The Minor Poems of Robert Henryson

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The Minor Poems of Robert Henryson

Modern critics of Henryson have, in the main, restricted their attention to The Testament of Cresseid, with some incursions into The Morall Fabillis. Henryson in fact, wrote at least fourteen other poems, of varying quality and interest, but stamped with their creator's individuality and each worthy of more detailed attention than it has been given. As in the cases of The Testament and The Fabillis, the most prominent feature of these minor works is the poet's learning and the rhetorical technique by means of which he incorporates it, quite unobtrusively, into his verse. Henryson's bookishness, far more extensive than Dunbar's, is evident in every poem, and the generally slow tempo induces an impression of weightiness which is absent from Dunbar. Henryson displays the learning of a conservative scholar of his time and country; not a mercurial soul like Dunbar, he is less given to emotional fluctuations of mood and much more of a deliberate preacher. His vocabulary is generally less mannered than Dunbar's and closer to what we believe popular speech to have been like; Henryson's atmosphere is pastoral and of the countryside rather than courtly and of the town and he contemplates the vicissitudes of the world from the point of view of his "rurall mous" whose "sempill lyfe withoutin dreid" is the ideal to be sought and cherished.

"Robene and Makyne" is perhaps the best illustration of the way in which Henryson marshals his talents as a lyrical poet to make a didactic pastoral. The subject is love between rustics, its form is that of the débat, and it is written, though only superficially, in the style of the OF pastourelles. The conversational dialogue between the Scots lover and his lass conveys a simple moral of the "gather ye rosebuds" kind, and each stanza is subtly different from its predecessor in mood or in the picture it builds. Robene is keeping his sheep when Makyne reveals her long-standing love for him and tells him that unless he returns it she will certainly die. Robene protests his ignorance of love,

\[\text{\textsuperscript{1}}\text{\textit{vidae} Arthur K. Moore, "Robene and Makyne" (Modern Language Review, XLIII, 1948), 400-3, who rejects the notion of Henryson's debt to French sources.}\]
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whereupon Makyne immediately reveals an unexpected sophistication and shows her familiarity with the language and practices of textbook amour courtois:

"be heynd, courtass, and fair of feir,
Wysse, hardy and firc;
So that no denger do the deir,
quhar dule in denn thow dre;
pres the with pane at all poweir,
be patienc and previe."

Robene is half-hearted and wants to postpone the preferred sexual association until a vague tomorrow; in spite of her entreaties, he leaves her desolate. Later, he has second thoughts, but by this time so has she, and quotes the old saw:

The man that will nocht quhen he may
sall haif nocht quhen he wald

Unwilling in his turn to accept rejection, Robene counters this with an enticing picture of dalliance:

"Makyne, the night is soft and dry,
The weder is warne & fair,
And the grene woid rytch neir us by
To walk attour all quhair;
Thair ma na Janglour us espy,
That is to lufe contrair;
Thairin, makyne, bath ye & I
Unsene we ma repair."

Nevertheless, she remains indifferent and the tables are turned. It is Robene who is finally left to mourn and Makyne to laugh, and we leave him as we found him, looking after his sheep, stricken with remorse because of his casual conduct.

The piece has strong dramatic qualities, for the stanzas are little scenes in themselves and the Scots dialogue is itself colourful and dramatic, but there is no explicit intention on Henryson's part to venture outside the pastoral-lyrical tradition, of which "Robene and Makyne" is an elaborate example looking forward to The Shipboardes Calender. Although the inevitable moral purpose is plain and the conventionally named personae may mask a significant contemporary allegory, as they do in the Fabillis, this is Henryson's lightest poem,

Wood, H. Harvey, ed. The Poems and Fables of Robert Henryson (Edinburgh & London, 1933) is the printed source of all quotations from the poet's works given in this article.

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essentially a song, voicing alternating moods of hope and despair, and conveyed in terms of old-established traditions of ballad, proverb and native irony.

"The Bludy Serk" has much in common with "Robene and Makyn," though it is more obviously derived from models. It is a narrative with moralitas appended, written in the style of the verse romances and telling of a king's beautiful daughter, imprisoned by a foul giant, released by a champion knight who defeated the giant but was so severely wounded in the process that he died. However, before expiring, he bestows on the lady his bloodstained shift, enjoining her to hang it up and think on it and on him whenever suitors beset her. The lady's love for her knight is so great that she vows to remain celibate. The key to the allegory reveals the king as the Trinity, the lady as the soul of Man, the giant as Lucifer, the knight as Christ the martyr, the dungeon as Hell, and the possible suitors as Sin. The bloodstained shift is a symbol of the blood of Christ the Redeemer. The poem is conceived in the ballad-style, and is an instance of an early attempt to create the artificial ballad in direct imitation of known genuine examples which circulated in fifteenth-century Scotland. Many devices of the oral-narrator are built into it—repetition for metrical convenience, conventional descriptive phrases and word-patterns, and a crude sketching of character, but the whole impression is one of a poetical exercise written to illustrate a religious truth.

It is tempting to claim Orpheus and Eurydice as early work, though there is no real evidence for this. The longest of the minor poems, it is based on Nicholas Trivet's interpretation of the Orpheus legend as told by Boethius4 and has little in common with the Middle English Sir Orfeo, to which it is in any event so inferior as to make comparison pointless. There is little human interest, for Orpheus is a symbol, allegorically justified in the tedious moralitas, as the union of Phoebus (wisdom) and Calliope (eloquence), and described as the intellectual part of man's soul. Eurydice represents desire led by temptation and the narrative is an allegory of the early Christian Psychomachia—the battle within the soul between the rational and sensual sides of man's nature; Orpheus's inability to resist looking back at Eurydice stands for the triumph of worldly lust and vain prosperity over reason. This is the standard Augustinian interpretation of the legend, popular with theologians from the sixth century onwards, and Henryson adds nothing to it. Just as familiar are the scholarly devices by which he gives the

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poem weight,—the musical references (taken from Boethius' De Musica), the procession of the Muses, the elongated classical allusions, the mapamundi,—all of which are ponderously literary and have parallels in earlier works by both English and Scots writers.

For the critic, the interest of the poem lies in its scenic descriptions. The way in which Scots poetry takes external nature from the life and does not simply sketch in an imagined background of natural lushness is a feature noted by critics from Ramsay onwards. The Scots excel at painting winter and bad weather scenes and Henryson's glance at Orpheus's path towards Hell is an act of memory—the dreary moor, with its thick thorn bushes, and the slippery track through the field have an authenticity about them not matched in English, wherein most late mediaeval climactic descriptions are inclined to be stagy conventional backdrops for the narrative matter which is usually the Southron poet's main concern. Hell is a "dully place," a "groundles deip dungeoun" with all its attendant material horrors, fire and stink and poison and torment, where dwell the undead "ay deand, and nevirmoir sall de." There we encounter the familiar collection of mediaeval sinners, starting with classical and Hebrew tyrants and evildoers and including contemporary prelates convicted of abuses—popes, cardinals, bishops, abbots and other men of religion who had misused their offices, all tormented in the flames. References of this kind are the stock-in-trade of the late mediaeval satirist but the clear domestication of the topography of hell and the importation of mythological personages, such as Cerberus, the Eumenides, Ixion, Tantalus and Titius, together with the unmistakably Lowland accents of Pluto, Prosperpyne and Orpheus himself place this work squarely in the Scots tradition.

The narrative is sketchy and follows the Ovidian and Vergilian versions; Orpheus only rarely comes alive, as for example in the three opening stanzas of the "Complaint," wherein he cries insconsolably for his vanished wife:

quhair art thou gone, my luve ewridices?

and takes his leave of his old haunts. The work shows Henryson to be already an accomplished poet and there is nothing in it suggestive of the 'prentice technician, but its heavy dependence on stock material and a comparison with The Testament of Cresseid reveals a certain rawness which one associates with immaturity of conception.

"The Thre Deid Pollis" treats of a familiar mediaeval subject, death—in this instance through its repulsive physical aspects which all men must one day adopt. The poem is strong in pictorial qualities

and the reader is asked to imagine the skulls in a row, either real ones or perhaps effigies on a tomb, contemplated by the gloomy poet. They stand out starkly, with cavernous eye sockets and hairless domes and behind them, in a mocking double vision, the "lustre gallandis gay" who will be as they are now, "holkit and how, and wallowit as the weid," and the "ladeis quhyt," their physical charms enhanced by precious stones and jewellery, who shall one day lie "with pellic pollis, and holkit thus your heid."

Having issued this awful reminder, the poet hammers home his moral, warning us against pride, asking us to be humble and seek mercy because earthly vanities and pomp, human achievement and learning are in the end best symbolised by an empty death's head. He makes a special appeal to the aged, who are shortly to die, exhorting them to fall on their knees and ask forgiveness, and concludes with a general injunction to all mankind to pray to the Redeemer for salvation. The piece is a sermon in miniature, which depends for its effect on the pervasive presence of the three grinning skulls and the awful terror of change which affected the mediaeval mind. Henryson keeps the skulls before us in each stanza, thus ensuring the success of an otherwise unremarkable poem through their morbid appeal.

"The Ressoning berwix Deth and Man" is a dialogue on the same subject, but lacking the force given by the image of the skulls—it reads like a scene from a morality play. Man is full of bounce until he finds out what he is addressing, when he straightway drops his arrogance and obeys death's command to repent and his injunction "edderis, askis and wormis meit for to be." Death is here his own moraliser and man shrinks from his grasp, crying for Christ's mercy on the judgment-day. "The Ressoning berwix Aige and Yowth" follows the dialogue pattern but is much more striking. It depends on contrasted portraits of youth and of age and the poet shows how their views of the world differ. Whereas the young man regards it as a place in which to disport himself and to be merry, the old man gazes outward with gloom and

*Contemporary Scots drama, with which Henryson must have been familiar, does not seem to have been as widespread as English miracles or moralties were, and we lack first-hand evidence concerning actual productions. Lyndsay's *Satyre of the Thre Estaitis* (c. 1540) was clearly written for a popular audience accustomed to conventional serious drama as well as farce and was far from being an isolated example though it is the only surviving complete text of a mediaeval Scots play. Many borough records mention dramatic performances of all kinds from the mid-fifteenth century onwards. Vide Mill, A. J., *Mediaeval Plays in Scotland* (Edinburgh & London, 1927), passim.
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despoodency and admonishes his companion, telling him that the flower of his youth will soon fade away. The contrast is emphasised in the two refrains which alternate with the speakers:

O yowth, be gled in to thy flowers green.

and

O yowth, thy flowers fellis fellone sone.

both of which are accepted by the poet, in the final stanza, as true.

"The Prais of Alge" is a variation on the same theme; this is the point-of-view of an old man, who takes what amounts to a Greek line of argument, rejecting youth's hot-blooded pursuit of vanity and stating a preference for the clear vision of mature years. Although decrepit, the old man is joyful and clear of voice, and inspires the poet who encounters him with his burden of contentment:

The more of age, the near hevynnis blisse.

There is a note of mild protest in this poem which seems to be born of patient endurance of the covetousness of others, and it conveys a personal message usually absent from poems on the theme of earthly vanity.

The same may be said of "The Abbey Walk," the title of which (suggested by Lord Hailes following a piece in the anonymous Compleyns of Scotlnde called The Cheapel Valk and existing in MSS of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries) has nothing to do with rambling in the cloisters but is merely a slender prop on which to hang a gloomy moralising poem on the standard pulpit text instructing one to accept one's lot, be it happy or miserable, because all is vanity. Henryson talks like a calm monk, who knows that the world and its values are set at naught and offers consolation from the point-of-view of a man whose faith has matured amidst raw experience. It is this tone in Henryson's religious poems which marks them off from Dunbar's; Henryson is far surer of his place in the scheme of things and he talks without animus as a man enabled by his faith to reject the ultimately worthless and hold fast to what he thinks really valuable; he seems to have little enthusiasm for the shiny attractions of urban life or for the court preferment which cost Dunbar so many sleepless nights. "The Want of Wyse Men" and "Agnis Haisry Credence of Titlaris" are both closer to Dunbar, or even Lyndsay, in spirit, although the tone is, as we have come to expect from Henryson, more detached and impersonal. The poems throw light on the crude "political" atmosphere of the two "estates," wherein fools were plentiful and loose-tongued, and irresponsible tale-bearers

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were hearkened to in high places. Henryson is giving a balanced opinion on the causes of administrative corruption, speaking as a poor outsider whose sufferings from the unwisdom of governors are indirect; in the second poem, he warns a governor against listening to unsolicited or lying reports without weighing the evidence; the last stanza paints a grotesque portrait of the "bakbyrtr," reminiscent of Langland:

Within a hedge he has a downhill face,
Ae bludy rung, undir a fair prentice.

"Ane Prayer for the Pest" has much in common with the preceding two, for Henryson, in sending up his supplication to God "to preserve us fra this perrelus pestilens," is speaking as spokesman for the ordinary man, later distinguished by Lyndsay under the name of John the Common Weel, whose burdens were unfair, whose treatment by the powerful was unjust and who lacked any protection but the power of prayer. The sentiment in this poem is that of the Morall Fabillis, particularly of "The Sheip and the Doig," in which, regarding himself as one of them, he pleads specifically for the poor. If Henryson is in any sense a court poet, he is a court poet from a very different stable from the "auld gray horse Dunbar," who is no champion of the oppressed and invariable thinks mainly of himself and his own insecurity at the hands of the king and nobles. Henryson's impersonality is not a sign of remoteness but of selflessness.

"The Annunciation" and "The Garmont of God Ladeis" are both exercises on familiar topics—the former stereotyped in theme but elegant in presentation, in fact, the last stanza attains a spontaneity rare among such utterances, drawing attention away from the meticulous care bestowed by the poet on the form of his creation, a hymn of praise for the Virgin:

O lady lele and jussuest,
Thy face moist fair & schene Is!
O blusum blithe and bowsumest,
Fra carnale cryme that clene Is!

7 e.g. Piers Plowman, passus v, wherein the Deadly Sins are disguised as costumed figures in a morality play, and graphically described.

8 Plague was rampant in mediaeval Scotland and provided a ready metaphor for "pests" of other kinds, particularly those connected with bad government. There was a very bad outbreak in Edinburgh in 1498 and another in Glasgow in 1501, necessitating the imposition in the former of public health regulations. Vide Comrie, J. D., History of Scottish Medicine to 1860 (London, 1927), 79 f., 162 f.
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This prayer fra my splene Is,
That all my werkis wikkitest
Thow put away, and mak me chaist
Fra termigate that teyn Is,
And fra his chuke that kene Is;
And syne till hevin my saule thou haist
Quhar thi makar of michis mast
Is kyng, and thow thair queene Is.

"The Garmont of Gud Ladeis" is a succinct version in short stanzas of a usually long-winded form, namely, the robing of his "gud lady" in various items of clothing each having its moral significance, and although Henryson had precedents, both in French and in English, for this kind of formal personification, he manages to impart a freshness and apparent spontaneity which, as in "The Annunciation" masks the triteness of the matter; this he does so well as to give the poem the same hymn-like character, even though in this instance the subject is a moral lesson, designed to be acceptable, perhaps, to the young children taught by Henryson in the Benedictine Abbey school at Dunfermline.

"Sum Pracysis of Medecyne" stands out from all the others because it is a parody of the prescriptions of contemporary apothecaries, aimed at the reader who knows of their ever-complicated character (a legacy of the Arabian compilers and of the medical schools of Salerno and Montpellier who followed the example of these treatises). Henryson achieves his satirical object by listing, in popular alliterative measure, items in a compound which are far-fetched, non-existent, or irrelevant as a cure for the ailment they claim to master. One is momentarily reminded of Villon's ballade suggesting a recipe for stewing envious tongues, but unlike Villon, Henryson is not twisted by contempt; instead he is impelled by a good-natured leg-pulling spirit to burlesque the practices of a profession for which he has a strong regard. Henryson is expert at describing the external symptoms of a disease and his account of Cresside's leprosy was cited by Simpson as evidence of the incidence of Greek elefantiasis in Northern Europe by the sixteenth century. A recent reviewer in these pages speculated on Henryson's

Burns's "Death and Dr. Hornbook" is sometimes mentioned as being in the same tradition (e.g. by Renwick & Orton in The Beginnings of English Literature to Skelton [2nd ed. London, 1952], 416) though it is really aimed at the continued use of ancient remedies such as those contained in John Moncrieff of Tippemallock's Poor Man's Physician (Edinburgh, 1712, 1724, 1731), popular among eighteenth-century Scottish ministers, lairds and ladies bountiful who wished to try out their home cures on the local peasants. (vide. Comrie, op cit., 113-4).


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possible dual role of schoolmaster and chaplain of a leper hospital, in the Scotland of that time a curious but not an unknown combination. Whatever the sources of the poet’s information may have been, “Sum Practyssis of Meedecyne” supplies additional evidence of his keen interest in healing.

Much of his inner meaning has been lost and commentary is difficult if not downright unproductive so far as the stimulation of the literary-critical faculties is concerned. The four “dias” are obscure and the compounds themselves are nonsensical so that a serious attempt to elucidate them is probably pointless. “Culcakit,” “longum,” “glaconicon” and “custrum” are almost certainly ad hoc improvisations by Henryson himself though it is possible that he parodied an mediaeval medicinal manual directly. The remedies seem to be for the colic, for insomnia, as a purgative and for the cough. Here is the third prescription:

DIA GLACONICON
This dia is rycht deir and denteit in daill,
Causs it is trest & trew, thairfoir that ye tak
Sevin sobbis of ane selche, the quhidder of ane quhaill,
The lug of ane lempet is nocht to fearsik,
The harnis of ane haddock, hakkit or haill,
With ane hurrfull of hlinde of the scho bak,
With ane brewing caldrun full of hair calli,
For it wilbe the softer and sweettar of the smak;
Thair is nocht sic ane lecheit craft fra lawdian to lundin:
It is clipit on our cannon,
Dia glecolicon,
For till the awaye son

“Glaconicon” may have been inspired by gleconies, flea-bane or pennyroyal, listed in Dioscorides’ Materia Medica (III. 36) as a herb generally used to treat disorders of the stomach, and there is also glaucism, an infusion from teasel. An obscure children’s complaint called the “glack” is referred to in a mid-seventeenth-century source, and we have the

12 Comrie, op. cit., 52.
13 Vocabulary: bustfull = boxfull; caill = broth; hail = whole; hakkit = cut up; harnis = brain; lempet = limpet; lug = ear; quhaill = whale; quhidder = spouting; scho bak = she-bar; selche = seal; smak = taste; sobbis = yelps.
14 e.g. dia culcakit from dia culim, a popular variant of diachyllum (composed of juices and making lead-plaster) or dia colocynthio (pumpkin); dia longum = from dia galenga (galengale) or even dia lagoum (hare’s dung); dia custrum from dia castoreum (beaver-oil). Vide NED (1961 ed.), III, 303, Sydenham Society Lexicon et al. on such compounds.
word "glaikit" = senseless or foolish, all or none of which could link us with Henryson's original intention. The repetition in the form "gleocolion" may be a scribal error, but if it is not, the poet may have been suggesting a pun on "colic," in which case the previous and more blatantly learned references are irrelevant. On this basis, "culcakit" may have been suggested by "culum" + "cack," while "longum" and "cstrum" could well be ribald anatomical references, originating, possibly, in "students' Latin."

All these poems are obviously the work of a skilled mabat, who tells us little about himself though he obviously moved in the world as an active teacher and helper of men, and whose mainly serious character and steadiness of purpose is mirrored in his handling of stock late mediaeval subjects, rustic love, religious faith, prayer, moral dialogue, incidents of classical legend, complaint against current abuses and of course death, both as a symbol and a stark reality. He is not much given to broad humour, and his sympathetic fastidiousness does not permit him to indulge in Dunbar's satirical scurrility—Henryson's single attempt at burlesque is mild and kindly meant and he lacks the temperament for poetic "flying." There is no single line in any of his poems which carries a dart with it, and no individual is ever wounded through his righteous indignation. Compared with Dunbar, whose moods vary from scorn to anguish, sometimes within the same poem, Henryson is consistent and predictable throughout the entire canon of his works. The pace of his poetry is leisurely but rarely laboured, in spite of the strong moralising character of most of it, and his use of Scots for dialogue, for "aureate" literary passages, and for original descriptive purposes, particularly of harsh weather, is unob-


Ibid., 661.

culus = backside; cacare (Gk eξτεσαι) = to void excrement; ME cakken (vide Kurath, Middle English Dictionary, II, 13); cack (vb) = esp. of children; (a) = dung, human excrement (vide Wright, English Dialect Dictionary, I, 479); Lyndsay, An Pleasant Saithre of the Thrie Estaitis refers to "the culum of Sanct Brydis kow" (Entry of the Pardoner). Henryson's intent here is plainly farcical, the more so if "dia culcakit" echoes a real compound as well as proclaiming an obscenity. I am indebted to Mr. J. Munro of the School of Scottish Studies, Edinburgh, for several of the suggestions in nn. 14 & 17.
trusively polished, so much so that one scarcely notes how markedly alliterative it is, as for example, in:

Treuth is all tynt, gyle has the governance,
Wretchtnes has wroth all weightis wele to wo;
Fredome is tynt, and flemyt the lordis fro,
And covatis is all the cause of this.\textsuperscript{18}

Henryson does not exercise Dunbar's despotic power over the alliterative long line, and he never risks experimenting with a daring vocabulary in order to justify an otherwise slender offering, so that his verse is less colourful, less dashing and generally more sober than Dunbar's. Not being an innovator in poetic forms and styles, he has not served as a model for later poets, as Dunbar did, and his firm intellectual rooting in the traditional learning of the Middle Ages, together with a saintly conservatism of temperament, has made of him an occasionally admired, but largely neglected makar. As a preparation for reading The Testament and The Fabilia, these minor poems are invaluable, and now that exactly one hundred years have passed since the first collected edition of his works was published,\textsuperscript{19} one feels that it should by this time be possible to discuss Henryson's poems, or at least his lesser pieces, without compulsive references to "Chaucer" and the Chaucerian yardstick.

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\textsuperscript{18} "The Prais of Aige" (11-14).

\textsuperscript{19} By David Laing, ed. \textit{Poems and Fables} (Edinburgh, 1865) 2 vols.