The Thre Prestis of Peblis

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It is difficult to understand why The Thre Prestis of Peblis is not more widely known than it is. Not only is it an attractive work, but it exhibits a high degree of literary skill through the manner in which it recreates and interprets contemporary society from more than one point of view, both sub specie Scotiae (in the 1480s during the reign of James III) and sub specie Aesternitatis. This multiple point of view is developed partly through the narrative detail and partly through the over-all controlling structure. Formally it is a very symmetrical work: three priests each tell one tale, and each tale has three distinct parts, the parts within the second tale being less closely knit, structurally, than the subdivisions of the first and third. However the three tales do not all exist on the same level: from the very beginning of William’s tale, the third one, we are aware that this final part of the book is related to the first two parts in such a way as to make us see the earlier parts in a different light. The first two deal with worldly matters, both worldly evil and worldly good, while the third postulates a wider context, containing but extending further than that of the first two. We are asked not to deny or reverse any judgments we may have earlier accepted, but to qualify them by subjecting them to a more fundamental discrimination. The relation between the last tale and the first two is therefore the key to the whole structure and purpose of the book.

I

John’s tale is about a king who summons representatives of his three estates and presents each with a question which must be answered next morning. The questions are in fact criticisms of the estates, against which they must defend themselves, and they constitute a common device of political writing in the later Middle Ages: enumerating the

1. ed. T. D. Robb (S.T.S., New Series, 8, 1920). The text I quote from is the Charteris, as given by Robb. As for authorship, Robb argues in favour of John Reid alias Stobo, a churchman who was secretary to James III, James IV and James V (pp. xiv-xix). A more recent suggestion, avowedly without evidence, that Henryson could have been the author is not convincing because it lays too much stress on the fact that certain social concerns and literary methods were inevitably shared and too little stress on the palpable differences in personality and range of interest. See D. MacDonald, 'Henryson and the Thre Prestis of Peblis,' Neophilologicus 51 (April 1967), 168-77.
defections of the estates in turn. This is the starting-point of nearly all the treatments of social and political problems of the period. Ruth Mohl identifies four traits of the genre: (a) enumerating the estates, (b) lamenting the shortcomings of each, (c) stressing the divine origin of the estates and their interdependence, and the necessity of being content with one's station, (d) searching for remedies for the defec-
tions.²

The king's welcome to his burgesses clearly relates this tale to fifteenth-century Scotland.

Quhen that your ships hails hail and sound,
In riches, gudes and wealfair I abound;
Ye ar the caus of my lyfe and my cheir;
Out of far lands your merchandise cums heir. (87-90)

As was natural at the time, the commons is represented by its wealthier and more influential element. The burghers were rapidly becoming a highly important force in the development of society, increasingly distinguishing themselves, as a class who bought and sold, from the craftsmen, the class who manufactured but were discouraged from trading.³ This reflects too the increasing use of money throughout the period as an alternative to the feudal currency of service or payment in kind—and personal wealth is the subject of the king's question to the burgesses:

Quhy burges baizens thrives not to the thrid air,
Bot casts away it that thair elders wan (94-95)

As Robb points out, this idea had the status of a commonplace in that it found expression in a number of proverbs, and it is worth noting that in many of the versions of this proverb the gains referred to are ill-gotten.⁴

The idea is still valid in Earle's Microcosmography (1628), in which the character of 'An Upstart Country Knight' concludes: 'In sum, he's but a clod of his own earth; or his land is the dunghill, and he the cock that crows over it. And commonly his race is quickly run and his chil-


dren's children, though they scape hanging, return to the place from whence they came."

The type of personal wealth referred to by the king is distinctly that of merchants: it is gained in the first place by personal effort, not inherited. While the power that was now coming into the merchants' hands was indeed important for the nation it will be noticed in the tale that the burgesses are not invited to comment on matters of polity. These are still reserved for their betters and the questions put to the lords and to the clergy allow for a wider treatment of questions of government; they allow too more scope for criticising the king.

Relations between monarch and lords, it need hardly be said, were of crucial importance in the operating of feudal society: if a lord became powerful enough he could become a threat, actual or potential, to the very position of the king; if the lords spent their substance and energy in civil strife then the whole country suffered. It was not enough for kings that their office, as such, was venerated: they had to earn the respect and awe of their subjects. Only the most astute, by balancing faction against faction, or the strongest, by being simply rougher than any likely rivals, succeeded in establishing a viable royal authority. Many kings must have felt this:

My lustie lords, my leiges and my lyfe,
I am in sturt quhen that ye are in stryfe;
Quhen ye have peace and quhen ye have plesance,
Than am I glade and derfie may I dance. (101-4)

In such a context recourse to the analogy between the human body and the body politic was almost inevitable:

Ane heid dow not on bodie stand allane
For our members to be of micht and mane
For to uphold the bodie and the heid,
And sickerlie to gar it stand in steid; (105-8)

The figure was a commonplace, occurring regularly to anyone who thought or wrote about the structure of society. John Major for instance uses it to justify the usefulness of the 'baser organs' of society, and James VI, in an interesting variation of the idea, refers to the microcosm of his own body as a pattern for his kingly behaviour. It was useful because it illustrated how every part, even and especially the humblest, had an important function within the whole, how disagreement between the parts could lead only to harm for the whole, how each part was

best fitted to perform its own function and could not be expected to perform a different one. The figure is indeed applicable to any organised society but it was seen as particularly relevant to feudal society, in which the exact duties and rights of the different degrees were clearly understood.  

The king’s question to his nobles may be seen as another commonplace, the assumption that the past was better than the present.

Quhairfoir and quhy and quhat is the cais
So worthie lords war in myne elders dayis,
Sa full of freidome worship and honour,
Hardie in hart to stand in everie stour,
And now in yow I find the haill contrair.  (117-21)

In fifteenth-century Scotland ‘myne elders dayis’ could refer to, say, the times celebrated by Barbour, when feelings of national pride were aroused by the assertion of independence, feelings too which have been preserved in the words of The Declaration of Arbroath. Hector Boece, however, referring to the ‘golden age’ when Scotsmen ‘grew mair strang and grete of bodijs than we ar in thir dayis’ and were not ‘as oursewth with superfleweit as now’, imagines this as existing before the days of Malcolm Canmore.  

In a similar vein the writer of The Complaynt of Scotland (1549) laments the former times when the ‘pepel lyvhit al to gydthir in ane tranquil and lovabill communitie’.

The king’s criticism of his noblemen here is not so harsh as the reproof delivered in The Complaynt by Dame Scotia to her noble son.


She refers to the conventional distinction between 'true' and merely formal nobility and accuses her son of having degenerated from the ideal:

... ane person may succed to heretage and to movabil guda of his predecessours, but no man can succed to gentreis nor to vrnue, for vrsu and gentreis most proccid fra the spreit of hymself, and nocht fra his predecessours ... ye professe you to be gentil men, but your verkis testifies that ye ar bot incivile vilains ... ane man is nocht reput for ane gentil man in Scotland, but gyf he mak mair expensis on his horse and his doggis nor he doun on his wyfe and bayrnis.

The proper signs for a coat of arms, she declares, ought to be powder, ash and earth. Nevertheless she insists on the rightness of the social order in which the commons are duly subjected by their superiors of the noble classes: the failings of each estate are not taken as reasons for abolishing the distinctions between the estates.9

There is also a reference to a better past in the king's question to his clergy. But first he hails them as his helmet, spear and shield. In his assumption that the devotions of his clergymen are efficacious in securing victory against his enemies he may seem to intend this figure in a more practical and worldly sense than that simply of St. Paul's Christian armour. On the other hand in view of the commonly accepted religious basis of monarchy it is logical for the king to refer to his clergy as the 'rule and rod' of his realm for they are the guardians of the tradition of which that conception of monarchy is a part.

For rght sa throu your mess and urisoun
   Myne enemysis suld put to confusion.
Ye ar the gaynest gait and gyde to God;
Of all my realme ye ar the rewle and rod.

(Asloan, 129-32)10

The king's question is addressed primarily to the bishops:

quhairfoir and quhy
In auld rymes and dayes of ancestry
Sa monie bishops war and men of kirk
Sa grit wil had ay gude warkes to wrik;
And thair prayers maid to God of micht,
The dum mon spak, the blind men gat theuir sicht,
The deif men heiring, the crukit gat thair feit,
War nane in bail, bot weill thay culd them beit;

9. C.S., pp. 150, 155, 152.

10. These lines are from the Asloan MS and it is worth pointing out that the Charteris print line 131 (corresponding to Asloan line 129) gives an emended and less pointedly catholic reference in 'your deoit orisoun'.
To seik folkes or into sairnes syne,
Til al thay wald be mendis and medicine;
And quhairfoir now in your time ye warie?
As thay did thay quhairfoir sa mot not ye? (151-62)

Just as the nobility once loved justice more so the clergy once loved virtue more. The basic institutions and purposes of the catholic clergy are not, of course, objected to, only the failure of individuals to live up to the ideals. James I supplies an example of a Scottish king making a severe criticism of his clergy. In his famous letter to prelates of Benedictine and Augustinian orders in 1425 he bewails the 'downhill condition' of religion and urges the prelates to rouse themselves from their torpor and put their house in order. He implies a threat when he says that their idleness may cause kings to regret the munificence of their gifts to such establishments.\textsuperscript{11}

Later in the present tale the clergy reply to the king's somewhat general complaint with some particular complaints of their own against the king. Just as the phrase 'in myne elders days' in the question to the nobles may refer to the time of Bruce, so here 'auld tymes' may refer to the period before the Scottish kings began to turn high church appointments to their own advantage.

In the merchants' reply we do not have a simple black-and-white contrast between the stock characters of the hard-working father who saves and the idle son who squanders. There is a point worth noticing in the character of the father: after his laborious progress towards wealth he indulges in extravagant ostentation:

Rich was his gownis with uther garments gay:
For Sunday silk, for ilk day grene and gray.
His wyfe was cumlie cled in scarlet reid: (213-15)

Now in 1471 parliament ordained that 'nae suld weir silkis in dublett, gowne or cloak, except knightis, minstrelis and haraldis, without the wearer of the same may spend ane hundred pounds worth of land rent'. We are told in detail of the father's acquisitions, yet no mention is made of substantial purchasing of land, so possibly he is flouting the law and pretending in appearance to a higher social class. Robb suggests that the green cloth would be Lincoln or Kendsal, i.e. English cloth which the Scots sometimes exchanged for fish. Yet a law of 1473, aiming to encourage the inflow of currency, prohibited such exchanges, so anyone dressed in such cloth could again be openly defying the law.\textsuperscript{12} The


\textsuperscript{12} A.P.S., II, 100, 105.
father then is not just an honest worker whose fortune is frittered away by a spendthrift son. He has himself become ostentatious and pretentious, and his widow continues in a similar course, encouraging her son in his idle ways:

   His mother not tholit the reik on him to blaw,
     And wil nocht heir, for vertie shame and sin,
     That ever his father said aue sheipskin. (232-34)

Trading in ‘sheep’ - skins was not only a humble occupation but sometimes also a suspect one. Inevitably the inheritance is whirled down ‘to the pin’ and the son discovers, too late, that it is so useless

   He can not mak be craft to wine aue eg. (249)

Both father and mother then had begun to be corrupted by their gains before their son wasted them.

The author of The Complaynt of Scotlande refers to this tale but before quoting what he says it is worth giving an indication of the kind of arguments he puts forward for the continued subjugation of the lower orders in general; his remarks are relevant to the tale of the merchant’s son. In her reply to Labourer’s complaint, Dame Scotia says:

   As sune as ye that ar comont pepil ar onbridilit and furth of subjectione, your ignorance, inconstance, and incivilitie, pulcis you to perpetrat intollerabil exactions . . . as sune as any of them, be sic honest industreus occupations, hes conquest girt reches or heretagis, that be cum mair ambicius ande arrogat nor only gentil man sperutal or temporal, that ar descendid of the maist nobil barons of the cuntre . . . There is nocht any mair odious thyng in this world, as quhen the successour of any indigent ignorant mechenyk lauberar ascendis tyl ony dignite abufe his qualite, for incontinent eftir his promitione, he mykennillis god ande man.

Given this attitude it is not surprising to find him declaring that in the above tale the matter has been treated too leniently: the truth is, the whole commons and not just the merchants are incapable of thriving to the third heir.

The prestis of Peblis sporis ane questione in ane heuk that he compilit, quhy that burges aycys thrivis nochr to the thrid ayr: but he micht hef sperit as weill, quhy that the successours of the universal comont pepil baytht to burght and land, thrivis nocht to the thrid ayr. The solutione of this questione requisit nocht ane allogoric expositione nor yit ane close, be rason that the text of this questione is nocht obscure, ane person that hed neyvr adversite and hes welth that procedit neyvr of his aucn industrie, and syne hes liberte, and hes neyvr knauen education, eruditione, nor civilitie, it is onpossibill that he can be vernous, and he that heyris vertu, sal neyvr thryve.18

Two assumptions are worth noting here. First, the practical effect of virtue: an unvirtuous man will not prosper. The merchant family, having acquired their riches, lose their virtue and lose their wealth too. Second, a nobleman who inherits his wealth does not gain it by 'his auen industrie', but if he is a true nobleman his innate civility will save him. By this view, education and civility will guard against the corrupting power of wealth.

The lords defend themselves by making three complaints to the king. Two of these are particularly noblemen’s complaints: that both commons and lords are poor so the latter can neither behave liberally as befits their status nor supply the king’s military needs; and that to remedy their poverty, noble families have to marry into rich commoner families. Their principal complaint however is of prime importance: the administration of justice is corrupt.

Your justice ar sa ful of suquedry,
Sa covetous and ful of avarice
That thay your lords impaires of thair pryece.
Thay dyte your lords and herys up your men;
The theif now fra the leill man quha can ken?

Criminals who ought to be punished can buy themselves off; innocent men, sure of their innocence, see no reason why they should buy off a trumped-up charge; judges have only one interest - despoiling people of their goods to supply their own desires.

If we relate the lords’ second complaint to contemporary circumstances three points emerge. First, inefficiency of justice may indeed have been a cause of poverty but the general lack of money referred to was aggravated by economic difficulties which affected most of Europe. Economic features of the age include a scarcity of bullion, frequent debasement of the coinage, inflation, official curbs on overseas spending, and attempts to encourage exports. Second, the complaint that when the men of the commons turn out for military service they cannot afford to bring a jerkin and bow or spear (as stipulated by parliament in 1456) has a real bearing on Scottish military weakness during this period. Although many burghs laid down as a condition of membership the possession of adequate weapons and armour it became commoner as the century progressed for burghers to buy themselves out of military service.14 James III used ‘wageours’ and James IV continued

and extended the practice. This was a common tendency throughout Europe and Scottish military weakness at this time can partly be accounted for by saying that Scotland did not adopt this practice extensively enough. Third, the ability of lords to call out a well-armed host to hold their 'right' (I. 306) was not always conducive to good order. It will be remembered that the king is in 'sturt' when his lords are in 'stryfe'. John Major, writing in 1521, complains how common quarrels are between neighbouring nobles and he claims that the wealthier farmers contribute to this strife: they hand over the cultivation of their land to their servants, equip themselves as warriors and are only too ready to take part in their lord's quarrel, 'be it just or unjust'.'\(^{15}\)

Marriage into the family of a rich commoner was one way of renewing a noble family's declining wealth: the nobility was constantly being replenished by common blood. To an aspiring merchant the rise in social status was no doubt a gratifying seal of his success, but while many noble families found financial considerations more pressing than social ones the typical or theoretical attitude was that expressed by the 'agit lord' —

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{worship and honour of linage} \\
\text{Away it weirs thus for their disparage.} \quad (311-12)
\end{align*}
\]

A churl, despite self-made wealth, could not be expected to know anything of

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{gentrice na honour,} \\
\text{Of fredome, worship, vassalage nor valour.} \quad (315-16)
\end{align*}
\]

Noble virtues belonged to the noble estate. It is interesting to note that, between forty and fifty years later, in the Satyre Lindsay makes Diligence and Scribe proclaim as the last of their reforming acts that marriages between different estates should be prohibited.'\(^{16}\)

The king promises to appoint a 'Doctour in the Law' who will see that justice is administered properly throughout the realm. In Archebald's tale a wise man does come to the king but he has to pretend to be a fool because that is the only way he can gain favour with the foolish king.

The clergy also accuse the king: they accuse him of interfering in the appointment of bishops, of setting aside the three canonical modes


16. On the other hand, Jean Bodin, in Six Livres de la republique (1577), Eng. ed. by Richard Knoles (1606), p. 578, recommends the marriage of younger children of noble houses to rich plebeians as 'the surest way to maintain the nobilitie in wealth, honour and dignitie'.
of election, *per viam Spiritus Sancti, per viam compromissi* and *per viam scrutinii*.

Bot, sir, now the contrair weel find,
Quhilk puts al our heaviness behind.
Now sair their name of thir ways thrie
Be chosen now ane bishope for to be,
Bot that your micht and majestie wil mak—
Quhat ever he be, to loife or yit to lak—
Than heily to sit on the rayne-bow. (401-7)*

The burden of the clergy’s complaint is that those bishops created by the king are unsuitable for their offices and thus degrade the church. Learning, piety and good blood (family) are no longer the accepted qualifications for promotion when profit (‘gold and gude’) is the only motive (II. 417-20); simony is no longer counted as a sin (I. 426). Apparently, the clergy allow ‘blood’ as a suitable qualification alongside ‘literature’, ‘science’ and ‘vertue’.

Thir bishops cumis in at the north window
And not in at the dur nor yit at the get,
Bot over waine and quheil in wil he get.
And he cummis not in at the dur
Gods pleuch may never hald the fur.
He is na hird to keip thay selie sheip.
Nocht bot ane tol in ane lambakin to creip.
How sould he kyre mirakil and he sa evil?
Never bot by the dysmel or the devill. (408-16)

The implication of ‘north’ in these lines is that such ‘intruded’ bishops are agents not of God but of the devil because in popular lore the north was associated with the abode of Lucifer. This notion is perhaps connected with the practice in the Mass of reading the set gospel for the day from the north end of the altar, signifying the carrying of God’s message towards the heathen.18

17. The general meaning of these lines is apparent but some of the details are less clear. In 1. 402 ‘Heaviness’, Robb suggests, must be understood in the sense of *gravis*, i.e. importance or influence. As they stand, 11. 403-4 are obviously unsatisfactory. Robb admits that there seems to be confusion between two ways of expressing the idea—‘Now shall there be none of these three ways chosen in the election of a bishop’ and ‘Now shall no-one, by any of these three ways, be chosen to be a bishop’. I doubt if total clarity is achieved by his proposal to put commas after name and thrie and to construe of as by means of. Since 1. 403 seems metrically deficient it is possible a word has been dropped—e.g. the insertion of *by* after *thair* may complete both rhythm and sense. Then in 1. 407 the rainbow idiom is somewhat obscure in its application here: presumably the line means ‘to sit proudly in a high place’.

18. See Isaiah, xiv, 12-15, and *The Vision of William concerning Piers*
The claim that the king has dispensed with the allegedly traditional ecclesiastical methods of promotion to high offices and now intrudes his own candidates for secular reasons is a common one throughout the period and of course this reflects the historical situation. As late as 1558 we find Quintin Kennedy declaring:

Gevie the kirk had the auld ancient libertie (as perchance sum tymie it had) that ane bishop wer frelie chosin be his chapitre, the abbot and prior be the convent, and of the convent, than sulde be qualitie men in all the estratis of the kirk; than sulde all heresie be lornit, and the peple weil techit. This wer the way to cum in at the dur to be ane minister in the kirk of God, quhilk our salveour speiks of; quhare now be tyrranic and avarice (for the maiste part) as it wer thevis or brygantis, we creip in at wyndois or bak durris.15

The historical situation here referred to was complicated and it involved in principle far-reaching questions about the limits and definitions of secular and ecclesiastical powers and in practice certain urgent economic problems with a bearing on the life of the entire community. In view of this complexity it is difficult to see how a simple ‘return’ to purely ecclesiastical modes of election could have helped to solve these problems. The king in his tale promises his clergy:

With kirk-gude sal I never have ado,
It to dispose to lytil or to large:
Kirk men to kirk sen they have at the charge. (434-36)

If the author is seriously putting this forward as a practicable solution (and presumably he is) then it ignores the fact that since the church had a major share of the nation’s wealth and had strong overseas allegiances no king could possibly leave the church to look after itself. Even as an ideal solution, and it is as an ideal that it is presented here, this comes to have less and less practical relevance to the historical state of affairs which developed in the following decades. By Lindsay’s time, for instance, the distinctions between ‘secular’ and ‘spiritual’ control of the church were almost totally blurred.


(18 con’d.)

In each of Archebald's three short tales the pretended fool surprises the king with his wisdom. The king's faults are

Hee luifit over weil yong counsel

and

To al lichnes ay was he redie boun.

So the learned and accomplished clerk manages to attract the king's attention and favour by adopting the dress and behaviour of a court fool:

_Dieu gard, sir king. I bidocht haid in hiddil_  
_I am to yow als sib as seif is to aue riddil._ (475-6)

On the surface this means simply 'we're both jolly fellows' but there is also an implied insult for just as a riddle is bigger than a sieve so the king is a greater fool than the professed fool.

The very name 'Fictus', suggesting an invention or imaginary character, should warn us against hoping to find some contemporary model. Both Dr. Andrews and Dr. John Ireland were clerks from over the sea and were intimate with James III but neither could fit the part. The former was an astrologer and could be regarded, if one wished, as one of the malevolent favourites himself, and the latter was too often given responsible business for him to be regarded as any kind of fool.

Like the Shakespearian kind of fool Fictus represents the wisdom which the world dismisses as foolishness, but only up to a point. This point is best seen when we relate the last tale, William's, to those of John and Archebald. His true abilities appear to the king as a revelation:

_For he as fule began guckit and gend_  
_And ay the wysar man neiter the end_ (647-48)

and

_I se weill I have lyril part of scule_  
_That thus sould be informit with aue fule._ (777-78)

The lean lunatic of _Piers Plowman_ is worth citing:

_Thanne lokerd up a lunatik a lene thing with-alle,_  
_And knelying to the kyng clergealy he seyde;_  
_"Crist kepe the, sire kyng and thi kyngriche,_  
_And leve the lede thi londe so leute the lovye,_  
_And for thi rightfull relyng be rewarded in heavene._"  
_(B. Prol., 123-27)_
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Skeat's note on this passage describes three aspects of the fool-device: (1) it conveys a touch of satire, as though it were a mad thing to hope for; (2) a lunatic is privileged to say strange things; and (3) he expressly declares, at the beginning of Passus XV (B-text) that people considered him a fool, and that he raved. This opinion he bitterly adopts. He makes the lunatic, however, speak clergeadly, i.e. like a scholar. Fictus, the scholar, deliberately speaks like a fool.

The wounded man in the first of the three tales is a figure akin to Lindsay's John the Commonwealth. He is reduced to misery by the lack of justice, a lack which suffers him not only to be robbed by unchecked common thievery, but also plundered and exploited by those who are supposed to exercise a responsible authority. His words to the king are a forthright indictment:

I have sic sturt,
For baith with theif and rever I am hurt,
And yit, suppois, I have all the pyne,
The falt is yowris, sir king, and nothing myne;
For and with yow gude counsal war ay cheif,
Than wald ye stanche weill baith rever and theif:
Have thow with the that can weill dance and sing,
Thow takth nocht thocht thi realme weip and wring.

(539-46)

The king is stung into considering his shortcomings:

Sa wantonly in vane al thing he wrocht;
And how the countrie throw him was misfane.
Throw yong counsel, and wrocht ay as a barne. (566-68)

Pitscottie alleges that this very criticism was levelled at James III: he says that the lords counselled James 'to leif young consall'.

Ye ar sa licht and ful of vanitie,
And sa weil luifis al new things to persew
That ilk session ye get ane servant new. (608-10)

Just as the flies already on the wounded man are sated and if they are chased away a new set of hungry ones will replace them — so the officers of the realm should not be replaced too frequently.

21. I, 170; see also Robb's note on line 456; and W. A. Craige, Mainland Folio MS (S.T.S., New Series, 7, 1919-27), Vol. I, Poem CXXVIII, 1, 43. 'Young Counsale' features as one of the evil advisers in King Hart (e.g. 1. 629).
Who are the flies? In part no doubt the allusion is to James' favourites: they were much disliked by his nobles and the chroniclers show an equal hatred.23 I feel however that the flies signify a wider group than simply the court favourites. It is generally agreed that at this period the administration of justice was most likely to break down at local level — partly through a lack of trained men, partly through lack of money to remunerate officers — so the flies here could well signify sheriffs. In John's tale the lords complain to the king about false justices:

Thay luke to nocht bot gif ane man have gude,
And it I trow mon pay the justice fude.
The theif ful weill he wil himself ouerby
Quhen the leill man into the lack wil ly;
The leil man for to compone wil nocht consent,
Because he waits he is ane innocent. (285-90)

Henryson brings a similar charge in the second stanza of the Moralitas to The Sheep and the Dog.

This wolf I likin unto a seref stout
quhilk bys a forfait at the kings hand
and hes with him a cursit assijis about
and dyris all the pure men up of land
and fra the crowner lay on thame his wand
supposis he be als trow as was sanct Iohine
slane saill thay be or with the lufe compone.

(Bannatyne MS, 11. 120-26)

Again the principal accused is the king — the oppressive sheriffs may be bad enough but, it is at the king's hand that they acquire their dubious right to 'administer' justice in their area. Fictus describes their methods in these lines, with their vigorous images of plucking heather and of skinning an animal by pulling the whole skin over its head —

Thay pluck the puir as thay war pouwand hadder,
And taks buds fra men baith neir and far,
And ay the last ar than the first far war.
Justice, crowner, sariand and justice clerk,
Removes the auld and new men ay they mark.

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Thus fia thay all the pur men belly flaucht,
And fra the puri takis many felloun fraucht.
And steirs them and wait the tyle wil gang.
Syne after that far hungrier cums then,
And thusgait ay the puri folk ar at under. (622-31)

In the second of the three tales concerning Fictus the king’s readiness
to forgive the murderer is in keeping with his character; he pardons
him thus —

Ane semely man of mak sa semit he:
To slay that man he thocht ane great pitie,
And bad him passe quhair he lykit to ga.
And be gude man and after slay na ma. (665-68)

The king readily accepts men at face value. Fictus had little difficulty
in being accepted on the terms of his pretense of being a fool. Now the
king assesses the murderer in terms of his appearance — he seemed to be
a seemly man. The king’s moodiness too is apparent when the courtier
having accepted a bribe to obtain a second pardon, waits for a suitable
occasion:

He lukit quhan the king was blyth and glad,
And nocht quhen he was heavie nor sad. (691-92)

Thus the king’s justice is seen to operate not according to reason but
according to the whim of the moment. The courtier offers this argument:

Suppois he hes slane twa, better it is that ye,
Have twa men slane than thus for to sla thrie. (705-6)

Although this may be a good argument against capital punishment the
author quite clearly intends it to be seen as a specious argument in the
present case, and again we see the king accepting this at face value.
After the third murder and the third request for a pardon, Fictus makes
this line of argument go the other way. The king has decided to refuse
this third request but, says Fictus

Now and ye gar not heid nor hang
This man, for them that he slew, it war wrang.
The first man weil I grant he slew,
The uther twa in faith them slew yow.
Had thow him puneis quhan he slew the first,
The uther twa had bene levand I wist. (745-50)

Apposite to this tale is the proverb ‘Hang ane theeff for the first fault
and scourg him for the nixt’. 24

24. Ferguson’s Proverbs, p. 49.
Archebald’s first two tales deal with matters of national importance and in each of them blame for discord is laid at the king’s door. The third tale is about the king’s private life, about the ‘stir strangenes’ between him and his queen, and although the contemporary relevance of such a tale may have been clear to the book’s first readers, evidence for us is scantier. There is, however, one chronicler’s reference which is worth quoting: Leslie, in listing the complaints brought by the dissenting nobles at Lauder, includes one which reads - ‘and, quhilk of al was maist unworthie, to contenme his wyfe, as worthie a woman, and set a hure in her place’. One manuscript describes this other woman as ‘ane howir callit the Daesie’.25 The stress on ‘low degree’ is in keeping with Fictus’ question:

Quhy that ye have in yow sik fantasy
To ly with wemen and of law degrie
Aganis your quens wilt and majestie,
Considdarand weill that shi is fair and gude? (910-13)

There are two points to note about the stratagem. First, the ease with which the king is deceived. This seems to me of more importance than the mere fact of his ‘lichtnes’. Second, the manner in which Fictus is rewarded. The king promises:

Thow sal have gude, gold, lordships and land,
Or cast fra the thy core and be thow wyse,
Ane bishoprik sal be thy benefyse. (946-48)

The implications of the part played by Fictus are fully understood only when we see the first two sections of the book from the point of view of the third. Here, it is a worldly kind of wisdom he represents: to worldly problems he offers worldly solutions and for these he receives worldly rewards.

II

The writer’s diagnosis of the ills of the estates is presented in practical terms: his conception of how those ills may be cured, on the other hand, is not confined to practical remedies but extends to the postulation of a universal context. It is William, the third priest, who develops this further dimension. We are given a strong hint of this possibility, however, long before we reach William’s tale for in the opening lines of the book William is already marked off as being somewhat different from his two companions.

Both John (who tells the first tale, about the summoning of the three estates) and Archebald (who tells the second tale, about the

advice given to the king by Fictus) are travelled men. John has been in 'monie uncouth land,' in Portugal and Seville, in the five kingdoms of Spain, in Rome, Flanders, Venice and 'uther lands sundrie up and doun' (11.51-56). Archebald does not presume to such extensive knowledge of foreign parts but he has been to Rome. These two, then, have seen the world and their tales are of worldly matters. By contrast William (who tells the third and last tale) disclaims such knowledge:

To grit clargie I can not count nor clame,
Nor yet I am not travellit, as ar ye. (40-41)

He disclaims worldly knowledge: his tale is about spiritual matters. The difference in kind between this and the other tales is at once apparent:

A king thair is and ever mair will be,
Thairfor the KING of kings him cal we. (1013-14)

The tales of both John and Archebald open with these words:

A king thair was sumryme and eik a queene,
As monie in the land befoir had bene. (63-64 and 451-52)

i.e. just one king among many, whereas William's king is unique.

The faults of John's king become clear in the course of the first tale: both the nobles and the clergy see him as responsible at least in part for their own alleged failings. The faults of Archebald's king are more exactly specified: he neglects justice, he pardons too readily and he is not as faithful to his queen as he is expected to be. In the first paragraph of the tale indeed his character is made plain:

... feil falts him befell:
Hee luifit ouer weil yong counsel;
Yong men he luifit to be him neist;
Yong men to him thay war baith clark and preist.
Hee luifit nane was ald or ful of age,
Sa did he nane of sad counsel nor sage.
To sport and play, quhyle up and quhylum doun,
To al lichtnes ay was he redie boun. (455-62)

But in William's tale we have not a fallible human king who is going to be criticised for his shortcomings, but God himself.

The narrative section of the tale is as follows.26 The king's officer summons a rich man to appear before the king and give an account of his affairs. The man is frightened.

26. Robb's discussion (pp. xxviii-xxxii) of the possible sources of this tale is worth attention.
Allace, how now, this is a sa haimly fair!
And I cum thair my tail it will be taggit,
For I am red that my cout be our raggit. (1042-44)

The last word here almost certainly refers to the notching of a stick
(to keep tally): he fears that his debt will be more than he can pay. He
refers to himself as a 'cumbed man' (1. 1046).

He turns to his friends, to prove them (1. 1053). The first friend
is one whom he loves more than himself: but this one refuses to help.

The devil of hell, he said, now mair me hing
And I compeir befoir that crabbit king:
He is a ful of justice, richt and resoun,
I lufe him not in ocht that wil me chesoun. (1067-70)

This first friend thus exposes himself as wishing to have no truck with
justice, right and reason. He further explains how everything he believes
in is, in the king's view, worthless; how everything he delights in is, in
the king's view, a mere fantasy and delusion. He is therefore of little
use as an advocate for the rich man.

Agane him can I get a gude defence,
Sa just he is and stark in his conscience;
And al things in this wordl that I call richt
It is nocht worth ane eg into his sicht;
And it that is my lyking and my eis
To him alway will neither play nor pleis;
And that to me is baith joy and glori
As fantasies judgit him befoir. (1075-82)

The second friend is one whom the man loves as much as himself.
He offers to come as far as the king's gate, but is unwilling to risk going
further.

I am ful red that I cum never agane.
Qhate salt me mend and of my bai me beit.
To take the sower and for to leif the sweit?
Qhate I have heir daylie in faith I fell,
And thair qhate I sall have I wait not weil.
Thairfoir this tale is trew into al tyde,
Qhair ane fairs weil the langer sould he bye. (1120-26)

This second friend is also exposed as being worldly, but this is worldli-
ness of a milder sort; he is self-regarding and has no intention of sacri-
ficing the comfort and pleasure he knows he can have, even to help his
friend.

The first two friends have been tested and found wanting. The man
realises he has deluded himself:
Me to begyle qha hes mair craft and gin
Than thay in quhome my traist ay maist is in? (1143-44)

Appearance and reality, again, are at odds. The man is now in a
quandary: the friend he loved more than himself and the friend he loved
as much as himself have both disappointed him, thus leaving the third
friend, but this is the one he has loved less than himself.

For in him I have lytil trouth or traist
Becaus to him I was sa oft unkynde. (1160-61)

But just as the first two friends do not respond as the man expected, so
the third friend surprises him. After a due reprimand —

To me thow had ful lytil clame or count (1190)

— he promises to repay the man generously for what little kindness he
had shown him. Indeed he will come with him all the way.

Thocht he the bind and cast the in a cart,
To heid or hang, fra the I sal nocht part. (1221-22)

The first friend was exposed as the king’s enemy: the third friend is
now revealed as the king’s trusted representative.

The king he lufis me ful weil, I wait,
Bot ever ailace to me thow come ouer lait.
And thow my counsal wrocht had in al thing,
Ful welcum had thou bene ay to that king.
Betwixt us twa wit he of unkyndnes,
Sone wil thou feil he wil the lufe the les;
Wit he betwixt us twa be onie lufe,
He wil be rieht weil payit and the apprufe. (1199-1206)

The true value of the three friends is thus shown to be the opposite of
what the man had allowed himself to believe.

The significations of these allegorical figures are clear enough in
the course of the narrative but they are clarified further in the latter
part of the tale. The king is God. The rich man is humanity,

bath thow and he
And al that in the world is that mon die. (1261-62)

The officer is death. In the lines describing death we have more than
a conventional memento mori, because here we have one of the central
meanings of the whole tale. The rich man’s hopes for his defence were
proved false. The general truth thus illustrated is this:

Is na wisdome, riches na yit science,
Aganis his officer may mak defence;
Is neyther castell, toret nor yit tour
May scar him anis the moment of ane hour;
His straik it is sa sharpe it will not stint,
Is nane in eird that may indure his dint. (1251-56)

The ultimate in human achievement, intellectual and physical, is not proof against death: and death's loyalty to his duties is totally unimpeachable. Unlike the king's officers in Archebald's tale this officer can never be bribed.

He is sa trew in his office and lele,
Is na practik agane him to appele;
Gild nor gude corne catcell nor yit ky
This officer with bud may noch ouerby. (1257-60)

The first friend, whom the man loves more than himself but who refuses to accompany him, is 'gude penny and pelfe'. The second, whom he loves as much as himself but who will come no further than the king's gate, is 'wyfe and barne and uther freinds'. The third, whom he has treated merely as a 'quarter freind' but who surprises him by offering to come all the way and plead for him, is 'almous deid and cheritie'. There is an allusion to hell-fire:

For as thow seis watter dois slokkin fyre,
Sa do I, almos deid, the judges ire. (1319-20)

Skeat (Proverbs, p.2) cites two earlier occurrences of the saying:

Al swa thet water acwencheth thet fur, swa
tha elmesse acwencheth tha sunne.

and

Almes fordoth alle wykkednes
And quenchyth synne and maketh hyt les.²⁷

These significations apply not solely to William's narrative but by implication they refer to the entire set of tales. In general terms John's tale is about greed, about excessive devotion to the values represented by the first friend. The merchants are corrupted by pursuing wealth; justice is corrupted by desire for gain; bishops are appointed not for their learning but for worldly ends. Similarly, Archebald's tales are about the values represented by the second friend — relationships between people — exploited instead of protected; murder is unchecked; temporary 'licht' relationships are preferred before permanent ones.

²⁷. The first is from Old English Homilies, ed. R. Morris (E.E.T.S., Original Series, 29, 34, 53, 1867) i, pp. 37, 39; the second is from Handlying Synne (1. 7079).
But more particular connections can be seen. In John’s tale the king’s welcome to the merchants is on a par with the man’s attitude to his first friend: he calls them ‘my beild and bliss’, ‘the caus of my lyfe and my cheir’, and when their ventures succeed ‘in riches, gudes and weilfair I abound’. The tale of the merchant’s son demonstrates the falseness of this friend. The corrupting power of wealth (sought for its own sake) was already apparent in the merchant and his wife before their son squandered the inheritance. The second friend represents relationships between people, particularly those in a close relationship, and a corrupt form of this is demonstrated in the king’s question to his lords and their reply. The king admits he is in ‘sturt’ when his lords are in ‘stryfe’, when they upset the proper interdependence of different members of society, and he wonders why they are no longer

Sa full of fredome worship and honour,  
Hardie in hart to stand in everie stour.  

In their reply the lords accuse the king’s justice — it is corrupted by pride, greed, extortion, deceit. In other words the legal system which ought to regulate society harmoniously is perpetuating discord. There is another example of false relationship, an ‘unworthy’ marriage arranged for financial gain:

They sel thair sonnes and aires for gold and gude  
Unto ane mokrand carle, for derest pryse,  
That wist never yit of honour nor gentryse.  

The connection between the third friend and the clergy is obvious. The king recognises their importance but complains that they ‘warie’, they have deteriorated and lost virtue. In their turn they accuse the king of perverting the clerical office: this is the opposite of ‘almous deid’ —

For now on dayes is nother riche nor pure  
Sit get ane kirk al throw his literature;  
For science, for vertyw or for blude  
Gets nane the kirk, but baith for gold and gude.  

A similar set of connections can be seen between William’s tale and Archebald’s. The wounded man is a victim of excessive greed and extortion: the king’s servants are so intent on gain that they are like flies on the wound, they go about their extortions so energetically that ‘they pluck the pur as they war powand hadder’. In the tale of the murderer who bribes the courtier to obtain pardons we see another example of corrupted social relationships: we see ineffective justice leading to further crime. The king’s initial reaction to the culprit is, admittedly, one of kindness:

To slay that man he thocht ane greit pitie,
but in its context this is meant to be seen as an instance of the wrong kind of 'almous deid'. Thirdly, the man's failure to recognize the true value of his third and best friend and his discovery that the friend he valued least is his truest one is paralleled by the king's indifference to his wife and his discovery that he has spent three nights with her when he imagines he has been with the innkeeper's daughter.

The tales told by John and Archebald are worldly in a particular sense: all the characters in them are worldly, they are all fallible, they are all to an extent corrupted by their devotion to worldly ends. This is true of the merchants in an obvious sense. The lords disrupt the order of society with their strife. Worldly bishops misuse their office. False justices pervert the law for personal gain so that the poor are exploited and murderers can buy themselves off. There is degeneration, for the world is subject to Fortune: merchants' sons do not have the thrift and industry that made their fathers rich, the lords no longer have the truly noble qualities which characterised their forebears, churchmen have lost the power of physical and spiritual healing.

At the head of this worldly society is the king. It is his office to rule and direct but he is as worldly as his subjects. He rejoices in his merchants' money-making. He allows bribery and extortion to corrupt his legal system. He utilises church appointments for his own ends. He is so light-hearted that when a wise man wishes to gain esteem he has to adopt the guise of a fool. He tolerates the oppression of his poor subjects. He is moody (like Fortune he is fickle), he neglects his proper advisers in favour of 'yong counsel', he is easily deceived. As we have seen, the characterisation of such a king in a poem written in the 1480s has undeniable affinities with the popular estimate of James III.

While it is clear that the poet intends his allusions to be recognised, it is equally clear, as we consider William's tale, that the poet is not just mirroring contemporary conditions. These are mirrored, they are criticised, but they are also set within a wider context. This can be illustrated in relation to the character of Fictus. At first sight he might be taken as a criterion against which to judge worldly society. He adopts the manner of a fool in order to be accepted by that world and gradually reveals his wisdom by giving some sound advice. His advice, however, is also worldly. His advice to the king in Archebald's first tale shows the wisdom of expediency — leave the flies alone, he says, and their bad effects will be softened. He accepts the existence of bribery and extortion and does not suggest a way of abolishing it. Again, look at the rewards he is offered in Archebald's third tale:
"THE THRE PRETIS OF PEBLIS"

Thow sal have gude, gold, lordships and land,
Or cas fra the thy cote and be thow wyse,
Ane bishoprik sal be thy benefyse. (946-48)

These are seen as worldly rewards for worldly services, and the bishopric is offered as having the same kind of value as the material prizes. He accepts the bishopric on the terms offered

And quhen this syde goun on him micht be
Ane cunning clerk and wyse than semit he. (995-96)

'Cunning' here means learned or skilful and can be read without pejorative associations (the earliest pejorative use of the word given in N.E.D. is dated 1590). But notice the implications of 'semit'. Ficurus is wise only within his worldly context — he is a criterion but only a worldly one and the ultimate criterion is the third friend in William's tale:

Thairfoir, gud folkis, be exempl we se
That thair is nane thus of thy freinds thre,
To ony man that may do gude bot ane,
Almos deid . . . (1321-24)

In the tellers of the tales themselves, in the three priests, there is a hint of worldliness. In the preface we are told that for their collation they retire to a 'privie place' (1.4), that they 'luiftit nor na rangald nor repair' (1.6), i.e. they avoid the milling crowds. From company they keep themselves 'coy' (1.16).

Thay luiftit nocht with ladry nor with lown
Nor with trumpour to travel throw the town,
Bot with themself quhat they wald tel or crak,
Umquhyle sadlie, umquhyle jangle and jak. (17-20)

So their apparent withdrawal from the noisy worldly crowd is not after all a sign of sobriety or abstention: they withdraw simply for the greater enjoyment of their own worldly pleasures. They sit 'richt soft and unfutesair' (1.5).

... they sat full easelie and soft,
With monie lowd lauchter upon loft.
And wit ye weil thir thrie thay maid gude cheir—
To them thair was na dainteis than too deir—
With thrie fed capons on a speit with creische
With monie uther sindrie dyvers meis (9-14)

They 'wantis nocht' (1.33).

On two occasions (11.38, 450) Archebald declares that the telling of tales will help to keep his foot 'out of this felloun fyre'. Literally
this means they will prevent him from dosing off and getting his toes scorched at the fireside. But sleep is another hint of worldliness, signifying the sleep of the soul in earthly pleasures. It will be recalled how the lion in *The Lion and the Mouse* lies sleeping in a fair forest and how this is clearly meant to signify his absorption in worldly concerns. The 'felloun frye' suggests hell-fire. Hence the moral purpose of the tales. Hence too the final couplet is more than just a tag:

> And than speiks the tother twa ful tye,
> "This gude tale, sir, I trow God will you quyte'. \((1343-44)\)

Hence, in its scale, in its representation and interpretation of contemporary society, in its development of this interpretation at several levels of significance, and in the highly wrought and integrated structure it evolves to present this multiple view, *The Thre Prestis of Peblis* must be counted among the highest literary achievements of the period, and by no means far short of the kind of achievement we have been more ready to accord to Henryson himself.

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