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*Robert L. Kindrick*

## Robert Burns and the Tradition of the Makars

One of the major questions involving the poetry of Robert Burns is the poet's awareness of earlier literary tradition. On the one hand is Henry Mackenzie's notion that Burns is a "natural" poet, replete with all of the gifts of nature that Rousseau ever envisioned. His use of folk meters and folk tales as his sources, and his love for the traditions and common folk culture of Scotland seem to some to embody all the elements of "untutored genius" which reaches its zenith in the Romantic period of British verse.<sup>1</sup> A genius, Burns surely was. But whether he was "untutored" has constantly been called in doubt. The case is hardly a simple one, for even though Mackenzie's interpretation has been largely rejected, it remains in general circulation. It is sometimes difficult to believe that a number of poets who draw their inspiration from folk verse and exhibit a sympathy towards the common man are deeply learned. Robert Henryson is only one other poet in the Scottish canon whose rhetorical ease and apparent simplicity appear to belie his immersion in the learned, as well as the folk, tradition.

The reappraisal of Burns's verse in the light of his learning has gained ascendancy. Robert Anderson, who was closely associated with Burns, argued early on that Burns had deliberately minimized his familiarity with literary tradition: "It was a part of the machinery, as he called it, of his poetical character to pass for an illiterate plowman who wrote from pure inspiration."<sup>2</sup> Most modern

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<sup>1</sup>See Henry Mackenzie, *The Lounger*, vols. 37-38 of *British Essayists* (London, 1817).

<sup>2</sup>"Letters from Dr Robert Anderson to Dr James Currie, 1799-1801," *Burns Chronicle*, 34 (1925), 12.

critics, having taken off the blinders of nineteenth-century Romanticism, have followed Anderson's lead. Donald A. Low has commented that Burns is far more learned than he is often believed to be.<sup>3</sup> L. N. Angus-Butterworth, in discussing Burns's education, comments on the "impressive range of his scholarship," and he goes on to note that "Not only was Burns himself a cultured man, but love of learning was characteristic of his family."<sup>4</sup> Maurice Lindsay comments that "He was ... in no sense an 'unlettered plowman'—although in later years, when it suited him to adopt such a pose for the gratification of the Edinburgh patricians, he did so without hesitation."<sup>5</sup>

Evidence of Burns's learning is easily found in his verse, and a part of that learning relates to the Middle Ages. The poet himself tells us that the roots of his devotion to Scotland are found in medieval history: "The story of Wallace poured a Scottish prejudice into my veins, which will boil along there till the flood-gates of life shut in eternal rest."<sup>6</sup> The fact that Burns did not read Blind Harry's Middle Scots tale of Wallace but instead an eighteenth-century adaptation is a matter of some significance that we shall revisit later. Nonetheless, there can be no doubt that Burns was at least indirectly influenced by medieval Scottish traditions as embodied in the poetry of the great Makars—Henryson, Dunbar, and Douglas. Moreover, his espousal of medieval traditions, no matter what the source, is clear evidence of his own literary nationalism.

Despite constant troubles with England, Scotland realized some of its greatest accomplishments during the Middle Ages.<sup>7</sup> As Burns himself notes, the story of Wallace inspired generations of Scots to rally to their country's cause. The tradition of the Makars reflects such pride in country. Although influenced by southern literary forms, Middle Scots verse retains its own integrity with regard to time and place. The poetry of Robert Henryson could have been written nowhere other than Scotland, for he infuses his verse with Scottish political and social interests. William Dunbar, more closely associated with the court, brings a vitality to the characterization of James IV and the intrigue and Byzantine diplo-

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<sup>3</sup>Donald A. Low, ed., *The Kilmarnock Poems* (London, 1985), p. xviii.

<sup>4</sup>L. M. Angus-Butterworth, *Robert Burns and the 18th Century Revival in Scottish Vernacular Poetry* (Aberdeen, 1969), p. 80. Henceforth Angus-Butterworth.

<sup>5</sup>Maurice Lindsay, *Robert Burns* (London, 1954), p. 40.

<sup>6</sup>*The Letters of Robert Burns*, 2nd edn., ed. G. Ross Roy. 2 vols. (Oxford, 1985), I, 136.

<sup>7</sup>On the medieval Scottish tradition, see *The History of Scottish Literature*, Vol. I, ed. R. D. S. Jack (Aberdeen, 1988), especially pp. 13-105. Many of the aspects of Burns's reliance on literary and cultural tradition have been thoroughly explored. See, for instance, G. Ross Roy, *Robert Burns* (Columbia, SC, 1966) and "Robert Burns: A Self-Portrait" in *Critical Essays on Robert Burns*, ed. Donald A. Low (London, 1975), pp. 13-38. Henceforth Low.

macy of his courtiers that is seldom duplicated. Gavin Douglas, even though purporting only to make an excellent translation of Virgil's *Aeneid*, clearly views his source through Scottish eyes. The flowering of the arts, and especially the literary arts, in the fifteenth century remains a source of pride for the Scottish nation. And it was so recognized in the eighteenth century. The publication of David Herd's *Ancient and Modern Scots Songs* and Ramsay's *Ever Green* reflect the growing recognition of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries as major cultural resources.<sup>8</sup> Burns's utilization of the medieval contribution to Scottish culture and his use of the tradition of the Makars may be illustrated in at least three major areas: language and metric forms, literary modes, and literary themes.

First, Burns's decision to write dialectal poems, which reflect far more closely than eighteenth-century British standard dialect the language of the Makars, demonstrates his attachment to his homeland, but it is difficult to estimate how much his use of dialect demonstrates a conscious interest in language structure, at least as defined in modern terms. Certain dialects of the American South (and notably the Missouri Ozarks) have until recently exhibited characteristics of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century British English that have remained impervious to change because of the geographical isolation of the speakers. Modern students of folklore, such as Vance Randolph, have investigated and recorded aspects of both dialect and folk tale. While they occasionally note the survival of frozen linguistic forms, it is clear that such diachronic linguistic analysis is not their main goal. They are more interested in focusing on the nature of contemporary speech and literature. The same, indeed, certainly may have been true with Burns. Yet the shadow of late medieval "Inglis" (as Middle Scots was called by the Makars themselves) lingers in interesting ways in his language. For instance, Burns spells the numeral "one" as "a-n-e" but, in 1923, Sir James Wilson recorded that the form was pronounced "yin."<sup>9</sup> The spelling form itself remains unchanged from the Middle Ages, and in that sense, Burns was merely recording what he saw in printed form. His adherence to Middle Scots spelling, even in the face of variant contemporaneous pronunciation, indicates that in this case his primary interest was likely not linguistic accuracy in the modern sense but instead the basically medieval survivals that distinguished the folk dialects of his nation from British Standard dialect.

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<sup>8</sup>See Angus-Butterworth, pp. 1-61; Raymond Bentman, *Robert Burns* (Boston, 1987), comments on how the Eighteenth Century Scottish Literary Revival would have afforded Burns access to medieval sources (p. 13); see also Dietrich Strauss, "Burns's Attitude to Medieval Reality," *SSL*, 26 (1991), 522-35, for comment on how intervening centuries colored Burns's view of the Middle Ages. Henceforth Strauss.

<sup>9</sup>Sir James Wilson, *The Dialect of Robert Burns* (Oxford, 1923), p. 52. See also Raymond Bentman, "Robert Burns's Use of Scottish Diction," *From Sensibility to Romanticism*, ed. Frederick W. Hilles and Harold Bloom (London, 1965), and David Murison, "The Language of Burns" in Low, pp. 54-69.

It is not necessary to belabor this matter, for numerous critics since Sir James Wilson have investigated Burns's dialectal poems. It is worth noting that, in addition to variances between spelling and pronunciation, such as the one cited above, Burns's dialectal poems abound with the archaisms of the folk vocabulary, despite the Ayrshire mastery of what Tom Crawford describes as "Modified Standard" English in the district.<sup>10</sup> The occurrence of words such as "spence," "harn," "gar," "howlet," and "souter" demonstrate his interest in the antique flavor of the vernacular of his homeland. In fact, David Murison asserts that "he gave the old Scots tongue a new lease of life."<sup>11</sup> The fact that his interest was not that of a descriptive linguist but of a nationalistic antiquarian has implications for his approach and motives in using other materials from the tradition of the Makars.

Burns's well-documented use of late medieval verse forms merits at least brief comment here. It has long been recognized that even in his earliest verse, he copied the forms of the Makars. "Mary Morison," for instance, is in the form of an octosyllabic ballade, likely introduced into Middle Scots by Henryson. Crawford argues that the direct source for Burns was Ramsay's *Ever Green*, which has about twenty poems in this form.<sup>12</sup> Other songs and lyrics use both traditional verse forms and melodies from folk songs, with origins usually lost in Scottish history. For instance, the air "Goodnight and joy be wi' you a" was a traditional Scottish song which Burns employed in "The Farewell to the Brethren of St. James' Lodge, Tarbolton" and "Auld lang syne" (*Poems*, III, 1195). That he enlarges its "evocative possibilities," as Carol McQuirk observes, show his mastery in the adaptation of traditional sources and his strong fervor for Scottish culture.<sup>13</sup>

The second area of influence is literary modes. It is likely in his use of literary modes that Burns shows the same kind of influence exhibited in his use of verse forms. Just as he drew from Herd's anthology and Ramsay's *Ever Green* for the ballad form, he also drew from near contemporaries, Renaissance poets,

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<sup>10</sup>Thomas Crawford, *Burns: A Study of the Poems and Songs* (London, 1960), p. 3. Henceforth Crawford.

<sup>11</sup>Murison, in Low, p. 69. For further analysis, see *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, ed. James Kinsley. 3 vols. (Oxford, 1968), III, 1549-1613 (henceforth *Poems*) and James A. Mackay, *Burns A-Z: The Complete Word Finder* (Dumfries, 1990), *passim*.

<sup>12</sup>Crawford, p. 11. For a study of Burns's use of the ballad, see Donald A. Low, "Burns and the Traditional Ballad," *SSL*, 26 (1991), 536-42. But see also comments by G. Ross Roy on the influence of a variety of sources, including James Watson's *Choice Collection* and *The Tea Table Miscellany*, "Burns: Editions and Critical Works, 1968-82," *SSL*, 19 (1984), 231-32. Henceforth Roy.

<sup>13</sup>Carol McQuirk, *Robert Burns and the Sentimental Era* (Athens, GA, 1985), pp. 120-48.

and selected medieval texts in his use of modes. One medieval mode that strikes most readers forcefully is his use of the beast fable. "Poor Mailie" incorporates all of the elements of the beast fable as described by modern literary theorists such as Annabel Patterson.<sup>14</sup> The animal is endowed with human characteristics and addresses another character in the fable with motives and psychological insights specifically intelligible to humans. In fact, Hughoc is specifically charged with taking her "last will and testament," in a manner of speaking, and relaying it to her owner (Burns himself). Patterson also specifically emphasizes the political and ethical character of beast fables, as exemplified in Henryson's fables such as "The Sheep and the Dog." Crawford comments that the ewe's plight may indeed be compared to Burns's own situation of being entangled in the "wicked strings" of a myopic society (Crawford, p. 78). Mailie too finds herself ensnared and dying, and, albeit in a comic manner, she charges Burns with the welfare of "My helpless lambs." However, early on in the poem she also weighs in on a major agricultural controversy:

Tell him, if e'r again he keep  
As muckle gear as buy a *sheep*  
O, bid him never tye them mair,  
Wi' wicked strings o' hemp or hair!  
But ca' them out to park or hill,  
An' let them wander at their will:  
So, may his flock increase an' grow  
To *scores* o' lambs, an' *packs* of woo'!  
("The Death and Dying Words  
of Poor Mailie," *Poems*, I, 32)

The theme is the matter of enclosure for grazing flocks in Ayrshire. Crawford speaks of this as Mailie's asking Burns to engage in a whole new system of agriculture.

One other example will suffice. In "The Twa Dogs" the dialogue between Caesar and Luath touches virtually every nerve with regard to class distinction and shows Burns's sympathy with the common people. "The Two Mice" from Henryson's *Fabillis* is an excellent touchstone. Once again, all of the traditional elements of the medieval beast fable, including the nature of the characterization and the political intent, are clearly illustrated. Henryson was commenting on the differences between the "basic" life of the countryside and encroaching urbanity. His two mice represent two very different lifestyles: the former sometimes harsh but basically straightforward, and the latter replete with creature comforts but punctuated by danger. His country mouse lives "Richt soliter . . . on hir waith"

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<sup>14</sup>Annabel Patterson, *Fables of Power* (Durham, 1991), pp. 1-81.

(ll. 166-68).<sup>15</sup> The city mouse “Was gild brother and made an fre burges” (l. 172). This contrast in characterization sets the tone for the narrative of the adventures in the city, which alternate between fine dining and luxury and dangerous encounters with a cat and a spenser. The poem’s *moralitas* concludes “Blissid be sempill lyfe withoutin dreid” (l. 373), likely Henryson’s own perspective on the events.

Burns deals with a similar type of social dialogue in “The Twa Dogs.” For him, however, the debate does not just involve the virtues of country life versus the joys of the city. His focus on quality of life has much to do with both Scottish class differences and the relationship between the English and the Scots. The imperious Caesar is described as:

... keepet for his Honor’s pleasure;  
His hair, his size, his mouth, his lugs,  
Show’d he was nane o’ Scotland’s dogs;  
But whalpet some place far abroad,  
Whare sailors gang to fish for Cod.

His locked, letter’d, braw brass-collar,  
Show’d him the *gentleman* an’ *scholar*; (*Poems*, I, 138).

Between the two animals, he is clearly the sophisticate and the foreigner. The other dog is Luath, named after Cuchullin’s dog in Ossian’s *Fingal*, whom Burns describes thus:

He was a gash an’ faithfu’ *tyke*,  
As ever lap a sheugh, or dyke!  
His honest sonsie, baws’nt *face*,  
Ay gat him friends in ilka place; (*Poems*, I, 138).

Just as in Henryson’s beast fable, the initial descriptions set the stage for the encounter, and Burns’s themes are very similar to Henryson’s. Caesar questions how Luath lives without the finery and wealth he himself enjoys. However, whereas Henryson’s theme emerges from the narrative, Burns relies on the use of pointed dialogue to drive home forcefully not only distinctions about two types of living but also concerns about the lack of social justice and true charity among human beings. It is perhaps all too easy to understand that his two dogs “Rejoic’d they were na *men* but *dogs*” (*Poems*, I, 145). Burns shares with Henry-

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<sup>15</sup>The edition of Henryson used here for all of Henryson’s poems except “The Want of Wise Men” is Denton Fox’s *The Poems of Robert Henryson* (Oxford, 1981). Hereafter, only line numbers will be cited. Citations from “The Want of Wise Men” are taken from H. Harvey Wood, ed., *The Poems and Fables of Robert Henryson* (Edinburgh, 1933; 2nd edn., rev., repr., 1958), pp. 189-91. Only line numbers will be cited. Fox did not include the poem because he was skeptical that it was written by Henryson.

son the ability to adapt the insights of his animal characters to contemporaneous social and political controversies.

"The Twa Dogs," however, also has clear elements of another medieval form, the debate. Henryson's *Ressoning betuix Aige and Yowth* shows in an allegorical fashion some of the same kind of dialogue as to be found in "The Twa Dogs." Departing from his use of narrative structure for the purposes of dramatically acting out opposing points of view, Henryson illustrates through this allegorical debate two of the Seven Ages of Man. Youth extols his own virtues throughout the poem, constantly exhorting "O, 3owth be glaid in to thi flouris grene" (l. 8). However, the somber voice of Aige reminds him of the grim realities of human life and repeats the refrain "O 3owth, thy flouris fadis ferly sone!" (l. 16). Henryson, the master of the beast fable among the Makars, seldom goes so far as to incorporate this kind of bloodless acrimony into his beast fables *per se*, unless one believes that the legally structured debate between "The Sheep and the Dog" moves in that direction.<sup>16</sup> Yet, Burns has clearly merged the two forms to illuminate his social themes.

Most often, the debate poem in the Middle Ages often involved a dialogue between two allegorical entities.<sup>17</sup> It was less likely to have current politics than ethical and religious issues at its core, as illustrated in *The Ressoning betuix Aige and Yowth* and *The Ressoning betuix Deth and Man*. There was usually no plot, and the interest of the poem focused on the multiple perspectives on life or the exchange of ideas. Elements of debate are also involved in the tradition of flying, to be considered shortly. In addition to "The Twa Dogs," Burns further employs the debate in the discussion between the "auld brig" and the "new brig" in "The Brigs of Ayr," which illustrates even more specific comparisons with Henryson's use of the debate. This particular debate becomes especially acrimonious. In "The Ressoning betuix aige and yowth," Henryson's "aige" says:

... 'My bairne, lat be.  
I wes within thir sixty 3eiris and sevin  
Ane freik on fold bayth frak, forsy, and fre;  
Als glad, als gay, als 3ung, als 3aip as 3e.  
Bot now that day is ourdrevin and done;  
Luk thow my laythly lycome gif I le:  
O 3owth, thy flouris fadis ferly sone!' (ll. 26-32)

In similar fashion, the "auld brig" says:

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<sup>16</sup>See John MacQueen, *Robert Henryson* (Oxford, 1967), pp. 127-31. I have also touched on the matter in *Robert Henryson* (Boston, 1979), pp. 79-81.

<sup>17</sup>For a useful overview of the debate, see B. N. Hedberg, "The Bucolics and Medieval Poetical Debate," *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, 75 (1944), *passim*.



I doubt na, frien', ye'll think ye're nae sheep-shank,  
 Ance ye were streekit owre frae bank to bank!  
 But gin ye be a Brig as auld as me,  
 Tho' faith, that day, I doubt, ye'll never see;  
 There'll be, if that date come, I'll wad a boddle,  
 Some fewer whigmeleeries in your noddle (*Poems*, I, 284).

Both of these passages emphasize the wisdom and often sad disappointment of experience and age. Both also strike a pose rhetorically superior to the impudence of youth. Henryson's "Yowth" responds:

'My cors is clene without corruptioun,  
 My self is sound, but seiknes and but soir,  
 My wittis fyve in dew proportioun,  
 My curage is of clene complexioun,  
 My hairt is hail, my lever, and my splene;  
 Thairfoir to reid this rowll I haif ressoun:  
 O 3owth, be glaid in to thy flouris grene!' (ll. 50-56)

In similar fashion, the "new brig" gives a fiery response to the "auld brig":

Auld Vandal, ye but show your little mense,  
 Just much about it wi' your scanty sense;  
 Will your poor, narrow foot-path of a street,  
 Where twa wheel-barrows tremble when they meet,  
 Your ruin'd, formless bulk o' stane and lime,  
 Compare wi' bonie *Brigs* o' modern time? (*Poems*, I, 285).

Throughout both poems, one sees the continuing debate between the old and the new, just as one sees the debate between short-sighted and long-sighted viewpoints. That this debate is an essential part of human nature, no one can doubt, especially in the way it engages issues of social ethics and critical stages in the development of human beings. Yet the structure of the debate itself is clearly an ancient tradition, especially popular in the Middle Ages, which Burns adapted for his own purposes. "The Brigs of Ayr" certainly deals with contemporaneous events, but it shares the long-term perspective of the medieval debate in touching on basic human issues as well.

Dunbar's approach to "debate" became more highly personalized and even more acrimonious.<sup>18</sup> Moving away from the tradition of abstract entities arguing about moral and ethical issues, Dunbar personalized the debate by mixing the discussion of issues with *ad hominem* attacks in a bitter and sometimes humorous vein, as "The Flying of Dunbar and Kennedie" attests. There can hardly be any doubt that Burns enjoyed a good flying, or oral duel, with his opponents.

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<sup>18</sup>See Ian Ross, *William Dunbar* (Leiden, 1981), pp. 85-6 and 184-7.

Even his epitaphs such as "On a Celebrated Ruling Elder" and "On Wee Johnie" show that he was not averse to attack. His numerous responses to critics, especially those of his sexual conduct, demonstrate his interest in a good battle in public. Probably one of his best examples in the tradition of Dunbar is the "Epistle from a Taylor to Robert Burns," which chastises the poet for his "foolish tricks" (*Poems*, I, 277) and begs him to repent. Dunbar puts similar words into the mouth of Kennedie, who admonishes him to "leif thy riming, rebald, and thy rowis" (l. 32). Burns's poem shares with Dunbar's the neat rhetorical trick of answering one's critics by making them appear ridiculous through a dramatic and comic self-attack. And of course part of the fun and interest of the tradition is that there must be responses. Dunbar calls Kennedie "Iersche brybour baird, vyle beggar with thy brattis / Cuntbitten crawdoun Kennedie . . ." <sup>19</sup> (ll. 49-50), obviously raising the intensity of insult. In "Robert Burns's Answer," he too provides an apparently emotional and vicious retort:

What ails ye now, ye lousie b—h,  
To thresh my back at sic a pitch? (*Poems*, I, 278)

In Burns's work and Dunbar's, the insults grow ever more direct, colorful, and comic after these initial exchanges. The personal tone, the vituperative nature, the rhetorical creativeness in attack and response all show through in Burns and Dunbar. In his flyting, Burns reflects the tradition of Dunbar in an advanced form of canny irony.

Also incorporating the structure of flyting along with the debate is the "debate of women" as exemplified in Dunbar's "The Tua Mariit Wemen and the Wedo" and one of Burns's songs, "The Five Carlins." Often lacking the escalating insult and vulgarity of "pure" flytings such as that of Dunbar and Kennedie, the "women's debate" nonetheless frequently dealt with issues in a highly personalized and often emotional fashion rather than relying on allegorical abstractions to mute the ferocity of discussions.<sup>20</sup> Dunbar's "Tua Mariit Wemen" for instance focuses on the joys and sorrows of sex and married life. The invectives are directed not so much among the protagonists themselves but to husbands and lovers who have abused or disappointed them. For instance, one of the women says:

My husband wes a hur maister the hungeast in erd;  
Tharfor I hait him with my hert, sa help me our Lord (ll. 168-9)

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<sup>19</sup>James Kinsley, ed., *The Poems of William Dunbar* (Oxford, 1979). This edition will be used for all citations. Hereafter, only line numbers will be provided.

<sup>20</sup>See Edmund Reiss, *William Dunbar* (Boston, 1979), pp. 115-25.

The typical "women's debate" often focuses on love and marriage but may include comment as well on social issues. This is the aspect of the women's debate Burns emphasized in "The Five Carlins." While structured around a contested election between Sir James Johnston and Capt. Miller for the five Dumfriesshire burghs, Burns's poem incorporates the medieval tradition of women's debate. The women themselves reflect the tradition of characterization found in Chaucer and Dunbar. Maggy, for instance, is "A dame wi' pride enough," while Marjory is "A Carlin auld and teugh." Reviewing the candidates that they will send "to London town / To bring them tidings home" (*Poems*, I, 478), they focus on personalities as well as issues, and ultimately "At strife thir Carlins fell" (p. 480). The conclusion of their debate is voiced by Marjory whose "auld Scots heart was true." She will send to London town "Whom I lo'e best at hame" (p. 481). Burns's use of the women's debate, including the stereotypical characterization, personal attack, and sense of comic irony of the Makars, shows his reliance both on the poetry of his homeland and his innovative spirit in adapting this traditional medieval poetic mode to contemporary problems.

Another typically medieval form that Burns blends throughout his beast fables is allegory. His use of the genre extends far beyond the poems discussed above. Just as Burns integrates the beast fable and the debate, he also integrates the beast fable and allegory with reflective poetry. The tradition of reflective poetry in Scottish literature runs deep, and one of the finest examples among the Makars is Robert Henryson's "The Abbey Walk." Reflecting on the abbey walk, likely at Dunfermline Abbey, Henryson evaluates the human condition through his meditations. Even Dunbar, in some of his court petitions and reflections on love affairs among the nobility, employs the same allegorical principle of extending the implications of a concrete act or situation to broader issues in human life. Among the Makars, this "allegorical habit of mind"<sup>21</sup> was deeply ingrained. As we have already seen, it infused the debate, the beast fable, and reflective poem, among other medieval poetic modes. Persistence in looking beyond worldly appearances for abstract principles or broader issues common to all mankind was emphasized in every medieval sermon.<sup>22</sup> It too re-emerged in the eighteenth century largely from classical, pastoral roots, but the type of allegory associated with the beast fable and the reflective poem has particular affinities with Scotland and France. Burns's poems engage this tradition. First, there is his integration of the reflective and allegorical principles in poems that have much in common with the beast fables, notably, "To a Louse" and "To a Mouse." Crawford considers them apart from Burns's beast fables as satires and

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<sup>21</sup>See Rosamund Tuve, *Allegorical Imagery* (Princeton, 1966), pp. 3-56.

<sup>22</sup>See James J. Murphy, *Rhetoric in the Middle Ages* (Berkeley, 1974), pp. 269-356 and D. L. d'Avray, *The Preaching of the Friars* (Oxford, 1985), *passim*. For comment on this tradition in the verse of Robert Henryson, see my *Henryson and the Medieval Arts of Rhetoric* (New York, 1993), pp. 189-272.

reflections. In technical terms, they do not meet the criteria of the beast fable. The creatures involved do not speak and possess human characteristics and motivations. Instead they are observed by the poet and inspire in him reflections on the nature of the human condition. To all intents and purposes, the animals are merely creatures in their environment engaged in natural, thoughtless, and non-articulate activities. Yet the louse inspires ironic reflections of the type that Henryson espoused in "The Want of Wise Men," illustrating how social station is not necessarily a mark of quality. In this regard, Burns has directly entered the "birth-worth" debate which was a major preoccupation of the fifteenth century.<sup>23</sup> The period witnessed a questioning of the traditional values with regard to the notion that "blood will tell." Whereas many previous generations of the Middle Ages had believed that genetics (in one form or another) constituted the sole basis for nobility, late medieval thinkers and poets espoused the notion that environment, personal determination, and ethical stature were the basis for nobility instead of birth. Medwall's *Fulgens and Lucrez* (1495) is a dramatic allegory that engages the issues, and they have a major presence in Henryson through his depiction of the innate nobility of the "pure" men as well as in Dunbar, whose portrayal of aristocrats is hardly flattering. Burns, too, takes on the issues with his reflections on the louse on Jennie's bonnet, attacking the pride which accompanied both hereditary nobles and the aspiring middle class. Yet there is an addition, a more modern tone. The ironic tone in his final apostrophe—"O wad some Pow'r the giftie gie us / To see *oursels* as *others* see us" (*Poems*, I, 194)—reflects a different notion on the importance of appearance than we find in the poetry of the Makars. Whereas fifteenth-century poets would see the contrast between Jennie's finery and the louse in terms of the vanity of human beings and the implied affront to God, Burns, by using a socially-sensitive human critic as an audience for such vanity, colors his poem with elements of social opinion and shame which Henryson would likely have ignored.

"To a Mouse" involves a different kind of reflection. Quite apart from any social satire, this poem inspires sad reflection on the mutability of life and the futility of human planning. The futile situation of the poor creature whose house is ruined by human plow is all too common in the allegorical thinking of the medieval mind. This theme runs throughout Henryson's beast fables, but it extends well beyond them. Indeed, both "The Testament of Cresseid" and "Orpheus and Euridice" are developed around the vanity and futility of human efforts.<sup>24</sup> Cresseid, who was once the "flour of luv" and "A per se" of Troy, descends to prostitution and is condemned by the Gods to die of leprosy. Orpheus loses his love because of carnality. Of course, Douglas' *Eneados* also vividly represents

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<sup>23</sup>See Arthur B. Ferguson, *The Indian Summer of English Chivalry* (Durham, 1960), pp. 3-32.

<sup>24</sup>See Matthew P. McDiarmid, *Henryson* (Edinburgh, 1981), pp. 59 and 112-15.

the frustration and futility in the relationship of Aeneas and Dido. The theme of mutability and fortune's wheel has a long history in the literature of the Middle Ages. Burns's reflections on the "Wee, sleeket, cowran, tim'rous *beastie*" join this tradition, particularly through his portrayal of the mouse as a "*fellow-mortal*." He further extends the mouse's plight to humankind in the final stanza where he observes that the mouse is affected only by the present but that humans have "prospects drear" in their past and fear the future. Allegory is critical to a number of Burns's other poems. "The Brigs of Ayr," "The Vision. Duan First," and "The Holy Fair," (which shares characteristics with *Piers Plowman*) all illustrate how Burns follows the basic principle of giving ideas "a local habitation and a name." In so doing, he uses concrete objects or the characterization of abstractions with an eye to inspiring meditation on the general human condition as well as theological notions of ethics. Burns's modernization of the allegorical tradition reflects not only the evolution of the form from the fourteenth through the eighteenth centuries, but also a distinctly Scottish flavor.

There are many nuances to Burns's use of medieval modes. The final mode, on which I wish to touch briefly, is the peasant brawl.<sup>25</sup> This mode was basically a satire on the chivalric tournament, usually displacing noble knights with the peasants and replacing the object of the brawl or tournament with a peasant woman instead of a noble lady. Late medieval examples include "The Tournament of Tottenham," Heinrich Wittenwaller's *Der Ring, Christis Kirk*, and most notably Dunbar's "The Tournament" (which deals with a satirical tournament set in hell). This medieval mode was likely inspired by the same spirit that brought about "the feast of misrule" during which boy bishops ruled the community for one day instead of traditional religious authorities. It turns social conventions upside down, replacing order with disorder and rules of civility with acrimony. One of the most obvious examples of such disorder in Burns is "Halloween." Its bawdy tone, in an atmosphere of the misrule that marks the holiday when evil spirits have a fling prior to All Saints' Day, is linked to the portrayal of rustic delights. The dance itself reflects not only the *danse macabre*, but also the spirit of the peasant festival which underlies the poems in the peasant brawl mode. The comedy of the poem, for instance in the description of the "Wanton Widow" Leezie, is maintained through the conclusion where the poet stands witness that "Wi' Merry songs, an' friendly cracks / I wat they did na weary" (ll. 244-5). Such an approach to life, emphasizing festivity and spontaneity instead of order and restraint, is the obverse side of Burns's use of allegory and the reflective poem. Burns's own jocular spirit clearly demonstrates why he would be attracted to this particular medieval form.

Generally, in his use of these medieval modes, Burns makes changes, integrates, and creates. He reflects the temper of the Middle Ages, but often with a

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<sup>25</sup>See George F. Jones, "'Christis Kirk,' 'Peblis to the Play,' and the German Peasant Brawl," *PMLA*, 67 (1953), 1101-25.

new twist, such as that sometimes found in the verse of the Renaissance or in poets such as Ramsay. The same is true in Burns's use of medieval themes. These themes pervade his work, and they range from larger social themes such as the class struggle in medieval Scotland, as illustrated by Henryson's fable of "The Wolf and the Lamb," to an ethical interest in the blessings of the simple life, as found in "The Two Mice." The continuing reflection of these themes in Burns's poems is hardly unique. Indeed, other societies at other times in other places have maintained or resurrected these medieval themes, which themselves have an inheritance from the classical period. However, the fact that Burns chose to focus on them during a century when the internationalization of Britain was having a major social impact again illustrates his feeling that the roots of his homeland were to be found in a folk culture with many interests that continued only slightly modified since the fifteenth century.

Burns's thematic interests reflect many of the concerns of his time. His yearning for the simple rustic life is much in line with the taste of his century. The French and English courts and their poets had a stylized taste for the country coupled with an idealistic view of rustic life. However, Burns's sympathy with the lower classes and their sense of the inherent dignity they possess seems to be more realistic than stylized. This sense that dignity and worthiness transcend class boundaries is pervasive in the works of Henryson. In "The Sheep and Dog," he shows how an innocent sheep is beguiled of his wool by a ruthless dog and a court peopled with vicious "Men of Law." In "The Wolf and the Lamb," he laments the ways in which the poor are victimized by the mighty. His emphasis on this theme led Marshall Stearns to observe that Henryson's "sympathies are always with the poor."<sup>26</sup> Burns's best known example of such sympathy is "For A' That and A' That" in which he extols "honest Poverty." His scorn for "yon birkie ca'd, a lord" is balanced with his respect for "The man of independent mind" (*Poems*, II, 763). He once again ties this theme in with the "birth-worth" debate. His final prayer is:

That Sense and Worth, o'er a' the earth  
Shall bear the gree, and a' that. (*Poems*, II, 763)

The vitality of this poem with its forceful rhythm and repetition has attracted much comment. Its emphatic tone strongly argues for something more than just poetic convention. However, it is hardly the only example of Burns's sympathy with the common people. His reflections on the ruling monarchy as "a Race outlandish" in "Lines on Stirling" show both his nationalistic longings and his reproof of the upper classes. Burns is perhaps less like Dunbar, who attacked the upper classes but often with sympathy or as an element of court quarrels. Unlike Henryson, Dunbar was much more the court poet, dependent upon the nobility

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<sup>26</sup>Marshall Stearns, *Robert Henryson* (New York, 1949), pp. 106-29. For comparison see James Kinsley, *Robert Burns and the Peasantry* (London, 1974).

for his living. While poems such as “A Dance in the Queen’s Chamber,” “Aganis the Solistaris in Court,” and “Schir Thomas Norny” bitterly attacked particular courtiers or nobles, Dunbar never goes so far as Burns or Henryson in a generalized attack on the upper classes. Among the Makars, it is Henryson whom Burns most closely parallels in his use of this theme.

In similar fashion, Burns attacks the decline of wisdom in political life. His song, “Such a parcel of rogues in a nation,” is built around the deterioration of current conditions. Its thematic touchstone is the opening line: “Fareweel to a’ our Scottish fame.” Burns berates the treason that has brought Scotland to such a pass and longs for the days of Robert Bruce and William Wallace:

O would, or I had seen the day  
 That treason thus could sell us,  
 My auld grey head had lien in clay,  
 Wi’ BRUCE and loyal WALLACE!  
 But pith and power, till my last hour,  
 I’ll mak this declaration;  
 We’re bought and sold for English gold,  
 Such a parcel of rogues in a nation! (*Poems*, II, 644).

Topical though this poem may be, the theme is medieval in its roots. Henryson’s “Want of Wise Men” focuses on a similar state of social decline. Conditions in his time, Henryson laments, are so bad that now fools sit on the benches of court. The old virtues are gone and the changes are not positive:

now wrang hes warrane, and law is bot wilfulness;  
 quha hes the war Is worthin on him all the wyte,  
 For trewth is tressoun, and faith is fals fekilness;  
 Gylle is now gyd, and vane lust is also delyte;  
 Kirk is contempnit, thay compt nocht cursing a myte;  
 Grit god is grevit, That me rycht soir forthinkis:  
 The causs of this ony man may sone wit,  
 That want of wysmen garis fulis sit on binkis. (*ll.* 49-56)

While the cause of Burns’s distress is English gold and Henryson’s is the general lack of wisdom, both have the same result—social disorder and injustice. Both also have basically the same cause: covetousness in the medieval sense of over-attachment to the things of this life. In certain ways, these poems are variations on the *ubi sunt* motif. Just as medieval poets wondered what happened to “the snows of yesteryear,” as Villon would say, so Burns and Henryson compare the current age with the past and find contemporaneous life a source of regret. Douglas too employs this motif, but it is hard to say how much of it is originally his and how much he derived from Virgil. In any case, once again, Burns reflects a tone and sentiment much more like Henryson’s than that of any of the other Makars.

Many of Burns's other poems have medieval roots but it is possible to provide only a brief sampling. His reflections on mutability incorporate a common medieval topos in "To a Mouse." Mutability was a favorite theme of the medieval poet and manifested itself in many ways in poems such as Henryson's "Lion and the Mouse" and Dunbar's "This World unstable." In a different vein, "Tam O' Shanter" reflects not only the peasant brawl but contains some grisly burlesque in exploring the confrontation between human mortality and the face of the supernatural. Both Henryson and Dunbar engage in rather grim humor with regard to the fleeting nature of human existence. Henryson's "Thre Deid Pollis" best establishes the macabre irony that this particular theme takes in the Middle Ages; Dunbar tends to mix such themes with a kind of levity as in "Fasternis Evin in Hell." Burns's poems seem to reflect more of Dunbar's raucous and grotesque humor than Henryson's somber satire.

Burns also attacks religious hypocrisy in "Holy Willie's Prayer." This theme had a long history in the Middle Ages, and it appears in the poetry of both Henryson and Dunbar. Henryson's fable, "The Confession of the Fox," portrays clergy as ignorant and easily beguiled wolves. Dunbar's "False Friar of Tungland" exposes with bitter ridicule the dishonesty and corruption of a charlatan. Burns couches his attack in terms of the pious pretensions of those who claim social and moral superiority. Willie's own unwitting revelation of his lack of wisdom and basic dishonesty of character place him in the great tradition of Henryson's wolfish clergy and Dunbar's abbot of Tungland.

As Tom Crawford has observed, Burns made use of the medieval motif of the Seven Ages of Man (Crawford, p. 19). Crawford shows that "Man was Made to Mourn" explores this theme particularly well in its second stanza. In describing the foibles of man in the stages of his life, he strikes a tone of medieval melancholy:

Young stranger, whither wand'rest thou?  
    Began the rev'rend Sage;  
Does thirst of wealth thy step constrain,  
    Or youthful Pleasure's rage?  
Or haply, prest with cares and woes,  
    Too soon thou hast began,  
To wander forth, with me, to mourn  
    The miseries of Man (*Poems*, I, 116).

Henryson employs this same theme—the misery and essential tragedy of life—in "The Want of Wise Men" and extends it to women in Cresseid's lament in "The Testament." Among other elements reflective of the Middle Ages, Burns's comic and satirical tone has been recognized as having much in common with *Christis Kirk* and other late medieval romps.<sup>27</sup> David Daiches comments on the

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<sup>27</sup>See J. C. Bittenbender, "Bakhtinian Carnival in the Poetry of Robert Burns," *Scottish*



importance for Burns of Ramsay's tendency to localize works in Scottish settings, an artistic technique clearly traceable to Henryson and Dunbar.<sup>28</sup> Like the Makars, Burns consistently uses settings and characters unique to his homeland. Even his epistles reflect the dictaminal rhetoric of the Middle Ages,<sup>29</sup> but not in so pronounced a fashion as to suggest genuine scholarly research.

In fact, it would be a mistake to conclude based on this evidence that Burns was in any modern sense a devout scholar of the Middle Ages. Was Burns influenced by the Makars? The answer definitely has to be yes. Parallels in language, theme, and mode clearly indicate Burns's comfort with and mastery of the forms and poetic concerns of his great predecessors. Burns espoused and renewed the traditions of his beloved homeland. He drew his inspiration largely from poets of the sixteenth century and the immediately preceding generation of poets who had kept the earlier traditions alive. Insofar as he imbued those themes and traditions with a new vitality, he attempted to embrace comprehensively the history of Scottish literary art. His own immediate familiarity with fifteenth-century tradition seems to have been limited, filtered through the eyes of subsequent generations, with some immediate access to medieval texts through collections such as Herd's *Ancient and Modern Scottish Songs* (Roy, p. 231). Burns's reading copy of *The History of Sir William Wallace* was an anglicized version modernized from the original by Allan Ramsay's friend and verse correspondent, William Hamilton of Gilbertfield (Angus-Butterworth, pp. 86-7). In short, Burns's model of literary antiquity was mixed, just as our own is, by the texts and interpretations of the era. Burns was undoubtedly learned, and he hides his learning just as well as Henryson does. One result of that learning was that he often came to the Makars through their preservation in the tradition of Ramsay and Ferguson. Dietrich Strauss argues effectively that this "inherited vision" of the Middle Ages colors his view of what he borrows (Strauss, especially p. 533).

Yet filtered as Burns's view was of the Middle Ages, his interest appears sincere. His attraction for peasant life, the traditions of his homeland, and the rustic setting were far less affected than was the approach of his contemporaries to an idealized concept of bliss in country life. Between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries, things had moved more slowly in the Scottish countryside than they had in the cities. Traditional culture was hallowed and retained both in folk ritual and literate social history. Even if he did not come to the tradition of the Makars through a close reading (by modern standards) of Henryson, Dunbar, and Douglas, the preservation of the Makars' tradition in the Scottish folk culture and

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*Literary Journal*, 21 (1994), 23-38; and Donald A. Low, "Byron and Burns," *SSL*, 27 (1992), especially 133-41.

<sup>28</sup>David Daiches, *Robert Burns* (New York, 1966), pp. 26-7.

<sup>29</sup>For a discussion of such rhetoric, see Kindrick, *Henryson and the Medieval Arts of Rhetoric*, pp 113-46. Burns's epistles have drawn considerable attention. For a summary comment see John C. Weston, "Robert Burns's Use of the Scots Verse Epistle Form," *PQ*, 48 (1970), 188-210.

in the verse of his learned predecessors resulted in unique adaptations of medieval language, modes, and themes to eighteenth-century problems and gave an added dimension to Burns's celebration of the cultural life and history of his beloved Scotland.

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Charlie is my darling—  
A Gray 1996