object (an "abiect odious" in line 133), a figure who has been altered. She reflects on her past and compares that with her present state. In the narrative as a whole it seems as if the clock has been kicked into fast forward for her; she has aged, her youth/spring turned to winter/old age by the effects of Saturn's frost, and she is unable to cope with this loss of her youth and beauty. She warns the young ladies of Troy, "And in 3our mynd ane mirrour mak of me" (457), because their old age and loss of beauty is nigh. MacQueen (88) notes Henryson's wonderful flower imagery in Cresseid's reflective complaint, the "fresche flowris" (426) becoming "ane failing flour" (461) and eventually "rotting" (464). So mirrors, in the sense Cresseid means in line 457, also project a futurity, looking, as it were, at past and future in relation to the present.

This image of the mirror which not only reflects the subject but alters it also brings this paper to a close. Henryson read authors such as Chaucer and Lydgate, holding a mirror up to their truths and faults, and he was not content merely to mirror them but to make examples of them. In this sense, Henryson's compulsion to comment, tweak, criticize, and moralize brings into being a new work, the next book, the "uther quair," and is not content to simply be a commentary. Thus his work takes its authoritative place beside that which it comments on. Henryson reacts not only to previous authors (Aesop, Lydgate, Chaucer) but also to the limits of the genres which these authors employed as well. Moral fables can be told in simple tale-moral form,
but, as Henryson shows us, this is not necessarily the only way this genre can operate. Likewise, morals do not have to be obvious or trite, and the sharp critic, like Henryson, enhances our appreciation of the previous work through his knowledge of past authors and literary traditions and through his own poetic invention. Henryson's reaction to Chaucer's *Troilus* reveals this very same dialogic compulsion as he questions Chaucer's own questioning of tragedy and romance. It seems pretty natural to see Henryson's *Testament* as a reflection and transformation of Chaucer's *Troilus*, a masterfully wrought poem which is distinctly "Henrysonian," or even "Scotch," but not necessarily "Scottish Chaucerian." The *Testament* stands in dialogic relation to the *Troilus*, just as the *Morall Fabillis* engaged in dialogue with Lydgate and Chaucer and Aesop. Henryson, unlike William Dunbar, did not engage in a flying with a contemporary poet. Instead, he chose Geoffrey Chaucer and John Lydgate to engage in dialogue. Henryson apparently admired these two authorities, and yet he had his own thoughts to convey as well, avoiding becoming simply an admirer or a clone of either English poet.

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All citations from Henryson’s works are from Denton Fox’s edition. All citations of Chaucer’s works are from Benson’s edition, The Riverside Chaucer.

See Henderson 42.

Henryson engages in dialogue with Chaucer most directly with his Testament of Cresseid which I will discuss later in this paper.

For a brief summary of the various critics’ views on the relationship of fables to their moralitates see Benson 216-17 and chapter three of Kindrick’s Robert Henryson.

According to Clark, Henryson’s Morall Fabillis “create a world whose greater realism makes easy black and white evaluations inadequate . . .” (2). Gray points out rightly that a fable “may generate many significances,” though sometimes Henryson’s “moralitas comes as a distinct surprise” (121).

See Clark 5, 10; Kindrick, Robert Henryson, 45-46, 49.

“In the series of moralitates the audience moves through stages of manipulation by the narrator” (Greentree 38).

See McDiarmid 85: “From the Fables with all their symbolic images and their complexities, there emerges an attitude which is wise, realistic, tolerant and religious at once. It is an attitude which is perhaps not as unlike that of Chaucer as has been claimed. Henryson’s judgment is sometimes severe, and his irony sharp.” See also Gray 160: While Henryson possesses a “grimmer, and sometimes more macabre imagination than Chaucer,” his “sympathy for his protagonists has
more than a touch of Chaucer’s *pite* and exhibits “rational detachment and passionate sympathy...”

10 Umberto Eco’s theoretical suggestion that readers become part-authors and complete the creation of meaning in texts through the act of reading is useful in examining Henryson’s almost adversarial relationship to Chaucer. Henryson reads Chaucer and responds, though not merely by reading. Henryson becomes an actual author whose responses to Chaucer are texts, not just thoughts.

11 Such is his description of himself in line 31 of “L’Envoi de Chaucer a Scogan.”

12 See his portrait in lines 411-44 in the "General Prologue.”

13 See Kindrick, *Robert Henryson*, 49. See also Spearing’s entire chapter on Henryson in his *Criticism & Medieval Poetry*.

14 See lines 42-43 of Chaucer’s “Parson’s Tale.” On Henryson’s use of alliteration, see also Kindrick, *Robert Henryson*, 42-43.

15 This is the main thrust of Kindrick’s chapter “Henryson and Literary Tradition,” pages 28-56 in *Robert Henryson*.

16 Stearns 57.

17 See Stearns 93-96; MacQueen 68-70; Gray 190-92. The best comparison of Chaucer’s and Henryson’s uses of the planetary gods in their poetry is Jill Mann’s “The Planetary Gods in Chaucer and Henryson.”

18 This, of course, resounds nicely with Henryson’s fable of “The Paddock and the Mouse.”

19 See Stearns 90-92.

20 Mann’s article represents an almost totally opposite opinion on this point.
Works Cited


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