4-1-1973

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Robert Henryson’s View of Original Sin in “The Bludy Serk”

Robert Henryson’s “The Bludy Serk” is a 120 line moral tale based on a story from the Gesta Romanorum, which Henryson has changed and adapted in several places. Three major changes are immediately noticeable: first, the lack of names or “identifying” elements in the story; second, the fact that the king still lives during his daughter’s capture; and third, the fact that the lady is carried off and thrown into a dungeon rather than seduced by the evil one. The effect of these changes is to remove (in the allegorical interpretation) the odious guilt of original sin and to regard the sin as merely a condition of man after Christ’s redemptive act. Henryson’s poem has further points of departure from the original, such as the long description of the “fowill gyan” or the twice mentioned “bigly bour,” but these do not change the focus or intent as the three major changes do.

There are two Early English manuscript versions of the Gesta Romanorum to which Henryson may have had access: British Museum MS. Harleian 7333, dated 1440, and British Museum MS. Additional 1. The tale is substantially based on the British Museum MS. Harleian 7333 version of the Gesta Romanorum. If Henryson also had knowledge of a Latin version of the Gesta, the poem may be based on two separate tales, number 66 (Of Constancy) and number 25 (Of Ingratitude). Both tales have the same basic framework of the rescue of a maiden by a knight and the lady’s vow to the knight to remain faithful. Tale 25, however, deals with unfaithfulness and the consequent loss of riches. The EETS edition of the Gesta Romanorum indicates that both tales can be included in Tale IX (Emperor Fredericus) of the MS. Harl. 7333 version. Tale 25 of the Latin Gesta does not appear as a separate tale in any of the Early English versions. See Sidney J. H. Her- tage, The Early English Versions of the Gesta Romanorum (London: Oxford University Press, 1879), pp. xxxix, 515.
9066, dated 1450. Internal evidence from Henryson's poem strongly indicates the use of MS. Harl. 7333. The evidence for use of this version rests substantially on the repetition of the word "sark" (and its variant forms) in both manuscripts. Although "sark" is not a particularly uncommon word, it occurs in only one story in the *Gesta Romanorum* (Tale IX, Emperor Fredricus) and in only two poems by Henryson. The recurrence of the word "sark" suggests that Henryson may have seen or heard this particular version of the *Gesta*, if not used the manuscript which remains.

It is difficult to know whether Henryson had seen a Latin version of the *Gesta Romanorum*, but there is a possibility that he was familiar with one, since in his poem he omits the name of the king and his place of residence. In doing so, he has removed topical or referential elements which might be distracting factors for his readers in order to emphasize the universal, and more important, moral statement of his tale. Henryson is very careful, however, (unlike Lydgare and others) to separate the "moralitas" from the tale itself. In this way the story can stand alone, as an adventure tale or comment on human nature, and take on the Christian allegory only when the proper application of Christian symbols or figures is made. Thus, in "The Bludy Serk," Henryson has really created two separate and distinct stories: one the story of a maiden’s rescue and a knight's courage, and another which is an allegory of Christ’s love for man and the necessity for man's response. In removing the topical elements, Henryson returns to the form of the Latin original since the Latin makes no use (in this case) of place or character names.

2. See G. Gregory Smith, *The Poems of Robert Henryson* (1914; rpt. New York: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1968), I, lvii-lxiv. The British Museum MS. Addit. 9066 version of the *Gesta* may have been known to Henryson also. It, like the Latin versions, does not make use of topical references, but does go into an elaborate "moralitas" (called the "Declaratio"), more so than any other version. This version bears a greater likeness to the Latin versions than does MS. Harl. 7333. A third English manuscript version, Cambridge University Library MS. Kk 1. 6, does not contain the Emperor Fredericus story; and a fourth English version, printed by Wynkyn de Worde, bears little relevance to Henryson studies, since it is dated c. 1510-15.


5. Smith, I, xvi.
The Latin versions of the *Gesta Romanorum* contain the phrase "arma sanguinolenta," while the second English version (British Museum MS. Addit. 9066) has the phrase "cote-armour . . . that was all be-sprynged with blode." The reference in both of these versions is to a piece of armor or protective covering rather than a "sark" or garment worn next to the body. It is possible that Henryson is attempting to make the garment a more personal item to intensify the response and feeling he intends to create in the reader, while at the same time bringing to mind the cloak or garment worn by Christ at the time of His death. It is also interesting to speculate on the possibility of a "shroud" legend of the Middle Ages as influencing the choice of "sark" over the words for armor. Such speculation could apply to the *Gesta Romanorum* as well as to Henryson. Nevertheless, the response of the audience is intensified by the "sight" of a bloody shirt, a much more common and personal item, rather than the less personal, and perhaps less evocative, armor. In addition to removing the topical references in adapting the poem, Henryson made two other major, and quite significant, changes in the original version.

The first change, though perhaps not the most striking, is the fact that the king is still living in Henryson's poem while he has already died in the *Gesta Romanorum*. In the *Gesta* tale, one of the reasons that the lady is seduced and led into sin is that there is no longer anyone (her father) to guide and support her. She is deceived by the promises of an Earl, and when she acquiesces to his demands, she is eventually thrown out of her kingdom. After great lamentations, she is befriended and aided by a knight who restores her to her rightful place in the kingdom. Thus, great emphasis is placed on personal failure as the cause of one's downfall, and the story recalls the temptation and sin of Adam and Eve in paradise. In both Henryson and the *Gesta*, it is the action of the knight which ultimately saves the lady, but in Henryson's poem, the redemption results from a situation which was not brought about by any action of the lady herself. The daughter is taken from her father by force, and it is he who searches for a knight to fight the giant. The real importance of this first change lies not so much in the literal story, but in the allegorical interpretation given in the "moralitas." Henryson is subtly shifting the emphasis given to original sin.


In both the *Gesta Romanorum* and *The Bludy Serk* the sin or 
"fall" mentioned is (allegorically) that of original sin. In the *Gesta*,
however, original sin is regarded as the sin of all men which was re-
deemed by Christ's death. Henryson, by having the lady snatched against
her will and thrown into the pit, treats original sin as a *condition*, but
not as a fault or sin of all men. Henryson's change removes the bur-
den of guilt from the lady (in the allegory, the soul) and places it
directly on the evil giant. Thus in the allegorical interpretation, men
(at least those coming after Adam and Eve) are not responsible for
their sinful condition and do not bear the guilt (though they bear the
condition) of that first sin. This seems a very significant theological
comment on Henryson's part, for though every soul inherits the original
sin, it is only the "evil giant" (Lucifer) who is responsible for that
fall. Indeed, Henryson's poem generally minimizes the "First Fall"
or the idea of original sin and focuses rather on the people of the
present and what their response should be to Christ for His saving
action. Moreover, the fact that the king remains alive lends a slightly
stronger continuity to the allegorical story because it represents the
father's (God's) concern for his daughter (man's soul) and his lasting
desire to keep her with him.

In the *Gesta Romanorum*, the king (God the Father) has already
died, and as a result, the daughter falls into sin and is cast from her
rightful kingdom. In the allegory, this fact presents a problem, since
it seems that God the Father has removed Himself from the lady's
life (i.e., taken away His grace and protection), and consequently
she falls into sin and loses the kingdom. Henryson, perhaps aware of
this inconsistency, attempts to resolve it by having the king remain
alive to search for someone to combat against the evil one. By making
this change, Henryson effects the shift from original sin and man's
fall indicated in the *Gesta* story to a commentary on the result of the
knight's (Christ) action for men of the present day. The king has his
daughter returned to him (i.e., the soul restored to God and His grace)
through the saving and selfless action of the knight, which ultimately
results in his death. Henryson's allegory much more easily reads as
the restoration of man to God through Christ's decisive action than
the seemingly chance rescue in the *Gesta Romanorum*. One final
change of significance, however, involves the relationship of the lady
and the knight.

In the *Gesta* there is a good deal of emphasis on the idea of
marriage of the lady and the knight, a notion which does not occur
at all in Henryson's poem.
"Al! lord, alas," quoth she "for I have nothing to geve þe but my self." "And I aske noon oþer of þe, but þat þou be my love, and love non so wele as me.""

This idea of firm devotion in love (i.e., marriage) is again reinforced in the "moralite" of the Gesta tale, perhaps to recall the idea of the Church as the "bride of Christ," and thereby link the love encountered in marriage to the love of the Church members for Christ. The "moralite" states:

þat is to sey, our lord ihesu crist, þe which hadde compassion of mankynde; and he drowe matrimony with vs, þat is to say, whan þat he rooke our kynde, and hayld batail agenst the devill, and gat our heritage."

Henryson makes no mention of a possible marriage between the lady and the knight, though he does follow the original tale by having her vow to marry no other, despite the fact that many men may come to woo her. She makes no bond before the fight (she is imprisoned), and thus gives her love spontaneously for the sacrifice which the knight has made for her.

The lady murnyt and maid grit mone,
With all hir mekle micht:
'I luve nevir lufe bot one,
þat dulfully nowis dicht.'

he said, 'fair lady, now mone I
De, trestly þe me trow;
Tak þe my sark þat is bludy,
and hing It forrow gow;
first thynk on it, and synce on me,
quhen men cumis þow to wow.'
The lady said, 'be mary fre,
Thairro I mak a wow.'

When men come to court this lady (after her restoration), she refuses to accept any of them.


9. See Ephesians 5:24-26. "Therefore as the Church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing. Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the Church, and gave himself for it, that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word."


11. "The Bludy Serk," in Smith, III, 98-99, 11. 65-68, 73-80. (All line references to the poem will be from this edition.)
She hangs up the bloody shirt (in the Gesta tale), and whenever she had entered the chamber, and saw the bloody serke, she said with a lamentable voice, "Alas! I could take any husband, after he lord that daide for me, And woe myne heritage!"  

The same is true in Henryson's poem, although he does not elaborate on the details of her keeping the vow. He does assert, however, that she prays for the man who saved her when she was "wont to sit full merk / In that deep dungeon," and notes, as a means of introducing the allegorical interpretation,

Sausd we do both day and nycht,  
With pryaries to him mak. 11. 95-96.

By ending the story in this manner, Henryson does not actually intrude upon the adventure tale, but rather suggests that men should respond to God (for His sacrifice) in the same way, and with the same devotion, that the lady responded to her knight. Through her statement, Henryson "sets up" or prepares for the "moralitas," which like the "moralize" of the Gesta Romanorum, attempts to expand the potential of the literal story by the substitution of Christian figures or ideas for the characters and situations of the story. By making the substitutions, one creates what is essentially a new and different story.

There are several important similarities and differences between the "moralite" (Gesta Romanorum) and the "moralitas" ("The Bludy Serk"). As before, the changes which Henryson makes from the original indicate a shift in focus from original sin (emphasized in the Gesta) to a more vital and pragmatic notion of what man's present action should be. Indeed, the focus of Henryson's poem is centered on Christ's saving action and its redepmpive value, but it is coupled with the assertion that all men must resist sin and pray to Christ for help. Although the Gesta story says nearly the same thing, it concentrates primarily on the death of Christ and what it means as redeeming the soul from original sin. Only one line reminds the present reader of his duty.

And þenne if any, soyl, the devill, or þe flesh, or any oþer stovy  
vs to synne, lat vs renne swifterly to be host of þe passion of  
crist, and sy, þat we woll haue non oþer but him þat so shadde  
hi bloode for vs, for we shold haue euerlasting life in blisse.  

Henryson, however, mentions the proximate necessity for proper action and prayer as a means of praising God and getting into heaven. The  
"bludy serk" is a reminder of the death of Christ, and in remembering His sacrifice, one would also be able to resist the temptation to sin.

Sa weill þe lady luvit þe knycht
þat no man wald scho tak.
Sa suld we do our god of micht,
That did all for ws make;
quhilk fullely to deid wes dicht
for sinfull manis saik;
Sa suld we do both day and nycht,
With prayaris to him mak. 11. 89-96.

The admonition to praise Christ becomes even stronger as Henryson moves into his "moralitas."

The knycht to chyst, þat deit on tre,
And coft our synnis deir; 11. 101-2.

Borrowit with chrystis angell cleir,
hend men, will ge nocht herk?
For his lufe þat bocht ws deir
Think on þe bludy serk. 11. 117-20.

Finally, with the association made between the wooers of the lady and the temptation to sin, Henryson exhorts his audience to live good lives in praise of Christ.

The lady was wowd, bor scho said nay,
With men þat wald hir wed;
Sa suld we wryth all syn away,
That in our breisits bred.
I pray to Jesu chryst verrey,
For ws his blud þar bled,
To be our help on domysday,
quhair lawis are strayit led. 11. 105-12.

Henryson's ending and "moralitas" assert much more strongly than the Gestas Romanorum both the sacrifice which Christ made for man's original sin and the necessity for man to respond and love Christ for His saving action.

Lastly, Henryson adds a detail to the body of the story which does not appear in the Gestas, and uses it again in the "moralitas" to indicate the punishment man might expect if he falls into sin again (i.e., the same awful punishment as if he had never been redeemed — the pit). The "pit" into which the lady is thrown by the giant is a unique addition on Henryson's part, and one which suggests the horrors of
sin and hell. The contrast of the scenes of pleasure and damnation is brought about by the movement from the "bigly bourn" of the king's land to the "deip dungeon" of the giant and finally back to "he Bourt" when the knight has rescued the lady. One can more easily visualize the results of failure to love Christ if he considers the realistic picture of the horrors undergone by the maiden in the Giant's dungeon. If consideration of Christ's love for man is not sufficient to evoke one's response, then perhaps fear of the torments of Hell will make him see the light. The poet emphasizes the theme of love, but never does he fail to recognize the penalty for man's failure to love.

There are several other minor variations and additions which Henryson makes in the original tale, mainly for the purpose of providing visual details in the poem. He describes in detail the giant and his features, the lady's suffering in the dungeon, and the fight between the giant and the knight. It might be easily argued that Henryson was not faithful to his original; such may be true, but Henryson's poem conveys a forceful message to his audience at which the *Gesta* only hints. Henryson's emphasis on Christ's sacrifice and what man must do to live up to that sacrifice actually concretizes what the *Gesta* implies, and in doing so perhaps more fully explains or develops the points implicit in the original tale. Henryson creates a frame in which Christ's redemptive act is affirmed and subsequently reemphasized by its implication for man's soul in the present; it goes beyond the generic soul which was saved from original sin to the particular man of the present day. Henryson reaches his audience with a vivid and more powerful presentation of the idea which the *Gesta Romanorum* attempts to convey, and in so doing makes "the bludy serk" a vital symbol for the sacrifice which Christ made for man.

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14. The following table shows the similarities and differences between the MS. Harl. 7333 version of the *Gesta Romanorum* tale and Henryson's poem with regard to the "moral Interpretation" appended to each.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><em>Gesta Romanorum</em></th>
<th>&quot;The Blud Serk&quot;</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emperor—&quot;fadir of hevyn&quot;</td>
<td>King—&quot;he trinitie&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daughter—&quot;soule of man&quot;</td>
<td>Lady—&quot;manis saule&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Earl—&quot;pe devill&quot;</td>
<td>Giant—&quot;lucefeix&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kingdom—&quot;heritage of paradise&quot;</td>
<td>Knight—&quot;chryst&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knight—&quot;ifesu crist&quot;</td>
<td>Pit—&quot;hell&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wooster—&quot;syn&quot;</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

In both the *Gesta* tale and Henryson's poem, the "serk" is the reminder that Christ has died for the sins of men. In the British Museum MS. Additional 9066 version and the Latin versions a term for armor is used rather than a term similar to "serk."