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*Edward C. Schweitzer*

## The Allegory of Robert Henryson's "The Bludy Serk"



"The Bludy Serk" is a minor poem even within the canon of Robert Henryson's work, but although it lacks the imaginative detail and complex interaction of particular and general truth of his *Morall Fabillis*<sup>1</sup>--for Henryson, after all, its general truth is absolute--"The Bludy Serk," in its concern with moralities and in the craftsmanship of its execution, typifies Henryson's art. Since it is, as A. M. Kinghorn notes,<sup>2</sup> an early example of the literary ballad, since its lack of narrative complexity and precise detail follows from the simplicity and abstractness of ballad style, and since comparison with other versions of the story will show that Henryson did what he set out to do with considerable skill, it is hardly fair to characterize "The Bludy Serk" as merely "a poetical exercise written to illustrate a religious truth,"<sup>3</sup> especially now that the nature of that religious truth has been called into question.

George S. Peek has argued recently that Henryson's source for "The Bludy Serk" was the story of the emperor's daughter in the Middle English version of the *Gesta Romanorum* extant in British Museum MS. Harley 7333, in which the lady is seduced by an earl after her father's death and then exiled from her kingdom, whereas in "The Bludy Serk" the lady is abducted against her will by a giant and thrown into a dungeon.<sup>4</sup> Peek

believes that both the *Gesta* story and Henryson's poem are allegories of original sin, and he concludes from the "change" in the story, removing "the guilt from the lady (in the allegory, the soul) and [placing] it on the evil giant," that Henryson suggests "men are not responsible for their sinful condition and do not bear the guilt (though they bear the condition) of that first sin." This is, Peek maintains, "a very significant theological comment."<sup>5</sup> And indeed it would be, if it were in fact what the poem said or suggested, for the view that original sin is a condition but not a fault; *poena* but not *culpa*, is completely at odds with the traditional doctrine of the Church; though Abelard proposed it in the twelfth century, Abelard was immediately and decisively refuted, and it is very nearly incredible on its face that Robert Henryson, chief schoolmaster of Dunfermline, would have proposed it in the fifteenth.<sup>6</sup> "The Bludy Serk" certainly gives us no reason to think he did.

The suggestion that the story of the emperor's daughter in Harley 7333 was Henryson's source for "The Bludy Serk" is itself unconvincing. The presentation of Christ as lover-knight is commonplace in the Middle Ages.<sup>7</sup> In Harley 7333 the lady is not imprisoned but exiled, and the only evidence of direct connection between it and "The Bludy Serk" is the use of the word *serk* in both, an especially insignificant parallel since in *most* versions of the story the lady hangs the knight's shirt in her chamber.<sup>8</sup> That a knight should give his lady the garment in which he has been wounded and that she should preserve it as a memento is not even peculiar to this story: in Wolfram's *Parzival*, for example, Gahmuret sends to Herzeloide the bloody shirt ("hemde nâch bluote var") in which he was mortally wounded while fighting for the Baruch.<sup>9</sup> Even if Henryson knew only a form of the story in which the knight entrusted his arms to the lady, he could easily have changed those bloody arms to a bloody shirt, as at least one other author manifestly did. The only detail "The Bludy Serk" has in common with the version in Harley 7333 is not distinctive.

Although it is impossible to identify any specific source for "The Bludy Serk," the contrast between Henryson's poem and its analogues, rather than a particular set of changes, might nevertheless suggest an eccentric view of original sin. But comparison with the version in Harley 7333 and the other analogues demonstrates Henryson's theological orthodoxy as surely as it reveals his poetical craftsmanship. That the lady in "The Bludy Serk" is abducted against her will, as Peek claims (p. 202), is an inference only. It would seem a very reasonable inference, if we were to draw any such inference at all, but the poem makes no comment one way or the other. Several

of the analogues, on the other hand, tell us explicitly that the lady was deceived through ignorance,<sup>10</sup> that she was deprived of her heritage through violence and injury,<sup>11</sup> unjustly and through fraud,<sup>12</sup> or that she could find no one who would defend her.<sup>13</sup> All such comments do suggest that the lady is an innocent victim, and all heighten the sentimental sensationalism of the narrative while confusing the interconnection of letter and moral, sense and sentence.<sup>14</sup> But "The Bludy Serk" contains none of them. Henryson, indeed, never recounts the actual abduction; when he first mentions it, it is an accomplished fact, and the action of the poem, if we can call it that, really begins with the lady's imprisonment:

Thair dwelt alyt besyde the king  
 A fowll gyane of ane;  
 stollin he hes the lady ying,  
 away with hir is gane,  
 and kest hir in his dungering,  
 Quhair licht scho nicht se nane;  
 hungir and cauld and grit thristing  
 Scho fand in to hir wame.<sup>15</sup>

And the next stanza further clouds the issue of the lady's personal responsibility while making her a representative instance and suggesting the condition of all men between Fall and Redemption when it remarks of the lady's giant abductor,

Thair wes nane that he ourtuk,  
*In rycht or yit in wrang,*  
 Bot all in schondir he thame schuke,  
 The gyane wes so strang.

(29-32, emphasis added)

"The Bludy Serk" is unique in its striking emphasis on the lady's imprisonment, both initially in the details that the dungeon (21, 34)--of a giant with nails like a hell's crook (27)--is so deep (34) the lady can see no light (22) and suffers there hunger, cold, and thirst (23-24) and again, near the end of the poem, when the lady recalls the "bandoun" (84) in the dungeon, both deep and dark (85-86), from which she has been freed. Especially since such a constellation of details stands out against the general abstraction of the poem's narrative style, we are made to understand--though we are not told until we reach the concluding *moralitas*: "the pit [is like] to hell, with panis fell" (103)--that the lady has been damned to hell, carried there by some demon, and is suffering the total deprivation of one cut off from the sight of God and the light of grace.

The analogues, on the other hand, typically use the lady's poverty in exile to represent man's plight in a fallen world, and so in Harley 7333 the lady laments to the fair young knight who is about to take up her cause, "Whan [the Emperor, my father,] was ded, þer come a knyzt, and spoiled me of my virginite; and after þe synne, he put me out of myne heritage, In so moch that I aske nowe my brede fro dore to dore."<sup>16</sup> But Henryson cuts through to essentials, not man's hardships in this world but his bondage to the devil in the next. He does not emphasize the lady's guilt, because "The Bludy Serk" is about the Redemption and the debt of gratitude man consequently owes God, not about the Fall, or indeed about the Incarnation, except as those are prerequisite to our redemption at the Passion. And accordingly Henryson does not describe directly either the lady's abduction (17-24) or the prince's agreement to fight for the lady (41-48), thus putting into relief the combat itself and the exchange between prince and lady which follows from it (49-80). But if Henryson does not emphasize the lady's guilt, neither does he in any way deny it, for if God is just, and the poem nowhere suggests he is not, she cannot be damned guiltless.

It is important here to distinguish between original sin and the first sin, for those are not the same. Adam and Eve, according to the Church, bear the guilt of an actual sin--the first sin. Their descendents are not equally guilty, but all men share in the guilt of Adam and Eve, *per originem*, because all men were present materially in them--or so at least the Church has explained since the time of Anselm.<sup>17</sup> Original sin is not eating the apple; original sin is the innate tendency to concupiscence, the privation of the original rectitude of the will which followed from the first sinful act. The guilt of original sin is less than the guilt of the first sin, but it is nevertheless sufficient to damnation. There is thus no distinction between the conception of original sin in Harley 7333 and the other analogues and the conception of original sin in "The Bludy Serk." The doctrine of original sin is irrelevant to Harley 7333, where we have to do with an allegory of the Fall, the first sin. And the doctrine of original sin is simply presupposed in "The Bludy Serk," where we have to do much more narrowly with an allegory of the Redemption, since it explains, if explanation is necessary, why the lady, who has committed no sinful act within the poem, should, like an unbaptized infant, be damned to hell. There is no reason whatsoever to suppose that Henryson's conception of original sin was at all unusual.

The difference between Henryson's poem and the prose of its analogues is not a difference in allegorical meaning so much as

a difference in literary effectiveness. As Henryson turned the story of the emperor's daughter into poetry in a ballad meter, he also simplified it in good ballad fashion by reducing it to its essential element: the captivity of man to sin and the devil which made the Redemption necessary. While "The Bludy Serk" includes at least by implication all the central events of salvation history--Fall, damnation, Incarnation, and Redemption--Henryson gives his poem greater unity by focusing on the Redemption, as Harley 7333 notably does not, allowing it ten lines (49-58) as opposed to the terse, "He zafe Bataile azen the Erle, and hadde þe victory" (p. 24), and making the exchange between prince and lady follow from it (65-80) rather than precede it in the awkward preliminary bargaining of Harley 7333 and those other versions where the knight finds the lady struggling in the world.<sup>18</sup> Although Henryson's narrative of the combat itself, unlike the narratives of the *Fabillis*, is abstract, as ballad style demands, he emphasizes the allegorically significant detail that the knight took the giant prisoner,

And kest him In his awin dungeon,  
allane withouttin feir,  
With hungir, cauld, and confusioun,  
As full weill worthy wer.

(52-55)

Henryson's narrative thus reveals that this is no ordinary combat, not trivially by confirming only that it is a transparently disguised retelling of the Passion<sup>19</sup> but by pointing to its underlying meaning as it shows captivity led captive in the detail of the giant cast into his own dungeon and made to suffer what the lady has suffered. And the general absence of detail throws into relief, too, the equally significant *bludy serk* (59-64, 75-78, 81-88), an emblem of Christ's sacrifice for man, which serves ever after to remind the lady both of the pain from which she has been set free and of the pain which her savior suffered in freeing her (81-88).

Gregory Smith, who found Henryson's moralizations tedious, was grateful that he kept them, "as the Latin fabulists did, at the end and at the will of the reader, not mingling them with the story as Lydgate and others did, to the dulling of the whole."<sup>20</sup> It would, however, be more accurate to say, on the contrary, that in "The Bludy Serk" Henryson has taken pains to make the story and the *moralitas* inseparable, if less complexly so than in the *Fabillis*; inseparable not only in the trivial sense that the moralization--"Sa suld we do our god of micht,/That did al for us mak," and so on (91-96)--precedes

the formal *moralitas* in which the allegory is explained (97-120) but also in the fundamental sense that Henryson has shaped his narrative to make the *moralitas* implicit in it. And since it is really the sentence of a simple allegory that enriches the sense, not the other way around,<sup>21</sup> we can never see the poem for what it is unless we can recapture, at least momentarily, the typically medieval excitement of watching the meaning unfold and the satisfaction of seeing the meaning we have perceived confirmed by the *moralitas* at the end. From this point of view, one important effect of Henryson's skipping over the actual abduction--and, to a lesser extent, the prince's undertaking the lady's cause--is to delay, briefly, the recognition that *this* story is the story of our redemption. For the significance of the story hardly begins to emerge much before the end of stanza three, and the first decisive clue is the giant's nails "lyk ane hellis cruk" in stanza four (27). That the king is "anceane and ald" (5) may suggest God the Father, but the "dukis, erlis, and barronis bald/He had at his bidding" and especially the sixty years he could reign suggest instead a conventional character in a medieval romance, as does the remark in the description of the king's daughter, "princis luvit hir paramour" (15). Even the giant, of course, might have come out of the pages of medieval romance, though a giant is obviously a more diabolical figure than a prince or an earl, and in the exegetical tradition giants are a common figure for the devil.<sup>22</sup> When Henryson's giant is said to have nails "lyk ane hellis cruk," however, it begins to be clear, even without the concluding moralization, that the lady's bondage figures forth man's bondage to sin and Satan before the coming of Christ. The poem's account of how the king found a knight to win his daughter's release, however, preserves a certain ambiguity, telling us that the king sought "baith fer and neir" (41) without specifying where the knight was found--or, indeed, describing how the knight took up the challenge--and telling us that the knight is "a worthy prince that had no peir" (45) without specifying any relationship between prince and king. Only in the literally unlikely detail that the giant is himself imprisoned, and the lady first freed and then brought home, by a knight who has been mortally wounded in the fight, is the underlying pattern laid bare which gives larger significance, in retrospect, to the age and power of the king, the beauty of his daughter, her "bigly bour," the ugliness and strength of the giant, and the peerlessness of the knight and which makes more precisely meaningful, again in retrospect, the sixty years the king could reign (6), suggesting the six days of creation, the qualification that there was none so fair as the lady "on fold" (14), here a limit as well as a superlative,

and the detail that the prince was "held ful trew cunnand" (48), for Christ is the wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1:24).<sup>23</sup> This revealed pattern of significance then gives force to the exchange between knight and lady and to the lady's subsequent fidelity to the knight, where what compels our attention is the significance shining through events, rather than the events themselves. If a final proof of Henryson's intertwining of story and *moralitas*--and a final instance of his poetic success--is required, it is that the *moralitas* concludes with the imperative not to keep Christ's Passion always in mind but, returning to the poem's central metaphor, to "think on the bludy serk" (120). More than a moralized tale, "The Bludy Serk" is thus a poem deliberately simple but finely controlled, its Christian moral made to seem not so much imposed as discovered.<sup>24</sup>

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NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See the sensitive appreciation by Denton Fox, "Henryson's Fables," *ELH*, 29 (1962), 337-56.

<sup>2</sup> "The Minor Poems of Robert Henryson," *SSL*, 3, (1965), 32.

<sup>3</sup> Kinghorn, p. 32.

<sup>4</sup> "Robert Henryson's View of Original Sin in 'The Bludy Serk,'" *SSL*, 10 (1972), 199-206.

<sup>5</sup> The argument is made throughout; the quotations are from p. 202.

<sup>6</sup> See Odon Lottin, *Psychologie et morale aux XII<sup>e</sup> et XIII<sup>e</sup> siècles*, IV (Louvain and Gembloux, 1954), 11-280; overview, pp. 271-80; on Abelard, pp. 27-29. For a brief account see any theological encyclopedia.

<sup>7</sup> The most important Latin analogues for "The Bludy Serk" are printed in Wilbur Gaffney, "The Allegory of the Christ-Knight in *Piers Plowman*," *PMLA*, 46 (1931), 155-68; both the theme and its background are discussed more generally by Rosemary Woolf, "The Theme of Christ the Lover-Knight in Medieval English Literature," *RES*, N. S. 13 (1962), 1-16, largely re-

produced, though without most of the theological evidence, in her *English Religious Lyric in the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1968), pp. 44-66.

<sup>8</sup> Gaffney, p. 164 and n. 21; the versions of Nicole Bozon and Albert of Metz--discussed by Gaffney, pp. 157-62--should be added to the list in n. 21. The "cote-amour" of the version in British Museum MS. Additional 9066--edited with that of Harley 7333 by S. J. H. Herrtage, *The Early English Versions of the Gesta Romanorum*, E.E.T.S., E.S., 33 (London, 1879), 23-26--also normally refers to a garment, one worn over a knight's armor and embroidered with his coat of arms (*OED*, *coat-armour*, 1; cf. Peek, p. 201).

<sup>9</sup> Ed. Karl Lachmann, 6th ed. (Berlin and Leipzig, 1926), 111.15. In an emphatically uncourtly context, Hildigunn, in *Njáls Saga*, gathers Hoskuld's blood in the cloak he was wearing at the time of his murder (Ch. 112), saves it, and uses it to force Flosi to take vengeance on the Njalssons (Ch. 116)--ed. Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, *Brennu-Njáls Saga*, Islenzk Fornrit, 12 (Reykjavik, 1954), and trans. Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Palsson (Baltimore, 1960).

<sup>10</sup> Nicole Bozon, in Gaffney, p. 158.

<sup>11</sup> Gui d'Evreux, in Gaffney, p. 161.

<sup>12</sup> MS. Harley 219, in Gaffney, p. 163, translated in the Middle English version of the *Gesta Romanorum* in MS. Additional 9066, ed. Herrtage, p. 23: "and so prively he begiled here and with fraude overcome here, and vnrightfully caste hire oute of this kyngdome."

<sup>13</sup> Albert of Metz, in Gaffney, p. 162, and Bibliothèque Nationale MS. Latin 16499, in Gaffney, p. 163.

<sup>14</sup> On the terms *sense* and *sentence* see D. W. Robertson, "Some Medieval Literary Terminology, with Special Reference to Chrétien de Troyes," *SP*, 48 (1951), 669-92, and, more briefly, *A Preface to Chaucer* (Princeton, 1962), pp. 315-16.

<sup>15</sup> Lines 17-24, *The Poems and Fables of Robert Henryson, Schoolmaster of Dunfermline*, ed. H. Harvey Wood, and ed. (Edinburgh, 1958). All subsequent references are to this edition and are made in the body of the text.

<sup>16</sup> Herrtage, p. 23; similarly the versions of Gui d'Evreux (Gaffney, p. 161) and Harley 219 (Gaffney, p. 163), translated

in Additional 9066 (Herrtage, p. 23): the lady "levid longe in pouerte and wrechidnesse, wantyng vertue and richesse." In some versions--such as those of Albert of Metz (Gaffney, p. 162) and the Northern Homily Collection in the Vernon MS., ed. C. Horstmann, *Archiv*, 57 (1877), 274-75--she is not even overcome, though she is hard pressed.

<sup>17</sup> Lottin, IV, 14, 275-76.

<sup>18</sup> So the knight in Harley 7333 (Herrtage, p. 24) lays out his conditions: "'And þerfore, if þou wolt graunte to me oo thing, sothly I shall fizte for thyne heritage, and behote þe the victorie....3it I woll haue an opir certayne of þe, as þis; If it happe me to dye for þe in batyll....'" The earliest version, in the *Ancrene Wisse*--Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, MS. 402, ed. J. R. R. Tolkien, E.E.T.S., 249 (London, 1960), 197-200--in its own way as unique as "The Bludy Serk," concentrates on just those preliminaries, but without the clumsy bargaining; its point is the constancy of God's love for man despite man's unworthiness, and there the besieged lady thinks nothing of the assistance repeatedly sent her and never yields to the great king's pleas when he comes in person to fight for her, but once he has fought, has been slain, and is miraculously resurrected, she loves him above all else.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. the version of Albert of Metz (Gaffney, p. 162), where the knight is wounded with five wounds and with the fifth is dead.

<sup>20</sup> G. Gregory Smith, *The Poems of Robert Henryson*, I, S.T.S., 64 (Edinburgh, 1914), 153-54; similarly Peek, p. 200.

<sup>21</sup> "The Bludy Serk" is in this respect typical of most simple allegories; see Rosemond Tuve, *Allegorical Imagery: Some Mediaeval Books and Their Posterity* (Princeton, 1966), p. 26.

<sup>22</sup> E.g., *Allegoriae in sacram Scripturam, Patrologia latina*, 112, col. 946: "Gigas, diabolus, ut in Job: 'Irruit in me quasi gigas,' diabolus superbe se erexit contra me"; similarly *Glossa ordinaria* on Eccli. 47:4, *Biblia sacra cum Glossa ordinaria...et Postilla Nicolai Lyrani* (Venice, 1603), III, col. 2209; Hugh of St. Cher on Ps. 32:16 and Prov. 9:18, *Opera omnia in uniuersum Vetus et Novum Testamentum* (Lyons, 1645), II, fol. 81<sup>vb</sup>, III, fol. 19<sup>vb</sup>.

<sup>23</sup> So Augustine writes in the *De trinitate*, 7.3.5, "Cum de sapientia Scriptura loquitur, de filio loquitur quem sequimur uiuendo sapienter, quamuis et pater sit sapientia sicut lumen et deus," and so Ps. 103:24, "Omnia in sapientia fecisti," means, according to Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, 103.s. 3.25, "omnia in Christo fecisti" (*Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina*, 50, 253-54; 40, 1520). The interpretation is universal in the Middle Ages and is not even regarded as allegorical; Hugh of St. Cher, III, fol. 8<sup>vb</sup>, paraphrases Prov. 3:19 ("Dominus sapientia fundavit terram"), "Ad literam, id est, in filio, *Psalm*. 103, 'Omnia in sapientia fecisti.'"

<sup>24</sup> I am grateful to Professor Denton Fox of the University of Toronto for his comments on an earlier draft of this essay.