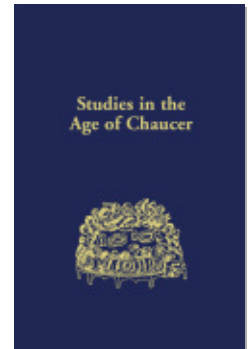
Henryson and the Medieval Arts of Rhetoric by Robert L. Kindrick (review)



George D. Gopen

Studies in the Age of Chaucer, Volume 17, 1995, pp. 223-226 (Review)

Published by The New Chaucer Society
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/sac.1995.0027*

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ROBERT L. KINDRICK. *Henryson and the Medieval Arts of Rhetoric*. Garland Studies in Medieval Literature, vol. 8. New York and London: Garland, 1993. Pp. xiii, 345. $54.00.

In this much-welcome volume Robert L. Kindrick has brought the burgeoning work of the last few decades in the history of rhetoric to bear on the poetic oeuvre of the fifteenth-century Middle Scots poet Robert Henryson. The book is admirable in its learning, its wide coverage, its clear organization of complex materials and influences, and its ability to transmit a sense of the energy, variability, and power of this still underappreciated poet.

The organization of the chapters is a model of clarity, considering how inextricably intertwined Kindrick's various strands of attention inevitably had to be. He risks an occasional pedestrian moment in his care to take the reader with him at all times; but for many, these repetitions will prove helpful. The first chapter offers for the uninitiated an introduction to Henryson and to medieval rhetoric. The next three chapters, by far the bulk of the book, treat separately three main rhetorical arts: the *ars poetriae*, the *ars dictaminis*, and the *ars praedicandi*. A final chapter investigates the ways in which Henryson might have been influenced by the (then) recently rediscovered work of Quintilian.

Kindrick has deftly managed to keep his work continually helpful and attractive to three distinct audiences: (1) those who know Henryson but not rhetoric, (2) those who know rhetoric but not Henryson, and (3) those who are relatively unfamiliar with both. The first and third of these audiences are particularly well served; the rhetorically aware may find the pace not swift enough, but should be compensated by the opportunity to watch familiar concepts being applied to fresh literary material.

Chapters 3 and 4 are the heart of the book. In Chapter 3, Kindrick does an especially fine job in demonstrating how the *ars dictaminis* extends far beyond its usual translation as the "art of letter writing"; it concerns itself with any written application to move the receiver to action or to a different understanding of the subject broached. By attending to what may seem at first an unpromising field, Kindrick manages to weave together matters of allegorical interpretation with structural, stylistic, philological, and textual concerns, a feat rarely accomplished in Henryson studies, where divide-and-conquer has often been the scholarly rule. A better understanding of the aims of the *ars dictaminis* throws clearer light on the variety of rhetorical poses, tones, and styles that Henryson employs. No longer do they

seem intended only for narrative delight or preacherly moral intensity; instead Henryson is revealed as the skillful manipulator of a knowable ancient tradition, the careful and conscious rhetorical strategist. Kindrick does an equally fine job in chapter 4 of demonstrating Henryson's knowledgeable use of the *ars praedicandi*, the art of preaching.

Kindrick encounters a central problem throughout the work that he cannot much avoid; although at times the problem undercuts the force of his conclusions and the continuity of his focus, for this reviewer it did not diminish the value of the work as a whole. That problem concerns the stated purpose of the book:

> The goal of this book is to apply the knowledge gained about the nature of medieval rhetoric during the recent flowering of rhetorical studies (led by James J. Murphy) to the poetry of Robert Henryson. The monograph is intended primarily as a contribution to Middle Scots studies and only incidentally, if at all, as a contribution to the study of medieval rhetoric. [P. xi]

In taking this position, Kindrick misconceives in part the worth and application of his own work. In persuading his reader to adopt a Middle Scots studies perspective, he increases unnecessarily the negative effects of the burden of ignorance under which we struggle. Since we know all too little about Henryson, we are left to speculate, not conclude, about which rhetorical texts might have influenced him, which public issues may have moved him to fashion allegory, and, as a result, which kinds of rhetorical stances he may have been assuming. For Kindrick to reduce the force of his rhetorical exploration to a supporting role in detective work on Henryson's intellectual background and literary intentions is to do himself and his work a disservice. Unfortunately, that is what tends to happen in chapter 2 (on the *ars poetriae*), where his examples of the manifestation of rhetorical influence degenerate on occasion into a less than optimally productive task of image hunting.

In chapter 3, however, (on the *ars dictaminis*), and again in chapter 4 (on the *ars praedicandi*), Kindrick strikes a much finer balance between the exegesis of Henryson and the demonstration of the natural functioning—almost imperceivable to any eye but the expert's—of a highly conscious and carefully learned rhetorical art. Part of the delight and surprise of Kindrick's book is to watch the dusty principles of ancient rhetoric, which may often have been taught joylessly to captive students, either glitter in their wit and power or slip by without notice through Henryson's particu-

larly attractive *sprezzatura*. It is in this constant play backward and forward between the dual foci—Henryson as example of rhetoric, rhetoric as influence on Henryson—that the book makes its greatest impact and offers its greatest delight. Kindrick follows his more limited initial statement of purpose throughout chapter 2, to its detriment; fortunately, he wanders from that original path throughout most of the rest of the work.

At some point in Kindrick's well-constructed argument, the pervasive influence of the rhetorical tradition on Henryson becomes a given. After that it becomes more interesting to follow Henryson's manipulation of the tradition. More interesting still is to watch both of these influences function simultaneously. By the end of chapter 4, Kindrick has managed to create that dual focus, giving slightly more weight to Henryson than to rhetoric but demonstrating the nature of their integration:

> More important, however, than classifying Henryson in any single camp is understanding the significance of his contribution to rhetoric in the fifteenth century. . . . While Henryson's language seems simple, direct, and "artless," the very simplicity of his style is deceiving, involving as it does the use of complicated Latin roots and a thorough understanding of the *ars poetriae*. So too, the simplicity of his *topoi* and the other rhetorical devices that he borrowed from the *ars praedicandi* tend to make much of his art seem transparent. Yet the student of rhetoric will readily understand that Henryson's simplicity is, itself, a highly skilled art. His mastery of the *ars praedicandi* and ability to go beyond it, along with his willingness to experiment and develop his own "personal voice," would suggest that in his rhetoric Henryson incorporated the best of medieval traditions into fifteenth-century British literature.

Kindrick is not only widely learned; he is a particularly good synthesizer of that learning. He keeps order for the reader by establishing boundaries for discussion in his choice of examples from Henryson, but within those boundaries he ranges widely and freely through a great many rhetorical texts and traditions to illuminate the chosen set piece. See the particularly fine job he does establishing the parallels in tone, content, and strategy between Henryson's "The Lion and the Mouse" and other, better-known confrontations between rulers and subjects (pp. 146–64). He is equally astute in his handling of the strategies of legal rhetoric that effortlessly appear in the *Moral Fables* and elsewhere (see especially pp. 167–69). Perhaps the most deft set piece of all is his demonstration of how the sermon of Henryson's Swallow (in the eighth of the *Moral Fables*) follows patterns long established by the *ars praedicandi* (pp. 240–48).

Kindrick reminds us that, under the *ars praedicandi*, a four-part concept of the authorial role emerged in which writers assumed the roles of *scriptor, compilator, commentator*, or *auctor*. In this book he himself has played all four roles: as *scriptor* he has conveyed to us accurately parts of the rhetorical tradition that have been developed over centuries of learning; as *compilator* he has arranged and rearranged the materials so that we may meaningfully juxtapose the various and intertwining influences of rhetoric with the whole of Henryson's opus; as *commentator* he has carefully sifted the materials and presented them through his own authoritative voice; and as *auctor* he has shared with us a great many insights not previously available in the study of Henryson. In demonstrating that Henryson was a sterling practitioner of the rhetorical arts, Kindrick has done an admirable job of practicing them himself.

GEORGE D. GOPEN
Duke University

IAN LANCASHIRE, ed. *Computer-based Chaucer Studies*. CCH Working Papers, vol. 3. Toronto: Centre for Computing in the Humanities, University of Toronto, 1993. Pp. vii, 205. $45.00 paper.

From the "Editor's Noticeboard" of the *European English Messenger* comes the following query: "Surely the emperour of CD does have some clothes on?"[1] The editor in a frustrating attempt to use the electronic text of Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* had found "water, water everywhere, but not a drop of new insight into the secrets of the text." Disappointed by his own efforts, the editor posted an appeal to "readers who have discovered what to do with or to a text on a computer, [to] advise us as to what pleasures those of us miss who are puzzled by all these oysters that refuse to yield the pearls they had promised."

Ian Lancashire's slender volume provides some answers to those questions. Collected from a two-day conference held in Toronto in November 1992, these essays produce a few genuine pearls and the promise of more to come from electronic texts. They demonstrate the usefulness of electronic technology in Chaucerian studies, and they offer models for literary and cultural analysis for other periods, other authors. The first two essays, those

[1] "Editor's Noticeboard," *European English Messenger* 3, no. 2 (1944): 86–87.