A Linguistic Look at the Buke of the Howlat

This document provides an introduction to some of the interesting linguistic aspects of The Buke of the Howlat, making particular reference to stanza number five. The sections on handwriting and orthography refer to the version found in the Bannatyne Manuscript, which contains some of the best work of Scotland's most important medieval poets. Transcribing medieval manuscripts is not always easy, and there are often puzzles - have a look at page seven to find out more!

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Manuscript transcription</th>
<th>Present Day English translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>he grat gryslie grym and gaif a grit soule</td>
<td>He wept terribly grimly and gave a great yowl,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bedand and chyndand w' churlich cheir</td>
<td>Heeding and chiding with churlish expression.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Quby is my face q3 ye fyle faisonit fo foule</td>
<td>“Why is my face,” quoth the wretch, “shaped so fouly,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My forme and my fetherem unfrelie but feir</td>
<td>My form and my feathers ugly without equal?</td>
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<tr>
<td>My neb is nytherit as a nok I am but ane oule</td>
<td>My nose is curved like a hook, I am but one owl</td>
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<tr>
<td>aganis natur in ye ny' I walk into weir</td>
<td>Against nature. In the night I wake in fear.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I dar do no' on the day / bot droup as a doule</td>
<td>I dare do nothing by day except droop like a feather;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No' for schame of my schaip in pert till appeir</td>
<td>Not, for shame of my shape, to appear in public.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thus all thir foulis for my filth bes me at feid</td>
<td>Thus all these fowls because of my filth are against me,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>That be I fene in yair ficht</td>
<td>That, should I be seen in their sight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To luke out on day lycht</td>
<td>To look out on daylight,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sum will me dolefully dycht</td>
<td>Some will treat me miserably,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sum ding me to my deid</td>
<td>Some (will) beat me to death.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Listen to the National Library of Scotland's Scots Scriever, Hamish MacDonald, reading a section of this stanza [here](#).
The handwriting of the *Buke of the Howlat*

The writing style used by the scribe of this manuscript of the *Buke of the Howlat* is called *secretary hand* or *court hand*. It can present a challenge for modern readers as many of the letter-shapes are unfamiliar. Below is a guide to recognising some of them.

The example words are all from stanza 5 of the *Buke of the Howlat*. Line numbers refer to the line within the stanza.

- **b** is hook-shaped and descends below the baseline. Though it looks different to modern *b*, it is a distinctive and noticeable shape to look out for.

- **h**
  - *r* looks like an arabic number two: 2. This can be confusing, especially when some other letters look more like a modern *r*, such as the *w* in *weir* (l.4).

- **s/f**
  - There are two shapes of *s* in secretary hand. The long *s* is typically used at the beginning and in the middle of words, and the short *s* at the end (as in *thus*, l.8). Long *s* and *f* often look very similar, as in *fassonit* (l.2).

- **c & t**
  - *c* and *t* are very similar in secretary hand. This can be seen in *lycht* (l.11) and *dycht* (l.12).

- **y**
  - Whereas *ȝ* signifies the sound usually represented now by *y* word-initially, medieval Scots *ȝ* sometimes signifies the sound usually represented now by *th*, as in *ye* 'the' (l.3). So *Ye Olde Inn* would be pronounced 'the old inn', not 'ye old inn'!
He wept terribly grimly and gave a great yowl.

Consonant spelling features

- **quh**
  - For present-day *wh*, e.g., *Quhy* 'why'.

- **sch**
  - For present-day *sh*, e.g., *ʃchaippe* 'shape'.

- **cht**
  - For present-day *ght*, e.g., *ʃcht* 'sight', *lycht* 'light'.

Vowel spelling features

In Modern English, the addition of 'e' to the end of a word changes the way the preceding vowel is pronounced, e.g., *bat* vs. *bate*, *bit* vs. *bite*, *not* vs. *note*. Older Scots also used final -e in this way but you will also find the addition of letter *i* or *y* next to the main vowel instead. So, for example, *ʃaif* and *ʃchaippe* have the same vowel sound, which is different to the vowel sound of *grat*.

Variable spelling

The idea of having a single 'correct' spelling for every word is a modern convention; in medieval Scots (as in most medieval languages), most words could be spelled multiple ways. For example, there is variation between *ʃchadow* (stanza 4, line 11) and *ʃchaddow* (stanza 6, line 3), and between *ʃchaip* (stanza 5, line 8) and *ʃchap* (stanza 6, line 3).

**U & V**

Until the 17th century, the letters *u* and *v* were not thought of as different letters. Instead Older Scots *u* and *v* did double-duty:

- *v* was usually found word-initially, as a vowel, e.g., *vmfrēlie* 'unsightly', and as a consonant, e.g., *valour* 'valour'
- *u* was usually found word-internally, as a vowel, e.g., *natur* 'nature', and as a consonant, e.g., *ouer* 'over'.

**v & w**

- *v* and *w* were also somewhat interchangeable at the time this poem was written, so for example you might encounter *lowe* 'love' or *lav* 'law'.

**The Spelling of the *Buke of the Howlat***
The **Buke of the Howlat** is written in 13-lined, rhyming stanzas. The first nine lines of each stanza are long, the final four are short. It is also an alliterative piece, repeating sounds at the beginning of words:

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he grat gryl'lie gr'ym and gaif a gr'it 30ule
hedand and ch'ydand w't ch'urlich ch'ei'r
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Most of the stanzas show everyday, vernacular vocabulary. Such words are often of Anglo-Saxon origin (e.g. *gryl'ie* 'grisly', *neb* 'beak'), but some are originally French (e.g. *forme* 'form', *appeir* 'appear'). Most Older Scots words were shared with English, although some words (e.g. *till* 'to') are distinctively northern.

Because the poem employs a particular rhyming scheme, we can identify words that are likely to have rhymed with each other when the poem was written. There are four sets of rhymes in each verse. The rhyming words in this particular stanza are:

- **joule** 'yowl', **foule** 'foul', **Oule** 'owl', **doule** a now-obsolete word meaning 'feather'. These words would probably rhyme with present-day Scots 'fool'.
- **cheir** 'cheer', **feir** 'match' or 'equal', **weir** 'fear', **appeir** 'appear'. These words would rhyme either with present-day Scots 'chair' or with French *cher* 'dear'.
- **ficht** 'sight', **lycht** 'light', **dycht** 'treat or handle', all with non-silent 'ch'; and
- **feid** 'enmity', **deid** 'death', each rhyming with 'seed'.

You can hear a rendition of these words on the recorded sample.
He wept terribly grimly and gave a great yowl.

Try a Transcription!

Here are the first three lines from stanza six of the poem, taken from the same manuscript as the examples in this document.

Use the handwriting and spelling pages to try transcribing it yourself.

Some tips if you get stuck:

If you're struggling with a particular letter, try comparing some of the words and letter shapes to those in stanza five.

Remember what the poem is about and that this line is from the stanza directly following stanza five. Use the context to help!

Remember that you can consult the online Dictionary of the Scots Language if you need help with the vocabulary!

Here is a transcription and translation. Words in red are Older Scots words which are no longer in common use.

Remember that there are often uncertainties when transcribing medieval manuscripts, so you may disagree with some aspect of the transcription given here!
The Grammar of the *Buke of the Howlat*

At first glance, the grammar of Older Scots is similar to English. There are, however, some differences which are visible in this passage.

### The present participle

Today, verb forms that end in *-ing* are called present participles, e.g. *I am walking*. In Older Scots, present participles usually end in *-and* instead. There are two examples in line 2: *bedand* and *chydand*.

### The past participle

Today’s past participles (and some participial adjectives) are regularly formed by adding *-ed* to the basic verb form, e.g. *I have walked, I am bored*. The corresponding ending in Older Scots is commonly *-it*, as in: *Quhy is my face [...] fassonit fo foule, my neb is nytherit*...

### Plural nouns

We now usually form plural nouns with an *-(e)s* ending, e.g. *buses, cars*. In Older Scots we tend to find plural *-is* instead, as in *foulis* 'fowls'.

### Some Puzzles in the *Buke of the Howlat*

The spelling of the first word of line 6 is tricky to decipher...

We can tell from the context of this word that it means 'against', but how to transcribe its spelling is not so clear because it contains two consecutive letters composed of *minims*. Minims are short, vertical pen-strokes, like this: ![Minims](image). Minims were used in the kind of handwriting seen in this manuscript to form the letters *i, n, u* and *m*. It can sometimes be difficult to be certain which letter is meant when there are lots of minims in a row, especially since *i* was not regularly dotted at this time - in fact, the word ‘minim’ itself can be written entirely with minim strokes: ![Minims](image) . There are three consecutive minims in the form of ‘against’ shown in the image above: ![Minims](image) . This sequence of minims could indicate *m, ni, in, ui* or *iu*. Because we can tell the meaning from the context, we can narrow down these choices to either *ni* or *in*. According to the *Dictionary of the Scots Language*, both *aganis* and *agains* were possible spellings of the word in pre-1700 Scots. Because the *i* isn’t dotted, we can’t be sure which spelling the scribe intended.

The last of the nine long lines presents a bit of a puzzle...

The final word of this line looks like *feid*, i.e. 'seid' with a long initial *s*, but none of the meanings of Older Scots 'seid' make any sense here. In another early version of the poem, the same word is spelled *feid*, giving: 'Thus all those fowls, because of my filth, have me at feud (= are against me)'. So, did our 15th-century scribe simply forget to add a cross-stoke to the initial letter of this word? Or did he in fact mean 'seid', but with another—as yet unrecorded—meaning? The alliteration pattern of this line suggests that this word is more likely to be 'feid'.

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