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Craig McDonald

The Thre Prestis of Peblis and *The Meroure of Wyssdome*:
A Possible Relationship



Like so many other Scottish literary pieces of the later Middle Ages, the *Thre Prestis of Peblis* has come down to us with little information as to its authorship, its date, and the circumstances surrounding its composition. Through this essay I would like to join the others who have attempted to piece together this missing information by studying certain parallels the poem has with the *Meroure of Wyssdome*, a royal handbook on faith and good government, written by John Ireland, a Scottish diplomat and theologian, in 1490. These parallels, which, in the light of present research, these two works share exclusively, suggest a possible relationship. It is my belief that the author of the *Thre Prestis* was familiar with Ireland's treatise and that he wove developed versions of two of Ireland's *exempla* into his framework of stories. This knowledge, then, offers some aid in determining the date of the poem.

We might begin by considering the work of previous scholars who have attempted to discover the origins of the *Thre Prestis*. A recent editor of the work, T.D. Robb, suggests that the poet is John Reid (d. 1505), the "Gud gentill Stobo" in Dunbar's *Lament for the Makaris*, l. 86. Reid was a native of Peebles, a vicar of the nearby Kirkcrist, and a secretary to James III and James IV. The setting of the poem, its

clerical bias, and the knowledge of law and of the royal court which it evinces are offered in support of Stobo's authorship.¹ Donald MacDonald is unconvinced by Robb's arguments, and on the basis of a linguistic and thematic analysis, offers Robert Henryson as a candidate. Furthermore, he claims, the connection between Reid and Stobo is uncertain, and there is little evidence to place Reid in the vicinity of Peebles.² But the parallels which MacDonald adduces between Henryson's work and the *Thre Prestis* might be explained by the borrowing of one poet from another, and his doubts about the identity of Reid are incontrovertibly answered by contemporary records.³ The argument that there is none of Reid's known poetry surviving by which to make a comparison with the *Thre Prestis* is a criticism which has to be squarely faced, but the evidence still tends to favor Reid or a man in a position similar to his.

As to the date of composition, due to references to St. Martin in the poem (ll. 446, 1006), Robb postulates that the *terminus a quo* is 1484, when the St. Martin's altar of the parish church at Peebles is believed to have been erected. The *terminus ad quem* is 1492, a date which is based upon ll. 53-54. There, Master Archibald, one of the priests, mentions in passing that Spain still has one heathen kingdom. In 1492, that kingdom, Granada, fell to the Christians. Robb, however, believes the poem to be a product of the uncertain times of James III, particularly of the last years of his reign (ca. 1484-8).⁴ He notes the correlations between historical events and details in the poem to substantiate such a claim. According to this view, the king throughout the work is a caricature of the Scottish monarch, James III. Slothful in the administration of justice (ll. 276-92, 543-6, 625-9, 651-788), eager to consort with young favorites (ll. 456-62), more concerned with the munificence rather than the spirituality of his bishops (ll. 375-430), unfaithful to his queen (ll. 809-990)--all these are charges which traditionally have been levelled at James.

More recently, attempts have been made to show that these "obvious" associations are not as great as they might at first appear. In the first tale, Master John's, the three estates present their grievances to the king in response to the accusations that they have declined from their former glory. The burghesses complain that their sons waste hard-earned inheritances (ll. 175-252). The nobles argue that because judicial oppression has been committed against their tenants, they themselves have become poor (ll. 265-320). The clergy point out that ecclesiastical appointments are made on the basis of money rather than spiritual qualities (ll. 375-

430). In the face of these complaints, the king acknowledges his failures and promises a reformation (ll. 321-52, 431-44). R.J. Lyall believes that it is the king's dramatic reversal of policy that argues against an historical association with James III.⁵ If we consider the story on the literal level alone, his criticism is probably correct. Few Scottish kings made such happy reforms. Nevertheless, the elements of the tale could be taken to represent symbolically various levels of the poet's purpose. The complaints of the three estates need not correspond to an actual parliament, though Parliament did take upon itself the responsibility of reminding monarchs of their duties.⁶ Instead, the parliament in the tale could symbolize the poet's analysis of contemporary conditions, the complaint of each estate a condemnation of one aspect of the present king's reign. The outline of reform proposed by the king in the story might then represent a recommended, though perhaps never actualized formula for bringing the kingdom back to its former glory.

N.A.T. Macdougall, a student of the reign of James III, has proposed that the doctor of laws which the king appoints to rectify injustices and to ride on circuits throughout the kingdom (ll. 341-52) is "unmistakably" John Ireland, the author of the *Meroure of Wyssdome* and a diplomat for James III. But such a reference, he continues, admits the poet's confusion of the offices of justiciar (a circuit judge) and a lord of Council (who formed part of the King's Council). Ireland held the second position, but not the first.⁷ Macdougall's criticism rests on the misapprehension that the doctor of laws was appointed justiciar. In the passage, however, the doctor is supposed to *accompany* the justiciar. Conceivably, Ireland, as a lord of Council, would have attended justice ayres as a counsellor or assessor. But another argument, not just the poet's confusion, strikes altogether at the identification of Ireland with the doctor. Despite his diplomatic career, Ireland was trained in theology rather than law. If the doctor of laws is meant to be identified with an historical person, a more likely candidate than Ireland is William Elphinstone, Bishop of Aberdeen, whose career spanned the reigns of James III and James IV. Although Elphinstone never advanced beyond the degree of licentiate in canon law, he was an influential figure in shaping and administering Scottish law from the 1470's onward.⁸ Perhaps he was chosen in response to Parliament's demands that the law of the land be codified and strengthened, a task not unlike that presented to Master John's doctor of laws, though such a codification never took place.⁹ In any case, the poet's grasp of the legal realities is slim and argues against a precise

interpretation. The nobles' complaint is only superficially sound, for any analysis of the legal structure in medieval Scotland demonstrates that the nobles themselves occupied the key judicial positions and at times oppressed their own tenants.¹⁰ Their criticism of the king's ministers redounds upon themselves. The general protests which the nobles make against injustice are too vague to be of further help in dating the poem with regard to a particular reign.

Turning to the second tale, Master Archibald's, we immediately notice that it actually consists of three stories which are all connected by a single figure, the fool Fictus. The tale opens with a description of the king's "carefree" court:

Hee luifit ouer weil zong counsel;
 zong men he luifit to be him neist;
 zong men to him thay war baith Clark and Preist.
 Hee luifit nane was ald or ful of age,
 Sa did he nane of sad counsel nor sage.
 To sport and play, quhyle vp and quhylum down,--
 To al lichtnes ay was he redie boun.

(ll. 456-62)

A learned man, Fictus, disguises himself as a fool in order to gain the foolish king's ear, knowing that open wisdom has no audience in the court. In the first story (ll. 499-634) the king meets a man who has been beaten by robbers and whose wounds are covered with flies. The man blames the king for his predicament, accusing him of some of the same shortcomings cited in the opening of the tale:

"For and with zow gude counsal war ay cheif,
 Than wald ze stanche weill baith reuer and theif:
 Haue thow with the that can weil dance and sing,
 Thow taks nocht thocht bi realme weip and wring."

(ll. 543-6)

When the king attempts to chase the flies away, the man prevents him, stating that he would rather have flies covering his body who are gorged with blood than gain temporary relief only to have fresh flies come to satiate their hunger and torment him even worse. Fictus turns the incident to good purpose by advising the king to retain counsellors and officials already in his employ. Like the flies on the wounded man's body, these officials, once glutted with the wealth of their position, will prove less of a hindrance to justice than a constant stream of newly-appointed officials (the new flies, swarming in to replace the ones which have been brushed off).

The second story (*ll.* 651-788) touches on a problem which was acute during the reign of James III, but which also has a prominent place in the parliamentary records of James IV--remissions.¹¹ Twice, the king, through the intercession of one of his counsellors, pardons a known murderer. When the man kills a third time, however, the king turns a deaf ear to such pleas and condemns him. Fictus states that the man should be released, the reason being that though he (the murderer) had killed the first victim, it was the king who, through his sloth in exacting justice, was responsible for the deaths of the other two.

The third story (*ll.* 809-990) depicts Fictus' (and perhaps the poet's) crowning achievement. The king, whose desire has turned from his queen to a burges's daughter, enlists Fictus' aid in securing his pleasure. Fictus then secretly arranges for the queen to exchange places in bed with the girl, and the king spends three blissful nights with his own wife. Fictus claims that he can make the royal mistress a queen and for a price will do so. When the king promises him goods, land, gold, lordships, or a bishopric, the "fool" reveals his plot.

The precise historical relevance of this tale, like that of the first, is open to question. The charges that James III consorted with young favorites and disregarded the counsel of his elder statesmen are largely unfounded. The traditional targets, William Roger, Thomas Cochrane, James Hommyl, and Thomas Preston, seldom appear in contemporary records. Of those known to have been intimate with James, all, with the exception of John Ramsay (named Lord Bothwell in 1485), were men of mature years. Most were capable administrators as well.¹² Singling out James' familiars is too convenient an explanation of his unpopularity, for other monarchs had men on whom they bestowed their favor. Robert Liddale, a tailor for James II, was appointed the keeper of Tantallon Castle, the constable of Dunbar Castle, the ranger of Yarrow, and a bailie to the Earl of March.¹³ An anonymous chronicler, whose short history covers the reigns of James II and James III, expresses contempt for Master James Lindsay, a keeper of the Privy Seal during the minority of James III and personal counsellor to Mary of Gueldres, the queen dowager.¹⁴ Personal favorites, especially those of mean estate, were probably a source of concern during James III's reign, but were by no means an uncommon problem. In fact, criticism of a king's favorites seems to have been a common pastime amongst authors of satire and complaint.¹⁵

James III's lechery, which seems to be alluded to in *ll.* 809-990, is uncharacteristic of the king, at least as he is

portrayed by contemporary records. His only separation from the queen occurred in 1482-3 and probably arose from her desire to protect the young heir to the throne, the Duke of Rothesay, from the Lauder rebels, who had captured the king in the summer of 1482. In other words, it seems to have been a politically expedient measure, which lasted for only a short time.¹⁶ In the sections dealing with the law, a general condemnation of James' failure to institute justice may have been intended, but the criticism, by its very generality, is applicable to other kings as well.

The third tale, William's, has no historical relevance at all, but as Robin Fulton points out, helps to establish a religious context within which to place the other tales.¹⁷

Having undermined or at least cast a reasonable doubt on our ability to state conclusively that the *Thre Prestis* is a satirization of James III, we are forced to turn elsewhere for an answer to the question of the poem's date. Actually, in this case, it is the very generality and conventionality of the criticism that offers us a glimmer of hope in dating the poem, for two of the stories which Archibald tells, the "wounded man with the flies" and the "king, the murderer, and the fool," are found, in slightly different versions, within two folios of one another in John Ireland's *Meroure of Wyssdome*, Book 7, ff. 332^r-3^r.¹⁸ In the remainder of this essay, I wish to discuss the possibility that the poet of the *Thre Prestis of Peblis* was partially inspired by the *Meroure of Wyssdome* and that at least a portion of the *Thre Prestis* dates from between 1490 (the date when the *Meroure* was completed¹⁹) and 1492 or thereabouts (when the poet would probably have heard about the fall of Granada).

These dates, in fact, have already been proposed, but for different reasons. Ronald Jack suggests that the poem was intended as an *exemplum* for James IV, possibly recalling, metaphorically, the weaknesses of the young king's father, but certainly drawing upon standard political theory.²⁰ Jack extols Fictus as a "Renaissance" model, one who is well-travelled and well-educated and who turns these virtues towards the advancement of Christian ideals, particularly as they are related to the state. Fictus' learning (see *ll.* 463-72) is turned towards practical politics rather than strictly theological ends.²¹ Building upon this idea of the poem as an *exemplum*, R.J. Lyall notes the conventionality of many of the themes. The tone, he also claims, is didactic rather than satirical. The references could be to James III, but there is little evidence to prove that they are exclusively so.²² Given the limits for the date of composition, 1484-93, the poem-as-*exemplum* would probably have most relevance to a

king beginning his reign rather than to a king well-advanced in his reign. The composition of the *Meroure of Wyssdome* gives evidence which tends to substantiate this kind of reasoning. Although James III had requested the book (perhaps for the use of his sons), Ireland felt compelled to finish it two years after that king's death in order to present the new king, James IV, with a book teaching the way to wisdom.²³ The first six books deal with the spiritual aspects of wisdom, the seventh with that part of wisdom most necessary to the good governance of a kingdom. As is the case with most medieval teachers, Ireland salts his discourse with *exempla*, and the two stories under consideration occur in this context. For the sake of convenience, I quote them in full:

I reid in the corniclis of Fraunce þat þe king was prayit to gif a remissioun for a slauchter. þan ansuerit þe king þat he remittit to þe samyn persoune fer a cryme of befor and þat he wauld nocht þane remyt him þat faut nor forgeue him. þan was þar present ane þat befor was haldin for a foule þat said to þe king: "Scher, weraly ze suld be werray ressoune forgeue him for ze haue causit þis slauchter mar þan he." þan said the king: "Pas þi way, fule. þou wait nocht quhat þou sais. Quhow haue I slane þe persoune?" Than ansuerit þe fule: "Scher, I sall tell zou. For and ze had done iustice befor to þis fautour, he had nocht now committit þis slauchter." Than þe king knew his faute, and þe fule was iugit wys....Ane vthir doctrine is, souuerane lord, þat þi hienes suld nocht multiply mekle þe ministeris of iustice na oft change þame.... And as to þe changeing of officiaris, sais þe gret clerk Arestotill in his *Rethoric*, þat a man was richt gretlie hurt and woundit sar, and þe fleis com in a gret multitud and couerit him and drank his blud abundanly. þan come a man þat had gret piete of him and chasit þe fleis away. And þan said þe hurt man in gret dolour: "For Goddis saik, lat thir fleis rest heir, for þai ar now foll of my blud. For and þar cum new fleis þai will aluterly consume me þai ar sa misterfull and hungry." And sa is of the new officiaris þat ay wil be fillit of the substaunce of þe pur pepil.

Both stories are used to illustrate what the king's attitude to justice should be, and in both cases his conclusions resemble those of the *Thre Prestis'* poet: a king is responsible when he allows crimes to go unpunished, and a king should avoid changing his ministers frequently. In the first he even

uses a fool to point out the king's wrongdoing. Admittedly, there are obvious differences between the two versions of each story. Most apparent is that the order of the two stories is reversed in the *Meroure* and that they are separated by other material. Ireland's stories are shorter. The king grants only one pardon before sentencing the murderer to be punished, and the role of the intermediary in court is less developed. The king's elaborate plans for reform in the *Thre Prestis* (which include calling a parliament to choose capable advisers) are also missing in the *Meroure*. In fact, Ireland omits telling us whether the king took any action at all. The fool and the king never appear in Ireland's second story, though the context of the story clearly indicates whom the passerby should represent. Accordingly, no accusation about the failure of the king to enact the justice which would have prevented the injury in the first place is forthcoming. Ireland assumes the role of explicator in the place of the fool. Furthermore, he draws upon historical parallels to illustrate his message. Classical examples being popular, he compares the changing of officers in the emperor Tiberius' day to the wringing of a sponge, so frequently and easily were the officials dismissed. But to demonstrate how generalized such criticism, however accurate, was, we must call to attention Ireland's comment that Louis XI of France, to whom he was "counsallour, oratour, and familiar," "was nocht fer fra pis condicioun" (f. 333^r).

The reason for these differences is not hard to discern. They are the kinds of differences inherent in a comparison between a "literary" work and a moral treatise. The author of the *Thre Prestis* has a narrative to consider and all that that consideration involves--continuity, the reader's interest in the story, multiple levels of meaning. In Archibald's tale the fool is added to the story of the man with the flies in order to tie it together with the other two stories. The problem in Archibald's tale being not only the administration of justice, but also the king's whole demeanor, the poet speaks of a parliament which will help the king appoint good advisers. The question of counsellors will also recall the opening lines of the second tale, where the king stands accused of putting too much trust in youthful men. The purpose of the *Thre Prestis*, therefore, is not merely to give isolated examples to reinforce a point as Ireland does, although the same isolated points are made. The development of the tension which arises in the *Thre Prestis* through the interaction between the king and Fictus, the king and the court, and the court and Fictus, however, adds greater depth to charges of royal incompetence or sloth. We are presented

with the character of a king who responds to several different situations. To use anachronistic critical terminology, we might say that the figure of the king is to some extent "rounded out." Although there is no sense of realism, we do gain an impression of the king's "character" by a process of accrual. That character is related to us piecemeal until we feel that we have some knowledge of an individual, even though that individual remains a type.

Despite these differences between the two works, enough of a similarity remains to at least posit a relationship. Ireland's version of the "king, the murderer, and the fool" is certainly closer to that of the *Thre Prestis* than any other submitted as a source or analogue thus far.²⁴ And the two stories are used in similar contexts and appear either side by side or in very close proximity to one another. They are also, so far as I have been able to discover, found in such close proximity in only these two works.²⁵ Both change Aristotle's story in a similar way, from a fox with leeches who is approached by a hedgehog, to a man with flies²⁶ who answers a human inquisitor. Since Ireland "names" his sources, it seems reasonable to believe that his work appeared first, there being little indication that he borrowed his material secondhand from the *Thre Prestis*. It is then possible that the author of the *Thre Prestis*, who, if he actually were Stobo, a governmental clerk, would certainly have known or known of Ireland, took these stories and developed them for related, yet extended purposes.²⁷ The task of culling examples from diverse sources had already been done for him by his colleague. It remained for him to weave the examples into a coherent and unified narrative.

The association of the two works, unfortunately, does not account for the other stories in the *Thre Prestis*. Perhaps only Archibald's tale dates after 1490. Collecting stories and reworking them so that they fit into a larger frame can, as Chaucer amply demonstrates, take place over many years. Even as unambitious a task as the *Thre Prestis* (with respect to the framework only) might have been undertaken under the same kinds of conditions.

The evidence is too sketchy and the argument too fraught with "if's" to enable us to be dogmatic in our conclusions about the influence of the *Meroure* upon the *Thre Prestis*. We can merely set forth the possibility. Yet it is tempting to envisage two royal servants, one a theologian, the other a poet, both concerned that the new king, James IV, be equipped with the knowledge necessary to govern successfully his kingdom, debating relevant issues with one another, and producing in rapid succession "handbooks" of two very different charac-

ters to aid their young lord in that endeavor.²⁸

King College, Tennessee

NOTES

¹*The Thre Prestis of Peblis: how thai tald thar talis.* Ed. T.D. Robb (STS, 2nd Series, 8: Edinburgh and London, 1920), pp. xiv, xvi-xix. See also John MacQueen, "Some Aspects of the Early Renaissance in Scotland," *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 3 (1967), 207. Quotations from the *Thre Prestis* will be taken from Robb's edition of the Charteris print (Edinburgh, 1603).

²"Henryson and the *Thre Prestis of Peblis*," *Neophilologus*, 51 (1967), 168-77, especially 168-9.

³See J.W. Baxter's presentation of the evidence in *William Dunbar: A Biographical Study* (Edinburgh, 1952), pp. 233-4.

⁴Robb, *The Thre Prestis*, pp. ix-xiv.

⁵"Politics and Poetry in Fifteenth and Sixteenth Century Scotland," *Scottish Literary Journal*, 3, No. 2 (1976), 12.

⁶*The Acts of the Parliaments of Scotland, 1124-1707*, eds. T. Thomson and C. Innes (Edinburgh, 1814-75)--hereafter, *APS*--2, 33 c. 3; 45 c. 13; 122; 208 c. 8; 225 c. 10.

⁷"James III: A Political Study, 1466-88" (Unpub. Ph.D. diss., Univ. of Glasgow, 1968), pp. 396-7. See Ireland's biography in J.H. Burns, "John Ireland and 'The Meroure of Wyssdome'," *Innes Review*, 6 (1955), 77-98.

⁸For example, he served as a lord Auditor. See his biography in L.J. Macfarlane, "William Elphinstone, Founder of the University of Aberdeen," *Aberdeen University Review*, 39 (1961), 1-18. Elphinstone often attended justice ayres as a "lord componitor" to help the king and justiciar in the administration of justice--Ranald Nicholson, *Scotland: The Later Middle Ages* (Edinburgh, 1974), p. 569.

⁹See *APS* 2, 105 c. 14; also 97 c. 20. *APS* 2, 252 c. 24, in order to eliminate the bewildering number of legal conflicts brought about by sectional differences in the law,

states that only royal law was to be in effect in the land. Attempts to establish order out of the chaos of existing law went back to the reigns of James I and James II--see *APS* 2, 9 c. 3; 10 c. 10; 36 c. 10; and Peter Stein, "Roman Law in Scotland," *Ius Romanum Medii Aevi*, 5, 13b (1968), 46.

¹⁰See Macdougall, *James III*, pp. 396-7, 399.

¹¹W.C. Dickinson, *Scotland from the Earliest Times to 1603*, 3rd ed., rev. and ed. by A.A.M. Duncan (Oxford, 1977), pp. 238, 253; and Nicholson, *Scotland*, pp. 429-31, 498-9, 521, 569-70.

¹²Macdougall, *James III*, pp. 101-9, 117, 157-62, 224-9, 231. Cf. British Library Royal MSS 17 DXX, cited in Nicholson, *Scotland*, p. 504, which states that James listened more to his household servants than to his noble counsellors. As Macdougall points out, however, the chronicler tends to favor James' brother, the Duke of Albany, who tried to usurp the throne in the 1480's.

¹³*The Exchequer Rolls of Scotland*, ed. George Burnett and John Stuart (Edinburgh, 1878-1908)--hereafter, *ER*--7, p. 11.

¹⁴*The Asloan Manuscript: A Miscellany in Prose and Verse*, ed. W.A. Craigie (STS, 2nd Series, 14, 16: Edinburgh and London, 1923, 1925), I, 232. Cf. *ER* 7, pp. xlvii-xlviii.

¹⁵Macdougall, "The Sources: A Reappraisal of the Legend," in *Scottish Society in the Fifteenth Century*, ed. Jennifer Brown (London, 1977), p. 28.

¹⁶Macdougall, "Sources," p. 19. As Macdougall points out, James III tried to have his queen canonized shortly after her death, a sign that there could not have been too much animosity between them or that he held her in very low esteem.

¹⁷"*The Thre Prestis of Peblis*," *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 11 (1973), 38-46.

¹⁸National Library of Scotland, Advocates MS 18.2.8. The first five books of the *Meroure* have been printed by the Scottish Text Society in two volumes, the first by Charles Macpherson (2nd Series, 19: Edinburgh and London, 1926), the second by F. Quinn (4th Series, 2: Edinburgh and London, 1965). I am grateful to the Trustees of the National Library for permission to edit portions of the *Meroure*.

¹⁹See f. 358^f.

²⁰"*The Thre Prestis of Peblis* and the Growth of Humanism in Scotland," *RES*, NS, 26 (1975), 257, 263-8.

²¹"Growth of Humanism," p. 263.

²²"Politics and Poetry," pp. 11-13.

²³See Ireland's "Exordium" and "Argument and Dedication" in Macpherson's edition of the *Meroure*, pp. 5-16, especially pp. 15-6.

²⁴See Jack's discussion in *The Italian Influence on Scottish Literature* (Edinburgh, 1972), pp. 16-20.

²⁵I have made a cursory search of those major French chronicles which seem most likely to have contained the first of Ireland's two stories, but it remains for some scholar more capable than I in Old French to find Ireland's "corniclis," if his source survives. Such a discovery will probably answer a number of the questions I have raised concerning the details of the story and may provide conclusive evidence either for or against my theory.

²⁶See the *DOST*, s.v. "Fle" (n. 1 and 2). In Middle Scots, the term for "flea" and "fly" is sometimes indistinguishable.

²⁷It is possible, of course, that this version of Aristotle's story also appeared in the French chronicle which Ireland cites, and that Ireland, recognizing the ultimate source and being a true medieval pedagogue, gave Aristotle credit. In this case, it is possible that both Ireland and Stobo drew upon the French work, perhaps independently of each other, Ireland giving credit to his source, and Stobo not. Locating the "corniclis" is therefore crucial.

²⁸Since the submission of this article, R.J. Lyall has written a piece entitled "The Sources of *The Thre Prestis of Peblis* and Their Significance," *RES*, NS, 31 (1980), 257-70, in which he discusses sources other than the one I have mentioned. Although Mr. Lyall (pp. 262-4) notes the resemblance between the *Thre Prestis*' story of the twice-pardoned murderer and the version found in Hoccleve's *Regement of Princes* (ll. 3123-64), my argument remains essentially unaffected.