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Ian Jamieson

Some Attitudes to Poetry in Late Fifteenth-Century Scotland



An interest in poetics, in both its theoretical modes and the relationship between theory and practice, is, of course, one of the most characteristic features of contemporary critical fashion. Yet interest in Middle Scots poetics has been spasmodic and little developed, and we lack that comprehensive analysis of attitudes to poetry in late mediaeval Scotland which would help literary critics, by providing an environment for the individual works and authors they seek to understand, and historians, who are beginning to write a wider history of the period than the narrowly political and economic history to which we have been used.² I offer the following as a modest beginning to that analysis, restricted, as far as we can be certain from rather insecure dating, to the last twenty or twenty-five years of the fifteenth century, and to non-alliterative and non-epic poetry.

We have no treatises of poetics from Scotland at this period to give a theoretical basis, so the evidence must come from the poetry itself. There seem to me to be at least four ways of obtaining such evidence. Firstly, we can discover something of what the poets have read, of what might have influenced their ways of thinking about the function and nature of poetry. We get some inkling of this reading, perhaps, from pursuing what records of contemporary libraries still exist;³

but more obvious information comes from direct reference in the poetry itself, and from the study of sources both acknowledged and unacknowledged--I include genre material within the meaning of "source." Secondly, in several prologues there are direct explanations of the purpose of the poetry about to be read. Such material is interesting in itself, but I find equally interesting in each case the relationship between what the prologue claims the poetry will do and what the poem actually does. Thirdly, the role of the narrator, the *persona*, can tell us much: his relationship to the story he tells, his interest in and reaction to it, shows us something of possible, or expected--even if on occasion perhaps deliberately partial--reactions to poetry. Fourthly, there is a point which is closely related to the third but which it is worthwhile to distinguish: we have some evidence of our subject from those poems comprising several stories, for the relationship between these stories, and between the stories and the outer frame which holds them together, can suggest a view of the expected function of the stories and, indeed, of the complete poem.

The first of these four methods--what we can find the poets to have read--I do not want to touch on in this article: work has already been done on it;⁴ the others, quite apart from not having been studied in any detail, are very closely related, as I imagine will become obvious.

To begin, then, with direct statement on the function and nature of poetry. Henryson provides an obvious example, but I do not want to elaborate on what I said in an article published recently⁵ where I tried to show that Henryson's seemingly direct statements about the nature of poetry, in the *Fables* and in *The Testament of Cresseid*, are very limited compared to the full impact of the poetry itself, and that they are deliberately planned to be so as a part of the projection of the humble and limited narrator. There is a useful comparison with the statements about poetry made by the Chaucerian narrator in the *Canterbury Tales*, statements which form a part of the presentation of a particular and limited character whose attitude to poetry is meant to be counterpointed against, and in its limitations show up, a complex and uncertain attitude which is never, perhaps cannot be, defined but only practised and illustrated. I take as my example, then, not Henryson, but the prologue of *Colkelby's Sow*.⁶ The narrator describes, as he begins, the function of poetry in royal courts when kings, dukes, marquesses, earls, barons, knights, gentlemen and squires are assembled.

Quhen riallest most redowttit and he
Magnificat crownit kingis in maieste

Princis duces and marquis curious
 Erlis barronis and knychtis chevelrous
 And gentillmen of he genolegye
 As scutiferais and squieris full courtlye
 Ar assemblit and sett in a ryell se
 With namit folkis of he nobilite
 Thair talk þat tyme in table honorable
 Befoir lordingis and ladeis amiable
 Is oft singing and sawis of solace
 Quhair melody is þe mirthfull maistrace
 Ermy deidis in auld dayis done afoir
 Croniculis gestis storeis and mich moir
 Manestralis amang mvsicianis merely
 To haif hartis in hevinly army (1-16)

The scene is one compounded from literary tradition of course. It has elements one can recall from *Sir Gawain*, the *Morte Arthure*, the *Squire's Tale* for instance. But the most obvious parallel is to *Sir Orfeo* where the patterns of nobility and music, set out in the introduction in a manner rather similar to that here in *Colkelby's Sow*, become interwoven into the very texture of the poem which follows, creating its narrative and the shape of that narrative, suggesting its values: the music in *Sir Orfeo* does indeed bring hearts into heavenly harmony, and, if links the poem makes between the characters *in* the poem and the possible audience *of* the poem are to be taken at all seriously, the poetry of *Sir Orfeo* is to serve that purpose too. The parallel with our poem is instructive, but we must return to the immediate context. What does "to bring hearts into heavenly harmony" mean in *Colkelby's Sow*? The phrase suggests a social purpose for poetry, making its courtly audience at ease with one another in a context--surely of feasting--which is also designed for that purpose. Presumably poetry will bring such ease by creating a mood of pleasure: the sounds it makes, the patterns it forms will relax its hearers. Poetry will develop such a mood of confidence and relaxation by echoing the values of those who have gathered--for, to an audience of knights and ladies, what is more pleasant than tales which tell of the honour of their own pursuits, which have the support of generations for these are tales of deeds of arms done of old, they are chronicles, they are *gestes* where the values are seen at their highest significance, the work of heroes. A social purpose then. But more is suggested: the harmony hearts are to be lifted to is "heavenly harmony," a phrase which implies the music of the spheres, a music which is a testimony to the harmony of the created universe, a harmony which Boethius tells us is shattered in man only,⁷

and which *Scipio's Dream* tells us has been imitated by gifted men on stringed instruments and in singing, gifted men who have gained thus a return to the heavenly regions.⁸ A definition of poetry's function in a royal hall, then. The narrator proceeds to extend that function to other settings. Indeed, he says, it would be fitting if always there were such pleasure and play--otherwise the world is mere suffering. And he turns to his present audience, lords he calls them, though whether he does so in earnest or jocularly, or even with possible shades of ingratiating, is impossible to tell at this point; and he bids them with him make some sport and recreation to comfort the company.

So we begin *Colkelby's Sow* with a very elevated view of the function of poetry. And, though there is a difference of emphasis and perhaps a difference of tone, an elevated view is seen, too, at the end of the prologue. There the narrator claims a teaching function for his verse. He asks his audience to "pardoun them the fulich face of this mad metir," for the matter to be reported is so foolish; he asks them to understand his jumping from event to event, tale to tale, for the world is constantly changing its appearance. Many of these events are indeed foolish, he admits, but sometimes the most foolish event presents wisdom: "Wisdome vmquhyle holdis þe nycest wys" (56); "The wyss nycest the wisest quhile is provit" (60). George Fenwick Jones, in his translation and commentary published in 1956,⁹ has taken this comment as a license for a full scale moralization and allegorization of the stories which follow. And there is a great deal in the poem to support this: the general frame for the three stories--Colkelby and the differing ways he uses the three pennies--is used by the narrator to read a lesson similar to that of the parable of the talents. Besides, each of the stories, and on occasion separate incidents of each story, are moralized, and even allegorized during the poem, in particular in a long analysis by Gurgunnald, the narrator's grandmother, who has told him the stories in the first place. So, it would seem, the definition of the function of poetry given by the narrator has been worked out thoroughly: from the foolish events we have been taught a lesson, and that lesson, that wisdom surely leads to "heavenly harmony."

But I wonder. For the rather crude way I placed together "taught a lesson" and "heavenly harmony" in my last sentence is indicative surely of the way the poem works. To look at the prologue alone first of all. Though there may be some superficial resemblance of attitude, yet the discrepancy of tone in the definitions of poetry's function at the beginning and at the end of the prologue seems to me disconcerting to say the least: the stately world of romance and epic with its

suggestion of the hall of heaven, a transition confirmed by the poet's art, is scarcely the same as that world which makes eager moralization out of silly events. Besides, the whole of the prologue seems to me to be enveloped in a tone of insidious and, finally, gratuitous favour-seeking by the narrator. We must make "recreatioun" for the assembled company, he says.

Wold my lordis do se quho wold begin it
 Quho sall furthschaw or quho sall first fall in it
 Quho sall with discret correctioun of zow
 Bot I quho hath begune this mater now
 For begynnyng without end quhat availis (21-5)

He proceeds to an extended comparison between a tree which blooms but does not produce fruit and his own situation were he not to produce "recreatioun" after such an introduction, concluding

All be my self is this symylitude
 Suld I begin to sport and nocht conclude
 Than wold ze all belyve say lo him zondir
 That set to bourd and left it in a blondir
 Quhairfoir I will say of my fantesy
 Sum solasing to glaid this cumpany (43-8)

Such humility is a very traditional opening, of course, and the narrator is displaying a certain type of decorum in his use of it. But, to my mind, the *topos* here is greatly overdone, reducing the effect of the definitions of poetic function to part of itself, making them mere ploys in the narrator's argument to win attention, and thereby degrading their seriousness--so the description of the royal assembly gratifies listeners by making them feel similarly important; so the plug for the possible seriousness of silliness convinces the listener of his own worth as an allegorist. Now, why should the definition of poetic function be so degraded, and what does such a degrading tell us about the poet's view of the function of poetry?

I can provide some sort of answer to those questions only by turning first to the remainder of the poem in relation to the two functions of poetry we have seen described. First, poetry as the supporter of noble values. There is in the story of the three pennies a great deal which is traditionally associated with noble values. The first story for instance--the narrow escape from slaughter yet the ultimate reward of and honour of the piglet from Colkelby's sow--has much of the heroic romance about it: music; the dance; the battle, with the

appearance and description of contending forces; the hero who fights with Melliager and Hercules, with the King of Sidon, with Eglamoir of Arthurian fame, is pursued by Diana. And the second story provides us with the King of France and his diversions, with the new-found Duke of Flanders, a master of noble sports, and his wife, a long-lost woman of gentle birth. The third story provides a description of lords and their ladies which is full of *fine amour* manners and assumptions. But my description does an obvious injustice to the stories. Those dancers and fighters of the first story are peasants who prance in confusion and fight ridiculously; that hero is a pig. The new-made Duke of Flanders derives his name from a monstrous piece of etymology, and his story is so ineptly told that all our attention is dragged to the account of the narrator's grandmother who first told that story. And the *fine amour* lovers are the inhabitants of a fowl run producing scores of eggs to make Colkelby's godson rich. The noble is mocked. The second poetic world of the introduction, the moral world, is also mocked, surely. For its main mouthpiece in the poem is the narrator's grandmother, 140 years old, greedily supping gruel, toothless so no one can understand her but her grandson, whom she is quite unable to control.

So what of poetry? Its noble pretensions are mocked with worlds that are mocked by the stories. Claims about poetry which are as traditional as the worlds they suggest are seen to be overplayed, giving a false importance to their perpetrators. All that is left is poetry as laughter--though not the laughter described in the prologue. It is a detached laughter, I think, a superior laughter, the laughter of a clever poet who gains pleasure--perhaps to share it--from his own skill. That may be a moral function, though I doubt it; it is certainly a very aware poetic, of the sort we have learnt to associate with Chaucer.

I want to turn now to my next way of obtaining evidence for attitudes to poetry, that of examining the role of the narrator. We have already had to note that subject in dealing with *Colkelby's Sow*. I want to discuss it more directly here from the evidence of Henryson's fable *The Lion and the Mouse*.¹⁰ The story, of course, is the well-known one of a sleeping Lion disturbed by a Mouse which is threatened with death but released because it argues that it may be able to help the Lion some day. Later, when the Lion is caught in a net, the Mouse helps it escape by chewing through the ropes of the net. Henryson's source seems to have been the version of Gualterus Anglicus,¹¹ but he expands upon the story there in ways which are characteristic. There is, for instance, a profusion of detail in which the story is set: the Lion is sleeping because

he is weary from the chase, and lies under a tree in a fair forest baking his breast and belly in the sun; there is a tribe of mice who play merrily all over the Lion, pulling his beard, clawing his face, "Myrry and glaid thus dansit thay a spais" (96); later, when the Mice release the Lion, we are given a typically Henrysonian description of busyness, witty, and syntactically energetic. Again, the given tale is built up by the bringing into it of traditional formal patterns: the dispute between Lion and Mouse, which in the original was merely a wondering in the Lion's own mind as to the dignity of killing an inferior creature, is here in Henryson a formal debate with, as is characteristic of the form, one creature representing Reason, the other Emotion; and the Lion, caught in the net, has a full scale lament form thrust upon him, using--the passage is really very funny--the same sorrowful devices as Cresseid when she discovers her leprosy or Orpheus when he loses Eurydice. Again, the *moralitas* becomes far more wide ranging, by becoming specific. The original reads, in translation, merely,

If you are raised up through power, help the
oppressed gladly, so the story of the Lion tells
you: to the lowly it is good to give help: for
on many occasions a person who cannot prevent harm
can get you out of it.¹²

In our poem the Lion is allegorized as "prince, or empriour/
A potestat or zit a king with croun" (254-5) who, instead of directing his people, lies in sloth and sleep in the fair forest of this world's vain delights, so causing rebellion in the commons. Those rebelling should be corrected but treated gently for they may even help their lords who, rolling in worldly lust and vain pleasure, are sure to fall through false fortune who is Mistress of all changes and leader of the dance to lustful men whom she blinds.

Now I have spent some time discussing the changes Henryson has brought to this particular story, and suggesting that these changes are of a type typical of Henryson's own creativity, because there are at least two fictive devices by which Henryson pretends to disclaim all responsibility for the poem we hear--and it is necessary for us to sort these out if we are to make any progress with our enquiry, for each of these fictive devices suggests in itself a view of poetry. But these views are not necessarily Henryson's, and it is essential that we return in the end to the sense of Henryson's own creative imagination and its views on poetry.

The two fictive devices I mentioned are, in fact, two narrators: the first is the normal *persona* of the *Fables* who is with us, to a greater or lesser extent, throughout the collection; the second is Aesop, the fabulist himself who, appearing to the narrator in a dream when the narrator falls asleep under a tree in an idyllic and very traditional spring setting, tells him the tale of *The Lion and the Mouse*. I want to begin with Aesop and what he has to say about poetry. When he first speaks he relates poetry to both law and religion. He studied "mony a day" in civil law in Rome, he says, and now his reward is in heaven, while his writings are known to many a wise scholar. The narrator asks him to tell a story, but at first he refuses. What is the use, he says, of telling an invented story when straight preaching now cannot succeed, and he goes on, using the traditional form of the *laudator temporis acti*, to lament the state of society in the narrator's world:

Now in this warld me think rycht few or nane
 Till godis word that hes devotioun
 The eir is deiff The hairt is hard as stane
 Now oppin syn without correctioun
 The E inclynand to þe erd ay doun
 Sua rowstit is þe warld with kanker blak
 That my taillis may littill succour mak (71-7)

So poetry--"invented tales" he calls it--to him is a form of moral teaching, pointing out true values for individuals and for political and social systems. But poetry is, it seems, of less value than straight preaching, can only work in a society which is already open to what it is teaching.

There is another, less obvious, way in which Aesop represents his views on poetry. He is persuaded, despite what he has said, to tell to the narrator the tale of *The Lion and the Mouse*, which he directs against the worldly Lion, the ruler with no care for the state of his kingdom. But the imagery of the poem extends that criticism. In the fable the Lion sleeping under a tree in the fair forest is made to represent kings and other rulers who sleep in the false pleasures of this world. But the narrator too is asleep under a tree in such a setting. In fact, certain details of the *moralitas* refer not to the description of the Lion's surroundings but to those of the narrator: the *moralitas* describes the fair forest with its unruffled leaves, birds' song and flowers which are so sweet, as representing the world and its prosperity. The fair forest comes from the Lion's world, but the birds' song and the flowers come from the narrator's own world--and one he took obvi-

delight in--at the beginning of the prologue. So the narrator is being criticised, by inference, as one who should be awake to the passing pleasures of this world. Now so far I have referred to the "I" of the poem who reports what Aesop has said as the narrator but I have been tempted throughout to call him the poet. In some senses, I suppose, there is little reason to do so: he is merely a reporter here (though even his description of what happened to him has poetic form) and Aesop makes no mention of the fact that he is talking to a poet, nor does the "I" figure claim this sort of kinship. In this sense one could take the "I" figure as representative of Everyman, I imagine, trusting in the pleasure he sees about him. But the term poet is I think justified. This "I" figure is the same one we know as poet of the other fables of the collection, and that figure had claimed himself to be a poet in the *Prologue* to the collection--a hamfisted poet he called himself then, a mere translator he said twisting the truth outrageously, but nevertheless acknowledging his role as a maker of polished terms of sweet rhetoric. Now, if this fable is directed by Aesop at the narrator as a poet, what can this mean? For one thing it means that Aesop has an exalted view of the poet's role. He is, or should be, ruler of men as well as of words, who should guide, promote justice with compassion. This implied view is supported by Aesop's command at the end of the poem that the poet persuade monks to pray continuously that treason be exiled from the land, and justice reign, with lords keeping their faith constantly to their king. The poet is to concern himself with such questions which are also of course religious questions for they imply a view of the world in which this world is not paramount but transitory, subject to false fortune, under the judgment of another realm. The poet, too, must be aware of such priorities, must practise them himself for poetry has a religious function. And, according to the structure of this poem, the poet is failing in his duty in a society which is itself desperately failing. The poet is asleep in the fair forest: *allegorice*, he is deceived by this world's passing pleasures, does not understand their danger, so cannot condemn them in others as he should. Such is Aesop's view of poetry, and it is consistent with the portrait we are given of him. This is not the Aesop of the traditional portraits such as that given in Caxton's translation.

First begynneth the lyf of Esope with alle his
 fortune/how he was subtyll/wyse/ and born in Grece/
 not feere fro Troye the graunt in a Towne named Amoneo/
 whiche was amonge other dyformed and euylle shapen/
 For he had a grete hede/large vysage/longe Iowes/sharp

eyen/a short necke/corbe backed/grete bely/grete legges/
 and large feet/And yet that whiche was werse he was dombe/
 and coude not speke/but not withstondyng al this he had
 a grete wytte & was gretely Ingenyous/subtyll in cauyllacions/
 And Ioyouse in wordes¹³

By contrast, to the narrator of our poem appears the fairest man that he has ever seen. He seems to be dressed in academic robes current in fifteenth-century use with gown, chimere, hood and bonnet, all of the finest material. He bears the tools of his trade: he carries a roll of paper, he has a quill "stickand vndir his eir" (37) and an inkhorn and writing case at his belt. He has long white hair, is large of stature "with feirfull face" (41), moves with purposeful decorum. When the narrator asks who he is he claims to be of gentle blood and goes on to say how he was born and educated in Rome. Aesop's appearance--very much that of a fifteenth-century academic or churchman--seems to echo his values, with a contemporary relevance he would want to see anyhow, and his poetics.

What, then, of the poet/narrator's attitudes to poetry? If we are to judge from Aesop's position, the narrator would be not only failing in his duty as a poet, asleep when he should be wakening others to correct values, but impervious himself to the values of the poetry he has already read and written--amused only by the superficial decorations of sweet rhetoric, if I can allegorize him into being both asleep and awake at the same time; in fact, the uncomprehending narrator of literary tradition, most obviously known from Chaucer. But there is more to it than this, for Aesop's definition and accusations take place within a dream vision, as we have seen. If I can generalize grossly,¹⁴ dream vision in later mediaeval literature can be read in one, or both, of two ways, suggested by Chauntecleer and Pertelote in Chaucer's *Nun's Priest's Tale*. A dream can be a vision, a revelation from God as Chauntecleer claims his own to be. It can also be the product of some external features of the dreamer's own environment or imagination: so Pertelote in *The Nun's Priest's Tale* ascribes Chauntecleer's dreams to constipation and prescribes laxatives; so in *The Parliament of Birds* the narrator, beginning to tell of his dream, tells how one dreams of those affairs foremost in one's imagination--the weary hunter goes to the wood again in his dreams, the judge dreams of his cases, the carter of his carts and so on. It is possible, too, for a dream to begin from a merely personal reason, and become a revelation. What is the reason for the dream in our poem? It can be seen to come from personal circumstances. The poet figure we are to assume, I think, has been at work translating Aesop's fables

from Latin. Those fables confront him with a situation which accuses him, for he is this worldly in devotion. His dream accuses him of this--if we are to use the form of modern psychology, puts to him those things that he has suppressed. And, as is common in dream vision poetry, the relevance of the dream to the poet's situation is made allusively, by inference.

But does the dream progress beyond these personal circumstances to a *revelation* of the truth? Or, to put the question in terms more directly relevant to this paper, does Henryson's own view of poetry echo that of Aesop, that which challenges the poet/narrator even though he has not lived by it? In one way I do not want to answer that question here--it seems part of a much wider question in relation to the *Fables* as a whole, or at least to that group of six of which this particular fable is a part.¹⁵ However, there is one matter I want to comment on, a matter which I hope has become obvious as I have discussed the poem. That is Henryson's impressive and satisfying control over a very complex scheme, a scheme he invented himself from a diversity of other, mainly literary, sources. There is a sense of a poet's mastery over his medium and, with it, an allusiveness which seems to place any view the poet may have always at several removes from any view being stated. Are these the characteristics of a poet whose concerns are exclusively, or even predominantly, moral and didactic? Perhaps we find some answer to this in the Aesop portrayed to us, who can also be allusive, as we have seen before. But Aesop does not escape from a personal statement of belief as Henryson, I think, often does. I find his understanding of poetry decidedly ambivalent--with moral interest, indeed, but with a sense of joy in the pleasure of poetic form and texture, and in his own ability to manipulate them, which at the very least begins to blur that moral focus.

The final means I have suggested by which we may discover attitudes to poetry in later fifteenth-century Scotland is to examine the ways in which frame stories relate to tales within the frame. The two poems I have already dealt with have, in some senses at least, frame stories, but here I want to look at two other collections, *The Three Priests of Peebles* and *The Tales of the Five Beasts*, from a somewhat different perspective. *The Three Priests of Peebles*¹⁶ tells the tale of three priests who decide to tell each other tales. One of the matters in the poem which interests me--and it is relevant to our theme--is the way in which, within the tales told by the three priests, characters are seen to react to moral words. For instance, within the first tale the king is seen to agree with the words of criticism directed at him by the three estates, and to act upon those words. Again, in the second tale, Fictus's

moralisation of the incident of the bloodsucking flies, and his reinterpretation of the king's understanding of his own judgment, lead the king to moral belief and right action. Fictus, in fact, provides an example of how the moral poet works, reading a lesson from a story he has learnt, and within this tale the method succeeds. Now all the tales are in fact moral tales and their significance is seen, eventually, to be universal. The first two tales are political tracts, suggesting how a king should behave, but the third is the well-known parallel to *Everyman* ending with the advice that we should mend our ways, keep ourselves from the seven deadly sins, so we may leave this world in peace and enjoy the bliss of heaven. It is the comment of the frame tale on these moral stories which will provide us with our view on poetry and its function. The setting of the frame story is relevant, as Robin Fulton pointed out briefly in his article on the poem:¹⁷ the three priests on St. Bride's Day, in a private and comfortable place, rejoice, feast and drink--there are three capons on a spit, at least a quart of ale or wine, a clean cloth on the table, a boy to wait on the priests. The passage is full of echoes of--or perhaps one should say parallels to--Henryson: the feasting mice in *The Two Mice* with grace said and a surfeit of food; the fire to sit by of *The Testament of Cresseid*. And the passage suggests to me the uncaring folly of the mice in Henryson's fable, from whom the narrator reads the lesson, quoting Philippians iii, 19, "O wanton man accustomed to feed your belly and make of it your god, beware of death." The priests' attitude to poetry is of a piece with their predominant interests. When they have drunk about a quart, Master John suggests they each tell a story, for it will be fitting entertainment for the occasion. Master Archibald agrees, for he needs to tell a tale to keep himself awake he says, for otherwise his foot will fall into the fire. Sir William, disclaiming knowledge or travel, proposes that the others begin. Master Archibald thinks it would be presumptuous for him to do so, for he has travelled only to Rome. Master John agrees to begin, so as not to offend. The scene is scarcely set for moral tales, yet, somewhat to our surprise, moral tales we are given. In this context we might expect to be provided in some detail with the reaction of the priests to each tale, but only the briefest reactions are given. The first two tales are greeted with the comment, "God and Sanct Martyne quyte 3ow of 3our tail" (446 and cf. 1006). The moral purpose of these tales is, it seems, oblique to the priests and any moral relevance can be sloughed off on to the king. But the purpose of the third cannot, for death comes to all men and all men will find earthly friends wanting. The central figure of that tale had

thought he had three friends; the poem suggests some sort of relationship between these three friends and the three priests,¹⁸ yet that relationship is not seen by the priests, it seems. And surely the priests' comforts are criticized by the tale itself, teller criticizing himself and his friends. But again the reaction we are shown is non-committal: the other two say to Sir William, "This gude tale, sir, I trow God will you quyte" (1344). All we know is that the tale is, wittingly or unwittingly on the priests' part, in direct contradiction to their situation. So, what then of poetry? It can be useful--at least, it points a moral lesson and one part of the poem shows a reaction to that lesson--but it need not be; its reception must depend to some extent anyhow on the quality of its hearers. Which places the responsibility on us, as audience, to react like kings or priests.

About *The Tales of the Five Beasts*¹⁹ I want to make one very brief point only, though the poem is of considerable interest and requires extended study. There are here two frames: the world of the animals who tell the tales and moralize them, and the world of the narrator who tells and moralizes the tale of the animals telling tales. It is with the first of these frames that I am concerned. The first four beasts, the horse, the hart, the unicorn and the boar, tell moral tales--some directed at the king (the tales are told in the presence of King Lion), some directed at the worldly. But the wretched wolf, the last of the animals to speak, refuses to tell a tale, and claims rather to tell the truth for the sake of common profit. His plain and unadorned truth turns out to be a lie, those feigned tales to provide a truth which the literal wolf cannot see but which, if he had seen, would have prevented his exile.

It would be possible to draw some sort of conclusions from the above. All the poets discussed here have an interest in the moral purpose of poetry. But all are aware that such a purpose is not easily achieved--it is dependent on the attitudes of its audience, for instance. And there is awareness, too, that there are other values in poetry, particularly perhaps those sophisticated pleasures of parody and sheer artistic skill, which at least divert attention from that moral purpose and may even question its one-dimensional and solemn understanding of human priorities. One must realise, too, that both these responses to poetry--the moral and the pleasurable--are variants, if interestingly alert variants, on very traditional defences of poetry. However, at this stage of enquiry it is all too easy, and too early, to draw conclusions. What I hope to have done is to begin discussion in an area I believe

important, and to illustrate some of the ways in which an inquiry into this area might proceed.

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NOTES

¹ This article is based upon a paper read at the First International Conference on Scottish Literature, Medieval and Renaissance, held in Edinburgh in September, 1975. I am very grateful to Mrs. Priscilla Bawcutt for her comments on the first draft.

² I would compare, for instance, Ranald Nicholson's *Scotland: the later Middle Ages* (Edinburgh, 1974), where the political and economic history of the fifteenth century is dealt with in an admirably thorough, if arguable, manner, while the social and imaginative history is disappointingly skimpy, with the bold attempt to write a wider history in *Scottish Society in the Fifteenth Century*, ed. Jennifer M. Brown (London, 1977).

³ Cf. John Durkan and Anthony Ross, *Early Scottish Libraries* (Glasgow, 1961).

⁴ Cf., for instance, John MacQueen, *Robert Henryson* (Oxford, 1967).

⁵ "'To preue thare preching be a poesy'e': some thoughts on Henryson's poetics," *Parergon*, 8 (April, 1974), 24-36.

⁶ Ed. David Laing, rev. W. Carew Hazlitt, *Early Popular Poetry of Scotland and the Northern Border*, (London, 1895), I, 179-211. In quotation I have expanded superscript "t" and at line 22 read "sall" for "fall" and "furthschaw" for "surthschaw."

⁷ *Consolation of Philosophy*, Bk. II, m. viii.

⁸ Tr. W. H. Stahl (New York, 1952), p. 74.

⁹ *Witenwiler's Ring and the Anonymous Scots Poem Colkelbie Sow* (Univ. of North Carolina Studies in Germanic Languages and Literatures XVIII, 1956).

¹⁰ Ed. W. Tod Ritchie, *The Bannatyne Manuscript*, IV (STS 2nd ser., 26, 1930), pp. 236-45. The text of the *Fables* is highly problematic and we await Denton Fox's forthcoming edition. But several readings in the Bannatyne version of this tale seem to me demonstrably better than those in other witnesses. And cf. John MacQueen, *Robert Henryson*, pp. 189-99. On this prologue see also Nicolai von Kreisler, "Henryson's Visionary Fable: Tradition and Craftsmanship in *The Lyoun and the Mous*," *TSSL* XV (1973), 391-403.

¹¹ Cf. *The Poems of Robert Henryson*, ed. G. Gregory Smith, I (STS, 64, 1914), pp. xxx-xxxv.

¹² Translated from Gualterus Anglicus, ed. Julia Bastin, *Recueil Général des Isopets*, II (SATF, 1930), p. 21.

¹³ *Caxton's Aesop*, ed. R. T. Lenaghan (Cambridge, Mass., 1967), p. 27.

¹⁴ Cf. A. C. Spearing, *Medieval Dream Poetry* (Cambridge, 1976).

¹⁵ I refer to the group of six fables placed together in Bannatyne. The order of the fables seems to me as yet open to discussion.

¹⁶ Ed. T. D. Robb (STS 2nd ser., 8, 1920).

¹⁷ "The Thre Prestis of Peblis," *SSL*, XI (1973-4), 23-46.

¹⁸ Cf. R. D. S. Jack, "The Thre Prestis of Peblis and the growth of Humanism in Scotland," *RES* n.s. XXVI (1975), 257-70.

¹⁹ Ed. David Laing, rev. John Small, *Select Remains of the Ancient Popular and Romance Poetry of Scotland* (Edinburgh & London, 1885), pp. 278-93.