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IN DEFENCE OF CRISEYDE.

A consideration of the character

as seen by

Chaucer, Henryson and Shakespeare.

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in English at Massey University.

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PREFACE.

In 1969 with my youngest child at school and my schooldays more than twenty years behind me, I made my first very hesitant enrolment in a History unit as an extramural student of Massey University. I little dreamed that I would ever get as far as graduating, let alone ever write a thesis for a masterate. Now after thirteen continuous years as a student, I find myself surprisingly in that position. I am deeply appreciative of the assistance given me by many people over those years towards attaining this end.

I was an extramural student for the first six years and my thanks must go firstly to Massey's wonderful extramural service which makes it possible for those living outside university centres eventually to acquire a degree. The annual vacation courses, although exhausting, were the highlights of those years as was the emotional support gained from belonging to a small study group during my first year. When one experiences as an internal student the stimulation gained from contact with lecturers and other students, one is doubly conscious of the loneliness of extramural study.

I wish to thank all those with whom I have been associated in the English department over the years for their continual encouragement and also any in the History and French departments who may remember me as an undergraduate. Special thanks to Drs. Ross and Poole for the loan of helpful material.

My thanks to my family for putting up with my tendency to become short-tempered whenever assignments were due or exams looming and my

apologies for not always participating in their activities because of these reasons. My apologies, too, to my baby grandson, Peter, for not always being available to look after him during the final stages of writing.

The person to whom I stand most indebted for the eventual appearance of this work is my supervisor, Mr. Robert Neale. Although he must have despaired often of this thesis ever reaching completion, he never failed to encourage me gently with infinite patience whenever my interest or energy flagged. I am deeply appreciative of the generous way he gave me of his time unstintingly and of the promptness with which he returned each chapter as it took shape.

Lastly my thanks go to my typist, Mrs. E. Lynch, for her efficiency and eagerness to get the work completed.

With apologies for any neglect
my studies may have caused her over the years,
and with the hope that this thesis
may inspire her to continue with her studies,

I dedicate this
To my daughter Monica
who alone of my family
appears to have any "feel" for English.

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ABSTRACTIn Defence of Criseyde

The love story of Troilus and Criseyde has had a continuous appeal since the appearance of its first version in the mid-twelfth century. The character of the heroine has proved controversial because of her unconventional behaviour.

The earliest version by Benoît de Sainte Maure was used by Boccaccio as the basis for a love poem which expressed his personal grief at being separated from his beloved. Chaucer, in his turn, built on Boccaccio's work with a long narrative poem which incorporated many of the ideals of courtly love. His narrator is hopelessly biased towards Criseyde and lays the blame for any defects in her character on the reports of his authorities. We, too, are led by the narrator to sympathize with her by sharing in her motives and deliberations.

A century later the Scottish poet, Henryson, produced an imaginary ending to Chaucer's poem in which the heroine contracted leprosy for her sins of the flesh and died after repenting of her past life. For nearly two hundred years this poem was believed to have been written as a sequel by Chaucer.

Just over a century after Henryson's poem, Shakespeare produced the story as a drama interwoven with the military background of the Trojan war. The stage presentation, unpopular until this century, meant that the audience could see and hear Cressida's betrayal of Troilus in front of them. Shakespeare also adopted a derisive tone towards courtly love which by his time was outmoded.

Despite her extreme timidity, Chaucer's Criseyde is shown to betray Troilus for pragmatic reasons. This adds a realistic and opportunist dimension to her character. Chaucer implies ironically that we should not judge from appearances only.

Henryson's Cresseid is revealed as excessively vain but she does gain self-knowledge through suffering and comes to terms with her fate before death. Whether Henryson viewed his heroine in pagan, courtly or Christian terms, is a point of disagreement among critics as the poem contains moral overtones.

Shakespeare's Cressida is persuaded by Troilus to abandon her realism and surrender herself reluctantly to his idealism. Despite her later betrayal of him, her vows of love are sincerely made. Like most of the characters in the play she is unable to live up to her ideals.

The heroine does not set out to ensnare either Troilus or Diomedes but once they pursue her she cannot resist their advances. She reveals herself as being a victim of human frailty but her human weaknesses serve to endear herself to readers as a credible human being.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION.

For centuries the Trojan War and its associated legends have provided a wealth of romantic material on which writers can give vent to their imaginations. Among the colourful anecdotes for which the war provides a background, few have had such a lasting appeal as the love story of Troilus and Criseyde. That its potential has been appreciated is evident when one considers that writers of the calibre of Chaucer and Shakespeare have made use of it.

The character of the heroine of the story has provided critics with a fascinating subject for conjecture by the nature of her complexity and also because she fails to conform to the stereotyped standard of behaviour expected of a heroine in medieval and Renaissance literature. The three notable works on which she has made her mark in the English speaking world are Chaucer's long narrative poem, Troilus and Criseyde written in his distinctive rime royal form, The Testament of Cresseid written in similar stanzaic form but in Middle Scots, by the Scottish poet Robert Henryson, and Shakespeare's drama Troilus and Cressida. The actual date of writing of all three is uncertain but there is roughly a century separating the poems of Chaucer and Henryson and a little more than a century between the works of Henryson and Shakespeare.

The origins of the story are somewhat hazy and complicated. While the names of many of the background figures are renowned in Homer's Iliad, the principals are either non-existent or unimportant in his work. The episode is not mentioned in the two medieval supposedly "authentic" histories of the Trojan war in Latin prose: the more popular De Excidio Trojae Historia by Dares, who was said to have lived in Troy during the siege, and Ephemeris

Belli Trojani by Dictys who purported to be with the Greeks at the siege. The accounts therefore viewed the war from opposing sides. However, Dares' Latin was later proved to be that of the sixth century A.D., probably abridged from a now lost text, while Dictys' belonged to the fourth century, possibly a translation of a Greek original. The authenticity of their "eyewitness" accounts was questioned as early as 1401.

As far as can be gathered, the earliest version of the love story was a poem Le Roman de Troie, written in Old French in about 1155 by Benoît de Sainte-Maure. It appears to be an original invention with perhaps some ideas gleaned from Dares. The heroine's name is "Briseida" and her story is told in only 1350 of a total 30,000 verses, interspersed between accounts of battles, truces and activities of other Greeks and Trojans. The story opens at the point where the lovers are about to be separated and is exceptional in that it concentrates more on Diomedes' suffering than on Troilus'. On reading Gordon's translation of the sections pertaining to Briseida's story, one is surprised to discover how much of the bones of Chaucer's story lies here. Briseida's long monologue, in which she justifies her betrayal, is so reminiscent of her similar rationalizations in Chaucer. Her prediction of her future in Benoît,

"Henceforth no good will be written of me
nor any good song sung," (1)

is plainly echoed by Chaucer's Criseyde,

"Shal neyther ben ywriten nor ysonge
No good word, for thise bokes wol me shende." (2)

The next major contribution to the Troilus story was a translation in Latin prose of Benoît's poem. It was called Historia Destructionis Troiae

- (1) Benoît per R.K. Gordon (trans.) The Story of Troilus. (Toronto, 1978), p.19.
 (2) Chaucer, Troilus and Criseyde, V, 1059-60.

and was written in 1287 by a Guido de Columnis. Although the style of the work was heavy and moralizing, it became more popular than the original. Its Latin text made it seem more scholarly and authoritative as well as making it accessible to a larger number of readers. The uncertainty about Briseida's motives that Benoît had sustained was removed by Guido who was explicit about her promiscuity, revealing her as a conniving hypocrite similar to the sixteenth century Cressida. Although Benoît is clearly his source, Guido nevertheless gives the credit to Dares and Dictys. Despite its being inferior as literature to Benoît's, Guido's work was regarded as the standard.

The principal forerunner of Chaucer's work and long considered as his chief source, was Boccaccio's Il Filostrato written in 1336. Instead of its being merely an episode in the Trojan wars, Boccaccio made the love story a complete poem in itself, using it as a vehicle for expressing his personal grief at being separated from his beloved Maria d'Aquino. As Troilus becomes the surrogate for his own anguish, the poem is infused with a passion absent in its predecessors. Boccaccio made other changes also. He altered the form of the heroine's name from "Briseida" to "Criseida" and made her a widow, presumably to make her more free than a married woman and yet more experienced than a girl. He introduced the figure of Pandarus as Criseida's cousin and Troilus' young friend. The personalities of the three protagonists are relatively simple with Criseida playing a minor part compared to Troilus. Boccaccio amplified Benoît's story by a detailed account of the lovers' affair prior to their parting. Because of Boccaccio's own disillusionment, the poem is tinged with a cynicism towards women, as can be seen clearly in the concluding stanzas:

"A young women is fickle and is desirous of many lovers She hath no feeling for virtue or reason, inconstant ever as leaf in the wind." (3)

Benoît's, Guido's and Boccaccio's stories were the chief precursors of the three works I am about to consider. Among the questions I plan to investigate is that of how far my authors have used these sources, particularly in relation to the characterization of the heroine. How far have they built on each other's work in the conception of their heroine and how far do their works overlap? To what extent is the heroine's character similar in the three works and to what extent different? How much of the difference is due to the different era in which each was written? How much of the difference is due to the demands of the genre? How much of the difference is due to the original creative conception of the individual writer? How far each ascribed to his characters the pagan values which historically they possessed and how far the writers' attitudes to their characters' behaviour were coloured instead by their own Christian values, is probably impossible to determine but an interesting subject for conjecture.

I hope to centre my main focus on whether my three writers have succeeded in creating a heroine who is credible as a human being and to identify the techniques they have used towards this end. Does the characterization of the heroine have relevance and appeal to a twentieth century audience and if so, why? Is the reader's view of the heroine influenced by previous knowledge of her reputation? Is her impact the same regardless of whether one reads one or all of the works and irrespective of in which order they are read? Bearing all this in mind, I shall now proceed to discuss each work in turn following the order in which they were written.

(3) Boccaccio per The Filostrato of Giovanni Boccaccio
trans. N.E. Griffin and A.B. Myrick, (New York), 8:30.

The chief emphasis in the next three chapters will be on the differing views of Criseyde/Cresseid/Cressida expressed by various critics. In the final chapter these views will be subjected to critical scrutiny, answers to the preceding questions will be attempted and conclusions about the character of the heroine will be deduced.