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Shared Suffering: Death, Devotion and National Identity in Medieval Scottish Literature

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'The catharsis offered by this sort of comedy and revelry has at its base the human fear of death' (McKenna)

Violence surrounding death becomes a vehicle for making an individual experience collective in *In a Thestri Stude Y Stod* (*Thestri*), Blind Hary's *The Wallace* and William Dunbar's *Fasternis Evin in Hell* (*Fasternis*). Although inflicting violence upon bodies, dead or alive, stirs different emotions in the texts, a similar end is achieved in reminding a medieval reader of their wider communities. *Thestri* predominantly evokes anxiety surrounding death and *Fasternis*, whilst having undertones of these apprehensions, encourages laughter. Unlike the others, *The Wallace* is concerned with the living and the numerous violent deaths described fuel anger towards the English and pride in the Scottish nation. This essay shall explore how these emotions draw back to the religious and social communities of a medieval reader, making the individual experiences collective.

It is important here to recognise the intertwinement of religious and social communities in the late medieval period to foster an understanding of social cohesion. Elizabeth Elliot highlights, 'Cultural patterns prominent in late-medieval Scotland…promot[ed] an interdependent construal of self' (88), looking at breastfeeding and living conditions to support her argument. Religion, too, was interwoven into the fabric of society, influencing local education and relationships alongside national policy. Although in the 16th century, the signing of the National Covenant demonstrates the extent to which religion was part of Scottish identity – a legacy maintained today with the reigning monarch swearing to uphold Scotland's independence of religion. It is thus difficult to divorce social communities and religious ones; both social class (looked at in reference to *Thestri* and *Fasternis*) and national identity are heavily influenced by religious thought.

Both *Thestri* and *Fasternis* are informed by a religious anxiety about the universal fate that awaits Christians after death, although this is far more pronounced in *Thestri* than *Fasternis*. Both Body and Soul are engrossed by their individual concerns and the varying violence both anticipate. This violence is a textual manifestation of the emotions encouraged

in a reader. The slow, passive degradation of the Body's corporeal form is initially focused upon as the Soul asserts 'Wromes hulen ete thy Fleyshe' (*Thestri*, 32), a fact lamented by the Body: 'Wormes shule ete myn herte, ant my white syde / Stynken worse then any hound' (*Thestri* 35-6). The Body is consumed by his own fate. He expands on the Soul's generalised 'Fleyshe', pinpointing specific biological structures he will lose: his 'herte' and his 'white syde'. A psychological violence exists alongside the physical – not only does the Body have no escape from this slow, persistent rotting,he is also aware of its inevitability and, in a sense, is feeling these sensations twice. The Soul, too, anticipates its eternal suffering. He entreats, 'Jesu, Vader, ant Holy Gost, shild me from helle shoures!' (*Thestri* 40) before he is cast to Hell. A religious community informs the dread of the fate awaiting the Soul: temporary pain in Purgatory if not eternal in Hell. Despite formerly being unified as one being, both Body and Soul are now strikingly self-concerned entities, reinforced by their uses of personal possessives 'myn' and 'me'. Individual experiences of death are reinforced by Abe Davies, who notes the progression of the body-soul debate, 'body and soul argue[d] from within their troubled union rather than across the space opened up by its dissolution' (233). In recognising the variations from the standard form, the prominence of their individuality is underlined. Body and Soul are not only separated by ideological distance but also a physical one in their argument post-dissolution, heightening the anxiety elicited through the text. As a result of two individual beings each detailing their own emotions, a reader experiences the same fear twice over The persistent violence the Body anticipates mimics the anxiety encouraged in a reader, as the Body's self-pitying is a collective concern brought into the spotlight.

The eschatological understanding in late medieval Christianity was universal, something further stressed when considering the Soul's retelling of Doomsday. The violence inflicted upon the living is extreme. Visceral imagery of 'blod a red deu' (*Thestri* 53), 'grene tren shule blede' (*Thestri* 55)and 'fur brenne al that hire forestond' (*Thestri* 57) is striking,

distorting not only humanity but nature. Ashby Kinch stresses that the 'disfigurement of human identity in death' served as 'a rhetorical means to jolt the living subject into a deeper spiritual awareness' (7). Violent images were understood to be more memorable than abstract accounts, ensuring a medieval reader would not forget the horrors awaiting both corporeal and spiritual forms. Even if they were not 'jolted' into deeper spiritual awareness by both the tangible image of the rotting Body and with the destruction wreaked upon humanity, they were certainly reminded of their religious community and the society surrounding them. *Thestri* is in part a warning against the individual materiality that consumed the Body in life, resulting in the condemnation of the Soul, encouraging anxiety and a desire to follow Christianity's doctrines.

Although anxiety informed by religion is present in *Fasternis*, the primary emotion evoked is laughter. Dunbar's text is a satire, necessitating an assumed religious community to induce the humour present. The narrator's individual experience is immediately translated into a collective one through the common laughter evoked. This is furthered when considering the narrator 'lay in till a trance' (Dunbar 3), both distancing the events from reality (allowing a reader to laugh at the pain rather than be immediately horrified at its implications) alongside removing accountability for Dunbar. *Fasternis* utilises the same religiously informed pain to *Thestri* to evoke radically different emotions. While the fire in *Thestri* 'shal…brenne al that hire forestond' (*Thestri* 57), an image inspiring fear and devotion to God, a reader laughs at the 'prowd trumpour…trippit, / Throw skaldand fyre ay as thay skippit / Thay gyrnd with hiddous granis' (Dunbar 22-24). 'Trippit' ridicules Pride's deceitful followers and 'skippit' adds an element of playfulness in the face of 'skaldand fyre'. Dunbar removes the existential threat from the religious images in *Fasternis*, allowing the bodily suffering to be one of amusement rather than terror in this carnivalesque setting. This setting is accompanied by a suspension of hierarchy and other medieval norms, emphasising

the dissonance between suffering and laughter. This tension is heightened considering Mitchell Merback's point that 'the experience of *seeing and imagining* a body that was ravaged and bleeding from tortures inflicted upon it lay at the centre of a constellation of religious doctrines, beliefs and devotional practices' (19). Even in a society where religion leverages the images found in *Fasternis* to evoke empathy, fear and personal reflection, the slapstick utilisation of grotesque bodies amongst the setting of subversion results in laughter. The narrator's retelling of his individual experience is turned collective as religious images of suffering are uphauled to encourage humour. Dunbar's readers, bonded by a religious community, were encouraged to laugh together at the absurdist use of violent images so common in devotional contexts. In their collective amusement, his primary audience of courtly groups were reminded of the community binding them.

Yet, fear rooted in religious thought still lingers amongst this amusement. Steven McKenna argues 'the catharsis offered by this sort of comedy and revelry has at its base the human fear of death' (131). The context of this essay demands a shift to a more accurate'Christian fear of death'. This fear was informed by the pain inflicted upon corpses in a Christian Hell, such as that seen in *Fasternis* – not a universal human understanding. Christian readers were encouraged to recognise the described sinfulness in themselves and, in laughing at these caricatures, are reminded of their religious community that condemns such behaviour. Graeme Davies explains laughter 'at the sins is the opposite of taking pride in them and is a preparation for confession' (2), highlighting how Dunbar's text encouraged a deeper level of reflection. Invoking Christian images of Hell and drawing attention to the sins prevalent in James IV's court – his primary audience – inevitably resulted in emerging undercurrents of fear and anxiety. Violence inflicted upon corpses in *Fasternis* certainly encouraged amusement but also provoked deeper reflection of prominent flaws and their consequences.

Unlike the other texts, *The Wallace* uses religion to justify the violence committed by the Scottish, as demonstrated by the Barns of Ayr episode. A monk describes Wallace's cause as a 'rychtwys wer', which is 'lovyt our the lave' (Henry 12. 1286-1287). Wallace is placed upon a pedestal, elevated beyond man as his label of 'gret slaar of men' (Henry 12, 1278) is justified in the eyes of God. The anger fuelling Wallace's vengeance after the Barns of Ayr murders is thus legitimised by religious figures. This individual experience of grief and rage is made collective as a reader internalised the justifications for Wallace's actions, raising him to a level beyond man, a champion of God. Indeed, the described brutality against the Scottish nobles during the Barns of Ayr episode pales in comparison to blood shed by Wallace in retaliation. Each Scottish knight had a 'rhynnand cord thai slewyt our his hed / Hard to the bauk and hangyt him to ded' (Henry 7. 207-8) and, although visceral, does not compare to how 'The myddyll of ane [Wallace] mankit ner in twa, / Ane other thar apon the hed can ta / The third he straik and throuch the cost him claiff' (Henry 7.307-9). The language describing Wallace's actions is animalistic, 'mankit', 'straik' and 'claiff' are onomatopoeic and speak to the intensity of his rage. Crucially, while each death Wallace causes is described in detail, each Scottish victim is described. 'Schir Ranald' (Henry 7.205) was first, followed by 'Schyr Brys the Blayr' (Henry 7.209), and 'kynd Cambellis that nevir had beyne fals' (Henry 7.220). A reader is introduced to the victims as Wallace knew them: kind, gentle and true. A fraction of his grief, rage and shock at the murders of his community is transferred onto a reader through such a number of names appearing in short succession. *The Wallace* encourages outrage at the atrocities of the English, leveraging religion to justify Scottish violence in retaliation.

The anger stirred by *The Wallace* contributes towards uniting a Scottish audience behind their national pride; the savagery inflicted upon bodies therefore reminded a medieval reader of their social community. Violence against Scottish bodies here is emblematic of

violence against the nation. The narrator refuses to detail the deaths of Wallace and his wife; it is not just their lives ending here but further insult to Scotland. Wallace's wife, that 'fair woman' (Henry 6. 187), was 'Put…to ded, I can nocht tell yow how' (Henry 6.193). Similarly, this inability to retell an event is employed with Wallace's death: 'I will nocht tell how he devydt was / In five partis and ordand for to pas' (Henry 12. 1407-8). This inclusion through omission is tantalising, leaving readers to envision pain unimaginable inflicted on national heroes, while describing Wallace's wife as 'fair' positions her as a feminine figure and further outrage is incited at the murder of someone vulnerable. To leave violence out in such a bloody text reveals the levels of violence committed against the pair, not only to their corporeal state but also societal. This is further explored by the reactions to their deaths. Wallace hears of his wife's death and, while distraught, leverages it to galvanise his soldiers: 'Sall nevir man me se / Rest intill eys quhill this deid wrokyn be' (Henry 6. 213-3). A similar reaction from the Scottish population is encouraged by Wallace's death. Mark Meyerson, Daniel Thiery and Oren Falk posit 'Wallace…transcends the status of even royal figures…through superiority in acts of legitimate violence' (9). The implications of his elevation are twofold: firstly, in demonstrating the importance of violence to a collective identity and, secondly, in increasing the national reaction to his death. Wallace's national standing was consolidated through his ferocious actions against the English, furthered by the memorability of violent images. In raising him above royalty, national sentiment unites behind his death, heightening the anger stirred by this text.

Thestri destabilises hierarchies, encouraging a reader to reflect on the shared human condition – an idea grounded in religious thought – eliciting compassion across the social spectrum. The Body in *Thestri* is not representative of all Christians but a distinct individual: a noble with a penchant for fine clothing and hunting. He insists he is no worse than any other as 'Mony fre bodi shal roten – ne be Y nout the laste!' (*Thestri* 28). The author refers

back to death as the great equaliser. The violence the Body is experiencing will be felt by every noble no matter whether they held ‘solers,…castles, ant… toures’ (*Thestri* 37) in life; their final resting place and its effects shall be the same. The poem’s internal rhyme (as ‘covertoures’ (*Thestri* 38) is rhymed with ‘toures’) reinforces the mocking tone already established by the Soul’s triadic listing. The Soul ridicules the Body’s preoccupation with material goods in life, stressing there is no correlation between status and a comfortable Afterlife. In reducing a wealthy noble in life to a whining corpse bemoaning his fate, *Thestri* not only encourages reflection on Christian eschatology but also societal status. Anxiety stems from the portrayal of someone secure in life lowered to instability in death; earthly privilege does not protect against the violence of death. Thus, *Thestri* reminds a medieval reader not only of their religious community but also their social: corporeal concerns are fleeting while shared humanity is constant, provoking sympathy and compassion, not necessarily for the Body and Soul but for their community.

A similar reminder is provoked by Dunbar’s satire as *Fasternis* mocks the spectrum of social classes. The mock tournament not only reveals the cowardice of the cobbler and the tailor but the reality of knighthood in parodying chivalry, ridiculing the elite in a similar manner to *Thestri* but to stir different emotions. The tailor’s ‘baner born wes him befoir’ (Dunbar 133), as the pair appear to be setting up for war, evoking grandeur and honour. Yet, this is subverted as the tailor's 'courage a littill schrenkit' (Dunbar 149) as he faced the cobbler. The illusion of glory is removed: the commoners are shown as timid and foolish while knighthood is depicted as violent and chaotic.The chaos is then suggested at the court of James IV, for the tournament was typical of jousting competitions held before Lent. Dunbar’s audience, be it the court or the general population, could laugh at both the satirised version of themselves alongside other social classes, the narrator’s experience made collective through the reflections of a reader’s own community. Aligning with this, the sins

identified were traits often found in court: ‘flattereris’ and ‘bakbyttaris’ (Dunbar 49-50) follow Envy while Gluttony personifies the excessive consumption in a courtly setting. Violence, seen here through the absurdist tortures disguised as dances, ‘engage[s] the emotions and corporeal senses’ (93-4), as Elliot argues. Violence is not only described to a reader but affronts their senses, the extent of which is demonstrated as both the narrator and the Devil are overwhelmed by the Highlanders’ commotion. The sensory overload is translated to a reader, making an individual experience collective in enduring it as well as reminding a medieval reader of their social communities through laughter. In encouraging the readers to laugh at themselves and those around them, *Fasternis* suggests a recognition that is mirrored in *Thestri*: despite social class, death is a universal state. Collective identity thus expands beyond religious community or the concept of nation to incorporate group consciousness centred around social structures such as class. A medieval reader, either through the anxiety stirred in *Thestri* or the humour in *Fasternis*, is reminded that both their bodies and souls will face violence in the Afterlife.

Through examining violence surrounding death, the emotions stirred in these texts are varied, from consuming anxiety about the reality of death in *Thestri* to laughter at caricatured versions of courtly sinfulness in *Fasternis* to outrage and grief of insults to the nation in *The Wallace*. Ultimately, these all contribute to reminding a medieval reader of their religious and social communities and their wider place in the world. Crucially, these two states cannot be separated as religion was interwoven into the fabric of society, which heightens the sense of communal identity running through the texts.

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