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Textual problems and the *Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue* (1977)¹

Edited by Caroline Macafee, 2015

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[13] As I hope to describe elsewhere,² the collections of the *Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue* (DOST) were assembled by what would now be regarded as somewhat haphazard methods, and depend mainly on the work of amateur excerptors. One consequence of this is that we have to handle in the actual editing of the dictionary many problems which could be roughly classed as 'textual', some at least of which professional excerptors could have dealt with in the actual process of excerpting.

A problem of this sort which is rather prevalent with literary Older Scots is that we have almost no holograph literary texts; nearly all are distanced by one or many recensions from their presumed originals; and this is true of some record texts as well. To take one well-known example, most of the texts of Robert Henryson's poems are of upwards of a century later than the dates of actual composition, with the result that the spellings used are *not* evidence of spellings current at the time of composition, that now and again an obsolete word has been replaced by a different one and that several whole passages have evidently been entirely rewritten after the Reformation to eliminate pre-Reformation theological allusions, such as references to the Virgin or to the doctrine of salvation by works. Evidently this sort of thing wants careful handling, something reviewers of the dictionary often fail to appreciate when they reprove us for over-looking a supposed early example which belongs only to these late witnesses. So we have to weigh the variant readings of rival texts and to decide in each case whether a given form belongs to the date of composition or merely of copying.

Sheer textual corruptions of course we commonly leave to the editors of the texts. Our business is to display the attested lexical usages of the language with the help of which textual editors can resolve the anomalies of their texts, but not to provide a record of what we judge to be mere scribal blunders or the lapses of printers.

We must nevertheless face the dilemmas arising from the innumerable ambiguities of Older Scottish handwriting and, at a higher level, of its orthographic system. We have a lot of difficulty, one way and another, with minims: in most handwritings the letters *m*, *n*, *u*, and miniscule *i* are indistinguishable except on a count of minims and of course the scribes'

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The text has been edited for uniformity of style with other Aitken papers. 'Scottish' has been replaced by 'Scots' with reference to the language. The original page numbers are shown in square brackets. All notes are editorial.

² AJA writes about excerption densities in 'Historical dictionaries, word frequency distributions and the computer' (1978), and about methodology generally in 'DOST: How we make it and what's in it' (1982, 2015).

counting is unreliable anyway: hence, for example, the sequences *un-* and *im-* and *ini-* may often be indistinguishable, and I shall mention one or two confusions resulting from this in a moment. From rhymes and from unambiguous spellings like <abufe> or <abuve> we know that the word ‘above’ was represented, among others, by doublet forms /abȳv/ and /abȳn/; but the spelling <abune>, supposedly /abȳn/, when unconfirmed by rhyme, might just as well be read <abuue> i.e. /abȳv/. Another such case is <grene> (a patch of grass) and <greue> (a grove), and there are lots of others. Other problems arise from the similarity of long *s* and *f*, for example in the words *list* and *lift*, both meaning ‘to enlist’ but of different chronologies, or *muffell* and *mussell* both meaning ‘a woman’s chin-cloth’. The letters *c* and *t*, which were mostly indistinguishable, occasionally cause similar difficulties, for example in the doublet forms *practick* and *prattick*, which in most manuscripts must really be indistinguishable. So do the manuscript abbreviations, especially the curl which stood for <er> and <ar> or sometimes <ri> and <re>. It used to be believed that the Older Scottish forms of the word *mark* (the name of the money) and *market* were <merk> and <mercat>. This arose because these words usually have this abbreviation and modern Scottish editors, anxious to give their^[14] texts as Scottish as possible, invariably preferred to expand the abbreviation as <er>. In fact, when these words are written in full they always turn out to be written <ar> until well into the 16th century.

The spelling system itself offers still more opportunities for ambiguity. The letter *y*, for example, varies with *ȝ* in words like *ȝere* and *ȝong* and with *th* in words like *the*, *this*, *thre*, and *uther*;³ the letters *u*, *v*, and *w* more or less freely interchange; among the vowels, spellings with *e* are pretty ambiguous as between three different phonemes, and this gives rise to innumerable homonyms; *o* and *u* often interchange; and there are many other similar cases both among the vowels and the consonants. So we get problems like that of <love>. Is this /lōv/ (to praise, OE *lofian*) or /lȳv/ (to love, OE *lufian*) in the numerous ambiguous cases? Or, rather differently, do the spellings <lowabill> and <louabill> stand for the definitely attested *lovabill* (praiseworthy) or the dubiously attested *louable* (from OF *louable*), also meaning ‘praiseworthy’? In DOST we commonly enter phonemic doublets and variants like *laich* and *lauch* and *law* (all three meaning ‘low’) separately. So what do we do with the spelling <lach> which could be an orthographic variant of either *laich* or *lauch*? For that matter what do we do with the same spelling, when it may be interpreted as either /lāx/ or /lēx/⁴ (a hollow) or /laʃ/ (a marsh)? Once we reach this point we may expect a little trouble with the *y-th* confusion when we have to deal with the singular second person pronoun, nominative *thow*, oblique case *the* (or <yow> and <ye>), and the corresponding plural, nominative *ȝe*, oblique *ȝow* (or <ye> and <yow>), and the breakdown of these distinctions with the introduction of invariable *you* <you, yow> in the late 16th century.

Some of these problems are complicated by the editorial policies of the majority of the editions we have to use. About forty or fifty of these editions are reliable diplomatic or near diplomatic editions, more than half of them in ‘Domesday’ or ‘record’ type. But the great majority are by national or local historians and aimed primarily at other historians, and these practise all sorts of minor normalisations which in an ideal world we might deplore, normalising to modern practice *ȝ* and *y*, *y* and *th*, *u*, *v* and *w*, and others, and expanding abbreviations without notice and with mutual inconsistency. It can be seen how this could aggravate some of the difficulties I have just mentioned.

Problems of this sort we have to handle by a judicious mixture of *ad hoc* editorial and palaeographic research, arbitrary decision and guesswork. For the *merk*, *mercat* problem we had to look at manuscripts, original prints, facsimiles and diplomatic texts. But the <love>

³ Editor’s note: in the latter group, *y* represents earlier *ȝ*.

⁴ Editor’s note: i.e. vowel 12 or vowel 4.

problem (i.e. either *love* or *luve*) is infeasible: in cases like this all we can do is inform the reader of the ambiguity. Most often, to save time, we simply accept the given texts of our textual editors, unless these seem obviously wrong, and warn the reader of the alternative possibilities.

Of course all editions also make positive mistakes and there are some editions so inaccurate as to be unusable and others which have to be used sparingly and critically. Some mistakes are easy to spot and rectify, like the word <linit stanes> which appeared in one text when the context clearly required <lunt-staues> (linstocks, sticks for holding the matches for guns), or <inventioun> which appears in a number of editions as an error for <munitioun>. Others are more deceptive, like the game <kyles>, which appeared in three editions of Older Scots texts. This seemed plausible, since the name corresponds to a present day Scots form of *quoits*. But on checking the originals, all three turned out to be misreadings of <kyles>, the common Older Scots name of the game of ninepins. Some editors are capable of passing from original text to modernised paraphrase without notice and, since Older Scots in some of its manifestations is very like Modern English, our amateur excerptors do not always spot this. Some of them even fail to notice a transition from original text to paraphrase when the editors *do* signal this. The result is a crop of potential ghost-quotations, which, if they have been missed in our over-hasty^[15] vetting of the excerption, have to be detected and weeded out at the editing stage.

Some of our excerptors too, both amateurs and others, themselves lay traps for us. No doubt other historical dictionary editors will be familiar with the excerptors' trick of shortening the context so as to make the keyword seem of a different word-class or different application from the one which a more complete context would show. But few will be as familiar with this trick as we are on DOST. One quotation (for the adjective *partiall*, which most often means 'biased or prejudiced'), as first provided, read:

That [with dots to mark an omission] thair adherents should be equall partial
or, one would suppose, 'That their adherents are equally biased'. The quotation *should* have read:

That the iniureis done to ony of them or to thair adherentis sould be equall partiall
to thame all

i.e. 'That the injuries done to any of them or to their supporters should be shared equally or treated as common to them all', which thus displays quite a different use of the adjective. The only safeguard against this sort of thing is the editor's awareness of its possibility, and a willingness to check any likely instance. In addition, all readily accessible quotations are routinely checked before printing. But even though no reviewer has yet spotted any, I could mention a few cases where deceptive quotations of this nature have penetrated all our defences and are masquerading as examples of something they are not, here and there in the Dictionary.

No doubt these expedients seem hand-to-mouth and mildly hazardous beside the perfectionist procedures employed in assembling the collections of some contemporary historical dictionaries. In some of the latter, such as the *Dictionary of Old English*, all editions to be used are collated with the original manuscripts before any excerpting is carried out and many texts are edited afresh in full before being excerpted. But with upwards of 2000 (often very large) volumes to cover and in constant penury of time and man-power there was no question of this for DOST. Nor do I believe the few plausible but erroneous readings which have caught us out form more than a tiny proportion of the total or falsify our results to any noticeable extent.

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