

1991

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Recommended Citation

Parkinson, David (1991) "Hollis Hair: Tracking a Phrase through Middle Scots Poetry," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 26: Iss. 1.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol26/iss1/26>

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David Parkinson

Holtis Hair: Tracking a Phrase through Middle Scots Poetry

Holtis hair is a perplexing, enticing bit of poetic language. Usually dismissed as a rhyme tag bereft of specific meaning, this phrase crops up in a variety of Middle Scots verse modes: narratives in alliterative stanzas; so-called "plain narrative," in five-stress couplets; courtly complaint in rhyme royal; and in ballad-like dialogues of love, on one or another stanzaic arrangement of four- and three-stress lines.¹ In Middle English verse by comparison, the phrase *holtes hore* is commonest in stanzaic romance, especially tail-rhyme romance; it is also to be found in a few romances in four-stress couplets, but is rare in unrhymed alliterative verse and courtly verse in rhyme royal.² In Middle Scots verse, there are several such phrases, dis-

¹For this categorization, see A. J. Aitken, "The Language of Older Scots Poetry," *Scotland and the Lowland Tongue: Studies in the Language and Literature of Lowland Scotland in Honour of David D. Murison*, ed. J. Derrick McClure (Aberdeen, 1983), pp. 19-21.

²Based on findings in J. P. Oakden, *Alliterative Poetry in Middle English*, 2 vols. (Manchester, 1930-35), II, 355, and on the relevant citations in the *OED* and *The Middle English Dictionary*, here is a rough list of occurrences in Middle English verse: (in tail-rhyme) *Amis and Amiloun*, l. 507; *Avowing of Arthur*, l. 684; *Octovian* (Thornton MS.), ll. 354, 534; *Sir Eglamour* (Thornton MS.), l. 396; *Sir Isumbras*, l. 167; *Sir Launfal*, ll. 171, 231; *Sir Perceval of Galles*, ll. 232, 257, 300, 1780, 2190, 2200; (six-line stanza, *ababab*) *Le Morte Arthure*, ll. 3029, 2535; (ballad quatrain, *abcb*) *Flodden Feilde*, l. 214; (four-stress couplet) *Romaunt of the Rose*, l. 6377; *Sir Orfeo*, l. 214; (eleven-line stanza,

tributed somewhat more widely than their Middle English counterparts (e.g., *riven and rent, raik in raw, braid on the bent*): can we learn more about Middle Scots verse style by examining and comparing the various contexts for one phrase?

The wide range of *holtis hair* may be associated with a sharpening of meaning for each context, as I hope to demonstrate. But as soon as meaning comes up, a shadow falls on the present enterprise. What are the *holtis hair*? In Scots as in English, *holt* is a largely poetic term for copse, wood, or forest, one which frequently occurs in alliterating phrases containing topographical pairs: *holt and heath; holts and hills*. Now topographical terms have a way of clumping in verse, but *holtis hair* often stands alone, as if that were a sufficient indication of the outdoors; and it has a real fixity, the noun always plural, the adjective always post-positive, the phrase generally occurring as object to a preposition in an adverbial phrase, and invariably at the end of a line of verse.³ The real problem with *holtis hair*, though, is that adjective *hair*. Like the English form *hoar*, it has a tight group of traditional applications, in some of which it carries a precise signification, while in others it doesn't seem to. Old men's heads are in the former category: when a personage in Chaucer or Langland says his head is hoar, we recognize his reference to his grey hair, and his allusion to his old age.⁴ Likewise with frost: when Henryson or Douglas speak of holts or fields "ouirfret" with "frostis hair," the whiteness of hoarfrost is immediately apparent.⁵ But what when the holt itself is hoar? Does this mean that the forest is grey or old or wintry?

Now before I proceed, there are some authoritative voices of warning to be heeded, not least that of the distinguished editor of Henryson George Gregory Smith, who insisted that *holtis hair* is a meaningless tag, "little more than an expletive."⁶ Admittedly, Gregory Smith was reacting to some ingenious glosses of the phrase, notably Lord Hailes's suggestion "the bleak

ababababcb) *Sir Tristrem*, ll. 378, 422; (five-stress couplet) John Lydgate, *Troy Book*, II, l. 2425; (rhyme royal stanza) John Lydgate, *The Complaint of the Black Knight*, l. 119; (unrhymed alliterative lines) *Morte Arthure*, l. 3521; *Wars of Alexander*, ll. 70, 76.

³The exception is in Malory's "The death of King Arthur," closely based upon the stanzaic *Le Morte Arthure*, see *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, ed. Eugène Vinaver, 2nd ed., 3 vols. (Oxford, 1967), III, l. 1241.

⁴E.g., *Canterbury Tales*, I, l. 3878; *Piers Plowman* (C-text), VII, l. 193.

⁵*Fables*, 1692; *Eneados*, VII, Prol. l. 42; cf. *The Testament of Cresseid*, l. 163.

⁶*The Poems of Robert Henryson*, ed. G. Gregory Smith, STS, 55, 58, 64 (1906-14), I, 61.

uplands."⁷ Still, his warning against "seeking too fine shades of meaning in the common tags of the alliterative poems" has carried weight with modern readers and editors.⁸ Attempting to resolve this little problem by recourse to natural history, the editors of the *New English Dictionary* saw in the word *hoar* a reference to the bareness of tree trunks and branches, and speculated that the phrase in question "referred perhaps to the grey lichen with which aged tree-trunks are clad, and thus combined the notion of old, ancient."⁹ While the word may have sustained associations with greyness, coldness, and oldness, in the phrase *in the holtis hair* it needn't have worked to produce a meaning more precise than "out in the forest"—although (as in the similar phrases *wilsum wayis* and *grauis gray*) this must have been a rather less hospitable outdoors than that generally evoked by "under the greenwood tree."

In looking at occurrences of the phrase in a number of Middle Scots poems, it might be best to begin with a passage in which topography and an attitude to that topography both seem explicit. Thus my first extract is from quite a late work, William Stewart's weighty verse translation (1531) of the *Scotorum historiae* by Hector Boece. The passage in question occurs in a chapter entitled "How Julius Agricola in the nixt symmer passit our Levin to Argatill and quhen thai [saw] the greit montanis thay abhorrit with thame." And indeed the survey of the land of the Picts is crammed with *ugsome* features:

With montanis hie ascendand to the air,	
With crag and cleuche and [mony] holtis hair,	[cliff
With mos and mure and mony wodis wyld	[bog; moor
And ron and roche with mony rammell ouirsyld:	[scrub; thicket; hidden
So fleit all thai wer at the first luke	[alarmed
And in thair mynd greit terror als tha tuke ¹⁰	

⁷[Sir David Dalrymple, Lord Hailes], ed., *Ancient Scottish Poems, Published From the MS. of George Bannatyne* (Edinburgh, 1770), p. 326; see also R. W. V. Elliott, *The Gawain Country, Leeds Texts and Monographs*, NS, 8 (1984), 148-9, 166.

⁸*Specimens of Middle Scots* (Edinburgh, 1902), p. 274.

⁹*A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles [The Oxford English Dictionary]*, s. v. *Hoar*, a. & sb., 4; cf. *The Middle English Dictionary*, s. v. *hor*; and *The Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue*, s. v. *hare*, *hair*.

¹⁰*The Buik of the Cronicles of Scotland*, ed. William B. Turnbull, Rolls Series, 6 (1858), I, 359 (ll. 11, 264-70); cf. *The Mar Lodge Translation of the History of Scotland by Hector Boece*, ed. George Watson, STS, 3rd Series, 17 (1946), 228: "The hichtis of montanis, and vnder þame lochis, merressis and woddis myxt þareamang, replete of thornys, breris and thik rammell, affrayit first þe Romane weremen;" and *Chronicles of Scotland*

Stewart builds a list of *with*-phrases, relying on collective singular nouns, repetition of *many a*, and alliterative pairing of vernacular synonyms for features of rough landscape. This reduplication works across the line, *holtis hair* being parallel to *wodis wyld* in the following line; a collocation hardly unique to this poem. Indeed, the passage as a whole is conventional: early in the Scots alliterative romance *Golagros and Gawane*, for instance, Arthur's army marches through

deip dalis bedene, dovnis and dellis,	
Montanis and marresses, with mony rank myre;	[marshes
Birkin bewis about, boggis and wellis,	[birch branches
With outin beilding of blis, of berne or of byre;	[building
Bot torris and tene wais, teirfull quha tellis ¹¹	[steep hills;
	troublesome paths

In both *Golagros* and in Stewart's passage, the alliterative phrases of topography are not assumed to be intrinsically horrifying. This must be pointed out in comments like "fleit all thai wer," "greit terror als tha tuke," and "teirfull quha tellis."¹²

What about those occasions when the phrase *holtis hair* appears unattended by synonyms and explanatory comments? No horror attends the phrase in *Rauf Coilgear*, where it stands alone, the mass of topographical detail having come much earlier.¹³ In Richard Holland's *Buke of the Howlat*, the situation is more peculiar. What is being described at the moment the phrase appears in this poem is not an outdoor scene but a performance at a banquet by a juggler who is miming a hunt. It is a depiction of a depiction, which suggests there may be something formalized about the turn of phrase:

In com jaland the ja as a jugelour	[jay
With castis and with cawtelis, a quaynt caryar.	[tricks; wiles; thief
He gart thaim se, as it semyt, in the samyn hour,	[made
Huntyng at herdis in holtis so hair,	

Compiled by Hector Boece Translated into Scots by John Bellenden, ed. Walter Seton, R. W. Chambers and Edith C. Batho, STS, 3rd Series, 10 (1936), 127, 147.

¹¹Scottish Alliterative Poems in Riming Stanzas, ed. F. J. Amours, STS, 38 (1897), ll. 29-33.

¹²Norman Blake, *The English Language in Medieval Literature* (London, 1977), pp. 97-100.

¹³*Longer Scottish Poems . . . 1375-1650*, ed. Priscilla Bawcutt and Felicity Riddy (Edinburgh, 1987), I, 112 (l. 419); see also *Golagros and Gawane*, l. 470.

Sound saland on the se schippis of tour,
Bernis battaland on burde, brym as a bair¹⁴

[Turreted ships sailing
safely on the sea
[Men fighting; fierce
as a boar

As in some other poems in alliterative stanzas (*Golagros and Gawane* and *The Awntyrs of Arthur* among them), an intensifying *so* precedes the adjective *hair*; perhaps its function is simply to set an additional unstressed syllable between the staves. *Holtis so hair* is accompanied by similarly conventional, metrically equivalent, phrases (*schippis of tour*, *brym as a bair*), the right expressions for the situation alluded to. It is unlikely that the juggler would scenically represent grey woods, but by going through the motions of hunting deer he would evoke the place (and the phrase) for an audience familiar with this pursuit. (People who stalk deer or go fly-fishing still have stock phrases for the "right spots," after all.) In the Middle English tail-rhyme romances, hunting regularly gets mentioned in the same breath as the *holtes hore*;¹⁵ but what would have seemed "habitual" about the turn of phrase in that sort of poem would have to be read at one remove by the audience of *The Buke of the Howlat*—indeed, more than one remove, for, after all, just now this poem is about a court of birds watching a jay.¹⁶

It might seem as if Holland is exploiting some common qualities of the style of the politer sort of romance, and the assumptions behind them: "In such a style, with its conspicuous consumption of words and of time, a leisure class confirms its identity; and at the same time an atmosphere of normality is established, on which the abnormal is to intrude with shattering force."¹⁷ "Hunting in holtis so hair" is one of several threads sent out in this part of Holland's poem, attaching to a "normality" of discourse and pastime. Given this comfortable familiarity, the upcoming intrusion of the Irish Bard (a rook) upon the birds' court is calculated to jar. To both audiences, inside and outside the poem, the apparent wildness of "in holtis so hair" is actually much more familiar and welcome than the Gaelic greetings and imprecations soon to follow.

¹⁴Longer Scottish Poems, I, 75 (ll. 770-75).

¹⁵E. g., *Sir Launfal*, l. 170; *Amis and Amiloun*, l. 507; *Awntyrs of Arthur*, l. 43.

¹⁶Susan Wittig, *Stylistic and Narrative Structures in the Middle English Romances* (Austin, 1978), p. 43.

¹⁷A. C. Spearing, *Medieval to Renaissance in English Poetry* (Cambridge) 1985), p. 133.

This notion of a familiar wilderness also emerges in another strand to the Middle Scots usage of *holtis hair*, that of complaint made by a female personage—an awkward way to say "woman," but one of these complainers is a parrot. The first of these complaints to be considered may well be the latest, the celebrated dialogue-poem "The Murning Maidin," found in the Maitland Folio Manuscript.¹⁸ This poem resembles the *chanson d'aventure* in that the main speaker, a man, encounters a solitary girl in the wood and persuades her to love. What is of greater importance is that the girl has recently been jilted, and has fled to the forest to live out her life as if she were an outlaw; she has the right clothing and equipment, but isn't doing very well as a hunter, because she can't stand the sight of blood. There are all sorts of early sixteenth-century songs about retiring to the forest while in the grip of unrequited love.¹⁹ Behind these lie all sorts of romances (*Sir Orfeo* eminent among them) in which a grief-stricken hero vows to go to the *holtes hore*.²⁰ Now it is the woman who has been betrayed in love; and, as she puts it, "That garris me oft syis sicht ful sair / and walk amang þe holtis hair / within the woddis wyld."²¹

Once again, *holtis hair* goes in tandem with *woddis wyld*, which is also widely distributed, not least in contexts of love-complaint.²² Here, however, the parallel between the synonymous adverbial phrases, equivalent in rhythm as in meaning, may draw emphasis back upon the prepositions in each case, and, further, upon the governing verb, "walk." Now *amang* is a fairly unusual preposition to precede *holtis hair*. By far the commonest preposition is *in*, by comparison to which *amang* gives a stronger sense of the individual trees involved: "among the trees," but "in the forest."²³ The "emphatic,

¹⁸C. S. Lewis praises this poem in *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century Excluding Drama*, Oxford History of English Literature, Vol. 3, ed. F. P. Wilson and Bonamy Dobrée (Oxford, 1954), p. 73.

¹⁹E. g., John Stevens, *Music and Poetry in the Early Tudor Court* (London, 1961), pp. 342-432 *passim*.

²⁰Penelope Doob, *Nebuchadnezzar's Children: Conventions of Madness in Middle English Literature* (New Haven, 1974), p. 140.

²¹*The Maitland Folio Manuscript*, ed. W. A. Craigie, STS, 2nd Series, 7 (1919), 360.

²²E. g., "Joseph's Trouble About Mary," *The York Plays*, ed. Richard Beadle (London, 1982), ll. 64-68.

²³*DOST*, s. v. *amang*, 1. "In or into the midst of (a number of persons or things); among, amid."

graphic" *within* of the next line heightens the sense of being set, permanently as it were, into place.²⁴ Now the verb *walk* might appear to be working against this fixedness; but this verb does harmonize, as reference to a source for this passage may prove. Late in Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid*, Cresseid bequeaths her spirit "to Diane, quhair scho dwellis, / To walk with hir in waist woddis and wellis."²⁵ This verb *walk*, which in the context of Henryson's passage evoked stable communal activity, conveys restless solitude in "The Murning Maidin." The maiden's sense of betrayal keeps her penned up in the forest.

Even closer to the model of Henryson's influential *Testament* is David Lindsay's *Testament of the Papyngo*, during which, after complaining on the state of court, kingdom, and church in Scotland, the dying parrot makes her last bequests, among them that

sen my spreit mon fra my body go,	[spirit must
I recommend it to the quene of farye,	[Queen of Fairyland
Eternally in tyll hir court to carye,	[to make (its) way
In wyldernes, among the holtis hore. ²⁶	

This skirts direct parody of Henryson. There is a formality here which was absent from "The Murning Maidin": the verb *recommend*, used in a precise, official way, has something to do with it, as does the formality of *eternally*, and (on another level) the anglicized spelling *hore*.²⁷ The royal parrot is addressing a queen on behalf of her soul, in order that this queen may admit it to her court. With the adverbial doubling of "In wyldernes, among the holtis hore," however, the style alters; and this cadence makes the stanza rather more obviously elegiac than is the comparable one in Henryson's *Testament*. Still, this vision is far more pleasant than the fate which immediately befalls the Papyngo, her corpse torn apart and gobbled up by the scavenging birds, the clergy of Lindsay's bird-world.

²⁴*OED*, s. v. *Within*, B1 (a)(b): "Emphasis on restriction or confinement by limits or boundaries"; Tauno F. Mustanoja, *A Middle English Syntax, Part One: Parts of Speech*, in *Mémoires de la Société Néophilologique de Helsinki*, 23 (Helsinki, 1960), 421: "Used locally of position, *within* serves as an emphatic, graphic equivalent of *in* . . . usually as a more or less explicit opposite of *without*."

²⁵*Poems of Robert Henryson*, ed. Denton Fox (Oxford, 1981), p. 130, ll. 587-88.

²⁶*The Works of Sir David Lindsay*, ed. Douglas Hamer, STS, 3rd Series, 1 (1931), 89, ll. 1132-5.

²⁷*The Concise Scots Dictionary*, ed. Mairi Robinson (Aberdeen 1985), s. v. *recommend*.

Tone is far more problematic in another poem drawn upon in both *The Testament of the Papyngo* and "The Murning Maidin," Henryson's "Robene and Makyne." Now I must ask your patience for quite a roundabout path to the *holtis hair* in this poem. For all the acclaim showered upon it by modern readers, "Robene and Makyne" may seem curiously inaccessible: Henryson would seem to be drawing on a store of popular song and pastime hardly recoverable now.²⁸ It is possible to talk about an evocation of popular style, however: the stanza form (that of "Tayis Bank"; it's the "Christis Kirk" stanza without its concluding bob and refrain), along with the frequency of rhyme tags, proverbs, tautologies, and snippets of rustic talk about sheep and weather, all suggest this. As well, Henryson's steady reliance upon alliterating pairs ("gud grene hill," "flok of fe," "lovit lowd and still," "dule in dern," "dowtless but dreid," to look no further than the first stanza points to the synthesis of a recognizable popular style. But it is a synthesis: this poem is carefully balanced, as its moments of courtliness and profundity and its symmetrical structure reveal.²⁹ "Robene and Makyne" consists of sixteen eight-line stanzas, each alternating four and three-stress lines and rhyming *ab* throughout. After an extremely terse descriptive introduction, a stanza-by-stanza dialogue ensues: Makyne begs Robene to recognize her love and respond to it, and Robene responds by showing his ignorance and preoccupation. So it goes for three pairs of stanzas, after which come two stanzas of more tightly interlocked dialogue, each of the interlocutors now speaking in turns of two lines. The exchange grows more heated until the halfway point of the poem, at which Robene declares that "hamewart I will fair" (l. 64). The second half of the poem begins with two stanzas of transitional narrative, in which Robene energetically pursues his affairs, while Makyne, lingering to utter a brief complaint, heads home; his tasks complete, Robene has a quiet moment for a change of heart. Dialogue then alternates through four stanzas, Robene now initiating and Makyne putting him off; he makes a last desperate effort in the penultimate stanza, in the last two lines of which she cuts him off. Now, at the end, the situation almost mirrors that of the halfway point.

Malkyne went hame blyth annewche	[enough
Attour the holtis hair;	
Robene mvrnit and Malkyne lewche;	[laughed
Scho sang, he sichit sair;	[sighed
And so left him bayth wo and wewche,	[both woe and injury
In dolour and in cair,	

²⁸Arthur K. Moore, "Robene and Makyne," *MLR*, 43 (1948), 400-403.

²⁹Douglas Gray, *Robert Henryson* (Leiden, 1979), p. 270.

Kepand his hird vnder a huche,
Amangis the holtis hair.³⁰

[a clif

First *attour*, then (as in *Papyngo* and "Maidin") *amang*: Makyne gets right over it; Robene is stuck right into it.³¹ She is heading home, self-possessed once more.³² Earlier, she was in *derne*, the lover's private place, in which she suffered *dule* (7, 53; cf. 22),³³ and in which she longed to *deal* with Robene (l. 39). To be a lover in *derne* alone is to be in *dule*: place and feeling become equivalent, as if both phrases were place adverbials. Likewise, when Makyne leaves Robene "in dolour and in cair," there is the same potential for feelings to be equivalent to places, all the more since the phrases just quoted are surrounded by vivid place adverbials of analogous tone.

Where did Makyne want to be while she was in love with Robene? Certainly not at home: that would hardly be *in derne*. And this notion of secret space to be occupied out here is precisely what has eluded Robene. For him there is no secret space, for everywhere around him are his demanding and censorious sheep. When he twigs to Makyne, though, he thinks of a new sort of place: "the nicht is soft and dry," he rhapsodizes, "The wedder is warme and fair, / And the grene woid rycht neir ws by / To walk attour all quhair." He has come upon the *bois d'amour*, a perennial spot.³⁴ But too late: his vision of *walking* with Makyne through all this warmth and softness is to no avail, as Makyne has already cast "cairis cauld" on anyone foolish enough to *play* with Robene "Be firth, forrest or fauld."

So Robene ends up "vnder a huche [a crag], / Amangis the holtis hair." What had seemed a "ful fair daill" when first he penned his sheep there now looks quite the opposite, Robene's mood governing his perception.³⁵ It is the same with the forest: they may seem to be antonyms, but *grene woid* and

³⁰Henryson, ed. Fox, p. 179, ll. 121-8.

³¹*DOST*, s. v. *attour*, 1: "Of movement: a. Over, across."

³²Cf. Alexander Scott, "Returne the, hairt, hamewart agane," Bannatyne Manuscript CCCXXVI, *Poetry of the Stewart Court*, ed. Joan Hughes and W. S. Ramson (Canberra and Miami, 1982), pp. 454-5.

³³Cf. *Dan Michel's Ayenbite of Inwit*, ed. R. Morris, EETS, OS, 23 (1866), 143: "þe ilke mayde strongliche opnome of loue . . . alneway zecþ . . . þe hulkes and þe derne stedes."

³⁴Richard Axton, *European Drama of the Early Middle Ages* (London, 1974), p. 52.

³⁵Derek Pearsall, "Rhetorical Description in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *MLR*, 50 (1955), 133.

holtis hair refer to the same place. The holt will remain hoary until Robene's feelings change.

Throughout Middle Scots verse, the strange phrase *holtis hair* is descriptive less of topographic reality than of the experience and preoccupation of the perceiving individual: it may correspond to the familiar pursuit of game, the horror of a strange place, an antitype of the court, or, perhaps most expressively, the secret place of love-melancholy.³⁶ Again and again, the most conventional features of Middle Scots verse style can be found to be enlivened by context and open to subtle gradation of meaning.

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³⁶Professor Alasdair MacDonald points out that a study of the connotative range of this word might profitably be extended back to the Old English form *har*, an adjective which often appears in contexts of grief and loss. On the ethical implications of the frosty trees at Grendel's Mere in *Beowulf*, see D. W. Robertson, "The Doctrine of Charity in Medieval Literary Gardens: A Topical Approach through Symbolism and Allegory," *Speculum*, 26 (1951); rptd. *An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism*, ed. Lewis E. Nicholson (Notre Dame, IN, 1963), p. 185.