Editor's Introduction

In the flesh

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postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies (2013) 4, 391–400.
doi:10.1057/pmed.2013.30

There is a viscous porosity of flesh – my flesh and the flesh of the world. This porosity is a hinge through which we are and of the world.

Nancy Tuana, 'Viscous Porosity: Witnessing Katrina'

Around the turn of the seventeenth century, William Fowler, courtier of Scotland's James VI, is thought to have returned to Creseyd's diseased legacy.¹ In heavily Anglicized heptameter, neatly composed in an elegant secretary hand, her demise unfolds yet again. In many respects, *The Laste Epistle of Creseyd to Troyalus* hardly seems worth the trouble, since Creseyd was a rather ragged figure when this poem was composed. By the late sixteenth century, references to her betrayal appeared so frequently that the details of her decline were regularly elided.² In fact, the story of her ruin was so familiar that it required only aphoristic shorthand: Creseyd's sexual license led her to betray Troilus, whereupon she was punished with leprosy and thereafter died as an abandoned beggar. Through a poetic litany of abbreviated mentions and fragmentary comparisons, Creseyd's literary remains are repeatedly interred. When Fowler exhumes the matter of Creseyd, in a sense he simply does what early modern gentlemen poets do: he recirculates her familiar corpus amongst members of an elite circle of manuscript readers. Except this is not what happens.

In *The Laste Epistle*, Creseyd brings unexpected life to the story of her demise. She is mournful and regretful, and she praises Troyalus even as she laments her

1 This poem appears in Volume XIII of the Hawthorden manuscripts held by the Scottish National Library. Because it is part of a gathering that contains letters, poems and papers in various hands, Meikle includes it among the 'Miscellaneous Poems of Doubtful Authenticity' (Meikle, 1914).

2 For a survey of treatments, see Rollins (1917). I deal with early-modern Creseyd-poetry in my current book, *The Matter of Feminine Virtue: Women's Ethical Action from Chaucer to Shakespeare*.

3 For convenience, hereafter I cite from the most available edition, Fowler (1997). I have also consulted the poem in manuscript (National Library of Scotland, Hawthornden MS 2065, 30v–33v) and have silently emended the text to accord with my own transcriptions.

4 See Mapstone (1988) for a comparison.

infelicitous betrayal. These features are common in later Creseyd-poetry. Nevertheless, the Creseyd commonly attributed to Fowler begins to elaborate a recognition of flesh's vitality which the essays that follow this introduction pursue: in *The Laste Epistle*, an unexpectedly animate and volatile Creseyd reaches out to audiences, addressing her disintegration directly to those who might otherwise view her story with knowing disinterest. Though she writes to Troyalus, her opening, 'Healthe, healthe' (Fowler, 1997, l. 1) hails readers, involving them in the desire, deceit and decay that constitute her experience.³ Her story compels contact, and refuses the distance that memory or iconicity might structure. When she apostrophizes Troyalus – 'But O my Troyalus ... Howe could thy knightly harte consent, / Or eyes abyde the sight ...?' (l. 109; ll. 111–112) – she imagines her beloved as a participant, not an observer, in the events that lead to her betrayal.

In its startling vitality and its repudiation of boundaries between self and other, *The Laste Epistle* is a poem of the flesh. While flesh is often treated as inert, pliable, *stuff*, the essays collected here reveal that it is less dead than it might appear, carrying life traces that might always find new modes of vitality. Whether it describes the body of a saint or the corpse of a king, flesh extends contact across spatial and temporal boundaries that, under this pressure, cannot remain orderly, linear or orthodox. When we speak of the dead, Kathryn Schwarz's provocative analysis urges us to acknowledge, we may participate in an effort to constitute the social subject as impervious to disease, decay or dispersal. But rather than affirm existence as at once sequential and static, the body's lively reach creates a jumble that combines the markers of life and death. Cynthia Turner Camp illustrates this point when she takes up accounts of medieval saints and problematizes the temporal excess of the corpse as a material thing. In ways both conceptual and curiously literal, life does not reliably end with death, nor does matter meekly yield to spirit. If premodern thinkers invested in such progressions, they did so in response to the disruptive, insistent presence of flesh.

The Laste Epistle reinvigorates Chaucer's Criseyde and Henryson's Cresseid in a fashion that is faithful to neither;⁴ from an obscure Cressid poem to Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, essays in this issue show that flesh does not substantiate the truisms we think we know. 'If you prick us, do we not bleed?': Shylock's famous question, with its less menacing follow-on, 'If you tickle us, do we not laugh?' become unsettling inquiries into flesh's presumed support for taxonomies and causalities (Shakespeare, 2005, 3.1.64–3.1.65). From Jonathan Goldberg's treatment of carnivalization to Jay Zysk's analysis of reformation, flesh's materiality exceeds the evidentiary status often assigned to it. It is both labile and docile, by turns under- and overwhelming the theoretical frameworks that seek to manage, tame and deploy it. In premodern treatments, flesh refuses to stay under the skin, even if there is a keen recognition, say in manuscripts made of vellum, that there should be a 'flesh side' (as opposed

to a 'hair side') that secures orientations of inside or outside, verso or recto, upside or downside.⁵

Creseyd directly voices her own predicament in *The Last Epistle*, but her voice both reflects and reframes her narrative history. Lamenting her long life, Creseyd addresses what has *already been said* about her:

Then should no poet have the cause
 Faire Creyseydes treuthe to blame
 Nor after this with ladyes falce
 Remember Creseydes name
 Ne yet no mann his fickle dame
 With Creseyd should upbraid
 Nor by examples bringe me in
 'Howe' Troyolus was betrayde. (ll. 25–32)

The polarities that should fix her meaning – true or false, chaste or impure, scapegoat or sinner – have contaminated one another over a long sequence of poetic representations, and this Creseyd uses the intermingled archive of judgments to disallow her own exemplarity. There is no recovering this Creseyd's reputation. Yet as Emily King's contribution to this volume attests, dualism is a hard game, which requires the persistent production of boundaries, membranes or surfaces meant to keep the suppressed matter that rises to intelligibility as 'flesh' discreetly out of view.

Creseyd's leprous body insists flesh will out. This is not the return of a grotesque latency that was masked, hidden or repressed. It was there all along, even if, as Creseyd's reflections upon her disturbing visage reveal ('To se me, men abhord,' [l. 260]), flesh is often ignored in favor of fantasized constructions: 'But love, in mowld of memory, / Imprintes in perfitt harte/ The loved, so that deathe itself / Can noght the same devert' (ll. 277–280). War, sex, disease, death: these conditions are written in the flesh, but as this volume emphasizes, they are usually overwritten by narratives of heroism, devotion, longsuffering and transcendence. We rarely look at what happens in the flesh, at the material consequences of actions political, ethical and sexual. Of course, after the fact it seems relatively easy to roll out the flesh as an explanatory (usually punitive) apparatus. Yet, as Frances Dolan demonstrates in her analysis of well-known accounts of bodily desecration from the second English Civil War, flesh follows textual accounts more readily than it substantiates them. Flesh's relationship to narrative – and, in Dolan's terms, to evidence – is both capricious and vexed.

Flesh is ever present, which means that the preoccupations it galvanizes are terrifyingly (and sometimes thrillingly) capacious. To attribute Creseyd's leprosy to wantonness is to draw far too narrow a conclusion about flesh's operations in the overlapping domains of war, sex, disease and death. Flesh was present from the outset, through the duration of her affair, as Creseyd recalls, 'For 3

5 Walter (2013) helpfully problematizes the binary of 'legible skin versus illegible flesh' through her reading of *The King of Tars* alongside medieval medical treatises and contemporary posthumanist theory.

yeares space no lyffe but one/ One love that did espye' (ll. 77–78). *The Laste Epistle* imagines the flesh's movements across the full arc of desire, encompassing love as well as loss in an embodied account of affect, violence and intersubjective availability. In his essay 'Hi Mho Jhi Kudd [this is my body],' Jonathan Gil Harris traces the transformations of flesh – through translation, through eating, through movement – that occur when a fragile body and an authorized narrative migrate from England to India. As *The Laste Epistle* equally demonstrates, flesh's transformations are incessant, and they implicate matters that extend beyond the body. In this sense, if Creseyd's experience concludes with destruction, her loss is not simply the result of her decision to betray Troyalus in favor of Diomedes. It arises from a far more accretive process, which shows how discrete and various actions collect and reorganize within the flesh. Nor are we exempted from such processes by intellectual distance or historical time.

In a modern example, Stacy Alaimo reports the results of tests run by Greenpeace that are designed to reveal levels of mercury in her flesh:

When I received my results, I imagined the various routes that mercury may have taken to my body (tuna sandwiches in childhood? Dallas air pollution?), but I was also struck by the bare number on the page (0.35), and the process by which scientific testing transformed my hair into a chunk of data (not unlike Latour's 'circulating reference'). It is a little unnerving, I think, not only to receive scientific data about the toxicity of one's own body but to consider how this particular bit of knowledge appears only after traveling through contingent networks that intermesh science and activism. (Alaimo, 2010, 19–20)

In a similar if more journalistic project, Florence Williams details the myriad chemicals that accumulate in the fatty tissues of women's breasts: 'breasts, I learned, are also the catchment for our environmental trespass' (Williams, 2012, 5). The acts of others, even faceless corporate others, get into our flesh. Yet, as Nancy Tuana argues in her analysis of the aftermath of hurricane Katrina, all flesh is not equally exposed. Bodies cordoned off by poverty, which in contemporary US culture are usually also marked by negative distinctions of race and/or gender, are subjected to greater levels of toxicity. Their flesh is meant to bear more harm, since it is exposed to more material sources of contamination (Tuana, 2009). Material feminist accounts such as these remind us that flesh's status, its presence as well as its condition, foreground issues that trouble abstract notions of social progress and the collective good.

In this vein, Cary Wolfe addresses flesh's centrality to factory farming, since it is there we might see 'the "herd" toward which the masses of humanity are inexorably tending' (Wolfe, 2012, 41). The common commodification of flesh presents a shared future that is both urgent and harrowing. Its most frightening aspect, which this issue aims to unfold, is the suppression of flesh's vitality. In the herd, in the tissues that gather collective harms, the flesh becomes inert, passive,

receptive – truly corporate, utterly dispensable. Flesh rendered as inanimate, as already-*dead* matter that can be distributed for always-increasing profits, is the cultural fantasy this volume contests. In the analyses that follow, flesh pushes back; even when its vitality is suppressed, it adds something as it receives and reassembles those substances it incorporates. Even ‘paper bodies,’ as Dolan shows, unsettle comforting suppositions about flesh’s distance and indifference. While Camp treats corpses that are miraculously incorrupt, St. Edith of Wilton’s preserved yet fragmentary remains produce what she calls a ‘superabundance of carnality’ that is anything but reassuring.

By attending to flesh’s proximity and specificity, essays in this issue underscore the importance of interpretation to embodied vitality and its suppression in the interests of ‘grander’ narratives. In his investigation of flesh’s carnivalization in *The Merchant of Venice*, Goldberg traces the demise of literality itself. Similarly, King’s assessment of flesh’s early modern hybridity shows us how certain cultural mythologies – in this case dualism as it comes to take on its Cartesian cast – are assembled out of multiple and sundry bodies (animal and human, living and nonliving, male and female) that resist categorical imperatives. To return to *The Laste Epistle*, the suffering Creseyd experiences is hedged round with a battery of classical references – from fortune, to the fates, to the gods – that obscure the quotidian specificities of her demise after her departure from Troy: boy seduces girl; girl contracts venereal disease; girl is slut-shamed. To be sure, the ‘girl gets traded in war’ as well as ‘girl gets transformed into poetic icon of feminine deception’ are aspects of this story that significantly raise the stakes of Creseyd’s plight. When Creseyd references her ill treatment by cosmic forces, this is not metaphor. Yet in the flesh, what happens to Creseyd is neither new nor old; it is neither magnificent nor inconsequential. It is common, but in a way that is not faceless or corporate. For the embodied Creseyd, as for the communal subjects addressed in Zysk’s analysis of the reformed *Book of Common Prayer*, flesh’s transparency and availability prevent it from becoming mystified or dismissed.

Importantly, in *The Laste Epistle* Creseyd also utilizes a mode of description that refuses to submerge flesh’s manifold sensibilities. When she recounts her transfer to the Greek camp, Creseyd unfolds the scene that met her arrival:

And now amidd the campe of Greekes
 We came, & as we paste,
 Myne aged father, glad to se
 Me, led me in as faste.
 Thatredes [Menelaus and Agamemnon], wreakfull brethern bothe,⁶
 Doe muche my bewtye prayse:
 The Lordes of Greece me welcomes bring,
 The soldiers on me gaze. (ll. 181–188)

6 This is an example of crisis in the poem; the reference is to ‘the

Atridae,' or the sons of Atreus.

Creseyd gives a sequential account that tracks responses to her entrance into the Greek camp. Because each action is loaded (with motion as well as emotion), it defies recent recommendations for 'surface' and 'depth' readings of literary texts. In their influential introduction to the special issue of *Representations* on 'Surface Reading,' editors Stephen Marcus and Sharon Best define the practice they advocate: 'We take surface to mean what is evident, perceptible, apprehensible in texts; what is neither hidden nor hiding; what, in the geometrical sense, has length and breadth but no thickness, and therefore covers no depth. A surface is what insists on being looked *at* rather than what we must train ourselves to see *through*' (Marcus and Best, 2009, 9). This stands in contrast to what they characterize as 'symptomatic' readings, or those methods that insist 'that the most interesting aspect of a text is what it represses' (Marcus and Best, 2009, 3).

Creseyd's evocative report of her arrival accommodates neither approach. To stay at the surface ignores the flesh of her account, rendering Creseyd's freighted entry into a hostile space as ceremonious reception and welcome reunion. But is it so simple? Is Creseyd just an honored guest? If we favor the manifest simplicity of Creseyd's account, we suppress the tensions that surface in this vexed recollection. To stay at the surface yields a reading that is skin-deep, but in a way that treats the skin as an impermeable membrane that shuts out everything that doesn't demand immediate attention. To read in the flesh is to admit that surfaces have depth, and are both more complex and more elusive than we sometimes allow.⁷ Medieval manuscripts, as Elaine Treharne explains, are immensely revealing precisely because of their status *as skin*. Surfaces are porous, messy, patched and pocked. They reveal far more than 'what insists on being looked at' (Marcus and Best, 2009, 9). Because the flesh is immanent to the point of invisibility, its continued presence is something we must train ourselves *not to look past*.

Reading in the flesh means we take the surface neither as an obstacle to deeper secrets nor as an end in itself, but as a densely intricate mixture of evidence and sign. This is despite the immediate allure of depth reading, which frequently allows us to get past misleading elements of a narrative's self-presentation: is something else at work here? Is Creseyd really a war trophy? Digging into the surface is crucial to reading in the flesh. Yet, were we to view Creseyd's reunion with her father and reception by the Greeks as something other than what she claims it is – say, as the totalized operation of the masculinist 'gaze' that makes her a victim of Diomedes's conquest – it would require us to overlook Creseyd's 'shame' (l. 177) which she assigns herself in an account of her moral responsibility: 'My conscience is attaint' (l. 178).⁸ Both elements – the power she claims for herself, and the way her self-control is compromised by circumstance – stand in obvious tension in Creseyd's (over)simplified account. Surface and depth are coextensive in a way that frustrates both modes of reading. In an effort to capture just this sort of aporia, Heather Love has urged scholars to practice 'flat' readings, those that are, in the words of her title, 'Close But Not Deep' (Love, 2010). This approach

7 Holsinger considers the complexity of surfaces through early geometry and Biblical interpretation (Holsinger, 2011, 600–606).

8 Since Strohm illustrates the conceptual and cultural multiplicity of 'conscience,' this is no

has the virtue of ‘sticking to description,’ a laudable priority it largely shares with surface reading (Latour, 2005, 136–137). Love takes the text at its word, but, unlike proponents of surface reading, the flat reading she outlines retains a healthy measure of hermeneutic suspicion. By working to provide a ‘good description,’ flat readings ‘account for the real variety that is already there’ (Love, 2010, 377).⁹ In other words, by documenting tension, flat reading could describe the competing strains on Creseyd’s arrival without seeking to connect either to larger concerns.

Flat reading is deeply appealing, and influences much of what I have to say about reading *in the flesh*. I do not describe the work of what happens in this issue as flat reading, however, because, as essays in this collection show, Love’s method puts too much stock in distance. Keeping the flesh at a distance, as Zysk and King demonstrate in their readings of early modern stagings, is a spectacular failure. In somewhat different fashion, Harris accounts for flesh’s work across distances of both time and place, while Dolan interrogates the veracities of time and place in flesh’s recollections. Reading in the flesh, unlike flat reading, assumes presence, contact and a collapse of the comforting distance of documentation. It does not link subjects through formal narratives that settle bodies into social position and literary history; instead, reading in the flesh enforces interpersonal implication at the level of the mutable, variable body. This is because, as Creseyd’s arrival attests, reading in the flesh involves its audiences in the temporal and spatial unfolding of particular narratives. Creseyd’s account is itself a description, one whose matter fails to substantiate fortune, love or betrayal. She stays flat when she recalls what she saw when she was reunited with her father. She is not a victim of fortune, nor does she betray herself, her lover or her father. Rather simply, her unadorned account puts her audience in the place she occupied. With a sequential, spatial rundown – ‘now amidd the campe’; ‘as we paste’; ‘The soldiers on me gaze’ (l. 181; l. 182; l. 188) – Creseyd offers no distanced vantage point from which to observe her experience.

Creseyd’s description includes no interpretation – she neither reflects upon her exchange nor looks forward to her demise – but what happens subsequently is therefore inescapable: ‘Sir Diomed to the tent [where] I lay/ With speddy pace him plyes’ (ll. 191–192). The bare unfolding of events is interpretive in its own right, because it shows how flesh gets enfolded within experiences that therefore seem (or become) inevitable. In *The Laste Epistle* Creseyd reckons with her betrayal through a form of immersive documentation, a method that plunges audiences into the complex details of her ordeal. Because Creseyd has no place from which to observe, process or interpret this sequence of events, neither do her readers. In this way *The Laste Epistle* outs distanced reading as wishful thinking. This is because, in Schwarz’s words, ‘when we ascribe any single meaning to flesh, the act of isolation sets false bounds.’ When Creseyd gives herself over to Troyalus, ‘And on my tombe some epitaphe / Engrave as lykes the beste’ (ll. 305–306), she attests to the desire to be done with flesh, to allow others

straightforward
explanation
(Strohm, 2011).

9 See Latour (2010) for a discussion of ‘better’ and ‘worse’ compositions.

to assign meaning to the experience she catalogues. In yielding, however, Creseyd still claims Troyalus, pressing commitments upon him by recalling his experience with her flesh, 'That thou vouchsafe tentere [to inter, bury] the coirps / That oft thyne armes hathe wynde' (ll. 303–304). It is possible, ultimately, that flesh involves Troyalus in Creseyd's disease, 'this lipers knight / Can shoue of me the rest' (ll. 307–308).¹⁰ As Creseyd prepares for her death, flesh's recollected pleasures continue to issue ethical obligations and material dangers.

Flesh's pleasures, along with the sustained debts those entail, recall me to consider my own engagement with *The Laste Epistle*. Perhaps I have overburdened this small, relatively unknown poem. Its comparative sparseness – it consists of just over 300 lines – bears the weight of my concerns about flesh's liveliness, presence and persistence. I've read the flesh off its bones, I feel obligated to say in nearing my conclusion, because this poem honors and enacts one of the most salient aspects of flesh as authors in this issue pursue it, and that is, quite basically, the impulse to tell. This impulse clarifies the material stakes of narrative practice, because literal flesh and 'paper bodies' exist in an entangled reciprocity of effect and cause. When William Fowler – or whoever wrote the poem collected in the loose gathering of letters, poems and papers that ended up in the hands of Sir William Drummond – returned to Creseyd's demise, he did something he didn't need to do. He bothered to recount this story, and in a fashion that restored Creseyd's voice.¹¹ Through this fulfillment of what we might recognize as an ethical obligation, Creseyd's fragmentary remains take on renewed flesh. Reanimating her story, rather than circulating its ruined bits as commonly known, dead matter, re-enfleshes Creseyd's narrative in ways that give it temporal, spatial and ethical immediacy.

Creseyd, once again, might get under someone's skin. Getting close to her – seeing her in the flesh – doesn't predict what we'll find in that moment of shared intimacy. A point I'd like to take from contemporary theorists whose work troubles divides between self and other, human and nonhuman, living and nonliving, is that flesh might be, in the words of Roberto Esposito, 'the unitary weave of the difference between bodies. It is the non-belonging, or rather the intra-belonging' (Esposito, 2011, 121). What I take Esposito to be saying here, and the reason I think his formulation is appealing to a posthumanist theorist such as Cary Wolfe, is that flesh defines a common beholdenness that does not respect the boundaries we might like to set for it.¹² I've focused here on flesh's immediacy, on its radical refusal of distance. But flesh also muddles difference, and not just in moments of corporate exploitation that unite all of us in a shared condition of vulnerability.¹³ The following considerations of flesh offer a constructive opportunity to contribute to what Rosi Braidotti calls the 'critical posthumanist subject,'

[which is] a relational subject constituted in and by multiplicity, that is to say a subject that works across differences and is also internally

10 McKim believes this line refers to Creseyd's messenger, who will tell the rest of her story (Fowler, 1997, n. 8). There is no reason not to see it as possessive (that is, Troyalus becomes her 'lipers knight,' who will tell her story after her death).

11 In 1665, Sir William Drummond, the eldest son of Fowler's nephew, Scottish poet William Drummond of Hawthornden (1585–1649), labeled this gathering 'Verces written by sundrie hands.' The poem is not in Fowler's handwriting, so its authorship ultimately remains unsettled.

12 See Wolfe (2012, 37–60) for his engagement with Esposito's concept of flesh.

13 Wolfe describes this condition as our common

differentiated, but still grounded and accountable. Posthuman subjectivity expresses an embodied and embedded and hence partial form of accountability, based on a strong sense of collectivity, relationality, and hence community building. (Braidotti, 2013, 49)

Though many of the contributors to this volume are not directly concerned with the posthumanist dimension of flesh as I've sketched it, the essays included here are similarly invested in a notion of subjectivity that accommodates corporeal expansion, disrupts linear temporalities, and traverses differences of place. It is the aim of this issue, then, to begin new conversations about embodied life, autonomous subjects, and the potentials and risks of social (inter)subjectivity. This is, finally, a collective yet varied effort to flesh out what it means to live, write, and read *in the flesh*.

'finitude' (Wolfe, 2009). My understanding is made more fleshy by Butler on precarity in a world of war (Butler, 2004, 2009).

Acknowledgement

Thanks to Cynthia Bateman Jackson and Kathryn Schwarz for their advice on earlier drafts of this essay. Research for this essay was supported by a fellowship at the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities (IASH) at the University of Edinburgh, and by a Provost's Humanities Grant from the University of South Carolina.

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