Reading the texts of Henryson's 'Fables'

By Kevin McGinley

Robert Henryson is undoubtedly one of the major figures not just of early Scottish literature, but of Scottish literature in general. His major works, *The Moral Fables* and *The Testament of Cresseid*, display an outstanding level of literary craftsmanship and philosophical depth. However, his works have come down to us in editorially unsatisfactory forms, mostly dating from late after the time of writing (*c*. 1480), copied from earlier versions that are now lost, and with texts that are incomplete or whose authority is far from clear. Yet what may be unsatisfactory for editors may be critically fruitful in other ways. Taking the *Moral Fables* as a preliminary test case, it may be possible to see that texts deemed faulty or deficient might still provide useful insights into the historical resonances and reception of Henryson's work.

The *Moral Fables* has the most convoluted textual history of any of Henryson's works. The surviving texts show that Henryson wrote thirteen fables plus a prologue. The Makculloch manuscript (EUL Laing III.149), which dates from 1477 and was added to into the early sixteenth century, contains the prologue and "The Cock and the Jasp". The Asloan manuscript (NLS MS 16500) from the early sixteenth century contains the fable of "The Two Mice". The 1658Bannatyne Manuscript (NLS Adv. MS 1.1.6) contains the "Prologue" and ten of the fables. BL MS Harley 3865, with a title page dated 1571, is the most complete manuscript, featuring the prologue and all thirteen fables. This is something the Harleian manuscript has in common with the extant early printed editions of the *Fables*. Of these surviving editions, the earliest were produced in Edinburgh, the first one by Robert Lepreuik for Henry Charteris in 1570, closely followed by an edition printed by Thomas Bassadyne in 1571. Another edition was printed in London by Richard Smith in 1577, and a fourth was printed in 1621 by Andro Hart, again in Edinburgh.

In investigating the fables' texts, scholars have for the most part been preoccupied with negotiating the numerous differences between the various

manuscripts and editions to reconstruct the lost original which Henryson himself wrote. This is an important and necessary project, but a consequence has been a view of the different texts of the *Fables* as primarily an obstacle to understanding, full or 'problems' and 'mystery'[1], a smokescreen through which we must peer to discern, however vaguely, the shape of the lost original text. Rather than thus seeing the variations between the surviving witnesses primarily in negative terms, as imperfect versions of the lost original, it may prove beneficial in studying Henryson, as it has done with many other writers from this period, to consider the differences in a more positive way. The various texts of the poems might in many cases be seen as distinct appropriations and reinscriptions that can tell us something of the ways in which different readers may have approached the *Fables* at different times.

Full consideration of what the differences between the witnesses might reveal about how Henryson was being interpreted and applied in different contexts, of course, would require an in-depth study. There is much need to separate wheat from chaff in terms of variant readings (sometimes scribes might simply misread their source and produce nonsense, for instance) and much uncertainty concerning the relationship between the witnesses and the sources that they may have drawn on. Nonetheless, some preliminary analysis might at least open up possibilities for further fruitful study.

One of the most pressing issues for analysts of the *Fables* has been the order in which they should appear. The most widely accepted arrangement is as follows:

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While some critics have scruples about this arrangement[2] it does have the recommendation of being the order in which they are presented in the extant early manuscripts and printed editions that give complete texts of all the *Fables*. This order has also been argued to provide a neat symmetrical arrangement of fables from the Aesopic and Reynardian traditions and also to provide a gradual darkening of tone that adds an important dimension to the collection's moral tone.[3]

Earlier manuscripts, however, show no regard for this ordering. The title page of the Asloan Manuscript, for instance, indicates that it originally contained seven fables (assuming that the lost 'Parliament of Bestis' is 'The Trial of the Fox'). These, if we adopt the numbering from above, were arranged thus: 13, 8, 7, 3, 4, 5, 2. The Bannatyne Manuscript orders its ten fables as follows (again using the same numbering system): 8, 3, 4, 1, 13, 2, 6, 12, 7.

Moreover, the Asloan and Bannatyne manuscripts do not even group the fables together as a unit. The Asloan title page tells us that it placed the first six of its Henryson fables together. It then inserted a number of other poems: 'By a Palace as I couth Pas', 'A Ballat of Treuth', *The Buke of the Howlat*, and *The Tale of the Fyve Bestis*. Only after these does 'The Two Mice' appear. In the Bannatyne Manuscript, the first fable from Henryson is immediately followed by *The Buke of the Howlat*. Bannatyne also inserts, between the fourth and fifth of the fables, Henryson's *Orpheus and Eurydice* and 'The Bludy Serk'.

Of course, the incompleteness and unusual ordering of the *Fables* in these manuscripts might stem from practical difficulties: Asloan and Bannatyne may have been working from texts that were themselves incomplete or possibly damaged and they may have copied their texts as they came to hand. However, when we consider how freely they arrange the fables and their willingness to interpose other poems between them without apology or comment, it does seem that the compilers of these manuscripts were quite untroubled by the literary consequences of such problems. Given this, it seems likely that Asloan and Bannatyne were simply reading Henryson's *Fables* with much less sense of their structural cohesion and unity than is implied by the later witnesses.

This is not to claim that we should read the *Moral Fables* as having no fixed order

or to have been originally several independent pieces that were later arranged into the thirteen-poem sequence. The arguments for the cohesion of the Fables as a collection are persuasive and it seems likely that they were designed thus by Henryson. But the earlier manuscripts' arrangement does indicate that early readers of the *Fables* took seriously Henryson's repeated injunctions that they should read actively[4] and often did so in ways that took liberties with the text quite alien to modern readers. They felt free to select from among the *Fables* and make their own connections, seeing little need to mould their understanding according to any formal unity imposed by the author. Given this so, we should perhaps then look again at the manuscripts to determine what kinds of connection were important to their compilers.

While the Asloan and Bannatyne texts show scant regard for such matters as authorial intention or the formal unity of the Fables, we might argue that these witnesses instead show that the *Fables* were understood in terms of intertextual patterning. In both manuscripts, the fables are embedded with other poems which share generic, thematic, or structural features. The Asloan Manuscript groups Henryson's fables among other Scottish beast poems such as *Cockelbie Sow*, *The Buke of the Otter and the Ele*, *The Parliament of Bestis*, and *The Buke of the Howlat*. Even Dunbar's *Flyting* with Kennedy which, according to the title page, preceded the first of Henryson's fables in the Asloan MS, has plenty of animalistic references.

The Bannatyne Manuscript similarly groups the fables with other beast poems, including *The Buke of the Howlat* and *Cockelbie Sow*. But Bannatyne, appropriately for a section of the manuscript which he entitles 'the Fabillis of Esop, vith divers vther Fabillis and poeticall workis', extends his selection further. Henryson's *Orpheus and Eurydice* and 'Bludy Serk' are not beast fables, but they do share the narrative/moralitas structure which characterizes Henryson's fables. Furthermore, the inclusion of poems by Dunbar and John Bellenden towards the end of this section of the manuscript also suggests that Bannatyne understands Henryson's fables in terms of a shared literary tradition with other makars, and that the fables' literary connections within this tradition are more important to him than the formal unity of Henryson's work itself.

In this respect, paying attention to the distinctive features of those manuscripts which depart from the accepted organization of Henryson's *Fables* rather than

viewing them simply as flawed might cast light on the literary attitudes of early modern readers of Henryson. The early manuscripts' readiness to select from among Henryson's fables, to reorder them, and to mingle them with other texts, indicates that for their compilers the modern critical and editorial concern over the original formal structure of the collection as reflecting the textual designs of the author was not a priority. Rather, these early readers appear to have been primarily concerned with identifying their generic affiliations and situating Henryson's poems within a distinctively Scottish literary tradition.

This should remind us that modern critical concerns over tracing Henryson's particular philosophical attitudes or characterizing his distinctive *weltschauung* may have little relation to the responses of his near contemporaries. For Asloan and Bannatyne, the distinctiveness of his literary achievement was much less important than its typical character and they were far more concerned with extrinsic criticism than intrinsic: their literary approach was not aimed at appreciating the unique formal integrity of the Fables, but at emphasising the intertextual dimensions of Henryson's poems so as to assimilate them within a broader framework of shared literary and cultural values. Bearing this in mind, we ourselves might turn back to the *Fables* with a keener eye for ways that signs of literary affiliation such as stanza form, structural organization, stylistic register, and vocabulary might have served as cues for early audiences to situate the collection in relation to other texts as part of a larger cultural grouping.

There remain many other questions about the variant texts of Henryson's fables, and indeed his other works. What motivated the inclusion of some fables and the exclusion of others in the earlier manuscripts -practical circumstances or deliberate selection? Is there any intrinsic patterning to the ordering of the fables in Asloan and Bannatyne?[5] Are there any social or political dimensions to the choices the compilers made? When we turn to the early editions too, there are interesting questions about how they frame and present the *Moral Fables*. For instance, the anglicized Smith edition of 1577 opens with an Epistle which discusses the translator's motives and problems in turning Henryson into English. This is closely followed by a poetic 'Argument between Esope and the Translatour' in which Aesop appears in a London churchyard 'Apparelled- after the Scottish guise' (an appearance even more startling than Henryson's own evocation of the Greek poet in Roman garb) and which discusses the reception of

Scottish texts in England. This framing raises significant questions over the cultural and linguistic relations between Scotland and England at the time. Is it significant that Smith expressly presents his text as a translation? Does the translation or Smith's presentation of the relation between himself, Henryson, and Aesop refigure Henryson's text in any culturally significant ways?[6]

Many of these questions about the texts of Henryson's *Fables* may be unanswerable; others may only yield speculative answers. But by paying closer attention to the import of the variant texts' distinctive characteristics, we might come closer to grasping the lived responses to his poems as they were received by early readers.

References & Further Information

[1] Douglas Gray, *Robert Henryson* (Leiden: Brill, 1979), 32-33;, xii.

[2] See John MacQueen, *Complete and Full with Numbers: The Narrative Poetry of Robert Henryson* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2006), pp. 285-89

[3] Georg D. Gopen, 'The Essential Seriousness of Henryson's *Moral Fables*: A Study in Structure', *Studies in Philology* 82:1 (Winter 1985), 42-59; Denton Fox (ed.), *The Poems of Robert Henryson* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1981), lxxv-lxxxi.

[4] See Gregory Kratzmann, 'The Poetics of the "Feinyit Fabill"', in *Of Lion and of Unicorn: Essays on Anglo-Scottish Literary Relations in Honour of Professor John MacQueen*, ed. R. D. S. Jack and K. McGinley (Edinburgh: Quadriga, 1993), pp. 16-38.

[5] For some preliminary suggestions on the Bannatyne ordering, see R. J. Lyall, 'Henryson's *Morall Fabillis*: Structure and Meaning', in *A Companion to Medieval Scottish Poetry*, ed. Priscilla Bawcutt and Janet Hadley Williams (Cambridge: Brewer, 2006), pp. 89-104 (p. 91).

[6] For some very brief but incisive and tantalising comments on the significance of the 1577 London edition, see Priscilla Bawcutt, 'Review of Gregory Kratzmann, Anglo-Scottish Literary Relations 1430-1550', *Notes and Queries* 29:2 (1982), 159-60 (p. 60).

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