

MEDIEVAL ASTROLOGY AND *THE BUKE OF THE SEVYNE SAGIS*

THE OLDEST LATIN prose text of the story of the seven sages, *Historia Septem Sapientum*, appears in the Innsbruck MS v. J., dated 1342.¹ Catherine Van Buuren, editor of the Middle Scots version of the tale, *The Buke of the Sevyne Sagis*, which is contained in the early sixteenth-century Asloan MS,² offers this Latin text as the most probable source for the Scottish poem,³ and agrees with Killis Campbell⁴ and Karl Brunner⁵ that the Middle Scots text is not connected with the Middle English versions.⁶ Although various accounts of the seven wise men who are engaged by the Emperor to instruct his son, and who come to their pupil's aid by telling stories in order to prolong his life, have generally similar plots, they vary greatly in detail. Two details that appear in the Middle Scots poem and are not found in either the Latin or Middle English versions are the poet's insistent use of the word "science" and his emphasis on the particular science of astronomy. This essay compares these texts, using the introductory material and two of the tales, and offers a general overview of the varying attitudes in Scotland toward astronomy and its cousin astrology during the Middle Ages. The assertion here is that the Scottish poet's insistence on portraying astronomy as a proper and useful field of scholarly endeavour in the *Sevyne Sagis* represents his personal stand on an issue that was of both popular interest and some controversy at the time. It also indicates a politically savvy author adapting source material to produce a text that would appeal to his monarch, James III, during whose reign the poem was written, according to Van Buuren, and whose interest in this area of study is well known.

The story of the seven sages of Rome is a familiar one. The widowed Emperor of Rome has only one son whose education he entrusts to seven wise men, the sages, who take the young man outside the city, build a proper school room, and instruct him over a period of years. The Emperor, meanwhile, takes another wife. The new Empress asks to see her husband's son and the Emperor instructs the sages to bring the boy back to Rome immediately or face death. When the sages receive this command they examine the stars, however, and see that if they take the boy to Rome he will be killed. When this news is delivered to the young man, he examines the heavens himself and sees what his masters did not: that if, upon returning to Rome, he can remain silent for a period of seven days, his life will be spared. The sages recognise his superior skill in reading the heavens, and each one agrees to distract the Emperor for one day until seven days have passed when the boy may speak without fear. They all

return to Rome, the Emperor discovers that his son is mute, and the Empress takes the boy off to her chamber promising that she will make him speak. Instead, however, she tries to seduce the boy. When she fails she screams, tears her face and hair, and tells her husband that the young man tried to rape her. The boy of course remains silent, and the Emperor sentences his son to death. When the first sage hears this, he offers to tell the Emperor a story if he will delay the boy's sentence for one day, which is what happens. After the sage tells his story, the Empress follows with one of her own, and the remainder of the work consists of tales told first by a sage, then by the Empress, until seven days have passed. When the boy can finally speak he tells a story of his own, lets his father know the truth about the Empress, who is then sentenced to death, and the tale ends.

It is useful to begin by comparing the way the sages are initially described to the Emperor in the Latin, Middle English, and Middle Scots texts. Although the Middle Scots text is not connected to the English ones, they serve as a useful backdrop to illustrate the singular nature of the Scottish version of the story. The Latin prose text describes the Sages thus: "Domine, in Roma sunt VII sapientes, qui omnes magistros mundi in sapiencia ac doctrina excellunt. Vnus eorum vocetur et illi puer tradatur ad nutriendum ac doctrinandum."⁷ The emphasis throughout this text is on the wisdom ("sapiencia") and learning or erudition ("doctrina") of the sages, and their collective task to nourish or nurture ("nutriendum"), and to teach or to educate ("doctrinandum") the young man.

The Middle English manuscripts, like the Latin one, also emphasise the wisdom of the sages. In each text they are described as the wisest men in the world. There is some variety in what the Emperor in the various texts wants his son to learn, but except for the Scottish version the Emperors speak in general terms. For example, MS Egerton 1995 describes how the Emperor wanted his son to learn:

And lette byfore hym com sone
The vij sagys that were yn Rome.
To hem he thought his sone take
Forto knowe the letters blacke,
For they were wysyst men leryde
That were Amonge alle mydyltherhe
The Emperoure sayde anon
To the maysterys eurychone
"Whiche of you wille take my sone
To teche hym wysdome, as ye cone?"⁸

Here the Emperor emphasises wisdom and asks that his son be taught "the letters blacke".

The Emperor of Balliol College MS 354 calls for the sages and, as in the Egerton MS, wants his son to be taught the letters black. He tells them:

My son j will betake to you
To teche hym well for your prowē.
Whiche of you shall j hym betake
To teche hym the lettres blake?⁹

Here the ruler values the “prowē”, the virtue, of the sages who, like those in the other manuscripts, are the wisest in all middle-earth.

In the Cambridge University Library MS, Ff. II, 38, the Emperor addresses his sages thus:

Now, lordyngys, he seyde, gente,
Aftur yow vij y haue sente,
I wyll my sone betake yow
To lerne hym wytt and vertue.
Whych of yow dar my sone vndurtake
To lerne hym þat þat ys wreten yn þe letturs bla.. [sic]¹⁰

The emphasis here is on the wisdom of the sages, who, like the others, are to teach the letters black. This Emperor values virtue, and adds “wit” to the storehouse of qualities befitting a prince’s education.

In MS Cotton Galba E. ix, as in the others, the Emperor says to the sages:

My son I wil ȝe haue forþi,
To make him kunand in clergy;
And I wil þat ȝe teche him euyn
Þe sutelte of sience seuyn;
And al ȝowre wisdom and ȝowre wit,
Mi wil es þat ȝe teche him it.¹¹

The emphasis here is on the wisdom, the learning, the wit and the ability of the sages to teach the subtleties of the seven sciences.

The Middle Scots version describes the sages and their first encounter with the Emperor in the following way. The Emperor

[...] than tuke study and gret dolour,
Quhom to he suld the child commyt
To nurys, teche and leir him wit.
In Rome cite than was thar sevyne
Sagis, the wisest vnder hevyne,
For by the sternis thai couth se how
Perellis appeir and tham eschewe.¹²

Here the idea of nourishing and teaching accords with the Latin version; the Emperor wants his son to learn “wit”, as in the Middle English accounts; but the Scottish sages are the wisest under heaven because they

are astrologers who can predict the future. This reference to astrological prediction is the first of several that stand out in the text.

Another example comes later in the introduction when, before they are all called back to Rome, the sages decide to test their pupil to see how well he has learned. One night when the boy is asleep they place one leaf under each leg of his bed and wait to see his reaction when he awakens.¹³ In each version the boy shows surprise, and a little confusion, when he wakes from his sleep. When asked why, the boy's response is similar in each instance: either the ground has been raised or heaven has been lowered. Yet it is the reaction of the sages that is of interest here. The Latin text reads as follows: "Magistri hec audientes inter se dixerent: 'Si puer iste vixerit, aliquit magni erit.'" ¹⁴ In the Egerton and Balliol MSS

þe maistres þo wel vnderstode
He coude inow of alle gode.
þe seuende 3er so tok he on,
He passede his maistres euerichon.¹⁵

The passage in the Cambridge MS is very brief: "Ther by wyste þe mays-tyrs vij/The chylde was wysest vndur heuen".¹⁶ In the Cotton MS

þe maisters þan wele vnderstode
þe childes wit was wonder gode.
Or þe seuin 3ere war gane,
He past his maisters euerilkane.¹⁷

In contrast is the reaction of the Scots in the Asloan MS where "His masteris leuch and knewe for-quhy:/He had yneugh of astronomy".¹⁸ Although the connection between astronomy and the boy's response to his raised bed can be appreciated after having heard the story, it is probably not the obvious reaction that everyone would have. Clearly the authors of the Latin and Middle English manuscripts thought in more general terms.

One more example relating to astronomy comes when the Emperor first tells the sages about his son and each one shows himself eager to teach the boy. In the various texts these passages are repetitive, and just a suggestion of their tenor is needed here. The first sage in the Latin text says: "Lord, give over your son to me for cultivating and learning! And I will cause him to know as much as I know and all that is known by my colleagues within seven years."¹⁹ The second sage follows with:

Lord, for many years I have served you and have accepted no recompense. For recompense I look for nothing except that you give over your son to me for cultivating. And I will cause him to know as much as I know and all that is known by my colleagues within six years.²⁰

Each text follows this general pattern. In the Latin, each sage asks to teach the boy as recompense for previous services to the Emperor, but they do not specify the subject matter to be taught. The Middle English texts vary

in what the sages offer to teach the boy. For example, the first sage in the Egerton MS will teach law,²¹ the fourth all that he can “Of mone and sterre and of the skye”²² (an interesting parallel to the Scottish text), and the others show their eagerness to instruct the boy in various, but general, terms. As for the first sage in the Balliol MS, “Of gramar he do cowlde all þe pars/And also of all the vij ars”²³, he will teach the boy all that he knows. The second Balliol sage, a “clarke and trewe man”²⁴ will teach all he can, and the fourth will teach the boy “Off euery maner mannes speche”²⁵. Two masters in the Cambridge MS will teach all that they “can rede and sayne”²⁶: one offers instruction in the seven arts,²⁷ another in “The art of þe fysches yn the see”²⁸ and another offers teaching on the topic at hand, “All maner of clargye/That are of the sterre and of the skye.”²⁹ The first master in the Cotton MS will instruct the boy in “al þe seuyn artes”³⁰, the third in “Al maner of clergie/þat ani man leres in þis liue”³¹, the fifth in “Als mekil als he mai vnderstand,/And als his wittes wele bere may”³² and the fourth, again close to the topic here, in “þe sienz of Astronomy,/þat falles to sternes of þe sky”³³. This portion of the story, in which the sages, one by one, offer to instruct the young boy, is identical in structure, if varied in detail, in the four Middle English manuscripts cited here. The actual number of lines devoted to the sages’ words in these manuscripts ranges from seventy-nine to ninety-three,³⁴ and the corresponding section in the Latin text is lengthy, mostly because of the repetition. The Scottish text, however, dispatches this episode in a brief thirty-one lines, and the words of the masters are equally brief. The first will teach his pupil “all science”³⁵, the second “Sall teche him in astronomy/All hale the science liberale”³⁶, the fourth will teach “our sciens all”³⁷, the fifth “all thair lair”³⁸ and the seventh “cunnyng”³⁹. The brevity of this section serves significantly to place all the emphasis not only on “science” in general, but on the science of astronomy in particular. The word “astronomy” does not occur in the Latin source, and the Middle English versions include it only occasionally, as one of various other scholarly offerings.

In *The Buke of the Sevyne Sagis*, two of the tales themselves, “Virgilius” and “Sapientes”, contain the theme of the (doctrinally unacceptable) practice of divination by dreams. Both tales deal with false interpreters of dreams and are told by the Empress as she attempts to discredit the Sages and ensure their death and that of her stepson. “Sapientes” is a tale about an emperor who is struck blind each time he ventures out of the palace and asks his seven sages to find the cause of this malady. The sages, upon whom the Emperor relies, also interpret dreams, and as the Scots poet writes, “Thus with thar wylis sic gold thai wan”⁴⁰. When they are unable to discern themselves the cause of the Emperor’s illness they seek help from the child Merlin. They find Merlin, and as they are bringing him to the palace they come across a man with a dream to interpret. Merlin tells the man not to give gold to the sages and that he will interpret the man’s

dream. He does so, his interpretation turns out to be accurate, and the sages take the child to meet the Emperor. The child tells the Emperor that the only way to cure his blindness is to kill the sages. Their death restores his sight and the tale ends. The contrast here is between the covetous sages who work against the Emperor and the honest child, Merlin, who loyally helps him regain both his eyesight and his kingdom. The idea that the sages cannot interpret dreams but are nothing more than covetous and deceitful scoundrels is contrasted with the ability of Merlin, who is an accurate and honest interpreter of dreams.

The tale entitled "Virgilius" involves magic and men who dupe a greedy king in order to make money for themselves. The men tell the king that by dreams they can predict where gold may be found in his city. Their talent is in trickery and not in the reading of dreams, and the story ends tragically for the king. The notion of the interpretation of dreams as a form of learning does not appear in the Latin text but is emphasised in the Scots version. In the Latin source the bounders refer to themselves as "augures tam perfecti" but in the Middle Scots text as "men of lair/Off augure and diuinite".⁴¹ Of interest here is the direct connection the Middle Scots poet makes between learning ("lair") and fortelling the future ("augure"). At one point the con men tell a believing monarch:

Lord, 3e knaw that we haf art,
For we haf all four dremyt our part.
To schaw our sciens 3it attour,
This nycht we schape to dreme all four.⁴²

The representation of dreams as a way of foretelling the future as both "art" and "sciens" accords with the treatment they are given by the Scots poet in the general introduction to the poem. The Empress's tale here gives an example of the way an emperor can be tricked into causing his own destruction by evil men who are false interpreters of dreams. Yet, it is through the false interpretation of dreams that the Emperor is undone. The efficacy of the process of divination does not come into question and the moral warning in the tale is against covetousness rather than against the credibility of astrological prediction. The tale ends when the outraged town leaders tell the Emperor, "Thow sall quyk erdit be/For thi cowatousnes'" and then kill him.⁴³

Of course, the seven arts and the seven sciences were interchangeable ideas in the Middle Ages. The idea of "science" had not acquired its array of meanings that differentiate it now from the humanities and fine arts and link it to the natural and physical sciences. The *Sevyne Sagis* poet uses the term in a sense directly connected to its Latin meaning of "I know" ("scio"), or "knowledge" ("scientia"). The first sage, in offering to teach the boy "all science" says much the same thing as the fifth sage who will teach "all thair lair" (learning or knowledge), or the seventh who will teach him

“cunnyng”, which also carries the meanings of learning or knowledge. Although the science of astronomy does appear in other versions of the story of the seven sages, the Scottish text is unusual in that the only specific discipline cited in the section is astronomy, thereby drawing all the attention of the reader or audience in that direction. The Middle Scots author’s use of the word “science” is insistent.⁴⁴ The sparseness of detail in some sections of the Introduction when compared to that of other MSS, along with the persistent featuring of the discipline of astronomy, suggests that the author considers astronomy to be the most important area of science, of knowledge.

The history of astrology during the Middle Ages is complex.⁴⁵ The fields of astrology and astronomy were not clearly separate as they are today, and medieval authors sometimes used the terms interchangeably. In general, astronomy then as now was the serious study of the cosmos grounded in mathematical investigation; it formed part of the quadrivium and was not doctrinally suspect. Astrology had a popular appeal, yet its connections with magic, necromancy, and things having to do with the occult in general often deprived it of credibility in the eyes of medieval scholars and virtually ensured its condemnation by the Church. In a discussion of late medieval science, Lynn Thorndike characterises the ambivalence toward these two fields: “Nicholas Oresme and Henry of Hesse, in the fourteenth, and Pico della Mirandola, in the fifteenth century, might criticise astrology, but almost every astronomer of the time wrote or lectured on astrology, and many of them made particular predictions.”⁴⁶ The practice of divination, an aspect of astrology, is central to *The Buke of the Sevyne Sagis*. Thus, the result of the Scots poet’s representation of this practice as an aspect of the field of astronomy is to afford it a credibility and a legitimacy it would not necessarily have, thereby intensifying the importance of divination as a field of study. The caveat here, of course, is that the terms astrology and astronomy were sometimes used interchangeably.

The attitude of the church toward astrology was clear on some issues and not so clear on others. One problem was the collision of the concept of man’s free will with the notion that his future actions can be predicted by astrological means. Patristic literature condemned astrology along with magic and all other types of divination.⁴⁷ In the *Confessions*, Augustine describes how he “rejected the fraudulent divinations and impious fantasies of the astrologers”,⁴⁸ and writes that “a true forecast is based not on art but on chance”.⁴⁹ In the seventh century, Isidore of Seville was vehement in his condemnation of astrology,⁵⁰ and in the twelfth century, Hugh of St Victor agreed with him.⁵¹ In the thirteenth century, both Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas, having accepted Aristotelian cosmology, helped mitigate the prevailing distrust of astrology while still condemning anything to do with demons or with anyone who claimed to predict with certainty the

outcome of future events.⁵² For example, in the *Summa Theologica* Aquinas discusses the topic of divination:

the operation of the demon thrusts itself into those divinations which are based on false and vain opinions, in order that man's mind may become entangled in vanity and falsehood. Now one makes use of a vain and false opinion if, by observing the stars, one desires to foreknow the future that cannot be forecast by their means. Wherefore we must consider what things can be foreknown by observing the stars: and it is evident that those things which happen of necessity can be foreknown by this means: even so astrologers forecast a future eclipse.⁵³

All kinds of astrological prediction save those having to do with natural phenomena are roundly condemned by Aquinas:

if anyone take observation of the stars in order to foreknow casual or fortuitous future events, or to know with certitude future human actions, his conduct is based on a false and vain opinion; and so the operation of the demon introduces itself therein, wherefore it will be a superstitious and unlawful divination. On the other hand if one were to apply the observation of the stars in order to foreknow those future things that are caused by heavenly bodies, for instance, drought or rain and so forth, it will be neither an unlawful nor a superstitious divination.⁵⁴

The writings of Aquinas, in conjunction with those of Albertus Magnus, provided basic texts for the understanding of astrology in the Middle Ages.⁵⁵ Both condemned what was known as judicial astrology, or divination, as being demonic, but accepted what today we would consider scientific predictions, such as might forecast an eclipse, for example. By the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries fewer actual texts were written specifically to condemn or defend astrology, because the major arguments had already been made. Astrological allusions did permeate literature, however, and approaches to the subject are as varied as the authors.

Middle Scots texts refer to astrology throughout the Middle Ages, some accepting it as legitimate practice and others decrying it as sacrilege. In 1375, for example, in Book IV of John Barbour's *Bruce*, Robert Bruce comes across a woman who predicts his future success and offers to send her two sons along with him because they will be rewarded when he becomes king. The Bruce thanks her but wonders how she might know the future. Barbour then takes the next hundred lines to discuss astrology. He says, for example:

For thouch a man his liff haly
Studeit [swa] in astrology,
That on sternis his hed he brak,
Wis men sais he suld nocht mak,
His lifyme, certane domys thre;
And 3eit suld he ay dout quhill he
Saw how that it com till ending:
Than is that na certane demyng.⁵⁶

Barbour's poem was written in the fourteenth century, but the two extant manuscripts are from the late fifteenth century,⁵⁷ thus the poem was still being read and its astrological ideas being circulated in the late 1400s.

Walter Bower's fifteenth-century *Scotichronicon* inveighs against astrology, even though it accepts a story from the diocese of Liège describing how "a sow bore a piglet with the face of a man", affirms the existence of "a four-legged chicken", and marvels at the burning by holy fire of a multitude until their limbs were "blackened like coals".⁵⁸ In a section describing the year 1187, Bower writes:

In that same year astrologers in the East and West, Jews and Saracens, sent out letters throughout the various parts of the world, predicting and asserting unequivocally that before September next there would be a violent storm, an earthquake and a plague such as had never been seen before. But subsequent events clearly proved an outcome that was quite different from what they had predicted. So those men are greatly in error who, presuming too much on their own knowledge, foretell or predict future events, which only God has the power to do. It is as if they have not heard: "It is not within your power to know dates or times, which the Father has made subject to his own power." So astrology must be rejected by all catholics, for (it does not bring us to salvation, but rather leads us into error).⁵⁹

Bower's censure of the practice of astrological divination in this passage is clear. The astrologers he describes are Jews and Saracens, infidel groups that by their very nature are guilty, from a medieval Christian perspective, of misguided thinking. They attempted to predict the future and failed. In so doing they proved to be what Bower describes – men who are "greatly in error" and who assume power that belongs to God alone. Their trust in the power of astrological prediction mirrors their erroneous religious beliefs.

In the early fifteenth-century *Ratis Raving*, a father writes a book of moral advice for his son. In an early section he tells the boy how certain qualities of temperament are produced, sometimes by the parents' state of grace or sometimes by the stars. The boy must first learn his predisposition so that he can use his free will to combat sin. The author of this text clearly accepts the idea that the heavens influence human action, and implicit in his advice to his son is the notion that the boy must work to change the temperament that was determined at the moment of his conception. For example, the father says to his son:

Tuichand the dispocisioune
Hapnand of thi conseptioun,
That thow inclynis to throw kinde
Rycht tenderly have in thy mynd.⁶⁰

The father concludes the section with this statement:

Twichand thi disposicioun,
Mowand throw constellacioun,
Thir maistrys of austronomy
Can the causs schaw & can nocht I:
Quharfor better to be styll
Than say vnknowandly thar tyll.⁶¹

The passage here, concerning the boy's predisposition and his ability to change what was caused by the stars, goes on for almost one hundred lines and contains a clear acceptance of astrological formulae. The notion that human behaviour is determined not simply at the time of birth but also at the time of conception, a moment almost impossible to determine, forms the basis of this man's statement, and such a view (squarely condemned by the Church many years before) was nevertheless a matter of wide contemporary debate.⁶²

In the latter part of the fifteenth century, Robert Henryson writes about astrology in the *Moralitas* section of *Orpheus and Eurydice*. He describes the punishment of Ticius, who is fastened to the ground while a vulture tears at his internal organs. He is being punished, according to Henryson, because he

Quhill he lyvit sett his entencion
To fynd the craft of diuinacion,
And lerit it vnto the spamen all,
To tell before sik thingis as wald fall.⁶³

He is punished by Apollo, the god of divination, for usurping his power:

Ilk man that heiris this conclusioun
Suld dreid to sers be constillatioun
Thingis to fall vndir the firmament,
Till ye or na quhilk ar indefferent,
Without profixit causis and certane,
Quhild nane in erd may know bot God allane.⁶⁴

Henryson, after the fashion of Aquinas, goes on to distinguish between astrology and astronomy, the latter having to do with certainties that may be predicted safely, such as the motions of the sun and moon and the occurrence of an eclipse.

Also witnessing to the variety of Scottish representations of astrology is *Lancelot of the Laik*, from the end of the fifteenth century. In Book I of the poem, King Arthur has a disturbing dream and calls upon his bishops and scholars to interpret it for him. The masters of astronomy consult their books:

And than the maistris of astronomy
The bookis longyne to ther artis set;

Not was the bukis of arachell forget,
 Of nembrot, of danyhelome, thei two,
 Of moyses, and of herynes all soo;
 And seking be ther calcolacioun
 To fynd the planetis disposicioun,
 The sich thei fond ware wonder weill yfet
 The samyne nyght the king his sweuen met.⁶⁵

The astronomers reluctantly tell Arthur what the heavens forecast, which is that the people on whom he relies most will fail him and that he must not seek earthly honour. They qualify their prediction by voicing the accepted doctrinal view that it is solely up

To hyme the wich is euery thing certan,
 Excep the thing that til our knowleg hee
 Hath ordynat of certan for to bee.⁶⁶

When Arthur hears their prediction, however, he asks if they see any way around what seems to be his “desteny”.⁶⁷ The astronomers reply that they cannot say for sure because one thing they see “Is so obscure and dyrk til our clergie,/That we wat not what It shal signefye”.⁶⁸ This section of *Lancelot* contains an interesting combination of astrological prediction and what Aquinas, following Isidore, categorises as divination by dreams, and attributes generally to demonic influence.⁶⁹ The divination in the *Lancelot* text instances what would be called unlawful and superstitious by both Aquinas and the Church. Later in the poem, Arthur laments:

I curs the tyme of myne Natiuitee
 Whar in the heuen It ordinyd was for me,
 In all my lyue neuer til haue ees.⁷⁰

The monarch’s unshaken belief in the efficacy of divination provides an interesting contrast to the skepticism of his advisors. The entire episode takes up roughly one hundred and fifty lines of the poem and reflects, in miniature, contemporary interest in this practice.

References in William Dunbar’s poems are few, but informative. In “I that in heill wes and gladnes”, one stanza reads:

Art magicianis and astrologgis,
 Rethoris, logicianis and theologgis,
 Thame helpis no conclusionis sle:
*Timor mortis conturbat me.*⁷¹

Here, Dunbar groups “art magicianis” (practitioners of the art of magic), and astrologers in the same line, and groups these craftsmen with the mainstream rhetoricians, logicians, and theologians. In a poem to the king,

"Schir, ye have mony servitouris", he lists courtiers good and bad; among the good he includes:

Divinouris, rethoris and philosophouris,
Astrologis, artistis and oratouris,
Men of armes and vailyeand knychtis
And mony uther gudlie wichtis.⁷²

The men in this group are, Dunbar goes on to state,

[...] all of thair craft cunning,
And all at anis lawboring,
Quhilk pleisand ar and honorable
And to your hienes profitable.⁷³

Priscilla Bawcutt calls this poem "one of the most interesting and carefully composed of Dunbar's petitions".⁷⁴ As she explains, in the opening section of the poem, from which this passage is taken, Dunbar "assembles what at first seems a miscellaneous list of those who serve the king [...]. But they form a coherent group because they possess a craft, practise it, and are therefore entitled to fair reward."⁷⁵ Of note here is the fact that there was apparently at least one astronomer at the court of James IV and, in the eyes of the court poet at least, he was pleasing, honorable, and profitable to the King.⁷⁶

These Scottish texts provide a context for the references to astronomy in the *Buke of the Sevyne Sagis*, and taken together, they indicate a varied and ambivalent attitude toward the field of astrology in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Scotland. The *Sevyne Sagis* poet sees both the field of astrology in general and the branch of it known as "divination by dreams" in particular as viable fields of learning, and portrays as legitimate what other texts often render as demonic. Arthur's belief in astrological prediction in *Lancelot of the Laik* is one aspect of the story that led W. W. Skeat to compare the legendary king with James III. Skeat also noted that the "French text does not say anything about 'astronomy'";⁷⁷ implying that the *Lancelot* author has Arthur consult astrologers in order to mirror the actions of James III. The same thing might be said about *The Buke of the Sevyne Sagis*. The Latin *Historia Septem Sapientum*, of course, contains the theme of divination by dreams because it is integral to the storyline. Yet it contains no references to either astrology or astronomy.

Thomas Dickson, in the Preface to the *Treasurer's Accounts*, writes that the court of James was "addicted to such arts" as that of astrology.⁷⁸ The respectful treatment given to astrology in *The Buke of the Sevyne Sagis* would appeal directly to this royal interest. Ranald Nicholson briefly describes the background of William Scheves, Archbishop of St Andrews during the reign of James III, who studied "medicine and astronomy at Louvain under a teacher of repute. These advanced studies," continues Nicholson, "seem to have led to preferment at court. Astronomy included astrology, which was both respectable and fashionable."⁷⁹ He explains that "whether or not

Scheves was court astrologer” he received payment for his services as royal physician.⁸⁰ Norman MacDougall writes that there “is no doubt that Scheves was interested in astrology, as a book on the subject was dedicated to him in 1491”.⁸¹ Of course, the connection between medicine and astrology goes back as far as Aristotle, and even Aquinas, in discussing whether or not divination is a sin, concedes that “astrologers by considering the stars can foreknow and foretell things concerning rains and droughts, and physicians, concerning health and death.”⁸² Perhaps James III’s interest in these two fields accounts, in part, for the abiding interest in both areas shown by his son, James IV.⁸³

A twenty-first-century perspective encourages us to consider James III’s interest in astrology as an instance more of superstition than of regard for what we would think of today as modern science. Yet, as Theodore Wedel states,

The tendency, indeed, to consider early opponents of astrology as forerunners of modern enlightenment has long fostered a misunderstanding of mediaeval science. From our point of view, of course, critics of astrology [...] appear emancipated in an age of gross superstitions. From the point of view of the Middle Ages, however, before the days of the Copernican astronomy, these judgements deserve in many cases to be reversed.⁸⁴

From a medieval perspective, the study of astrology would have held out the possibility of discoveries to be made and real advancements in the field of knowledge to be gained. If viewed in this light, *The Buik of the Sevin Sages* is the work of a modern author who has adapted his source material (the Latin text in the Innsbruck manuscript or one like it) to include the topic of astrology that was both popular and little understood at the time. Although this text lacks the polish and complexity of a work by Henryson or Dunbar, it is the product of a competent and careful author who has taken a stand on a controversial subject. In presenting astrology in a positive manner in his text, the Scottish poet has certainly demonstrated his political wisdom in appealing to the politics of James III. Yet he has also produced something that might have appealed to the King’s intellectual curiosity and perhaps revealed something of his own into the bargain.

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NOTES

¹ K. Campbell, *A Study of the Romance of the Seven Sages with special reference to the Middle English Version* (Baltimore, 1898), p. xxiv.

² *The Buke of the Sevyne Sagis*, ed. C. Van Buuren (Leiden, 1982), p. 41. She dates the manuscript between 1513 and 1530, and the original of this text between 1460 and 1480. See also I. C. Cunningham, "The Asloan Manuscript", in: *The Renaissance in Scotland: Studies in Literature, Religion, History and Culture*, ed. A. A. MacDonald, M. Lynch & I. B. Cowan (Leiden, 1994); Cunningham dates the manuscript 1515-1525 (p. 133).

³ Van Buuren, pp. 133, 187, 196. Campbell believes the text contained in the Asloan MS "was probably drawn directly from the French" (p. xli).

⁴ Campbell, p. xxxvi.

⁵ *The Seven Sages of Rome, Southern Version*, ed. K. Brunner, EETS OS 191 (London, 1933 [for 1932]; rpt. New York, 1971), p. v.

⁶ Van Buuren, p. 196. There are eight Middle English manuscripts that contain the story of the seven sages of Rome and one Middle Scots manuscript.

⁷ *Die Historia Septem Sapientum, Nach der Innsbrucker Handschrift v. J. 1342*, ed. G. Buchner (Erlangen 1889; rpt. Amsterdam, 1970), pp. 7-8. All quotations from the Latin version are taken from this edition.

⁸ Brunner, ll. E21-30.

⁹ Brunner, ll. B221-24.

¹⁰ Brunner, Appendix, ll. 29-34. The manuscript is incomplete at the end of this line.

¹¹ *The Seven Sages of Rome*, ed. K. Campbell (Boston, 1907) ll. 45-50.

¹² Van Buuren, ll. 6-12.

¹³ Actually, in the Latin and Middle Scots texts they place one leaf under each leg, and in the Middle English texts they place four leaves under each leg.

¹⁴ Buchner, pp. 9-10.

¹⁵ Brunner, ll. E189-92; ll. B201-4.

¹⁶ Brunner, Appendix, ll. 219-20.

¹⁷ Campbell, ll. 249-52.

¹⁸ Van Buuren, ll. 107-8.

¹⁹ Buchner, p. 8: "Domine, trade michi filium tuum ad nutriendum et doctrinandum! Et eum faciam scire quantum ego scio et omnes socii mei sciunt intra .VII. annos."

²⁰ Buchner, p. 8: "Domine, a multo tempore tibi seruiui et adhuc mercedem nondum accepi. Pro mercede nichil aliud peto nisi ut michi filium ad nutriendum tradas. Et ego faciam eum scire quantum ego scio et omnes socii mei sciunt infra .VI. Annos."

²¹ Brunner, l. E35.

²² Brunner, ll. E71-2.

²³ Brunner, ll. B31-2.

²⁴ Brunner, l. B59.

²⁵ Brunner, l. B78.

²⁶ Brunner, Appendix, ll. 44 and 54.

²⁷ Brunner, Appendix, l. 40.

²⁸ Brunner, Appendix, l. 102.

²⁹ Brunner, Appendix, ll. 79-80.

³⁰ Campbell, l. 58.

³¹ Campbell, ll. 84-5.

³² Campbell, ll. 112-13.

³³ Campbell, ll. 99-100.

³⁴ Egerton MS, 79 lines; Balliol MS, 93 lines; Cambridge Univ. Lib. MS (Ff. II 38), 81 lines; Cotton MS, 87 lines.

³⁵ Van Buuren, l. 35.

³⁶ Van Buuren, ll. 40-1.

³⁷ Van Buuren, l. 49.

³⁸ Van Buuren, l. 52.

³⁹ Van Buuren, l. 57.

⁴⁰ Van Buuren, l. 2122.

⁴¹ Buchner, p. 43; Van Buuren, ll. 1700-1.

⁴² Van Buuren, ll. 1761-4.

⁴³ Van Buuren, ll. 1822-3.

⁴⁴ In the Introduction (289 lines), the word appears nine times: ll. 35, 42, 49, 62, 81, 92, 109, 172, 192; in the remaining text (2493 lines), the word appears five times: ll. 384, 576, 642, 771, 2567.

- ⁴⁵ See T. O. Wedel, *The Mediaeval Attitude toward Astrology, Particularly in England* (New Haven, 1920, rpt. North Haven, 1968); P. Zambelli, *The Speculum Astronomiae and its Enigma: Astrology, Theology, and Science in Albertus Magnus and his Contemporaries* (Dordrecht, 1992); S. J. Tester, *A History of Western Astrology* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, 1987); J. R. Veenstra, *Magic and Divination at the Courts of Burgundy and France: Text and Context of Laurens Pignon's "Contre les Devineurs"* (Leiden, 1998).
- ⁴⁶ L. Thorndike, *Science and Thought in the Fifteenth Century* (New York, 1929; rpt. New York, 1967), p. 22.
- ⁴⁷ Wedel, pp. 15–16.
- ⁴⁸ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. H. Chadwick (Oxford, 1991), Bk VII, Chapter vi, p. 116.
- ⁴⁹ Augustine, Bk VII, Chapter vi, p. 119.
- ⁵⁰ Wedel, pp. 27–8, 36–7, 118–19; see also *A Source Book in Medieval Science*, ed. E. Grant (Cambridge, MA, 1974), pp. 11–12.
- ⁵¹ Grant, p. 56.
- ⁵² Wedel, p. 67.
- ⁵³ T. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica: Literally Translated by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province*, 22 vols (London, 1913–1942), Part 2:2, Question 95, Article 5.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵⁵ Wedel, pp. 63–72.
- ⁵⁶ J. Barbour, *The Bruce*, ed. W. W. Skeat (Edinburgh, 1894), Bk IV, ll. 709–16.
- ⁵⁷ Cambridge, St John's College, MS 1487; Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, Advocates' Library MS 1489.
- ⁵⁸ W. Bower, *Scotichronicon*, ed. D. E. R. Watt et al., 9 vols (Aberdeen & Edinburgh, 1987–98), Vol. 4 (1994), Bk VII, Ch. 53, p. 151.
- ⁵⁹ *Scotichronicon*, Vol. 4, Bk VIII, Ch. 42, p. 373.
- ⁶⁰ *Ratis Raving, and other Moral and Religious Pieces, in Prose and Verse*, ed. J. R. Lumby, EETS OS 43 (New York & London, 1870), ll. 859–62.
- ⁶¹ *Ratis Raving*, ll. 899–904.
- ⁶² For the future forecast from the moment of conception, see also the life of St Clement, pp. 373–402, in *Legends of the Saints in the Scottish Dialect of the Fourteenth Century*, 3 vols (London, 1968; orig. pub. 1896), Vol. 1, p. 384, ll. 389–402.
- ⁶³ R. Henryson, *Orpheus and Eurydice*, in: *Poems*, ed. D. Fox (Oxford, 1981), ll. 561–4.
- ⁶⁴ *Orpheus*, ll. 571–6.
- ⁶⁵ *Lancelot of the Laik: A Scottish Metrical Romance*, ed. W. W. Skeat, EETS OS 6 (London, 1865), ll. 432–40.
- ⁶⁶ *Lancelot*, ll. 488–90.
- ⁶⁷ *Lancelot*, l. 506.
- ⁶⁸ *Lancelot*, ll. 511–12.
- ⁶⁹ Aquinas, Part 2:2, Question 95, Article 6.
- ⁷⁰ *Lancelot*, ll. 704–6.
- ⁷¹ *The Poems of William Dunbar*, ed. P. Bawcutt, 2 vols (Glasgow 1998), Vol. 1, pp. 94–5, ll. 37–40.
- ⁷² “Schir, ye have mony servitouris”, Bawcutt, Vol. 1, pp. 222–4, ll. 5–8.
- ⁷³ “Schir”, ll. 17–24.
- ⁷⁴ P. Bawcutt (ed.), *William Dunbar, Selected Poems* (London, 1996), p. 282.
- ⁷⁵ P. Bawcutt, *Dunbar the Makar* (Oxford, 1992), p. 34.
- ⁷⁶ See also Dunbar's “To speik off science, craft or sapience” (Bawcutt, Vol. 1, p. 266).
- ⁷⁷ *Lancelot*, p. xii.
- ⁷⁸ *Accounts of the Lord High Treasurer of Scotland*, ed. T. Dickson, 13 vols (Edinburgh 1877–1916), Vol. 1 (1877), p. xlviii.
- ⁷⁹ R. Nicholson, *Scotland, The Later Middle Ages* (Edinburgh, 1974), p. 465.
- ⁸⁰ Nicholson, p. 465.
- ⁸¹ N. MacDougall, *James III: A Political Study* (Edinburgh, 1982), p. 102.
- ⁸² Aquinas, Part 2:2, Question 95, Article 1.
- ⁸³ See, for example, L. J. Macfarlane, *William Elphinstone and the Kingdom of Scotland 1431–1514* (Aberdeen, 1985), p. 300. Macfarlane discusses James IV's desire to establish a Faculty of Medicine at the University of Aberdeen in relation to his interest in medicine and “his fascination with astrology, alchemy and the lure to manufacture gold”.
- ⁸⁴ Wedel, pp. 152–3.