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A Check List, 1956-1969, For Four Middle Scots Poets

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NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

A Check List, 1956-1969, For Four Middle Scots Poets

We are greatly indebted to Florence Ridley for her useful, informative lists (*SSL*, VIII, No. 1, pp. 30-51), but she should refrain from gratuitous deprecations. In spite of Tom Scott's book on Dunbar (1966) and John MacQueen's on Henryson (1967), Ridley says there is "no satisfactory book-length treatment" of any one of the four poets, excluding in a footnote MacQueen's study as being useful only for background and "critically" for "Orpheus and Eurydice" and Scott's as being a "psychosociological study rather than a literary critical one." She seems particularly hostile to Scott, since she pointedly excludes him from four scholar-critics who in her judgment have mainly added to our understanding of the four poets (incidentally Kinsley's first name is James, not Robert). I find MacQueen's book useful "critically" for *The Testament of Cresseid* (50 pages of the best criticism I've read anywhere on the poem) and for the *Morall Fabillis* (admittedly, not all the tales are discussed, but Ridley doesn't name incompleteness as a ground for exclusion). It is puzzling that Ridley does not find Scott's book "literary critical" since it deals at length with the text of all the poems, gives close readings of them, is constantly evaluative, and even has a long chapter on versification. My guess is that her real objection is to the political, moral fervor in Scott's book, but haven't we gotten beyond the Arnoldian notion that literary criticism must be passionless, neutral, uncommitted, "scientific"? I find that Scott's Scottish nationalism and Christian-socialist values enhance his insight into Dunbar and that his moral commitments may have produced a tendentious book but certainly not one which doesn't offer valuable insights into all of Dunbar's poems.

Further, Ridley's remark in her second paragraph that the four poets carried on a tradition "begun by Chaucer" suggests that she still accepts the now one should think thoroughly discredited "Scottish Chaucerian" label. And in the same paragraph, it seems remarkable that one must correct Ridley, of all people, by pointing out that Douglas did not translate Virgil into English but into Scots, "na sudron bot our awyn langage."

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