

## Robert Henryson Presentation Outline

- I. Pass Out Timeline
  - A. I had more fun with this one and included things I just thought were interesting like 1467 and 1495.
  - B. Once again we can see the political upheaval in the 15<sup>th</sup> century in general.
    - 1. Conflict in England created social and economic uncertainty.
    - 2. Church was struggling with internal corruption and government's attempts to take over.
    - 3. Country changing from agricultural to mercantile.
      - a. Economic prosperity made corruption commonplace and a "show" of piety.
  - C. Kings of Scotland are being murdered or killed in 1437, 1460, and 1488. (James II killed in ordnance accident?)
    - 1. Two kings James II and James IV, came into power as minors.
    - 2. As we know the previous system was based on kinship Because barons objected to the centralized power.
- II. We don't know much about Henryson's life.
  - A. He is believed to have been a grammar school master at Dunfermline's Benedictine abbey.
  - B. He was also probably a notary public with legal training.
    - 1. Both of these would explain both his use of Fables (often used in grammar school teaching) and the legal content of them
  - C. He most certainly took an M. A. degree from somewhere; however, scholars disagree as to where. The most popular choices are either from a Scottish university or from an Italian one, perhaps Bologna.
    - 1. This too is interesting because of the humanist quality of Henryson's work. Especially the *Fables* and *The Testament of Cressaid*.
      - a. Fortune is not to blame for life's problems but we ourselves
- III. The Testament of Cressaid (after fables, writing mature)
  - A. No manuscript.
    - 1. We rely on a printed edition from 1593 for this work
  - B. A sequel to Chaucer's Troilus and Criseyde (1382-1386).
    - 1. Not necessarily an attempt to imitate
    - 2. Narrator acknowledges limitations to Chaucer's ending. Which makes Criseyde innocent in the cause of her own misfortunes.
  - C. In it humanity is depicted a vulnerable and victims of both the powerful and of its own lack of prudence.
  - D. Cressaid is rejected by Diomedes and is isolated.
    - 1. In fear for her loss of beauty and male companionship. She blasphemes the gods, esp. Venus and Cupid.
    - 2. She is stricken with leprosy (then thought to be a venereal disease) and goes to a leper camp to whine about life.

3. Troilus later finds her, recognizes her, and showers her with gold.
  4. She sees his generosity and constancy and repents her earlier actions.
  5. During this Cresseid changes her mindset about the cause of her own tragedy: from divine betrayal, to fortune's process, to her own character flaws.
  6. She dies thinking about Troilus' tokens of true love being in the hands of Diomedes.
- IV. Orpheus and Eurydice (before fables)
- A. A combination of mythological fable, romance, and moralitas, this story traces the life of King Orpheus.
  - B. It is different from the Middle English romance Sir Orfeo in that the story ends with Orpheus's loss of his wife because his love prompted the forbidden backward glance.
  - C. The most striking part of it is the 218 line moralitas in couplets (the rest of the poem is in rhyme royal).
    1. In it Orpheus is described as the intellectual power of the soul and Eurydice as the appetite.
    2. Their marriage is, therefore, a combination of the two.
- V. Moral Fables (political comments suggest written in 1480s)
- A. Unlike Lydgate and Hoccleve, there is no indication that Henryson is connected in anyway to those who were in power in Scotland.
    1. This may account for the overt political descent found in the fables.
      - a. Most often they are warnings about or to those who are rich, powerful, and cruel to the lower classes.
    2. Written for an audience concerned with the disintegration of communal life.
  - B. Fable form allowed reader/writer to ignore possibility of literal interpretation
    1. Representative
      - a. bestial traits in humans
      - b. human traits in bestial
    2. Figural
      - a. Beast signify us
    3. Symbolic
      - a. Behavioral *types* could comment on human "condition"
  - C. Fables in England
    1. In England, may be as old as St. Augustine.
    2. Bayeux tapestry depicts the tales of the Wolf and the lamb and the Swallow.
  - D. Henryson's fable different than previous
    1. Extends the length of the fables and morales
    2. Developed stock characters that could be drawn upon
    3. Moral issues are more complex

4. Structure
- E. Fables are both humorous and serious.
  1. Humor from the actions of the animals
  2. Seriousness is indicated in the Prologue.
    - a. Henryson justifies writing frivolous verse and warns the reader to look deeply.
    - b. 15<sup>th</sup> century readers considered fables serious works.
    - c. The first tale “The Cock and the Jasp” is also a warning to not take the fables at face value.
    - d. Henryson writes in Rhyme Royal, a scheme for high works.
      - a. Not just and imitation of Chaucer.
- F. Characters call upon reason and prudence
  1. Prudence is used often in Henryson
    - a. Prudence is “the ability to discern the most suitable, politic, or effective course of action”
    - b. For example in “The Cock and the Jasp,” the cock cannot see the value of the Jasper because it cannot see beyond materiality.
- G. Lion and the Mouse
  1. Important
    - a. Contains a separate prologue
    - b. Told by Aesop
    - c. Utopian dream vision. Only be told in dream
  2. Henryson falls asleep and dreams that Aesop comes to him
  3. Aesop tells him the story.
    - a. Mice frolic on sleeping lion and one is caught.
    - b. Mouse tells him that if it is set free it might be able to help the lion some day.
    - c. The lion grants mercy.
    - d. Later when the lion is caught in a net, the mice all come and chew him free.
  4. Themes
    - a. Lion, powerful, shows prudence toward the mouse, commoner, when it shows mercy.
    - b. Utopian Dream vision. Important that can only be shown in a dream.
    - c. It is noteworthy that Aesop says that it is pointless to tell fiction to teach when people don’t listen to the preachers.
    - d. There is no call for divine intervention like in the Sheep and the Dog, however we can still survive if we use prudence.