

# Robert Henryson

## Time Line of Life Events and Works

- 1420? Robert Henryson born
- 1423 James I of Scotland released
- 1436 Scots defeat English near Berwick
- 1437 James I murdered. James II succeeded
- 1438 Nine years' truce between Scotland and England
- 1448 War renewed between England and Scotland. Lancaster and York factions beginning to form in England.
- 1450 John Lydgate dies.
- 1455 Beginning of the War of the Roses
- 1460 James II killed. James III succeeded.
- 1464 Peace between England and Scotland
- 1467 Scottish parliament outlaws soccer and golf
- 1472 Dante's *Divine Comedy* printed
- 1474 William Caxton prints first book in English
- 1478 Thomas More born. Sir Thomas Malory finishes *Le Morte D'Arthur* (?)
- 1485 Henry Tudor defeats Richard III. Crowned Henry VII
- 1488 James III murdered. James IV succeeded.
- 1491 Henry VIII born.
- 1494 Lydgate's *Fall of Princes* published
- 1495 Matteo Mario Boiardo's *Orlando Innamorato* published
- 1496 James IV invades Northumberland
- 1498 Erasmus teaches at Oxford
- 1501 Gawin Douglas writes "The Palace of Honor"

- 1503 William Dunbar writes “The Thrissil and the Rois.” Thomas Wyatt born  
 c. 1505 Robert Henryson dead. Dunbar lists him in his “Lament for the Makers”

Not much is known about Henryson’s life. He is believed to have been a grammar school master at Dunfermline’s Benedictine abbey. He was also probably a notary public with legal training.

He most certainly took an M. A. degree from somewhere; however, scholars disagree as to where. The most popular choices are either from a Scottish university or from an Italian one.

## Major Works

### *The Testament of Cresseid*

**Manuscripts Surviving:** None

**Standard Editions:** *The Poems of Robert Henryson*. Edited by Denton Fox. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981)

**Synopsis:** A “sequel” to Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde* (1382-1386). In it humanity is depicted as vulnerable and victims of both the powerful and of its own lack of prudence. Cresseid, who was blasphemous against the gods, is stricken with leprosy. Troilus later finds her and still loves her. Cresseid changes her mindset about the cause of her own tragedy: from divine betrayal, to fortune’s process, to her own character flaws before she dies.

### *Orpheus and Eurydice*

**Manuscripts Surviving:** 2

**Source:** From book 3 of Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy*

**Standard Editions:** *The Poems of Robert Henryson*. Edited by Denton Fox. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981)

**Synopsis:** A combination of mythological fable, romance, and moralitas; this story traces the life of King Orpheus. The most striking part of it is the 218 line moralitas in couplets (the rest of the poem is in rhyme royal) where the allegories are described. Orpheus is described as the intellectual power of the soul and Eurydice as the appetite. Their marriage is, therefore, a combination of the two.

### *The Moral Fables*

**Manuscripts Surviving:** 2

**Source:** Anonymous late 12<sup>th</sup> century fables ascribed to Gwalterus Anglicus, “Walter the Englishman”

**Standard Editions:** *The Poems of Robert Henryson*. Edited by Denton Fox. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981). And *The Moral Fables of Aesop*. Edited and Translated by George D. Gopen (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1987).

**Synopsis:** See handout.

### Shorter Poems

There are also 12-13 poems currently ascribed to Henryson including “The Abbey Walk” and “Ane Prayer for the Pest.” Like with the longer works, many of these revolve around dark subjects. However, like with Lydgate, the certainty of the attributions is questionable.