Theme and Structure in Henryson's "The Annunciation"

Charles A. Hallett
Fordham University
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Though Robert Henryson is being rediscovered and the pleasures of his poetry are being appreciated once again as they undoubtedly were in his own time, critical attention has so far been concentrated upon the skillfully written Testament of Cresseid and the witty Fables, while the minor poems, many of which have equal charm, are still largely neglected. Henryson’s “The Annunciation” is a case in point. On the surface the poem, I suppose, seems too simple to require explication. It is clearly a poem in praise of the Virgin, and its purpose appears to be simply to celebrate the mystery that rendered Mary at once “moder and madyn.” From this point of view, the emphasis throughout is upon Mary’s absolute purity: she is “a maid Infild,” a “princes pure, withoutyn peir,” a “blosum blithe and bowsumest. / Fra carnale cryme that clene Is.”¹ In exalting the Virgin Mary, however, Henryson is simultaneously able to glorify God, Whose love for the world is manifested in the Annunciation made by Gabriel, and to examine through the poetic medium the very nature of divine love. And it is this latter theme that actually gives the poem its structure.

Structurally, “The Annunciation” breaks down into two distinct parts of three stanzas apiece. Part I — that is, Stanzas 1, 2 and 3 — is superbly designed. Note, for example, that the first five lines are introductory:

Forcs as deith Is likand lufe,
Throuch quhome al bittir suet is,
No thyngh Is hard, as wryn can pruf,
Till him in lufe that letis;
Luf us fra barret betis . . .

1. Citations to Henryson in my text are to The Poems and Fables of Robert Henryson, 2nd ed., ed. H. Harvey Wood (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1958). See John Stephens, “Devotion and Wit in Henryson’s ‘The Annunciation,’” English Studies, 51 (August, 1970), 323-31, for such an interpretation. Stephens argues that “the focus is on the perpetual virginity of Mary and everything else is related to this”; for him, the Immaculate Conception is “the poem’s major theme” (pp. 323-26).
Functioning as a prologue not only for Part I but for the poem as a whole, these lines serve to introduce the theme of love, which is envisioned here as a force which renders harmless the world’s slings and arrows and makes our fardels bearable: “Luf us fra barret betis.” For him who puts his trust in Love, says the prologue, the difficult is made easy, the bitter is made sweet. The association of love with death, and the equation of the powers of the two (“forcy as deith Is likand lufe”), neatly foreshadows the discussion of the resurrection through which death is conquered by love at the end of the poem. In general, then, the message of this little prologue is that nothing is impossible for Love to accomplish.

To the religious mind of the fifteenth century, of course, there was no doubt that the greatest evidence of God’s love for the world lay in his readiness to take on human form and to endure human suffering in order to redeem mankind from the sins of Adam. Quite naturally, therefore, Henryson has chosen to begin his poem about love at the very instant that God’s intention to make this momentous gift is revealed, the instant at which Gabriel delivers the Annunciation. This event is described in the “body” of Part I (lines 6-29).

Henryson has made every attempt to render the event as concretely as possible. The episode is presented with a great deal of realism: we witness the fear that strikes the innocent maiden and renders her speechless upon hearing Gabriel’s message (13-15), we see all of her senses fail her as the heavens open up and she finds herself in the presence of the Almighy (20-21), and we watch these emotions of terrified awe give way to feelings of bliss once Mary has comprehended and accepted her important role (27-29). It is evident from the sense of immediacy with which Henryson tells his story that he wishes in this section of the poem to attest to the actuality of the event.

Though endeavoring to depict the Annunciation as a credible historical event, Henryson is far from unaware of its miraculous nature; indeed, he has taken as many pains to stress the extraordinary aspect of the event as he has its reality. In keeping with his celebration of Mary’s “cleness” and his insistence upon the omnipotence of Love, Henryson has centered the poem upon the miracle of the Immaculate Conception. As anyone who has been taught about the birds and the bees knows, it is an inevitable fact of life that a maiden’s virginity must be sacrificed as a prelude to her maternity. But, as anyone who has diligently studied his catechism knows equally well, Mary was not re-
required to make this sacrifice. She was to be both mother and maid. This seeming paradox is made the essence of Gabriel's message in the first three stanzas of the poem. The revelation is structured so that the reader will be continually aware of the contrast between human love, which even when sanctified by marriage is ultimately expressed through carnality, and divine love, which because of its perfection can pierce innocence without wounding, without beguiling, without staining. God, announces Gabriel, will take "rest and ease" with Mary, but His coming to her will result in neither the harmful personal effects of sin nor the public shame ("reprove") that normally accrues to the unwed mother (10-11). Mary shall conceive without being physically "wounded" in any way (17-18), he explains; hence, she will be free, or "exile," from sin. Again, when the union prophesied by Gabriel actually takes place, Mary is "na thing begild" (22), that is, she is deceived in no way; though with child she remains absolutely chaste (23). This emphasis upon the Immaculate Conception most certainly has the effect of glorifying the Virgin, who had lived virtuously of her own free human will and was therefore found worthy to be the mother of God. But it also convinces us that "no thing Is hard" for the Creator, through Whose grace Mary's purity was preserved in the face of all the laws of nature.

The apostrophe to the Virgin by the speaker in the closing lines of Stanza 3 functions as an epilogue, bringing the first portion of the poem to an end. By expressing his own wonder at the miracle described in these stanzas the speaker conveys to us a further sense of the vast power of Love, in that through Love the infinite Being who rules the "erd, wattir, & hevinnis" was to be encompassed in the finite space of Mary's womb (33-36).

Part I of "The Annunciation," then, consists of three major sections, the first introducing the primary subject of the poem, the second containing the narrative from which the poem takes its title, and the third bringing this section to a conclusion. Within this structure we find a eulogy, focused upon the Virgin Mary, which is designed and organized so as to direct our attention to the ability of God to accomplish the impossible, and, in addition, the groundwork for a study of the way His love is revealed to the world. This latter study will blossom out in the final half of the poem as a full-fledged theme.

Part II (i.e., Stanzas 4, 5 and 6) also breaks down into three sections. Its prologue, elaborating upon the definition of love offered
at the beginning of the poem, occurs in Lines 37 and 38, and its conclusion, a more impassioned apostrophe to Our Lady, occupies the whole of Stanza 6 (61-72).

Stanza 4, with which Part II opens, deals with Mary’s role on the level of mystery. Since this is not only the most revealing but also the most difficult section in “The Annunciation” and since the reverberations of this stanza echo throughout the poem and transform the poem from a mere description of the emotion gushing from a pious speaker to a moving expression of divine truth in which the reader is himself caught up in eternity, there is good reason to examine it in some detail:

The miracles ar mekle & meit,
fru luftis Byver Bynnis;
The low of luf haldand the hete
unbrynt full blithlie birnis;
quhen gabrick beignnis
With mouth that gudely may to grete,
The wand of aarone, dry but wete,
To baruoun nocht blynnis;
The flesh all donk within Is,
upone the erd na drop couth fleit;
Sa was that may maid moder suete,
And sakeless of all synnis.

The themes that we have seen operating in Part I are, of course, carried on here in Part II. In this fourth stanza, Henryson departs from the pure narrative with which he presented the historical event in Part I. He begins by stating that the miracles which flow from God are not only copious (“mekle”) but also significant (“meit,” fitting, proper), then he provides us with three examples. The “low of luf haldand the hete / unbrynt full blithlie birnis” of lines 39 and 40 is an oblique reference to the Biblical account of God’s miraculous appearance to Moses on Mount Horeb (“low,” of course, means “flame” here). The “wand of aarone, dry but wete, / To baruoun nocht blynnis” (43-44), the wand which is dry and completely lacking in moisture but which begins to bloom without ceasing, is meant to recall the events described in Numbers 17.1-10, where each of the princes of the tribes of Israel is commanded to give Moses a rod or wand to be placed in the tabernacle, with the understanding that the Lord would choose the high priest who was to have sole charge of the sanctuary from among

2. “And the Angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush: and he looked, and, behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed.” Exod. 3.2.
them by causing one of the rods to blossom miraculously and bear fruit. And finally, "the flesh all donk within Is, / upone the erd na drop couth fleit" (45-46) describes an episode from Judges 6:36-40 in which Gideon was assured by a miracle that the Lord wished him to lead the battle against the Midianites. The "flesch" that is completely drenched in Henryson's poem is the dew-soaked fleece of Gideon, and the dry earth around the fleece, upon which not a drop of moisture could be found, was the earth of the valley of Jezreel where the Israelites had pitched their tents.

It is easy to see why Henryson chose these particular episodes out of the many that were available to him, for, when we compare the three figures used in the poem, we find that each recounts a story in which a particular individual is chosen to serve God. In the first, the moment when Moses was commanded to lead the Israelites out of Egypt and into the land flowing with milk and honey is depicted. In the second, the way in which Aaron was chosen from among the twelve tribes to minister to the sacred Ark is portrayed. In the third, the sign of proof given to Gideon that he had truly been elected by God to rid the land of the enemies of Israel is described. Thus the Old Testament stories recounted here function to associate Mary as the chosen vessel of the Lord with others who had been singled out to assist in His work on earth.

At the same time, however, the three passages, inasmuch as they are concerned with the miraculous nature of the conception, once again underscore the incomprehensible power of Love that is insisted upon in Part I. Henryson had no need to elaborate upon the brief allusions to these miracles made in his text. The original readers, accustomed to the patristic technique of typology, would have easily discovered the meaning which lay beneath these cryptic phrases, for the burning bush, the rod of Aaron and the fleece of Gideon had for centuries been

3. "And Moses laid up the rods before the Lord in the tabernacle of witness. And it came to pass, that on the morrow Moses went into the tabernacle of witness; and, behold, the rod of Aaron for the house of Levi was budded, and brought forth buds, and bloomed blossoms, and yielded almonds." Numb. 17:7-8.

4. "And Gideon said unto God, if thou wilt save Israel by mine hand, as thou hast said, Behold, I will put a fleece of wool in the floor; and if the dew be on the fleece only, and it be dry upon all the earth beside, then shall I know that thou wilt save Israel by mine hand, as thou hast said. And it was so: for he rose up early on the morrow, and thrust the fleece together, and wringed the dew out of the fleece, a bowl full of water." Judges 6:36-38.
understood as figures of the virgin birth. The three symbols invariably occur together, along with a host of others of the same type, including the enclosed garden (Cant. 4.12) and the locked gate through which the Lord shall enter the temple (Ezek. 44.2-3) in Medieval sermons, in the church liturgy, in poetry and in art, and all serve to explain the mystery that Henryson wishes us to contemplate — “Sa was that may maid moder suete, / And sakeless of all synnis.”

There is a third way in which the stanza contributes to the glorification of the Virgin Mary. Henryson, of course, desires to relate the historical facts of the narrative to the reader’s own life, that is, to make the reading of the poem an emotional experience. In this regard, Stanza 4 is crucial. The account of the Annunciation is concluded in the third stanza, and the remainder of the poem prepares the reader for the metamorphosis of the Virgin from “that myld” to the merciful intercessory figure who would henceforth mediate between God and man. He must at the end of the poem be able to accept Mary as Queen of Heaven. Obviously the events described in Stanza 4 associate Mary with time past; they serve to indicate that Mary was part of God’s plan from the very beginning. In Stanza 5 which follows, Henryson will deal with the events that took place in Mary’s own lifetime — the birth and crucifixion of Jesus. And in the last stanza he will speak of events that at the time of the Annunciation were still 1500 years in the future.

5. Rabanus Maurus tells us, for example, that Mary “received the divine flame in her womb yet was not consumed,” thus resembling the bush which Moses saw on the mountain (De Universo, Patrologia Carolaris Completus, Series Latina, ed. J.-P. Migne (Paris: Apud Garnier Freres, 1879), cxxi, col. 513). Similarly, Mary, who knew not man, was for Bernard of Clairvaux like the sterile branch that flowered without contact with the earth (Super Missus est angelus boniluce, PL, clxxxiii, col. 63). Honorius of Autun, in his sermon on the Annunciation in Speculum Ecclesiae, explains that the fleece infused with dew in Judges 6 signifies the Virgin Mother, impregnated with child, the untouched area around the fleece her virginity, which remained intact (PL, clxxii, col. 904). This association of the Old Testament story of Gideon with the conception of Christ resulted from the linking of the “dew” in the verses from Judges with the passage in Psalm 71 which states that the Lord shall descend like rain upon fleece; thus, the liturgy for the Feast of the Purification says of Jesus, “When thou wast born ineffably from the Virgin, then the Scriptures were fulfilled; thou didst descend like rain upon fleece.”

As a result of this association of the Virgin with three different eras of religious history, first with the events of the Old Testament, then with those of the New Testament, and finally with the speaker's own historical present, Mary is felt in Part II of the poem to have a kind of eternal existence which renders her more divine than human. Through the medium of poetry she is actually transformed from the may maid of the opening stanza to the Queen of Heaven of the final line.

We have seen in the foregoing pages that Stanza 4 functions, as does Part I, to honor the mother of God and to prove that it is in the nature of Love to achieve miracles. It is also important, however, for us to see that the theme of human salvation is as central to the poem as that of the Annunciation itself. It has been pointed out by Professor Elliot that "The Annunciation" is not static but rather has a narrative structure. This is quite true. But Henryson relates more than just the story of Mary's life. The poem progresses from the announcement of the coming of the Redeemer to save mankind to the poet's prayer for personal salvation — it tells the story of God's plan to raise men from their fallen state. Ultimately, the initial subject of the meeting of Gabriel with Mary becomes subordinated to a higher purpose, as must any incident that is only one part of a larger plan. Certainly we fail to do the poet justice if we miss the suggestions developed throughout the poem with respect to the revelation of divine love through time.

Part I of the poem deals with God's revelation of His love to a single individual at a particular moment in time. Stanzas 1 through 3, as we have seen, tell us what Gabriel said and how Mary responded. In these three stanzas we are not concerned particularly with the significance of the event to the world at large. We witness the event, but we are given no key to its meaning beyond the knowledge of "crist our kyng" which we ourselves bring to the poem. Stanzas 4 through 6, the final half of the poem, however, deal specifically with God's revelation of his love to the world. In these stanzas His plan for the salvation of mankind is gradually revealed by Henryson in exactly the way it was revealed through history.

In the phrase "luffis Ryver" which opens Stanza 4, Henryson combines the tradition established in Genesis 2 that the rivers which have their source in Paradise and ultimately in God branch out to reach all parts of the world with the suggestion that God's love is like a

river running endlessly through time and manifesting itself at various points along the way, thus broadening the definition of love contained in the initial prologue and introducing the dominating idea of Part II. He then moves back in time to the era of the Exile. We have already seen that Stanza 4 reflects the Old Testament. By carefully choosing and ordering the three prefigurations in this stanza, Henryson was able to suggest a progression from the captivity in Egypt to the Promised Land. The stanza moves from the calling of Moses to lead the people out of Egypt through the hardships and trials of existence in the wilderness to a point where the people have actually crossed the Jordan and entered the Promised Land. The individual miracles thus trace out, when considered collectively, the Old Testament journey which traditionally was taken to symbolize the spiritual pilgrimage of the soul from sin to salvation. The primary reason for their inclusion here, however, as we have seen, is that these Old Testament miracles in retrospect proved to be prophesies of the birth of Christ. Many centuries were to pass, of course, before anyone became aware of their significance, and consequently the details are purposefully cryptic. What Henryson has achieved in creating this stanza is exactly what men of his time believed God to have achieved in creating the Bible: he has embodied New Testament truths in veiled terms which may be understood only by one who approaches them through the knowledge of Christ.

That Henryson’s poem on this level is clearly meant to convey to its audience a feeling for the workings of revelation in the world is clearer in the fifth stanza:

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Hir mervalus hail madinhede
  god in hir bosum bracis,
And hir divinite fra dريد
  Hir kepit in all casis.
The hie god of his gracis
  Him self dispuirt us to speideid,
  and dowit nocht to dee one deid:
He paneit for our peacis,
  And with his blude us bacin;
Bot quhen he Ras up, as we Rede,
  the cherit of his godhede
  Was plane in every placis.
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The reader is now brought forward from the Old Testament era to the era of the Gospels. Here he sees divine love entering the world. He is first reminded of Mary, and the miracle of the Immaculate Conception. Yet Henryson makes a point of the fact that God’s angel had spoken to Mary alone. The knowledge of divine love that Mary gained
from the Annunciation was for a time to be enclosed ("bracis") in her own bosom (49-50). The stanza then recounts briefly the life of Christ, pointed to emphasize His willingness to die on the cross for mankind. Just as God's parental love and tender concern for Mary is stressed in Part I of the poem, so His love for mankind is emphasized here. God sacrificed Himself to save us (54), knowing He must die but not fearing death (55). He suffered pains for our peace (56), bought us with His blood (57). But still the knowledge is not general. Christ Himself is aware of what His death will mean to mankind, but this knowledge is not shared by the public at large. Only in the last lines of the stanza is the miracle revealed: when Jesus rose up from the dead, the charity of his Godhead was plain in every place (58-60). Not until the plan was completed in the Resurrection was the full knowledge of divine love available to the world in general.

In the final stanza of Part II, its epilogue, the love that entered the world as a hidden thing given to Mary secretly and covertly, the love that later blossomed out in Christ's charity, is fully available to the poet. He is personally able to call upon that love to assist him in his own pilgrimage from the "Egypt" of sin to the "Promised Land" of virtue and salvation. He can pray that his most wicked deeds may be put away (65-67), that he, made chaste, may be beyond the reach of the sharp claws of cruel and wrathful devils (67-69), and that his soul may be hastened to heaven where Christ is King and Mary is Queen (70-72). Here, what was at the moment of Gabriel's appearance the past is miraculously caught up with what was at that moment the future, and such mundane divisions of time are transcended as the charity of Christ is seen to fill a living present. Time is redeemed by God's love; this, the ultimate effect of the tidings revealed to Mary at the Annunciation, is, for Henryson, an even greater miracle than that of the virgin birth.

Insofar as Henryson's poem deals with the theme of human salvation then, it is extremely personal. Henryson, of course, does not wish his reader to remain passive. In the initial statement of the opening stanza he includes an exhortation to faith. It is suggested that if the reader centers his existence in Love he will discover that "no thing is hard" for him to achieve and that he will be relieved from the bitterness and strife of daily living. During the course of the poem Henryson attempts to draw the reader closer to Love so that by the time he reaches the final stanza, he is emotionally prepared to act upon this exhortation and will join with the poet in calling on Mary to unite him with Love. Once again the poem proves to be more than
simply a hymn in praise of the Virgin. But to say that the original story of the Annunciation is transcended is not to say that it is unimportant. On the contrary, it is essential. Henryson is well aware that it is only by contemplating such an episode in which divine love is revealed that one can come to a fuller knowledge of that love.

Fordham University