

The function of  
authority in Chaucer's  
"Troilus and Criseyde"  
and Henryson's "Testamentum"



' Qhua wait gif all that Chauceir wrait was trew?/Nor I wait nocht gif this narratioun/Be authoreist'.

In his Testament for Cresseid, inspired by Chaucer's Troilus and Criseyde, Henryson's narrator presents an almost immediate challenge to the truth of his literary predecessor, consequently plunging the authority of his own narrative into doubt and humbling himself before his readers. This display of the narrator humbling himself is present elsewhere, in both Troilus and Testament, with the plain citing of literary sources; 'worthie Chauceir', [58] in Henryson's work and 'myn auctor Lollius' [394] (amongst others) in Chaucer's. Aside from giving us a fair licence to conflate the authors with the narrators, (as the narrators refer to works both authors had read) presenting the sources from which their work has derived seems to detract from their own authority and originality. However, what may seem humbling in fact has ulterior literary functions. Nicholas Watson argues, for instance, that Western literature has a tradition of 'homage and displacement', meaning Chaucer and Henryson acknowledge their sources in order to make literary space (and thus authority) for their own work, covering themselves with the artifice of 'homage'. While this is true, I would take Watson's argument further to suggest that both writers additionally cement the truth and authority of their narratives in the repeated suggestion that the tragic events in their narratives are in the hands of either fate or the gods themselves, and thus located outside of the narrator's control. Instead the narrators act deictically, guiding the readers through the action and intensifying the tragic elements of each respective poem by lamenting at things out of his control. Under the blanket of being 'humble', both authors thus establish their work as

authoritative and true by the 'homage and displacement' of their literary predecessors and the infallibility of gods and predetermined events from outside the narrator's realm.

One interesting feature of Chaucer's poem is the narrator's language of obligation; an insistence that he must convey his narrative no matter how painful or trying it may be. Such language is present to an extent in Henryson's narrative too, (though he briefly attempts to separate himself from the narrator with 'sum poeit' [66]) and serves to hyperbolize both the importance and urgency of their work. For example, Henryson's narrator describes the telling of the story as being 'Maid to report the lamentation', [67] 'Maid' being particularly forceful language as well as a word suggestive of a higher authority in control doing the forcing. This suggestion can similarly be seen in Chaucer's poem where the narrator describes himself as 'the sorwful instrument/That helpeth loueres'. [10] Again, 'instrument' is unavoidably suggestive of someone above the narrator 'playing' him, painting him as a transmitter or mediator. What is interesting about this mediating effect is also the pretense it creates of neutrality in the narrator from the outset. Henryson's use of 'report' in particular insinuates lack of bias, whilst Chaucer repeatedly refers to his attempts at being faithful to his sources: 'as myn auctour seyde, so sey I', [18] with even the syntax of 'I' following on from 'auctour' again creating the impression that Chaucer is merely a kind of scribe. Creating this impression of neutral obligation, I would argue, works by making the readers believe that the narrators are doing them a service, and have endeavoured to make sure everything they write is true. Acting as mediators of their narratives, the narrators are thus

protected from criticism, 'Disblameth me if any word be lame', [17, Troilus] whilst simultaneously lending importance to their work.

Control of narrative is something made very clear and tangible in both Troilus and Testament, with both authors painting those of higher authority (namely fate or the gods) as the dictators of the most important or tragic events in their narratives, whilst the narrators act deictically, guiding the readers through the action. Chaucer's narrator, for instance, asks in the opening lines of the poem: 'Thesiphone, thow help me for tendite', [6] whilst Henryson describes how 'Saturne' 'tuik on hand' [309] Cresseid's punishment', 'hand' depicting physically Saturne's control over Cresseid's fate. In places, both Henryson and Chaucer's narrators speak in the present tense whilst depicting the fate of their characters as having already been decided in the past. Chaucer's narrator states, 'on hire whiel she sette vp Diomedes; / for which right now myn herte gynneth blede', [13-14] whilst Henryson's narrator similarly begs to Saturne: 'Withdraw thy sentence and be gracious', [327] where 'gynneth blede' and 'withdraw' locate the narrators in the present. By creating a clash of this kind between the present narrator and events that have already supposedly happened or been decided, Chaucer and Henryson locate their narratives outside of their own work, presenting them as established stories. This also places the men on a level with their readers, all being at the mercy of fate and the gods like Troilus and Cresseid. By pretending to surrender narrative control, both narrators react to the tragedy as it happens and heighten the emotional impact of the most important moments in both poems. In a similar way to Henryson's questioning of narrative truth and authority, this 'surrendering'

appears to be a performance of the narrators humbling themselves before more important forces or figures, and though this is true, the emotional reactions of the narrators against the pre-established events in both poems also serves to affirm their unequivocal truth.

As Marilyn Corrie points out in her essay on ' fate, destiny, and fortune', ' the idea that what happens to people, and what people do, are determined by forces external to themselves was current in the Middle ages[.]' As previously discussed then, fate and pagan gods in both *Troilus and Testament* lend an ultimate authority to both poems. However, as features, they also ensure that any ill tidings or punishments that befall *Troilus* or *Cresseid* cannot, to any serious degree, be contended with as unjust by the readers, something more visible in Henryson's work which imagines a punishment for *Cresseid*'s infidelity that Chaucer did not. Derek Pearsall suggests of the gods in *Testament* that they ' operate in a manner brutally similar to what goes under the name of divine justice', a comment which encapsulates Henryson's treatment of *Cresseid*; his punishment of her is brutal, but the god, rather than himself are painted of the instigators of it. As a result, the readers can only see what befalls her as just and deserved, thus heightening Henryson's moral didacticism at the close of his poem, ' Ming not your lufe with fals deceptioun',[613] as *Cresseid* is shown to be an unmistakable example of ' deceptioun' and falsity.

Fate and the gods are not the only figures that Henryson and Chaucer exploit as means for narrative authority; both also use their respective literary sources to do the same. Once again, under the guise of being humble, Chaucer credits ' Lollus',[1. 394] ' Omer',[1. 146] and ' Dares',[1. 146] as <https://assignbuster.com/the-function-of-authority-in-chaucers-troilus-and-cresseid-and-henrysons-testament-for-cresseid/>

the authorities over his work, whilst Henryson states 'Chauceir'[58] is the origin of his work. However, what is interesting about both writer's deployment of sources is, as Thomas C Stillinger points out: 'when the shape of the story makes it seem digressive to narrate [...] [various events] at length, he [Chaucer] tells his reader where that material may be found[.]' And indeed, Chaucer avoids launching into lengthy descriptions of how Troy fell: 'Ne falleth naught to purpos me to telle;/ffor it were here a long digression/ffro my matere and 3ow long to dwelle.'[1. 142-144] Here, 'long digression' and '3ow long' suggest a narrative urgency, and contain a subtle, yet visible, suggestion that Chaucer's narrative is more important than those of 'Omer' or 'Dares', which 'digressed' and strayed away from what was important. Whilst Chaucer suggests this in a fairly indirect way, Henryson makes space for himself much more clearly. In a similar manner, Henryson states on Troilus: 'Of his distress me neidis not reheirs,/For worthie Cahuceir, in the samin buik,/In guidelie termis and in joly veirs,/Compylit he his cairis',[57-60] using comparatively positive language like 'joly veirs' and 'guidlie termis' in reference to his source. However, Henryson's sweeping aside of Chaucer is made clear by the line that follows this 'homage', which we will return to: 'Quha wait gif all that Chauceir wrait was trew.'[64] In this line, any previous praise of Chaucer is diminished, and by deploying a rhetorical question, Henryson sows doubt about Chaucer's literary authority without making any direct statement. By proposing the possibility that Chaucer's work was untrue, he creates his own space to write in, as does Chaucer with his own sources, insinuating that their work will be better than what has come before.

Neither Chaucer nor Henryson claim outright that their work is the most authoritative, true or valid, but when examined, it becomes clear that both poets manipulate their narrator, sources, and language in order to claim authority under the guise of being humble servants to their readers. It is the narrators in particular who allow the authors inside the narrative of the poem to persistently guide their readers and gain their trust, rendering the poems leak-proof to contentions as to whether they are 'trew' or 'authoreist'.