

"I tuik ane quair -- Henryson as *Auctor*"

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Henryson at the beginning of *The Testament of Cresseid* states:

I tuik ane quair -- and left all uther sport --  
Writtin be worthie Chaucer glorious,  
Of fair Cresseid and worthie Troylus.  
(*The Testament* ll. 40-42)

Then, after reading Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* he takes 'ane-uther quair' in which he claims he finds an account of 'the fatal destenie/ Of fair Cresseid, that endit wretchitlie. (*The Testament* ll. 62- 63). This, then, is the supposed source of Henryson's account of what happened to Cresseid after Chaucer (and Diomeid) had left her. Some suggest that the "uther quair" was the exemplum in the third part of *The Spectakle of Lufe* found in the Asloan MS, but this account is far from the story that we get in Henryson and was probably written later.<sup>1</sup> Most critics, like Charles Elliott, simply state that this 'uther quhair' is devised to 'provide Henryson with a show of objectivity',<sup>2</sup> while others suggest that it is an example of lack of confidence in his own creative powers when taking on the major task of continuing a story by 'worthie Chauceir'. He then queries the 'truth' of both Chaucer's and the second author's work:

Quha wait gif all that Chauceir wrait was trew?  
Nor I wait nocht gif this narratioun  
Be authoreist, or fenyeit of the new  
Be sum poeit, throw his inventioun  
Maid to report the lamentatioun  
And wofull end of this lustie Creisseid,  
And quhat distres scho thoillit, and quhat deid. (lines 64 - 70)

The implication is that Creisseid was an historic character and Henryson's narrator queries the veracity of both Chaucer's narrative and that of this second 'narratioun' which shows her later distress and 'wofull end'. 'Fenyeit' need not have a negative connotation, but simply mean 'devised'. There is however a tension created in these

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<sup>1</sup>See *Robert Henryson: Poems*, ed. Charles Elliott (Oxford, 1963), p.148.

<sup>2</sup> Op.cit.

lines between the 'authoreist' text and the invention by 'sum poeit', suggesting that the latter is inferior or lacking 'truth'. It is important to appreciate a distance between Henryson and the 'man of age', cold in a frosty, 'doolie' season, fortified by a fire and spirits, who queries the veracity of the books he claims to read. We have in the first few stanzas a Chinese box effect of a character, Creisseid, created by a fictional character, the narrator, who gleans his information from a fictional book, based on the fiction of Chaucer -- all told by Henryson under the guise of authorised 'truth'. If nothing else, Henryson cleverly distances himself from any accusations of 'inventioun', just as the narrator sums up the final events by a distancing 'Sum said...' (l. 603).

Henryson, then assumes the role of the compiler of material, not the inventor; the simple narrator of what he heard or read elsewhere. This is the pose that most medieval writers adopted. Jean de Meun, the author of what might be called the greatest medieval work of fictional narrative opens with a typical *apologia*, stating that he simply compiles material he has found and if you doubt him, go to his source books to check. If there are any lies, then they are not his, but belong to his sources.<sup>3</sup> 'Je n'i faz riens fors reciter', 'I do nothing but recite/report', he states.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, 'worthie Chaucer glorious' constantly distances himself from his material and any accusations of originality by claiming that he read his material elsewhere, e.g., inventing a source called Lollius in his *Troilus*, by stating that he dreamt the story or by insisting that his fictional characters told him the tales, e.g. in *The General Prologue*:

For this ye knowen al so wel as I,  
 Whoso shal telle a tale after a man,  
 He moot reherce as ny as evere he kan  
 Al speke he never so rudeliche and large,  
 Or ellis he noot telle his tale untrewe,  
 Or feyne thyng, or fynde wordes newe....  
 My wit is short, ye may wel understonde. (General Prologue 730)

The narrator's job is to 'reherce' or repeat as closely as possible his source or he is being 'untrewe'. The danger is that he will otherwise 'feyne thyng, or fynde wordes newe' and such originality is to be avoided at all costs. The vernacular poet's function is to compile, possibly reorganise, the thoughts of others, preferably of authorised *auctores*. Such a

<sup>3</sup> See *Roman de la Rose* II, 15220-24.

<sup>4</sup> See A.J.Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship* Aldershot, 1988, pp. 197-98.

sentiment echoes Henryson at the beginning of *The Testament* when he relinquishes responsibilities, hoping that his source is not 'feneit of the new/ Be sum poeit, throw his inventioun' (lines 66-67). When it comes to unauthorised material, Chaucer hides behind the guise of objective transcriber of the words of others, such as when the foul-mouthed Miller tells his tale:

He nolde his wordes for no man forbere,  
 But tolde his cherles tale in his manere.  
 M'athynketh that I shal reherce it heere.....  
 ... demeth nat that I seye  
 Of yvel entente, but for I moot reherce  
 Hir tales alle, be they bettre or werse,  
 Or elles falsen som of my mateere.

Again, Chaucer uses the verb 'reherce', akin to Henryson's 'report', for his action as scribe of others' words. The alternative is to 'falsen', falsify' his material. The poet, even in the late Middle Ages, goes to great lengths to avoid any criticism of originality -- diametrically opposed to the aims of the modern writer who would otherwise be accused to plagiarism. Interestingly, Chaucer's real source for his *Troilus*, Boccaccio's *Il Filostrato*, is never mentioned, while he mentions an imaginary author, the hitherto untraced Lollius.<sup>5</sup>

So, according to Chaucer, all the writer must do is to recycle old material, or, as he puts it in *The Parliament of Fowlis*:

For out of olde felde, as men seyth,  
 Cometh al this newe corn from yer to yere,  
 And out of olde bokes, in good feyth,  
 Cometh al this newe science that men lere.  
 (*The Parliament of Fowlis* lines 22-25)

Just as new corn grows from the earlier seed, so also is new material taken from the works of the ancients. Once more the concept of 'good feyth' or 'truth' is introduced as a kind of escape clause. The modern author, then, will reproduce or translate the sentiment of his source as honestly as he can. In the *Prolog* to *The Morall Fabillis* Henryson gives the same explanation:

In lyke maner as throw the bustious eird,

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<sup>5</sup> See Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, Book I, lines 393-99.

Swa it be laubourit with grit diligence,  
 Springis the flouris and the corne abreird,  
 Hailsum and gude to mannis sustenance,  
 Sa dois spring ane moral sweit sentence  
 Oute of the subtell dyte of poetry,  
 To gude purposis qhua culd it weill apply. (*Prolog* lines 8-14)

Henryson admits in the *Prolog* that he is basing his poetry on 'feinyeit fabils of ald poetry' which are 'not al grunded upon truth' (lines 1-2), yet the results, 'the flouris and the corne abreird' (line 10) are wholesome and morally beneficial.

Are these declarations simply a case of the modesty topos? I believe that there is more behind this apparent show of objectivity and that it is not merely a mechanical renunciation of any claim to originality. If anything it is the opposite, as by drawing attention to the process of composition and by playing with these topoi, the author is confirming his originality and powers of creativity. There is a definite concern with the function of poetry and the changing perception of the poet in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Henryson, like Chaucer, toys with the modesty topos, and postures at being a mere channel through which earlier writers can be heard, but I doubt if he intends us to take this seriously.

The medieval theory of authorship provides us with clues as to attitudes to creative writing and helps explain the concern with sources and originality. The term *auctor* means much more than the modern concept of 'author'; indeed it is closer in sense to 'authority'. The *auctor* possessed sanctioned knowledge and considerable authority and was regarded as someone who bore full responsibility for what he had written. He is worthy of being believed, can be trusted to tell the truth, and is worthy of being imitated. Two other criteria are necessary: the *auctor* must have intrinsic worth and authenticity, and of course the supreme example was the sacred pages of the Bible,<sup>6</sup> while fiction was akin to lying. Fables, it was admitted, can hold *some* moral truth and ethical doctrine, such as those of Aesop.

Truth is implicit in *auctoritas* and found in the writings of the Bible or early commentators such as the patristic writers, and the classical authors whose works had been 'moralised' by medieval writers. The credit for the organisation and restructuring of the material -- the new corn from old fields -- according to Vincent of Beauvais, goes to the *compilator*, the compiler. A.J. Minnis quotes St Bonaventure's succinct

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<sup>6</sup> See Minnis, pp. 2-11. especially p. 10.

definitions: to copy a page is simply the work of a scribe; to convey the words of others is to compile; to add one's own exemplification of an authoritative text is to write a commentary, while to be worthy of the title of author one writes one's own material while using that of others to confirm it. As nothing that is not in Latin is of intrinsic worth, all the vernacular author can hope to do is to convey the essence of the meaning of authoritative texts to a lay audience – to be a midwife to the *sentence* 'meaning' and hence a *compiler*, reporting what others say.

There was also a perception that old was good and the best writers were the most ancient. Like canonisation, the title of *auctor* was only given after generations agreed to honour a work or author with this accolade. Walter Map in the late twelfth century apologises that he is still alive and will have to die before being a proper *auctor*.<sup>7</sup>

Even Henryson's 'worthie Chaucer glorious', 'the floure of rhetoris alle', as Dunbar describes him, is not considered an authority or *anauctor*, and Henryson questions his veracity: 'Quha wait gif all that Chauceir wrait was trew?'. The second book the narrator looks at in the *Testament* is anonymous and dubious -- 'fenyeit of the new/Be sum poeit, throw his inventioun'. All these words can have a pejorative meaning, such as 'feigned' (although it generally means 'invented') 'new' and 'invention', as they all suggest originality. In addition this second book which Henryson has picked up has no author or authoritative name and hence cannot be trusted.

The whole question of named authors is important in the Middle Ages, as the authors of all true works of authority, that is canonical texts, would be known. Indeed if they were anonymous and their worth recognised, then they would be ascribed to a famous author such as Aristotle, Boethius, Augustine, or Cato, to whom most proverbs were ascribed. If authorship were disputed, then the text would be called apocryphal and hold lesser esteem. But what of vernacular texts? There is not a single Old English poem to which we can ascribe with certainty the name of a poet, although the names of the authors of sermons are well known.<sup>8</sup> The major poetic works in Middle English are equally anonymous, e.g., *Sir Orfeo*, *The Owl and the Nightingale*, *Havelock the Dane*, *King Horn*, *Alliterative Morte D'Arthur*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Pearl*, *Purity* and *Patience*, the medieval Mystery Plays, etc. The fact that a few were unsigned and anonymous might be considered unfortunate, but that so many were so suggests that this was the practice. Why? These were not works of authority, sanctioned and written by *auctores*. They were compilations, new corn from old fields, the result of reading old books, dreaming or repeating stories heard.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., pp. 11-12

<sup>8</sup> Cynewulf and Caedmon are undoubtedly fictitious names.

Another feature of the authorised text was the fact they were in general heavily glossed and commented upon, as an un glossed Latin text was like an unreviewed book today -- no one thought it important or significant. All texts presented with an apparatus of glosses and commentary would be known as objects of scholarly value. The script chosen, whether cursive formata or secretary hand or a time-consuming textura script, the presence of illuminations, illustrations, coloured capitals, or use of gold, also reflected the status and prestige of the text.

Sometimes the gloss or commentary took on a life of its own and was circulated independent of its source text. There were glosses on glosses in a Chinese box fashion and in the manuscripts of scholastic texts the original text trickles through wide margins filled by glosses on glosses, all clearly laid out with lemmata to aid the reader. The collections of glosses such as the *Magna Glosatura* of Peter Lombard or the *Glossa ordinaria* provided the important patristic exegesis of the Middle Ages and these collections were given the status of authorised texts. Beryl Smalley stresses the vital importance of the glosses in teaching and exegesis; they formed 'an indispensable minimum for the teaching of the "sacra pagina"'.<sup>9</sup> The writings of the *auctores* formed the basis of the medieval educational system, that of scholasticism, whereby the accepted authors were memorised and manuscripts compiled to aid memory, for example in columns, or *pila* (hence *com-pilator*) with lemmata or signs indicating sources, fingers pointing to important texts, colours, rubric, and glosses both marginal and interlinear -- altogether a vast array of ingenious mechanical devices to guide the reader and help elucidate the *auctor*. The layout or *ordinatio* itself then had an interpretative function in the way the text is presented to the reader.<sup>10</sup> Of course the key is that we are dealing with *written* texts, as all these manuscript signs would be useless if the texts were read aloud. This suggests an important difference between the intended audiences of the works of authority and fiction, and the latter could not be privileged with glosses when a reading public was anticipated. For this reason it is significant that glosses begin in vernacular texts in the fourteenth century and in particular those of famous authors such as Boccaccio, Chaucer and Gower.

The narrator of vernacular fiction, then, cannot be an *auctor* in the original sense, i.e. holding authority, but a *compiler*, a middle man. Medieval writers frequently

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<sup>9</sup> Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1964, p. 66.

<sup>10</sup> See the article by M.B. Parkes, 'The Influence of the Concepts of *Ordination* and *Compilatio* on the Development of the Book', in *Medieval Learning and Literature: Essays presented to R.W. Hunt*, ed. J.J.G Alexander and M.T. Gibson. (Oxford, 1975), pp. 115-41.

quoted Seneca's metaphor of the *compiler* being like a bee, collecting honey from other sources and simply recycling it in cells. The old material is digested, hoarded and composition is a ruminative process, as Mary Carruthers in *The Book of Memory* points out.<sup>11</sup> The memory 'is not an alternative to creativity.. but the route to it.'<sup>12</sup> Composition starts in memorised reading; and this is often depicted as a reader of an old book or a listener to an old story which he recalls by retelling. The book's layout and ordering help the reader implant the information in his mind, as it is not expected that the reader owns the book and can refer to it whenever he wishes. The book simply supports memory.

Much of the above concerns Latin, scholastic texts, but what of the writer of vernacular literature? He was originally considered, as we saw above, a glossator of earlier authorities - a pygmy on the shoulders of giants at best reshuffling old ideas. Isidore of Seville says that a *compiler* 'mixes things said by others with his own words, as paint dealers pound together different mixes in a mortar.' A writer of fiction then is a plunderer, a borrower. Marie de France claims that the ancient authors wrote obscurely so that later writers might 'gloss' or interpret them. An example might be Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Prologue* which is a 'gloss' on a section of the *Roman de la Rose*, which is a 'gloss' on Jerome's *Contra Jovinianum* which in turn echoes St Paul's teaching. Similarly, to unravel Henryson's *Testament* we revert to Chaucer's *Troilus*, then Boccaccio's *Il Filostrato* and further back to the *Roman de Troie* by Benoît de Sainte-Maure, and so on.

However, a vernacular author who is perfectly aware that he is writing fiction of the highest quality has a dilemma and there appears to be a crisis in authorial identity in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, a crisis which is connected with nationalism and the growing prestige of vernacular languages in literature. With the growth of the literate populace after the Black Death, the social widening of education, as seen in the numbers of grammar, merchant and guild schools, the weakening of the Latin language and the strength of vernaculars around Europe, vernacular writers were growing in confidence and with their increased fame and power, they were usurping the privileges of the authoritative text. This can be seen in the layout of the manuscript page, for example in the use of marginal glosses. Boccaccio was one of the first to add glosses to his work and Chaucer's earliest manuscripts are liberally glossed, perhaps by Chaucer himself.<sup>13</sup> Author's names are now known; for example in England we have the names of poets such as Chaucer, Gower, Lydgate,

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<sup>11</sup> See Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory*, Cambridge, 1990, p. 192.

<sup>12</sup> Op cit.

<sup>13</sup> See my article 'The Significance of Marginal Glosses in the Earliest Manuscripts of *The Canterbury Tales*,' in *Chaucer and the Scriptural Tradition*, ed. D.L. Jeffrey, Ottawa, 1984.

Hoccleve and Usk. All this reflects the growing prestige of the vernacular text and in particular fiction.

Gower is an interesting case, for he claims in his Latin work, *Vox Clamantis*:

But I have not written as an authority [*ut auctor*] these verses in a book; rather, I am passing on what I heard for you to read. A swelling of my own head did not cause me to write these things, but the voice of the people put them in my ear.<sup>14</sup>

This appears typically medieval, and yet when he comes to write his vernacular collection of stories, *Confessio Amantis*, a work akin to *The canterbury Tales*, he does so without apology.

Henryson in the *Prolog* to *The Morall Fabillis*, as we saw above, states that, although his poetry, based on 'feinyeit fabils of ald poetre/Be not al grunded upon truth', yet it can be morally beneficial:

Of this authour, my maisteris, with your leif,  
 Submitting me in your correctioun,  
 In mother-toung of Latyng I wald preif  
 To mak ane maner of translatioun --  
 Nocht of myself, for vane presumptioun,  
 Bot be requeist and precept of ane lord,  
 Of quhome the name it neidis not record.  
 (*The Prolog* to *The Morall Fabillis*, lines 1-14 and 29-35)

He claims that he is just translating Aesop from Latin, not because he proudly thinks he would do it well, but because an anonymous patron has asked him to do so. There might well have been no patron, just as there was no 'ane-uther quair' in the *Testament*, but Henryson is again distancing himself from any personal claim to fame or originality. The *Prolog* continues in the same vein with apologies for his 'hamelie language', 'termis rude' and lack of eloquence and rhetoric. This claim to modesty sounds very like the mock apology that Chaucer's Franklin makes in his Prologue, a work that is ironically expressed in an elaborately rhetorical style. However, through the rhetoric of modesty, Henryson in the prologue is stressing the significance of vernacular translations of Latin authors, and the nature of literary authority; by doing so he is indirectly claiming for himself the status of *auctor*.

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<sup>14</sup> Quoted from Minnis, p. 185.

In the prologue to *The Tail of the Lyoun and the Mous*, the only fable with a Prologue and the only dream vision, the *makar*, Henryson, meets the *auctor*, Aesop, and they address each other as 'Father' and 'Son'. The *auctor* then becomes part of his fiction, and so he is no longer translating Aesop, Aesop is narrating directly via Henryson and this *is* new, albeit akin to Dante's use of Virgil as narrator in *The Divine Comedy*. Aesop initially is reluctant to tell 'ane fenyait taill' (line 1389) when 'haly preiching' falls on deaf ears, but Henryson persuades him to do so.

The dream vision genre also distances the author and helps avoid accusations of originality. The narrator has a dream, possibly book-inspired, then falls asleep while reading an *auctor* and the resulting poem is an interpretation of that authoritative work. A.C. Spearing in *Medieval Dream-Poetry* discusses reasons for the popularity of this genre in the Middle Ages, one of which is the ability that it gives the author of fiction to distance himself from criticism and also from the medieval concept of fiction being lies.<sup>15</sup> Hence Gower in *Vox Clamantis* claims to be under the influence of the author of the biblical book, Revelation. Henryson in *The Lyoun and the Mous* 'lenit down amang the flouris sweit,/ Syne cled my heid and closit baith my ene:/On sleip I fell...' (lines 1344-46) and dreams Aesop approaches him.

Similar distancing takes place in The Prologue to Book XIII of Douglas's *Eneados*, the beginning of Dunbar's *Goldyn Targe* and of course *The Kingis Quhair*. Dunbar goes one step further in *The Tretis of the Twa Mariit Wemen and the Wedo* by playing with the topos, and instead of starting in a rose garden in a May morning he pushes his narrator through a prickly hawthorn hedge ("through pikes of the plet thorne") on a midsummer evening when he does not fall asleep but stealthily eavesdrops on the women. Chaucer used a similar technique in *The Canterbury Tales* when he creates a narrator-pilgrim who listens in on other people's narratives and, against his will, is forced to 'reherce as ny as evere he kan'.

Both Henryson and Chaucer stress the moral and ethical strengths of their 'feinyait fables'. They constantly remind us of this function in terms of fruit and chaff or 'the flouris and the corne'. Fiction can be 'sueit and delectabil' and 'plesand to the ear', but may also contain 'prudence and moralitie', 'hailsome to mannis sustenance', reaching those who turn a deaf ear on sermons (*The Lyoun and the Mous*, lines 1391-1396).

Chaucer and Henryson, more than Gower, revel in their 'marginal' status. They use the commonplace distancing topos, but are sure of their originality and literary strengths. Chaucer may well portray himself as just a fellow pilgrim on the margins

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<sup>15</sup> A.C. Spearing, *Medieval Dream-Poetry* (Cambridge, 1976).

of the pilgrimage commenting on what others say and Henryson may create an old, cold, lonely narrator in his *Testament* who simply retells a story he has read elsewhere, but I believe that both are very confident authors, playing with conventions and sure of their status as *auctor*.

Chaucer, like Boccaccio and Gower, supply the commentary, the all-important glosses, to their manuscripts, which gives the works and themselves the same prestige and institutional status as accepted authorities. Although we do not have such external, codicological proof of status for Henryson, as we do not have his original manuscripts, there is sufficient internal evidence to demonstrate his self-awareness as an original *auctor*, in spite of the self-conscious side-ways glances of the medieval writer. He used scholastic conventions; for example in *Orpheus and Erudices* he based the *moralitas* on the popular Latin commentary on Boethius's *De consolatione philosophiae* by Nicholas Trivet and the section on music of the spheres on Boethius's *De musica*. It was extremely imaginative of Henryson to have Aesop come to him and oblige him with a Tale. This elevates Henryson's position and authority and puts him on the same footing as this great *auctor*, akin to Gower being approached by St John the Divine. The medieval modesty topoi, then, could be manipulated to demonstrate originality and to show that vernacular poet was no longer a liar or compiler of other men's material but could be of as high a status as the accepted *auctores*.