

Humorous Poetry in Late Medieval Scots and Latin (c. 1450-1550): An Overview

Janet Hadley Williams

The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia

Abstract

The humorous poetry of late medieval Scotland is diverse in genre, including among its forms the drinking song, farce, parody, burlesque, elrich fantasy, and satiric invective. Some examples, closely related to other popular entertainments of the time, lack technical subtlety, making use of stereotypes and crude plots. Others however are works of imaginative and technical skill, with jesting allusion to classical precedents. Although many forms, especially parody, draw upon Continental examples, the Scottish examples across all genres are also enriched and made distinctive by their great verbal and situational invention.

Keywords: Scotland, late medieval poetry, parody, elrich fantasy, burlesque

Early humorous poetry takes such diverse forms that an overview is challenging. Individual examples elude classification, often blending two or more genres, among them the drinking song, farce and buffoonery, parody, burlesque, elrich fantasy and satiric invective. These are diversely present in the poetry of many countries, but this article focuses on their occurrence in the rich vein of late medieval Scottish comic poetry, loosely 1450–1550, much of which, whether in Latin or Middle Scots, is closely related to other popular entertainments, such as music-making, dancing, juggling, jesting and horseplay. Compositions with a sometimes crude use of stereotypes (corrupt friars, dishonest tailors) and an unsparing exposure of perceived inadequacies (flawed physical attributes, meaningless ritual) thus have their places; others, however, display invention and technical skill. The chief purpose, like that of earlier riddles, jests or merry tales based on the Latin *facetiae*, is therapeutic—to provide pleasure and solace—by irreverently inverting but not seriously challenging the social norms.

Humorous drinking poems form a group that overlaps with several others mentioned

here. Many are written with ingenuity and are deserving of notice. One poem, in a five-line stanza (*aaabB^d*), begins ‘Quhy sowld nocht allane honorit be?’ (Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland [NLS], Adv. MS 1.1.6, folio 107^{r-v}). It delights in puns and wordplay, even to the name of the author, said to be ‘allane matsonis suddartis [Allan Malt’s soldier]’. Barley is personified (doubting no peril as he ‘lyis in to ane barrell’), the emphasis not on his murder, as in the English ‘John Barleycorn’ versions, but on Allan’s necessary and joyous place in the scheme life, whether as festive catalyst, purse emptier, or daily sustainer. Another poem, of a single quatrain, ‘And thow be drunken’ (Edinburgh, NLS Adv. MS 1.1.6, folio 145^f), is filled with verbal ambiguities on the word ‘wytt’ (as either wit / mental powers, or blame). It considers the role that wine can play in these meanings, concluding (wittily), ‘Gif thow it drinkis the wytt is thyne’.

Poems written in the farcical genre known as peasant brawl or mock tournament (names reflecting the focus on non-courtly characters, such as cobblers, grooms, and labourers), concern outdoor communal activities (wooings, weddings, and processions) that degenerate into boisterous misrule. These poems share characteristics with the earlier German literary (and actual) combats called *kübelturnier* [bucket jousts] (Jones 1951: 1123–1140). Among Scottish examples is the anonymous ‘Sym and his bruder’ (MacLaine 1996: 23–27; Fisher 1999: 99–113). This tale about two idle brothers who decide that pilgrimage to Rome is preferable to begging a living in St Andrews (ironically itself a major pilgrimage centre), opens with a promise that it will outdo the stories of great champions, Robin Hood and William Wallace. The seriousness with which the brothers dress the part recalls the arming of the knight: they carry steel-tipped staffs, wear tartan tabards decoratively patched, and sew scallop shells to their sleeves to suggest that they have already made the arduous pilgrimage to the Compostela shrine. The dry aside in the penultimate line of the ten-line bob-wheel stanza (*abababab⁴c¹d³*), that the pair are as pretty as any crab toe, suggests strongly that the reality is quite different. In a burlesque of the penitent pilgrim (or strong champion), the brothers tire of carrying their bags before they have travelled very far, returning without ever having visited a shrine. They make a handsome living selling spurious pardons, so Sym’s brother, full of pride at his wealth, decides to marry. He is taunted by town lads, the resulting rough brawl at the wedding breakfast humorously balancing the grandiose chivalric claims of the opening. The combat is infused with the high seriousness of the knightly joust, but not the feats of arms, and there is a mock-heroic loss of teeth.

This genre must have been widely known in Scotland; several examples survive (MacLaine 1996: 1–17; Bawcutt 1998: 149–156; Hadley Williams 2000: 109–111; Bawcutt and Riddy 1987: 269–278). Even a clever inversion exists in William Dunbar’s ‘Sir Jhon Sinclair begowthe to dance’ (Bawcutt 1998: 233–34). In this poem a merry occasion at the court of James IV is derisively observed as a peasant festivity. Named courtiers, not grooms or labourers, are the inept and energetic participants; the colloquial diction of the more rustic example, and some similarly reductive animal and scatological imagery are here used ironically to ridicule the noble dancers, who shuffle or stagger like an ungainly old horse or young bullock.

Parody, the strict subversive imitation of a well-known sacred or secular text of fixed form, has a long tradition in medieval humorous poetry. In Scotland, literary testaments, based on the legal document, were especially popular as texts for the genre. William Dunbar’s ‘I maister Andro Kennedy’ (Bawcutt 1998: 89–92), in its deft oppositions of Latin and the vernacular that twist the formulae of actual wills to reveal the scurrilous purposes of Kennedy, a self-confirmed drunkard, and its skilled variations in metre, amply demonstrates the presentational variety of Scottish examples, as does the anonymous ‘Duncan Laideus Testament’ (Edinburgh, National Records of Scotland, MS GD 112/7/9, folios 485^v–480^v).

This is written in rhyme royal (*ababbcc*⁵), a stanza form often used for moral instruction (here a deceptive ploy), and purportedly spoken by the notorious highland outlaw, Duncan McGregor, hanged in 1552. Having no worldly goods, the fictional Duncan bequeaths his spiritual attributes, ironically leaving them to churchmen—negligence and sloth to his curate, oppression to the parson, flattery to the friars, and so on. Duncan makes the expected pious allusion to the destination of his soul, but turns it wickedly into a last bequest: so that he might stand before God, he leaves his sins to the devil! The poem ends in a further parody, of the formal leave-taking of loved places familiar from early Gaelic poetry (Gillies 2005). Awaiting the gallows, the condemned outlaw laments that he will not see his highland haunts again. Using elaborate courtly diction he names and describes each one, but this is not a sign of a longing for home: the nostalgia is for his most successful hiding places and best sources of plunder (Hadley Williams 2005).

Early Scottish parody takes many other forms. William Dunbar's highly inventive *Dirige to the King*, beginning 'We that ar heir in hevynniss glorie' (Bawcutt 1998: 274–277) opens as a formal letter, written by those in the supposed heaven of Edinburgh to those presently in the purgatory of Stirling, the place of the Scottish king's Lenten retreats. The Edinburgh sybarites send the Stirling penitents a mock dirge (Matins from the Office of the Dead). Instead of the customary intercessions, usually drawn from the book of Job, Dunbar substitutes original prayers on the theme of the superiority of one place over the other. The rhythmically repeated responses in Scots and Latin are modelled on those of real church services, with familiar liturgical formulae interspersed, but the final Latin prayer alters the expected blessing of Lauds (the Office following the Matins of the Dead): the peace of Edinburgh, rather than that of God, is requested to alleviate the suffering of those presently residing in Stirling.

Frequently, however, parodic elements, as distinct from stricter parody, are blended with burlesque, in intermittent imitation of the style or spirit of the genres or topics to which allusion is (subversively) being made. Some Scottish parodic works re-write solemn myths of creation. In 'How the first Helandman of God wes maid' (Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland [NLS], Adv. MS 1.1.6, folios 162^v–163^r), for example, St Peter and God come down from heaven to walk in Argyll, a northerly region of Scotland, and there, in a comic allusion to the creation of Adam from clay, St Peter challenges God to make a highlander from a horse turd. He does so, and the new highlander, to God's amusement, promptly steals his knife, the sleight of hand involved recalling Mercury's crafty appropriation of Apollo's quiver (similarly causing Apollo to laugh), in Horace's ode to Mercury (Book I.10). Other parodic poems overturn traditional myths of geographic origins. An ogress laughs so hard when her would-be lover 'bleeds' milk porridge from her blow that she farts North Berwick Law, a conical hill in Lowland Scotland ('In Tiberus tyme', Edinburgh, NLS, Adv. MS 1.1.6, folios 136^v–137^r). In another poem, a giantess grandmother loses her temper, and spits Loch Lomond into being ('The crying of ane playe', Edinburgh, NLS, MS 16500, folios 249^r–242^v).

Medical burlesques, popular in early French and English poetry, also have their counterparts in Scottish literature. Robert Henryson's 'Sum Practysis of Medecyne' (Fox 1981: 179–182) contains four medical prescriptions—cures for the colic, impotence, hoarseness, and the last, a broad hint that the poem is not straightforward, for warding off folly. The ingredients poke fun at the contemporary practice of medical obfuscation, as just two, the yawn of a grey mare and the ear of a limpet, amply reveal. Yet this poem, and several of the others discussed below as elrich fantasies, are far from casually written, their alliterative thirteen-line stanza form (*ababababc⁴dddc²*) requiring great expertise. Not all in this group, however, follow such a demanding metrical form; rhyming couplets are used in a

poem about the ghost of Lord Fergus (Edinburgh, NLS, Adv. Ms 1.1.6, folios 114^r–115^f). It begins, as a heroic romance might, with an address to a noble audience, ‘Listis lordis I sal yow tell’. Listeners are promised a very great marvel, but the hints of heroic romance unexpectedly lead to a burlesque ‘recipe’ for the conjuration of a ghost. The list of impossible ingredients (including three tusks of an old dead horse, a fowl’s tooth, and the tail of a castrated sow), together with the mock-learned instructions, part Latin liturgy, part folkore, jest at meaningless religious ritual.

The tone of these poems is unpredictable, yet almost always genial. The fascination with inventive nonsense and with dextrous generic shifts already noted is developed even further, frequently with metrical and linguistic skill, in another group of humorous poems in Scots called ‘elrich’ or ‘eldritch’ fantasies (Lewis 1954: 69–72; Bawcutt 1992: 257–292; Fisher 2005: 292–313). Some of the poems previously mentioned would fit equally well into this group, in which there are associations with the supernatural, the dream, or with remote otherworlds, coupled disorientingly with more familiar or domestic things and places. One illustration, ‘My gudame wes a gay wif’ (Beattie 1950: 192–193), is a seemingly simple folkloric work of three stanzas (these, however, notable examples of the thirteen-line bob-wheel type, *ababababcdcdc*). It tells of a grandmother named Kittok, a good drinker who dies of thirst and makes her way to heaven. Scattered throughout the poem are impossibilities: Kittok is said, for instance, to live in France on Falkland fell (a hill in Scotland); it is claimed she died of thirst yet that she made a good end (which at this time meant that she died as a penitent Christian). It is when Kittok wanders off the path to heaven to an ‘elriche’ well, a feature associated in Scottish tradition with the edge of the known world (Wood 1986: 526), that events become even less predictable. She meets a newt riding on a snail, and continues in their company, riding ‘ane inche behind the taill’ (her ‘mount’ the snail’s viscous silvery trail?). She stops at a tavern for a last drink, then sneaks past St Peter at the gates, in a (traditional) outwitting that causes God to laugh ‘his hairt sair [heart sore]’ (Thomson 1955–58: K2371.1, K2371.2, K2371.5). Hope of her redemption is suggested, despite the unorthodox entry, when Kittok spends the first seven years in heaven as Our Lady’s henwife. On the contrary, model behaviour leads not to sainthood but to temptation. Kittok yields to it robustly, rejecting heaven and its sour ale, and escaping to the pleasures and employment of the alehouse nearby.

Such entertaining ambivalence, comic yet disorienting, is also present in a poem posing the equivocal question, ‘Quha doutis dremis is bot phantasye? [Who doubts that dreams are only fantasy?]’ (Edinburgh, NLS, Adv. MS 1.1.6, folios 101^r–102^r, and Cambridge, Magdalene College, Pepys Library, MS 2553, pp. 152–155) in which the dreamer-narrator is taken by the king of fairy (the realm of enchantment and illusion), and is mercilessly, yet ineffectively, bound hand and foot with a rope of sand. Despite even more fearsome and impossible obstacles (a prison wall of mussel teeth, a mire of flint) the dreamer escapes his prison by a somersault, only to hurt his head on a knoll of cream. These and many following absurdities recall the early *impossibilia*, yet often have threatening as well as playful elements. The bizarre mix, distinctively Scottish, is strikingly displayed in another poem, ‘Sym of Lyntoun’ (Edinburgh, NLS, Adv. MS 1.1.6, folios 142^v–143^r). This tells of Berdok, King of Babylon, who is, teasingly, first presented as a creature of the vegetable patch, where he lives in a cabbage stalk (changing to a cockle shell in winter for frost protection). Yet he is also a knight—stalwart, skilled on harp, lute, and with the crossbow—and a lover, having wooed Mayok, the three year-old ‘Golk’, or cuckoo, of Maryland, for seven years. The burlesque of romance motifs changes to become a spoof Ovidian tragedy when Berdok at last captures Mayok and takes her home, only to discover she has metamorphosed into a nest of skaitbirds (Arctic skuas). When her father (once again the king of fairy) and his allies angrily

pursue Berdok as Mayok's kidnapper, shooting radish bullets at him, the gods take pity and Berdok is saved, or changed—into a bracken bush. These poems' incongruities and threats are humorously resolved with wordplay and ingenious escapes.

Poems of satiric invective form a separate group of Scottish comic verse. Their tone is often censorious or abusive, chiefly of individuals, but humour is retained in many of these satiric compositions. A petition by William Dunbar, 'Schir, I complane off iniuris' (Bawcutt 1998: 199), bitterly attacks a poet he disdains to name, who has plagiarized his work, but the complaint is no unconsidered outburst. It is deftly composed in an unusual seven-line stanza (*aabbcbC⁴*) and is pungently entertaining: the unnamed poet has 'dismemberit' and 'poysonid' Dunbar's meter, and made 'discordis' of his figures of speech. The gift of a fool's bauble, Dunbar slyly suggests, is fit punishment. Some examples in this group comment sardonically on topical social injustices or church corruption. The irony, whether of tone or situation, frequently becomes sharper, although a thread of humour is retained. In David Lyndsay's *Testament of the Papyngo* (Hadley Williams 2000: 58–100), for instance, the dying parrot expresses doubts about the holiness of her bird-cleric executors, the magpie (a canon regular), the raven (a Benedictine), and the kite (a friar). The three make solemn deathbed promises to save the parrot's soul, the rituals they offer to perform amusingly garbled. Their ignorance and deceit are matched by incongruous conduct, revealed for instance in their cunning claim that the stealing of a chicken is a rightful exaction of the church tithe. Such a method of sustaining the faith is ironic comedy, yet in identifying the bird-clerics as predators, it is serious satire of a social evil.

In another poem in this group invective is mostly dominant. This is a poetic cursing purportedly by a churchman, Sir John Roull ('Devyne power of michtis maist', Edinburgh, NLS, Adv. MS 1.1.6, folios 104^v–107^r; and Cambridge, Magdalene College, Pepys Library, MS 2553, pp. 141–148). With all the power of the ecclesiastical authorities behind him, Roull denounces the sinners, revealing the terrible sin they have committed, the stealing of five fat geese, 'With caponis, henis and othir fowlis'. The bathetic revelation provides a humorous aspect to the threats, reducing the speaker's authority; nonetheless the poem is an uncomfortably dark attack, closely parodying the real-life prose excommunication in the structure of the curse, the specialized language (the many references, for instance, to horrific diseases), and in the terrors of its imagery of hell's serpents, adders, and devils with whips and clubs.

By contrast, in the literary flytings that belong to this group, audacious yet measured humour combines with invective. Although these poetic quarrels derive from the noisy defamatory street quarrel for which fines and more severe punishments were imposed in Scotland, in the literary form the abuse is not improvised but calculated, drawing on classical Latin and contemporary English examples (the *Eclogue* of Theodulus; John Skelton's *Against Garnesche*) and also, possibly, Gaelic satirical tradition. Representative of the genre is *The Flyting of Dunbar and Kennedie* (Bawcutt 1998: 200–221), in which, in two exchanges each, the poets, both educated clerics, hurl scorn and insults, their topics (at some points applied with painful particularity) the traditional ethnic and cultural rivalries—Lowlander versus Highlander ('Ane Lawland erse wald mak a bettir noyis [A Lowland arse would make a bettir sound]', Dunbar tells Highland-born Kennedy); Scots against Gaelic; family name and honour. Above all, these poets attempt to outdo each other in artistry, the insults imaginatively malicious: 'I perambalit of Pernaso [Parnassus]' and have drunk from the 'fontayne' (of Hippocrene), says Kennedy, and you, Dunbar, having drunk from a pool made turbid by frog-spawn, have only 'termes glod [slippery or messy figures of speech]'. The eight-line stanzas are most adroitly varied in pattern and by alliteration ('Turk trumpour, traitour, tyran intemperate'), with the dense internal rhymes adding to the piston-like impact

of the poetic exchanges.

This brief overview of humorous early Scottish poetry reveals a dependence on literary tradition, but also a distinctive response to a particular time and culture. Over five hundred years later, it is not always easy to be sure of the intended tone of these works, but the verbal artistry and technical skill demonstrated in many of them are undeniable.

References

- Bawcutt, Priscilla, ed. (1998). *The Poems of William Dunbar*. 2 vols. Glasgow: Association for Scottish Literary Studies.
- Fisher, Keely. (1999). 'Comic Verse in Older Scots'. Unpublished D.Phil. thesis, University of Oxford.
- Fisher, Keely. (2005). 'Eldritch Comic Verse in Older Scots'. In *Older Scots Literature*, ed. Sally Mapstone. Edinburgh: John Donald, pp. 292–313.
- Fox, Denton, ed. (1981). *The Poems of Robert Henryson*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Gillies, William. (2005). 'Gunn ann ach an ceò: "Nothing left but their Mist": Farewell and Elegy in Gaelic Poetry', in Sally Mapstone (ed.), *Older Scots Literature*, Edinburgh: John Donald, pp. 370–396.
- Hadley Williams, Janet, ed. (2000). *Sir David Lyndsay. Selected Poems*. Glasgow: Association for Scottish Literary Studies.
- Hadley Williams, Janet. (2005). "'We had the ky and thai gat bot the glaikis": Catching the Echoes in *Duncan Laideus' Testament*', in Sally Mapstone (ed.), *Older Scots Literature*. Edinburgh: John Donald, pp. 346–69.
- Jones, G. F. (1951). 'The Tournaments of Tottenham and Lappenhause'. *Publications of the Modern Language Association* 66, 1123–1140.
- Lewis, C. S. 1954. *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century Excluding Drama*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- MacLaine, Allan H., ed. (1996). *The Christis Kirk Tradition: Scots Poems of Folk Festivity*. Glasgow: Association for Scottish Literary Studies.
- Thompson, Stith. (1955–58). *Motif Index of Folk-literature*. Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger.