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**John MacQueen. Robert Henryson, A Study of the Major Narrative Poems. Oxford. The Clarendon Press. 1967. vi + 229 pp. 30 shillings.**

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## Reviews

John MacQueen. *Robert Henryson, A Study of the Major Narrative Poems*. Oxford. The Clarendon Press. 1967. vi + 229 pp. 30 shillings.

In an article published some years ago Professor Denton Fox argued that the relationship between *moralitas* and tale in Henryson's *Moral Fables* was not at all the arbitrary one that has often been maintained but was instead that of inseparable unity, the tales being in his view the narrative expression, in allegorical terms, of the content of the *moralites*. Fox demonstrated this proposition convincingly in a discussion of the fables of "The Cock and the Jasp" and of "The Preaching of the Swallow," and although he stopped short of claiming a like correspondence for each of the tales and its *moralitas* the implication of the essay — reinforced perhaps by the inclusiveness of its title, "Henryson's *Fables*" — remained that the essential unity of fable and moral provided the norm against which occasional exceptions could be measured.

A very similar point of view is taken by Professor MacQueen and is extended to an analysis of Henryson's major poems which, although it includes much of additional interest, is largely concerned with explaining the narrative sections of the poems as allegorical representations of the *moralites*, even when, as in the *Testament of Cresseid*, the moral is unstated. Thus he sees the narrative portion of *Orpheus and Eurydice* as an "interior allegorical drama" which embodies the philosophical and ethical views contained in the *moralitas* and presents in dramatic action Eurydice as appetitive power, Orpheus as intellectual power, Asistaeus as moral virtue, and the serpent, through whose sting Eurydice is given over to the powers of hell, as sensuality. Throughout the narrative section of the poem the allegory is pervasive: the treatment of Orpheus, for example, who becomes sovereign (as a result of a marriage that is "morally neutral") only upon the initiative of Eurydice, illustrates both the capacities and the limitations of intellectual power; the curious role of Aristaeus, at first sight so incongruous to his assigned function in the *moralitas*, is to be explained by the fact that appetitive power is the legitimate prey of moral virtue. Hell represents "unsatisfied and uncontrolled appetite," and its predominant-

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ly masculine inhabitants, both pagan and Christian, have particular significance for Orpheus, "the masculine intellect which has failed to bring appetitive power under control." These residents of hell are relieved of their torments by the harmonious music Orpheus has learned in his journey through the spheres, but the tragedy is that Orpheus, "a fallen intellect," is unable to impose harmony in his own world, and at the end of the poem he has lost Eurydice because he has failed to resolve the conflicting claims of love and appetite.

The *Testament of Cresseid* exhibits a closely similar structure of moral allegory. At least in the early part of the poem Cresseid, representing non-intellectual appetite and rejecting as she does both moral virtue and reason, corresponds to Eurydice. As her dream-vision of the planets shows, she has rebelled against the order of law and government, and since she has rejected the moral and physical laws of the universe her physical punishment has become inevitable. The possibility of moral redemption, however, still remains, and her Complaint indicates that she has to some extent come to recognize the inevitability of human suffering and of the impersonality of the operation of Fortune. Exhibiting a radical alteration of her previous attitude of bitter and blasphemous railing against the gods, Cresseid later in the poem takes on something of the allegorical function of Orpheus, having reached at this point the degree of redemption attainable through intellectual power. In the climactic scene of the poem, half-blinded by leprosy ("the visual representation of Cresseid's invisible sin"), she is unable to recognize Troilus (Virtue), and he in turn fails to recognize her in her altered state. As MacQueen explains:

In this passage the allegory still holds — Virtue cannot recognize the appetite deformed by sin, though he may be stirred by it to the remembrance of unfallen appetite, and thus to an act of charity. Equally, appetite, deformed by sin, cannot recognize Virtue, except through an act of charity, which in effect symbolizes divine grace.

The justification for this kind of allegorical exegesis of the poems receives its clearest support from the Prologue of the *Fables*, with its assertion of the allegorical function of poetry, with its claim that a "morall sueit sentence" derives from the "scitell dyt of poetre," and with its explicit emphasis on the carnal passions of man as the principal theme of the tales. In his analyses of the fables of "The Cock and the Jasp" and of "The Preaching of the Swallow" MacQueen follows the general direction of Fox's previous discussion, although his treatment of both poems contains much original material. The exegesis of

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"The Frog and the Mouse" is, particularly, a model of allegorical interpretation, bringing to bear in its explanation of the relationship between narrative and moral an awareness of the potentialities of symbol that illuminates the underlying allegory, with its echoes of Boethius and of the Platonism of Chartres, in its full complexity. The discussions of "The Two Mice," of "The Fox, the Wolf, and the Husbandman," and of "The Fox, the Wolf, and the Cadger," although briefer in compass, show the same competent concern for symbol and allegory as they operate in the narratives.

It would be unjust to give the impression, however, that the book restricts itself entirely to allegorical interpretations of the poem. The first chapter, "Henryson's *Milieu*," although it adds little to the results of Laing's investigations into the facts of Henryson's life, contains a useful discussion of fifteenth-century Scottish education, including a description of the status and function of the grammar school at Dunfermline, and makes some suggestions about Henryson's own studies and about his possible role as an early humanist which, though speculative, deserve close consideration. Throughout the volume, MacQueen is able to indicate possible sources (the importance of Boccaccio for Henryson has I think not previously been adequately appreciated) and to present parallels from both English and Scottish literature that consistently enrich one's understanding of the poems. The chapter on the *Testament*, contains, in addition to its exegesis of the moral allegory, a fine analysis of the structure of the poem and of Henryson's rhetorical techniques, including his use of alliteration and his manipulation of various levels of style; it is in the present writer's opinion the most perceptive account of this remarkable poem that has yet appeared. Not the least valuable part of the book, incidentally, is tucked away in the three appendices. The first of these, on "The Text of the Morall Fabillis," establishes beyond doubt the superiority of the Bannatyne Ms. as the basis for the text of most of the *Fables* and encourages one to hope that MacQueen's discussion of the textual problems may lead to the production of a new edition of the poem; the other two, which are concerned with the relationship of the *Fables* to, respectively, the Aesopic tradition and to the beast-epic, are praiseworthy combinations of cogency and erudition.

One might wish, perhaps, that with all its virtues the book could have been more closely focussed; there is, in fact, except for the rather general sub-title, no clear statement of its governing purpose, and at times it yields the impression of uncertainty of aim. The first chapter, interesting though it is, has a somewhat tenuous relation to those that

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follow, and the discussions of the poems themselves are inclined to be uneven. What might be called the poetic values of *Orpheus and Eurydice*, for example, as well as the rhetorical techniques employed in the poem, receive relatively brief mention, and the author's preoccupation with allegorical interpretation leads him to slight those of the *Fables* that are less susceptible to this kind of approach. The result is that the analyses of some of the *Fables*, including, unfortunately, some tales that might be said best to display Henryson's talent for comic narration and for social and political satire, consist of not much more than an assembly of notes. This is a pity, for the author is a critic of uncommon acuity, and one can only regret that the analytic powers which provided the excellent reading of the *Testament* were not engaged to an equal degree in his consideration of *Orpheus* and of the *Fables*. These reservations, however, are intended not to negate but rather to emphasize the value of MacQueen's contribution to Henryson studies. His book is one that no student of Henryson or of Middle Scots literature will read without substantial profit.

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