

2007

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Recommended Citation

Kindrick, Robert L. (2007) "Robert Henryson and the Roots of Reformation," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 35: Iss. 1, 295–306.
Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol35/iss1/22>

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Robert L. Kindrick

Robert Henryson and the Roots of Reformation

It has lately become a truism to attack the notion of "Reformation" as a single event in history occurring at multiple geographic locations at different times.¹ As an example of the earlier tradition, note the comments of Augustus Welby Pugin:

The so-called Reformation is now regarded by many men of learning and of unprejudiced minds as a dreadful scourge, permitted by divine Providence in punishment for its decayed faith; and those by whom it was carried on are now considered in the true light of Church plunderers and crafty political intriguers, instead of holy martyrs and modern apostles. It is, indeed, almost impossible for any sincere person to see all episcopal and ecclesiastical power completely controlled at the pleasure of a lay tribunal, without condemning the men who originally betrayed the Church, and feeling that in our present divided and distracted state, consequent on the *Reformation*, we are suffering severely for the sins of our fathers. This is the only really consistent view which can be taken of the subject.²

¹See especially Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition* (Chicago, 1984), pp. 10-68. Henceforth Pelikan. See also Gordon Leff, *Gregory of Rimini: Tradition and Innovation in Fourteenth-Century Thought* (New York, 1961), pp. 14-27; and Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars* (New Haven, 1996). Henceforth Duffy.

²A[ugustus] Welby Pugin, *Contrasts: Or, A Parallel Between the Noble Edifices of the Middle Ages, and Corresponding Buildings of the Present Day; Shewing the Present Decay of Taste*, 2nd edn. (London, 1841), Preface, p. iv.

Indeed, a study of the history of the Church in the Middle Ages reveals numerous attempts to reform medieval Catholicism. Some of the attempts may have been largely rejected, such as the practices of the Albigensians. Some became incorporated into the very fabric of the medieval Church, such as the “revolutionary” practices that led to Benedictine orders. Yet others, sponsored by some dominant elements within the Church itself, seemed very much at odds with the basic goals of *caritas* and wisdom. The Inquisition (sometimes called a part of the Anti-Reformation) is only one example of an effort to purify both Church practice and society that led to the abrogation of basic Christian ideals as advocated in earlier medieval belief systems.³ While the term “Reformation” is often related to seminal political events, such as those during the reign of Henry VIII, the basic practice of Reformation is a continuing process.

If the notion of reformation is understood as not necessarily referring to a particular period in time or a particular set of watershed political or economic movements, it can be accepted that there have been a number of significant “Reformations” going on throughout the history of Christian religious belief. These efforts at change have often come from the most devout and well-schooled in traditional dogma (see Duffy, pp. 381-85). This paper will focus on elements of one of those small reformations in fifteenth-century Scotland. In examining the poetry of Robert Henryson, I hope to trace a few of the elements that precurse the Knoxian Reformation in Scotland. While Henryson himself likely was a devout churchman, possibly headmaster of the school at Dunfermline, many of his attitudes do not reflect strict application of the terms of fifteenth-century dogma.

We all know that Henryson was generally orthodox in his beliefs because of revisions that were apparently imposed on his original writings. Let me cite only a few examples from *The Morall Fabillis*. While we are not certain in all cases what the originals might have been, it is clear that certain lines in the fables were replaced because of objections to their theology. In “The Trial of the Fox” alone, several lines have been changed at one stage or another to reflect “Protestant” revisions. The basic thrust of the fable involves the events leading up to the execution of a fox by command of the royal court, after the fox has served as a false courtier and has killed a lamb. As is the case with all of Henryson’s fables, immediately after the narrative the poet appends a *moralitas*. In his *moralitas*, he reflects on the implications of the events of the fable of human beings. At the beginning of the last stanza of this particular fable, the Bassandyne print (1571) has the following reading:

³See Steven Ozment, *The Age of Reform* (New Haven, 1980), pp. 95-6 (henceforth Ozment); and Gordon Leff, *The Dissolution of the Medieval Outlook: An Essay on Intellectual and Spiritual Change in the Fourteenth Century* (New York, 1976), p. 120.

O mediatour! mercifull and meik
Thow soveraigne Lord and King, Celestiall (*ll.* 1139-40).⁴

However, in the Bannatyne manuscript (c. 1568), a text more certainly derived from earlier literary traditions, the lines read:

O Mary myld, mediatour of mercy meik,
Sitt down before thy sone celestiall (*ll.* 1139-40).

It is clear that the history of these lines in the movement from Bannatyne to Bassandyne reflects an attempt to delete references to Mary. One other example may also be instructive. In line 1111, where Henryson describes a mare who refuses to appear in court, the earlier Bannatyne reading is "The meir is men of contemplioun." The Bassandyne text reads "men of gude condition." The sense of the Bannatyne reading is that the mare represents people in monastic orders. The significant change in Bassandyne is intended to make the line completely secular.

Perhaps only one other note is in order as an obvious example of Henryson's largely orthodox Catholic background, and that is from "The Fox and the Wolf." In lines 712-14, Henryson describes the three-part sacrament of penance:

"Weill," quod the wolf, "thow wantis pointis twa
Belangand to perfyte confessioun;
To the thrid part off pennance let us ga (*ll.* 712-14).

This doctrine is strictly in keeping with that of the orthodox Church in Henryson's day. Other features abound. His animal characters appear in ecclesiastical courts and wear the garb of cardinals, bishops, and priests. His theology, while never thoroughly investigated in its general framework, often reflects the standard views of the fifteenth-century Church.

It is against this background that Henryson's own reformation tendencies must be read. These tendencies do not offer a sharp break from the established body of doctrine, but they do provide enough insight for us to see ways in which Henryson was a precursor of John Knox. Henryson was clearly sensitive to the many intellectual, social, and economic pressures that made up the basis for the Protestant Reformation. While we know little about his life, we believe that he was at least a notary (a very different type of profession in

⁴*The Poems of Robert Henryson*, ed. Robert L. Kindrick, With the Assistance of Kristie A. Bixby (Kalamazoo, MI, 1997), p. 130. Henceforth Kindrick. See also John MacQueen, *Robert Henryson* (Oxford, 1967), pp. 189-99; and *The Poems of Robert Henryson*, ed. Denton Fox (Oxford, 1981), pp. 230-51. Henceforth line numbers from the Fox edition will be cited in the text.

fifteenth-century Scotland than conceived today), very likely a teacher, and certainly a member of the educated, if not wealthy, class. If he was indeed the principal officer at Dunfermline school, he doubtless would have had interaction with a wide variety of social types, both through the abbey and his contacts with the parents of his children. His background in theology, coupled with his intellectual and social awareness, provided for his own sense of necessary changes in fifteenth-century Scottish religious habits.

There are many elements to Henryson's "Reformation." At least one of his fables shows a pronounced reference to the Virgin as an intercessor on the part of mankind. The same approach is to be found in Henryson's "The Annunciation," as the focus in the poem is on Mary and the conception of Christ.⁵ Nonetheless, Henryson shows, at the very least, ambivalence about the use of saints and the Virgin as intercessors on behalf of human beings. He shows a pronounced directness in his approach to God in "The Sheep and the Dog." One of the most interesting passages in that poem is to be found in the complaint of the sheep after he has been brutalized in a consistory court on a trumped-up charge. His complaint is as follows:

... "O lord, quhy sleipis thow sa lang?
Walk, and discern my cause groundit on richt;
Se how I am be fraud, maistrie, and slicht
Peillit full bair, and so is mony one
Now in this warld richt wonder wo begone.

"Se how this cursit syn of couetice
Exylit hes baith lufe, lawtie, and law.
Now few or nane will execute iustice,
In falt of quhome, the pure man is ouerthrow.
The veritie, suppois the iugis it knaw,
Thay ar so blindit with affectioun,
But dreid, for meid, thay thoill the richt go doun.

"Seis thow not, lord, this warld ouerturnit is,
As quha wald change gude gold in leid or tyn?
The pure is peillit, the lord may do na mis,
And simonie is haldin for na syn.
Now is he blyith with okker maist may wyn;
Gentrice is slane, and pietie is ago.
Allace, gude lord, quhy tholis thow it so?

⁵John Stephens, "Devotion and Wit in Henryson's 'The Annunciation,'" *English Studies*, 51(1970), 323-31.

“Thow tholis this euin for our grit offence;
Thow sendis vs troubill and plaigis soir,
As hunger, derth, grit weir, or pestilence;
Bot few amendis now thair lyfe thairfoir.
We pure pepill as now may do no moir
Bot pray to the: sen that we ar opprest
In to this eirth, grant vs in heuin gude rest.” (ll. 1295-1320).

Most interesting among these lines is “O lord, quhy sleipis thow sa lang?” (l. 1295). The line has interest for a number of reasons. First, it seems at least moderately imprudent in its approach to God, reflecting the doubt and questioning found in major Reformation figures such as Luther. The sheep clearly is questioning the ways of Providence, not the appropriate function of a lay person. It is secondly interesting insofar as it indicates a direct appeal to God without the intercession of members of the church hierarchy or saints or the Virgin. As in the case of Cresseid’s attack on Venus and Cupid in *The Testament*, Henryson does not indicate a need for ceremonial complexity. There is no suggestion that the hapless sheep is even in a chapel. His direct appeal is followed by an elaboration on his case and the urging of divine justice in lines 1300-1306.

The sheep even indicates a cause—it is the “cursit syn of covetice” (l. 1300)—that has now overtaken the world. This sinful carnality has pushed out love, loyalty, and law. The very length of the sheep’s appeal and its quasi-notarial structure suggests some inherent elements of Henryson’s theology based, in part, on the failure of the Church to bring humankind to God. One of the sheep’s other comments is quite interesting: “Seis thow not, lord, this ward ouerturnit is” (l. 1307). In this refrain, Henryson is reflecting the “golden age” theory of history. There is another poem, “The Want of Wyse Men,”⁶ perhaps spuriously linked to his name, which has the same theme. In that poem, the narrator strikes again the general theme of the degeneration of contemporary society:

Me mervellis of this grete confusion;
I wald sum clerk of connyng walde declerde,
Quhat gerris this world be turnyt upsyd doun.
Thare is na faithfull fastnes founde in erd;
Now are noucht thre may traistly trow the ferde;
Welth is away, and wit is worthin wrynkis;

⁶Henryson’s authorship of this poem has particularly been questioned by Fox, who omits it from his edition of *Poems*.

Now sele is sorow this is a wofull werde,
 Sen want of wyse men makis fulis to sit on binkis (Kindrick, ll. 1-8)⁷

This sample is representative of the tenor of the entire poem. This approach to history is fairly common in the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance, but is also clearly a theme which reformers and humanists might strike.⁸ In asserting that society, the Church, and other social institutions have departed from their original ideals and are now corrupt and degenerate, the reformer typically points to a different way.⁹ The significance of this theme in the sheep's comments is clearly tied into the theological directness of his immediate appeal to God.

Only one other example must suffice, and this is from *The Testament of Cresseid*, a sequel to Chaucer's *Troilus*. Cresseid goes directly into the "oration" and, without the benefit of priest or other intercessor, makes her complaint against Venus and Cupid:

"Allace, that euer I maid 3ow sacrifice!

"3e gave me anis ane deuine responsaill
 That I suld be the flour of luif in Troy;
 Now am I maid ane vnworthie outwaill,
 And all in cair translait is my ioy.
 Quha sall me gyde? Quha sall me now conuoy,
 Sen I fra Diomeid and nobill Troylus
 Am clene excludit, as abiect odious?

"O fals Cupide, is nane to wyte bot thow
 And thy mother, of lufe the blind goddes!
 3e causit me alwayis vnderstand and trow
 The seid of lufe was sawin in my face,
 And ay grew grene throw 3our supplie and grace.
 Bot now, allace, that seid with froist is slane,
 And I fra luifferis left, and all forlane." (ll. 126-40).

While the sheep's complaint in "The Sheep and the Dog" may be direct and certainly questions God's ways, Cresseid's complaint represents an attack on her gods. Henryson likely felt more freedom in depicting this attack on pagan

⁷Kindrick states, "After a thorough review of the evidence, Fox concluded that the poem is not Henryson's.... Nonetheless, the poem is reproduced in previous editions and discussed in Henryson criticism, and it is included here for the sake of completeness" (Kindrick, p. 274).

⁸See Ozment, pp. 290-317.

⁹See Pelikan, pp. 10-59.

gods than he would have on the Christian God.¹⁰ Moreover, Cresseid is punished for the effrontery of her comments. Yet, still and all, it is out of direct interaction between a human being and deities that *The Testament of Cresseid* line of the poem spins. Even Henryson, as narrator, himself takes such a direct approach in “Ane Prayer for the Pest,” where he prays directly to God for relief from the plague:

Superne Lucerne, guberne this pestilens,
Preserue and serue that we nocht sterf thairin,
Declyne that pyne be thy devyne prudens,
For trewth, haif rewth, lat nocht our slewth ws twyn;
Our syte, full tye, wer we contryt, wald blin;
Dissiuir did nevir, quha euir the besocht
But grace, with space, for to arrace fra sin;
Lat nocht be tint that thow sa deir hes bocht!

O prince preclair, this cair quotidiane,
We the exort, distort it in exyle;
Bot thow remeid, this deid is bot ane trane
For to dissaif the laif and thame begyle.
Bot thow, sa wyse, devyse to mend this byle,
Of this mischeif quha may releif ws ocht
For wrangus win, bot thow our sin oursyle?
Lat nocht be tint that thow sa deir hes bocht! (ll. 65-80).

There is no doubt that the “Superne Lucerne” he addresses is the supreme deity. There is nothing in his language to suggest that he believes he needs to use intercessors in order to make his case. Henryson’s narrator makes an appeal directly to the deity to punish him and his fellow citizens with any other kind of torment. The clear assertion of human-ultimate deity relationships in Henryson seems clear.

To expand on only one other example, among the many changes in religion which Henryson projected, a challenge to the protected status of a corrupt clergy seems to be first and foremost. Henryson drew from the tradition of anti-fraternal satire,¹¹ but his attacks seem less generically driven and more focused on specific abuses which informed the satire and complaint of the Reformation. A number of instances may be cited from both *The Morall Fabillis* and *The Testament of Cresseid* which will make the point. In *The Testament of Cresseid*, Calchas, Cresseid’s father, is an ineffectual figure, at the

¹⁰Lee W. Patterson, “Christian and Pagan in *The Testament of Cresseid*,” *Philological Quarterly*, 52 (1973), 713-14.

¹¹Penn R. Szittyá, *The Tradition of Anti-Fraternal Satire* (Princeton, 1986).

very best. Developing part of his characterization from Chaucer's poem, Henryson portrays Calchas, who is a priest of Venus and Cupid, as possibly a purveyor of his daughter's honor or, at the best extreme, as an ineffective mediator and protector.¹² In this poem, Cresseid returns from the Greek camp after Diomedes has "had all his appetyte, / And mair, fulfillit of this fair ladie" (ll. 71-2). When she returns to her father's house, she passes into "ane secreit orature," (l. 120) or small chapel, usually dedicated to the worship of Venus and Cupid. Instead of worshipping her father's gods, she attacks them. The result is traumatic. Cresseid's beauty is immediately changed into ugliness in a very direct and naturalistic way. Henryson's artistry in his poem is so precise, in fact, that in 1841 Sir J. W. Y. Simpson¹³ identified her illness and transforming agent as elephantiasis leprosy:

"Thy cristall ene mingit with blude I mak,
Thy voice sa cleir vnple sand, hoir and hace,
Thy lustie lyre ouirspre d with spottis blak,
And lumpis haw appeirand in thy face:
Quhair thow cummis, ilk man sall fle the place.
This sall thow go begging fra hous to hous
With cop and clapper lyke ane lazarous." (ll. 337-43).

Calchas should be an effective mediator. After all, he has devoted his life to the worship of these two gods. Yet he seems full of platitudes. For instance, when Cresseid returns to her home, he says:

... "Douchter, weip thow not thairfoir;
Peraurenture all cummis for the best. (ll. 103-4).

While his advice may be sound, it is hardly consoling, especially to a young person like Cresseid who has suffered the disappointment of sexual excess. Cresseid then falls into a slumber. In the course of her slumber, she is judged by the gods based upon accusations by Venus and Cupid that she has falsely accused them of crimes of which she herself is responsible.¹⁴ When she awak-

¹²See Douglas Gray, *Robert Henryson* (Leiden, 1979), pp. 175-6. Henceforth Gray.

¹³J. A. Y. Simpson, "Antiquarian Notices of Leprosy and Leper Hospitals in Scotland and England," *Edinburgh Medical and Surgical Journal*, 56 (1841), 301-30; 57 (1842), 121-56, 294-429.

¹⁴See Robert L. Kindrick, *Robert Henryson* (Boston, 1979), pp. 141-2; see Gray, pp. 205-207.

ens, she realizes the nature of her diseased state. She summons her father and expresses her frustration. His reaction is as follows:

He luikit on hir vglye lipper face,
The quhylk befor was quhite as lillie flour;
Wringand his handis, oftymes said allace
That he had leuit to se that wofull hour;
For he knew weill that thair was na succour
To hir seiknes, and that dowblit his pane;
Thus was thair cair aneuch betuix thame twane. (ll. 372-78).

After they had mourned together "full lang," he decides to send her to a leper house. It is quite true that under the conditions, little else could be done. Nonetheless, the abbreviated nature of Calchas's response generates questions. Why did not he, as a priest of Venus and Cupid, attempt to intercede on her behalf? Why is there not more attention to their mutual mourning? It is true that some of these questions unfairly second-guess Henryson's artistry. The reason I bring them up is simply to indicate that the situation with Calchas is one example of a priest who can do no good as intercessor or mediator. Yet, even given our understanding that pagan priests are fair game for attack, Henryson does not spare corrupt advocates of, or sponges on, Christianity.¹⁵

Other examples of Henryson's attacks on clergy and their privileged status along with their corruption abound in *The Morall Fabillis*. I have already mentioned "The Trial of the Fox," in which a wolf serves as a member of the clergy who advises the noble king. That the wolf is corrupt and stupid becomes clear in the course of the fable. While engaged on a royal mission to serve a summons on a mare, he is kicked in the head for his trouble and condemned to shame in the court. Throughout, he has been tricked by the fox. His imbecilic behavior leads the fox to quote a Scottish proverb: "The greitest clerkis ar not the wysest men" (l. 1064).¹⁶

Perhaps another more pointed attack may be found in "The Sheep and the Dog." In this fable, Henryson establishes a situation in which an individual is victimized by a consistory court.¹⁷ We are told that a dog, because he "wes pure" (l. 1147), sues a sheep over "certane breid" (l. 1149). The sheep is called into a consistory court. This court is fraught with difficulties. The judge is

¹⁵See, for instance, Gray, pp.108-9, and John Block Friedman, "Henryson, the Friars, and the *Confessio Reynardi*," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 66 (1967), 550-61.

¹⁶See Allan Ramsay, *A Collection of Scotch Proverbs, Containing all the Wise Sayings and Observations of the Old People of Scotland* (Paisley [1840?]), p. 18.

¹⁷See Marshall Stearns, *Robert Henryson* (New York, 1949), pp. 25-32.

“Ane fraudfull volff” (l. 1150), obviously the sheep’s traditional foe. Henryson goes on to indicate that “Schir Corbie Rauin wes maid apparitour” (l. 1160). The text specifically notes that the raven has picked out many sheep’s eyes. Other court officers are just as bad, and the outcome of the trial is to be expected. The sheep loses his suit and, in order to pay the dog, must be shorn in the midst of winter. Henryson is quick at making the point that the consistory court is hardly a place where one can find justice. Numerous examples from other fables might be cited as well to illustrate the point that Henryson sees the clergy for the most part not as gentle, beneficent, and munificent people but instead as scoundrels and ravenous villains. In fact, the only churchman with *caritas* in *The Morall Fabillis* is the Swallow, obviously a parish priest who is not a member of monastic orders or the Church hierarchy.

A few summary comments should be considered with regard to other elements of Henryson’s Reformation spirit. The lack of emphasis on religious ritual has already been pointed out, most notably in *The Testament of Cresseid*, where Cresseid acts both as a supplicant and as the priest. The lack of emphasis on ceremony also appears in “The Trial of the Fox.” In the funeral of the father of the poem’s protagonist, he is simply thrown into a bog. In this case, Henryson uses the lack of ceremony to emphasize the villainy of the younger fox who is ultimately executed at the end of the tale. Nonetheless, throughout there is an emphasis on the responsibility of human beings for their own actions. Henryson even enters the debate about works and faith as the road to salvation (see Fox, pp. 273-6). Moreover, in “The Preaching of the Swallow” he focuses on the problems that are encountered when people refuse to heed good advice:

And quhen the swallow saw that thay wer deid,
 ‘Lo,’ quod scho, ‘thus it happinnis mony syis
 On thame that will not tak counsall nor reid
 Off prudent men or clerkis that ar wyis.
 This grit perrell I tauld thame mair than thryis;
 Now ar thay deid, and wo is me thairfoir!’
 Scho tuke hir flicht, bot I hir saw no moir. (ll. 1881-87).

How far does such an attitude put him in the Reformation camp? It is hard to discern, because the Pelagian controversy had raged for years prior to Henryson’s writing. But Henryson continues to reassert this notion as a critical element through Orpheus and Eurydice and many of the other fables.

There are many traditional elements in Henryson’s theology. In “The Bludy Serk” he relies on traditional theology and imagery in his portrayal of a bride of Christ. In “The Abbey Walk” he engages many of the Senecan notions of tolerance for suffering and worldly variance that mark earlier medieval

Catholicism. Given his traditional theology, is it possible that all of the Reformation elements in his verse are Protestant revisions? Likely not, for most of his theological directness and many of his attacks on corrupt clergy are deeply embedded in the structure of verse. They have a significant impact on plot and character development. And there are other aspects of Henryson's life and verse that should inform our judgments about his theology. Insofar as the Reformation relied on humanism, the rising spirit of the middle class, marked economic change, and power shifts coupled with literacy as the basis for its development, Henryson truly witnessed and engaged many of those "counter cultural" tendencies.¹⁸ Based on his own broad learning, there is no doubt that he was an early humanist in Scotland. John MacQueen and others have shown that he embraced the learning of the "quattrocento" as well as the earlier Classical tradition in which he was schooled.¹⁹ It is hard to determine which rhetoric has influenced him the most but in addition to the *ars praedicandi* he was also clearly influenced by the *ars poetria* and the *ars dictaminus*. It is even conceivable that he would have known Quintillian.²⁰ Any review of Henryson's work will show how deeply he was influenced by the revival of Classical materials, Classical rhetoric, and the new humanism from the continent, with which Scotland had close ties because of mutual abhorrence of England. His own learning, coupled with his role as a schoolmaster (if indeed he was), gives rise to the suggestion that Henryson's theological directness is perhaps spurred on by his interest in all worthy individuals having direct access to all texts, and not simply Christian interpretive texts.

Henryson was influenced by some of the same elements that shaped the fervor of John Knox. His notion of "Reformation" is informed by the continental tradition of intellectual and theological questioning, of espousing the basic virtues of the older Church—but questioning the way the Church implemented those values and questioning its own commitment. While it is traditional Catholicism that infuses the theology of his writings, Henryson shows himself to be a transitional figure. As a humanist and as one interested in educating others, he certainly knew the value of individual knowledge and that moral value extended beyond the texts of the Bible and Church fathers.

¹⁸See particularly Duffy, pp. 379-477.

¹⁹John MacQueen, "Neo-Platonism and Orphism in Fifteenth-Century Scotland," *Scottish Studies*, 20 (1976), 69-89.

²⁰Robert L. Kindrick, *Henryson and the Medieval Arts of Rhetoric* (New York, 1993), especially pp. 3-39.

Insofar as there are conflicting tendencies in his work, they doubtless show Henryson to be a child of a transitional period. These conflicting tendencies also show the complexity of the concept of "Reformation"—a series of movements beginning virtually with the inception of Christianity and continuing through the present day.²¹

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²¹Bob Kendrick passed away shortly after this article was submitted, and before I had copy-edited it, so it was not possible to resolve certain editorial questions with him. The major change upon which I decided, and for which I take full responsibility, was to use Denton Fox's edition, *The Poems of Robert Henryson* (Oxford, 1981), rather than Kendrick's own *Poems of Robert Henryson* (Kalamazoo, MI, 1997). The choice was not based on the quality of the edition, but on the availability of Fox's edition, particularly for readers residing outside the United States. I owe an enormous debt of gratitude to Professor Deanna Delmar Evans who proof-read the article twice and provided me with several valuable suggestions. *GRR*.