

Famous Last Words

Robert Henryson was a poet who flourished in Scotland in the period c. 1460–1500. Counted among the Scots *makars*, he lived in the royal burgh of Dunfermline and is a distinctive voice in the Northern Renaissance at a time when the culture was on a cusp between medieval and renaissance sensibilities. Little is known of his life, but evidence suggests that he was a teacher who had training in law and the humanities, that he had a connection with Dunfermline Abbey and that he may also have been associated for a period with Glasgow University. His poetry was composed in Middle Scots at a time when this had become a state language. It is one of the most important bodies of work in the canon of early Scottish literature.

Henryson, dying of diarrhea or flux as it was then called, had been consigned to death by all the physicians he could muster. As he lay drawing his last breath an old woman, whom many held to be a witch, came to him and asked whether he would like to be cured. Henryson willingly agreed, whereupon the old crone said:

'There is a whikey tree in the lower end of your orchard, if you go and walk but thrice about it, and thrice repeat these words "whikey tree, whikey tree, take away this flux from me", you shall presently be cured.'

He told her that he was extremely faint and weak and that, besides, there was extreme frost and snow outside, making it impossible for him to go. The old woman replied that unless he did so it would be impossible for him to recover. Henryson, then lifting himself up and pointing to an Oken (oak) table that was in the room, said:

'Gude dame, I pray ye tell me, if it would not do as well if I repeated thrice these words: "oken burd oken burd garre me shit a hard turde"'.

Seeing herself derided the woman ran out of the house in a great passion. Henryson's wit could not save him. A few minutes later he departed life.