

THE POETRY OF WILLIAM DUNBAR

Helen Fulton

William Dunbar (c.1460 – c.1520) was a court poet, a ‘makar’, to the Scottish king James IV, who reigned from 1488 to 1513.¹ Like many medieval writers, Dunbar trained as a cleric, graduating from the University of St Andrews before entering the service of the royal court. Living mainly in Edinburgh, Dunbar travelled regularly to France as a member of various Scottish embassies and was greatly influenced by French and English styles of court poetry. His greatest achievement was to transform these styles into the language now known as Scots.

James IV was urbane and well educated, a great patron of the arts and a renowned philanderer, who was enormously popular with his people. For reasons which we can only guess at now—perhaps connected with Dunbar’s clerical disapproval of James’s cavalier attitude to his marriage vows—Dunbar was not a favourite with James. What Dunbar wanted most of all was to be granted a comfortable living as minister of a wealthy parish, like his contemporary, Gavin Douglas (1475–1522), also a graduate of St Andrews and a poet. Douglas was appointed by the king to the position of Provost of St Giles in Edinburgh, becoming a renowned and influential member of the senior church hierarchy.

For Dunbar, such an appointment—indeed, any clerical living at all—was never forthcoming. Instead, he waited around at court, composing occasional poems of celebration and entertainment, supported mainly by James’s wife, Margaret Tudor, the sister of Henry VIII. Dunbar composed poems to Margaret on her arrival in Scotland to marry James in 1503, and later accompanied her to attend a pageant in Aberdeen in 1511, two years before the death of James at the battle of Flodden. Though Margaret’s patronage enabled him to stay at court, Dunbar lived and died a disappointed man, whose frustrated hopes of preferment permeate his poetic output.

¹ The following references have been consulted in this article: J.W. Baxter, *William Dunbar* (Oxford: 1952); James Kinsley, ed., *The Poems of William Dunbar* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958); and Maurice Lindsay, *History of Scottish Literature* (London: Robert Hale, 1977).

The language of the poetry

Dunbar wrote in the native language of lowland Scotland, which was Scots, or Middle Scots to give it a precise linguistic description. Scots, later known as Lallans (the Scots word for 'lowlands'), was a Germanic language descended from Anglian, one of the languages used by the Anglo-Saxon settlers of northern Britain and Scotland from the sixth century AD. Scots evolved during this pre-medieval period, alongside other Anglo-Saxon languages which developed into northern and southern varieties of English. Scots is therefore not simply a dialect of English, but a separate language, at least as old as English, derived from a common Germanic ancestor.

In its earliest form, Scots was known as 'Inglis', and as Anglo-Saxon settlement expanded in the north of Britain it rapidly displaced Gaelic as the main language of the lowlands. Contacts with Gaelic and Scandinavian speakers soon made Inglis a very different language from that spoken in its nearest neighbouring region, Northumbria, where it developed into the Northern dialect of Middle English. The name Inglis was changed to Scots in the early seventeenth century when standard English (derived from the southern dialects) became more common in lowland Scotland.

As a court poet, Dunbar's output largely conformed to contemporary expectations of ceremonial and occasional verse related to events at the royal court. However, Dunbar also wrote in his own voice about people and events of the day, expressing views that were at times pungent and directly critical. His repertoire reflects the influence of dominant literary traditions in late-medieval France and England, particularly love lyrics, dream visions and satires, linking the Scottish court with the cultural practices of the great royal courts of western Europe. For drawing attention to these links, thereby reinforcing James's image of himself as central to a common aristocratic culture, Dunbar earned his place at court.

William Dunbar had a particular affinity with Margaret and was clearly one of her favourites. He composed an occasional poem welcoming her to Scotland when she arrived in Edinburgh to marry James IV in 1503, and also composed a famous allegorical celebration of the wedding, which is known by the eighteenth-century title of 'The Thrissill and the Rois' ('The Thistle and the Rose'). Based on Chaucer's *Parlement of Foules*, it is a dream vision in which the dreamer attends a great gathering of animals and birds presided over by Nature. She makes the Lion the king of the beasts, the Eagle king of the birds, and the Thistle king of the plants—all three representing

The Poetry of William Dunbar

James as his heraldic emblems. The Rose, representing Margaret Tudor, is celebrated as the perfect flower:

Than callit scho all flouris that grew on feild,
Discirnyng all thair fassionis and efferis;
Upone the awfull Thrissill scho beheld
And saw him kept with a busche of speiris;
Concedring him so able for the weiris,
A radius croun of rubeis scho him gaif
And said, 'In feild go furth and fend the laif.

And sen thow art a king, thow be discret;
Herb without vertew thow hald nocht of sic pryce
As herb of vertew and of odor sueit;
And lat no nettill vyle and full of vyce
Hir fallow to the gudly flour delyce,
Nor latt no wyld weid full of churlichenes
Compair hir till the lilleis nobilnes:

Nor hald non udir flour in sic denty
As the fresche Ros of cullour reid and quhyt;
For gife thow dois, hurt is thyne honesty,
Conciddering that no flour is so perfynt,
So full of vertew, plesans and delyt,
So full of blisfull angelik bewty,
Imperiall birth, honour and dignite.'

Than to the Ros scho turnyt hir visage
And said, 'O lusty dochtir most benyng,
Aboif the lilly illustare of lynnage,
Fro the stok ryell rying fresche and ying,
But ony spot or macull doing spring;
Cum, blowme of joy, with jemis to be cround,
For our the laif thy bewty is renownd.'

A coistly croun with clarefeid stonis brycht
This cumly quene did on hir heid inclois,
Quhill all the land illumynit of the licht:
Quhairfor me thocht all flouris did rejos,
Crying attonis, 'Haill be thow richest Ros,
Haill hairbis empryce, haill freschest quene of flouris;
To the be glory and honour at all houris.'

(‘The Thrissill and the Rois, lines 127–61)

The Poetry of William Dunbar

(Then she called on all the flowers that grew in the field, identifying all their ways and behaviours; upon the awesome Thistle she looked, and saw him armed with a bristle of spears; considering him very able in battle, she gave him a radiant crown of rubies and said: 'To the battlefield go forth and defend the others.

And since you are a king, be wise; do not rate a plant without virtue to be of such value as a plant of virtue and sweet odour, and let no vile nettle, full of vice, accompany a delicate worthy flower, nor allow any wild weed full of churlishness to compare itself to the nobility of the lily.

Do not hold any other flower in such esteem as the fresh Rose, red and white in colour; for if you do, your honour will be damaged, considering that no flower is so perfect, so full of virtue, pleasure and delight, so full of blissful angelic beauty, imperial birth, honour and dignity.'

Then to the Rose she turned her face and said: 'O beautiful daughter most benign, higher than the lily [i.e. France] of illustrious lineage, rising fresh and young from the royal stock, without any spot or stain emerging; come, bloom of joy, and be crowned with gems, for your beauty is renowned above all the rest.'

A costly crown with bright polished stones enclosed the head of this lovely queen, till all the land shone from the light. With that, I thought that all the flowers rejoiced, crying together: 'Hail to you, richest Rose, hail, empress of plants, hail, freshest queen of flowers; may glory and honour be yours at all times.'

In 1511 Dunbar travelled with the Queen to Aberdeen, where the city put on a series of pageants of the kind made famous by the English mystery plays. Episodes from the Old and New Testaments were acted out by members of the guilds, including the Salvation, the coming of the Magi, the expulsion from Eden and so on. In memory of this royal visit, Dunbar composed an official eulogy to Aberdeen:

Blyth Aberdeane, thow beriall of all tounis,
The lamp of bewtie, bountie, and blythnes,
Unto the heaven ascendit thy renoun is
Off vertew, wisdom and of worthines;
He nottit is thy name of nobilnes
Into the cuming of oure lustie quein,
The wall of welth, guid cheir and mirrines:
Be blyth and blisfull, burgh of Aberdein.

The Poetry of William Dunbar

(‘Blyth Aberdeane’, lines 1–8)

(Blithe Aberdeen, beryl [gemstone] of all towns, the lamp of beauty, bounty and happiness; up to heaven your fame for virtue, wisdom and worthiness has ascended; noted on high is your name for nobility. Upon the arrival of our beautiful queen, wellspring of wealth, good cheer and merriment, be blithe and blissful, town of Aberdeen.)

A Poet of Two Voices

William Dunbar was clearly a man of different moods—either effusive and sparkling or bitter and deeply depressed. He sometimes referred to himself as suffering from headaches and migraine (‘magryme’) which brought on serious despair and a keen sense of the transitory nature of the world:

I that in heill wes and gladnes
Am trublit now with gret seiknes
And feblit with infermite:
Timor mortis conturbat me.
Our plesance heir is all vane glory,
This fals world is bot transitory,
The flesch is brukle, the Fend is sle:
Timor mortis conturbat me.
The stait of man dois change and vary,
Now sound, now seik, now blith, now sary,
Now dansand mery, now like to dee:
Timor mortis conturbat me.

(‘Timor Mortis conturbat me’, lines 1–12)

(I who was in health and happiness am troubled now with great sickness and enfeebled with infirmity. Fear of death disturbs me. Our pleasure here is all vain glory, this false world is only transitory, the flesh is frail, the Devil is devious. Fear of death disturbs me. The state of man does change and vary, now sound, now sick, now happy, now wretched, now dancing merrily, now about to die. Fear of death disturbs me.)

Yet, it was perhaps these depressive moods that enabled him to be a master of satire, a genre in which he often reveals the less attractive side of his personality. One of his satirical poems concerns a priest called John Damien, who was a favourite of the king (and therefore a rival to Dunbar’s own ambitions at court). Damien tried to fly, using wings made from bird

The Poetry of William Dunbar

feathers, but when he jumped off the walls at Stirling Castle he was seriously injured. In his poem commemorating the event, Dunbar takes delight in describing how all the real birds came down to attack Damien, just to reinforce his stupidity.

Dunbar was also renowned as a champion ‘flyter’, who could demolish an opponent with the force of his invective. Flyting was an ancient Gaelic practice, alluded to in early Irish literature, and carried into Gaelic Scotland from where it was taken into the Scots literary tradition. It belonged to the satirical function of the early Gaelic bards, whose role was to exercise social control, not only through the excessive praise of chieftains and rulers, but also by releasing barrages of abuse and satire upon those who did not conform to accepted standards of behaviour. The medieval tradition of flyting was often a two-way contest between bards, who exchanged a series of insults and gross name-calling largely as a means of displaying their superior skills of poetry and metre. (A similar practice is found in medieval Wales, where the poetic *ymryson*, or ‘contest’, between bards is a conventional genre.)

Dunbar’s scathing satire of Walter Kennedy is the earliest surviving literary example of a flyting in Scots. Kennedy was the brother of Lord Kennedy of Dunure and a descendant of Robert III. He was a poet himself and a few of his poems survive in later manuscripts. The flyting of Dunbar and Kennedy was probably partly rhetorical, for the entertainment of the court: parts of it were circulated in manuscripts and read before the king. This extract gives the flavour of the satire, and also showcases the extraordinary feats of imagery, rhyme and metre which would have made the poem a tour de force when read aloud:

Mauch muttoun, byt buttoun, peilit gluttoun, air to Hilhous,
Rank beggar, ostir dregar, foule fleggar in the flet,
Chittirlilling, ruch rilling, lik schilling in the Milhous,
Baird rehator, theif of nator, fals tratour, feyindis get,
Filling of tauch, rak sauch—cry crauch, thow art oursett;
Muttoun dryver, girmall ryver, yadswyvar—fowl fell the;
Herretyk, lunatyk, purspyk, carlingis pet,
Rottin crok, dirtin dok—cry cok, or I sall quell the.

(‘The Flyting of Dunbar and Kennedie’, lines 241–48)

(Mutton thief, button biter, peeled glutton, heir to Hillhouse; stinking beggar, oyster dredger, foul flatterer in the hall; piece of offal, rough

The Poetry of William Dunbar

shoe-leather, money-grubber in the mill house; enemy of poets, thief by nature, false traitor, devil's offspring; full of tallow, take heed of the willow-rod, admit defeat, you are overturned; sheep stealer, granary robber, whore-lover, may evil befall you; heretic, lunatic, pickpocket, witch's pet, rotten old ewe, filthy arse, cry chicken [i.e., give up] or I shall destroy you.)

Though Dunbar and Kennedy were fellow makars, Dunbar would have had cause to envy Kennedy's powerful connections with the academic, legal and clerical worlds of Scotland. One of Dunbar's particular prejudices against Kennedy was undoubtedly Kennedy's Gaelic connections. Though the Kennedy family was far removed from the network of Highland clans, its home was the Carrick district of Ayrshire, which was still Gaelic-speaking in the sixteenth century. As an avowed royalist Dunbar resented, on the king's behalf, the political ambitions of the Highland chieftains, and his anti-Highland and anti-Gaelic bias is regularly expressed through satirical comments about the Gaelic culture of the Highlands. In a ghoulish dream vision about the seven deadly sins dancing around the devil, who has asked for a highland pageant, the poet ends on a comic note at the expense of the Highlanders:

Syne ran a feynd to feche Makfadyane
Far northwart in a noke.
Be he the correnoch had done schout
Erschemen so gadderit him about
In hell grit rowme thay tuke.
Thae tarmegantis, with tag and tatter
Full lowd in Ersche begowth to clatter
And rowþ lyk revin and ruke.
The Devill sa devit wes with thair yell
That in the depest pot of hell
He smorit thame with smuke.

(‘The Dance of the Sevin Deidly Synnis’, lines 110–20)

(So a fiend ran off to find Macfadyan far to the north in a nook. When he had shouted the outcry, so many Irishmen gathered around him that they took up a lot of room in hell. These termagants, in rags and tatters, began to chatter very loudly in Erse [Gaelic] and shouted hoarsely like ravens and rooks. The Devil was so deafened by their yelling that he smothered them with smoke in the deepest pit of hell.)

The Poetry of William Dunbar

This malicious wit is also exercised in Dunbar's distinctly misogynistic poems. While he tends to idealise beautiful young noblewomen, he can be very cruel to married women, as he is in 'The Tretis of the Tua Mariit Wemen and the Wedo' ('The Treatise of the Two Married Women and the Widow'). This poem describes three women having a glass of wine and a gossip together about their sex lives. One woman's husband is old and useless. The second woman's husband has worn himself out with affairs with other women. The widow, who is strongly reminiscent of Chaucer's Wife of Bath, has been married twice, once to an old man who coughed up phlegm and then to a rich merchant who lavished money on her in return for her favours, but all the while she was deceiving him with one of the servants:

Than said the weido, 'I wis ther is no way other:
Now tydis me for to talk, my taill it is nixt;
God my spreit now inspir and my speche quykkyn
And send me sentence to say substantious and noble,
Sa that my preching may pers your perverst hertis
And mak yow mekar to men in maneris and conditionis.

I schaw yow sisteris in schrift I wes a schrew evir,
Bot I wes schene in my schrowd and schew me innocent;
And thought I dour wes and dane, dispitois and bald,
I wes dissymblyt suttelly in a sanctis liknes;
I semyt sober and sueit and sempill without fraud,
Bot I couth sixty dissaif that suttillar wer haldin.

(‘The Tretis of the Tua Mariit Wemen and the Wedo’, lines 245–56)

(Then the widow said: ‘Indeed, there is no other way; now it’s time for me to talk, my tale is next. May God now inspire my spirit and quicken my speech, and send me something sensible to say, substantial and noble, so that my preaching may pierce your perverse hearts, and make you meeker to men in your behaviour and treatment.

I tell you, sisters in confession, I was always a shrew, but I was bright in my shift [dress] and appeared innocent; and though I was grumpy and haughty, contemptuous and bold, I was subtly disguised in a saintly appearance: I seemed quiet and sweet, and simple without guile, but I could deceive sixty who were thought to be cleverer [than me].’)

The poem is in the courtly genre of the love-debate: the widow is the president of the court of love and asks the others a *demande d’amour*, a ‘love question’ meant to open up debate—‘Reveal what mirth you find in marriage

The Poetry of William Dunbar

and do you not think it a blessed bond?' After the three women have all spoken, and told of their experiences as wives, the poem ends with the poet's own question (he has been eavesdropping): which of these three 'wanton wives' would you take as your own? In his deliberate contrast between the women's superficial beauty and delicacy on the one hand, and their essential coarseness and corruption on the other, Dunbar reveals his opinion of female morality in general.

But there was a much brighter side to William Dunbar's outlook, and in his more positive moments he could be very uplifting about the redemptive power of true love and the glories of the natural world. One of his most famous love poems is 'The Goldyn Targe' ('The Golden Shield'), an allegory of love using the device of the dream vision. The poem is about the failure of Reason, bearing a golden shield, to defend the dreamer from the attack of Venus, attended by gods and goddesses who represent various feminine qualities such as Beauty, Fair Demeanour, Youth, Patience and others:

Thik was the schote of grundyn dartis kene,
Bot Resoun with the scheld of gold so schene
 Warly defendit quho so evir assayit;
 The afulfull stoure he manly did sustene
 Quhill Presence kest a pulder in his ene,
 And than as drunkyn man he all forvayit.
Quhen he was blynd, the fule wyth hym they playit
 And banyst hym among the bewis grene;
 That sory sicht me sudaynly affrayit.

Than was I woundit to the deth wele nere,
 And yoldyn as a wofull prisonnere
 To lady Beautee in a moment space;
 Me thought scho semyt lustiar of chere
 Efter that Resoun tynt had his eyne clere
 Than of before, and lufliare of face:
Quhy was thou blyndit, Resoun? quhi, allace!
 And gert ane hell my paradise appere,
And mercy seme quhare that I fand no grace.

(‘The Goldyn Targe’, lines 199–216)

(Thick was the barrage of keen sharpened arrows; but Reason with the shield of gold so bright stoutly fended off anyone who attacked: he manfully sustained the awful conflict until Presence threw a powder in his eyes, and then he staggered about like a drunken man. When he

The Poetry of William Dunbar

was blind, they played the fool with him, and banished him among the green boughs: that sorry sight made me suddenly afraid.

Then was I wounded almost to the death and handed over as a wretched prisoner to lady Beauty in the space of a moment; I thought she seemed brighter in her manner after Reason had lost his clear sight than she was before, and lovelier in her looks: why were you blinded, Reason, why, alas, making my paradise seem a hell, and mercy appear where I find no grace?)

Reason has been blinded by Venus, the power of Love, represented by her attendant, Presence, that is, the physical presence of the beloved which alone has the power to drive the lover's reason away. The dreamer, wounded and deprived of Reason, falls into despair before being woken from his dream by birdsong and the sensual comforts of the natural world. Many of the allegorical figures in the poem, and the divisions of the armies under Venus and Reason, come from the fourteenth-century French narrative poem, *Roman de la Rose* ('The Romance of the Rose'), which also circulated in a Middle English translation, *Romaunt of the Rose*, attributed (doubtfully) to Chaucer.

Religious Poems

Not surprisingly, given his training as a cleric, Dunbar's poetic gifts invariably turn in the direction of God's presence on earth. Whether invoked indirectly through the beauties of the natural world, or addressed explicitly as a salve and inspiration, the image of God is never far from Dunbar's poetic reality. By using the same styles as in the secular poems, including ornate language and dream visions, Dunbar creates a seamless connection between the religious and secular poems which naturalises God's presence and suggests a close bond. In this dream of the Passion, Dunbar offers a vision of literal crucifixion that is also redolent of symbolic and allegorical meaning:

Amang thir freiris, within ane cloister,
I enterit in ane oritorie;
And kneeling doun with ane pater noster
Befoir the michtie king of glorie,
Haveing his passioun in memorie,
Syn to his mother I did inclyne,
Hir halsing with ane gaude flore:
And sudandlie I sleipit syne.

The Poetry of William Dunbar

Betuix tuo theiffis the spreit he gaif
On to the Fader most of nicht;
The erde did trimmill, the stanis claif,
The sone obscurit of his licht;
The day wox dirk as ony nicht,
Deid bodiis rais in the cite:
Goddis deir Sone all thus was dicht,
O mankynd, for the luif of the.

(‘The Passioun of Crist’, lines 1–8 and 81–88)

(Among the friars within a cloister I entered an oratory, and kneeling down with a ‘pater noster’ before the mighty king of glory, having his passion in mind; then to his mother I bowed down, greeting her with a ‘rejoice in the flower’ [opening of a hymn to Mary]; and suddenly then I slept.

Between two thieves he gave up his spirit unto the mighty Father; the earth did tremble, the stones did cleave, the sun withdrew its light; the day grew dark as any night, dead bodies rose again in the city: thus was God’s dear Son treated, O mankind, for love of you.)

In the range of his poetry, William Dunbar exemplifies the cultural links that existed between the court circles of England, Scotland and France. Strong diplomatic and cultural ties between Scotland and France lasted until the end of the sixteenth century, and were not forgotten in the centuries that followed. Many French noblemen visited James’s court and many Scottish noblemen spoke French as a mark of their cultural sympathies and experiences. Inevitably, then, Dunbar came into contact with French courtly literature, especially love lyrics and ‘court of love’ poems, and he copied or adapted their high style in his ornate diction and range of metres.

But the explicit models for his poetry are English—Chaucer, Gower and Lydgate are all named in his verse. In this stanza, Dunbar pays tribute to Chaucer as one of his models for composing in ‘Inglich’, used here to include Scots:

O reverend Chaucere, rose of rethoris all,
As in oure tong ane flour imperiall
That raise in Britane, evir quho redis rycht,
Thou beris of makaris the tryumph riall;
Thy fresch anamalit termes celicall
This mater coud illumynit have full brycht:
Was thou noucht of oure Inglich all the lycht,

The Poetry of William Dunbar

Surmounting eviry tong terrestriall
Alls fer as Mayeis morow dois mydnycht?

(‘The Goldyn Targe’, lines 253–61)

(O revered Chaucer, rose of all rhetoricians, like an imperial flower in our language that ever grew in Britain, who has skilled knowledge, you bear the royal triumph of makars [poets]; your fresh enamelled celestial terms could have illuminated this material so brightly: were you not the whole light of our English, outshining every terrestrial language as far as a May morning does midnight?)

Like Chaucer, Dunbar adapted his diction to his subject matter and genres, using an enamelled diction studded with French and Latin in his religious and courtly poems, and a very broad coarse form of Scots for his satire and abuse. In his sensitivity to the sounds of spoken language and to the literary forms of his day, Dunbar can truly be called a ‘makar’ of Scots poetry.

Timeline: William Dunbar, c.1460 – c.1520

c.1460	Born in East Lothian, perhaps related to Earls of Dunbar
1477	Graduated as Bachelor of Arts from the University of St Andrews
1479	Graduated as Master of Arts from St Andrews
1480–1490	Preached as a Franciscan novice, became a member of the secular clergy
1491	Visited France as Secretary to a Scottish embassy
1500	Visited England as a member of the embassy which managed the marriage proposal of James IV to Margaret Tudor. Received an annual pension from the king
1503	Composed poems to Princess Margaret on her arrival in Scotland to marry James IV
1511	Travelled north with the Queen to attend a pageant at Aberdeen; composed eulogy to Aberdeen
1513	James IV declared war on England
1513	9 September: James killed at Battle of Flodden
1515	Dunbar’s name disappears from the list of pension payments

University of Wales Swansea