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Scottish Chaucerians: Transforming and Reclaiming a Discarded Category

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by

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Scottish Chaucerians: Transforming and Reclaiming a Discarded Category

The term “Scottish Chaucerians,” which scholars have used in the past to refer to the fifteenth-century writers of Middle Scots poetry including Robert Henryson and William Dunbar, has now largely been rejected as reductive and minimizing of these poets’ individual accomplishments.¹ Not only have critics including John MacQueen and A.A. MacDonald suggested other primary sources for these poets’ work, but some have also rejected the idea of Chaucerian source-texts influencing these Scottish “makars,” arguing instead that they are masters in their own rights.² While I would not contest the idea that the makars have both developed and mastered their own tradition in Middle Scots, I would suggest that scholars need not discard this category altogether.

To understand the need to reclaim this term, I would like to offer a brief history of the concept of the “Scottish Chaucerians.” While this term had become commonplace enough to merit section-headings in anthologies on English literature by the 1940s, the category had still belonged to “English” literature, as if it were a subset of the genre, rather than a tradition all its own (Sampson 73).³ In the 1970s, however, John MacQueen was among the first to argue that scholars should draw a distinction between Scottish literature and English, arguing that

¹ For more on the rejection of this term, please see MacQueen 235; Bawcutt 24; MacDonald 243.
² For more studies distinguishing Dunbar from the Chaucerian tradition see Grey 181; Bawcutt 24. For more on this discussion regarding Henryson, see Kindrick 190.
the expression “Scottish Chaucerians” implies that the authors to whom it refers “owe to Chaucer any merits they happen to possess, and that their only deficiencies are native to Scotland and themselves” (235). In the wake of MacQueen’s proposal to reject the term, some critics such as Roy Pearcy have also acknowledged that the although makars were familiar with Chaucer, they also relied on other sources, including Lydgate, Petrarch, or even French lyric poetry (Pearcy 50). In focusing on these other influences, MacQueen and Pearcy appear to have largely rejected the notion of any Scottish reliance upon Chaucer.

While early twentieth-century criticism may have emphasized the idea of “ardent devotion to the master poet,” I would argue that this recent swing in the pendulum has caused critics to minimize Chaucer’s influence too greatly, despite recent protests (Ives & Parkinson 58). The Scottish tradition in the fifteenth century does indeed owe a debt to “reverend Chaucere,” as Dunbar called him, as seen by the many word-for-word quotations of and allusions to Chaucer and his work (Golden Targe 253). Nevertheless, we ought not to limit that indebtedness to line-by-line references to Chaucer’s works, which scholarship has outlined thoroughly in editions of both Henryson and Dunbar’s poetry. 

Despite the aforementioned critics’ recent preoccupation with searching for the

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more obscure sources from which Scottish poets drew inspiration, one cannot
deny the existence of these references and allusions to Chaucer’s work. While
Carolyn Ives and David Parkinson have argued that Middle Scots poetry “alters,
revises and completes ‘Chaucerian’ texts,” these critics represent a minority in
this field (186). Furthermore, I would argue that the Scottish makars deliberately
set out to define their relationship to Chaucer by replaying a coherent set of
allusions, but more importantly, by engaging with these allusions to his work. By
discarding the idea that Scottish poets drew upon Chaucer in any significant
way, we deny the opportunity to explore the purpose and nature of this
relationship.

Both Denton Fox and A.A. Macdonald have criticized the idea of
“‘Chaucerianness’” as a vague and unspecified marker for Chaucer’s influence
upon Scottish texts; as yet, Chaucerianness only refers to a text that follows the
tradition of Chaucer in some respect, whether in subject or specific wording (Fox
355, MacDonald 243). I would posit, however, that “Chaucerianness” in the
Scottish makars may indicate their interest in various gender issues persistent in
Chaucer’s texts. Many of the Scottish works which critics have already concluded
take Chaucer’s work as their source also deal in some capacity with gender
politics—the ways men and women interact, as well as the way each gender is
viewed (whether by the author, the narrator or readers). In particular, I will
examine two longer narrative works from Henryson and Dunbar: Henryson’s
Testament of Cresseid and The Cock and the Fox, as well as Dunbar’s Treatise of Twa
Mariit Wemen and the Wedo and The Golden Targe. First, I will offer fresh readings of these poems’ suggested Chaucerian sources to illuminate the moments of intersection between the texts. Next, through close readings of each makar’s poem, I will examine the way in which the Scottish makars engage with Chaucerian questions of gender. I would argue, however, that rather than reiterate what Chaucer has already concluded or discussed, Henryson and Dunbar add to existing debates that until now have been ignored by critics. While gender has become a popular subject in Chaucer studies, gender studies approaches in Scottish literature remain rare. Instead, questions of what defines these authors as “Scottish” have remained prevalent in critical discussions. Rather than discarding the notion of the Scottish Chaucerians altogether, I aim to redefine and reclaim this category by illuminating the ways in which Henryson and Dunbar not only acknowledge Chaucer’s work, but also reinterpret his interests through their references to Chaucer’s texts. Through repeating distinctly Chaucerian language, or through interest in broader questions, such as the aims of gendered discourse, Henryson and Dunbar allude to Chaucerian works, but also transform the original sense to fit each poet’s interest. I will admit, as Harvey Wood does, that “Dunbar ‘...is in fact as different from Chaucer as it was possible for another medieval poet to be,’” and that Henryson and Dunbar

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6 Although Ives & Parkinson discuss Scottish misogyny, they remain the exception, rather than the rule.
7 For more on the Scottishness of these makars, see Fox 165 and Parkinson 355.
themselves do not resemble one another except in their Scottish identity (28).\textsuperscript{8} However, these distinctions seem to be based on formal qualities more than on narrative choices. Even works that do not outwardly or obviously resemble Chaucerian works may still carry out discussions that Chaucer’s work began. In fact, I would argue that the despite Dunbar and Henryson’s apparently dissimilar poetic interests, they both respond to the influence of the popular author that came before they did; furthermore, that response frequently relates to the gender politics suggested by Chaucerian texts. Thus, this sense of influence evident in the “Scottish Chaucerians” does not reflect mere translation, inspiration, or imitation. Rather, the term becomes a category of tradition-conscious innovation by both Henryson and Dunbar.

1. Robert Henryson’s Testament of Cresseid

First, I would like to explore the possibility that Henryson’s Testament of Cresseid not only takes Chaucer’s Troilus and Criseyde as its source, but rather calls for a reinterpretation of Chaucer’s original work. While critics who have named Henryson a “Scottish Chaucerian” have largely read Henryson in the light of Chaucer (that is, in imitation of Chaucer), Henryson’s decision to insert his poem within the narrative of Troilus and Criseyde urges the reader to reevaluate Chaucer’s work in light of Henryson’s new ideas, and thereby actively engage with Henryson’s source text rather than merely reiterating or elaborating it.

\textsuperscript{8} Wood quotes John Speirs here, but also argues that “the degree to which it is true depends on the works of Dunbar, Henryson and Chaucer you are talking about,” a caveat that this essay will certainly support.
Although Henryson’s text offers a harsher critique of Cresseid than of her Chaucerian counterpart, Henryson builds upon a text filled with reversed and mixed gender stereotypes. By incorporating *The Testament of Cresseid* into the time frame of Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*, Henryson actually expands the scope of his moralizing; further, when juxtaposed with Chaucer’s text, Henryson’s didactic insertion demands morality from Chaucer’s otherwise morally ambiguous text.

Although almost no detail about Henryson’s life can be known for certain, William Dunbar’s ‘I that in heill wes and gladness’ (sometimes known as the *Lament for the Makars*) mentions a “Maister Robert Henrisoun,” the same title that of the notary who witnessed three deeds in Dunfermline around 1477. These details give scholars such as Douglas Grey reason to believe that (if these notes referred to the same person) this Robert Henryson would have been educated in the arts and canon law. Further, this education (tentatively at the University of Glasgow in 1462) would have familiarized him with the English literary tradition—including Chaucer (Gray 156). Acknowledging this awareness of Chaucer’s works does not necessarily relegate Henryson to the position of translator or imitator. Henryson achieves the richness of his verse and narrative as the result of intentional engagement with Chaucer’s text, but he also transforms the essence of this well-known narrative to fit his own poetic aims. Henryson’s text not only seizes upon the way in which Chaucer’s male character Troilus reflects upon the female Criseyde, but also uses this compilation to heap
the sins and punishments of both genders upon Cresseid alone. As unpalatable as this result may be to a modern audience, I would argue that this reading also matches Henryson’s larger literary interests as expressed by his other works, and that this agenda therefore illustrates Henryson’s impulse to edit Chaucerian sources.

To understand Henryson’s inventiveness, the reader must first understand the foundation upon which he builds: Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*. *Troilus and Criseyde* both existed as literary characters before Chaucer wrote his poem, but Chaucer’s version of this story goes so far as to describe both title characters as ideal representations of their respective genders.9 Furthermore, since the narrator initially purports to tell the story of “The double sorowe of Troilus” it seems from the outset that story’s focus will center about that ideal male figure, Troilus, and his downfall (I.1). As a result, I will argue that Criseyde becomes not only a vehicle for depicting male frailty, but perhaps more importantly, a reflection of maleness itself. Of Troilus, the narrator writes, “As fer as tonges speken, / There nas a man of gretter hardinesse / Thanne he, ne more desired worthinesse” (I.565-7). From outside observation, Troilus represents the best of male courage and resolution in all senses. His “hardinesse” indicates strength and steadfastness as a knight, while his “worthinesse” motions to a more vague, internal quality – perhaps, as D.W. Robertson suggests, his

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9 For an earlier version of this story, see the parallel text of Boccaccio’s *Filostrato* and Chaucer’s *TC* in B.A. Windeatt’s *Troilus and Criseyde: A New Edition of the Book of Troilus* (London: Longman, 1984).
spiritual elevation (7). For all this elevation and esteem, however, Troilus bewails his stature, calling himself “refus of ever creature” (I.570). While this self-effacing statement could perhaps indicate another virtue (humility) his drawn-out complaint continues for several more stanzas, suggesting that his humility does not represent the virtue of a great man. Elaine Hansen indicates that Troilus, “from his early sufferings as a lovesick male to his final posture as the abandoned lover, is tragically feminized” (176).

The feminization does not necessarily create a negative image of Troilus; in fact, the narrator treats him with certain sympathy. Even as Troilus demonstrates the severe lack of self-esteem typical of male lovers in courtly poetry, the narrator celebrates him as a man that surpasses other men both physically and “spiritually.” According to the genre, his virtuous characteristics allow Troilus to be highly esteemed, but also, as Robertson points out, pitied by the reader once Troilus falls to the sins of cupidity (8). Thus, the narrator has positioned him to inspire pity, specifically the pity of the woman he seeks; even the “fall” toward the feminine does not negate Robertson’s claims regarding the “pathos of this tragedy” (33). Hansen argues that the feminization of Troilus incites him to assert his manliness, for instance through his attempted display of prowess in the bedroom, as well as his participation in the all-male aggression of war (150-52). The conflicting characterizations of Troilus establish twofold versions of the ideal male: the hero, worthy and capable of a tragic fall, and the sensitive (or perhaps overly sensitive) lover. As a result, Troilus does not achieve
the distinct manliness that he anxiously works toward; rather, this male archetype seems to encompass both genders.

The narrator introduces Criseyde as if she were something between a god and a woman: “lik a thing inmortal semed she / As doth an hevenyssh perfit creature” (I. 104-5). Later, he continues this introduction with an assessment of her “wommanhod,” indicating that she is not only meant to be seen as separate from humanity, but particularly from men; he emphasizes this separation by comparison when he remarks that she is “nevere lasse mannish in semynge” (I. 283, 284). Her attributes not only represent the ideal qualities of a person—approaching goddess status—but they also oppose “mannish” qualities, as exhibited by Troilus. As a result, if Chaucer’s narrator presents Troilus as the ideal male figure, then Criseyde is presented as the negation of those characteristics. While Troilus bemoans his situation (indeed, in a typical manner for men in this chivalric literature), the female character seems to be almost beyond humanity, and thus beyond this human frailty. By repeating the idea of “semynge,” the narrator significantly undercuts these assertions. Criseyde does not definitively possess these “inmortal” qualities, but she “semed,” or looks that way, just as her non-“mannish” characteristics only appear in “semynge.”

Because her virtues are both conferred by males and derived from comparison to them, Criseyde’s virtue seems contrived. The narrator shies away from depicting her assets in action, and chooses to cite men’s “gesse[s]” as the ultimate source any knowledge of her virtue (I. 286). In this manner, the narrator establishes
Criseyde’s character as what Carolyn Dinshaw names the “disruptive Other” (63). This otherness, I would add, manifests itself in the narrator’s language; she is a “thing” that cannot be understood except by comparison or negation.

The narrator continues to hold Criseyde at a distance for the remainder of the poem by declining to allot her nearly as many monologues, discussions with other characters, or even as many letters as Troilus. By so doing, the narrator limits the reader’s understanding of Criseyde’s character by highlighting only the information from male characters (or the presumably male narrator). The narrator states that Troilus and Criseyde will tell “how that [Criseyde] forsook hym er she deyde” (I.56). Despite the intimation that this poem will demonstrate Criseyde’s behavior, it does not give an account of her autonomous behavior, so much as it highlights her reaction to the activities of men. The death of her husband makes her a widow, which throws her “estat” into question if she were to love again (II, 465). Of course, these are not new notions; however, as Dinshaw suggests, Criseyde’s love(s) do not indicate that she deliberately betrays any male character. Rather, she complies with the masculine pressures being exerted upon her (an argument that Dinshaw pursues more fully in her book).\(^\text{10}\) Despite the fact that Chaucer’s narrator specifically aims to describe her “wommanhod,” the reader does not emerge with a clear picture of that quality. Womanhood, it seems, can only respond to the activities and characteristics of men; so, the character of Criseyde can only be understood as a reflection of men’s

\(^{10}\) For more details on her argument, see Dinshaw 28-64
observations. As a result, despite her disloyalty to Troilus, Criseyde herself remains mostly beyond the narrator’s reproach. Rather than being a woman in her own right, Criseyde must be presented as “Other.” This presentation holds the narrator at enough distance to keep him from punishing her; Criseyde’s behavior remains so foreign as to be almost excusable, if not condoned outright. Thus by limiting her femininity, this text also limits the criticism she absorbs from the narrator.

Henryson’s Testament of Cresseid fits somewhere into the time scheme presented in Chaucer’s Troilus (prior to Troilus’s death, presumably around V. 1764), so it seems that his tactic was, not surprisingly, to illuminate the actions and viewpoint of distant Criseyde. In The Testament of Cresseid, however, femininity no longer belongs to the male gaze (or at least not so obviously) nor is it gilded in goddess-like perfection. Henryson refers to Chaucer’s characters as “fair” and “worthie,” but David Parkinson remarks that Henryson’s telling achieves an opposing effect. Henryson’s telling of Cresseid’s fate revolves about her “debasement and expulsion” (Testament 42, Parkinson 255). While Chaucer states that his poem will tell Troilus’s story, Henryson’s “poeit, throw his inventioun / [will] report the lamentation / and wofull end of this lustie Creissied” (67-8). Although these lines point out a rather obvious detail, they also represent a reversal of these gendered types. Henryson’s narrator, like Chaucer’s, focuses upon a “double sorrow” in telling of Cresseid’s betrayal and
subsequent punishment, but that sorrow no longer belongs to the male type; instead, it belongs to the woman (I.1). Whereas Chaucer’s narrator distances himself from Criseyde, Henryson’s Troilus receives a similar treatment. This treatment occurs, in a somewhat literal instance, when Cresseid spots Troylus at a distance and does not recognize him at first. When she finally does see him, his image merely reminds her of her own sorrows; his virtues are illuminated only as she reflects upon her “fals,” “fickle and frivolous” nature (546, 552). Thus, whereas the male’s view once determined a woman’s character, Henryson’s narrator subjects the male to this same fate in Cresseid’s eyes. Henryson indicates his familiarity with Chaucer’s text as a story when his narrator reads a book “writti

be worthie Chaucer glorious…” (42). More importantly, he specifically responds to gender-oriented issues present in Chaucer’s narrative with his own reversal of the male and female roles.

This reversal becomes most obvious in Cresseid’s speeches, in that they bring this female character clearly into focus; however, they also seem to mirror Troilus’s language in Chaucer’s poem. Troilus laments Criseyde’s absence:

Wher is myn owene lady, lief and deere?
Wher is hire white brest? Wher is it, where?
Wher ben hire armes and hire eyen cleere
That yesternyght this tyme with me were? (TC V. 217-221)

Troilus certainly praises Criseyde, but his language also turns her into a set of features. His obsession transforms her from his “owne lady” (an individual woman) to the projection of a lady; any woman (especially the courtly ideal of a
woman) could have a “white brest” and “armes.” His love (or rather, this expression of his love) has objectified her human beauty to the point that she seems more artifice than woman. Criseyde’s memory is not as important as Troilus’s words in memory of her. Furthermore, according to Parkinson, Troilus’s primary concern lies with what Criseyde’s absence means for his own welfare (357). As he continues his lament, Troilus cries, “Who can conforten now youre hertes werre?” (V.234). Thus, Troilus’s expression of love for Criseyde, though undeniably ardent, focuses almost entirely upon his own sorrow. He even articulates his concern for Criseyde’s well-being in terms of how she will fare in his absence, imagining her fate: “O piteous, pale, grene / Shal ben youre fresshe wommanliche face / For languor, er ye torne unto this place” (V. 243-45). Here, he imagines that Criseyde’s “wommanliche face” waxes pale; by suggesting that her womanly qualities that will fade without him, Troilus implies that her beloved features depend upon himself, just as her virtues depend upon male observation. Surely, as Robert Watso indicates, Criseyde is to Troilus “the false world he makes his idol” (3). However, since Criseyde reflects Troilus himself, Troilus’s idolatry of Criseyde therefore represents an idolatry of self.

This same language appears in Cresseid’s complaint as she lists those things she misses in her exile:

Quhair is thy chalmer wantounlie besene,
With buryed bed and bankouris browderit bene;
Spycis and wyne to thy collatioun,
The cowpis all of gold and siluer schene,
Thy sweit meitis servit in plaittis clene
Instinctively, upon receiving her punishment from the gods, she does not mourn her choices, or even her mistreated lover, but rather she laments her lost possessions – especially those that once signified her status and beauty. Furthermore, she mentions only decorative items, including cups with “gold and silver shene,” highlighting their reflective quality and thereby suggesting the self-concerned and yet superficial nature of her laments. Parkinson likens this lament to an *ubi sunt*, which mourns the loss of something precious, but the precious things she mourns are all objects that reveal or decorate her own body (355). Thus, just as Troilus’s vision of Criseyde reflects entirely upon himself, so Cresseid’s complaint also reflects — almost literally — upon herself as well. At a time in which she perhaps ought to express her repentance to the offended gods, she becomes absorbed with herself, thereby making her guilty of Troilus’s fault — obsessive self-love. More importantly, Henryson’s Cresseid exaggerates the self-love that Troilus’s lament reveals. Troilus uses Criseyde’s body to express his self-absorption, but Cresseid never looks outside of her own physical condition — past or present. Furthermore, where Chaucer’s woman only appears as a reflection of a man’s experience, Henryson’s woman creates the lens through which the reader views the female character.
In shifting the narrative focus to Cresseid, Henryson’s *Testament* might have disclosed an exploration of the feminine character in more detail than Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde* manages. Instead, Henryson’s narrator focuses more intensely upon the woman to intensify her condemnation, as we can see by comparing Henryson’s Cresseid to Chaucer’s Troilus. Both lovers structure their self-involved complaints in the same way, and they both invoke the gods of Love; nevertheless, Henryson’s character receives explicit personal punishment from the gods. Troilus does not offend the gods of Love alone. He also “curseth Jove, Apollo and ek Cupide…and save his lady, ever creature;” however, no gods appear specifically for the purpose of punishing his blasphemy (V. 207-10). Cresseid, on the other hand, “Vpon Venus and Cupide angerly / Scho cryit out...” causing a large portion of the pagan pantheon to reprimand her (124-25). It would seem that, given their similar faults—the idolatry of earthly beings and blasphemy—that Chaucer’s Troilus would perhaps deserve what Parkinson describes as “pulverizing, dissolving, and rotting’...[that] Henryson has in store for Cresseid” (357). However, his end comes fairly quickly: he is “slayn,” without further physical distress (V.1807). Donaldson insists upon Troilus’s hellish sufferings in Book V, but Henryson’s narrator seems to outdo the emotional sufferings of Chaucer’s male character by adding physical punishment (leprosy) to Cresseid’s fate (32). The narrator cites the fifth book of Chaucer’s *Troilus* as his source, recalling the reversal of Troilus and Cresseid’s gendered roles that began at the poem’s outset. In this manner, Henryson critiques the misplaced love, the
obsessive love of self, that once belonged to Troilus. By confining the majority of
his narrative to the female character, however, Henryson simultaneously shifts
the critique to Cresseid and distributes a harsher punishment than even Troilus
receives at the end of his own “tragedye” (V. 1786).

Henryson’s Cresseid gains a psychological depth that had previously
belonged only to Chaucer’s Troilus. In Chaucer’s text, the narrator gives the
audience insight into Criseyde’s thoughts and feelings on several occasions, but
these moments are introduced almost as sub-plot to the story of Troilus: “lat us
stynnte of Troilus a stounde” or “let us stynnte of Troilus a throwe” (I. 1086, II. 687).
The recurrence of this particular phrase creates a sense that the narrator steps
away from the main subject of his story to address a somewhat forgotten
character. In these moments, the narrator reveals Criseyde’s “thoughte[s]”
regarding Troilus, but when Criseyde shifts her attentions to Diomede, the
narrator limits her expression of thought. Thus, the narrator endows her with a
psychology that is not nearly as developed as Troilus’s words and thoughts.

Most notably, the narrator records the about 100 lines of a letter from Troilus to
Criseyde, whereas Criseyde writes a mere 42 lines in response (II. 456; V. 1317-
1422; V. 1590-1632). While this length might partially reveal Criseyde’s loss of
interest in Troilus, I would argue that it also supports the general deficiency in
personal narrative from Criseyde’s point of view, as if to suggest that Criseyde’s
character simply may not be known. By making Cresseid the center of the
Testament and Troilus the peripheral “trew knicht” observed from a distance,
Henryson effectively uses Chaucer’s Troilus as a female “hero” (560). This substitution, however, does not merely present the other side of the story for the purposes of balancing the narrative’s perspective. Rather, because Cresseid’s character also aligns with Troilus, it seems that she also becomes a reinvention of Chaucer’s Troilus, both in terms of the attention given to her, and in the sense of her actual character, if not in literal action, then certainly in the heart or motivation of their actions—that is, their excessive self-concern. Because Chaucer’s Troilus therefore parallels Henryson’s Cresseid, her punishment implies the condemnation of Troilus’s character, almost as a byproduct.

On its own, the Testament’s central concern with Cresseid’s fate—particularly the punishment for her disloyalty and blasphemy—serves as a warning for “worthie wemen.” Although Henryson’s work appears to issue a warning solely to women, Cresseid’s alignment with Troilus expands the warning to include the central male figure in Troilus and Criseyde, thereby inserting moralizing that may not have even existed so explicitly in Chaucer’s version. While critics like D.W. Robertson have argued that Troilus receives punishment akin to torture in Hell, it seems that Cresseid experiences a much more literal and explicit torture even before death (32). As for their treatment after death, Elaine Hansen suggests, that “Troilus dwells in an abstract realm, detached from and scornful of life, free of self-interest, and closer to God…” (186). Meanwhile, Cresseid remains dead, with so little honor that the narrator refuses to continue speaking of her: “Sen sho is deid, I speik of hir no moir”
(616). It seems that Henryson’s dissatisfaction with the punishment-free disappearance of Criseyde also includes dissatisfaction with the lack of explicit criticism regarding Troilus as well. In this manner, Henryson compresses the critique of males and females by relying on Chaucer’s existing text, and aims this potent revision at females, specifically; to call Henryson a “Scottish Chaucerian” could certainly imply an accusation of rewriting. However, Henryson’s rewriting in the Testament of Cresseid essentially removes Troilus from the center of the action. By so doing, he transfers all of Troilus’s faults to Cresseid—and ultimately compounds their punishments. In light of this creative move, the term no longer signals the derogatory category to which critics relegate Scottish authors as passive followers of a great tradition. The label “Scottish Chaucerian,” in this sense, signifies a habit of reinterpretation established between the makar and his master. Furthermore, Henryson’s creative move in the revising the ending of Troilus and Criseyde matches his literary goals even outside of this particular work. After all, this same author pens the Morall Fabillis, which aims to use poetry to provide its readers with “ane morall sweit sentence” (Prologue 12).

2. Robert Henryson’s Morall Fabillis: “The Taill of the Cok and the Fox”

Henryson’s Morall Fabillis impart their lessons in a more light-hearted fashion than his sharp criticism of Cresseid in the Testament, but in this work he continues to exercise similar tendencies. Specifically, he continues to make rhetorical moves toward separating the feminine and masculine characters that had once been united in Chaucerian sources. Although each one of Henryson’s
moral fables undoubtedly deserves critical attention, I will contain my remarks mainly to the relationship between Henryson’s tale of *The Cock and the Fox* and Chaucer’s Nun’s Priest’s Tale.\(^{12}\) The makar’s Prologue to *The Morall Fabillis* credits Aesop as the source for his “translacioun” of beast fables, and George Clark asserts that Henryson transforms Aesop’s fables into a “deeper . . . more pessimistic view of the human condition,” ([*MF* 27, 32, Clark 5]). However, particularly in his second story, *The Cock and the Fox*, his interests intersect more obviously with those of Chaucer *Nun’s Priest’s Tale*, and I would argue that when Henryson engages with this Chaucerian text, he emerges with a more pessimistic view of women, specifically. Although Chaucer’s beast fable is simultaneously longer and more digressive than Henryson’s version of this tale, the two share discussions of rhetoric—particularly the rhetoric of women. As Stephen Manning points out, Chaucer’s version actually relates the tale of the cock and the hen, as opposed to the tale of the cock and the fox, as seen explicitly in tale’s heading, which reads: “Heere bigynneth the Nonnes Preestes Tale of the Cok and Hen, *Chauntecleer and Pertelote*” (7). In light of this significant distinction, it seems that Chaucer’s narrator mainly concerns himself with the gendered interactions between the couple for a moralizing effect. Henryson’s tale, however, separates the male dialogue from that of the females, thereby choosing to tell two tales: the tale of the cock and the fox, and the tale of the three hens. As a result, I would

\(^{12}\) For affirmation of this relationship, see “Henryson’s Fables” 344, Wood 16; for dispute see Wheatley 89.
argue that his consciousness of Chaucer’s version appears in his attention to rhetoric, and particularly in the separation of male and female rhetoric.

Henryson, it seems, uses the foolish rhetoric belonging to both male and female figures presented Chaucer’s version of this story, but fails to offer a reading of the female characters’ discussions in his “Moralitas.” Thus, Henryson exhibits the tendencies we have already seen in his revisions of Chaucer’s gender politics by controlling and ultimately shutting down unwieldy feminine rhetoric.

While Chaucer casts his *Nun’s Priest’s Tale* in the form of a beast fable, he does not remain solely interested in moral allegory; rather, he seems more intrigued by the interactions between Chauntecleer and Pertelote. His text, furthermore, establishes a dichotomy between the emotional and experiential knowledge of the female character and the intellectual knowledge of the male—both of which the narrator ultimately abandons as futile or foolish. Before the story’s main action (that is, the story that comprises the whole of Aesop’s version of this story), the majority of the work involves the conversation between the cock and the hen. Chauntecleer asks one of his “wives,” Pertelote, for advice regarding his dreams, but mistrusts her advice to ignore them. Her first reaction is to persuade him with an emotional argument: “Have ye no manne’s herte, and han a beard?” (2919). Literally, this statement is absurd: he is a beast and not a man at all. Pertelote, nevertheless, impugns Chauntecleer’s masculine qualities. She phrases this insult in the form of a rhetorical question, by which she hopes to motivate him to listen to her claim. Paying attention to dreams, her question
suggests, causes one to doubt Chauntecleer’s masculine qualities. She implies, of course, that to protect his status as the dominant male among hens, Chauntecleer must discard his own instincts and submit to hers. Although her remark may injure the cock’s self esteem, it does not provide a logical reason to disregard his dream. Additionally, Pertelote’s confident suggestions for curing the health-related causes of Chauntecleer’s dream ignore the possibility that this dream might, in fact, be prophetic. Instead, she dismisses his dream as the side-effect of his “coleryk” humor and his “fevere terciane,” but as Larry Benson’s notes on the text suggest, her medical solutions would also worsen the condition that she believes Chauntecleer suffers—namely, his “hotness and dryness” (2961-66).\textsuperscript{13} Thus, not only does rhetorical argument drive her argument rather than substantial logic, but the advice is also inaccurate and, in fact, detrimental.

Chauntecleer offers a rebuttal by insisting that one ought to consider dreams prophetic and supports his claims with particularly intellectual arguments. He offers support from “the gretteste auctour that men rede,” as well as from Scripture, saying: “By swiche ensamples olde maistow leere / That no man shoulde been to recchelees /Of dremes . . .” (3105-3108). Here, he employs an argument from authority as his rhetorical tactic during this dialogue with Pertelote by citing sources for his opinions rather than attempting to provoke the desired response with emotional ad hominem (Pertelote’s tactic). Although he claims to have superior knowledge, Chanticleer appears to listen, at least in part,

\textsuperscript{13} For full description of Pertelote’s faulty medical knowledge, see Benson 938
to Pertelote’s advice; not only was he “namoore aferd,” but he also “fethered Pertoolte twenty tyme,” as the impressive amount of copulation would reassert or compensate for the manliness that Pertelote had called into question (3176, 3177). While he does not seem to have submitted entirely to her suggestions – the narrator does not say that Chanticleer takes fallacious medical advice – he remains guilty, if nothing else, of ignoring his own wisdom. Although the Nun’s Priest reminds the audience that his “tale is of a cok…/ that tok his conseil of his wyf, with sorowe,” Chanticleer’s fault actually appears to be twofold. D.E. Myers argues that the moral not stated by the narrator explicitly includes the fox in his critique as well; however, this premise seems misleading, given the amount of detail lavished upon the dialogue between the male and female characters (212). As stated earlier, the true critique resides in the relationship between the cock and the hen. Not only does Chanticleer fail to listen to his own advice, but also falls prey to the emasculating rhetorical question that persuades him to ignore his dream. Chanticleer’s choice invalidates both the cock’s and the hen’s arguments equally; he rejects Pertelote’s advice verbally, but fails to live by his own advice. Thus, neither gender possesses the ability to construct convincing arguments. In Chaucer’s dialogue between cock and hen, women are condemned explicitly, but the male takes a similar amount of implicit blame – not merely for listening to the female, but also for being foolish in his own right.

In Henryson’s version of this fable, however, the female figures do not even receive the opportunity to engage in a debate with the male figure; rather,
the narrator has disconnected the male dialogue and the female dialogue, both of which seem to be the subject of the narrator’s satire. Chantecleir’s main interactions involve Lowrence the fox, another male figure. Meanwhile, the female figure, Pertok (whose name most resembles that of Pertelote), is joined by two additional hens, Coppok and Sprutok, who engage in a discussion separate from that of the males. By separating these dialogues into male and female categories, Henryson implicitly undermines the idea of partnership that Chaucer establishes with his “Tale of the Cok and Hen,” by isolating the male and female rhetoric and exaggerating the disparity between them. The conversation between Lowrence the fox and Chantecleir seems logical, if somewhat foolish. Lowrence establishes a shaky premise that he comes to Chantecleir out of loyalty; he says: “Wald I not serue yow, it were bot blame / As I have done to yowr progenitouris” (439-40). This assertion, of course, is truthful – he comes to eat Chantecleir, just as he has done to the rooster’s ancestors. However, by feigning an intent to provide “seruice,” Lowrence snares his prey with vague rhetoric. In believing Lowrence, Chantecleir appears foolish; he does not engage in excessive or empty rhetoric, but he succumbs to it.

Furthermore, Henryson’s dialogue between the cock and the fox seems particularly logical compared to the almost absurd and satirical dialogue of the hens. While Chaucer’s Pertelote engages in a direct debate with Chaunticleer, Henryson’s Pertok, Coppok and Sprutok only argue with each other. Henryson characterizes Pertok’s part in this conversation as “sair murning,” intense
mourning; she moans about the loss of Chantecleir, particularly his “paramouris,” his lovemaking, among other qualities (495, 506). She continues: “Quha sall our lemmun be? Quha sall vs leid? / Quhen we ar sad, quha sall vnto us sing? / ...Now efter him, allace, how sall we leif?” (502-8). In this overly-emotional speech, saturated in rhetorical questions, Pertok’s rhetoric bears some resemblance to Pertelote’s. Unlike Pertelote’s speech, however, Pertok’s speech, remains truly rhetorical – it does not achieve anything but an effusion of emotion, nor can it hope to persuade or incite anyone to action. Furthermore, while her intense mourning could have represented real emotion, it strikes a false note when Pertok immediately retracts her sadness. Sprutok reprimands her and suggests instead that she join her rejoicing: “‘Wes neuer wedo sa gay!’” (515). Finally, Coppok’s “crous” speech condemns Chantecleir for both adultery and pride, yet creates a certain absurdity because Chantecleir and Coppok herself are barnyard animals, and they are not capable of moral thought or behavior (530, 536-7). As a result, these female figures not only appear unworthy of engaging in a rational dialogue with the male sphere, but also appear incapable of rational dialogue in general. Pertok’s speech reads as an effusion of emotional rhetoric, which crumbles in the face of Sprutok’s rebuttal. Moreover, Coppok’s truthful, if hypocritical, statement does not actually convince the hens to believe in Chantecleir’s sinful fate.

Instead, Henryson drops the narrative of the female discussion altogether, as if it were merely an interjection of absurdity upon the existing narrative.
Furthermore, because he does not carry this section of the allegory into the Moralitas (in which he supposedly explains the moral meaning of each tale), he implies that this female dialogue is not only foolish (on the same level as the prideful fall of Chantecleir to Lowrence’s wiles), but also completely superfluous. By adding a sense of isolation to these women’s conversations, Henryson distills Chaucer’s existing critique of foolish rhetoric in order to deal specifically with excessive female rhetoric. Henryson’s beast fable, therefore, does not offer the general critique of human rhetoric like Chaucer’s, but rather a precise representation of the uselessness of female speech. As in his treatment of the story of Cressied, Henryson’s Tale of the Cock and the Fox does not merely present a distilled version of a Chaucerian text. Rather, where Chaucer’s text offers mild criticism of both genders, Henryson engages with this morality by targeting and isolating the women. Although Henryson’s craftsmanship transforms Chaucer’s moral into one that does not appeal to modern sensibility, this makar exhibits extreme sensitivity to his source text’s rhetorical interest, while maintaining and developing his personal poetic aims. Thus, owing to his engagement with and reinterpretation of Chaucerian texts, Henryson fits comfortably into the category of “Scottish Chaucerian” without becoming a mere translator.

3. William Dunbar’s Tretis of the Twa Mariit Wemen and the Wedo

Scholars know more about William Dunbar’s biography than Henryson’s, but only slightly. According to Douglas Grey, records in Treasurer’s accounts
mention paying a salary to “Maister William Dunbar” as a “servitour” in royal household of James IV. Records from at St. Andrews in 1477 also mention a William Dunbar, and although this fact is not certain, this critic acknowledges the general consensus that these William Dunbars are, in fact, the same (181). Like Henryson, Dunbar would also have been familiar with the English literary tradition.

While Robert Henryson characteristically narrows the focus of Chaucer’s poems for specific and intense critique, William Dunbar takes a somewhat opposing approach in expanding Chaucerian texts to include both genders. Nevertheless, I would posit that both belong to our newly-defined “Scottish Chaucerian” category. While Grey would argue that Dunbar “is manifestly not a ‘Scottish Chaucerian,’” owing to his “many voices” and mastery of poetic techniques, this distinction only aligns him with Chaucer—a poet who, like Dunbar remains as comfortable in fabliau as in high courtly romance. As for the “Scottish Chaucerian” issue, the matter of stylistic competence seems less pressing than his ability, like Henryson, to engage with the discussions that Chaucer’s work had already begun. Both of these Scottish makers would have known Chaucer’s work, and while they respond to different texts with separate goals, they can be united under the “Scottish Chaucerian” category for their mutual interest in exploring and transforming the themes present in their Chaucerian source texts. As I have shown in the earlier sections of my argument, Robert Henryson’s poetic revisions of Chaucer’s works tend to separate women
for critique. In contrast, William Dunbar appears to open Chaucerian texts to include the participation of both men and women in his *Tretis of the Twa Mariit Wemen and the Wedo* and the *Golden Targe*.

First, I would like to examine Dunbar’s response to Chaucer’s Wife of Bath in the *Treatis*. If Alisoun discusses primarily what “wommen moost desiren,” both in terms of her own desires and in a more universal sense, then both the speaker and the intended audience must play a role in how she defines these desires (*Wife of Bath’s Tale* 905). As Roy Pearcy suggests, “Dunbar’s three ladies have clearly profited from the English poet’s example” in the *Wife of Bath’s Prologue* and *Tale*; nevertheless, I would argue that the common element of the narrator’s performance remains the most significant aspect of the relationship between the two works (58). Although a male poet gives the Wife of Bath her voice, The Wife of Bath narrates what women want to mixed company—all the while suppressing the voices of her male companions, husbands, and even the authors of the texts she cites. Meanwhile, Dunbar’s narrator, a man addressing men, not only considers what women desire, but perhaps more accurately, what men desire as well. Through the use of frame narrative and his final question to the male readership, Dunbar’s poem acknowledges and expands the concerns of his source text, namely the distinct needs and desires of the sexes.

In Chaucer’s *Wife of Bath’s Prologue* and *Tale*, Alisoun of Bath primarily concerns herself with women and women’s perspectives. Her prologue, which is among the lengthiest of the prologues in the *Tales*, offers her own perspective on
marriage. In the process, however, she allows this perspective to take precedence over traditional interpretations of authoritative texts (such as the Scriptures). Because her rhetorical move silences these male literary authorities, S.H. Rigby calls her a “witty debunker of clerical misogyny,” but he also insists that Alisoun remains morally problematic, not to be taken seriously by the reader (153, 138). I would argue that the most important issue here is neither Alisoun’s morality nor the perennial question of what Rigby refers to as “Chaucer’s comic satire” (156). Rather, it seems that Chaucer’s Tale and Prologue use Alisoun’s voice to explore the possibilities of female desire. Like Hansen, I would not claim that Chaucer necessarily “espouses the cause of [women’s] freedom and equality,” since he is still a man writing as a woman (53). However, he does effectively indicate the only way in which a woman could achieve any kind of equality: Alisoun’s use of women’s words to gain the sovereignty she desires. In the Wife of Bath’s tale, when King Arthur defers the rapist knight’s punishment to the opinion of the “queene and other ladyes,” they sentence him to a verbal quest: he must find what women “seyde” about their greatest desires (898, 925). He must then relay those words back to the court, where the queen will “seye” whether his answer is accurate (1016). Thus, the queen and her court empower women by hanging the knight’s fate on women’s words; there is no guarantee that these women will ever agree, leaving the result of the knight’s quest in the subjective hands of the female court. As he completes his quest, the knight receives a variety of answers:

Some seyde wommen loven best richesse
Some seyde honour, somme seye jolynesse,
Some seyde riche array, somme sayden lust abedde,
And ofetyme to be wydewe and wedde....
And somme seyen that we loven best
For to be fre and do right as us lest (WBT 925-936)

Here, the narrator’s primary interest seems to be the opportunity for women to
“sey[e],” rather than the actual answer each woman supplies. Some of their
answers overlap in theme (such as “honor” and “to…do right,” or “richesse” and
“rich array”). However, women cannot universally desire contradictory ideas
such as “lust abbede” and “honor.” The first refers to base, carnal instinct, while
the other remains an intangible and abstract ideal; a woman could definitively
achieve “luste abbede” (with the help of a partner), but gaining honor can
require a lifetime of cultivating social esteem. Because of these intrinsic
contradictions in many of the nouns, we should therefore note the consistency
with which the verb “seyde” recurrs. The knight discovers that women generally
have something—although not always the same thing—to say about their
desires. According to this narrator, women merely want the opportunity to
“sey[e].” Thus, just as Alisoun wants to tell a story in which women’s words
become the ultimate source of authority, the women in her Tale also demonstrate
this desire.

In the same way, Dunbar’s Treatise literally centers on the conversation of
three women, as they express what they desire (as well as what they do not
desire) through their lively—and often bawdy—discussion of their spouses. As
they continue to drink wine, they “waris out wourdis,” pouring out words more
quickly, underlining the effusive, uninhibited quality of their speech. While the Wife of Bath’s words are, on some level, a performance in the contest among the mostly male group of pilgrims, these women—at least, to their knowledge—have no audience but themselves. Here, they revel in their ability to speak freely, discussing their husbands’ sexual capabilities (or rather, the men’s incapabilities) and their own lusty desires with equal frankness. Although they do not necessarily exercise the power of their words in the same way as Alisoun of Bath does in dominating the men in their lives, their conversation does reveal their desires. The widow asks the second wife to weigh in on their discussion of marriage; she asks her to “speik,” and emphasizes the importance of speaking—“dissymyland no word”—speaking the truth. What the women “seye” in response to this prompting certainly reveals a rather simple scorn for their inadequate husbands, but more importantly, their answers supposedly reveal the truth about what women desire in their own words. The first wife to answer the widow replies:

I suld….blaw my bewtie in breid quhair bernis war mony
That I micht cheis and be chosin and change quhen me likit
Than suld I waill ane full weill our all the wyd realme
That suld my womanheid weild the lang winter nicht,
And quhen I gottin had ane grome, ganest of uther,
Yaip and ying, in the yok ane yeir for to draw…
… ane galland micht [I] get aganis the nixt yeir
For to perfurneis furth the werk quhen failyeit the tother (Treatise 70-84).

Although the women’s discussion to this point has included lewd comments on the husbands’ impotence, this wife introduces a new element to the discussion:
she remains concerned about sexual pleasure, but her speech reaches its peak with conclusions about a woman’s ability to “cheis.” She still desires to “blaw her bewtie,” to display her beauty in front of men, but the men themselves seem secondary to the mere ability to choose one freely. She dehumanizes the men; one of them will “draw” the yoke for one year (a sexually suggestive image of an ox plowing a field), and plans to replace him the next year when he fails to perform. The men, here, are barely distinguishable from one another in her use of general nouns: “ane grome,” a man or a fellow; “ane galland,” a suitor; and finally “the tother,” the other. The wife does not want a particular man—or even a particular kind of man, because she can replace one with “the tother.” However, the language she uses as she describes this continual discarding of husbands highlights her own desire for autonomy. She fantasizes not about the sexual prowess of her new suitors, but rather about the opportunity to “cheis,” and to “change quhen me lykit.” Furthermore, in desiring to “weild” her womanheid, she uses the word for “enjoy;” however, it also resembles the stem of the word “weilding,” which refers to “control” or “direction,” as well as “wielding a weapon.” Thus, sexuality becomes a type of weapon that women can wield or direct to achieve their desired autonomy. Men therefore represent a mere means to an end. That end, of course, is sovereignty over oneself and one’s choices,

particularly regarding marriage: the freedom of choice, to use Tom Scott’s term (182).

While the first two wives complain about the absence of female sovereignty, the widow appears to have put those desires into practice; she remarks, “mar with wily I wan than wightnes of handis” (295). Like the clever hag in the Wife of Bath’s tale, this widow dominates her husbands through wiles, rather than through physical dominance, although according to John Conlee’s translation, she does allude to his sexual submissiveness when she mentions that she “wald haif riddin him to Rome” (331, Conlee 208). Despite the apparently physical nature of her domination of her husband, she not only becomes provoked by “akword wordis,” but she also describes the nature of her revenge: to kiss and to cherish her husband (286). However, she claims that her “wily” triumph over “wightnes,” wiles over strength—her success is psychological more so than physical. Similarly, she also calls attention to the success of her emotional “cheris[ing]” over her physical “chuk[ing]” (kissing). In both of these instances, she remains concerned almost wholly with words over actions as the vehicle for gaining sovereignty (291). Furthermore, although the wives remain fixated on the physical appearance and performance of their husbands, the reader must be reminded that this is, in fact, all talk; no real action takes place over the course of the poem beyond their conversation. Instead, they assert their would-be (and in the case of the wife, her so-called) sovereignty through words. We might not have any cause to doubt these women’s veracity; however, the fact remains that
the narrator (and thus, the reader) does not see female sovereignty in action, but rather, overhears a conversation about it.

Although women’s words express, and perhaps achieve, a version of female sovereignty, the distinctly male voice observing and speaking to a male audience in Dunbar’s *Tretis* undercuts the authority they claim for themselves. While Chaucer’s Wife of Bath’s Prologue also contains male observation when the Pardoner interrupts her, Dunbar’s decision to include and, more importantly, to acknowledge a man’s presence in this female world suggests that the women do not actually possess the sovereignty they proclaim. In particular, the man’s narrative voice appears to transform the women into his own fantasy, thereby undercutting this so-called female sovereignty. Although Pearcy describes the narrator’s setting as “extraordinarily courtly,” it seems to me that male fantasy seems to intrude somewhat on the narrator’s descriptions of the idyllic garden and women who belong there (60). The first stanza sets the poem in a “gudlie garden” with “sueit flouris,” but also establishes the narrator’s presence; when he overhears the “hautand wordis” of the women there, he hides himself in a hawthorn bush to observe and to listen. We see these women through what Tom Scott calls “Peeping-Tom’s” eyes, which fixate on these women’s bodies—an overtly sensual act in an environment that traditionally kept sensuality beneath the cover of allegory (204). While the narrator is initially interested in these women’s conversations, Scott argues that the narrator’s voice quickly shifts to a sensual tone as his attention drifts to their physical appearance (204). Although
they remain surrounded by representations of courtliness, the women themselves are subject to the narrator’s sexualized fantasy. He describes the women as “Quhyte, seimlie, and soft as the sweit lilies,” not thereby not only describing the women in ideal setting but also choosing gently sibilant “s” sounds that accentuate the sensual aspect of his attentions. He then compares their green mantles to May’s grass; while many “courtly” poems begin in May (Chaucer’s Knight’s Tale, for instance, introduces Emelye in May), Hansen notes that other associations with this springtime month invoke May as “the time of disorder and of female sexual excess” (222). Dunbar’s acknowledgment of the narrator’s observation suggests that this comparison belongs to the narrator himself; he associates these women with “sexual excess,” which then leaks into the language of his visual introduction. In this manner, the narrator’s voice causes the reader to picture these women carnally, if not yet lewdly, even before these women are given the opportunity to speak. Furthermore, despite the fact that the Wife of Bath speaks with sexual frankness, the narrator of the Canterbury Tales never describes her in quite the sensual manner that the Dunbar’s narrator uses in describing the women of the Tretis. Certainly, the narrator mentions physical traits to suggest Alisoun’s sexuality (her red face, the gap in her teeth) but her appearance never becomes the subject of lyrical elaboration. The narrator’s sensuality emphasizes his role as a biased observer in the events to follow.
From this point forward, the narrator largely fades from view, but his presence nevertheless colors the effect of the three ladies’ words on the reader. The narrator envisions these women as sexual beings, even though they exist in an idealized romantic setting. The initially courtly description comes to a halt at the end of the first stanza and disappears for the remainder of the poem. The wives and the widow speak not only about their husbands’ impotency, but also about their own lust. The second wife, for instance, expresses the frank desire to be “A forky fure, ay furthwart, and forsy in draucht,” which roughly translates to “A furious furrower, always up front, and forceful in plowing” (Tretis 85, Conlee 201). The addition of the narrator’s interest in their sexuality, however, reconciles these apparently contradictory tones by introducing these women’s sexuality even in the midst of the courtly idealism. Further, it also suggests the narrator’s bias in the events. If he can turn the traditionally chaste (if suggestive) scenes in the garden into a sexual fantasy, then perhaps his retelling of their overheard conversation becomes just as selective. Although the women speak for themselves, he inserts almost sarcastic references to the ladies as “the semly,” “the plesand,” and “this amyable” – referring to them as genteel ladies in one breath and describing their bawdiness in the next; he returns to the image of the ladies drinking wine, picturing their unrefined manners: “Thai sawpit of the sueit wyne, thai swan quit of hewis” (243). He has previous discussed their consumption in words that do not “strike a genteel note,” and only continues to combine the ideal and the unrefined (Conlee 438). The narrator’s use of the word
“sawpit” creates a slurping sound, and thus connotes excess that mirrors the sexually suggestive description at the poem’s beginning. He also compares the women to “swan[s],” a comparison that suggests grace and beauty, but also demotes them to beastliness (which, in fact, their words support—notably, the widow’s advice to “be dragonis baitht and dovis ay in double forme” when she instructs them in a shrew’s behavior) (Tretis 263). The women themselves seem to revel in their sexuality and baser, more beastly inclinations, but the narrator himself seems to have more difficulty relegating them to simple depravity. Thus, while the women’s words dominate of the poem’s text, they certainly are not free of the narrator’s projections upon them.

Furthermore, the demaunde d’amore, in which the narrator asks the audience, “Quhilk wald ye waill to your wif gif ye shuld wed one?” not only calls attention to the male audience, but also casts the poem as an exploration of what men “waill,” or wish (530). In light of the recurring male presence amid this female-dominated discussion of desire and choice in marriage, we can conclude that Dunbar’s takes an interest in creating a balance in voices. Clearly the narrator subjects the women to a certain amount of satire—but the men are also a target. As Tom Scott writes, the flyting in the Treatise creates a “double-edged sword that cuts the user as much as or more than the victim” (184). The women, as he writes, “pile up evidence against the accused,” in their language, but the narrator’s sarcastic name-calling and his emphasis upon the women’s sexuality even in their ideal state, gives the male victims voice in this contest. Although the
husbands do not receive an opportunity to defend themselves, men nevertheless receive an opportunity to speak through the narrator’s distinctly male perspective. It seems that he cannot decide whether or not he would “waill” for the women to be sensual or bawdy, whether to highlight the incongruous setting and speech, or whether to undercut the idealism with hints of their wantonness. Although the narrator never records the audience’s answer, the question itself creates a rhetorical dialogue between the narrator and the male audience regarding the women.

Kenneth Oberempt has suggested that Chaucer’s Wife of Bath has become the “unmitigated advocate of vaginal politics,” but I would contend that Dunbar’s treatment of the subject of freedom of choice in marriage acknowledges both male and female viewpoints (Oberempt 287). His vision of marriage, while comical and even satirical, places men and women on equal footing in terms of expression of their desires. Although the narrator relies on typically misogynist depictions of women in which they “are usually denigrat’d, depicted as harlots, shrews, or drunkards,” the women also have the opportunity to even the score by depicting men just as negatively (Bawcutt 296). Though this tone turns Dunbar into an “amused and ironic observer in the game of love,” it also creates a more balanced vision of the union between male and female than we see in Chaucer’s Wife of Bath’s prologue (Bawcutt 297). Alisoun and the women that she imagines require complete dominion over men in both word and deed; however, Dunbar becomes more interested in the interchange between the sexes.
Furthermore, if the Wife of Bath owes its success as a work fiction to Chaucer’s creation of Alisoun’s individual psychology, then to call Dunbar a “Scottish Chaucerian” highlights his deficiency in this area, as his women and their husbands become caricatures, receiving neither names nor traits to distinguish them from one another. Nevertheless, by creating a woman whose individual psychology allows her to address the desires of women, Chaucer limits the scope of his work to the female perspective. By engaging in similar discussions of marital sovereignty that depict both male and female modes of achieving that choice, Dunbar allows both sexes to participate in the discussion of what they desire. In this manner, Dunbar becomes not an imitator of Chaucer’s work, but rather, a participant in a conversation with it that turns Chaucer’s discussion on its head. As such, Dunbar cannot be accused of imitating Chaucer’s text. Ignoring the particulars of his engagement with this source, however, would diminish the scope of Dunbar’s invention, while exploring this relationship acknowledges the richness of both the poet’s source and his new creation. Thus, by categorizing Dunbar as a “Scottish Chaucerian,” the reader can more easily understand his project of response and alteration regarding Chaucer’s texts.

4. Dunbar’s Golden Targe

In the same way that William Dunbar’s Tretis exhibits the tendency to balance men and women’s participation in discourse, his Golden Targe aims to treat gendered conflict in the same way; this activity, we should also note, echoes Robert Henryson’s consistency in meeting his own poetic aims as he revises
Chaucerian works. Denton Fox’s influential article has described Dunbar’s approach to *The Golden Targe*’s traditional allegorical form as changes that “work toward an elimination or at least a decrease, of the human and psychological elements” that have been present in earlier iterations of dream-vision encounters with the court of love (318). As a result, Fox classifies the poem as a “poem about poetry.” However, I would tend to agree with Priscilla Bawcutt, whose interpretation suggests that the poem appears “quite as much concerned with love as with poetry,” and acknowledges what Lois Ebin calls Dunbar’s “enameled style” but also notes the poem’s allegorical elements (Bawcutt 311, Ebin 292). As John Conlee notes, critics of the *Golden Targe* typically compare its landscapes to those found in Chaucer’s *House of Fame*, the *Book of the Duchess*, and occasionally, the *Knight’s Tale* (343). Nevertheless, I would argue that Dunbar’s description of the court of love most clearly parallels the one found in the Prologue of Chaucer’s *Legend of Good Women*. Although this relationship has not been so frequently acknowledged by Dunbar’s critics, I would argue that Dunbar’s poem can be characterized by his *response* to Chaucer’s specific iteration of these allegorical tropes.

As critics such as Bawcutt have already indicated, Chaucer and Dunbar diverge distinctly in their use and effects of their language. Chaucer’s narrator purports to expose meaning, to incite “makyng ropen” (reaping the fruit of writing, to use Benson’s translation) with his poetry (*LGW* G–Prologue 74, Benson 590). Meanwhile, Dunbar’s language of surfaces or “enameling,” to
borrow Lois Ebin’s term, seems to indicate an greater interest in the poetic craft that conveys that meaning than in the meaning itself (292). To this argument, I would add that while both poets appear to have opposing poetic agendas, they effectively achieve the same ends in obscuring their principal characters. The difference lies in the misleading priority that Chaucer’s narrator gives to women. In prescribing a poem that details feminine virtue, Chaucer’s work suggests an interest in the interior “goode”-ness of women, but in so doing, he uses his text to cover over any potentially unsightly, threatening, or powerful expressions of femininity. Furthermore, the narrator glosses over men in the Prologue as a mere by-product of a female-centric text. Dunbar’s version of this allegorical scene, however, provides additional poetic “enameling” of male characters. While his narrator does not lavish his attention on them as he does the women, the mere inclusion of men in this garden defies the determinist qualities of Chaucer’s Legend. In Chaucer’s poem, women must triumph in virtue; in Dunbar’s, men and women clash, but the poem itself ultimately subsumes them both. In this manner, Dunbar’s poem dismisses both genders and their conflict outright. Thus Dunbar’s “little quair” at once intensifies Chaucer’s textual coverings, and transforms them to suggest the futility of passing judgment—whether implicit or explicit—upon either gender (Targe 264).

In the Chaucer’s Prologue to the Legend of Good Women, narrator’s introductory remarks compare the internal and external aspects of a text, its meaning and its literal form. The narrator addresses the reader: “For trusteth
wel, I ne have nat undertake / [...] No more than of the corn agen the shef” (*LGW, G* 71-74). Here, he exercises an early instance of the “fruyt” and “chaff” metaphor for the extraction of moral meaning or virtue from an allegorical text (for a later example, see *Nun’s Priest’s Tale*, 3443). Larry Benson glosses the word “ageyn” as “in comparison.” In this light, the narrator suggests that his work undertakes only the *comparison* of the “corn,” or meaning, with the “shef,” or the husk — the outer protective layer of text surrounding that meaning. Under normal circumstances (indeed, later in the Prologue, as well), the outer shell that the text represents ought to be discarded in favor of the real fruit of the text, that is, its meaning. Rather than the discarding of this outer layer for any morally beneficial meaning, however, the narrator chooses to focus upon the act of comparing the two complementary aspects of his story — he apparently sees no need to choose. Furthermore, he declares that he is not a person who “serveth lef ne who the flour” (*LGW, G* 70). Nicola McDonald reads this line as a reference to a debate game popular in courts at the time, while other critics like George Marsh indicate that the debate occurred between “orders of knights and ladies.”  

15 All quotations from the Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women* will come from the *G*-Prologue, as Dunbar would more likely to have been exposed to a text that was in circulation most widely. For more discussion of the date of each version, see Amy 107-188.

the natural image of a leaf and a flower also reiterates the image of the kernel and husk. In this instance, the leaf surrounds a budding flower, perhaps in “the month of May,” the beginning of spring, when flowers have begun to bloom (89). The leaf, although necessarily a part of a flower’s growth, must eventually fall away to reveal the more appealing and valuable part—the bud itself—just as the husk must be removed to access the corn. Thus, he asserts the “entent of [his] labour”—two layers exist in his text, but he will not enter into any debate over whether either should be discarded; he will explore both interior and exterior aspects of the text, but favor neither one (78). In this manner, he states his poetic goal: to provide a text that may be exposed and examined. By extension, this approach applies to characters within that text; the narrator implicitly purports to address both the exterior and internal qualities of his characters without choosing one over the other.

Perhaps the narrator actually does intend for his text to remain an objective portrayal of texts that authoritative “autours” have already “seyn” (88). However, his text does not actually achieve this aim; through the language and the action of the Prologue, the narrator favors the “shef,” despite his earlier protests of impartiality. Although this insistence appears as the narrator describes the work that he will undertake, it seems that the same kind of misdirection also applies to his characters. According to Carolyn Dinshaw’s assessment of this Prologue, Alceste orders “a very long work dedicated only to positive images of women; but her plan ensures a work peopled by caricatures
[...] that severely limits the feminine” (71). Since this argument has already been thoroughly outlined, I will not reiterate its evidence and conclusions; however, I would reexamine some of her terms, namely the idea of “strip[ping], par[ing], and scrubb[ing]” women (86). While surely the text limits scrubs the Legend’s women into “good”-ness in the narrative proper, the Prologue contains the initial motions toward limiting these characters. Furthermore, this constraint seems not to appear in the stripping down of the women, as Dinshaw suggests, but rather in the form of clothing and covering them from the beginning of the poem. As Cupid and Alceste arrive, Chaucer’s narrator describes the members of their court: “I saw coming of ladyes nyntene / In real habyt, a ful esy pas…/ And trewe of love these wemen wer echon” (186-193). These ladies are dressed in “real habyt,” a description that evokes clothing, but relies on the reader to determine what the actual appearance of their garments might be. As D.S. Brewer suggests, the medieval reader would have been so familiar with the image of ideal feminine beauty that only the barest catalogue of features was needed to evoke a woman’s beauty. Here, the narrator pushes this trope, leaving only the vague acknowledgement of their outward appearance, their “real habyt,” or typically courtly dress. Instead, the narrator seems more interested in characterizing the group, even as he turns them into an undifferentiated mass of ladies, for as he addresses the “shef” of the females characters, he must also address the “corn,” as per his stated goals.
Almost immediately, the narrator seizes upon their interior characteristics; they all are all “trewe of love.” Interestingly, the narrator has no reason for knowing that they possess this quality, other than conjecture; they follow “behyn the God of Love,” so they have presumably devoted themselves to him and to the love that he stands for (LGW 185). However, nothing in their appearance itself suggests the interior qualities that the narrator perceives. In looking at them, he projects this trait onto the women, thereby he adding his perception to their “real habyt,” their outward appearance as a noblewoman. As a result, these women become as flattened as the “goode women” to follow in the remainder of the narrative (LGW 476). Dinshaw classifies this type of female “caricature” as “stripped, clipped, and scrubbed” to remain under men’s control, intimating a sense of nakedness in the women of Chaucer’s Legend. But here, the narrator’s words clothe the women in that the readers know only the gesture of their clothing and the suggestion of their character. In the same way that these nineteen women have become a crowd of undifferentiated bodies, their individual personalities have been covered by the narrator’s projection. However, interior that he supposedly reveals does not expose the qualities of a woman, but rather, blankets them with a catch-all phrase. They have not been “stripped” so much as they have been hidden by what purports to be a glimpse at the interior. The narrator remains fascinated by the surface of these women’s bodies, whether visible or imagined, and so he disturbs his proposed balance of textual elements.
This moment of textual covering extends to the remainder of the Legend, but is most succinctly illustrated in Alceste’s mandates to the narrator. She says:

“. . .Thy tyme spende
In makynge of a glorious legende
Of goode women, maydenes and wyves,
That were trewe in lovynge al here lyves;
And telle of false men that hem betrayen...
Spek wel of love; this penaunce yeve I thee.” (LGW 47-476).

Initially, Alceste seems primarily concerned with the “matere” of the narrator’s work, a word that could either refer to the source of the narrator’s older works, or perhaps to the subject of them—that is, womens’ “wickednesse” (LGW 270, 269). In this passage, Alceste demands subject matter that promotes a flattering image of women who are “trewe in lovynge al here lyves.” Significantly, he uses the same phrase as to describe the central characters in the legends to follow as he does to describe the faceless women following Cupid. In so doing, the text suggests that the women to follow in the narrative will remain just as faceless and passive as the ones that precede them. In commanding the narrator to “spek wel of love,” Alceste conflates women and love, in that the narrator must speak well of women in order to speak well of love. Thus, the narrator conflates people with an idea, as if to suggest that women who are true must be just as theoretical as the ephemeral concept love. Finally, this mandate for the remainder of the narrative suggests that the narrator will continue to cover these women with the same prescribed terms. Michael Cherniss argues that “…Cupid will not tolerate books which he believes express negative views of his law of love, regardless of
the author’s actual views or intentions” (191). He does submit to Cupid’s intolerance, but Hansen describes this behavior as characteristically feminine for its “wiliness and duplicity,” in that he accepts and subverts Cupid’s purposes; for all their goodness, the women in the Legend are continually “betrayed” and often killed (9-10). I would posit, however, that the idea of duplicity and wiliness, however, characterizes the very nature of the command. Accepting these limits upon the women causes the narrator to become duplicitous to his own poetic goals. Even if he hopes to present “the naked text,” he must veil his characters beneath a text that adheres to Cupid’s demands (86).

To return to Dinshaw’s argument, however, she does suggest that limiting the feminine characters also limits the masculine characters. Men, here, serve as the vehicle for highlighting the goodness of the women. However, because the directive from Alceste and Cupid hopes to repair the image of women particularly, the reader does not necessarily expect a dissection of the male characters. Vivid depictions of females’ minds and actions should remain in the spotlight, especially in a work that purports to be equally interested in both interior and exterior aspects of a text. Cupid, moreover, orders the narrator to “Let be the chaf, and writ wel of the corn” (529). Here, the God of Love directs the narrator to “writ wel;” thus, this order suggests creating an artificially positive depiction of the text’s meaning. The narrator therefore intends to address the outward craft of storytelling, as well as in the inward purpose of that story. In the effort, however, he actually allows the narrative to smother
women’s individual characters. The issue of covering men’s mouths, therefore, seems secondary to the text’s more insidious covering of women when it claims to be honest exposure of their “goode” and “trewe” qualities.

Although Dunbar’s Targe takes a form similar to the traditional allegorical garden scene, Dunbar’s narrator dismisses the Chaucerian narrator’s fixation upon its corresponding meaning. Critics have generally accepted a certain amount of superficiality in Dunbar’s poetry without much question. Both C.S. Lewis and Denton Fox have agreed that Dunbar’s allegory in The Golden Targe is “‘little more than a peg, but an adequate peg, on which to hang its poetry’” (13).17 In a similar manner, Henry Wood writes of Dunbar’s allegorical poems that “one misses the humanity, the quiet conversational tone, the glimpses of personal experience, and the humour that give life and variety to Chaucer’s allegories” (31).18 Both Chaucer’s narrator and Dunbar’s critics therefore acknowledge the “glimpses” beyond the literal text and into “humanity” as a primary goal of Chaucer’s work. However, this conclusion has led critics to assume that Dunbar’s work resides at the opposite end of the spectrum – that humanity did not interest him so much as the prospect of creating a literary work of art. These critics may accurately assess Dunbar’s tendency to place priority upon the formal qualities of poetry over tightly rendered allegory; still, they have not performed much interrogation of the effects of this choice. While I would not necessarily

17 Here, Fox quotes Lewis’s Allegory of Love.
deny Dunbar’s suggested fascination with surfaces, I would argue that his attention to language reveals an effort to conceal gendered conflicts within the poem. Furthermore, by using language as an artifice that covers men, women, and landscape alike, Dunbar’s poem responds to the anxiety in Chaucer’s poem regarding the “chaff.” He levels both genders with the text itself, thereby suggesting the futility of texts that attempt to probe human character for prescribed meaning—particularly when that meaning prioritizes one gender.

As in Chaucer’s Legend, the narrator encounters a procession of women upon finding himself in the typical dream-landscape:

And hard on burd unto the bolmyt medis
Amang the grene rispis and the redis
Arrivit she; qhuar fro anon thare landis
Ane hundreth ladies, lusty into weis
Als freshc as flouris that in May up spredis
In kirtillis grene, withouten kell or bandis
Thair brycht hairis hang gleting on the strandis
In tressis clere, wyppit with goldyn thredis,
With pappis quhite and mydlis small as wandis (Targe 55-63)

In Dunbar’s Golden Targe, the ladies who appear in the dream-vision of the Prologue burst into bloom, so to speak. Where only one woman is compared to a “daisye” in Chaucer’s Legend, Dunbar’s narrator sweeps over this procession and compares them all to “flouris that in May up spredis.” Where there were once nineteen women, the Court of Love now includes “ane hundreth” ladies, making them such an overwhelming mass as to preclude any individual distinction. The nineteen ladies following Cupid in Chaucer’s Legend might well have been premonitions of those particular “goode wommen” the narrator would set out to
depict with more realism in the individual legends. In Dunbar’s *Targe*, however, the narrator clearly has no intent (stated or implied) of endowing each member of this crowd with an individual characterization. In fact, the allegorical characters he lists as members in the feminine Court of Love only number about sixty. Like Chaucer’s narrator, he weaves an elaborate garment of text with which to cover these women. He specifies that they wear robes “withouten kell or bandis,” without any kind of decoration, but in so doing, he describes their nondescript attire. Thus, he begins to clothe the female figures not only through the literal action of the poem, but also in the act of writing. Furthermore, D.S. Brewer notes that Chaucer’s only description of ideal feminine beauty in the *Legend of Good Women* calls Lucrecia “bright” and her hair yellow (267). He also indicates that Chaucerian commonplaces of feminine beauty (particularly in the translations of the *Romaunt of the Rose* provisionally attributed to Chaucer) include “bright[ness],” “lily and rose” colored-flesh, yellow hair, and a well-proportioned body. These tropes appear in Dunbar’s version as well; his women have “brycht” hair, braided with “goldin thredis;” their breasts are white, and their middles are small (*Targe* 61-63). They initially appear as a group rather than entering individually and receiving a personified virtue with a distinct yet ideal physical description as in the *Romaunt*. Thus, Dunbar’s crowd of women appear to use Chaucer’s *Legend* as a more obvious source than even the *Romaunt*, which has countless other reiterations. In this manner, the women in the narrator’s dream vision simultaneously reference Chaucer’s *Legend* and revise it. Dunbar
covers these women with textual garments made from these poets’ common
tradition and his own invention.

Dunbar’s narrator follows this superficial description of the group of
ladies with an address to the masters of “rethorike,” further removing the
women from reality. I would posit that by juxtaposing these two stanzas,
Dunbar’s narrator actually indicates not only his interest in the craft of poetry,
but also in the function of poetry in disguising or obscuring each gender; in this
case, he obscures the women with his rhetoric. In apparent humility, the narrator
writes:

Discrive I wald, bot quho could wele endyte
How all the felids with thai lilies quhite
Depaynt war brycht, quhilk to the heven did glete?
Nocht thou, Omer, als fair as thou could wryte…
Nor yit thou, Tullius, quhois lippis swete
Of rethorike did into termes flete. (64-70).

In the previous stanza, the field is covered with women whom the narrator first
compares to “flouris.” Here, however, the field is covered with actual “lilies
quhite;” in this manner, Dunbar’s narrator transforms the women into a purely
poetic image. Furthermore, the narrator dismisses even the description of
flowers, saying that neither he nor older, esteemed poets could accurately
describe the scene. The claim to inexpressibility does not introduce a new theme
in medieval poetry, but it does serve to remove the women further from view.
They are covered by the “rethorike” of the poet as he exaggerates the comparison
of women to flowers, and they are subsumed by the weight of authoritative writers.

Furthermore, Dunbar’s *Targe* separates the feminine court of love, led by Nature and Venus, from the masculine court of love, led by Cupid. By isolating the genders, the narrator takes a distinct look at male characters. As he looks at them, however, his depictions align them with the type of females he has already established. Although the narrator’s vision does not idealize the men as he does the women, the narrator does exhibit the same kind of interest in the exterior appearance of the male characters. “Aneother court thare saw I consequent / Cupide the king, wyth bow in hand ybent / And dredefull arowis grundyn scharp and square‖ (109-11). This secondary court not only sets up a more distinct opposition between the sexes, but it also allows the narrator to treat masculine figures with the same attention to surfaces that his women receive. These men enter the scene with certain strength and intimidation, seen, for instance, in the narrator’s attention to their weaponry (such as Cupid’s bow). The catalogue of Cupid’s court also includes Mars “the god armypotent / auffull and sterne, strong and corpolent” (112-113). Particularly, the use of word “corpolent” not only suggests a large, powerful person, but it also evokes the physical body of the god. After the narrator uses a word indicating such material weight, Mars’s strength must also belong to the same physical category, rather than indicating the innate virtue or strength of character. Naturally, the traditional allegorical form from which Dunbar works would indicate that the literal and
physical could stand in for the figurative and immaterial. However, Mars receives no other trappings of allegory, in that his name suggests no human characteristic. Were he named “Strength,” his physical appearance could appropriate his virtues accordingly, but he remains a pagan god with masculine characteristics. Even the least literal word, “armypotent,” translates as “mighty in arms,” which keeps the reader’s attention firmly on the god’s bodily capabilities. In fact, everything the reader understands about Mars relates to his physical strength and demeanor, which is “stern” and “aufull.” Furthermore, this characterization remains perhaps the most detailed as each of the male gods arrive; instead, the narrator chooses to characterize the remaining gods by title as they enter the scene. A title, (for instance, “the god of gardingis,” “the god of wildernes,” and “the god of wyndis”) exhibits a purely rhetorical view of these male characters. Rather than continue in the same style of description accorded to Mars, the narrator chooses instead to apply sweeping generalizations to the gods that follow him (118-120). As a result, the reader does not understand these less-detailed characters in a visual sense, but rather in a theoretical sense. The construction of each title parallels the other five, a narrative move that serves to flatten each male character into merely one in a crowd— not an individual, despite the individual titles. Furthermore, it aligns them all with the female characters who have already been covered by the narrator’s rhetoric.

The narrator pushes this alignment further through associations with the literal descriptions of the women. By echoing the language he uses for the female
characters, the narrator makes even these hyper-masculine, “strong” male gods appear similar to the ladies from whom they have been separated. After briefly listing the members of Cupid’s court, he writes:

And every one of thir in grene arayit  
On harp or lute full merily thai playit  
And sang balletis with michty notis clere.  
Ladyes to dance full soberly assayit,  
Endlang the lusty revir so thai mayit  
Thair observance rycht hevenly was to here. (127-132)

The male characters here not only mirror the only described male figure in the Prologue to the Legend of Good Women, but they also bear striking similarity to the female characters earlier in the Golden Targe. Both men and women, for instance, wear green apparel and sing “ballatis;” however, the men specifically play harps and lutes. Spearing suggests that the Golden Targe functions as the “poetic equivalent to the kind of masque, mumming, or disguising that might really have been performed at James IV’s court ” (241). Certainly the separation of the male court and the female court indicates, as Spearing suggests, an imitation of a courtly pageant. This act of “disguising,” however, seems to be the work of the narrator’s language, not of the masque performance in the narrative. The men and women become almost indistinguishable from one another simply due to the way the narrator has chosen to characterize them. The women, too, “sang balletis in luf, as was the gyse, / With amorouse notis lusty to devise / As thay that had

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lufe in thair hertis *grene*” (103-105, my emphasis). The narrator chooses particular words with which to describe both parties, limiting his vocabulary in order to obscure the differences between the behaviors of the men and women. Although they belong to separate courts, the narrator envisions them as similar elements of a unified scene. Furthermore, these related behaviors specifically evoke song: “sang,“ “balletis,” “notis.” The language of song therefore becomes the rhetorical garment in which the narrator dresses both men and women. The word “grene,” furthermore, refers to the mens’ dress, as well as the womens’ hearts. By describing both interior and exterior features with the same word, the narrator suggests not only the sameness of the men and women, but also the uniformity of their internal and external characteristics. Furthermore, consistent with the interest in surfaces that Ebin and Fox have already noted in Dunbar’s poetry, “grene” is a color perceived visually. To use this visual word to describe a heart may hint at freshness or even innocence, but certainly does not expose an individual’s feeling. The effect does not merely draw attention to poetry for its own sake. Rather, poetry seems a way of covering and mitigating the differences between the sexes.

Just as the narrator fits men and women into the same mold, he fits the landscape to that vision as well. Specifically, the narrator repeats the word “lusty” in the second passage (the arrival of the male court), but this time he describes the “revir.” This transferal of characteristics with human connotations to the natural landscape occurs throughout Dunbar’s *Targe*, as Spearing indicates
(248). More specifically, however, the narrator continually describes the landscape in terms of human clothing. The landscape, in this manner, becomes the equivalent of men and women. It is typical for Nature to “present [May] a goun,” as in Chaucer’s “Now hadde the’atembre sone al that releved / and clothed hym [the medow] in grene al newe ageyn” (LGW 116-117). It is also typical for a narrator-dreamer to sleep on “Florais mantill,” as Conlee notes (Targe 48, Conlee 345). However, Dunbar carries the idea of clothing his text to the extreme. Phoebus is “in purpur cape revest,” and boughs of trees are “apparalit quhite and rede,” for instance (Targe 7, 12). The narrator dresses the landscape richly, but in so doing, he also makes the landscape seem more human. By choosing words distinctly associated with clothing (“revest,” “apparalit,”) the narrator applies the same kind of rhetoric to the landscape that he does upon the men and women. The reader cannot distinguish human from the non-human; thus, the narrator further obscures any distinction between men and women.

All this time, the narrator merely watches and attempts to make poetic sense of the vision before him. When he observes from his hidden place, the narrator maintains the ability to “descreive” his dream-vision. Although he claims that he does not have as much rhetorical talent as Homer or Cicero, he observes and retells the scene in a manner that draws more attention to the poem and his language than to the action of the narrative. When the narrator becomes involved in the action, however, he cannot achieve any of these rhetorical moves that he so
admires. When “be lufis queen / [he] was aspyit,” the narrator indicates that the “ladyes fair lete fall thair mantilliss grene” (136-37, 139). This undressing contains more than simply sensual connotations. If the green mantles have, until now, kept the female characters in under the cover of uniformity, then the shedding of these garments indicates the shedding of poetic artifice that has until now kept them hidden. Now that he has been discovered, it seems that he cannot use poetry to obscure the characteristics of these characters. His objectivity as a poet has been compromised, and he has now become involved in what Pamela King refers to as “the battle of the sexes” (127). King argues that the similarities to masques in Dunbar’s Targe achieves a parody of the medieval pageantry that sets each gender against the other. However, in participating in the conflict, the narrator has disrupted the usual order of the courts’ games of love; more importantly, he has disturbed the unity and conformity established by his rhetorical mask. The moment he is discovered and ceases his rhetorical covering, the feminine court advances an attack upon the narrator from which the masculine court defends him. The conflict itself reaches a climax when the “Lady Beautee” blinds the male “Reason” (210-214). The narrator swiftly resolves the dream vision. He observes:

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God Eolus, his bugill blew I gesse
That with the blast the levis all toschuke
And sudaynly in the space of a luke
All was hyne went—thare was bot wilderness
Thare was no more bot birdis, bank and bruke.

In twynklyng of ane eye to schip thai went
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And swyth up saile untio the top thai stent (Targe 230-236).

The narrator’s “I gesse” indicates his uncertainty, and perhaps his supposition of the action that follows. Regardless of how the disappearance happened, the narrator attributes the “blast” that shakes the leaves on the trees to a member of the male court. His participation in the conflict results in his capture and the defeat of his masculine defender, but he recovers the balance by crediting Eolus with the wind that leaves this battlefield “bot wilderness,” uninhabited by the crowds of people. The masculine court (as represented by Eolus here) does not continue the conflict or even defeat the feminine court, but instead dismisses the battle completely; all of the characters sail away immediately. The “I gesse” then reads as an assertion of the narrator’s presence and influence upon the reader, who can only perceive what the narrator has “gesse[d]” and chosen to depict. His narrative choice, therefore, leaves the conflict unresolved, and instead turns into a contemplation of poetic tradition, as signified by an address to “Chaucere, rose of rethoris all” (253). Through this resolution—rather, dismissal—of conflict, the narrator swiftly turns his attention back to rhetoric. In this manner, the narrator suggests that poetry (and indeed, the poet) ought not to enter into these debates between men and women, but rather observe them as objectively as possible.

Although Chaucer’s Legend of Good Women purports to reveal some meaning of value to its reader, it only obscures any actual virtues or faults—the human essence—of the females it presumably promotes. The narrator’s insights,
however, merely project uniform virtue onto these women, so that the actual individuals all fade into the same woman, indistinguishable from the mass that follows Cupid. As I have argued, Dunbar responds to the Chaucerian narrator’s anxiety over interiors—not with mere dismissal, but with a careful reconstruction of each gender’s depiction. Through Dunbar’s narrator, the Targe reflects not only the sameness of women, but also the sameness of men and landscape. Dunbar’s so-called attention to surfaces, therefore, does not indicate a simple interest in poetry, but rather an impulse to rectify the wrongs done by poetry in the past. Chaucer’s *Legend of Good Women*, which claims to address both corn and shef, fails to achieve its poetic aims. The narrator enters into Cupid’s contract, taking sides in the battle of the sexes by attempting to adhere to the prescribed outcome. By recasting these allegorical figures beneath a sheen of rhetorical performance, Dunbar’s narrator in the *Golden Targe* avoids resolving the conflict in favor of either party. In so doing, he acknowledges and reinterprets the Chaucerian source’s solution to battle of the sexes.

In both William Dunbar and Robert Henryson, we have seen specific engagement with Chaucer’s work, but more importantly, we have seen their individual reevaluation of Chaucer’s tradition. Henryson’s narrators, for instance, pinpoint the moral implications of *Troilus and Criseyde* and The Nun’s Priest’s Tale. Rather than simply restate those morals, however, Henryson’s narrator carries to the extreme whatever hints at punishment or critique exist in Chaucer’s texts. In intensifying the moral grounding of Chaucer’s poems,
Henryson not only reassesses and transforms the original text, but also affirms his own poetic agenda. Despite Henryson’s independence as a makar, however, poetry cannot be completely separated from the work that it claims to modify. William Dunbar, on the other hand, uses his poems to expand gendered discourse. Where Chaucer’s text focuses only on women, Dunbar’s narrator seizes this discussion, and extends an opportunity to participate to men. In the case of the *Tretis*, he allows men and women a voice; in the case of the *Targe*, he silences them both. In either case, however, he notes, elaborates upon, and broadens the existing argument, fitting tradition to his own aims. Thus Dunbar, like Henryson, engages with, but does not become obscured by, his Chaucerian sources.

In light of the creative impulse inspired by Chaucer’s gender politics, the label “Scottish Chaucerians” receives a new definition that exposes, rather than ignores, the achievements of the makars. “Scottish Chaucerians” characterizes the 15th century poets, Henryson and Dunbar, whose poems establish their authors as important contributors to continuing literary discussions of gender. This term in its new form must therefore be reclaimed. In establishing this definition, the category becomes a means of exploring the rich invention of two makars who have not only distinguished themselves from the rest of their contemporaries, but who have transformed the vast tradition behind them.
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