

An Early Flyting in Hary's *Wallace*

Dr. Ben Parsons
University of Leicester

The unique place of flyting in the courtly culture of medieval and early modern Scotland has long been recognised. As Geoffrey Hughes summarises in his recent history of cursing, 'the genre became most highly developed at the Scottish court in the sixteenth century, remarkably among aristocrats and major poets... these texts demonstrate an astonishing use of language so sophisticated and so foul that it clearly belongs to a convention of linguistic versatility quite unfamiliar to us'.¹ However, despite its curious popularity in the Scottish court, fuller understanding of the practice has been hindered by the relative paucity of texts. There are only three full-length flytings now extant, 'The flyting of Dunbar and Kennedy' (c.1503), 'The Flyting betwixt Montgomery and Polwart' (c.1583), and an exchange between Sir David Lindsay and James V dating from c.1536. Of these, the Dunbar and Kennedy piece is the earliest by some decades. The patchiness of the literary record has in fact driven a number of commentators to look beyond the direct context of the poems when trying to understand them, turning to remote sources for parallels and analogues. Thus Janet Smith reads them against the *partimen* and *sirventes* of the Provençal troubadors, while Nicole Meier discusses them in the light of the thirteenth-century English debate poem *The Owl and the Nightingale*.² A number of critics have taken an even longer view, and compared them to episodes in Old English and Norse epic, such as Beowulf's duel with Unferth, or Loki's bouts with Freyja, Njörðr and other gods in the *Lokasenna*.³ As Priscilla Bawcutt comments, critics have been driven to study 'fictional encounters...different in style and far apart in time' in an attempt to comprehend this 'peculiarly Scottish and chronologically limited' practice.⁴

However, one text which has so far escaped serious attention in these investigations is *The Actes and Deidis of the Illustre and Vallyeant Campioun Schir William Wallace*, attributed to the fifteenth-century *makar* 'Blind' Hary, and com-

¹Geoffrey Hughes, *An Encyclopedia of Swearing* (New York: Sharpe, 2006), pp.174-76.

²Janet M. Smith, *The French Background of Middle Scots Literature* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1934), pp.53-56; Nicole Meier, *The Poems of Walter Kennedy*, Scottish Text Society 5th Series no. 6 (Woodbridge: Scottish Text Society, 2008), pp.civ-cv.

³See for instance Ward Parks, *Verbal Duelling in Heroic Narrative* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990); E.R. Anderson, 'Flyting in The Battle of Maldon', *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, 71 (1970), 197-202.

⁴Priscilla J. Bawcutt, *Dunbar the Makar* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), p.222.

posed at some point between 1472 and 1479.⁵ The *Wallace* has a peripheral link to the context of later flytings. The handful of documents relating to Hary suggest a connection with James IV, as between 1490 and 1492 he is mentioned five times in treasurer's accounts for unspecified services 'at the Kingis commande'.⁶ He was also known to poets with demonstrable links to the court, being mentioned several times in the work of William Dunbar and Walter Kennedy.⁷ The section of the *Wallace* which has particular relevance to the flytings occurs towards the beginning of the fifth book. Here Hary's hero finds himself in Lanerick, where he is challenged by an English soldier as he and his men leave church: the episode therefore follows the general emphasis on English 'provocation' sparking 'righteous anger' that Anne McKim traces throughout the text.⁸ The exchange that follows, before Hary resumes his 'carefully concocted brew of bloody fanaticism', is an interesting set-piece.⁹ The exchange consists entirely of what Hary terms 'scornys' and 'lychly wordis', as the two men trade obscenities and insults for some twenty lines:

'Dewgar, gud day, bone sen3hour and gud morn'.
 'Quhom scornys thow?', quod Wallace. 'Quha lerd the?'
 'Quhy, schir', he said, 'come 3he nocht new our se?
 Pardown me than, for I wend 3e had beyne
 Ane Inbasset to bryng ane wncouth queyne'.
 Wallace ansuerd, 'Sic pardoune as we haiff
 In oys to gyff thi part thow sall nocht craiff'.
 'Sen 3e ar Scottis 3eit salust sall 3e be -
 Gud deyn, dawch Lard, bach lowch, ban3och a de'.
 Ma Sotheroune men to thaim assemblit ner.
 Wallace as than was laith to mak a ster.
 Ane maid a scrip and tyt at his lang suorde.

⁵ Matthew P. McDiarmid, (ed.), *Hary's Wallace*, Scottish Text Society 4th series nos. 4-5 (Edinburgh: William Blackwood, 1968-69). Subsequent references appear in parentheses in the text. The probable date of the text is examined by McDiarmid, and further discussed by McClure: see Matthew P. McDiarmid, 'The Date of the *Wallace*', *Scottish Historical Review*, 34 (1955), 26-31; J. Derrick McClure, 'Hary (b. c.1440, d. in or after 1492)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. by Colin Matthew and Brian Harrison, 60 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), XXV, 698-99.

⁶ Quoted in William Henry Schofield, *Mythical Bards and the Life of William Wallace*, Harvard Studies in Comparative Literature 5 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1920), p.323.

⁷ See Priscilla J. Bawcutt and Janet Hadley Williams, 'Poets "Of This Natioun"', *A Companion to Medieval Scottish Poetry*, ed. by Priscilla J. Bawcutt and Janet Hadley Williams (Cambridge: Brewer, 2006), pp.1-18 (p.3). Dunbar refers twice to 'Blynd Hary', once in the 'Lament for the Makars' (v.69) and once in the dramatic fragment 'The Droichis Part Of The Play' (v.10): see *The Poems of William Dunbar*, ed. by James Kinsley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp.180, 102.

⁸ Anne McKim, *The Wallace: Selections* (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2003), p.7.

⁹ R. James Goldstein, "'I Will My Proces Hald": Making Sense of Scottish Lives and the Desire for History in Barbour, Wyntoun and Blind Hary', *Companion to Medieval Scottish Poetry*, pp.35-49 (p.47).

'Hald still thi hand,' quod he, 'and spek thi word'.
 'With thi lang suerd thow makis mekill bost'.
 'Tharoff,' quod he, 'thi deme maid litill cost'.
 'Quhat caus has thow to wer that gudlye greyne?'
 'My maist caus is bot for to mak the teyne'.
 'Quhat suld a Scot do with so fair a knyff?'
 'Sa said the prest that last Ianglyt thi wyff.
 That woman lang has tillit him so fair
 Quhill that his child worthit to be thine ayr'.
 'Me think', quod he, 'thow drywys me to scorn'.
 'Thi deme has beyne Iapyt or thow was born'. (VI.132-54)

('*Dieu garde*, good day, *bon sieur* and good morn'. 'Whom do you scorn?' said Wallace, 'Who taught you?' 'Why, sir', he said, 'have you not come recently over the sea? Pardon me then, for I thought you were an ambassador to escort a foreign queen'. Wallace answered, 'such pardon as we have to give by custom, you should not ask your part'. 'Since you are Scots you shall be greeted: good day, *daucht laird, l'ail, luibh, beannach a De'*. More Southern men gathered near to them. Wallace then was loath to make a din, and made a gesture and tugged at his long sword. 'Hold still your hand', he said, 'and speak your word'. 'With your long sword you make much boasting'. 'From that', said he, 'your dame made little complaint'. 'What cause have you to wear that good green?' 'My greatest intent is only to make you furious'. 'What should a Scot do with so fair a knife?' 'So said the priest that last tumbled your wife. That woman has long tilled him so fairly so that his child is entitled to be your heir'. 'I think', he said, 'you drive me to scorn'. 'Your mother had been fooled before you were born'.)

Even at first glance, there are clear overlaps between this episode and the flyting texts. Despite its comparative brevity, many of the typical flyting themes of 'the grotesque...the physically ignoble' are in evidence, albeit with bawdiness supplanting the usual scatology.¹⁰ Thus the speakers accuse one another of illegitimacy, cuckoldry and sexual impotence, and mock each other's appearance, from their 'wncouth' demeanour to their 'gudlye' clothing. Perhaps the most significant set of insults, however, revolve around nationality, as the English soldier even parodies Scots Gaelic in his abuse of Wallace, stating '*dawch Lard, bach lowch, ban 3och a de'*: according to Murison, this probably means 'bonnet laird, herdsman, God's blessing'.¹¹ Such focus on national or regional identity

¹⁰ Rachel Annand Taylor, *Dunbar, the Poet and his Period* (London: Faber and Faber, 1931), p.53.

¹¹ David D. Murison, 'Linguistic Relations in Medieval Scotland', *The Scottish Tradition: Essays in Honour of Ronald Gordon Cant*, ed. G.W.S Barrow (London: Chatto and Windus, 1974), pp.71-83 (p.79). Jamieson gives an alternative rendering, 'lazy laid, if you please, God bless you': John Jamieson, ed., *Wallace, or, The Life and Acts of Sir William Wallace of Ellerslie* (Glasgow: Maurice Ogle, 1869), p.377.

has particular importance, since it is a recurrent feature of later flyting contests. It also forms the basis of several insults exchanged by Kennedy and Dunbar, with the former deriding the latter's 'Heland strynd', and arguing that 'ane Lawland ers wald mak a bettir noyis'.¹² Later still Alexander Montgomerie ridicules Polwart in much the same terms, calling him a 'foule mismade mytting, borne in the Merse'.¹³ In fact, the specific identities attacked by Wallace and the soldier are also evident in other exchanges. The pattern of 'two speakers, an Englishman and a Scot' haranguing and abusing one another also occurs in the six-line 'miniature Anglo-Scottish flyting' identified by Bawcutt, and spills over into formal exchanges between Dundas and Skelton, which at least recall the tradition of Scottish insult-verse.¹⁴

However, Wallace's encounter with the Englishman does not only echo the flytings in content, as it also follows their characteristic form. For instance, there is a marked use of alliteration in the insults that are exchanged. The dialogue includes phrases such as 'ʒe had beyne/ Ane Inbasset to bryng', 'wncouth queyne', 'makis mekill bost', and 'gudlye greyne'. This tendency culminates with the snatch of broken Gaelic, with its heavy concentration of b- and d-sounds. Such effects closely correspond to typical practice in flytings, as Thorlac Turville-Petre in particular has noted.¹⁵ The use of alliteration was in fact treated as a key aspect of the form by contemporary commentators: in a 1584 treatise on the 'reulis and cautelis to be obseruit and eschewit in Scottis poesie', James VI prescribes 'Rouncefallis or Tumbling verse' for 'flyting, or Inuectiues', a form which entails 'that the maist pairt of your lyne sall rynne vpon a letter'.¹⁶ More importantly, the dialogic structure of the flytings is also evident here. Rather than merely consisting of disconnected insults, Hary's exchange follows the 'highly stylized' pattern described by Carol Clover, as 'the exchange...is characterized by logical and syntactic parallelism: questions and answers, counterposed speeches, recurrent phrases'.¹⁷ This parallelism is evident in the innuendos and symbols that occur throughout the duel. For instance, both Wallace and

¹²'The Flyting of Dunbar and Kennedy', in *Poems of Dunbar*, p.78, vv.55-56.

¹³'The flyting of Montgomery and Polwart', Alexander Montgomerie, *Poems*, ed. by David J. Parkinson (Edinburgh: Scottish Text Society, 2000), p.175, v.12. On this point, see Sally Mapstone, 'Invective as Poetic: The Cultural Contexts of Polwarth and Montgomerie's *Flyting*', *Scottish Literary Journal*, 26 (1999), 18-40.

¹⁴Priscilla Bawcutt, 'A Miniature Anglo-Scottish Flyting', *Notes and Queries*, 223 (1988), 441-44; Gregory Kratzmann, *Anglo-Scottish Literary Relations 1430-1550* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), pp.156-57.

¹⁵Thorlac Turville-Petre, *The Alliterative Revival* (Cambridge: Boydell and Brewer, 1977), p.118.

¹⁶James I, *The Essayes of a prentise, in the diuine art of poesie*, ed. Edward Arber (London: English Reprints, 1869), p.63.

¹⁷Carol J. Clover, 'The Germanic Context of the Unferth Episode', *Speculum*, 55 (1980), 444-68 (p.452).

his interlocutor accept the metaphor of 'lang suorde' for the penis, although the Englishman shortens it to a less impressive 'knyff'. It is also evident in the way the speakers seize on and revise aspects of one another's speech: thus Wallace's first riposte to the Englishman takes up his mocking 'pardown me', as he states 'Sic pardoune as we haiff...thow sall nocht craiff'. The Englishman for his part burlesques Wallace's Gaelic after learning he is a Scot. The structure the text assumes in its final lines further emphasises this sense of balance and response, as each speaker often completes a couplet the other has begun: hence when he is asked 'Quhat caus has thow to wer that gudlye greyne?', Wallace replies 'My maist caus is bot for to mak the teyne'. Clearly, the vehemence of the abuse is only as important as the extent to which it engages with and revises the words of the opponent. In short, the exchange in which Hary involves Wallace follows many of the contours of later flyting texts.

The resemblance of this dialogue to other, self-avowed flytings has a number of implications. The piece cannot of course be classified as a full-blooded flyting in its own right, as there is no reason to suppose that it represents a real interchange, especially in a poem that has little 'claim to historical accuracy' as a whole.¹⁸ Nevertheless, it does seem to follow the conventions of flyting fairly closely, perhaps deliberately striving to evoke them. As such, it suggests that these conventions were already in place by the time it was composed. This in turn might allow the date of flyting as a ritual to be pushed further back than has hitherto been possible. Since the *Wallace* seems to date from the 1470s, during the reign of James III, it predates the Walter and Kennedy exchange by at least two decades.¹⁹ Given Hary's connection to the royal court, or at least to noble households at Craigie or Halkerstone, it may even show flyting to be a distinctly aristocratic ritual at this point in its history, as it undeniably was by the sixteenth century.²⁰ In fact, a similar story is told by another Scottish work of quasi-historiography, Sir Gilbert Hay's *Buik of Alexander*, composed for Lord Thomas of Erskine in c.1460. This features a number of brief insult-exchanges which echo Hary's scurrilous dialogue: throughout the text Alexander trades abuse with a variety of eastern leaders, being branded 'a knaife, ane rever, and ane theife' by Darius of Persia and a 'young wantoun' by Nicholas of Media, before responding to each in kind.²¹ At any rate, the *Wallace* certainly shows some-

¹⁸ David Daiches, *A Critical History of English Literature*, 2 vols (London: Secker and Warburg, 1960), II, 507.

¹⁹ McDiarmid, 'The Date of the *Wallace*', 30-31.

²⁰ M.H. Keen, *The Outlaws of Medieval Legend* (London: Routledge, 1987), p.xx.

²¹ Gilbert Hay, *The Buik of King Alexander the Conqueror*, ed. by John Cartwright, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: Scottish Text Society, 1986-90), I, pp.57, 33, vv.2225, 1273. On these exchanges, see G.H.V. Bunt, *Alexander the Great in the Literature of Medieval Britain* (Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 1994), pp.66-67.

thing of the high value attached to abusive eloquence in Scottish vernacular culture. Hary's objective was to create a national hero, a figurehead for 'the ideal of an independent Scotland', and the fact that he counts an ability to swear impressively among Wallace's powers shows the regard in which such behaviour was held.²²

²²Richard J. Moll, "'Off quhat nacioun art thou?': National Identity in Blind Hary's *Wallace*", in *History, Literature and Music in Scotland, 700-1560*, ed. by R. Andrew MacDonald (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), pp.120-43 (p.135).