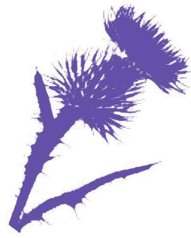

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Discursive Instability in Robert Henryson's 'Sum Practysis of Medecyne'

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'The dominance of sound over meaning… renders the "practical" dimension of medical writing ridiculous' (Orlemanski)

The textual traditions to which Robert Henryson's 'Sum Practysis of Medecyne' is indebted have been clearly identified. Fox (453-7), Orlemanski (395-7), and Kinghorn (37-8) have shown that the poem inherits features of Middle Scots flyting, alliterative verse, medical burlesque, and *materia medica*. However, the mechanism by which these traditions mutually interact within the poem has not received due critical attention. Gray, for example, is concerned only with how the poem draws upon flyting for its invective (33); Orlemanski primarily focuses on the inscrutability of the poem's jargon and scatology as it emerges from the context of *materia medica* (415). This essay, contrariwise, seeks to examine the formal means by which these textual traditions mutually interact, and the ends to which they do. Specifically, I argue that the monologic form of 'Sum Practysis of Medecyne' generates a discursive instability which yokes the poem's textual traditions in satire: flyting, medical burlesque, *materia medica*, and alliterative verse are brought into confluence by monologic discursive instability in order to generate a dynamic satire of medicine which targets all involved elements. To demonstrate this, the monologic form of Henryson's poem shall first be elucidated, with reference to the theoretical heuristic 'dramatic monologue', and its discursive instability identified. Next, it shall be shown how the aforementioned textual traditions interact within and are subsumed under this discursive instability. Finally, the satiric dynamism the poem generates via the interplay of its textual traditions within its monologic discursive instability shall be evinced.

The initial verses of 'Sum Practysis of Medecyne' establish its monologic form and intimate the discursive instability therein. Via the proliferation of deictics, the poem's mimesis of speech roots itself in a specific moment of utterance (the 'gud day' (1)), and within a specific communicative context (a physician's scornful response to the 'schir' (1) who has insulted his practice). Moreover, this mimesis of speech is that of the physician, or speaker, alone: though he responds to a hostile interlocutor, the latter's words have been 'on

syd set' (5) for being 'geir of all gaddering, glaikit' (*borrowed stuff, idiotic*) (6) and are not explicit within the text. The poem, then, is formally a monologue. These observations may seem blatant; however, they beg the question: though the interlocutor's speech is absent from the speaker's monologue, might his presence not inform it? Clearly, the speaker does respond to the interlocutor both physically ('gud laik in your hude' ((*good fun in your hood*) (2)) and psychologically: 'I ken your cunnyng into cure / Is clowtit and clampit' (*I know your skill at curing cobbled and patched*) (15); 'On your saule beid / That ye be sicker of this sedull I send yow' (*On your soul be it that you be sure of this prescription I send you*) (21-2). The latter's presence, then, can in fact be said to mediate the speaker's invective utterance and to provide it with a fluid target for the derision of 'lawitnes' (*ignorance*) (17). A feature supposedly outside the speaker's monologic mimesis of speech (the interlocutor and his presupposed words) exerts influence upon that monologism: the monologue does not have a sole, stable discursive source in its speaker.

Therefore, when Fox cursorily notes that the poem 'is, strictly speaking, not a flyting but a dramatic monologue in which the speaker is satirized' (456), he is overly hasty in shifting the poem's satiric focus entirely upon the speaker. Nevertheless, the formal label he uses, 'dramatic monologue', may serve as a useful heuristic by which to clarify the potential instability of monologic form. Slinn, a theorist of the dramatic monologue, writes that the speakers of these poems 'commit the[ir] self to a social or dialogical intrusion, to an inevitable division, that ironically undermines their single sovereignty in the very act of attempting to establish it' (84). Such is the case for the speaker of 'Sum Practysis of Medecyne'. As seen above, the interlocutor, who would 'wrett on as [he] culd to gar folk wene / For feir my longis wes flaft' (*write on as he could to make people think, for fear my lungs were panting*) (9-10), informs the speaker's monologue. But, because of the poem's monologism, it is the speaker who must voice these hefty criticisms of his own ineptitude to

then assert himself against them: the words of his own speech-mimesis are the very words which would undermine it. From this encoding of antagonistic meanings within the poem's formally monologic speech-mimesis, discursive instability emerges: the speaker's utterance is discursively unstable because it is composed of various semiotic sources, 'several layers of textual action' (Slinn 83), simultaneously and contradictorily informing each other.

The 'layers of textual action' which contribute to the monologue of 'Sum Practysis of Medecyne' extend beyond the presence and unheard utterances of the poem's interlocutor: I shall now demonstrate that they are the different textual traditions to which Henryson's poem is indebted (flyting, medical burlesque, medieval *materia medica*, and alliterative verse), and, further, that these traditions mutually interact, within the discursive instability generated by monologic form, to produce a dynamic satire of medicine.

The tradition of flyting provides the poem's monologue with its affective dimension. In a limited literary sense, flyting is a 16th century Middle Scots verse practice in which two poets level invective at each other in turns. As Bawcutt notes: 'Flyters… proclaim that [theirs] is a poetic contest by criticising each other's poetic skills' (12); *i.e.,* what is at stake for flyters is their superiority in the skill of which they boast. The speaker of 'Sum Practysis of Medecyne' adopts this tradition's invective and concern for superiority in his monologue: before he goes on to provide his 'sedull' (*prescription*) (22) of *materia medica*, he foregrounds the falseness of 'thame that leid' (*them that lied*) (17) that 'My prectik in pottingary… be als pure / And lyk to your lawitnes' (*My skill in pharmacy be as pure and alike to your ignorance*) (16-7). His task, therefore, is not only to show 'Gife I can ocht of the craft' (*If I know anything about the craft*) (12), but also – just as the flyter's task is to prove that their opponent is the inferior poet – to prove that he is the superior physician and to deride his interlocutor's inferiority in the craft: 'I ken your cunnyng into cure / Is clowtit and clampit and nocht weill cleird' (14-5). This task is central to the satiric vision of the poem.

The interlocutor is not arbitrarily addressed to provide a motive for speech that may be detached from its context; rather, the speaker's monologue, in so far as the speaker operates within the tradition of flyting, is invested in the affective goal of demeaning the interlocutor's 'nocht weill cleird' (*not well polished*) (14) knowledge of medicine.

The interlocutor, as a faulty physician, is thereby set up as the principal object of the medical satire. Gray, assuming this static interpretation of the poem's satiric aim, writes '[the poem] is a deliberately crude piece of invective intended to make an opponent reel as from a boxer's blow' (33). However, the poem is in fact dynamic in its satiric aim. Subject to the discursive instability of the monologic speech-mimesis which it enters, flyting is informed by the other textual traditions to which the speech-mimesis is indebted; and, thus, its affective directionality and the directionality of the poem's satire are complicated. For instance, the medieval literary tradition of medical burlesque, which further underpins the speaker's words, calls into question whether it is in fact the interlocutor or perhaps the speaker instead who is satirized as a charlatan. This tradition 'is characterized by a concatenation of medical, or pseudo-medical, terms' (Fox 454) via which the apothecary who utters them is shown to be no more than a quack. Thus, when the speaker of 'Sum Practysis of Medecyne' provides such ridiculous instructions as 'Annoynt it with nurice doung' (*Anoint it with a nurse's dung*) (46), or prescribes intangible ingredients like 'the gufe of ane gryce' (*the grunt of a pig*)(69-70), a new 'layer of textual action' (Slinn 83) enters into the discursively unstable and variegated monologue which constitutes his character. The words of his own speech-mimesis inadvertently encode the tropes of a burlesque which would make him, not his interlocutor, the object of medical satire. The poem's satiric scope is thus redirected towards the speaker who – when in the mode of flyting once claimed that there 'Is nowdir fevir nor fell that our the feild fure, … Bot I can lib thame' (18-20) – is not capable of providing anything in way of proper medicine but hyperbole, often of a scatological or

phallic kind, such as ‘the dram of ane drekters’ (*a drake’s penis*) (42) or ‘cuk maid’ (*fresh dung*) (27).

This is not to say, however, that the poem gives precedence to either textual tradition discussed. The discursive instability inherent in formal monologism ensures that the tension between the ‘layers of textual action’ (Slinn 83) which constitute it remains unresolved. To exemplify, when the speaker instructs his interlocutor that ‘The crud of my culome (with your teith crak it)’ (*the dirt of my anus (with your teeth crack it)*) (30), or that he ‘The count of ane cow kis’ (37) (*kiss a cow’s vagina*), it is impossible to say whether these are instances of ridiculous treatments given in earnest by the speaker (as in the tradition of medical burlesque), or whether the speaker is cunningly disguising pronouncements of violence against his interlocutor in the language of pseudo-medicine (following the tradition of flyting). Instances of such potentially (in)deliberate prescriptions abound in the poem: ‘The hair of the hurcheoun nocht half deill hakkit’ (*the hair of a hedgehog not half chopped*) (32) would be painful to ingest, and *Dia Glaconicon* – whose is effect is ‘For till fle awaye fon / Quhair fulis ar fundin’ (*To chase folly away from where fools are found*) (64-5) – would only need be prescribed to a fool of a patient. Oppositely, these ingredients and medicines might only be spoken of by a fool of a physician. As these meanings from distinct textual traditions are both encoded within the same discursively unstable mimesis of speech neither can be asserted over the other. The poem thus formally generates a dynamic satire of medicine wherein both speaker and interlocutor are criticized as improper medical practitioners in the context of the poem’s constituent textual traditions.

Moreover, the poem’s satiric dynamism moves past both speaker and interlocutor via its incorporation of the textual traditions of medieval *materia medica* and alliterative verse. As regards the former, the speaker’s prescriptions do in fact mirror the structures of late medieval recipes: Fox states that the ‘opening *Cape* (imperative of Latin *capere*) is a proper

beginning for a prescription; the plants named [in the poem] were all, at times, used medicinally' (458); the same may be said of 'Cape' (27) as of the imperatives 'Recipe' (40) and 'Myng' (73) which punctuate the latter treatments. However, as Orlemanski notes, this tradition of *materia medica*, which the speaker thus structurally and verbally echoes, itself possessed a 'particular turbidity' (396): it was often macaronic, jargonic, and not well understood by its late medieval compilers and readers (Jones 460-2). Accordingly, the speaker's medically ineffective hyperboles encode, alongside satire of his competitor and himself, satire of that obscure medical tradition's inscrutability. This satiric effect is emphasized by the alliterative verse tradition to which the poem belongs: 'the dominance of sound over meaning… renders the "practical" dimension of medical writing ridiculous' (Orlemanski 409). However, as each tradition enters into the discursive instability of the speaker's monologue, the same reserve as before must be held when evaluating their contributions to the poem. The inscrutability of meaning and the alliterative jingle which would satirize and reduce *materia medica* stand beside both the potentially affective (hostile) dimension of meaning provided by flyting and the self-reflexively critical dimension produced by medical burlesque, each an equal part of the speaker's monologue. The inscrutability of meaning and alliteration, then, may also be instruments with which to jeer at a victim of flyting, or by which to mock the absurd speech patterns of a misguided physician. Thus, via the mutual interaction of these four textual traditions within the monologic, discursively unstable form of 'Sum Practysis of Medecyne', a dynamic satire of medicine is produced. Because the poem's speaker encodes all the meanings which these traditions imply within a single alliterative monologue, the violence of flyting, the self-reflexive satire of medical burlesque, and the inscrutability of *materia media* unite to point to a combination of satiric medical objects: the interlocutor of the poem, as an inferior physician and the victim of flyting, the speaker, as a quack, and medicine, as an unknowable corpus of jargon.

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