

A. J. Aitken

A sixteenth century Scottish devotional anthology (Review) (1957)¹

Edited by Caroline Macafee, 2015

Editor's note: this early review illustrates AJA's long-standing interest in Older Scots stylistics. There is a full treatment of verse stylistics in 'The language of Older Scots poetry' (Aitken, 1983, 2015), but he did not gather together his observations on prose in the same way. As well as the present paper, he wrote on prose in 'Oral narrative style in Middle Scots' (1978, 2015). He had intended to say more on the subject in 'Variation and variety in written Middle Scots' (1971, 2015); the present edition of that paper includes some of his rough notes as an Addendum.

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[¹⁴⁷] Manuscript Arundel 285, the more important of the two British Museum manuscripts now made available by the Scottish Text Society, is a sixteenth century manual of Catholic prayers and devotions in vernacular Scots.² Its nature has so far been known, one supposes, only to the editors who drew upon it for those of its verse contents which have already been printed in editions of Dunbar and of Walter Kennedy and in Carleton Brown's *Religious Lyrics of the Fifteenth Century* (1939). The Arundel MS contains also a rather inferior text of the *Contemplacioun of Synnaris*, a verbose series of religious meditations for each day of the week by one 'frer William of Touris', which, in a text closer to the author's original, forms the sole content of Harleian MS 6919, the other manuscript printed in this edition. Besides these the volume contains a number of other pieces of Scottish [¹⁴⁸] verse, hitherto unprinted, mostly in the old-fashioned octosyllabic style, and also several poems of English origin.

If some of the verse contents of the Arundel MS were already accessible, this will be for most of us our first acquaintance with an important collection of Older Scottish prose of an unusually high over-all standard of literary competence. Some of these prose devotions and prayers may well be original compositions in Scots. But the majority are translated works, most of them from Latin, but also a small handful adapted from English originals. The Latin and English sources and analogues appear in many late medieval English and Continental devotional collections, including many of the printed hour-books and primers, as is shown in detail by Dr Bennett in a valuable section of his Introduction. Here, it may be, we are brought for the first time face to face with those "matin bukis of the use of Salusbery" such as the

¹ [¹] *Devotional Pieces in Verse and Prose*, ed. J. A. W. Bennett, MA DPhil. Pp. xxxviii, 349. (Edinburgh: Scottish Text Society, 1955).

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The text has been edited for uniformity of style with other Aitken papers and some bibliographical references have been expanded or added. The original page and note numbers are shown in square brackets. 'Scots' has been substituted for 'Scottish' with reference to the language, and quotation marks have been removed from some technical terms.

² [²] Other versions occur in the Asloan MS and in a print of 1499 of Wynkyn de Worde.

rivals of Walter Chepman were importing in 1510, and which, despite the Lords' prohibition, were doubtless imported before and since.³

On linguistic grounds (the scribe's preference for the late form *fathir*, the occurrence, in native prose, of the anglicised forms *quhom*, *most*, *so*, *onlie*, with, conversely, the consistent use of *nocht* rather than *not*, and other similar tests of spelling and usage) the compilation of the Arundel MS might be placed c. 1540–60, which supports a similar dating proposed by Dr Bennett on other grounds. An examination of the text, with the help of the compact but most useful selection of variant readings which constitute most of the Notes to this edition, suggests also that many of these pieces had passed through more than one scribal recension before reaching the extant Arundel version. No doubt this Arundel MS is the lucky survivor of a once considerable body of manuscript copies of similar vernacular devotional pieces circulating in Scotland in the first half of the sixteenth century.

In one respect, that of subject-matter, the collection is very homogeneous and as a result there is a good deal of even verbal repetition from one piece to another. The longer of the two main sections has the Passion and the details of Christ's suffering as its strongly predominant theme and the shorter concluding section consists exclusively of devotions and prayers to the Virgin. The only extraneous pieces are a few prayers for special purposes such as before confession or the sacrament and to the proper Angel, which would naturally add to the usefulness of the collection as a general devotional guide. Within each of the larger sections the verse pieces, longer devotions in prose, and shorter prayers mostly in prose, are grouped together. On the other hand, the separate items quite obviously vary widely in such respects as authorship, date of composition or translation, literary competence of the various authors, fidelity of translation, level of literary style used (as between, say, the ornate and Latinate or the ^[149] more vernacular style), and textual accuracy. It follows, as Dr Bennett says, that the contents of the manuscript have been assembled from a number of sources, perhaps including earlier compilations of a similar kind.

The most ancient piece of Scottish verse in the collection – and the oldest vernacular Scottish devotional piece in existence – is the rather uninspired rendering into occasionally erratic octosyllabic couplets of the 'XV Oes', a popular series of Latin prayers which occurs regularly in books of Hours and in less formal private devotional books, such as this one, throughout the later Middle Ages. The text of this piece calls for frequent minor emendation to restore what must have been the original readings. Among the rhymes the following point to an early date:

dres : *fresche* (i.e. *fres*),
blud : *zeid* (read *zude*),
 and *heid* : *levit* (apparently *hevid*⁴ : *levid*).

³ Editor's note: cf.:

January 14, 1509 Anent the complaint maid be Walter Chepman, that quhar he, at the desyre of our souerane lord, furnist and brocht hame ane prent and prentaris, for prenting of croniclis, missalis, portuuss, and utheris bukis within this realme, and to seclude Salisberys use: And to that effect thair wes lettres under our said souerane lordis priue sele direct, till command and chargeoure souerane lordis liegis, that nain of thaim suld Inbring or sell ony bukis of the said use of salusbery under the pane of escheting of the samyn: Neuirtheless, Wilyam Frost, Francis Frost, William Sym, Andro Ross, and diuers utheris, merchandis within the burgh of Edinburgh, hes brocht haim, and sellis daly, diuers bukis of the said use sik as mess bukis, mannualis, portuiss, matin bukis, and diuers other bukis, in the dissobeing of the said command and lettres ...

(quoted by Dickson, 1890: 84)

⁴[1] Superseded by *hede*, *heid* c. 1440. This particular rhyme occurs several times in *early* poems, e.g. *Sc. Saints Legends* I, 719, *lewyt* : *hed*; *ibid.*, xxv, 165, *lewyt* : *hevyd*.

The words *ay-lestandly*, *braith* and *tholmudlie* seem to be obsolete during or soon after the fifteenth century. The usage of relative pronouns (*that* chiefly, *the quhilk* twice, *quhilk* once) agrees with early practice. Perhaps most suggestive of all is the fact that in the 377 lines of this work, rhymes of fourteenth century Scots *ā* and *ai* seem to be avoided⁵ and *-y*, *-ly* does not rhyme with *-ē*, although separate rhymes of all four of these occur frequently. In fact the language of the piece agrees pretty well with that of Wyntoun, and in the licences taken with word-order and the rather excessive use of tags and expletive phrases, with early octosyllabic verse generally. In this instance at least, and I think possibly in some others also, Dr Bennett has been too hasty in assuming that none of the Scottish contents of the manuscript is older than the late fifteenth century.

No doubt the most important find of the collection, however, is a remarkably vivid and therefore harrowing realisation of the scenes of the Passion entitled ‘Ane Dewoit Exercicioun ... in the honour of the Croune of Thorne’ in rhythmical and in places alliterative prose. This work should be in any future anthology of Scottish prose. Its author is evidently a ‘rhetorician’ who attends carefully to the structural patterns of his sentences and periods, and who is much addicted to the favourite contemporary artifice of accumulating synonyms in groups or in balanced pairs. For all that, his language is unusually vernacular in construction, word-order and word-choice and as free from aureate or Latinate elements in any of these respects as any Middle Scots prose could be. Examples like “with oppin handis and lukin newis”, “that all man suld se and know ^[150] that maist schamfull and wile ded that ze suld de”, and “maid lik the face of ane lipper man” are typical of the stylistic tone of the piece. The author’s perfect command of language and prose rhythm and the completely idiomatic ‘feel’ of the whole work (except in a few sentences of quoted speech) strongly suggest that this is an original composition in Scots.

The critical apparatus to this edition supplies, thoroughly and lucidly, all the essentials (palaeographic description, including an interesting account of the illustrations of the two manuscripts, notes on sources and analogues, textual notes, variant readings), but dispenses with unnecessary trimmings like philological or textual analysis or a glossary. Even so, there is rather more here than the Scottish Text Society editors of the other Older Scots manuscript anthologies provided. Dr Bennett has further departed from precedent in giving an emended and punctuated and not a diplomatic or ultra-conservative text. And indeed most readers will be grateful for his occasional help with the rather garbled Arundel text, even if he seems now and again to tinker unnecessarily.⁶ Unfortunately a very few errors in transcribing or proof-reading are still to be seen uncorrected in the text: *gaugrellis* 110/552, *tawill* 229/460 (for *cawill*); and one wonders about *hicht* 245/196, where *sicht* would read more naturally (the Latin reading of the original, which would have settled this, happens in this instance not to be given), *heildit* 331/270 (? read *zeildit*) and *how* 39/988 (where *zow* is required). There also remain rather many mistakes, mostly of cross-reference, in the Introduction, footnotes and Notes.⁷ But these are minor blemishes on what is, in the main, a most satisfactory edition. The seven reproductions of manuscript illustrations are a pleasing and valuable feature of the book, but it is disappointing that facsimiles showing the handwritings of the manuscripts could not be provided also.

⁵ [2] Two apparent exceptions are *said* : *maid* (ll. 18–19) (but a case can be made for this as a pure *ai* rhyme) and *gaif* : *ressaue* (20–21): on these see Girvan ed. (1939: lix), where there is a discussion of criteria of this kind.

⁶ [1] Occasionally even erroneously: at 197/99 the form *If*, introduced by way of emendation, would be unique for this text, which regularly has the normal *gif*: the true reading doubtless follows the wording and punctuation of the source-work quoted in the Notes. It would also destroy the point to alter *well vntemabill* (i.e. inexhaustible) to *vntellabill* (281/96).

⁷ [2] For the alleged corruption at f. 154 v (p. ii), ? read 145r, 155r, or 186v. P. iv supplies an oddly garbled quotation from one of the poems here printed, plus an inaccurate line-reference (read 459 and 461, not 464). Other trifling but irritating slips of this kind occur sporadically.

With this book Dr Bennett and the Scottish Text Society have brought to light the only important Older Scottish anthology hitherto unedited, one, incidentally, of unique importance among the sparse remains of devotional literature from pre-Reformation Scotland. The historians of Scottish literature must now supply an additional chapter to take account of its remarkable prose contents.

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