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Reforming Rhetoric: The Immodest Proposals of David Lyndsay

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David Lyndsay (c.1486-1555) began his life at the Scottish court as attendant to the first and short-lived Prince James in 1508, thereafter holding the positions of Usher and Master Usher to his elder brother James V, working alongside Gavin Dunbar, who provided the prince's tutelage from the age of six. While Dunbar remained as tutor to James for a further two years after Archibald Douglas, the Earl of Angus, became the young prince's guardian, Lyndsay lost his position at court in 1524. James escaped from the supervision of the Douglasses and commenced his personal rule *de facto* in 1528 and Lyndsay appears back in the exchequer rolls as an Usher shortly after this. By 1530 he is reported to be conducting the duties associated with that of a royal herald. He later held the office of Lyon King at Arms, Scotland's Chief Herald.

Lyndsay is now remembered primarily for his play *Ane Satyre of the Thrie Estaitis* (1540) a work whose literary and cultural significance has the potential to define its author, as is suggested by Walter Scott's appreciation in *Marmion* (Scott, 2003):

The flash of that satiric rage,
Which, bursting on the early stage,
Branded the vices of the age,
And broke the keys of Rome.
[...]
Still is thy name in high account,
And still thy verse has charms,
Sir David Lindesay of the Mount,
Lord Lion King-at-arms! (IV:7.124-154)

In describing Lyndsay's satirical rage against the 'vices of the age', Scott echoes the sentiments of Henry Charteris, the Edinburgh burgess, publisher and patron of John Scot's 1568 first edition of Lyndsay's collected 'Warkis'. In his preface Charteris describes Lyndsay's 'ingenious poetical inventionis', juxtaposing his personal and creative virtues against a 'tyme of sa greit and blind ignorance, of manifest and horribill abhominacionis and abusus' (Hamer 1930, 397). Charteris's pro-Protestant reading, however, ignores Lyndsay's humanist credentials that provide an important background to his call for a 'spiritual and moral renaissance' (Edington 1994, 147). As Lynch highlights, the court of James IV into which Lyndsay was first employed stood at the head of a dynamic cultural confluence (2003, 160), and although the Scottish court at this time was influenced by a 'complex and shifting set of elements', the figure of the king still 'lay at the heart of an intricate web' of religious and socio-political interaction (Carpenter 2000, 137-138). Lyndsay's regicentric verse develops the figure of an archetypal Christian king, a just monarch whose sound moral judgment would ensure the temporal and spiritual welfare of all three estates. By repeatedly referencing his relationships with James IV and James V in his poetry, Lyndsay provides this figure with an additional level of rhetorical strength.

In *A Modest Proposal* (1729) Jonathan Swift's concern for the public good sees him deliver an ironic and unsettlingly macabre political parody, satirizing the mercantile and dehumanizing attitudes being openly expressed regarding the validity of preserving an impoverished underclass. Swift develops the suggested 'modesty' of the pamphlet's proposal—to let the Irish farm their children as a cash crop—into a potent rhetorical conceit, displaying the literary prowess of a satirist capable of redefining a genre while attempting to bring about social reform. Unlike the canonical literary appreciation for

Jonathan Swift's work, the satirical aspect of Lyndsay's writing has often distracted critics from the rhetorical playfulness and literary complexities on display. T.F. Henderson's judgement that Lyndsay 'was less a poet than a political and social reformer' (1910, 116) demonstrates how the pervasive view of Lyndsay as an anti-clerical polemist has resulted in the marginalization of his poetic abilities. Maurice Lindsay, in a similar vein, suggests that Lyndsay was a 'writer who would sell his soul for a rhyme', being 'so much a preacher with a purpose that he ceased to be a poet' (1948, 8). Lindsay goes on to suggest that Lyndsay's verse forms an 'attractive outhouse' in contrast to William Dunbar's 'main building' (1948, 8). Similarly, William Barclay lauds Lyndsay's contribution to the 'world of practical ideas' (1956, 353) over any literary prowess, while Matthew McDiarmid depicts Lyndsay as a 'practical moralist', and, although he views *Ane Satyre* as an outstanding example of the 'theatre of the absurd', McDiarmid continues to lend support to the traditional sectarian debate regarding the specifics of Lyndsay's 'theological position' (1977, 8-15). This debate regarding Lyndsay's 'confessional status' (1994, 146) is, as Edington rightly states, an academic 'red herring' (Edington 1991, 418), and whether he should be described as a 'reforming Catholic' or a 'Catholic-minded reformer' (Kenneth 1950, 91) is to equally lose sight of the important didactic intent operating within the poetry.

Such readings demonstrate the lack of 'critical paradigms' (Heijnsbergen 2004, 198) available in Anglo-American literary studies to discuss the European intellectual maelstrom that shaped Scottish culture during the first half of the sixteenth century. Counteracting these readings is the research of Janet Hadley Williams (2000), Carol Edington (1994) and Theo van Heijnsbergen (1998 & 2004) which seeks to establish a broader range of historical and

critical approaches, allowing Lyndsay's verse to be seen within the wider European literary context. Continuing this reappraisal of Lyndsay's *scriptible* verse, Kevin McGinley illustrates how Lyndsay's poetics express a 'polysemous, multi-voiced rhetoric' (2004, 1) whose ambivalence and multi-layeredness invites various, and often oppositional, readings from different audiences. In relation to Lyndsay's perspective on the use of vernacular language, however, there can be little ambiguity. As Gregory Kratzmann notes in relation to Lyndsay's *The Testament of The Papyngo* (1530), the poem's address to an unlearned audience, the 'rurall folke' (67)¹ is 'something more deeply felt than the usual modesty topos' (1988, 106). This establishes the notion, essayed further in the 'Exclamatioun to the Redar' in *Ane Dialogue Betwix Experience and Ane Courteour* (1553), that the audience for his poetry includes all those who use the 'toug maternall' (53), the language of common speech, which Lyndsay argues, is the true medium for the transmission of God's word.

This paper focuses on just one facet of Lyndsay's 'ingenious poetical inventionis', namely his employment and development of the trope of modesty. In *Ane Dialog* this trope is used to further Lyndsay's socio-political and religious ends while positioning the author, the text and the reader in relation to each other. Lyndsay's use of modesty in his early poetry of advice and complaint establishes a context for this later application where his focus widens beyond the preoccupation with the educational and political development of the young monarch to the extended exploration of the temporal nature of earthly monarchies as witnessed in *Ane Dialog*. Thus, Lyndsay's

¹ All citations of Lyndsay's poetry are from Williams (2000) with the exception of those from 'Ane Exhortatioun Gyffin be Father Experience Vnto his Sone the Curteour' which refer to Hamer (1931).

implied audience shifts from that of the king to the kingdom, his reforming agenda extending beyond the court to the country.

The opening of Lyndsay's *The Dreme* (c.1526) depicts the poet-persona within the service of the young king, with the past tense construction of 'my seruyce done' (3) and 'excerst in seruyce' (6) being used to let the poem's implied recipient know that patronage is not being sought through the promise of future deeds, but rather, acts to remind the king that royal patronage would be the only just desert for service already conducted (McGinley 2005, 7-9). In 'The Complaynt of Schir David Lyndsay' (c.1530) a similar plea for patronage is used to call upon James to exercise justice and exert his authority in relation to the clergy so they may be reformed in accordance with the 'comounweill'. Comparing Lyndsay's *The Dreme*, 'The Complanynt' and 'Ane Answeir to the Kingis Flyting' (c.1535) with William Dunbar's 'Complaint to The King', 'Remonstrance to the King' and 'New's Gift to The King', we find similar references to the poet's long service, lists of unworthies, and the desire that the monarch's rule will further peace and justice. Despite the poetic dexterity of Dunbar's appeals, they lack the breadth of intimate detail or sense of familiarity between the persona and the implied audience. Where Dunbar artistically vies for patronage, Lyndsay suggests how best it should be delivered. In reminding the young king that he has been too long overlooked, being so long in want of 'recompence' (52), Lyndsay's 'Complanynt' is reminiscent of the petitions made by Johne the Comounweill in *The Dreme* and *Ane Satyre of the Thrie Estatis*, who laments that he has been long 'ouerlukit' (2447), being forced to tolerate impoverishment while the corrupt prosper.

The implied intimacy between poet and patron in *The Dreme* is created through a series of domestic vignettes which detail

Lyndsay's service to the young prince from the moment of his 'natyuitie' (23), being his 'purs maister and secreit theasaurare' (22), 'Yschare' (23) and chamber groom. After *The Dreime's* opening epistle to the reader establishes the relationship between author and audience, Lyndsay's persona delivers an apology for his inability to do adequate literary service to the poem's true 'mater':

Bot humlie I beseik thyne excellence,
 With ornate termes thocht I can nocht expres
 This sempyll mater for laik of eloquence,
 Yit nocht withstanding all my besynes,
 With hart and hand my mynd I sall adres
 As I best can and moste compendious.
 Now I begyn. The mater hapit thus (50-56).

The kernel of the poem's matter is then suspended until the prologue, 13 stanzas of high style rhyme royal, has sufficiently demonstrated the poet's ability in aureate description, performed deftly despite the persona's self-professed 'laik of Eloquence'.

The opening stanzas of the prologue form an inverted *locus amoenus*, with the descriptions of the transmutability of the natural world acting as a pathetic fallacy to express the moribund and restless state of mind of the persona who is depicted 'Musing and marvelling on the misirie/Frome day to day in erth quhilk dois increas' (118-19). After decrying the moral 'instabilitie' (120) of the human 'mynd' (122), order is re-established in the natural world with Phebus ascending to his celestial throne, his 'fyrie chariot tryumphant' (176) illuminating all creation. Through the contemplation and appreciation of a higher beauty the persona temporally forgets his 'warldie cure' (188). This device is similarly employed in Dunbar's 'Mediation in Wyntir' and 'Of the Changes of Life', and while the brevity of both of Dunbar's poems ensure an exactitude of expression and tightness of form that is absent from Lyndsay's poetics, Lyndsay's

knowing use of form and device nonetheless reveal a poet who is clearly inspired by his subject matter and is confident about his ability to convey it to his audience. The allegorical and didactic nature of the dream vision as a poetic form provides the perfect vehicle to convey a persuasive argument as to why the king should rule justly. However, Lyndsay, with an eye ever on the hourglass, closes *The Dreme* by reminding the king of the short tenure of his mortal rule, the conventional *momento mori* serving to contextualise earthly monarchies within a larger historical and spiritual context. This earthly monarchy/divine kingdom juxtaposition is revisited in ‘The Complaynt’ with the king being reminded that he is ‘bot ane instrument/To that gret kyng omnipotent’ (499-500), being himself a subject to a truly divine ruler:

For David, kyng of Israeli,
 Quhilk was the gret propheit royall,
 Sayis God hes haill at his command,
 The hartis of prencis in his hand;
 Evin as he lyste thame for to turne,
 That mon thay do withoute sudgeorne;
 Sum tyll exault to dignitie,
 And sum to depryve, in povertie,
 Sum tyme, of lawid men to mak lordis,
 And sum tyme, lordis to bynd in cordis
 And thame alutterlye distroye,
 As plesis God, that ryall roye. (484-98)

Just as his views on kingship are delivered within the context of an implicit relationship between poet and recipient, Lyndsay’s statements of explicit modesty in regard to his poetic abilities are conceits for his audience to recognise and be amused by; he confesses falsely before his reader so he may be found out, wishing to be contradicted in their judgement. The concepts of confession and performance are important features of Lyndsay’s use of literary

modesty, particularly in ‘The Epistill’, ‘The Prolog’ and ‘Exclamtioun to the Redar’ of *Ane Dialog*, allowing his poetic idiom to serve both his political and spiritual ends.

The opening epistle of *Ane Dialog* sees the poet-persona metafictionally address the text, defining it as a ‘lytill quair, of mater miserabyll’ (1), describing how its appearance should mirror its contents by suggesting that ‘weil auchtest thou coverit be with sabyll’ (2). Expressing the hope that his verse will advance ‘the sincier word of God’ (74) by reaching the ear of both the nobility and the clergy, the Courteour briefly recalls the biblical accounts of the Flood, Sodom and Gomorra, and the destruction of Jerusalem, so by establishing both the apocalyptic and didactic tone of the poem. The opening address also provides the opportunity to register the poem’s first modesty *topos*; apologizing for the use of ‘rurall ryme’ (101), the lack ‘Off Rhetorick’ (103) and ‘Ornat terms’ (110). The reader is advised to exercise ‘pacience’ (115) over their reading. The metaphor developed is that of ‘brutall beistis’ (113) grazing on ‘weidis’ (112) in seemingly ‘Barran fields’ (112). Employing beast-fable imagery comparable with Henryson’s opening stanza of ‘The Cock and The Fox’ in the *Morall Fabillis of Esope the Phrygian* (c.1450–1505), the suggestion is that, unlike the ‘brutall beistis’, the Christian reader has a soul and the God-given capacity for improvement, the ability to be ‘amendit’ (170) through thought and deed. The imagery of ‘brutall beistis’ is reworked again in Part Three of *Ane Dialog*, where the destruction of Sodom and Gomorra is presented as the natural consequence of the ‘vnnaturall’ (3395) behaviour of their citizens, who ‘Lyke brutall beistis, by thare myndis,/Unnaturally abusit thare kyndis’ (3398–3399). Echoing the earlier passage in the epistle, the didactic intent here is to reinforce the understanding that any temporal monarchy is always answerable to a higher authority, an

authority whose rule is all encompassing and whose judgment is absolute:

Thae Kyng, thare Quene, and peple all,
Young and auld, brynt in poulder small.
No Creature wes left on lyfe,
Foulis, Beistis, Man, nor Wyfe. (3462-3465)

Unsatisfied with leaving the proofs of God's fearful judgement as historical parables, Experience gives the warning that 'God sall slak his bow' (72) only when 'the peple doith repent' (71), thus bringing the significance of scriptural teachings into a contemporary setting. This is further supported by the plea aimed at those who 'have gouverance' (74) to 'conforme to Christis Institutioun' (76) before God's wrath is again invoked. By identifying his audience and addressing them directly, Lyndsay plays his part in directing his readers toward the 'straucht way' (23), and establishing his 'lytil quair' as a Christian handbook as well as a source text for social reform.

Despite the epistle's modest apology for the absence of ornate rhetoric, *Ane Dialog's* prologue launches forth in gilded terms, describing the May morning on which the persona awakes to confront the 'malancole' (127) brought on by his musings on the vices of humanity. Delivering a display piece of high style Classical allusions concerning 'Phebus', 'Synthea', 'Venus', 'Jupiter, Mars, and Mercuruis', 'Saturne', 'Neptune' and 'Eoll' (139-185), and an elaborate blazon to Dame Nature's artistry, the prologue forms an explicit display of Lyndsay's poetic authority, foreshadowing the authoritative delivery for the didactic histories which follow. Berating himself for wasting his time rehearsing such an 'vnfrutul and vaine descriptioun' (203) in 'raggit rurall vers' (204), the Courteour informs the reader that it will be in 'roustye termes' (213), not

‘termes bryght’ (211) that he will rehearse his mournful ‘mater’ (213).

Graham Caie (2003) explores how Henryson uses modesty *topoi* in *The Testament of Cresseid* to justify the authority and demonstrate the creativity of the vernacular poet, and I would argue that Lyndsay’s adopts a similar ploy in *Ane Dialog* to show his artful control of rhetoric and his creativity as a storyteller. For Lyndsay, however, it is not enough that Scots (‘Inglis’) is seen to have validity as a medium for poetry and storytelling; his task is to justify why it should replace Latin as the mother tongue of the Church. It is perhaps of little wonder that divine assistance is sought to help with such an undertaking:

Withoute ony vaine invocatioun
 To Minerva or to Melpominee,
 Nor yitt wyll I mak supplicatioun
 [...]
 Raveand Rhammusia, goddes of dispyte,
 Mycht be to me ane muse rycht convenabyll,
 Gyff I desyrit sic help for tyll indyte
 This murnyng mater, mad, and miscrabyll.
 I mon go seik ane muse more confortabyll
 And sic vaine superstitioun to refuse,
 Beseikand the gret God to be my muse, (216–243)

To call upon a Classical muse would be the expression of a ‘vaine superstitioun’, and although recognising the eloquence of the pagan poets, he dispenses with elaborate allusion and calls upon God by name in a manner more akin to the Psalms than epic poetry. As well as a conventional trope, Lyndsay’s modesty in regard to his poetic abilities is also an indication of the value he attributes to his subject matter; rejecting a series of potential Classical deities in favour of a heavenly muse, Lyndsay’s Courteour calls upon the assistance that will turn his poetry in verse of ‘wysdome’ and ‘eloquence’ (285), just as Christ ‘conuertit cauld water’ into ‘wyne’ (296).

Choosing Calvary over Parnassus, the Courteour describes how drinking the water which is mixed with Christ's blood will save his verse from 'schame and syn' (298). The powerful allusion to the sacramental wine is used to suggest the possibility of moral correction, for both the poet and the reader, leading ultimately to the salvation made possible through Christ's passion. In a similar vein, Gavin Douglas's invocation of the muse in the Prologue of *The Eneados* [I:453] necessarily stops short of Lyndsay's direct addresses, forming instead a synthesis of Classical and Christian allusions which equate Calliopee with the 'Virgyn moder and madyn' and 'Sibill' with 'Christ's moder dear' (Prologue VI:145). While Douglas is striving to innovate as well as translate for a gentile audience, Lyndsay is free to address his 'hevinly muse' directly, yet like the Calliope of Douglas's *Palis of Honoure*, who mediates on behalf of the persona and ensures both atonement and harmonious rule, the Courteour's muse is the creator of order and harmony, who 'maid all thing of nocht' (246), and placed 'Hell in the mid centir of the Elementis' (247). The notion of a well governed, divinely ordered universe is first employed by Lyndsay in *The Dreame*, with Dame Remembrance guiding the poet through the divisions of Hell and Heaven and the revolutions of the celestial spheres, before juxtaposing a vision of universal harmony with the disorderly kingdom of contemporary Scotland. *Ane Dialog* laments Scotland's fallen state further and in a far more sustained manner, suggesting that it is not only the king and clergy but every Christian who must reform. For this national reform to happen the lay community must have, as the Courteour suggests, the 'bukis necessare' in the Scots 'toug vulgare' (600) as

Thocht every commoun may nocht be one clerk,
 Nor hes no leid except thare toung maternall,
 Quhy suld of God the marvellous hevinly werk
 Be hid frome thame? I thynk it nocht fraternall. (552-55)

Highlighting the importance of a common language, Lyndsay's persona is calling for direct access to biblical texts to allow interpretation without clerical mediation. To illustrate his point he compares the 'bairns of Israell' (561), who were taught Moses's laws in their own 'vulgare language of Hebrew' (560), with the 'devote cunnyng Clerkis' (545) of Scotland's priesthood, who preach sermons in the 'Latyne toung' (546) to 'unlernit' congregations who 'knewis lytill of thare werkis' (547). Turning from biblical to Classical sources, the examples of Aristotle, Plato, Virgil and Cicero are cited as authors who wrote in the language that was 'naturall' (575) to them. He also uses the example of Saint Jerome, who translated 'The Law of God' (624) into his maternal language from Hebrew and Greek, suggesting that if Saint Jerome had been born in Argyle in 16th Century he would have written in Irish (627-8).

The series of literary precursors establishes a Judeo-Christian genealogy of language, demonstrating how God's word has been transcribed from Hebrew into Greek and Latin in turn, the next proposed stage being its transmission into the vernacular. Using the example of the apostle Paul who taught Christ gospel in 'the divers leid of every land' (630), Lyndsay argues that if people could 'pray and reid' (648) in their own language they would better equipped to understand the teachings being delivered to them from the pulpit, as well as being able to comply with the laws derived from Christian doctrine. The closing stanza provides a concise summation of this argument, and with the absence of authorial distance safeguarding against intentional fallacy, the reader can safely equate this stanza directly with Lyndsay's authorial intent:

Bot lat us haif the bukis necessare
 To commoun weill and our salvatioun,
 Justlye translatit in our toung vulgare.
 And als I mak the supplicatioun:
 O gentyll redar, haif none indignatioun,
 Thynkand I mell me with so hie matair.
 Now to my purpose fordwart wyll I fair.
 (678-84)

Ane Dialog closes with an exhortation from ‘Experience to the Courteour’ in which Experience provides a last few words of comfort and advice before the Courteour begins the task of composing the poem. A final modesty *topos* addresses the reader, once again excusing the author’s ‘rurall rude Indyte’ (6335), but the closing remark to let God be the judge gestures towards the presence of a greater authority than any earthly patron or gentile reader:

And sped me home, with hert sychyng full sore,
 And enterit in my quyet Oritore.
 I tuke paper, and thare began to wryt
 This Miserie, as ye haue hard afore.
 All gentyll Redaris hertlye I Implore
 For tyll excuse my rurall rude Indyte.
 Thought Phareseis wyll haue at me dispyte,
 Quhilkis wald not *that* thare craftynes wer kend,
 Latt God be luge: and so I mak ane end. (6330-38)

As has been discussed, Lyndsay’s use of literary modesty repeatedly draws the reader’s attention to the supposed naturalness of vernacular language, the idiom which he argues should be the chief medium for the transmission of biblical texts. Throughout *Ane Dialog* the acts of reading and interpretation are repeatedly referenced, with such authorial intrusions as ‘reid thee with pacience’ (115), ‘tak tent: for now I purpose to begyn’ (299), ‘mark weill in thy memory’ (6267) and ‘consydder, in thy contemplatioun’ (6285), serving to remind the reader that despite the poem’s lowly ‘rurall rhymes’ and ‘rustye termes’ its subject matter is of the highest import, being the salvation of the reader and the restoration the church into an institution that is once again fit for purpose. Belying the rhetorically

playful addresses to the reader are the vehement complaints of a humanist reformer calling for the word of God to be reinstated into the common language of the people, a far from modest proposal.

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