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ANN SULLIVAN HASKELL

A Scots Poem on Heraldry in Its Literary Tradition

In the latter fifteenth century, during "the Indian summer of English chivalry,"¹ the first treatises on British heraldry written in the native dialects began to appear.² The best known, and long considered the earliest, of these treatises is contained in *The Boke of St. Albans*, dated 1486.³ The recently discovered *John's Trevis*,⁴ only in print since 1943, is now thought to pre-date the St. Albans work. Written in 1494, and easily the most interesting of this group of treatises, however, is a heraldry poem in Lowland Scots.⁵

Though readily available for almost a century, the Scots Poem on Heraldry is virtually unknown. It was published in a volume devoted to courtesy books and, in such an incongruous context, was treated rather disinterestedly by its first editor, whose "only excuse for printing it," he states, is the "interest of our old men in the subject."⁶ Not only was the poem annotated with unreliable notes, but the overall attitude of the editor toward the piece is phlegmatic, if not apologetic, and there has been no subsequent effort to alter the initial impression.

There is in the Scots heraldry poem an attractive literary independence. Rather than the unornamented prose style of, for example, *John's Trevis*, the author of the Scots work has chosen the form of

¹ Arthur B. Ferguson, *The Indian Summer of English Chivalry* (Durham, N. C., 1960).

² A list of such treatises and their descriptions is given by H. Stanford London, "Some Medieval Treatises on English Heraldry," *Antiquaries Journal*, XXXIII (1953), 169-183.

³ Facsimile edition, William Blades (London, 1881).

⁴ Evan Jones, *Medieval Heraldry* (Cardiff, 1943; London, 1945), pp. 213-220.

⁵ "A Scotch copy of a Poem on Heraldry," *Queene Elizabeth's Achademy and other pieces*, ed. F. J. Furnivall, Early English Text Society, E. S., no. 8 (London, 1869), pp. 93-104.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. xvi.

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stanzaic verse. In addition to its form, the poem's content is unusual also. It contains two sections which are atypical of such treatises. The introduction comprises eight stanzas (i-vi, viii-ix) on the origin of armory, claiming a descent through Brutus, in typical medieval tradition. (Stanza vii, concerning differencing, seems misplaced.) With no patience for such literary license, the annotator of the 1869 edition, G. H. Adams, has chastised the poet for being "one of that unwise class of writers on Heraldry, who, not content with assigning to that science its proper place as a hand-maid to History . . . by claiming for it a fabulous origin, and one so manifestly capable of disproof, has brought the whole subject into . . . contempt and ridicule. . . ." ⁷ In addition to the distinctive preliminary section, the last eight stanzas, following the treatise proper, remove the poem from the didactic classification, with a glorification of heraldic offices and the privilege of bearing arms. In all, eighteen of the poem's thirty-five stanzas, or more than half, are devoted to material not typically included in a heraldry treatise.

The Scots poem's authorship constitutes a literary enigma, the solution of which, at least in part, is connected with the unusual opening and closing sections. Within the introduction the author refers to his books on the siege of Thebes, destruction of Troy (ll. 29-39) and Brutus' coming to Britain (ll. 51-53). ⁸ These sections may be the original contribution of a Scots copyist, Adam Loutfut, to a standard heraldic nucleus, as suggested by H. S. London. ⁹ Indeed, it would be normal for the Scots poem's section on blazoning to have been modeled on another. Most of the extant treatises may be traced to one of a handful of original works, ¹⁰ and a possible ancestor for the Scots poem has been mentioned. ¹¹ Since there is no evidence that Loutfut was an author, however, it seems more likely that he copied the complete work—introduction, heraldic treatise, and conclusion—from its original author, who had also written a *Siege of Thebes*, a *Troy Book* and a *Brut*. But the presumption of non-Scots origin for the poem, stated in the 1869 edition, ¹² seems unnecessary.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. xvii-xix.

⁹ *Op. cit.*, 173.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 169 f.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 173, 183.

¹² *Op. cit.*, pp. xvii, 102-103.

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The opinion of the annotator, which was accepted by the editor, attributed probable English ancestry to the poem and explained that it was merely "scottified" by the copyist.¹³ It is quite true that Scots dialectal features, such as the cited *qu-* for usual English *wh-*, could easily have been added by a copyist. In both stylistic and heraldic details, however, the likelihood of additions by a copyist is less probable, and there is significant evidence for Scots origin in both content and style.

The heraldic section of the poem is in accordance with other early treatises, which followed a prescribed form. Not only were lists of items enumerated in specific order, but even the usage of function words was restricted: "ffour thingis in armes bot onys suld namyt be,/ Onis of, onis in, and onys withe, and onys to see" (ll. 104-105).¹⁴ The most skillful author would find his literary leeway restricted in such circumstances. The employment of alliteration, for example, would be difficult. By contrast, the opening and closing sections of the Scots heraldry poem, those in which the author's freedom is not restrained, show a decidedly greater use of alliteration, as well as other devices characteristic of fifteenth-century Scots literary influence.

The structure of the poem is certainly within the late medieval Scots tradition. The seven-line stanza with a rime scheme of *ababbcc* is employed throughout, except in the twenty-second stanza, which omits the third *b*-line. This stanza and rime were frequently used by Scots poets such as Henryson, and may reflect the Chaucerianism of the period, since such works as the *Troilus* and *Parlement of Foules* also utilize this structure. And it is from the fifteenth-century Scots *Kingis Quair* and its connection with James VI that the *rime royal* designation derives, of course.

Of most significance in retaining the work in the fifteenth century Scots literary tradition is the use of alliteration throughout the poem. This is not, to be sure, the alliteration of *Rauf Coilzear* or *The Howlat*. It is, rather, the use of alliteration "not formally, but as a poetic device to vary the intensity of expression."¹⁵ This "purely decorative alliteration . . . was superimposed on the Chaucerian verse forms, and is quite common in all Scots poetry of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries."¹⁶

¹³ *Loc. cit.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 103. "Thyse thre termes, Of, And, With, shall not be hercyd in armis but onys ony of them.—*Book of St. Albans.*"

¹⁵ Kurt Wittig, *The Scottish Tradition in Literature* (Edinburgh and London, 1958), p. 35.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

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Not infrequently the author of the heraldry poem adopts James VI's "tumbling lyne,"¹⁷ employing maximum alliteration without regard to stressed or unstressed syllables:

(So convalit vicis & variance)

Amang men materis maliciouse. (ll. 2-3)

Typically, however, the alliteration is contained within a phrase, such as *noble and necessary* (l. 23), or *liegis and lordis* (l. 243). In several instances the alliterative pattern is extended through a unit larger than a phrase or line, as in Stanza xxiv, which is dominated by the *b*-sound:

Ale maner of best to blase, sey 'be armit,
and al birdis, sey 'membrit' saufly:
Girphinne, baith bird and best, we suld call it
To blase, 'membrit and armyt' both lustly.
zit in armes, pictes and delphes espy.
Billetis, hewmatis, and ij indenturis be,
Perpale cheveroune, perpale glondes to se.

And occasionally there are two or more linked alliterative sets within a few lines, such as:

Saif this ordour, prudently to proceid
Amang kingis, princis, liegis and lordis;
Of cristindome to cause luf and concordis!
(ll. 242-244)

Here the /p/ alliteration of l. 242 links it with *princis* in l. 243, and the /k/ in *kingis* and two /l/'s of *liegis* and *lordis* are linked to l. 244 in four /k/'s *crisindome*, *cause*, *concordis*, and the /l/ of *luf*.

Perhaps the most significant evidence of the poem's composition within the alliterative tradition, however, is its author's use of stock phrases from that literature.¹⁸ Examples are: *douchtynes in dedis*, l. 42; *best or bird* "beast or bird," l. 143, and *bird and best*, l. 163; *mater on mold*, l. 172; *foullis and fischis*, l. 195; *flowris florite*, l. 155 (cf. "flowers flourished in the field," *Scottish Field*, l. 311, Oakden, p. 282); *in werely wedis*, l. 94; *to maid menis* "to make amends," l. 251; *tretatris of trowith*, l. 233 (cf. "trayste and trewe," *Howlat*, l. 287); *prince of peté*, l. 232 (cf. "princes of prys," etc., Oakden, p. 297f.); *vicis and variance*, l. 2 (cf. "vice and vertue," etc., Oakden, pp. 307, 363, 371,

¹⁷ *Scottish Alliterative Poems*, ed. F. J. Amours, Scottish Text Society (Edinburgh and London, 1897), p. lxxxviii. ". . . The maist pairt of your lyne sall runne vpon a letter as this tumbling lyne ryannis vpon F—
Feiching fude for to feid it fast furth of the Farie."

¹⁸ See J. P. Oakden, *Alliterative Poetry in Middle English*, Vol. II (Manchester, 1935). Oakden's survey includes the Scots alliterative poems.

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377); *riches riolest*, l. 88 (cf. Oakden, Scots references, p. 357 and pp. 299, 334); *langest leving*, l. 15 (cf. Oakden, p. 369). Without close counterparts in other alliterative pieces, but certainly of the same type, are the phrases: *diamont of det*, l. 74; *siluer and sable*, ll. 78 and 85, and *sable and siluer*, l. 82; *armes of honour*, l. 70; *to bere and to blasoun*, l. 61; *materis maliciouse*, l. 3; *best to blase* "beast to blaze," l. 161; *attentik armys*, l. 179; *efter in excellence*, l. 197; *liscenciat and lovit* (*with al ledis*), l. 220; (*honerable*) *actis in armis*, l. 224, and *honorabile in (al) armis*, l. 182; *hatrent or harmis* "hatred or harms," p. 226; *noble and necessary*, l. 231; *verray verite*, l. 227; *mansuete maneryt*, l. 236; *digniteis desiris*, l. 237; *prudently to proceid*, l. 242; *thingis (be) taken treuly*, l. 219; *mesaris of malice*, l. 234; *luge amang gentrice*, l. 232; *officiaris in honour*, l. 208; and *parlementis prerogative*, l. 215.

The heraldry poem's author gives further evidence of acquaintance with fifteenth-century literary trends of Scotland. He frequently employs the phrases used for filling out lines in such alliterative poetry. These phrases are often unnecessary to the meaning or, indeed, at times devoid of meaning, but add a note of simplicity, naïvete, or casualness. The Scots heraldry poem includes such phrases as: *to sey*, l. 147; *and now quba likis heir*, l. 28; *at al*, l. 110; *and mony mo siclik*, l. 24; *with-all*, l. 160; and *to wit*, l. 91. Redundancy, a hallmark of the alliterative line, frequently occurs in the Scots poem in such phrases as *more felle and wit*, l. 16 and *be wit and discrecioun*, l. 58.

Characteristic of the alliterative tradition, also, was the reference phrase which gave authority for the validity of the material in the poetry.¹⁹ The heraldry poem gives evidence of this facet of the tradition in: *proportis the test*, l. 67; *sum sais*, ll. 33, 78; *sum baldis*, l. 175; *as I lernit am*, l. 84; *as I red*, l. 203; *it is said*, l. 100. In addition to common opinion and the authority of books, reference is also made to the author's own works: "as this my buk the most sentence did soune," l. 39; "quhiche at linth I did write," l. 30; "his lif and dait my buk efter recordis," l. 52. And the phrase which enjoined the reader to take notice, and simultaneously filled out the line, abounds: *ful attently behold*, l. 171; *study weil, and espy*, l. 174, and simply *espy*, l. 165; "quha will study his wittis, and conterpace," l. 191.

Another device characteristic of the alliterative tradition employed the infinitive. While this trait is discussed by Oakden only in its position following an alliterated word,²⁰ its use by the heraldry poet in

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 387-389.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 382.

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other positions fulfils the same function, i.e., completion of a line. Examples are: *to behold* (following an alliterated word), l.102; *to tent*, l.45; *to sene*, l.143, and *to see*, ll.134, 167; *to declair*, l.198; *to proceid* (following an alliterative word), l.242; *to blase* (following an alliterative word), l.161. Comparable in type is the prepositional phrase used in alliterating position. While Oakden cites this usage in the "bob" line,²¹ the appearance of two of the most frequently employed of such expressions in the Scots heraldry poem may reflect the tradition. The phrases *on mold*, l.172 (Oakden, p. 389f.), and *in ertbe*, l.206 (p. 385), both follow alliterating words.

The occurrence of internal rime is still another facet of the tradition of fifteenth-century Scots poetry.²² Instances are found in *one in thre*, *the hali trinite*, l.240; *makis and brekis*, l.80; *heris, speris*, l.16; *fussewis, masklewis*, ll.158, 159; and *ferre of werre*, l.12. And still another characteristic of the tradition is the device of iteration, referred to by Armours in *Scottish Alliterative Poems*.²³ Stanza iv, ll.22-28, which uses *sum* fourteen times, may reflect this trait.

On the basis of literary features, then, there is no obvious reason to reject the possibility of Scots composition for this poem, as did Mr. Adams. Nor is the rejection on the basis of heraldic practices defensible. One main point on which the rejection is based, for example, concerns differencing for cadency. "These differences or distinctions of houses . . .," Mr. Adams states, "are only used in British heraldry."²⁴ In contrast, Gayre plainly asserts that "in the middle ages this principle was rigorously maintained, and while in some countries, for certain specific local reasons, the differentiation of coats of arms may in later times have become a less marked feature in the administration of heraldry, it has, nevertheless, almost everywhere in Christendom been recognized as part of the Law of Arms, and in some administrations, such as Scotland, is rigorously enforced."²⁵ Adams seems to have been criticizing fifteenth-century heraldry on nineteenth-century terms.

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²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 389-391.

²² Wittig, p. 110 f.

²³ P. lxxxv; see also, Wittig, p. 111.

²⁴ *Q. Eliz. Achad.*, p. 95, n. 1.

²⁵ Robert Gayre, *Heraldic Cadency* (London, 1961) p. 24; see also [Gayre] "Heraldry," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 14th ed., Vol. 11.