View metadata, citation and similar papers at core.ac.uk

brought to you by CORE

provided by eGrove (Univ. of Mississippi)

Studies in English, New Series

Volume 2 | Article 7

1981

The Role of Kingship in William Dunbar's Thrissil and the Rois

J. C. Nitzsche
Rice University

Follow this and additional works at: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/studies_eng_new

Part of the Literature in English, British Isles Commons

Recommended Citation

Nitzsche, J. C. (1981) "The Role of Kingship in William Dunbar's Thrissil and the Rois," *Studies in English, New Series*: Vol. 2 , Article 7.
Available at: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/studies_eng_new/vol2/iss1/7

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Studies in English at eGrove. It has been accepted for inclusion in Studies in English, New Series by an authorized editor of eGrove. For more information, please contact egrove@olemiss.edu.

THE ROLE OF KINGSHIP IN WILLIAM DUNBAR'S *THRISSIL AND THE ROIS*

J. C. NITZSCHE

RICE UNIVERSITY

Dunbar's poems have received little critical attention, but what has been published thus far centers either on the literary aspects of *The Goldyn Targe,*[1] one of his two major poems, or on his language and style,[2] or, given his membership in a group loosely described as Scottish or Scots Chaucerian, on his use of Chaucer.[3] His other major poem, *The Thrissil and the Rois,* has not yet received extended critical analysis, perhaps because it is generally regarded as "light-weight compared to 'The Goldyn Targe'. "[4] It seems insubstantial apparently because it is a topical poem of the kind Dunbar termed a "celebration," written as a prothalamion for the political marriage of King James IV of Scotland and Margaret Tudor on 8 August 1503. Its topical character is underscored by heraldic representations of a lion, an eagle, a thistle and by an apostrophe to a rose, in that the thistle stands for Scotland and the rose for England, and hence even these symbols are conventional, political — and unoriginal: Dunbar's editor James Kinsley notes that "the new windows of Holyrood Palace carried the arms of Scotland and England with a thistle and a rose interlaced through a crown, and James's marriage contract was bordered in intertwined roses, thistles, and marguerites" (p. 109).[5] The other images, of the lion and eagle, are also used to honor James IV: the poem's coronations of the king of beasts and the king of birds, along with that of the king of herbs, the thistle, celebrate the King's tripartite role as government-leader, law-giver, and war-chief.[6]

In addition the poem may be seen to contain thinly-veiled advice to King James IV in the form of Dame Nature's admonitions to the three kings. Nature asks the lion, as king of beasts and "cheif protector in woddis and schawis"(l. 104), to "keip the lawis"(l. 105) by tempering justice with mercy and conscience, specifically by treating apes and unicorns alike and by refusing to allow the wild ox to oppress the plough ox. She asks the eagle as "king of fowlis" to protect the weak from the strong, to treat all birds equally, and to "mak a law for wycht [strong] fowlis and for wrennis"(l. 124) so that the strong do not overpower the others. Finally, she asks the bold thistle with his "bush of spears" — "sen thow art a king"(l. 134) — not to treat virtueless herbs the same as virtued and sweet herbs, and to keep the nettles

away from the flowers. Keeping the laws, making the laws, enforcing the laws: all three functions, when combined, portray the role of the ideal king depicted by St. Thomas Aquinas as the directive principle of society in his treatise on kingship, *De Regno, Ad Regem Cypri.* For Aquinas, the king who understands divine law will promote three goals: "first of all, to establish a virtuous life in the multitude subject to him; second, to preserve it once established; and third, having preserved it, to promote its greater perfection."[7] The eagle seems to establish the virtuous life by making the laws, the lion preserves it by keeping the laws, and the thistle attempts "to promote its greater perfection" not only by enforcing the laws but by following a curious injunction of Nature: to hold in highest esteem the Rose, most perfect of flowers, which on one level represents the bride of James, Margaret Tudor, and on another, as we shall see, the Virgin Mary. Dunbar here echoes Aquinas in believing that human law should be informed and inspired by divine law. The reason for this interrelationship stems from the king's understanding of his position in the universe, analogous to that of just and responsible God and to a soul merciful to its body, or so Aquinas believes:

> Therefore let the king recognize that such is the office which he undertakes, namely, that he is to be in the kingdom what the soul is in the body, and what God is in the world. If he reflect seriously upon this, *a zeal for justice* will be enkindled in him when he contemplates that he has been appointed to this position in place of God, to exercise judgment in his kingdom; further, he will acquire the *gentleness of clemency and mildness* when he considers as his own members those individuals who are subject to his rule (p. 54, my italics).

The major problem with this interpretation of the poem as political philosophy and topical allegory is that it ignores the beginning and end of the work, a dream-vision envelope in which a dreamer is persuaded by the personification of May to leave his room for a chilly if enameled garden and, after the dream vision (ll. 43-182) wherein he sees Dame Nature crowning the three kings, he awakens determined to write it all down. There seems to be no connection between the dreamer reluctant to leave his warm bed on a cold spring morning and the king crowned and married in the celebratory vision, or between the dream-vision envelope and the dream vision, or between the dreary complaint by the slothful dreamer and the joyous celebration of the king by industrious Nature.

One possible connection is supplied, once again, by Aquinas in *On*

Kingship, when he explores the relationship between human and natural law. Dunbar's dreamer is a man alone and intentionally isolated in that he sleeps, but the three kings are very much a part of a parliament intentionally summoned by Nature. Dunbar seems to point to the unnatural situation of the former and the natural and harmonious situation of the latter, especially through the images of lion, eagle, and thistle who represent the "kings" of beasts, birds, and herbs, and the figure of Nature who presides over this Chain of Being, this Parliament. Aquinas proclaims that,

> if man were intended to live alone, as many animals do, he would require no other guide [than reason] to his end. Each man would be a king unto himself, under God, the highest King, inasmuch as he would direct himself in his acts by the light of reason given him on high. Yet it is natural for man, more than for any other animal, to be a social and political animal, to live in a group.... If, then, it is natural for man to live in the society of many, it is necessary that there exist among men some means by which the group may be governed. For where there are many men together and each one is looking after his own interest, the multitude would be broken up and scattered unless there were also an agency to take care of what appertains to the commonweal (pp. 3-4, 5-6).

What the dreamer learns in the subsequent vision of the parliament of Nature is that the king is appointed to care about the whole kingdom — the lion about all beasts, the eagle about all birds, the thistle about all herbs, and Nature herself about all species. Thus the figure of the king, which Aquinas defined as the directive principle of society equivalent to reason in the microcosm and God himself in the macrocosm of the universe, links three kinds of law, natural, human, and divine:

> Wherefore also in all things that are ordained towards one end, one thing is found to rule the rest. Thus in the corporeal universe, by the first body, i.e. the celestial body, the other bodies are regulated according to the order of Divine Providence; and all bodies are ruled by a rational creature. So, too, in the individual man, the soul rules the body; and among the parts of the soul, the irascible and the concupiscible parts are ruled by reason ... *Therefore in every multitude there must be some governing power* (p. 6, my italics).

The dreamer himself as a *slugird* signifies a lazy "king" who refuses to take care of himself because he fails to understand that rational behavior (i.e., getting out of bed) is natural, or, in a larger sense, because he fails to understand Nature. If Dunbar, like Aquinas, believes that "the light of reason is placed by nature in every man, to

guide him in his acts towards his end"(p. 3), then this dreamer suffers from an immobilizing malaise because he is without reason. Asleep at a time when March has passed and May has inspired the singing of the lark, he dreams that Aurora invites him, along with other lovers, to "Awalk, luvaris, out of your slomering" (l. 13) and that May, garbed like Alain de Lille's Nature in the twelfth-century *De planctu Naturae* (l. 16 ff.), asks him to "awalk annone for schame,/ And in my honour sum thing thow go wryt"(ll. 22-23). The human mind's natural function is busy and rational — as in writing a poem — and not dormant and irrational like the dreamer's. This physical and spiritual malaise is symbolized by his "paill and grene" color[8] and by his supine position, a posture which suggests sleep, certainly, but also weakness, illness, defeat — or death. Spiritually he *is* dead, and thus resembles the cold, unfeeling world May wants him to describe and to honor. Why should he "uprys at morrow" only to feel the cold and unhealthy air as it blasts through the boughs of the trees, when even the birds refuse to sing ("Thai haif moir caus to weip and plane thair sorrow," he complains in l. 31)? Why should he sing of May when the birds do not?

The answer to his question is contained in May's demand that he "Uprys and do thy observance"(l. 3), exactly the same advice given by May to Emelye in l. 1045 of Chaucer's *Knight's Tale* because May "wole have no slogardie a-nyght."[9] In Chaucer's poem, however, this appeal works: it "maked Emelye have remembraunce/ To doon honour to May, and for to ryse"(ll. 1046-1047). In rising on this day to do her 'observance' to May, Emelye is actually *observed* by Palamon and Arcite, who consequently fall in love with her. But her duty to May transcends the role of courtly lover offered by Palamon or of creature lover offered by Arcite, as we discover later in the poem. Her rising up and doing 'observaunce' to May means marriage, both to perpetuate the species and also to fit harmoniously into the natural scheme of things: "Bitwixen hem Palamon and Emelye was maad anon the bond/ That highte matrimoigne or marriage"(ll. 3094-3095). This bond provides one link in "that faire cheyne of love" with which the Firste Moevere "bond/ The fyr, the eyr, the water, and the lond/ In certeyn boundes, that they may nat flee"(ll. 2991-2993). So man and woman, as unlike as the four elements, are joined in harmony and so of Palamon and Emelye Chaucer says "nevere was ther no word hem bitwene/ Of jalousie or any oother teene"(ll. 3105-3106). Marriage then reflects in little that cosmic love structuring the universe and identical to the Chain of Being.

May in Dunbar's poem does not demand that the *slugird* dreamer rise up to be observed and later married like Emelye, but that he *observe* May, that he understand nature and man's place within it. He actually learns to do this not from May's injunction but from his dream vision of Nature in the garden. The goddess Nature herself epitomizes Reason in the universe through the fair chain of love, described by Theseus in the *Knight's Tale* as a marriage of the elements of earth, air, fire and water, and represented in *The Thrissil and the Rose* by the regions of the universe through which she descends to earth. Each region offers her obeisance in the form of song and harmonious sound as she passes. That is, before she appears in the poem the birds' song, with its "blisfull soune of cherarchy"(l. 57), mimicks the music of the legion orders of heavenly hosts. As she nears earth, the god of the sea (Neptunus) and the god of air (Aeolus) are instructed not to "perturb the wattir nor the air"(l. 66). Finally, once she has reached earth, the birds, beasts, and flowers as the three major types of terrestrial inhabitants are summoned by Nature "To hir thair makar to mak obediens"(l. 76). They must make their *observance* to Nature like Emelye who marries and like the dreamer who awakens to become himself a *makar* of song. Indeed, Nature's advice to the three kings, lion, eagle, and thistle, although explicitly advice about kingship, also reveals an understanding about the natural role of man as a "king" of himself. Because he is a rational animal he must naturally behave like a king (of beasts, of birds, of herbs) and govern his kingdom with justice and mercy. Because this particular man has been slothful, he must also awaken and write down what he has seen in his dream: recording such sense-perceptions is rational activity and making poetry involves the melodic articulation of thought and praise — the actual "observaunce" of May demanded of him earlier.

Such rational behavior is also virtuous behavior, in that writing down what he has seen will help others as he himself has been helped. In a sense the *makar* has a specific obligation to guide the 'commonweal' of his audience through the proper governance of himself and his craft. In short, the creation of his 'word' constitutes an act of charity and is anticipated by the Word of God. This virtuous concern for the spiritual welfare of others leads man to the eternal Kingdom which is governed, in Aquinas's words, by "that king who is not only a man, but also God, namely, our Lord Jesus Christ, Who by making men sons of God brought them to the glory of Heaven. This then is the

government which has been delivered to Him and which 'shall not be destroyed,' on account of which He is called, in Holy Writ, not Priest only, but King" (p. 61). Because human law is motivated by divine law, the dream vision in *The Thrissil and the Rois* ends with a paean to the Virgin Mary through the figure of the rose — and begins with a tribute to the "purple sun" — or Son of God — beaming upon the garden in which Nature convokes her parliament. Indeed, the sluggish narrator has finally arisen to enter the garden behind May only because reminded of his promise to her to describe the "Ros of most plesance" (l. 38), the best that this fallen world has to offer. He "uprises" to do his "observance" — to Nature — because of the promise to man implied by divine law through the example set by the Son of God. While the crystal eyes of Aurora do not comfort the grieving narrator, the fresh face of the sun/ son offers true salvation and comfort to the sinner: "all the world tuke confort, fer and neir,/ To luke upone his freshche and blisfull face/ Doing all sable fro the hevynnis chace"(ll. 54-56). Redemption images abound: the light of the sun's face removes the dark of the heavens, an image directly parallel to the birds' apostrophe to May, Flora, and Aurora: "O luvaris fo, away, thow dully nycht,/ And welcum day that confortis every wight"(ll. 60-61). As the day overthrows "dark night" through the rising of the sun in the natural world, so Christ ascendant overcomes the powers of Satan. The "purple sun," purple suggesting the passion of Christ plus regal majesty, truly represents man's spiritual redeemer and comfort, as Aurora and May act as the sleeper's physical redeemer and comfort. So *The Thrissil and the Rois* echoes the rondel of the birds at the end of the *Parlement* when they welcome Summer "with thy *sonne softe,/* That hast this wintres wedres overshake,/ And driven away the longe nyghtes blake'. "(ll. 680-682, my italics). Natural and supernatural regeneration seem analogous through the symbol of the purple sun: man's uprising to do his "observance" (to observe or *see* a purple sun) parallels and is inspire by Christ's uprising as the sun/son to do *his* "observance." Thus all the consequences of the Fall — on the natural level of the poem, the black night, the harsh winter, mutability — are overcome. Death has died. And if the purple sun reaffirms and crowns the *slugird's* uprising, it is the promise to describe the Rose that initiates it — the Rose here representing the Mother of Christ, the Virgin Mary described in Dunbar's divine poem "Rorate celi desuper" as "the ros Mary, flour of flouris."

For Dunbar, like Aquinas, intimates that divine law not only

inspires human law but is reflected in natural law. The introduction of the single rose — Margaret Tudor — implies perfection beyond the natural. When she is summoned to be crowned as queen, in l. 153-154, the lines echo the description of the bride or Sponsa in the Song of Songs 4:8 [Thou art all fair, my love; there is no spot in thee. Come with me from Lebanon, my spouse, with me from Lebanon.]:

> Fro the stok ryell *rysing* 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 (ll. 151-154).

The rose here "rises" from the royal stock to make *her* observance like Emelye: her marriage to James invites comparison with that of Palamon and Emelye. Also the idea of marriage in the Song of Songs symbolically underscores the wedding of Christ to his Church or man's soul to God. As a symbol, marriage, then, signifies not only the realization of cosmic love on the microcosmic level but also the fulfilment of natural law (the perpetuation of the species and the joining of diverse elements, or the two sexes, in a *discordia concors*). Marriage creates that unit of human society which necessitates human law and anticipates symbolically that spiritual joining of man to God promised by divine law.

This rose is also a type of Mary as the purple sun was a type of Christ. Note that the singing of the birds after her coronation emphasizes explicitly the idea of Christian regeneration merely hinted at elliptically before: " 'Chryst the conserf frome all adversite,' " they sing in l. 182. Margaret Tudor as an embodiment of natural virtue is modeled upon Mary, flower of flowers, for she is "Naturis suffragene/ In bewty, nurtour, and every nobilnes,/ In riche array, renown, and gentilnes"(ll. 173-175). That is, Margaret is to the Virgin as Beatrice is to Mary in the *Paradiso*. The salute to the blossom at the end (" 'Haill blosome breking out of the blud royall,' ": l. 167), according to editor James Kinsley's note on this line, refers to Mary giving birth to the fleur-de-lis, presumably the Christ child. The promise of future generations springing from this earthly marriage in fulfilment of natural law reminds the poet of the past fulfilment of divine law in a more supernal marriage that resulted in offspring.

The poem does not end with the apostrophe to the Rose, however, The dreaming *slugird* now awakens refreshed by his visionary experience and arises to become a poet. Because this poem has functioned

primarily as an answer to his question concerning the value of fallen nature, it appropriately ends when he finally performs both of the requests of Aurora and May made at the beginning of the poem, as if fully convinced of the efficacy of this answer. First, he "annonne awoilk quhair that I lay" upon hearing the birds' harmony, which he could neither discern nor accept earlier, and second, he writes: "And thus I wret, as ye haif hard to forrow,/ Off lusty May upone the nynt morrow"(ll. 188-189). To awaken from sleep parallels the awakening of spring from the sleep of winter, a ritual act experienced earlier in the vision; to write of May in this enameled and ornate language of Dunbar resembles the enameling of earth by a loftier artist or Makar. So April has "silver schouris," and an "orient blast"; so Aurora has "cristall ene"; so May "In brycht atteir of flouris forgit new ... / Balmit in dew, and gilt with Phebus bemys/ Quhill all the hous illumynit of hir lemys"(ll. 18-21). The *slugird* has been transformed into the poet Dunbar as Nature has been regenerated from a wintry waste to an enameled spring garden. Indeed, he obeys Nature or natural law when he arises from bed to write — to exhibit a trait naturally characteristic, according to Aquinas, of man, who has only speech and neither sharp teeth or claws to help preserve his life. By serving as a "king" of himself, the poet resembles King James IV making and keeping human law with justice and mercy and Christ the King exemplifying divine law. Now that the narrator recognizes the analogy between his internal kingdom and the external political and spiritual kingdoms —or between natural, human, and divine law — he can perform his "observance" to Nature at the very end of the poem. Like Emelye he does arise: 'up I lenyt, halflingis in affrey,/ And thus I wret ... / Off *lusty May*"(ll. 188-189, my italics). Law is love — the king *does* marry — and, uplifted, the swain becomes a *makar* who will uplift others through the medium of his courtly art.

When, then, this fifteenth-century courtly poem is placed within the appropriate philosophic literary tradition, it becomes more than a "light-weight" topical and political "celebration." As the combined celebration of a marriage and complaint about fallen nature it finds literary antecedents in Alain's *De planctu Naturae* and Chaucer's *Parlement of Foules*: the former complains about the adultery of Venus with Antigamus (or Anti-marriage) against Hymen (or Marriage), and the latter celebrates the "marriage" of birds on Valentine's Day. There is also a thematic resemblance among these three works. In both the *De planctu Naturae* and the *Parlement of Foules* natural

law is abrogated when various "kings" no longer govern wisely. In Alain's *prosimetrum,* man behaves irrationally and unnaturally when he unmans himself by succumbing to homosexuality (a physical unmanning) and then to deadly sin (a spiritual unmanning). After Nature complains because the reproduction of human kind has ceased and because man's soul no longer governs his body, sinful man is excommunicated from the realm of Nature by her regal priest Genius, the god of human nature. In addition to such infractions of natural law, the *Parlement* also displays infractions of human law through the explicit failure of a "king" — of birds — to govern effectively. The tercel eagle, as the highest-ranking member of the four orders of fowl (the birds of prey, the water fowl, the worm fowl, and the seed fowl) representing the four estates of human society, should set an example for the lower orders when he selects a mate by choosing wisely and quickly. Instead he defers to the judgment of the formel eagle in a gesture more mindful of courtly love dictates (and debate poems) than the political obligations of an aristocracy to the lower classes. Because of the noble bird's failure in judgment, chaos ensues: the lower classes do not have enough time to select mates, and the eagle himself must await for yet another year the formel's decision. The tercel eagle has thus abrogated natural law by delaying the annual mating of the species and, more figuratively, human law by failing to consider the interests of the commonweal. This "unnatural" practice of courtly love by the eagles parallels the unnatural homosexuality and deadly sin by man in Alain's *De planctu Naturae.*

In *The Thrissil and the Rois* the situation differs, for it is man and not Nature who complains that nature is fallen, and also man who finally attempts to obey both natural and human law in spite of this fact. Dunbar seeks to justify to man the ways of Nature — and, because Nature is God's vicar, of God. Thus although the poem begins with a complaint like that of Alain's *prosimetrum* but delivered by the narrator instead of Nature, it ends with a celebration like that of Chaucer's poem, but of the harmony of Nature symbolized by the marriage of James IV and Margaret Tudor. Man must govern himself and also others *because* the world is fallen and spring is often wintry; there is need for wise kings, and wise *makars.* The dream vision accordingly reveals to the slothful *makar* exactly how human law derives from natural law, and how, in addition, man is counseled by divine law. Dunbar's originality, given his affinity for Chaucerian themes and genres, and the specific place of this poem within the

philosophic literary tradition of Nature represented by these two earlier works, stems from his combination of literary forms and his synthesis of themes of nature and human nature, here optimistically unified by Aquinas's concept of law and kingship in *De Regno, Ad Regem Cypri.*

NOTES

[1] See Denton Fox, "Dunbar's *Golden Targe,*" *ELH,* 26(1959), 311-334.

[2] See, for example, Edwin Morgan, "Dunbar and the Language of Poetry," *EC,* 2(1952), 138-158; Isabel Hyde, "Primary Sources and Associations of Dunbar's Aureate Imagery," *MLR* 51(1956), 481-492; A. M. Kinghorn, "The Mediaeval Makars," *TSLL* 1(1959), 73-88; and John Leyerle, "The Two Voices of William Dunbar," *UTQ*, 31(1962), 316-338.

[3] For a thorough compilation of the extant criticism on the Scots Chaucerian issue see Florence H. Ridley, "A Plea for the Middle Scots," in *The Learned and the Lewed: Studies in Chaucer and Medieval Literature,* ed. Larry D. Benson (Cambridge, Mass., 1974), pp. 175-196; also see Denton Fox, "The Scottish Chaucerians," in *Chaucer and Chaucerians,* ed. D. S. Brewer (London and Edinburgh; University, Alabama, 1966), pp. 164-200.

[4] Tom Scott, *Dunbar: A Critical Exposition of the Poems* (New York, 1966), p. 50.

[5] Dunbar describes the lion in this way, for example:

> Reid of his cullour as is the ruby glance:
> On feild of gold he stude full mychtely,
> With flour delycis sirculit lustely.

From *William Dunbar: Poems,* ed. James Kinsley (Oxford [England], 1958), l. 96-98. All quotations from Dunbar's poems derive from this edition.

[6] Scott, p. 50.

[7] St. Thomas Aquinas, *On Kingship, to the King of Cyprus,* trans. Gerald B. Phelan, rev. I. Th. Eschmann (Toronto, 1949), p. 65. Subsequent references will appear within the text.

[8] The syntax in line eleven is confusing. The "paill and grene" visage may refer to Aurora peering in through the window with her crystal eyes, a reference to the wintry spring day, but more probably it refers to the narrator, for the full line reads that she "halsit me, with visage paill and grene."

[9] *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer,* ed. F. N. Robinson. 2nd ed. (Boston, 1957), p. 27 (11. 1041-1044). All references to Chaucer derive from this edition.