

Section 3 - Stanzas 21 - 38

Cresseid's Dream

Cresseid falls into a faint and has a vision of Cupid. The planetary gods are summoned to give judgement on Cresseid for her blasphemy against Cupid's power and justice.

Interpretation of Cresseid's Dream

There are three ways of approaching the dream sequence. Read the following notes on the different interpretations. Your teacher will go over this with you in greater detail. As you read the notes, work through the various activities.

1.



“somnia naturale” - inspired by Cresseid's disturbed spiritual state and the onset of her disease. This assumes that leprosy has already been contracted.

but

Henryson's use of 'extasie' and 'ravischit in spreit' can be seen as language often used in spiritual and visionary writing.



Therefore, perhaps this sequence and Cresseid's experience is linked more to a 'vision' rather than a natural dream.

The idea of the pre-existence of Cresseid's leprosy can be taken from her speech:

'that seid [of lufe] with froist is slane'

This can be taken as a metaphor and is clearly linked to the wintry god Saturn who sentences her. This implies that she is already aware of the symptoms of leprosy. It could be argued, therefore, that Henryson is giving us a cue for a naturalistic interpretation.

2.

Allegory

The allegorical interpretation links the pagan gods and their strong, traditional associations. These ideas of the gods were very much in the medieval consciousness and the physical descriptions of the gods are largely based on the mythical traditions of the Middle Ages.

Allegorical Interpretation 1

Cresseid is 'devoted' to the goddess, Venus and as such, Cresseid displays the 'instability' that is attributed to the goddess.

- ❖ Identify and make a note of any references to Venus in the poem which would point to her unstable character and/or nature.

but

At the same time, Cresseid herself complains against the inconstancy of Venus. Her punishment at the hands of the gods may well illustrate this.

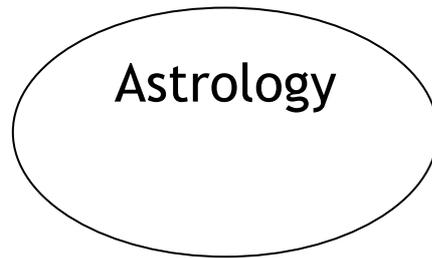
- ❖ By referring closely to the text, write down where you feel Cresseid criticises Venus.

Allegorical Interpretation 2

The sentence of leprosy could also be taken as an allegory. For a medieval audience, the disease was sexually transmitted. Cresseid's punishment, therefore, might be taken as an allegorical statement of the relationship between wantonness and leprosy.

- ❖ What might be the argument against such an interpretation?

3.



Cresseid's dream can be interpreted in terms of astrology. The gods are presented to us according to astrological knowledge in the fifteenth century.

- ❖ As Henryson's presentation of the gods is fairly extensive, work your way through the activities which follow:

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Cresseid's Dream: The Gathering of the Gods

These stanzas present Henryson with the opportunity of using vivid language and imagery.

- ❖ Work your way through the presentation of the gods in stanzas 21 – 38. Your teacher will help you here.
 - i) In your own words and in note form, give an account of the sequence of planetary deities as they appear in the poem.
 - ii) Draft a table. Make the headings 'hostile', 'favourable' and 'ambiguous'. Going over your list, put in the different gods and their descriptions.
 - iii) Make another column. This time, the heading should 'temperament'. Write down the 'personality trait' of the different gods.

- ❖ Answer the following questions:
 - i) What do you notice about the way in which Henryson presents the planetary deities?
 - ii) Why do you think he has chosen to present the gods this way?
 - iii) What about Cresseid in this episode? What do you feel about her contribution here? Again, is there a reason why Henryson presents her in this way?

Critical Essay

- ❖ Now you have worked on Cresseid's dream, work on the following critical essay. Remember to plan your response before you begin.

Rubric : In blaming '*...fals Cupide...*', Cresseid is in effect blaming all the gods of her world. In what way can this be said to be true or are there any other interpretations of Henryson's dream sequence in 'The Testament of Cresseid'? Discuss

The Character of Cresseid

*'...the fatall destenie
Of fair Cresseid, that endit wretchitlie '*

From the quotation, we are lead to believe that Henryson's portrayal of his heroine seems to be sympathetic. On closer analysis of the text, we can see that Henryson's treatment of Cresseid appears to be difficult, if at times problematic. In addition, there are also negative references made about Cresseid.

- ❖ By taking notes and making appropriate headings, look at the words/phrases that explicitly condemn Cresseid.
- ❖ Now, write down the words/phrases that invite our sympathy for her.
- ❖ Finally (and perhaps this is more difficult), look at the words which offer excuses for her behaviour.

As you work through the various sections of the poem, your teacher will refer you to your notes on this section. In addition, it would be helpful to you if you were to add to your list.