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## STRUCTURAL SYMMETRY IN HENRYSON'S "THE PREICHING OF THE SWALLOW"

Sandra Whipple Spanier

The rich narrative art of Robert Henryson's late fifteenth-century *Morall Fabillis of Esope the Phrygian* has earned general recognition and appreciation, but modern readers have sensed in a number of cases a discrepancy in effect between the vital, sensitive humanity of a fable's narrative line and the detached didacticism of the *moralitas* immediately following it. Some have been troubled by it and have concluded that Henryson's moral simply does not always fit his story, that his material has somehow gotten out of hand.<sup>1</sup> Others argue that Henryson knew exactly what he was doing. They feel the fables manifest a subtle and complex integration of both his human sensibilities and his firm moral judgment which is a tribute to his genius.<sup>2</sup> "The Preiching of the Swallow" is an

<sup>1</sup> "It seems almost as if the poet has allowed his own colourful fable to run away with him, and is now returning to his duty," says Kurt Wittig of a particular *moralitas*. He cites two others as "a certain exception in their close integration with the tale." See Kurt Wittig, *The Scottish Tradition in Literature* (Edinburgh and London: Oliver and Boyd, 1958), p. 40. James Kinsley calls Henryson's moral applications "often too ingenious for modern taste." See James Kinsley, *Scottish Poetry: A Critical Survey* (London: Cassell and Company, Ltd., 1955), p. 18.

<sup>2</sup> Two particularly valuable discussions of Henryson's skill in binding together the variegated tones and subject matters in his fables are Denton Fox, "Henryson's Fables," *ELH* 29 (1962):337-56; and Harold E. Tolliver, "Robert Henryson: From *Moralitas* to Irony," *English Studies* 46 (1965):300-09. Tolliver, considering the unity of several fables and *The Testament of Cresseid*, claims that "moral judgment and a sense of human worth reinforce each other in Henryson's better poems; they fuse into one complex attitude rather than standing separate, like images in a malfocused stereoscope" (p. 300). Fox, whose article includes one of the very few detailed examinations of "The Preiching of the Swallow," also feels we are left with "a single whole" in this fable and remarks, "Henryson's triumph, I would suggest, is that he

exemplary case of both this apparent conflict of tones and, I believe, its subtle resolution.<sup>3</sup> In the course of the fable, the attitude presented toward nature seems to change drastically. The prologue's rich depiction of nature's abundance as the manifestation of God's goodness and wisdom seems contradicted by the depiction in the *moralitas*, in which the natural cycle of sowing and reaping becomes an allegory of damnation. The reader finds himself wondering if this is a "schizoid" tale with two conflicting messages or if some underlying structure binds it into an organic whole. I find two important binding elements.

One is the motif of the four seasons. As we pass three times through the cycle of the seasons, our vantage point shifts from the heavens to the earth to the underworld. Henryson leads us from the prologue's opulent tapestry of the seasons, complete with an array of gods and goddesses (ll. 1622-1712), through a more concrete, earthly view in the body of the fable (ll. 1713-1887) to the dark view of the cycle from the underside presented in the *moralitas*. The movement is a downward spiral.

Another unifying element is point of view. To present these different perspectives on nature, Henryson employs two distinct narrative voices, each well-suited to speaking from its particular vantage point. The "authoritative voice," as I will call it, speaks of the earth from the remote regions of heaven and hell in the prologue and the *moralitas*, respectively. The voice is impersonal, learned, philosophical, and theological—often speaking in abstractions and capable of transcending time and space. Most of the fable proper, which takes place on solid earth—what is called in *Piers Plowman* "the field of folk"—is narrated by a very human rustic wanderer, whose descriptions and perceptions are concrete and earthbound.<sup>4</sup> He is precise about the time of day that he journeys out and about the fact that he carries a walking stick.

The prologue and the *moralitas* present opposing views of the cycle of the seasons. The prologue takes a cosmic overview of all creation, from "The firmament payntit with sternis cleir" (l. 1657) to the fishes in the sea. Although the authoritative voice, citing Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, warns us of the limitations of our human understanding, it reassures us,

Yit nevertheles we may haif knowlegeing  
Off God Almychtie be His creatouris

manages to fit all these contrasting ingredients together into a perfectly organized world, and to establish the ontological superiority of God without denying the reality of ordinary experience" (p. 355).

<sup>3</sup> The line numbers in this essay refer to "The Preiching of the Swallow," in *Robert Henryson: Poems*, edited by Charles Elliott, 2nd. ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), pp. 49-58.

<sup>4</sup> The resemblance between aspects of this fable and the landscape of *Piers Plowman* is noted by John MacQueen, *Robert Henryson: A Study of the Major Narrative Poems* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), pp. 153-63.

That he is gude, fair, wyis and bening. (ll. 1650-52)

We are told that all creatures, the times of day, and "ilk seasoun" were created "for the behufe/ Off man" (ll. 1671-72). The glories of each season give evidence of God's abundance and benevolence. Only winter, with its "wickit windis," is unkind.

The treatment of nature is metaphorical in the *moralitas*, too. The authoritative voice, now citing Aesop, again intends to use the cycle of the seasons to provide "gude morall edificatioun" (l. 1893), but here the depiction is hellish, rather than celestial. In the *moralitas*, the devil sows wicked thoughts which sprout into deadly sin, and "carnall lust grouis full grene and gay" (l. 1907). This scene of terrible fecundity is a striking perversion of the prologue's lovely picture of "The somer with his jolie mantill off grene./ With flouris fair furrit on everilk fent" (ll. 1678-79). The harvest, too, is different here. Instead of the filled barns of Ceres, the wine casks of Bacchus, and the horns of plenty of Copia Temporis that decorate the prologue's autumn scenery, we see in the *moralitas* Lucifer bagging a fat lot of damned souls to be "brocht to hell and hangit be the crag" (l. 1936). Instead of inviting us to rejoice in the abundance of God's creation, the authoritative voice now warns, "Best is bewar in maist prosperitie:/ For in this warld thair is na thing lestand" (ll. 1939-40).

It is in the middle section, the fable proper, that the two opposing views of nature come together to make the piece a symmetrical whole. The structure of the work as a whole dramatizes the medieval belief that God's glory is manifest in all creation but that evil is also at work in the world. The depiction of the seasonal cycle in the middle section embodies that duality.

When the year has come full circle at the end of the prologue, the authoritative voice fades away, and the rural wanderer steps into the spring landscape. Glad that winter is finally over, he is out for a morning walk. He takes great pleasure in hearing the birds sing, in surveying "the soill that wes richt sessonabill./ Sappie and to resave all seidis abill" (ll. 1718-19), and in watching the laborers prepare the fields. He says: "It wes grit joy to him that luifit corne/ To se thame laubour baith at evin and morne" (ll. 1725-26). As the wanderer rests on the bank, a flock of birds appears, and the swallow warns them of the sower's dark purpose—eventually to trap the birds with nets made of the flax he now is planting. After the scornful flock departs, the wanderer tells us:

Upon the land quhair I wes left alone  
I tuke my club and hamewart couth I carie,  
Swa ferliand as I had sene ane farie. (ll. 1773-75).

June passes and it is summer when we next see the rustic going forth "betuix midday and morne" (l. 1780). In contrast to the prologue's

ethereal depiction of summer, featuring Phebus and Flora Goddess, this description is concrete and the vantage point at ground level:

And seidis that wer sawin off beforene  
 Wer growin hie, that hairis mycht thame hyde,  
 And als the quailye craikand in the corne. (ll. 1777-79)

The birds reappear, the swallow again warns that they will end up spread-eagled on the churl's skewer if they do not strip the flax from the ripening plants, the heedless birds fly off, and the prosaic narrator, presumably hungry for lunch, tells us, "I tuke my staff quhen this wes said and done./ And walkit hame, for it drew neir the none" (ll. 1823-24).

The rustic wanderer does not reappear with his walking stick to narrate the third appearance of the swallow, though, or to give his account of the next two seasons. Instead, Henryson backs off from the scene at this point and again employs the impersonal authoritative voice. Unlike the rustic's joyful depictions of spring and summer, the account of autumn is neutral and objective, an economical, one-stanza summary of the harvesting of the flax and the weaving of the nets. It is also the authoritative voice which describes in fearsome detail the coming of winter, with its "wickit wind" again, and the capture and slaughter of the birds (briefly interrupted by an editorial stanza on the attributes of a "grit fule"). It is only in the last line of the fable proper that the rustic wanderer, who before had so minutely documented the circumstances of each encounter with the swallow, oddly reappears from nowhere, it seems, to remark, "Scho tuke hir flicht, bot I hir saw no moir" (l. 1887).

One wonders if Henryson has been forgetful and let the point of view get out of control: Why should the rustic narrate the spring and summer sections of the fable but disappear for the fall and winter, only to pop up again in the final line? I believe that the shift in point of view is intentional and structurally significant. In the prologue we are warned that man's understanding, like the vision of a bat, is limited. The human narrator, who revels in joy to see the sowers at work and who is as amazed after hearing the swallow's wise warning as if he had seen fairies, is like the birds who look forward to the ripening of the flax so that their young can eat the linseeds. Both the man and the birds are naive and do not perceive the evil possibilities inherent in the cycle of sowing and reaping. It is necessary for the clearer-eyed authoritative narrator to take over and balance the rustic's ingenuous account of spring and summer with his blacker report of the fall and winter, just as good and evil coexist and balance each other in the world. Thus the middle section, which takes place on firm earth, incorporates both the prologue's celestial depiction of nature and the dark depiction of the *moralitas*, both the limited, human point of view of the rustic and the omniscience of the authoritative voice. The symmetrical structure of "The Preiching of the Swallow" symbolizes the medieval view

of the world itself as a field bounded on either side by heaven and hell and influenced by both, and the view of man as a creature with both carnal limitations and divine possibilities. Perhaps the rustic narrator pipes up behind the authoritative voice in the last line of the fable not only to remind us that we are still in his realm, the field of folk, but also to indicate that he has seen clearly, for the first time, with his human vision, the duality of his world.

**Sandra Whipple Spanier** received her B.A. in English in 1972 from the University of Illinois at Chicago Circle and her M.A. in 1976 from Pennsylvania State University, where she is currently a doctoral candidate with a special interest in American literature. She was awarded an Edwin Erle Sparks Fellowship in 1977, and is now writing a dissertation about Kay Boyle under the direction of Professor Philip Young.