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J. E. H. Williams

James V, David Lyndsay, and the Bannatyne Manuscript
Poem of the Gyre Carling

The earliest known references to the tales of the giant witch, or gyre carling, and of the monster called the Red Etin, are made by David Lyndsay in 1528. In the epistle to James V that prefaces his *Dreme*, Lyndsay says that these two particular "plesand storeis" were among those he told the king during James's less-than-happy childhood, when he was pawn in the factional power struggle that followed his father's death in 1513. Let me quote the passage in the *Dreme* where Lyndsay reminds the king, as he emerges from tutelage, of stories told in the past:

More plesandlie the tyme for tyll ouerdryue,
I haue, at lenth, the storeis done discryue
Off Hectour, Arthour, and gentyll Iulyus,
Off Alexander, and worthy Pompeyus,

Off Iasone, and Media, all at lenth,
Off Hercules the actis honorabyll,
And of Sampson the supernaturall strenth,
And of leill Luffaris storeis amiabyll;
And oft tymes haue I feinzeit mony fabyll,
Off Troylus the sorrow and the Ioye,
And Seigis all, of Tyir, Thebes, and Troye;

Some sections of this paper were published, as part of a more extensive study of Lyndsay's *Dreme* catalogue, in *A Day Estivall*, ed. A. Gardner-Medwin and J. Hadley Williams (Aberdeen, 1990).

The Prophiseis of Rymour, Beid, & Marlyng,
And of mony vther plesand storye,
Off the reid Etin, and the gyir carling,
Confortand the, quhen that I sawe the sorye.
(ll. 32-46)¹

What are these two final tales of the Red Etin and the Gyre Carling? They are clearly not quite the same as the romances, fables and heroic pieces David Lyndsay lists before them. Can they therefore add further detail to our reconstruction of the fifteen-year period of James V's minority? And can we discover, or make reasonable conjecture upon Lyndsay's reasons for reminding the newly-crowned king of these two nursery tales in particular?

In the case of the Red Etin tale, surviving evidence is scanty. Here is what we have. Lyndsay's reference is the first.² It links the Red Etin to that of the "gyir carling." Both are considered "plesand" stories for a young child, with a potential to comfort him. But David Lyndsay offers no further detail.

Then, about twenty-two years later, comes the reference in the *Complaynt of Scotland*—this time giving some indication of the tale's fabulous subject-matter in the extra details of the title: "the taiyl of the reyde eyttyn vitht the thre heydis."³

The context of the *Complaynt of Scotland* reference is also worth noting. Allusion to the Red Etin tale is made in the writer's "Monolog," within a summary of the "storeis" and "flet [or fireside] taylis" told by the shepherds, their wives, and their servants, who are gathered for "recreation."⁴ The emphasis on the telling of these stories as a leisure-time occupation accords well with Lyndsay's inclusion of his two tales among the prince's out-of-school pleasures, for we know Lyndsay as the king's "familiar servitor," not as tutor.⁵

¹*The Works of Sir David Lindsay*, ed. Douglas Hamer, STS, 3rd Series, 1, 2, 6 and 8 (1931-6), I, 4-5. Henceforth, all references to Lyndsay are to this edition.

²See *DOST* and *SND* s.v. "etin." ("Etin" is recorded from c. 1515 and "reid etin" from 1528.)

³Robert Wedderburn, *The Complaynt of Scotland*, ed. A. M. Stewart, STS, 4th Series, 11 (1979), 50.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁵See the various early offices held by Lyndsay in the *Accounts of the Lord High Treasurer*, ed. T. Dickson and J. Balfour Paul (Edinburgh and London, 1903), V, 37, 112, 127, 160, 196.

Contemporary versions of the Red Etin tale itself have not survived. Beyond this tantalizing gap in the records, however, are the versions recorded in Scotland in later centuries. These, as Professor Briggs and others have noted, and Professor Buchan has kindly explained to me,⁶ have variant affinities with Aarne-Thompson's tale-type 303, "a wonder tale with an extensive European spread."⁷ Together with the evidence from Lyndsay and the *Complaynt of Scotland*, therefore, these later Scottish versions, fruits of the nineteenth-century antiquarian interest in a subject previously uncharted, support the argument that the tale of the Red Etin monster was being told in Scotland from at least the sixteenth century onwards.

The versions current in the nineteenth century include those from Aberdeenshire and the kingdom of Fife;⁸ one of the earliest is that collected by Peter Buchan.⁹ It tells of three young men, two of whom are brothers, who set out in turn to seek their fortunes. In the course of each man's similar, difficult journey, magic tokens and grotesque beasts play important parts, but so, too, do the human attributes of resourcefulness and generosity. Each man in turn is confronted by the Red Etin, in this Englished version described as "a horrid monster, who spared no man, having three frightful heads."¹⁰ Only the youngest man, who has put his mother's blessing before his own well-being, shared his bread with those less fortunate, and above all heeded the magic tokens along his way, is able to behead severally the Red Etin. This is a dénouement apposite to James V's own newly-favorable situation, for the young man is then able to free the king of Scotland's daughter, and restore his brother and neighbor to life. Though we can prove nothing, we can see why Lyndsay might have brought the tale to James's attention again in 1528, just as he was taking responsibility for his realm and its restoration.

⁶K. Briggs, *A Dictionary of British Folktales*, 2 vols. in 4 (London, 1970-1), A I, 37 and 463-70; personal communication with Professor David Buchan, 26 May, 1989, and 20 July, 1989.

⁷D. Buchan, "Folk Tradition and Literature till 1603," *Bryght Lanternis*, ed. J. Derrick McClure and M. R. G. Spiller (Aberdeen, 1989), p. 7.

⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 7 and 12 (footnote 21).

⁹"Ancient Scottish Tales: An Unpublished Collection Made by Peter Buchan," ed. J. A. Fairley, *Transactions of the Buchan Field Club*, IX (1908), 143-7.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 144.

For Lyndsay's other tale, the story of the powerful giant witch or "gyir carling," there is much more evidence to ponder. Lyndsay's 1528 reference is again the first known,¹¹ but this time the sixteenth-century tale itself, or a version of it, is also preserved. This, found in the Bannatyne Manuscript (fols. 136^V-137^T), is a three-stanza alliterative poem of skilled mock-heroics and great narrative vigor.¹²

Dr. Helena Shire first drew attention to this poem as a possible devising for the young Scots king, and suggested that it may have been written by David Lyndsay himself.¹³ She noted in evidence Lyndsay's mastery of the *Gyre Carling's* alliterative meter in the *Satyre of the Thrie Estaitis*, and the poem's overall energy yet absence of bawdry, with a nursery-joke outcome to the gyre carling's forceful blow to her would-be lover, Blasour:

behind the heill scho hatt him sic ane blaw
 Quhill blasour bled ane quart
 off milk pottage Inwart . . .
 (ll. 9-11)

Beside Dr. Shire's suggestion must be put the information that George Bannatyne did not ascribe this poem to David Lyndsay, as he did with each of the other works of Lyndsay's he included in his manuscript anthology; and that, furthermore, there is no attribution to Lyndsay in the near-contemporary hand—not George Bannatyne's—that assigns to "Linsday" another Bannatyne poem, *Peder Coffeis*.¹⁴

Yet, whether or not Lyndsay is the author or merely the narrator to the prince of a nursery piece current in sixteenth-century Scotland, there is an interesting connection between Lyndsay, James V and the Bannatyne poem. We remember, in the *Dreme's* catalogue of stories, that Lyndsay declared he told "Siegis all" (l. 42) to the young king. It is noteworthy, then, that the *Gyre Carling* poem begins thus:

¹¹See *DOST*, s.v. "gyre-carling," *SND*, s.v. "Gyre," I, senses 1 and 3.

¹²All quotations are from *The Bannatyne Manuscript*, Scolar facsimile, ed. D. Fox and W. Ringler (London, 1980). The text of the poem is imperfect: stanza two lacks line 6, and stanza three line 7. I wish to thank Mr. J. Derrick McClure, Aberdeen, for his spirited delivery of the poem at the meeting.

¹³"Style King James V," an unpublished paper delivered at the Second International Conference on Scottish Language and Literature (Medieval and Renaissance), Strasbourg, 1978.

¹⁴See Bannatyne Manuscript, fol. 162^V and Hamer, III, 484.

In Tiberus tyme the trew Imperiour
 Quhen tynto hillis fra skraiping of toun henis
 wes keipit. . . .

For this is an apparent allusion to the opening lines of the *Siege of Jerusalem*, a popular English alliterative work of the late fourteenth century:

In Tiberyus tyme, þe trewe emperour,
 Sir Sesar hym sulf seysed in Rome. . . .¹⁵

The allusion has long been noted,¹⁶ but not so this detail: that the Scots parody gains specific point if the child-king is its audience. The youthful James, brought up on "Siegis all," undoubtedly would have recognized this jesting allusion. (Just as he, or any Scot with the need to travel about this area would know that the Tinto Hill is made from terracotta-red rhyolite, upon which nothing worth a hen's scraping can ever have grown.)

A further connection links the *Gyre Carling*, and its possible associations with James V and Lyndsay, with another poem in the Bannatyne Manuscript (fols. 114^r-115^v) beginning:

Listis lordis I sall 3ow tell
 off ane verry grit marvell
 off lord fergus gaist

Both poems have in common a reference to a "beittokis bour." Of course, we know of Beattock Summit, in the Lowther Hills not too far from Tinto, but a certain attribution is lost to us. In the *Gyre Carling* the bower is the deliciously sinister hall or chamber of "awld betok," but now taken over by the gyre carling, that "levit vpoun christiane menis fleshe" (l. 4). It functions in *Lord Fergus Gaist* with some of the same overtones, as the last "safe" hiding place of the thieving, harried ghost.

Lord Fergus Gaist can be dated—by its pseudo-religious, lighthearted references to "pater noster patter patter" (l. 20), "brede benedicite" (l. 51), and the conjuration itself in the names of both "god and sanct marie" (l. 54)—as pre-Reformation, and so current at a time that includes James's childhood. The poem's set of mock-learned, absurdly portentous instructions on how to conjure up the ghost (by way of a collection of relics that must

¹⁵*The Siege of Jerusalem*, ed. E. Kölbing and M. Day, EETS, 188 (1932).

¹⁶See *Complaynt of Scotland*, ed. J. Leyden (Edinburgh, 1801), pp. 221-2.

include a fowl's tooth and "thre tuskis of ane awld deid horss" (l. 34)), would delight any child. Lyndsay has already mentioned, in an earlier stanza of the *Dreme's* epistle, that such entertainments *did* delight one royal child. For James, Lyndsay remembers disguising himself like a "feind" (l. 15), dressing up as the "greislie gaist of gye" (l. 16),¹⁷ and in other transfigurations "aye to [James's] plesoure" (l. 20).

While both poems, moreover, fall within the romance-burlesque tradition of many of these comic alliterative pieces—their anti-romances are between the gyre carling and the shepherd Blasour, and the ghost and a Spanish flea!—it is perhaps suggestive of a common if anonymous author that these two tales are resolved similarly: the gyre carling marries "mahomyt" and becomes "quene of Jowis" (l. 25); the ghost marries the Spanish flea, who is then crowned "kyng of kandelie" (l. 91).

In two recent, separate, studies, different in emphasis but equally thorough and helpful, Dr. Margaret Mackay and Mrs. Felicity Riddy have given fresh, detailed appraisals of the alliterative tradition or revival in Middle Scots verse.¹⁸ Both have noted how the *Gyre Carling* is related technically to the several other Scots humorous pieces in the alliterative stanza or with alliterative features, and how, especially in its actual presentation of the comic, the *Gyre Carling* is also typical of the type. It mingles otherworldly and domestic elements, for example, and uses various incongruities of subject and activity, or disparate sizes, to create a world at once known yet fantastic and risible. The *Gyre Carling* is close, for instance, to the alliterative poem, *The Maner of the Crying of ane Playe* (Asloan MS, fols 240^r-242^v),¹⁹ in its use of these incongruities. Just as in *The Crying*, the giantess-wife of Gog-Magog "spittit lochlomond with hir lippis" (l. 53), so the gyre carling, laughing at Blasour's porridge-bleeding demise, "lut fart / North berwick law" (ll. 12-3), thus "creating" a still-prominent hill in East Lothian.

In its treatment of setting, however, the *Gyre Carling* does differ from this group of comic poems. From its opening lines, there is no doubt that the poem is located in lowland Scotland. The Roman-imperial timing may,

¹⁷See further, *The Gast of Gy*, ed. R. H. Bowers, *Beiträge zur Englischen Philologie*, 32 (Leipzig, 1938).

¹⁸M. A. Mackay, "The Alliterative Tradition in Middle Scots Verse," Diss. Edinburgh, 1975, especially pp. 413-8 and 440; F. Riddy, "The Alliterative Revival," in *The History of Scottish Literature . . . Origins to 1660*, ed. R. D. S. Jack (Aberdeen, 1988), pp. 39-54.

¹⁹*The Asloan Manuscript*, ed. W. A. Craigie, STS, 2nd Series, 14 and 16 (1923-4).

at first reading, seem rather incongruous or exotic, in the characteristic manner of these pieces, yet it is not actually out of keeping: Roman traces are still to be found in the Lanarkshire area—near Tinto hills, for example, or at Cramond, mentioned later in the poem.

And as it is progressively further revealed, the geography of the *Gyre Carling* does not follow the disorienting format of other alliterative poems, in which a reliance on alliteration alone may lead to the most unlikely or impossible associations: of Kind Kittock, for example, dwelling "far furth in france on falkland fell" (Bann. MS, fol. 135^V), or of Lichtoun's dreamer finding himself in "poill pertik peblis and portiafe," that is, Poland, Partick, Peebles, and Port Jaffa (Bann. MS, fols. 101^r-102^r). By contrast, the area covered by the *Gyre Carling* is logical and coherent. The "defensible bestis" of the poem's king of faery are recruited from an area between Dunbar and Dunblane. These towns are likely alliterative companions, but also define a stretch of country that would be looked-to naturally to provide extra troops to resolve a siege to the south. They in turn are sensibly supplemented by "all the tykis of tervey" (l. 17), a more northerly—and more wild and bellicose?—town in Perthshire.²⁰ (We must accept, of course, that the force itself is canine, and it is possible to see in this a continuation of the *Siege of Jerusalem* parody: the Scots poet's answer to the English work's description of the Romans' use of elephants, dromedaries and camels in their siege of Jerusalem.) And Haddington, the awful scene of hens scared into infertility by the gyre carling's curses, is nearby the other gyre carling landmarks of the poem, North Berwick and Dunbar.

All of these locations are within a well-defined area of Scotland, territory certain to be familiar to James V. We know he moved between the royal residences during his childhood, and that after he became the virtual prisoner of his step-father, the Earl of Angus, from July 1525 on, James travelled often in these areas with members of the Douglas entourage as close companions. In June 1526, for example, James, with Angus, the Council, and a large force, travelled through the border regions to make a display of the royal, and so of Angus's, strength.²¹ The subsequent attempts to rescue the king, indeed, were carried out near Melrose, and near Linlithgow, the

²⁰Compare John Major's comments, *A History of Greater Britain*, trans. A. Constable, *Scottish History Society*, X (1892), 40, on the Wild Scots, who "dwell more towards the north" and for whom "war rather than peace is their normal condition."

²¹*Acts of the Lords of Council in Public Affairs 1501-1554*, ed. R. K. Hannay (Edinburgh, 1932), p. 244.

latter when James was returning from the Middle Marches with Angus.²² Interestingly, the records also tell us that the Earl of Angus held among his baronies lands in both Lanarkshire, country of the Tinto Hills, and East Lothian, where the Douglas stronghold of Tantallon Castle looked inland to the landmark "created" by the gyre carling, North Berwick Law.²³ That one of James's first acts, on attaining power in 1528, was, like the king of faery, or like his own father James IV in 1491, to "sett ane sege" on Tantallon's "mony grit stane" is a nice distortion of the literary actions. It adds tremendous zest to Lyndsay's reference to the tale of the *Gyre Carling* in his own epistle to the king, written so near the time of the real siege.²⁴

At the time Lyndsay *first* told the *Gyre Carling* to the royal child, the tale would have drawn for James a memorable verbal landscape of his kingdom's wondrous origins, placing in perspective his harsh present experience of destructive factionalism and captivity. When Lyndsay recalled the tale in 1528, the changes were obvious: the potential for the realm's restoration was now in the hands of the newly-empowered king, whose sieges were real. As with the Red Etin tale, we can see why Lyndsay might have reminded James V of *this* tale, too, and linked both, as he does, to his own following dream vision, in which much useful information on kingship in general, and on the good government of Scotland in particular, is set out for the young Scots ruler.

Canberra

²²*Ibid.*, pp. 250-1; *State Papers of Henry VIII*, V, Part IV, pp. 452-9.

²³*An Historical Atlas of Scotland, c. 400 - c. 1600*, ed. P. McNeill and R. Nicholson (1975; rpt. St Andrews, 1976), pp. 71 and 182 (Map 79).

²⁴For James IV's siege, see further N. MacDougall, *James IV* (Edinburgh, 1989), p. 90. For James V's, see *State Papers*, V, Part IV, 519-22.