The Minor Poems of Robert Henryson

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I. W. A. JAMIESON

The Minor Poems of Robert Henryson

I had hoped not to have to write on this subject, for even the implications of the title are decidedly misleading, but A. M. Kinghorn's article under the same title and the assumptions behind the arrangement of poems in his anthology The Middle Scots Poets have convinced me that I must, not merely because of the distortions done to the poems so described, but because the assumptions of Kinghorn's work exemplify an approach to Middle Scots literature as a whole which has been fairly widespread and, to my mind, damaging to the attempt to find the essence of that literature and of the society which gave it birth.

Kinghorn tries to personalise the poems. They are the product, he claims in conclusion, of a serious and learned man, sober, restrained, kindly, whose diffidence has so masked the real quality of his work that we are only now beginning to recognise him as the most important of the Scottish Makars. With the value judgment I do not wish to contend, though this kind of assertion is one of those misleading and rather meaningless irrelevancies which blight our field, but I do wish to condemn, or at least to modify, the tendency to talk of these poems as characteristic of a personality. The very term is, of course, probably largely anachronistic as Brandt's book on the nature of mediaeval perception has recently underlined: he argues for the fact that mediaeval man saw himself—and acted accordingly—as a cluster of attributes, not necessarily even consistent, each determining a man's action at any particular moment, none of which were subordinate in any hierarchy of values to a conception of the real self. Brandt's book seems to me partial in its selection and discussion of evidence, and of

1. Studies in Scottish Literature III (1965), 30-40. Kinghorn's definition of Orpheus and Eurydice as a minor poem seems to me to come from a complete misconception of its own demands and I shall not discuss it here.
3. Ibid., pp. 31-2.
course its thesis concerns man as displayed in chronicles considerably earlier than the work we are dealing with, but it seems to me that its analysis, to a greater or lesser extent, is self-evidently relevant to our period.

However, the main evidence I wish to use against Kinghorn’s approach is of a much less general kind. Even if we could talk in terms of personality I cannot see that the evidence for a Henrysonian personality is in any way convincing: we cannot assume, because of the partial state of Middle Scots poetry remaining to us, that we have a representative sample of Henryson’s shorter poems collected; even those which are attributed to Henryson are surely uncertain because of the notoriously inaccurate nature of attribution in the manuscripts; and, even within the very small body of shorter poems we have, the range of tone and attitude scarcely suggests to me the consistency of personality Kinghorn suggests—he has to distort the fine-toned sexual competitiveness of Robene and Makyne and the obscene fiercenesses of Sum Pratysis of Medecyne to make them fit his schema. But the main evidence on this subject that I want to deploy, and to do so at some length, concerns the fact that the poems we have are all genre poems even if, in some cases, they creatively restructure the genre, for that feat is, in any case, a normal form of exploitation in genre poetry. The characteristics of what are called Henryson’s minor poems are dependent, largely, on their generical antecedents, not any factor of personality, and to neglect this, or, conversely, to suggest that because the poems follow genre strictly they are bad poems, is to completely misread them.

I would like to start with the group of four poems—The Resonning betuix Aige and Youth, The Prais of Aige, The Thre Deid Polis, and The Resonning betuix Deib and Man—which examine transitoriness,

5. Denton Fox is to publish an article on this problem. The most obvious case is that of The Wmute of Wyse Men which has no direct attribution and which Gregory Smith argues into the Henryson canon thus: ‘The collocation of the piece with Orpheus and Eurydice in Chepman & Myllar, not only in a single tract but with a run-on title, must have some weight as evidence of contemporary opinion on the authorship’ (The Poems of Robert Henryson, 1, S.T.S. 64, 1914, p. lxxvii). The practice of ascription in the Chepman & Myllar tracts does not support this claim and I shall not discuss the poem in this article.

the threat of Death the leveller who will make naught of all human pretensions and show the folly, indeed the danger, of pursuing earthly joys. To take the poems first as a group, one notices that they do not all reflect the same attitude: the three latter poems all firmly reject this world’s joys, but the first is not so sure for the narrator there, having seen the examples of Yowth and Aige before him, it seems to see the value of both: he claims, of both, that ‘Of trewh... they triumph in thair tone’ (70) and restates, approvingly, both slogan-refrains, the young man’s ‘O yowth, be glaid in to thy flowris grene’ and the aged’s ‘O yowth thy flowris faidis felledone sonic. All the poems use the same metrical form, the Monk’s Tale stanza—indeed this is a very common form for didactic poetry throughout the fifteenth century in Britain; the first two use refrains; all make use, to greater or lesser extent, of intensifying alliterative patterns. All the poems employ the device of the example appearing before an audience to testify to the truth of the statement made—in the first two poems the witnesses appear before a narrator explicitly present, in The Thre Doit Polis appeal is made to mankind as a whole who should see in the skulls ‘suth exemplair /Off thy self’ (7-8), in The Resoning betwix Death and Man Man, as one of the protagonists of the debate, sees Death which claims it should ‘thy mirrour be baith day & nicht’ (2). And, of course, apostrophe is used extensively to underline these confrontations. Three of the poems use the beauty and decay of the natural world as images of their attitudes. Two are debates with stanzaic alternation. So one can easily establish a community of interest—though not of attitude—and form between the poems.

To turn to the individual poems, I want to establish the fact that the poems represent received attitudes in received forms—often, of course, what is established about one of the poems will implicitly apply to others, or all. To start with The Resoning betwix Aige and Yowth and its attitudes. Middle English literature contains many warnings by older people of the passing of youth and its beauty, joy and love. There are three characteristics of this type of warning which can also be found in Henryson’s poem. Firstly, there is the depiction of the sheer horror of physical decay: to illustrate from The Parliament of the Thre Ages: 

7. Ed. M. Y. Olford (E.E.T.S. 246, 1959). Parallels and analogues to so much of the material in this article could have been noted at enormous length, but the process would have been both tedious and valueless. For general discussion of several of the genres described see Rosemary Woolf, The English Religious Lyric in the Middle Ages (Oxford, 1968); parallels are most easily pursued in C. Brown and R. H. Robbins, Index of Middle English Verse (New York, 1943) and Robbins and J. L. Cutler, Supplement to the Index of Middle English Verse (Lexington, 1965).
The thirde was a laythe lede lenyde one his syde,
A beryne bowne alle in blake, with bedis in his hande;
Croked and courtbele, encrampeschert for elde;
Alle disfigyured was his face, and fadit his hewe,
His berde and browes were blanchede full white,
And the here one his hede hewedede of the same.
He was balled and blynde, and alle babirlippede,
Totheles and tenefull, I tell gowe for sothe;
And euer he momelide and mete and mercy he askede...

Such physical decay is constantly compared to decay in nature—this is the second characteristic. Lines from The Priske of Conscience explain:

...Darfor a man may likend be
Til a flour, jat es favre to se,
Dan son astir þat it es forth broght,
Welkes and dwynes til it be noght;
Dis aught to be ensample til us;
For-whi lob, in a boke, says þus:
Homo, qua s flot, egreditur et conseritur, et fugit ve-
lud umbra et nunquam in eodem statu permanet.
"Man," he says, "as a flour bright,
First forth comes here til þis light,
And es some broken and passes away,
Als a shadu on þe somers day;
And never mare in þe same state duelles,"
Bot ay passand, als lob telles; (704-17)

Not only does this conceit have similarities with that repeated in the refrains of Henryson’s poem but it also helps to explain the flower-bedecked spring setting of the poem—very similar to that of The Parliament of the Thre Ages—which echoes the attitudes discussed. The third characteristic of many of these warnings is the dramatisation of the threat: it is put into the mouth of one who has personally experienced the ravages of time. So the old man in The Parliament of the Thre Ages describes how he had been ‘euerous in armes’ (271) but then ‘Elde vndre-gode me’ (283). So he can with reason tell others to ‘sett ensample bi my-selfe’ (269), ‘Makes goure mirours bi me’ (290).

As with Aige’s complaint so Yowth’s attitudes are easily found within poetic tradition: his pleasure to ‘mell with mowthis mett, / In secreir place’ (37-8) and his physical prowess are found too in the young man of The Parliament of the Thre Ages who was the ‘semelyeste segge that I seghe euer’ (135), who took pleasure

With ladys full louely to lappyn in myn armes,

And clyp thaym and kyse thaym and conforthe myn hert;
And than with damesels dere to dausen in thait chambris;

(247-9)

The form—the debate—is as traditional as the subject matter: the spring opening with its narrator in pursuit of experience; the argument in alternating stanzas with appropriate refrains; the inconclusive ending; in the debate between Eye and Heart, Venus does not judge but sends to all lovers asking their opinions—and there the poem ends, *The Owl and the Nightingale* ends with the birds going off to submit themselves to 'Maistre Nichole's' judgment, in the thirteenth century French dispute between Water and Wine both elements are "right":

Car quant à verté retraire,
Tous estes bons et nescenaires
Chascun de vous en sa seson.

And this conclusion may be that of our poem.

Much of what has been established with reference to the old man's complaint in *The Reasoning betwix Aige and Youth* is also relevant to *The Prais of Aige* but a few additional points can be made. The floral setting here is that of a 'rede rosere', another conventional conceit, which is explained by Lydgate's *As A Mydsomer Rose*:

*Lat no man boaste of konnyng nor vertu,
Off tresour, riches, nor of sapience . . .
Al stant on chaung, lyke a mydsomyr rose.*

*Holsum in smellyng be the soote fflourys,
Ful delitable outward to the sight;
The thorn is sharp, curyd with fresh colouris,
Al is nat gold that outward shewith bright.* (1-12)

An additional reason is given in *The Prais of Aige* for the folly of youthful pleasures: not only does youth fade, but the world itself is variable, 'And covartise is all the cause of this' (14). The same reason

is given, in the same _laudator temporis acti_ form, in Henryson’s own
_The Dog, the Scheip and the Wolff._

> Se how the currit syn of curvatys
> Exyllit hes bayth lufe lawly and law. (155-6)

> Now symony is haldin for no syn;
> Now is he blycht with okir can most wyn;
> Gentreiss is slane and pety is ago. (165-7)

So far I have discussed the poem as if it were simply a restatement
of the old man’s complaint in _The Reasoning betwix Aige and Youth._
But, of course, it is very different in tone. In that poem the old man
showed nothing but despair at his state; this man rejoices in his old
age because it brings him nearer God. The general pattern, of course,
is more than familiar—once I was blind but now I can see—but I
have not been able to find any exact parallel to this theme in earlier
literature (though I suspect it is traditional). However, there are two
fascinating parallels in Middle Scots literature, the similarities to
Henryson not only suggesting sheer imitation—though it is of course
impossible to say who imitated whom—but also pointing up what I
hope this whole article will make obvious, the feeling for genre in
Middle Scots literary theory. Dunbar’s _Of Luve Erdly and Divine_ shows
exactly the same theme: the falseness of the things of this world
is apparent to all but blind, unhappy youth; age shows man that love
which is stable. As in _The Prais of Aige_ the refrain—‘Now cumis aige
qhair yowth hes bene, / And trew luve rysis fro the splene’—reasserts
the poem’s attitude. With Kennedy’s _Honour with Age_ there are
even closer resemblances. In both the narrator (though in different
circumstances) hears an old man singing gaily of the folly of youth
and the holiness of old age; in both the present state of the world,
destroyed at least in part by covetousness, is lamented in _laudator tem-
poris acti_ form: Kennedy’s ‘aigit man’ complains

> ‘This warld is settr for to dissawe us evin;
> Pryd is the nett and covece is the trane; (25-6)

> ‘Law, luve and lawtie gravin law thay ly;
> Dissimulance hes borrowit conscience clavis;

13. In quotations from the _Fabillis_ I have prepared my own text from
that in the transcript of the Bannatyne Manuscript by W. Tod Ritchie, IV
(S.T.S. 2nd Ser. 26, 1930).


15. _The Oxford Book of Scottish Verse_, ed. John MacQueen and Tom
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Aithis, wriz, walx nor sellis ar nor set by;
Flattery is festerit baith with freindis and sayis; (33-6);
in both the old men do not wish to be young again but to worship Him
in whom stability is found; both poems use the Monk’s Tale stanza,
have refrains, use heavy alliteration.

The Thre Deid Polis: the warning given by a dead man to those
living is not unusual in medieval poetry. Thus

You art now as I was in warde figure
I was as you art sum tyme be dayes olde. 28

Again:

Take bode vn to my figure here abowne
And se sumyme I was tresche and gay
Now turned to wormes mete and corrupcoun
But bowle erth and stynkyng slyme and clay. 27

Our poem generalises similarly—‘As ye ar now, Into this warld we
wair’ (5)—and there is a preoccupation, too, with the physical details
of decay. This preoccupation is, of course, too widespread to need
annotation but we could perhaps note that Skelton’s Upon a Dead Man’s
Head 29 uses, like our poem, the sight of a decayed skull as an example.
The categories of people warned by the skulls are those of tradition:
‘peure & riche, sal be but differens’ (39) is a common classification;
rulers (38-9), the beautiful (stanza 4), the wise (45-6), the old and
young (stanzas 3 and 7), all figure prominently in this type of poetry.
So does the warning that pride is obvious folly. We might compare
Henryson’s

O wantone yowth, als fresche as lusy may,
fares of flowris, renewit quiet & reid,
Behold our heads: O lusy gallandis gay,
full lachly this sail ly thy lusy leid,
bolkit and how, and wallowit as the weid,
Thy trampand hair, & eik thy cris:all eue;
full cairfully conclud sail dueuelui deid; (17-23)

with lines from The Dance of Death: 29

16. O ze al whilk pat by me cummes and goth, st. 12, 11, 5-6; Mittel-

17. Take bode vn to my figure, 11. 1-4, ‘Mittelengische Todesgedichte’.
op. cit., p. 30.


Ze that be Jentel/so freshe & amorous
Of zeres sone/flowryng in zower grene age
Lusti tre of herte/and eke desyrous
Ful of deuyse/and chayne ye gowre corage
P'esaut of poste/of loke and of visauge
But al shal turne/in to ashes dede (433-8)

All shal die, this world is a 'mortall se' (1) warn the skulls, in an image as traditional as any, so the poem ends, typically, with an exhortation to 'fall on thy knees; ask grace at god grete' (52).

The Reasoning betwix Deth and Man: the traditional nature of much of the argument and form of this poem has been traced earlier, but a few additional points deserve notice. Death speaking directly to Man is a very common dramatic device which often leads to a debate. Man's question of Death—'quhat art thou? That biddis me thus tak rent' (9)—is similar to Everyman's 'I knowe the not. What messenger arte thou?'20 Man complains, like the old man in the Parlement of the Thre Ayes, that he thought youth would remain with him forever, that he has spent his time pursuing his sinful and proud desires. There is a conclusion to this debate: Death persuades Man to accept his decrees and advice, as the body accepts the decrees and advice of the worms in A disputacion betwyx he body and wormes.21

Much of this detailed checking off of analogues is without doubt tedious but it has been necessary—and, I repeat, much more confirming material could have been presented—to establish the very heavy dependence of these four poems on tradition.

I want to turn next to a group of moral poems, two—The Abbey Walk and The Garmont of Gud Ladeis—counselling how to behave; two—Aganis Haisty Credence of Tislaris and Sum Practysis of Medecyne—warning against the evil. The Abbey Walk: advice to accept the vicissitudes of life, indeed to thank God for them, was common in medieval poetry. Chaucer gives the advice in his Bolade de Bon Conseyl22 using proverbial constructions similar to Henryson's:

Tempest thee noght al crokde to redresse,
In trust of hir that turneth as a bal:
Gret reste stant in litel businesse;
Be war also to sporne ayeyns an al;
Sryve not, as doth the cokke with the wal. (8-12)

Know thy contree, look up, thank God of all; (19)

A poem from the Bannatyne Manuscript contains the same advice:

Welcum be werd as evir god will (5)
Eiss or diseiss qhilk god sall send
allyk sall pleiss eiss or diseiss
ay till obeyiss Till lyfe mak end
Eiss or diseiss qhilk god will send (13-16)

An anonymous fifteenth century poem has the refrain 'And thanke God that al hath sent', Deo Gracias, from the Vernon Manuscript:

Doug I wore out of bonchef brougft,
what help were to me to seye alias?
In þe nome of god, what-euer be wrougft,
I schal seie Deo gracias.

"In Mischeft and in bonchef boþe,
þat word is good to seye and syngye,
And not to wayle ne to bi wroþe,
Doug al be nougt at vre lykynge. (45-52)

We have, then, enough evidence to show that the poet was writing within a tradition even without the evidence of direct source material pointed out by Gregory Smith. He showed the great similarities between our poem and one in the Vernon Manuscript, a poem which exists in several variant, mainly shorter, forms. One need only print together representative stanzas to notice the strong metrical, lexical and attitudinal similarities between the poems. First, the Vernon poem:

Doug þou waxe blynd or lome,
Or any sekesse on þe be set,
þenk riht wel hit is no schome,
Wip such grace god hap þe gret.
In serwe & tene þou art 1-knit,
And þi catel bi-ginnelp to fal;
I not neuer hou þou myst do bot,
But euere to þonke god of al. (9-16)


Thocht thow be blind, or haif ane halt,  
Or in thy face deiformit ill,  
Sa it cum nocht throw thy delfit,  
Na man suld the repref by skill.  
Blame nocht thy Lord, sa is his will;  
Spurn nocht thy fete ananis the wall;  
Bot with meik hairt and prayer still  
obey and thank thy god of all. (25-32)

The settings of the two poems are very similar with the narrators wandering, thinking on the adversities they have experienced, and being confronted with writing on a wall which is directly relevant to their concerns: 'Euire to þonke god of al' (8); 'off quhat estait, man, that thow be, / Obey and thank thy god of all' (7-8). Henryson’s setting is in fact a little more explicit, ‘as I went up and doun / in an abbay’ (1-2) rather than merely 'Bi a wey wandryng as I went'. Unfortunately this particularity has almost universally been taken as autobiographical—referring to the Benedictine Abbey at Dunfermline where Henryson may have been a schoolmaster—whereas it is almost certainly a particular form of the literary convention in which a narrator overhears in an appropriate setting. The poem Deo Gracias mentioned before presents the narrator in church at prayer when a clerk brought out a book:

Haste he souȝte what he scholde sygne,  
And al was Deo Gracias.  
Alle he queristres in þat qwer,  
On þat word fast gon þei cri. (7-10)

The narrator called aside a priest to explain the phrase. A Lamentacion beate marie 28 begins

In a churche as I gan knelle  
Thys endres dey for to here messe,  
I saw a synth me lykyd welle . . .  
Oure lady and hyre sonne in fere

Reading advice on a wall is also to be found elsewhere, in another chanson d’aventure 29 which begins

Throwe a toun as y com ryde,  
Y saw wretyn on a wall  
A lefte of letteris long and wyde:  
‘Hyre and se, and sey not al.’


29. Ibid., pp. 121-3.
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The Garment of Gud Ladis: although Janet Smith's certainty 30 that the source of this poem is Olivier de la Marche's Le Triomphe des Dames 31 seems scarcely justifiable—the French poem is too late for one thing, and its extended moralism brings a quite different tone and application—yet its very existence is of interest for our purposes, suggesting as it does that received community of interest from which all the poems we are discussing springs. Similarly interesting in this connection is a Scots poem from the Bannatyne Manuscript, 32 seemingly later than The Garment of Gud Ladis, which must have used Henryson's poem as its source. Besides similarity of metre and form there are many direct parallels: to instance the beginnings

Wald my gud ladye that I Luiff
Luiff me best t for ny
I suld gar mak for hir behuif
Ane garmond gude and gay

The Garment of Gud Ladis:

Wald my gud ladye lufe me best,
and wrik eftir my will,
I suld ande garmond gudliest
Gar mak hir body till.

The allegorisation of clothing has strong Biblical justification not only in St. Paul's famous armour analogy of Ephesians vi, 13-18, but, more directly for our purposes, in I Timothy ii, 9-10, which was often interpreted allegorically by mediaeval exegetes: 'In like manner women also, in decent apparel; adorning themselves with modesty and sobriety, not with plaits hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly attire; But, as it becometh women professing godliness, with good works' (Douai). More particularly we could note that variants of 'wrik eftir my will' are common enough in love poetry, 33 that the 'grene nor gray' of the garment which would not fit this gentle lady 'half so weill' (39-40) as her decent apparel of virtues are colours often allegorised to disdain, and that the


simplicity which gives rise to Speirs's just judgment that this is 'a poem
with a taking metrical movement . . . here Henryson is a very gentle
moralist' 34 is an artful device of rhetorical paralleling, alliterative link-
ing, and the ballad stanza.

Aganis Hasty Credence of Tislaris complains of contemporary con-
ditions (now', 1.1) yet the very complaints voiced come from a com-
mon stock of complaint poetry. There is a fairly considerable group of
poems advising reticence, or at least wisdom, in speech, to avoid the evil
consequences of flattery, of scandal, of tale-telling and of rash speech.
A representative stanza may be quoted:

Certayn thys ys a wondere thyng!
Be a tale nevyr so fas
Meny men haue grete lekyng
To tell it forth, and eche it als;
And be it tode ons or twayne
Hyt wol be long or it downe fall.
There-for y rede be ware and wyse,
And hyre, and se, and sey not aill. 35

Several poems confine themselves to condemning the wickedness of
the tongue, in terms similar to lines 41-5 of our poem: so a carol 36 begins:

Off al the enmys that I can fynd
The tong is most enmy to mankynd

Others (cf. line 44 of our poem) threaten the pains of hell to wicked
tongues. Still more akin to our poem are those advising against credu-
lity. P. W. Thomson pointed out to Gregory Smith 37 similarities be-
tween our poem and two of Lydgate. In The Court and the Bird 38 the
bird, in return for her release, gives the churl three pieces of advice, the
first of which is

"Yff nat of wisdom to hasty credence
To every tæc, nor to eche tidynge,
But considre of reson & prudence
Mong many taiz is many greyt lezyng;
Hasty credence hach causid gret hyndryng,
Report of talis, & tydynges brought vp new
Makith many a man to be bold vntrew. (197-203)

35. Throwe a towne as I com ryde, op. cit.
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The bird tests the churl and, discovering he has forgotten the advice, complains

"Taught I the nat this wisam in sentence:
To every tale brought to the of newe,
Nat hastily yeue ther-to credence,
Into tyme thou knowe that it were trewe? (302-5)

Thomson’s other reference is even more interesting. Book I of Lydgate’s
Fall of Princes 39 includes the story of Theseus whose greatest sorrow
was that he ‘gaff credence’ (4485) to his wife. Readers are warned

Nor he to hasti talis for to leexe
Off flaterers in chaumbre nor at table;
Forgers of lesygis, myn auctour doth wel preuee,
Tabide with lordis that thei be nat able.
Heeron he maketh a chapitale ful notable,
And off his wriyng, this was the cause whi:
That pyncis shoide examyne ech parti,
Off wisam also and off discpectioun,
Without a preeff nat be parcial; (4495-4503)

Princes must not be hasty of judgment nor

Leue no talis nor yie no credence,
Till that the parti may come to audience.

Sumwhile hath happid, how the sloue credence
Hath in sum cas be founde ful notous;
But hasti credence, I dar sey in sentence,
A thousand fold is more perelouis;
For onauisid at haste is odious:
For haste ful ofte, for lakkynge off resoun,
Off moche peeple hath be destruccioun. (4584-92)

A prince ought to examine well before he delivers judgment

For ther is noon mor dreadfull pestilence
Than a tunge that can flaire and fage; (4621-2)

The cause of much trouble

Been these lieres with ther tunges double,
Themsilff afferoyng ay trouthe to oppresse;
With whom flarie is a cheef maistresse:
And, worst of all, to ther dreadfull sentence,
Is whan pyncis been hasti off credence.

Hasti credence is roote off al errore,
A froward stepmooder off al good counsell,
Ground off gret hyndryng, a dreadful deceyvour,

Fair ofte off face, with a ful pereilous tail,
Gladli concluding with ful gret dissaule,
Next nevybeour onto repenauence
To all that tryste & haue in hir plesauence. (4805-16)

In fact

Yt is ther non, to myn opynyoun,
So dreedful chaung nor trasmutacion,
As chaung off pryncis to yie a iugement,
Or hasti credence, withoute auisement. (4820-3)

The envoy ends with a plea:

Pryncis, Pryncessis, off noble and hih parage.
Which haue lordshippe and domynacioun,
Voide hem a-side, that can flatre and fage;
Fro tungen that haue a tarage off tretsoun,
Stoppith your eris from ther bittir sou
Beth circumspect, nat hasti but prudent,
And yueth no credence withoute auisement. (4838-44)

The resemblances to Aganis Hasty Credence are indeed very close.
Lydgate's work could be the source though only in combination with
other forms noted. Elsewhere Lydgate echoes the advice, in a shorter
poem 40 whose mode of address—a warning—is similar to that of
Aganis Hasty Credence:

Moste noble princes, cherissheris of vertu ... .
The first vertu most plesyng to iesu
Be the wriyng and sentence of Catoun
Is a gode ronge, yn his oppynyoun
Chastiseth the reuers, & of wisdom dothe this,
Voieth gowre hereyng from al that sey a-mys. (127-33)

In a poem from Oxford MS. Digby 102 41 we find the same theme:

Gloreses maken mony lesynges —
Al to sone men hem leue —
Bohe to lordys and to kynges,
Pat bohe partye ofte greue.
Wolde lordis seche repreue,
Glosers shuld not go so gay,
Ne not so hardy for to meue
Suche wordes as they say. (73-80)

Dunbar likewise in Reul of Anis Self 42 advises flight 'fra all fals tungis

42. The Poems of William Dunbar, op. cit., pp. 75-6.
fulfilled with flattery and 'perrellus taillis' (26-9) and of course Henryson's Fabillis themselves have passages similar in diction and attitudes in The Mouse and the Paddock lines 134-49 and The Fox and the Cock lines 204-10. Two further points need be made. Firstly, this poem belongs to a group addressing lords, or princes, or the king (often employing the apostrophe) and giving advice. Secondly, the poem and its like are part of a very large group of poems decrying contemporary conditions.

In view of some previous criticism of Sum Practys of Medecyne it may seem strange to place it amongst these moral poems rather than in a separate form of pure, good-humoured burlesque, but I hope to prove my point as I proceed. There seem to me to be four traditions which bear upon this poem. The first is that of attack on medical men of all types, physicians, surgeons, apothecaries. Le Roman de la Rose presents the customary attack: the physician's actions are tainted by greed for gold.43 A Poem on the Evil Times of Edward II has a similar attack, but here greed is matched by incompetence.44 Gower's Miroir de l'Omme attacks physicians, coupling them with apothecaries who are mere money-makers.45 Langland urges diet on his readers; then physicians will have to sell their furred hoods and precious possessions; indeed 'morthereris aren mony leches'.46 Chaucer's portrait of the physician is satirical, partly at least aimed at his mercenary nature.47 Brandt attacks ignorance and exploitation.48 Sum Practys is obviously related to this tradition. There is accusation of ignorance as implied in lines 7-9 and 14-17 where the narrator's words, though aimed at another, are really a reflection of his own character—a common rhetorical device. There are also hints of the narrator's mercenary motives:

The ferd feisik is fyne, and of ane felloun pryce . . . (66)

Ye may clamp to this cure, & ye will mak cost . . . (74)

43. 11. 5091-5090, ed. Ernest Langlois, II (S.A.T.P., 1920), 244.


There is a hint too perhaps of collusion between apothecary and physician:

on your saule beid,
That ye be sicker of this scull I send yow,
With the suthfast seggis, )
that glean all egges, ) of malis to mend yow.
With dia and dreggis, )

(21-6)

The second tradition to which *Sum Practysis* is related is that of the versification of medical prescriptions. To take an example:

for ye gowte. Take jws of rubarbe ful aney,
And as mekyl of eyvyl I ye sey,
And ye ye eyvyl be sarp & sowre
And mege it wt aportion barly flour,
And on aflaxene clout sped it clene,
And bynd yt yer ye goute is most sene.
Take olye of rubarbe & alemad
Ye wel togedir be seped & meygd
Wt ye playster of flaxen cloth
Bynd ye soor feerteyd wel abowre;
... And as good lechys alle seyn
Men xul yer to no oyer thyg ley. 49

*Sum Practysis* is not the only work in which such prescriptions are burlesqued:

A good medycyn for sor eyen.

For a man that is almost blynd,
Let hym go bathed all day agyn the wynd,
Tyll the soge be sette;
And than wrap hym in a cloke,
And put hym in a hows full of smoke,
And leke that every hol be well shet.
And whan hys eyen begyne to rope,
Fyll hem full of brynstong and sope,
And byll hym well and warme.
And yf he se not by the next mone,
As wel at mydnyght as at none,
I schal lese my ryght arm. 50

Though the aim of the two poems is similar, Henryson's is nearer the actual prescriptions. He uses the same wording and constructions: the use of the 'dia' prefix is common in prescriptions; the construction


'Tak...’ is a normal way of beginning prescriptions as can be seen from that cited above; similarly ‘Recipe...’ is a common prescription beginning. The assurance of Henryson’s narrator that his cures will work, and the use of herbs gathered at the correct astrological hours are also obvious enough features from contemporary prescriptions.

The verse form Henryson uses is the common form of the alliterative tradition in Middle Scots, in thirteen line stanzas, rhymed, the lines of patterns of unequal length. The form is appropriate here—the heavy movement of the verse seems to embody the exaggeration which is part of the poet’s satirical technique, and the irregularity of the metre serves to illustrate the confusion of the speaker’s mind, confusion shown also by the studied difficulty of the diction. The exaggeration I have just mentioned—wildly cavorting to obscenity and absurdity—is itself a common enough form of invective in late mediaeval poetry: Dunbar and Skelton provide obvious examples. Taking the ancestry of the traditions within which Henryson is working into consideration I fail to see how one can claim him to be ‘impelled by a good-natured leg-pulling spirit to burlesque the practices of a profession for which he had a high regard.’

Three more specifically religious poems comprise the last major grouping: *Ane Prayer for the Pest*, *The Bludy Serek* and *The Annunciation*. The first aroused Gregory Smith’s curiosity as to which of the plagues of the fifteenth century the writer might refer. The curiosity is misplaced, however, for the prayer could refer to any or all of the plagues, just as a prayer in a Mass for the Pestilence. It is not a personal prayer setting forth an individual’s emotions or needs, rather it is the type of prayer that could be prayed in a community, a general petition for the needs of community and nation. The traditions which have influenced this poem are both religious and literary though in most cases these are so interwoven that it is quite impossible—and unnecessary—to try to distinguish. The idea of plague as a punishment for sin has, ultimately, Biblical derivations (Cf. Numbers xiv, 11-12; (II Samuel xxiv, 15-16). It is embodied in certain Masses, such as that of Pope Clement ‘pro mortalitate evitanda’ and the ‘Missa de sancto Sebastiano, tempore pestis’. It is used in sermons and in history and in verse:

54. *Missale ad Usum Insignis et Praeclarae Ecclesiae Sarum*, ed. F. H. Dickinson (Burntisland, 1861-83); cols 886*-889* and 892*-896*. 
De Rysing of the conuyne in londe,
De pestilens, and the eorpe-quake,
Deose the oloses, I vnderstoode,
Beo-tokenes the grete vengance & wrake
That schulde falle for synnes sake... 30

In Piers Plowman Conscience

preide the peple, haue pite of hemselue,
And preude that this pestilences. wreke for puire synne... 30

Henryson's own The Dog, the Scheip and the Wolff maintains that God has sent 'pluigis soir' and 'pestilens' for our grit offens'. (169-71) Sin being the cause, the cure, Ane Prayer suggests, is penance, but above all the mercy of God expressed in His sacrifice of His Son—it would be an impertinence to illustrate the origins of these claims. The very formulae in which the poem claims mercy—'we the besieke', 'Remem-ber Lord', 'Haif mercy', 'Lord of lordis' among others—are Biblical and liturgical, and the poet has not merely used random phrases, for the whole work is based on a common concept of prayer order and tech- nique. Prayers typically begin with praise, moving thence to petition as can be seen almost anywhere in the liturgy. And, of course, Henryson was by no means the only poet to use the construction:

Now rightwis luge, Crist lord Ihu
of kyngis kyng and lord also,
With thi fadis how regnes se tew
the haly gost & elles no mo.
Gudely how sake my prayer now,
and twmen ought pin ere her fro. 67

To stress the omnipotence of God, the poet uses a special type of vocabulary: 'superne', 'Lucerne', 'preclar'. Smith pointed out similar usage in Dunbar's Ane Ballat of Our Lady. 59 It is also to be found in prayers of Lydgate and Skelton. All are religious poems, hymns and prayers. Apart from the verbal "firework-display" that has been sug- gested, and the tendency of the period to aureation, this usage also forms some attempt, influenced perhaps by the Latin hymns, at realising a heightened poetic vocabulary suitable for religious verse. 60 Many of

58. The Poems of Robert Henryson, I, op. cit., p. 77 note to 1. 65.
the poems of this type use the same verse form: the Monk's Tale stanza with refrain. Ané Prayer for the Pest, then, is not a personal plea, though it could perhaps be used as one. From the text it would be very difficult to justify Douglas Duncan's statement that the poem 'shows Henryson clinging to orthodoxy in the face of terrible circumstances. . . . In this tormented and moving poem it can be said that Henryson is just keeping his balance between faith and experience.'\textsuperscript{91}

The ultimate source of The Annunciation is, of course, St. Luke's Gospel (i, 26-38) and traditional exegesis of certain other Biblical passages (Exodus iii, 2—The Burning Bush; Numbers xvii, 8—the rod of Aaron). But numerous other poems use the same story and the same Old Testament exegesis, developing the paradoxes set by this tradition (chaste with child, mother and maiden), sometimes with similarly appropriate patterns of wit and conceit.\textsuperscript{92} These poems remind too of the future death of Mary's son, they end with a plea to the Blessed Virgin for her intercession with her son on behalf of sinners, they often indeed describe her with the same attributes as those of our poem—as a princess, as one without peer, as a blossom, as one whose face is 'moist fair & schene' (62), one who is 'clene' (64). The Annunciation uses a twelve-line stanza rhyming a, b, a, b, a, b, a, a, b, a, b, a, b, a, b with 'a' rhymes ending lines of iambic tetrameter, 'b' rhymes those of trimeter—the 'b' rhymes are the same throughout the poem. Dunbar's Ané Ballat of Our Lady has a very similar metrical and rhyme pattern. The twelve-line stanza is itself a very common form for mediaeval religious verse, including poems concerning the Blessed Virgin. I know of no parallel elsewhere in Annunciation poetry to the introductory passage in praise of love, but if it is new it is new through combination for poems telling of the power of love are numerous and some begin in similar manner to The Annunciation:

\begin{verbatim}
Luf es lyf þat lastes ay, þar it in criste es feste;
For wele ne wa it chaunge may, a's wytten has men wysete.
De might it tourues in til þe day, þi truel in til restre;
If þou wilt lyf þus as I say, þou may be wyth þe best.\textsuperscript{96}
\end{verbatim}

\textit{The Blady Sork}: Gregory Smith's statement \textsuperscript{94} that the source of


64. The Poems of Robert Henryson, I, op. cit., p. lix.
this poem is the *Gesta Romanorum* has not been questioned. The stories
certainly have many similarities: they are tales of a knight who dies
for a lady in distress who treasures his 'bloody serk', and the *moralitates*
are essentially the same. But there are several differences. In the *Gesta
Romanorum* the lady's father dies while that in *The Bludy Serk* not
only remains alive but initiates his daughter's rescue. The tale in the
*Gesta Romanorum* places much of the blame on the lady, who yielded
to temptation; there are perhaps hints of some yielding in our poem
but the more obvious cause of the trouble is the Giant—and, of course,
the male antagonist is not the Duke of the *Gesta Romanorum*. In that
story the lady is seduced and robbed of her land; the lady of *The Bludy
Serk* is 'stollin' (19) and thrown into a dungeon where she suffers
great pain. There she cannot see the knight before he saves her at her
father's request; in the *Gesta Romanorum* the lady's weeping disturbs
a knight to whom she tells her tale and who vows to fight for her. At
this meeting, before the battle, he asks her to take his armour, if he is
killed, and to remind herself of it if any other would marry her; in *The
Bludy Serk* this request is made by the dying knight who has rescued
the lady. Now the differences from the *Gesta Romanorum* story could
be explained—as Smith explained them—by Henryson's inventiveness
if other versions of the story did not occur elsewhere, versions which
in places seem closer to Henryson's account. So in Nicole Bozon's—
where there are admittedly differences from Henryson's poem (no
mention of a father, the knight as the lady's jealous husband, the lady's
agreement to betrayual) and much additional material (the arming of
the knight, the promise to return after death)—we find the lady rescued
from prison where she had suffered much hardship, the conversation
between lady and knight takes place after the battle, and it is then
that the knight offers the lady, among other things admittedly, his shirt.
The 'gyane' of *The Bludy Serk* can be found in an analogous story:

... I seye every man was gette in bateyll þorowe þe myghtfull
dethe þat Crist suffred on þe Rode Tree. And how þat he gette
þe I will shewe þe by ensample. I rede of an ermyte þat
walked by a veye and met with a knyght commynge agryns hym
vn-armed. And þe ermyte asked him fro whens þat he com
and wheþer þat he wolde. And þe knyght answered and rezd,
"I com fro my fader and am goynge to freyght with a gauyte

65. Ed. H. Oesterle (Berlin, 1872), pp. 376-7. The English versions are
edited by Sidney J. H. Hertrage, *The Early English Versions of the Gesta


XLVII, II (London, 1868), 426-37.
HENRYSON’S MINOR POEMS

Yet hath men of my fader’s men in pryson. The sayd he ermyne, “Seben yet thou wolte geve feynge withe yet some, tell me what yet thou bereste in thine armes.” “I here a beere of blake with a lylie of whyte and v roses of redde.”

By his arme I vndirstonde goostlyche every Cristen man in his worlde yet walke in he vay, I hope, towarde heven. For when yet thou shalte walke yet vay, thou shalte mete witeh a knyght, wiche is Criste, Goddes Son of heven; for gyfte thou meve yet oon fote toward heven, Criste commeth toward by an hundred myle. But his Knyght com from is Fadere when yet he com from heven and toke flesche and blode of yet gloryousse vergyn, Oure Lady Seynte Marye. But he com vnarmed when yet he lette all is grete povere yet and com downe mely for to feyght with a gaeunie, yet was yet dewell of hell.44

It would be silly, of course, to maintain that The Blody Seke owes everything to its source whether that be particular form or group of stories—including, by its retelling in a metrical pattern allied to the ballad metre and by glancing alliterative patterns and transparent accumulatives it has a strange delicacy that quite transforms any original, a transformation which puts it apart from almost all the poems we have dealt with earlier in this article and which, in the light of the Fabulis in particular, might make it seem typically Henrysonian in quality—but it would be equally silly not to realise what this poem owes rhetorically to its predecessors.

The one poem left to describe is the pastourelle Robene and Makyne. Gregory Smith69 commented on the similarities between this poem and the traditional French pastourelle. W. Powell Jones70 pointed to a particular pastourelle which has many similarities to Robene and Makyne. However, Arthur K. Moore has disputed this genre attribution:71 Henryson’s poem resembles the typical pastourelle in that the setting is rural, and the characters answer to the name of Robene and Makyne. . . . But further the comparison cannot be legitimately extended.72 The claim seems to me quite untenable. A cursory

71. ‘Robene and Makyne’, M.L.R. XLIII (1948), 400-3; and further in his The Secular Lyric in Middle English (Lexington, 1951), pp. 188-94.
HENRYSON'S MINOR POEMS

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*bat hathe many of my faders men in pryson,"Pan seid  he ermye, "Sehen  hat hou wolte goye feyghte withe  hat gaunte, tell me what  hat hou bereste in  pin armes." "I bere a brece of blake with a lylie of whyre and v roses of redde."

By  his armet I vndirtonde goostlyche every Cristen man in  his worlde  hat walke in  he yeye, I hope, towarde heven. For when  hat hou shalte walke  hat yeye,  hou shalte mere withe a knyght,  he wiche is Criste, Goddes Sone of heven; for giffe  hou meve  he oon fote toward heven, Criste commep towardle  he an hundred myle. But  pis Knyght com from is Fadere when  hat he com from heven and toke fieshe and blode of  hat gloriuse vergyn, Oure Lady Seynte Marye. But he com vnaarmed when  hat he lefte all is grete povere  he and com downe meckely for to feyght with a gaunte,  hat was  he dewell of hell."

It would be silly, of course, to maintain that *The Blody Sere* owes everything to its source whether that be particular form or group of stories—indeed, by its retelling in a metrical pattern allied to the ballad metre and by glancing alliterative patterns and transparent accumulations it has a strange delicacy that quite transforms any original, a transformation which puts it apart from almost all the poems we have dealt with earlier in this article and which, in the light of the *Fabillis* in particular, might make it seem typically Henrysonian in quality—but it would be equally silly not to realise what this poem owes rhetorically to its predecessors.

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72. 'Robene and Makyne', op. cit., p. 401.
glance at Karl Bartsch’s collection of pastourelles shows not only that almost all contain a Robin and Marion or some variant on that name and that the setting is rural, indeed shepherd, but also, as in Robene and Makyne, that the sole preoccupation is love, very often unrequited love, that the refusal of a shepherd to love a maiden is a common starting point, that frank expression of emotion is common, that the ending is often unhappy, that the ‘débat’ characteristic of argument and counter-argument is often used. Of course, Robene and Makyne is coloured by the ballad form—Moore has pointed out that the opening recalls that of the ballad Lord Thomas and Fair Annet and that the proverb used by Henryson as his “moral” is found also in The Battled Knight; more generally, both the alliterative formulae and the verse form, which give the poem its affectionate movement, are related to ballad technique, and the directness and simplicity with which the story is told are also reminiscent of the ballad—but at base it remains a pastourelle nicely piquant with the contrast between the elements of fine amour in the third stanza and the deliciously earthy expression of Makyne’s desire, an earthiness probably underlined by the very name Makyne. As Smith notes the name was sometimes used in the deteriorated sense of slut or wanton. Indeed, Lindsay uses it as a popular name for the female pudendum. It would be unfair to the poem to describe it as pastourelle and leave it as such, for it has a tone which is distinct and utterly charming, but it would be unfair too to the rhetorician who built this poem not to realize the material from which it was compounded.

From our survey it would seem to me we have learnt remarkably little of Henryson the “personality”. If these poems be his we have learnt that he could write within a considerable number of genres—more of them tend to be “moral” than not but, even if what we have is truly representative, this says more about his environment than himself. We have learnt that he can fuse genres to make a new whole but this is certainly not characteristic only of him, it tells more of rhetorical training than personality. Wherever we turn we come back to rhetorician, not personality. Derek Pearsall’s recent book on Lydgate sums up what I have been trying to illustrate:

Writing of a Romantic poet, one would be tempted to create, even if there were no extant chronological evidence, a chronologi-

73. The Poems of Robert Henryson, I, op. cit., p. 59.

cal structure in which each poem was so placed as to illustrate the growth of the poet's mind, or some mythical prototype of it. The pressures would be recognized as inward, a struggle towards self-expression... It is not profitable to study a medieval poet like Lydgate in this way—fortunately so, for we lack much of the chronological evidence we should need. There is development in his writing, but it is a development of style, or rather the development of new styles, not of poetic personality. Lydgate's personality is a matter for curiosity only, for it is of the supreme relevance to the understanding of his poetry. Every mask he puts on is a well-worn medieval one, and it is well to recognize these masks for what they are, otherwise we may find ourselves interpreting poems like the Testament as personal documents. The coherence of his work as a whole is to be found, not in terms of its relation to his inner self or to any concept of the self-realising individual consciousness, but in terms of its relation to the total structure of the medieval world, that is, the world of universally received values, traditions, attitudes, as well as, and more significantly than, the world of 'real life'.

Pearsall's statement needs modification in terms of the extended poems he discusses, and in fact his practice is not as uncompromising as his principle. But even for such extended poems — and, in this context, I would make this point about Henryson's longer poems and the Middle Scots corpus as a whole — a solid foundation in generical and rhetorical tradition must be set before discursive judgments are offered.

Henryson's minor poems would be well rid of the epithets Henryson and minor. They are genre poems which make sense by their relationship to their genre, not to some invented personality. They should be seen for what they are, and in the process a blow, even if a small one, would be struck for a fuller understanding of Middle Scots poetry as a whole. And perhaps also, cleared of the necessity to hang to a personality, those many fine poems in the corpus which, till now, have suffered under the abusive label "anonymous," might be given the attention they deserve.

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