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Robert Kindrick

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*Robert L. Kindrick*

## Politics and Poetry at the Court of James III



There is a long tradition of political inference from fifteenth-century Scottish poetry. The works of Robert Henryson and William Dunbar, along with *The Thre Prestis of Peblis* and other poems, have been mined to show the political perspectives of their authors. For many poems, this kind of inquiry has focused on the reign of James III. Until quite recently, James' reign has been portrayed as disastrous for nobles and peasants alike, and it has traditionally been argued that the monarch's political ineptitude is reflected in the moral and courtly poetry of the period.<sup>1</sup> The zenith of this kind of political analysis is found in Marshall W. Stearns' *Robert Henryson* (1949). Stearns devotes much of his attention to Henryson's politics and religion, along with pertinent aspects of the law and the socioeconomic background. His general point of view is that

By uniting Henryson's allusions to the subjects of politics, religion, and law, we arrive at a revealing portrait of the age. The poet's interest in the fundamental problems of his day was exceeded only by his outspoken attitude towards them. In each case, his point of view is characterized by detailed knowledge and keen understanding, which sheds new light upon the history of the times.<sup>2</sup>

In concluding his evaluation of Henryson's work Stearns argues that "Henryson was writing...in a violent age of transition from a feudal to a mercantile economy...Henryson speaks out boldly for the poor."<sup>3</sup> Examples could be multiplied from other critical and historical works. But this type of interpretation, dominant so long in Middle Scots studies, has more recently been challenged. Roderick J. Lyall argued in 1976 that many of the political interpretations had, in fact, been misinterpretations.<sup>4</sup> Having reviewed the political analyses by Stearns, Ranald Nicholson, T.D. Robb, Robin Fulton, and R.D.S. Jack, among others, he concludes that "a great deal of the material which is attributed to the reign of James III, then, belongs to a tradition of political advice which enjoyed continuous currency in Scotland between about 1450 and about 1580."<sup>5</sup> Lyall goes on to note that his thesis should not preclude the possibility of making inferences but that such inferences should be drawn with care and caution.

More pointed arguments, directly involving the personality of James III, have been made by Norman A.T. Macdougall and Jenifer M. Brown.<sup>6</sup> In reviewing historical evidence about the careers of the early Stewarts, Macdougall notes that most inferences about the King's "base counselors" and his political ineptitude are drawn from poems and chronicle narratives rather than official records. And, drawing a parallel with the Tudor treatment of Richard III, he points out that there were "good political reasons for many of the chronicle narratives to portray James as a 'scalawag'."<sup>7</sup> Jenifer Brown argues for the toughness and strength of the Scottish monarch "because of what it had to offer--political and social stability."<sup>8</sup> Even though she concedes that James did indeed show certain weaknesses, including indifference to the common welfare, she argues for reappraisal of his kingship. Both sets of arguments have presented a revisionist position in Scottish studies, one perhaps designed to enhance the image of James III, while at the same time implicitly challenging the trustworthiness of Henryson and other contemporary writers as political sources.

While these two arguments have not been completely fused, the general thrust of both is clear: Political inferences from fifteenth-century poetry are to be distrusted either because they may be part of the tradition of political writing or because they are not supported by the revised view of the character of James III. While my primary concern is the tradition of political writing, I wish to address briefly the matter of James' character and career. There are grounds for a defense of James' character. He was a patron of the arts and architecture, and during his reign the Golden Age in

Medieval Scottish literature began. He was certainly aware of the growing power and importance of the burgesses, and his domestic policies were designed both to mollify and to exploit the developing middle class. He made a strong effort, particularly involving the appointment of William Sheaves, to bring church benefices under control of the crown, perhaps an especially important achievement to historians who applaud growing secular control in the period. Like his father and grandfather before him he attempted to continue the consolidation of power into the hands of the monarchy and thereby to bring Scotland into the modern political age. Unfortunately, it is particularly with reference to the latter point that his reign must be judged a failure.

As Jenifer Brown points out, the mark of a good lord was that he "offered effective protection."<sup>9</sup> In attempting to continue a policy of consolidation of power, James found great resistance among the Scottish lords. His disputes with the nobility, legion and legendary, need not be recounted in detail. Quarrels among the MacDonalds and their vassals, the Earl of Buchan and the Earl of Erroll, and the master of Crawford and Lord Glamis are among only a few of the disputes that helped to break Scotland's domestic peace. The King's disagreements within his own family involving the Duke of Albany and the Earl of Mar took an almost disastrous turn for him and for Scotland after the Lauder Bridge rebellion in 1482. The rebellion itself, which both Pitscottie and Lesley felt to be directed against the King's "vyle counselors," was an indication how far confidence in the monarch had declined among the ruling classes. Although, as Macdougall asserts,<sup>10</sup> there may have been vicious hindsight applied to the description of Cochrane, Preston, and the other counselors, there seems to be irrefutable proof that the Lauder rebellion was inspired by James' policies and his counselors' roles in establishing those policies. One of the most telling pieces of evidence involves the fact that the Lauder conspirators did not march forward to relieve Berwick, then under English siege, but, having captured the King, they disbanded and returned to their homes, leaving Scotland with no effective government in a time of national crisis. Nicholson points out that such actions make their motives suspect,<sup>11</sup> but they may equally well signify how deeply felt the inadequacies of James' administration must have been. The joint problems of international relations (especially involving harassment from the English) and internal monetary policy (in particular the debasement of the coinage) must have proved too much to bear not only for nobles but for many commoners as well.

No matter, then, how much we may be inclined to praise

James for some of his aims and accomplishments, particularly in the area of the arts, it is clear that he was not politically successful. A monarch is, after all, a political creature, and success in politics is defined as the exercise of power.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps many of the problems that James faced were insoluble. Perhaps the trauma of his youth in a period of quarreling regents permanently impaired his administrative and monarchal abilities. Perhaps the situation in Scotland was too overwhelming for any single monarch to master completely. But, for whatever reasons, James was unsuccessful. While it is valuable to attempt an objective view of his reign, his artistic accomplishments and good intentions should not divert us from the political failures, of which his contemporaries were apparently keenly aware.

Because James' political failures were much more obvious to a broader range of the population than his successes, they could hardly escape the notice of fifteenth-century poets, whose production was dramatically influenced by Scotland's political problems. It is not possible here to trace the history of political satire and complaint in the British Isles during the fifteenth century, but a few general concerns are quite important. As Lyall notes there was in all British literature a tradition of political writing which often provided political advice or attacked general political abuses. A substantial consideration of fifteenth-century English political satire has been provided in V.J. Scattergood's *Politics and Poetry in the Fifteenth Century*.<sup>13</sup> Some of the principles that Scattergood elucidates for English political satire have equal relevance for Scottish political satire. Scattergood notes that indeed there were "general complaints dealing with society as a whole" and that "they concentrate usually on large abstract issues rather than particular events."<sup>14</sup> He traces the origin of such general political complaints to tracts of the "twelve abuses" "variously ascribed in manuscripts in the ninth, tenth, and eleventh centuries to Cyprian, Augustine, and Origin."<sup>15</sup> But he also shows how English poems which draw on the tradition of the abuses adapt that tradition to specific political concerns. And he notes that fifteenth-century verse in general tends to depend "somewhat less on this traditional material."<sup>16</sup> He also suggests, as Lyall mentions, that there are indeed standard attacks on the so-called bad counselors or feudal retainers, along with traditional complaints about the nature and development of commerce. Yet Scattergood shows quite logically that these attacks are based on contemporary abuses which violated traditional and conservative social mores. This same principle applies to Scottish political satire of

the fifteenth century: It is usually some specific abuse or problem that inspires even the general political complaint. And those general political complaints, conservative in their ethics and tone, look back to an "age of gold" when such abuses would not have been tolerated. It seems unquestionable that, no matter what the literary tradition, a mode as closely related to contemporary events as political and social satire would not flourish if there were not abuses that inspired the writing.

The political situation during James' reign had serious implications for the types of Scottish poetry produced. As in the reigns of James I and II, there continued to be a tradition of courtly and heroic poetry. But the output of such poetry during the reign of James III was markedly diminished. The late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries had witnessed the writing of *Roswell and Lillian*, *The Awntyrs of Arthur*, and the translation of the *Romaunt of the Rose*, along with the nationalistic splendor of Barbour's *Bruce*, and the courtly flash of *The Kingis Quair*. Literary men of the later fifteenth century, however, turned their attention to folk forms and the tradition of political satire which appear in *The Three Prestis of Peblis*, Henryson's *Fables*, *The Howlat*, *Rauf Coilgear*, and "The Harp."

It is true that Blind Harry's *Wallace* was very likely written during James' majority. It continues the tradition of heroic poetry found in Barbour, but in other respects it is something of an enigma.<sup>17</sup> There is no doubt that it is in the courtly tradition. It shows the influence of Chaucer in metrical and technical devices, and its hero is one of the great figures of Scottish history. The poem shows also the influence of humanistic learning. In general, its political stance is squarely nationalistic and traditional, though touched occasionally with irony. Yet insofar as we can now tell, it is a minstrel's poem, written specifically for courtly audiences. Despite the nationalism of its theme, it is a poem based on feudal values, values which were contributing to the political fragmentation of Scotland. Even though the poem carries on courtly traditions, its emphasis on feudal ideals instead of political unity and the nature of its composition, custom-written for great nobles upon the largess of whom its author's living depended, give it too a topical political bent not always present in earlier courtly poems.

Far and away, however, the dominant tradition of Scottish literature in James' reign is not that of the heroic and romantic traditions. It is instead the vein of political and social satire, embodied only occasionally in courtly forms but more often in folk forms employed for a specific occasion. In

Scotland, learned men of the 1460s-1480s were not generally writing romances, treatises on love, or glorifications of king and country which transcended politics. They were taking sides on the major political issues of the day.

The assumptions that James III was not a successful monarch and that political satire is most often stimulated by a specific political event are important in analyzing the poetry of Robert Henryson. Probably the most obviously political of Henryson's tales is "The Tale of the Lion and the Mouse," most likely completed during the period 1841-3.<sup>18</sup> This typically Aesopic fable retells the familiar story of a lion who is rescued from capture by a group of mice, to one of which he has previously shown mercy. Henryson makes significant political comments throughout the tale. When the "maister mous" is first captured by the lion and accused of not showing proper respect, he replies:

3e lay so still and law vpon  
the eird  
That be my saull we weind 3e had bene  
deid;  
Elles wald we not have dancit  
ouer your head. (ll. 1444-6)<sup>19</sup>

It could, of course, be mere coincidence that James III was accused of this same inattention to governance by the chroniclers, but the date of composition of this fable and the results of contemporary political events strongly suggest a topical reference.

The implications for contemporary politics in this fable are reinforced in Henryson's *moralitas*. The lion represents:

...ane prince or empriour  
Are potestate, or 3it ane king with croun,  
Quilk suld be walkrife gyde and  
governour  
Of his pepill, and takis no labour  
To reule and steir the land and iustice keep...  
(ll. 1547-78)

The mice are "the commountie," while the hunters are "rurall men, that... / Waittit always amendis for to get..." (ll. 1608-10). Henryson takes special care to comment on how a great lord may be overthrown if he does not give due attention to his kingdom, a situation that is clearly reflected in the Lauder rebellion of 1482. Lyall, Stearns, MacQueen, Nicholson, and virtually every other scholar who has examined this

fable<sup>20</sup> agree that it contains political implications. The similarities between the monarchal shortcomings addressed in this poem and those specifically imputed to James by the chroniclers strongly indicate that Henryson is referring to contemporary events.

Lyall has raised some interesting questions about possible political references in "The Sheep and The Dog" and "The Wolf and The Lion." About the former tale, Lyall contends that Henryson's "real concerns are wider than the present political situation."<sup>21</sup> Very briefly, this tale involves a sheep who is summoned to court by a dog for payment of some "breid." The court is analogous to a full-scale human court with the wolf as a judge, the raven as apparitour, the fox as clerk and notary, and the kite and crow as lawyers. Needless to say, with this court, an adverse judgment is returned against the sheep and he looks forward to a long winter after being told that he must sell his wool to satisfy the judgment. Henryson states in his *moralitas* that:

This selie scheip may present the figure  
Of pure commounis, that daylie ar opprest  
Be tirrane men.... (ll. 1258-60)

He then proceeds to interpret each of the other characters as a similarly contemporary type. The wolf is a "schiref stout"; the raven, a "fals crownair." While these contemporary references surely show Henryson's awareness of problems in the administration of justice during James' reign, Lyall's general assertion is also correct: In fact it is a mark of Henryson's genius that he is able to transcend present situations into more generalized political, social, and ethical realms. But the tropological implications of both tale and *moralitas* should not blind us to the possibilities of specific political reference. After all, one of the specific responsibilities of the monarch was enforcement of justice.<sup>22</sup> James' notorious laxness in maintaining justice in the courts and his tendency to divert the ends of justice to his own purposes must surely have been the specific inspiration for some of Henryson's poems.

Lyall reviews "The Wolf and The Lamb" and, after having pointed out that the subject itself is traditional in political literature, goes on to assert, "We cannot assume, *a priori*, that Henryson's discussion of the issue means the position was worse in late fifteenth-century Scotland than at other times and places..."<sup>23</sup> But the conflict in this tale, in which a vicious wolf devours a poor lamb simply for drinking upstream of him, is one that has particular relevance for

fifteenth-century Scotland.

Henryson reinforces that sense of relevance in his *moralitas*. The lamb, as usual, symbolizes the "pure pepill." For his interpretation of the wolf Henryson takes special note of contemporary applications: "Thre kynd of wolfis in this world now ringis" (l. 2714). These three types are "fals perverteris of the lawis," "mychtie men," and "men of heritage." Henryson shows how each victimizes his fellowmen. The strong conflict between the nobles and the monarch, a conflict into which many common people were drawn, would have given this fable even stronger applicability to Scottish life. Just like the monarch, the Scottish lords were jockeying for position, attempting to consolidate their own resources, and taking advantage of any means at their disposal. While James himself was often not to blame for many of the injustices perpetrated by a haughty and defensive nobility, his inability to check the nobles and the clergy must have been perceived as the ultimate cause of many social ills. James was doubly damned, not only for his own faults but for those of the nobles that he was expected to control. Other fables may have political implications as well. "The Taill of The Uplandis Mous and The Burges Mous" may contain some implications about James' role in fostering or exploiting the new urban commerce. Basically the traditional tale of the town mouse and the country mouse, this fable involves a visit by the country mouse to her sister's home in the city, where both are harassed by a spencer and the cat. The emphasis on urban society, the intrusions of the spencer, and the destruction caused by Gib the cat (a symbol associated with nobility) all suggest that this tale could have political implications about James' tendency to interfere with free commerce.<sup>24</sup> "The Trial of the Fox" has, as MacQueen has shown, obvious political implications.<sup>25</sup> Not only does Noble the Lion, another royal symbol, appear as a central character but his setting is a full-fledged Scottish court. The prominence of rapacious characters such as the wolf and the fox in Noble's court seems, by implication, to be a condemnation of fifteenth-century Scottish court life. Finally, "The Taill of the Wolf and The Wedder" illustrates Henryson's point of view on one of the most crucial issues of fifteenth-century discussions of nobility and court administration: The birth-worth debate. In this tale a poor shepherd takes the advice of a sheep who offers to disguise himself as a watchdog to chase away the wolf. Carried away by his disguise, the sheep chases the wolf beyond the bounds of the shepherd's protection. His disguise is discovered and he is unceremoniously killed. With its emphasis on the quality and source of political advice, this fable brings into sharp focus the question

of who is qualified to help rule, a question that was raised by the Lauder conspirators. In spite of proverbial wisdom that sheep are daft (l. 2492), the shepherd elects to take the sheep's advice. He and his flock both suffer for it. Henryson specifically implies contemporary applications in his *moralitas*:

Heir may thow se that riches of array  
Will cause pure men presumptuous for to be...

Out of thair cais in pryde thay clym sa hie  
That thay forebeir thair better in na steid...

That thay will lychtlie lordis in thair deidis,  
And lukis not to thair blude, nor thair offspring.  
(ll. 2595-6, 2599-2600, 2604-5)

A better statement of the problem culminating in the Lauder rebellion could hardly be found.

Henryson's attitude toward James and the institution of kingship is further reflected in *The Thre Prestis of Peblis*.<sup>26</sup> T.D. Robb speculates that *The Thre Prestis* was written near the time of the Lauder rebellion. The form of the poem is a series of three tales, similar somewhat to the structure of *The Colkelbie Sow*. Given the topical nature of the subjects treated, it seems highly likely that James III is the monarch portrayed, and the portrait is again unflattering. In both form and tone, this poet has been led away from courtly conventions.

In the first tale, a king summons a parliament to pose questions to the three estates about problems in the land. He asks the burgesses, "Quhy Burges bairns thryues not to the thrid air."<sup>27</sup> They respond that values of hard work and persistence usually die out in the second generation and people think only of spending. The heart of the attack on the king, however, is to be found in the responses to the second and third questions. The king asks the barons why there are not men of might and noble deeds abroad in the land as there once were. Their reply is an attack on the king's system of justice:

3our Justice ar sa ful of sucquedry,  
Sa covetous and ful of avarice  
That thay 3our Lords impaires of thair pryce.  
(ll. 276-8)

The complaint is extended and bitter, and it reflects a genu-

ine social grievance during James' reign. The nobles go on to argue that no matter how loyal a man might be, he is driven to extremes by the capricious administration of the courts, yet another critical perspective on a subject that Henryson treated so extensively.

The king's third question is to the clergy. He asks why they are not able to perform miracles as in previous years. The clergy respond that formerly men in orders were devout and free to govern themselves on the basis of holiness, not politics. They complain about political intervention in their affairs while asserting that now "is nouthir riche nor pure / Sal get ane Kirk al throw his literature" (ll. 417-8). External interference has made simony the ruling force in the church, and no man can thrive only through good works without money or political connections. This tale is an exposition of grievances Henryson also treated dramatically in "The Trial of the Fox."

After each complaint, the king assures his subjects that he will put everything right. But, as Robb suggests, the satirist's point has already been made.<sup>28</sup> If this monarch is indeed James III, the very leveling of the charges has been sufficient to point up the inadequacy of his reign. Had the king been supervising his realm properly, these social ills would never have developed in the first place. The direct accusations against the King are reinforced by the description of the general disarray in his kingdom--a situation which he alone can correct. The king's promise of correction may imply that monarchal action is the only recourse but certainly does not mean that he has the will or the disposition to deal with the problems.

The second of the three tales is even more pointed in its satire. In this story about a wise clerk who disguises himself as a fool and goes to live with a king, the king is accused of being vain and frivolous. The description of the king's disposition accords with contemporary accounts of James:

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 doun,--  
To al lichtnes ay was he redie boun.  
(ll. 459-62)

In other contemporary poems and later chronicles, the Stewart king is repeatedly attacked for ignoring his wiser and older counselors and following "young counsel."

The fictitious king's other faults also correspond with

those of James. He ignores the suffering in his kingdom and the demands of justice and conscience in the pursuit of his pleasure. He releases a man guilty of murder on two successive occasions to allow him to kill yet a third time. He unfeelingly attempts to betray the royal bed, a crime for which James was notorious. That he uses Church offices for his own ends is demonstrated by his rewarding the clerk with a bishopric apparently for aiding him in adultery.

In all of these activities, the clerk acts as a kind of foil. His common sense and compassion are sharply contrasted with the king's egotistical self-gratification. Even though he leads the king to wisdom at the conclusion of the tale, the author's point of view remains critical. As in the first tale, he seems to be showing that Scotland's problems are not beyond remedy, but he makes it clear that they have not been cured at the time of his writing.

Both Henryson and the author of *The Thre Prestis* have turned from traditional courtly forms to modes more often found in folk literature and poems of religious instruction. The beast fable, though sometimes appearing in courtly literature, has folk roots. The three-part structure of *The Thre Prestis* also shares aspects of tone with the *Gesta Romanorum* and elements of dramatic form with *Everyman* and *The Colkelbie Sow*. Yet, even courtly forms were turned to satirical uses during James' reign, as *Rauf Coilzear* illustrates. This poem is an anti-romance, a tale which utilizes romance conventions superficially for purposes of social or literary satire. Although the form enjoyed some popularity in late-fourteenth and fifteenth-century England, *Rauf Coilzear*, probably completed around 1475-1480, marks its first appearance in Scotland.

Early noted as literary parody by Brandl and Herrtage,<sup>29</sup> the poem is an example of the "king among rustics" motif. The first 750 lines narrate Rauf's rise in social status through his assistance to Charlemagne. Separated from his party, the king, incognito, takes shelter at the collier's home. Rauf pushes the king around and complains to him but treats him to the rough hospitality and rude fare of his home. The king leaves, and, sometime later, Rauf sets out to seek him in Paris. He knows the king as "Wymond of the Wardrobe" and is not able to find him until after several misadventures. Rauf is intimidated by the court and is flabbergasted at the revelation that his friend is really Charlemagne. The king tells the nobles of Rauf's hospitality and asks them for a judgment on the collier. The nobles declare that Rauf should be hanged for his rudeness, but Charlemagne decides that Rauf should be knighted "for his Courtaise."

Satire in this poem is directed not against the monarch but

against self-interested and overly defensive nobles whose real life counterparts could have been either the king's unpopular counselors or the hereditary nobles. When the poet contradicts Charlemagne's knights and judges the courtesy of the court inferior to that of Rauf's home, as he does directly through the lips of Charlemagne, he seems to be attacking the tone of the Scottish court. These nobles cannot even show the same hospitality to a stranger that Rauf, for all his blundering and naivete, has freely extended to Charlemagne.

The social satire continues in the second half of the poem. Once Rauf has been knighted, he is obliged by all of the laws of chivalry to demonstrate his prowess. He had previously arranged a combat with Roland, because the latter tried to divert him from his journey to the court. Rauf mistakes Magog for Roland and engages him in combat. Their battle is described with appropriate romance rhetoric: "Haistely hewit thay togiddir," and as a result of their combat "baith thair hors deid lay, / Their speiris in splenders away / Abufe thair heid spreit."<sup>30</sup>

Into the midst of their combat rides Roland. A reader might assume that Christianity has triumphed, but, instead of joining the fray, Roland parts the combatants. He tries to convince the Muslim to accept the Christian faith, but without success. All the while, Rauf is eager to resume the fighting. Finally, Roland mentions the "landis, with mony riche toun" that the Muslim might claim if he took a Christian wife. With no further delay, Magog sees the virtues of Christianity. Herrtage saw clearly the elements of literary satire in this passage,<sup>31</sup> but there is social satire as well. Magog's avarice was the kind of social ethic which Henryson treated in "The Wolf and The Lamb." It was a common danger in the everyday life of the Scottish peasant and burghess. Moreover, the combat itself may illustrate the author's further disappointment with fifteenth-century fighting men. As the king asserts in the first tale of *The Thre Prestis*, there were simply no more Rolands and Olivers to be found. This poet might have been illustrating the same point through Roland himself. The hero's preaching may have appeared to him as a sorry alternative to the kind of no-nonsense persuasion that Rauf was prepared to offer. It may well be that the *Rauf Coilzear*-poet is a conservative idealist who finds the narrow politics of self-interest, and the concomitant lack of chivalric commitment in fifteenth-century Scottish nobles, very hard to accept.

These poems are not isolated examples. Most of the poetry during James' reign turns away from the traditional themes of romance and lyric to the hard realities of Scottish political life. In *The Buke of Howlat* the beast fable is used for an

allegorical examination of Scottish court life. In "The Harp" there is another attack on the inconsistency of the king's justice. Political poems such as "Sons hes bene ay exilit out of sicht" and "Adveyce to a Courtier" consist of complaints against or satire on the king's impotence or the barons' avarice. Many of these works are written by authors who, like Henryson, apparently possessed a knowledge of and interest in "courtly" forms. Yet their more immediate interests lay elsewhere, in the satirical forms that addressed political problems of the day.

The lack of courtly literature during the Reign of James III is atypical compared not only with preceding ages but with the reign of James IV as well. During "The Aureate Age" satires continue to be written by Dunbar and Lindsay, but there is more production of typical courtly forms. Dunbar himself wrote numerous such courtly poems as "The Thrissil and the Rois" and his work was complemented by that of Gavin Douglas and poets who translated works such as *Lancelot of the Laik*. There was such a reviving interest in the romance that Chepman and Miller found their most profitable books were "tales of chivalry and romance, Blind Harry's *Wallace*, and some of the poems of Dunbar and Robert Henryson."<sup>32</sup>

Political satire was not eradicated during the reign of James IV--indeed it had always existed. However, during the period of prolonged political crisis from 1470 to 1488, it rose from a murmur into a cry, and satires and the didactic forms which were the vehicles of political censure displaced the courtly literature of earlier years. The basic position of traditional historical scholars such as Stearns, MacQueen, and Nicholson (and I recognize a great deal of disparity among their outlooks) has much to recommend it. James III was not a successful monarch. Whether the "vyle counselors" were a myth or not, he was not able to consolidate political power into the monarchy<sup>33</sup> by attacking the power base of the nobles while simultaneously maintaining widespread support from the rest of Scottish society. Moreover, the history of political satire and complaint in the British Isles during the later Middle Ages reveals that generalized complaints most often do have a specific source of inspiration. The abuses of which these poems complain have such a particular relevance for fifteenth-century Scotland that it would have required conscious effort on the part of the poets to ignore their political implications. However, these poems do not have only political importance. As Lyall asserted, very often they have implications that extend far beyond any limited political context. Indeed, that is part of the reason for their continuing appeal. Yet our awareness of the traditions of political writing and concurrent attempts

to revive the reputation of James III should not encourage us to ignore specific political implications where they appear.

Western Illinois University

NOTES

<sup>1</sup>For examples, see Marshall W. Stearns, *Robert Henryson* (New York, 1949); John MacQueen, *Robert Henryson* (Oxford, 1967); Ranald Nicholson, *Scotland: The Later Middle Ages* (Edinburgh, 1974). For later examples of this interpretation, see Robert L. Kindrick, "Lion or Cat?" *SSL* 14 (Columbia, 1979), 123-36; "Monarchs and Monarchy in the Poetry of Henryson and Dunbar," in *Actes du 2<sup>e</sup> colloque de langue et de littérature ecossaises* (Strasbourg, 1979), pp. 307-25; and *Robert Henryson* (Boston, 1979).

<sup>2</sup>Stearns, p. 32.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 129.

<sup>4</sup>Roderick J. Lyall, "Politics and Poetry in Fifteenth and Sixteenth Century Scotland," *SLJ*, 3 (1976), 5-27.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>6</sup>Norman A.T. Macdougall, "The Sources: A Reappraisal of A Legend," and Jennifer M. Brown, "The Exercise of Power," both in Jennifer M. Brown, *Scottish Society in the Fifteenth Century* (London, 1977).

<sup>7</sup>Macdougall, pp. 21-23.

<sup>8</sup>Brown, p. 50.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 55.

<sup>10</sup>Macdougall, p. 28.

<sup>11</sup>Nicholson, p. 505.

<sup>12</sup>For commentary on this attitude, even in the Middle Ages, see Brown, pp. 33-35, and W. Croft Dickinson, *Scotland, From The Earliest Times to 1603* (Oxford, 1977), pp. 94-114.

<sup>13</sup>V.J. Scattergood, *Politics and Poetry in the Fifteenth Century* (London, 1971).

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 299.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 304.

<sup>17</sup>T.F. Henderson, *Scottish Vernacular Literature* (Edinburgh, 1898), p. 64. See also M.P. McDiarmid, "The Date of the Wallace," *SHR*, 34 (1955), 26-31; and Lyall, pp. 16-7, for comments about possible political implications.

<sup>18</sup>David K. Crowne, "A Date for the Composition of Henryson's Fables," *JEGP*, 61 (1962), 588-91, suggests an earlier date; see Kindrick, *Robert Henryson*, pp. 59-61.

<sup>19</sup>*The Poems of Robert Henryson*, ed. Denton Fox (Oxford, 1981), p. 58. All subsequent citations will be from this edition; hereafter line numbers only will be provided.

<sup>20</sup>See Lyall, p. 10; Stearns, p. 94; MacQueen, p. 171; Nicholson, pp. 508-9; however, Douglas Gray in *Robert Henryson* (Leiden, 1979), p. 143, chooses to remain neutral on the subject.

<sup>21</sup>Lyall, p. 6.

<sup>22</sup>Brown, p. 55, and Nicholson, pp. 428-431.

<sup>23</sup>Lyall, p. 7.

<sup>24</sup>See MacQueen, p. 121.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 149, 153.

<sup>26</sup>*The Thre Prestis of Peblis*, ed. T.D. Robb (Edinburgh, 1920), xii-xiii; but, for a view that the poem was written after James' death as instruction for James IV, see R.D.S. Jack, "The Three Prestis of Peblis and The Growth of Humanism in Scotland," *RES*, 26 (1975), 257-70.

<sup>27</sup>Robb, 7, line 94. All succeeding citations will be from this edition.

<sup>28</sup>Robb, p. x.

<sup>29</sup>Alois Brandl "Mittelenglische Literatur" in Hermann Paul's *Grundriss der germanischen Philologie* (Strassburg, 1893), 714; S.J. Herrtage, ed., *Charlemagne Romances* 6: *Rauf Coilzear, Roland and Vernagu, and Otuel* (London, 1882), p. vii.

<sup>30</sup>Herrtage, lines 817-819.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, p. vii.

<sup>32</sup>Nicholson, p. 592.

<sup>33</sup>See Dickinson, p. 241. Lyall comments (p. 13) that although he does "not think that some reference to James in *The Thre Prestis* is impossible, I do consider it to be a matter of conjecture."