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THE LANGUAGE OF WILLIAM DUNBAR: MIDDLE SCOTS OR EARLY MODERN SCOTS?

1. William Dunbar: The Scottish makar and his language

Living across the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, William Dunbar (c.1460-1520) has been acclaimed as one of the most ingenious, skilled and compelling Scottish poets of his time (see the contributions to McClure and Spiller [eds.] 1989, Bawcutt 1992, Jack 1997, Mapstone [ed.] 2001). His *oeuvre* comprises aureate courtly verse, satires, ribald flytings,¹ elevated religious elegies, and even introspective personal poems. The poet responds to the reality around him: to the dealings of James IV's court, to the changeability of seasons, to human virtues and vices and to many other sources of inspiration. The aim of this paper, however, is not to analyse Dunbar's poetry for its literary merit but rather to reconsider the characteristic features of his linguistic profile in a search for an adequate periodisation label. This task is not straightforward because from a literary perspective the poet seems to be positioned between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance: he refers to medieval masters and exploits medieval themes and techniques, such as alliteration, but at the same time draws on classical sources and shows skill in responding to poetic conventions of his day, as well as in reaching beyond them. Still, he is classed among Middle Scots poets, with a medieval bias to the term, as Alasdair MacDonald points out in his essay contributed to the present volume.² The traditional periodisation labels are of consequence not only for interpreting the literature in Scots, but also for the Scots language. The present paper chooses a linguistic, data-based approach to periodisation, in an attempt to question the label 'Middle Scots' as applied to Dunbar's poetry, and to propose that the 'Renaissance' or 'Early Modern' status of Dunbar as an author may also be argued on linguistic grounds.

The present study closely follows Roger Lass's (2000) paper on the concept of 'middle' in Germanic languages.³ The author devised a linguistic test for placing a selected Germanic 'language-state', current or historical, on a scale from archaic to modern, expecting that 'perhaps "Middle" will emerge as a "natural" scalar property' (Lass 2000: 26). I return to the rationale applied in that paper in more detail below. Scots is a West Germanic language, so it could have well been addressed by Lass alongside Gothic, Old English, Middle English, Old Icelandic, Old High German, Middle Dutch, Afrikaans, and others. Since Lass zoomed in on the Middle English

¹ Priscilla Bawcutt defines flyting as "a contest of wits wherein poets assailed each other alternately with tirades of abusive verses" (1992: 220).

² Middle Scots poets used to be referred to as 'Scottish Chaucerians' until this term was refuted as anachronistic and biased (Wittig 1958, Scott 1966).

³ I would like to thank Prof. Marcin Krygier for the brainstorming session on this topic.

period and applied his criteria to Middle English poetry (e.g. to Chaucer and to *The Owl and The Nightingale*) and religious texts (the *Ormulum* and *Kentish Sermons*), I have decided to assess the ‘middle’ nature of William Dunbar’s language using the same linguistic tests. The analysis is based on a selection of the earliest surviving Dunbar poems (Bawcutt 1998), reflecting his stylistic versatility, the range of genres, and the array of topics he addressed. It is hoped that the results will shed new light on the traditional periodisation of Scots, which was typically construed with literary texts in the background, in view of the ongoing discussion and change of paradigm (Costa 2009, Kopaczyk 2013). At the same time, the analysis of Dunbar’s linguistic features will provide a succinct summary of the grammatical tools available to the poet and his contemporaries, and will place the language used in his poems against a wider Germanic background, especially with Middle English in mind.

2. The choice of poems

One cannot study the language of William Dunbar in a straightforward manner. There are no autograph manuscripts or copies directly associated with the poet. His poetry has come down to us in several manuscript collections, some of which were contemporary with Dunbar. Nevertheless, according to Priscilla Bawcutt, who published a comprehensive collated edition of the poet’s works, ‘[n]o witness has over-riding authority’ (1998: 10). The surviving copies are spread across a one-hundred-year period, from the 1502-1507 Aberdeen Sasine Register to the Reidpeth Manuscript, started in 1622 (Bawcutt 1998: 4-10).

The manuscripts used in the present study date back to the period between 1505 and 1525. They ‘have particular importance, in that they were produced by those to whom Dunbar’s language was still familiar, and for whom his poetic traditions and religious doctrines were vital and essentially unchallenged’ (Bawcutt 1998: 11). Thus, I have analysed the following poems, which the editor of the collection deemed ‘the best instances’ of such a profile (Bawcutt 1998: 11):

- a) ‘The Tretis of the Tua Mariit Wemen and the Wedo’ (Number 3, Bawcutt 1998):⁴ lines 104-530 of a partial copy from the so-called ‘Rouen print’ (c.1508), claimed to have been ‘printed under Dunbar’s “own inspection”’, but Bawcutt says it is unlikely (1998: 5);
- b) ‘Quod sum dyabolus incarnatus’ (Number 19), from the Rouen print (c.1508);
- c) ‘Timor mortis conturbat me’ (Number 21), from the Rouen print (c.1508);
- d) ‘This lang Lentrin it makis me lene’ (Number 57), from the Aberdeen Sasine Register (1507-1513);
- e) ‘The Goldyn Targe’ (Number 59), from the Chepman and Myllar print (1508);
- f) ‘The Flyting of Dunbar and Kennedie’ (Number 65): lines 316-522 from a partial copy of the poem, from the Chepman and Myllar print (1508);

Together, the poems amount to about 9,800 words and represent a variety of styles, topics, and technical choices: from heroic stanzas to alliterative verse, from flyting to ‘courtly verse in the grand manner’ (Aitken 1983: 21). In this way, they constitute a

4 As Bawcutt points out, “[f]ew of the titles given to Dunbar’s poems have early authority. Most were invented in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by his first editors” (1998: 17). Her critical edition, therefore, does not superimpose poem titles but uses numbering instead. In spite of that, I have decided to list the poems under their traditional titles and add Bawcutt’s numbers for reference.

relatively substantial sample of the poet's language, which can support the analysis of its linguistic features.

3. 'Middle' and 'Early Modern' features in Germanic languages

In the traditional periodisation of Scots (Aitken 1985: xiii), the time when Dunbar penned his poems is referred to as 'Early Middle Scots' (1450-1550). As I have shown in a recent paper (Kopaczyk, 2013), this period label can be contested on both extra-linguistic and linguistic grounds. In the sections below, Dunbar's linguistic tools will be scrutinized to address the question whether the language in which he wrote displays the 'middle' qualities of a Germanic language, as outlined by Lass (2000), or whether it can already be considered 'early modern'.

In his search for the features displayed by a Germanic language in its 'middle' period, Lass defines a range of structural characteristics which should be present in a language from this family in its most archaic form. He builds on Henry Sweet's idea, which was developed on the basis of English, that a Germanic language goes through three phases: 'the period of full endings', 'the period of levelled endings' and 'the period of lost endings', which would be labelled respectively as the old, middle and modern periods in language periodisation (Sweet 1874; following Fisiak 1994). In a philological vein, Sweet's periodisation was later refined to include transition stages, corresponding to the most outstanding representatives of a literary tradition in a given period. Thus, Chaucer was listed as 'Late Middle English' (1300-1400), Caxton was placed in the 'Transition Middle English' period (1400-1500), while Shakespeare followed in the 'Early Modern' period (1500-1650). In fact, Sweet's periodisation of English still underlies the way in which the timeline of that language is divided and labelled, although much emphasis has also been placed on political, social and cultural developments.

In his paper, Lass does not want to use extra-linguistic criteria, and relies purely on structure. The fewer features from the list of archaisms, modelled closely on Proto-Germanic, a given 'language-state' displays, the closer it is to the 'modern' state in the development of languages in the Germanic family. Such characteristics can be grouped into the following categories (following Lass 2000: 26):

(1) phonological

- a) root-initial accent
- b) at least 3 distinct vowel qualities in weak inflectional syllables

(2) morphological, with emphasis on the nominal categories

- c) a dual
- d) grammatical gender
- e) adjective inflection⁵
- f) distinct dative in at least some nouns
- g) inflected definite article (or proto-article)

⁵ In Lass's paper this feature comes under (h), because he has listed the vowel gradation, characteristic for verbs, under (e). I have decided to group the features into three broader categories, which resulted in swapping the places of the original features (e) and (h): the vowel grades under (h) in the verb category, and the adjectives under (e) in the nominal categories. This technical change is important to remember when juxtaposing the results of the present study with Lass's, see Table 1.

- (3) morphological, with emphasis on the verb
- h) four vowel-grades in (certain) strong verbs
 - i) infinitive suffix
 - j) person/number marking on the verb

Using a simple diagnostic whereby a presence of all the above archaic features scores 1, and the absence of all of them scores 0 (allowing for 0.5 in some cases), Lass ranks various Germanic languages, discovering four clusters among the thirteen studied language-states (2000: 30-31):

1.0- 0.9 OLD

- a) Gothic, Old English, Old Icelandic
- b) Modern Icelandic, Old High German

0.6 MIDDLE

Middle High German, Modern German, Middle Dutch

0.35 EARLY MODERN

Middle English, Modern Swedish, Modern Dutch

0.15-0.0 MODERN

Afrikaans, Modern English

Since Middle English fared remarkably ‘modern’ on the basis of Chaucer’s writings, Lass was also interested in analysing texts from the whole chronological range of Middle English. The following rankings were obtained for Middle English texts (2000: 33):

- 0.75 *Ormulum*
- 0.70 *The Owl and The Nightingale*
- 0.6 Kentish sermons
- 0.35 Chaucer

This analysis shows clearly that Middle English is not a uniform period in linguistic terms, and that Chaucer is already substantially removed from a prototypical ‘middle’ type of a Germanic tongue, in contrast to the other three texts: the *Ormulum*, the *Owl and The Nightingale* and the Kentish sermons. It remains to be seen how Dunbar’s ‘Early Middle Scots’ poetry, written in the late fifteenth or early sixteenth-century, meets the criteria for the Germanic ‘(early) middle’.

4. Working with the criteria for the ‘middle’

It is necessary to remember that Scots in the Scottish Lowlands can be ultimately traced back to the Old Northumbrian dialects of Old English.⁶ Still, one should watch out when extending the Old Northumbrian features beyond the Old English period, because ‘[t]he varieties of English spoken in Scotland ... were to some extent

⁶ Northumbrian dialects also displayed linguistic variation. On the lack of homogeneity within the surviving Northumbrian texts, see Fernández Cuesta et al. 2008, Fernández Cuesta and Senra Silva 2008; for later forms of Northern English, see Wales 2010.

restructured, presumably under the influence of the Norse-English contact variety common in the northern Danelaw' (Johnston 1997: 55). This implies that Scots should be perceived as a separate linguistic entity rather than a direct continuation of Old Northumbrian dialects, especially in view of the patchy textual evidence for Northumbrian itself (see Fernández Cuesta et al. 2008).

Clearly, many factors, both linguistic and extralinguistic, contributed to the split of Scots from the continuum of northern Middle English, and to its specific lexical and grammatical character. On the brink of the sixteenth century, Dunbar wrote in a language which was not only structurally distinct from contemporary northern English dialects, but which also enjoyed a stable position as a literary, formal and public medium (McClure 1995: 30-33), in addition to being used in everyday communication by the inhabitants of the Scottish Lowlands. The exploration of Lass's criteria below is sensitive to the Northumbrian roots of Scots, while at the same time it approaches Dunbar's writings synchronically, to observe the presence or absence of a given feature. If applicable, I illustrate relevant attestations with quotations from Dunbar's poems, with a commentary on the linguistic structure of the Scots of the day.

4.1. *Lass's phonological criteria*

a) root-initial accent

This criterion is not applicable to Dunbar's Scots because the language is already too far removed phonologically from the Proto-Germanic sources and displays moveable word stress. Therefore, the first score is 0.

b) at least 3 distinct vowel qualities in weak inflectional syllables

This criterion could be modified to include a finer grading: 1 for three vowel qualities, 0.5 for two qualities, and 0 for a single quality of an unstressed vowel in an inflectional syllable. What Lass had in mind devising this criterion was the presence of full vowels, spelled with <e, a, o, u>, in unstressed positions in inflectional endings in the earliest extant texts in Germanic languages; consider the vowels in Old English *stānes* 'stone Gsg', *stānas* 'stone N/Apl' or *stānum* 'stone Dpl', which would have merged to <e> by the Early Middle English period, or reduced and levelled out altogether, as in the plural paradigm.

In Scots morphology, this merger also took place as a consequence of processes already present in Old Northumbrian. Studying the loss of the final *-e*, Donka Minkova revisits the works of Neogrammarians who noticed that 'the earliest instances of loss are recorded in Scotland and the North Midlands, whereas in Kent, and in the South in general, the process took much longer' (Minkova 1991: 18-19). The change comes across as uneven geographically, with the north as the innovation area. In fact, in their *Elementary Middle English Grammar* (1923), Joseph Wright and E.M. Wright dated the completion of this change already to the middle of the thirteenth century in 'Scottish and Northern dialects' (Minkova 1991: 25). As Paul Johnston puts it, 'Northumbrian is an innovative dialect... when it comes to the development of unstressed syllables – a trend that will continue into Early Scots/Middle English as final *-e* is lost a whole century before it disappears in London' (Johnston 1997: 52). Prior to the complete loss of inflections, '[i]n a weakly stressed position Middle English had two phonemes, /i/ and /ə/' (Fisiak 1968: 46).

The first variant was characteristic both for northern Middle English dialects and for Scots, and spelled <i> or <y>.

The search for unstressed syllables in nominal inflections rendered 446 tokens in the Dunbar sample, of which 97% contained <is / ys> spellings, and 3% <es> spellings. The overwhelming majority of nouns inflected for the plural and/or the possessive contain the raised unstressed vowel in their inflections, e.g.

- (1) For *menis saulis* thai say thai sing...
- (2) On to the ded gois all *estatis*,
Princis, prelotis and *potestatis*...
- (3) My lady Cleo, that help of *makaris* bene...
...hir mychti *quenis* in *crounis* mycht be sene
Wyth *bemys* blith, bricht as *Lucifera*.
- (4) To *knychtis* and to *cleirkis* and cortly *personis*
Quhen *frendis* of my *husbandis* behaldis me on fer...

The 4% of nominal inflections which contain the <es> spelling may be due to anglicising influence of similar writings from the south, even though a stronger wave of Anglicisation was yet to come to Scotland in the second half of the sixteenth century (Devitt 1989: 16-30, on the basis of selected variables) and later. The <es> spellings were typically found in *The Golden Targe*, which is an example of courtly poetry in the grand style (Aitken 1983: 21), where the printers or copyists of Dunbar's poem may have had access to other such writings from south of the border.

The noun which most readily attaches <es> is *lady*, as in the following examples:

- (5) Than *ladyes* fair lete fall thair mantillis grene,
- (6) Seruit wyth *ladyes* full of reuerence.

The <es> spelling is used in 5 instances, whereas once in the sample the text has *ladyis*:

- (7) He is for *ladyis* in luf a right lusty schadow,

The number of instances is too small to draw any specific conclusions about this word. However it is remarkable that the <es> spelling appears several times, even though such a spelling for the plural has not been listed in the Older Scots part of the *Dictionary of the Scots Language* (cf. DSL *lady* n., pl *ladis*, *-ys*).⁷ Other <es> spellings occur in a similar phonological context, namely where the noun finishes in a high front vowel (or a closing diphthong):

- (8) With werblis suete did perse the hevinly *skyes*,

⁷ The *Dictionary of the Scots Language* (DSL) comprises two main historical dictionaries of Scots: the *Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue* (DOST), which has been used in the present analysis, and the *Scottish National Dictionary* (SND) for modern Scots vocabulary.

(9) Thair scharp *assayes* mycht do no dures

(10) How all the feldis wyth thai *lilies* quhite

There is also one instance of metathesised spelling for the plural of *hege* ‘hedge’, which would have probably been spelled *hegis* or *hegeis* (cf. DSL *hege*, pl *heg(e)is*):

(11) On every syde the *hegies* raise on hicht,

Coming back to Lass’s metrics, these examples of two potential spellings of unstressed vowels in Dunbar’s Scots do not really support a 0.5 score for this feature. Lass was interested in the extent to which the original Proto-Germanic vowels were retained, and how much they have merged and lost their full distinctive quality. As explained earlier, the <is/ys> and <es> spellings in Scots represent a single-vowel outcome of earlier mergers, which had produced one vowel quality – a high front unstressed /i/ in the north, and the central /ə/ in the south.

Whether <e> in a handful of specific words in Dunbar is only a spelling feature or an underlying lowering of the Scots vowel under southern influence, cannot be answered at this point. It may be the case that the <e> spellings continued the earlier northern Middle English spellings for unstressed vowels: ‘Scots apparently generalised /i/ (though /ə/ remained part of the unstressed vowel system) while northern English, on the evidence of <e> and <i> usage...used both /ə/ and /i/ interchangeably’ (King 1997: 161). Thus the retention of a schwa alongside /i/ in unstressed positions may have later helped the introduction of <e> spellings, as Anne King suggests in her further discussion (1997: 180).

What is more telling, however, is the presence of nominal inflections with no unstressed vowel, which may have been deleted for metric purposes in cases like (12). Other cases indicate that vowel deletion in such positions in Scots was a potential unmarked pronunciation pattern, as in the alliterative *Tua Mariit Wemen and the Wedo* (13).

(12) Wp raise the lark, the *hevyns* menstrale fyne

(13) The *ravyns* sall ryve nathing bot thy tong rutis.

It seems that Scots is already one step further in the typological change. There can be no vowel in the inflectional ending which used to have it. Using the rationale presented above, the score 0 would then be too high for this feature. Nevertheless, since languages such as Modern English and Afrikaans score 0 in Lass’s analysis (2000: 30), we can keep the same score for Dunbar’s Scots, especially that the full reduction was only present in a handful of examples (9 instances with C+<s>, and 12 instances with final <e>+<s>, as in singular *beme* ‘beam’ and plural *bemes* – even though the spelling *bemys* was also encountered).

4.2. Lass’s morphological criteria: Nominal categories

c) a dual⁸

⁸ The original numbering of criteria has been kept for easier reference, cf. section 2 above.

Dual number in pronouns, employed in reference to objects which come in pairs or to a pair of speakers, was a Proto-Germanic feature surviving until the Anglo-Saxon times, and also found by Lass in the *Ormulum* and *The Owl and The Nightingale* (2000: 32). The Northumbrian dialect from which Scots emerged still had this type of inflection (Campbell 1959: 289) but then ‘the dual number in the first and second person pronouns was lost’ (King 1997: 169). Therefore, it is not present in Dunbar’s Scots and the score for this feature is 0.

d) grammatical gender

Germanic language-states in Lass’s matrix were awarded 1 when they displayed three genders based on grammatical properties of the noun, 0.5 for two genders, and 0 for no grammar-based gender distinctions (2000: 29-30). Grammatical gender can be observed if nouns in a given language form different inflectional paradigms and produce concord with other gender-marked elements in the noun phrase. If the finite verbs are also marked for gender, they should form agreement with the noun phrase in this respect.

The shift from grammatical to natural gender, ‘complete in Middle English by the end of the thirteenth century...had taken place also in Scots by the Early Scots period. This move...should come as no surprise given that this simplification began in the north in late Northumbrian Old English texts like the *Glosses* to the *Lindisfarne Gospels* or the *Durham Ritual*’ (King 1997: 158-159). Scots does not display rich inflectional morphology, so the gender of the noun is not determined by its grammatical behaviour, but rather by semantic principles. The only structure where gender may be revealed in grammar is the use of gender-marked personal pronouns (*he - his - him* vs *scho - hir - hir*, King 1997: 170) in reference to inanimate antecedents. It should be also borne in mind that the paradigm for the neuter pronoun *it* was defective and had not yet developed an inflected possessive by the time of Dunbar’s writings (cf. Bugaj 2006: 177-178, 196).

In Dunbar’s poems, the use of personal pronouns in reference to inanimate objects has not been encountered. The situation with abstract nouns requires a comment. Consider the reference to death in the famous elegy:

(14)

He sparis no lord for his piscence,
Na clerk for his intelligence;
His awfull strak may no man fle:
Timor mortis conturbat me.

Death is assigned the masculine gender, but clearly this is a personification strategy whereby the abstract concept gains human features, and – consequently – the same grammatical treatment as humans. A similar strategy was employed throughout the aureate *Goldyn Targe*, where the protagonist observes gods, muses and personified qualities and concepts, such as, for instance, danger:

(15)

Than saw I *Dangere* toward me repair.
I coud eschew *hir* presence be no wyle,
On syde *scho* lukit wyth ane fremyt fare.

Following the long-established *Roman de la Rose* tradition,⁹ Danger is portrayed as a woman, alongside beauty, youth, womanhood, *hamelynes* ‘familiarity’, and other abstract nouns, which become antecedents of personal feminine pronouns. Thus, personification or reference to humans is the only context where the gender of the noun is marked in the personal pronoun. Therefore we can concede that the Scots of the day had no grammatical gender and scores 0 in this respect, just like Chaucer’s writings.

e) adjective inflection

Inflectional marking on the adjective may also carry more or less complex grammatical information. Lass gives 1 for case and number marking, 0.5 for number marking or some other feature, e.g. definiteness or quantification, and 0 for no inflectional marking on the adjective. Using this metric, he notices the difference between Chaucer, who scores 0.5, and other Middle English texts, which come across as more archaic in this respect and score 1 (2000: 33).

The Germanic pattern would require a different set of adjectival endings in definite premodification, as opposed to indefinite contexts and predicative use. After full endings had been reduced to schwa, the difference in adjectival marking would boil down to the presence or absence of a final unstressed vowel, spelled <e>. King explains that ‘[v]ariation between adjectival forms with and without <e> is found...in the same syntactic contexts, even within the same text throughout the fourteenth century in Scots (as in English) texts...What this suggests is that by this time the final <e> on adjectives no longer served any grammatical purpose’ (1997: 173).

Since the feature at issue is the final unstressed vowel, spelled as <e>, it may also be present (or absent) because of the metre requirements in Dunbar’s Scots. Commenting on metre irregularities which have to be considered when editing the poems, Bawcutt concedes that ‘there is no good evidence that adjectives with final *-e* (from whatever source) were current in Scottish usage at the time of Dunbar, even as a poetic archaism’ (1998: 14). It should also be noted that Bawcutt’s edition differs from previous editorial practices, which had treated final scribal strokes or curls as the final <e> and silently expanded it. Bawcutt disregarded such cases (1998: 22), which will also be of relevance in the discussion of nouns below. Interestingly, the search for four adjective functions in the poems – definite premodification, indefinite premodification, postmodification and predicative use – rendered several instances of final <e> attached to the adjective of Germanic origin.¹⁰

There were 76 cases of definite premodification with a Germanic adjective. In 14 cases (25 tokens) the adjective was disyllabic and simply finished in a vowel, as in *michty*, *lusty* or *drery*. In 11 tokens the final vowel was still attached (as in [16]), whereas in the vast majority of cases (51 tokens, 77%) the vowel was not present (17).

- (16) Among the *grene* rispis and the redis...
For that is Goddis *awne* bidding...

⁹ I am grateful to J. Derrick McClure for this observation.

¹⁰ As in the case of nominal inflections discussed in more detail in (f), borrowings from French and Latin may end in <e>, which should not be treated as an inflectional ending and does not influence the argument for the lack of marking on the adjective.

- (17) I schrenk for the *scharp* stound, bot schout dar I nought,
For schore of that *auld* schrew, schame him betide!

Interestingly, no adjective appeared in this syntactic context both with and without the final vowel.

With indefinite premodification, however, the situation is changing. Among the 97 tokens of Germanic adjectival premodifiers, 20 items are disyllabic or end in the root vowel, e.g. as in *haly* ‘holy’ or *hie* ‘high’, so they can be disregarded. Out of the remaining number, 21 end in <e> (as in [18]), and 56 end in a consonant (73%, as in [19]).

- (18) *Grene* Innocence, and schamefull Abaising...
Suete Womanhede I saw cum in presence...
Depaynt and broud be *gude* proporcion...
- (19) With *gret* engyne to beiaip ther iolyus husbandis...
With *sueit* Cuthbert that luffit me neur...
Be constant in 3our gouernance, and counterfeit *gud* maneris...

Several adjectives appear both with and without the final vowel in this syntactic context, which may support the idea that the <e> did not serve any particular grammatical function and that its distribution was prompted by other factors (stylistic, graphic, idiolectal, etc.).

Moreover, a similar scattering can be observed in the postmodifying position. Among 41 such constructions in the sample, containing a Germanic adjective (many more contained a Romance borrowing), the distribution of forms with and without the final <e> is almost equal – 22 tokens with the vowel (as in [20]; it should be noted that the adjectives *grene* and *suete* account for half of these instances) and 19 without the vowel (as in [21]).

- (20) And banyst hym among the bewis *grene*...
Nor yit thou, Tullius, quhois lippis *suete*...
Of rethorike that fand the flouris *faire*...
- (21) To fyle my flesche na fummyll me without a fee *gret*...
And drawis my clok forthwart our my face *quhit*...
Halesum the vale depaynt wyth flouris *ying*...

Finally, in the predicative context, out of 49 cases, about one fifth has the final vowel, as in (22). Again, the same adjectives repeat, e.g. *grene*, *kene*, *suete*. Nevertheless, one finds them without the final vowel too, among the remaining 39 tokens, as in (23).

- (22) The bank was *grene*, the bruke vas full of bremys,
Thought 3e be *kene*, inconstant and cruell of mynd
Suete war the vapouris, soft the morowing,
- (23) I semyt sober, and *sueit*, and sempill without fraud...
Gret reuth it wer that so suld be...
‘Cummar, be *glaid* baitht ewin and morrow...’

The findings support the earlier point made by King, about the lack of any particular grammatical function attached to the presence or absence of the final vowel. Its use seems to be random, perhaps resulting from printers' and scribes' habits in a given literary context. Still, the vowel is there, an orthographic relic of an earlier inflection, so to be on the safe side we may allow the Dunbar sample a 0.25 score for this criterion.

f) distinct dative in at least some nouns

Lass found this feature in all Middle English texts, including Chaucer (2000: 33). He treated the final <e> attached to a noun in the function of an object as a dative marker, going back to more complex Germanic nominal paradigms. '[V]estiges of the Old English synthetic marking of the dative case on nouns can [also] be found in the earliest Scots texts... However such forms very soon give way to the more usual Scots periphrastic expression using prepositions like *to* and *for* with uninflected nouns. ... In Early Scots, synthetic and analytic expressions of what had been in Old English the adverbial function of the dative case could co-occur, as in *for ye terme of hir life*, where *term* is marked with <e> (the reflex of the Old English dative singular <e>), as well as occurring in the prepositional phrase with an adverbial function' (King 1997: 166). Since King specifically mentioned the prepositional contexts which could require an additional marking on the noun, I have looked for the remnants of the dative case in oblique contexts, where the noun followed a preposition in Dunbar poems. Because of the fact that the plural paradigm had by Dunbar's time levelled out to a single form, regardless of the function in a clause, I have concentrated on singular nouns, following the prepositions *to*, *with*, and *for*, with the exception of proper names, such as *France*.

In the poems, there were 45 instances of a singular noun following *to*. In this group, 15 tokens had a final <e>, which requires some reflection whether this is really an instance of the old dative Germanic marking. Out of these, some words were borrowings: *dame* from OF (also spelled <dam>, DSL *dam* n.2, variant of *dame*), *croce* from OF (DSL *croice* n, also *croce* n.1), *spousage* from OF (with a potential spelling without the final <e>, DSL *spousag(e* n.), *sesone* from OF (with a potential spelling without the final <e>, DSL *seso(u)n(e* n.), *sable* from OF (DSL *sabill*, *sable* n.2), so only in 9 instances was there a Germanic word ending in a final <e>. It was quite straightforward to check whether these items appeared in other syntactic positions without the <e>, to postulate the case-marking function for that element.

(24) *toune* – no other instances, but for place names where the final <e> was not present, e.g.

The gud syr Hew of *Eglintoun*,
And eik Heryot and *Wyntoun*

(25) *quene* – always with a final <e>, even in the subject function; the only case without the <e> is the plural, as in:

- a. Thare saw I Nature and Venus, *quene* and *quene*
- b. Thir mychti *quenis* in crounis mycht be sene

(26) *felde* – only with the final <e>, but for one plural case:

- a. In quhite and rede was all the *felde* besene
- b. How all the *feldis* wyth thai lilies quhite
Depaynt war brycht, quhilk to the hevyn did glete?

(27) *fute* – one other instance of dative, this time without the final <e>:

And him befor with my *fut* fast on his I stramp;

(28) *swoune* – no other instances, but appears as a verb also ending in <e>

(29) *craudoune* – also spelled with the final <e> as a direct object:

I crew abone that *craudone* as cok that wer wictour;

(30) *sone* – this word is a homograph with *sone* ‘sun’ and *sone* ‘soon’, but in the meaning of ‘son’, it only appears in the compound:

Herefore, false harlot *hursone*, hald thy tong,

(31) *freke* – also spelled with the final <e> as a direct object:

To hald a *freke* quhill he faynt may foly be calit.

(32) *barne* ‘barn’ – no other instances

When it comes to singular nouns following the preposition *with*, there were 61 instances of such a construction in the Dunbar sample, 11 of which were borrowings with the final <e>: *curage* from OF (also spelled without the final <e>, DSL *curage* n.), *change* from OF, *engyne* from OF (potentially also without the final <e>, DSL *engine*, *engyn(e)* n.), *contynance* from OF, *face* from OF (also spelled *fas* or *fais* without the final <e>, DSL *face* n.), *hurcheone* ultimately from ONF (the majority of spellings without the final <e> in DSL, *hurch(e)oun* n.), *trawe* ultimately from French *trahir* ‘to betray’ (DSL, *trawe*, *trew*, n.), *course* from OF (the main entry without the final <e>, DSL *cours*, n.), *choise* from OF (also *chois*, DSL *chose*, n.), *note* ultimately from Latin (also without the final <e>, DSL *note*, *noit*, *not(t)*, n.) and *infirmite* from Latin (DSL *infirmite*).

There were 8 words of Germanic origin which had the final <e> when following the preposition *with*:

(33) *speche* ‘speech’

And ralzeit lang, or thai wald rest, with ryatus *speche*.

This noun also appears without the final <e> in object positions:

- (34) Oure rude langage has clere illumynate,
And fair ourgilt oure *spech*, that imperfyte
Stude or your goldyn pennis schupe to write.

Other instances of Germanic vocabulary which contain the final <e> in the oblique case:

(35) *luke* ‘look’

I drup with a ded *luke* in my dule habit...

(36) *lufe* ‘love’ (for instances without the final <e> in the oblique case, see below)

Trowand me with trew *lufe* to tret him so fair...

(37) *berne* ‘a warrior’ (DSL *bern*, *beirn*, n.)

And I wer in a beid broght with *berne* that me likit...

(38) *stane* ‘stone’

A ring with a ryall *stane* or other riche iowell,

(39) *schelde* ‘shield’

Than come Reson with *schelde* of gold so clere

Finally, there were 36 examples of a single noun in the context of the preposition *for* in the Dunbar sample. Among them, there were 8 borrowings with final <e>: *piscence* from OF (a Scots variant, DSL *puis(s)ance* n.), *intelligence* from OF (also *intelligens*, DSL *intelligence* n.), *ordynance* from OF (also without the final <e>, DSL *ordinance*, n.), *substance* ultimately from Latin (also *substans*, DSL *substance* n.), *tresone* from OF (also without the final <e>, DSL *treso(u)n(e)*, n.), *blame* from OF (also *blam*, DSL *blame* n.), *prese* most probably from the OF verb *presser* (DSL *pres(s)*, v1.), and *schore* from Middle Dutch, which may have also been spelled without the final <e> (DSL *s(c)hor(e)*, n.).

Out of six native tokens with the final <e>, *rede*, *scorne* and *snawe* appear only once in the text, so it is not possible to confront them with spellings in other functions. The word *scorne* was found once more in the object function, where it also has the <e>:

(40) And thus the *scorne* and the scaith scapit he nothir.

The two remaining lexical items, *dede* ‘death’ and *lufe* ‘love’ were found several times in various functions, and they exhibit no clear pattern in the use of the final <e>: the oblique case may have the <e> or no vowel, as in (41a-42a) and (41b-42b).

(41) *dede* ‘death’

- a. Quhill eftir *dede* of that drupe, that docht nought in chalmir...
- b. On to the *ded* gois all estatis...

(42) *luf* ‘love’

- a. Thay sang ballettis in *lufe*, as was the gyse
- b. That did in *luf* so lifly write,

Considering the above examples, it is not straightforward to assess whether the final <e> was only a spelling feature or whether it concealed a phonetically realized grammatical marker for the dative. It is nevertheless important to note, that such cases

where the <e> does appear in the native vocabulary are in minority, and that the typical form of the noun after the prepositions *to*, *with* and *for* was the same as in the function of the subject – without the final <e>. The appropriate numeric value for this criterion seems to be 0.25, just like in the case of adjectives, due to the presence of ambiguous cases outlined above.

g) inflected definite article (or proto-article)

This criterion has been fine-tuned by Lass to allow for the distinction between case and number marking (most complex and archaic, therefore worth 1), number marking alone (worth 0.5), and no marking on the definite article (worth 0). Chaucer and Orm seem to display number marking on the definite article and score 0.5 for this feature (Lass 2000: 33). In the Dunbar sample, the definite article is always *the*, disregarding the spelling variation which may be present in the manuscripts.¹¹ This goes hand in hand with Kings assertion that ‘[t]he definite article *the* (spelt <þe> in preference to <the> in Early Scots) is indeclinable and is the sole form used in this function. This contrasts with the nearest equivalent to the definite article in Old English, which is classified and which functioned also as a demonstrative pronoun... A form <þe> appeared in the tenth century...in Mercian and Northumbrian texts, and this is the probable source of the form <þe>/<the> – invariable apart from merely orthographic changes... – which is encountered first in the north and so in Scots texts, as Early Scots <y(h)e>/<þe>, giving way to <the> from the 1300s onwards’ (King 1997: 167). It is hardly surprising, then, that no variation in the definite article was found in Dunbar. On this basis we can assign the score 0 to this criterion.

4.3. Lass’s morphological criteria: The verb

h) four vowel-grades in (certain) strong verbs

In Germanic verb conjugations, one of the most archaic features is the retention of the full ablaut series in a group of verbs, traditionally referred to as strong verbs, where the change of the root vowel carries information on the tense, finiteness, and aspect. The full series was built out of four grades, where the first vowel grade was characteristic for infinitives, the second grade for the past tense 1 and 3 person singular, the third grade for the remaining past tense forms, and the fourth grade contained a vowel characteristic for the past participle. On top of the root forms, appropriate number and person inflections were added, as required (Campbell 1959: 296-307). More recent research has shown that even Old English strong verbs did not display regular behaviour in terms of the ablaut series (Krygier 1994: 35-79), and that one could already see mergers of grades and shifts between ablaut classes. Marcin Krygier also notes that in the Northumbrian dialect, ‘[a] more extensive transfer to the weak category’ could be observed among the original verbs with the ablaut series (1994: 79).

Manfred Görlach comments on the problems with access to data for a study of strong verbs in Scots (1996: 165-167). His research was based, among other texts, on Nisbet’s *New Testament* (c.1520), which is roughly contemporary with Dunbar. The

¹¹ Bawcutt admits that in her edition of Dunbar’s poems she decided to replace all the thorn-forms with <th> because they were ‘rarely distinguishable from y’ (1998: 21).

conclusions drawn by Görlach support the merger of the past grades in the ablaut series: ‘preterite forms do not distinguish between singular and plural’ (1996: 168). King makes a similar general observation about Older Scots writings: ‘In Older Scots, the number of vowel grades per verb had reduced by comparison with Old English, with the previously different vowels of past-tense singular and past tense plural often levelling under the vowel of the singular’ (King 1997: 177). Thus, in Modern Scots only three grades remain (Purves 2002 [1997]: 103-108) after the merger of the past forms and/or the past participle.

Lass, on the other hand, recognizes the presence of a four-grade system in three Middle English texts under his scrutiny, possibly because of a rather loose formulation of this criterion, where only ‘certain’ verbs should display such archaic marking in order to score 1. The notable exception is Chaucer (2000: 33), whose verbs do not follow a four-grade system but rather three-grade one, as in *write* - *wrote* - *written*. As signalled above, Dunbar’s poetry is not different in this respect, with only three grades available for the verbs which may already be called ‘irregular’. For this criterion one may therefore assign the 0 score.

i) infinitive suffix

All Middle English texts discussed by Lass display inflectional marking on the infinitive, which is the only feature (together with [f]: ‘a distinct dative in at least some nouns’, see Table 1) shared by all these texts. This is a point of clear divergence of the northern dialects and Scots, already in the late Old English period.

‘Northumbrian, in its late form, was a source of morphological innovation, though Norse-influenced reconstruction may have already been involved. The infinitival ending is already *-a*, rather than *-an*’ (Johnston 1997: 52). On the way from Northumbrian to Scots, the reductions continued, which led to the situation where ‘[a]part from some relics of final schwa in very early Scots, the infinitive was unmarked in Older Scots’ (King 1997: 179).

As the infinitive was usually introduced by *to* or *til*, or by *for to*, with ‘a meaning of purpose of intention’ (1997: 180), I have browsed the Dunbar sample for these items, looking for inflected nouns in the oblique case (see [f] above). Interestingly, the search also rendered some verbs with an optional <n> attached, see (43)-(45). The DSL gives the <n>-form as a potential spelling for the verb ‘see’ (DSL *se* v.) in the infinitive. This spelling may in fact continue the old infinitival marking (OE *sēon*), especially that the frequent employment of this verb may have prompted a relic form to be retained.

- (43) So nobily that ioy was for to *sene*...
The party was so plesand for to *sene*.

Similarly, the verb ‘say’ (DSL *say*, *sa* v1.) has a variant with a final <n> in the dictionary list. It may be treated as a continuation of Old Northumbrian *sayne* (as used, e.g., in *Cursor Mundi*):

- (44) The salt was all the sarar, suth to *sayn*.

Finally, the dictionary does not list any form with the final <n> for the verb ‘do’, OE *dōn*. The line in (45) may therefore contain another relic, or, alternatively, an elliptical past form *to have done*, with the auxiliary missing.

(45) Full sore thay dred to *done* a violence.

Given these rare cases where the old infinitival ending may still be discerned, it is fair to award 0.25 for this feature to the Dunbar sample, as the overwhelming majority of verbs were unmarked in the infinitive.

j) person/number marking on the verb

The final criterion has also been modified by Lass, who awarded 1 to a language with 3 persons in verbs in both the singular and the plural, 0.5 for 3 persons in the singular, and 0 for no such marking on the verb. This criterion concerns present tense inflections, which is one more area of grammatical innovation in the north: ‘The present-tense paradigm has already generalised *-es/-as* to all persons [by late Northumbrian], provided that a pronoun does not immediately precede’ (Johnston 1997: 52). As a result, in Older Scots ‘[o]nly one inflection in <i(e)s> was used for all persons and numbers’ (King 1997: 176). This phenomenon is known as the Northern Present Tense Rule, or the Northern Subject Rule.¹² Dunbar’s poems display this feature throughout, as in the following excerpts: 2 person singular in (46), 3 person singular in (47), plural antecedents in (48):

(46) Thou *beris* of makaris the tryumph riall...
Rymis thou of me, of rethory the rose?

(47) No stait in erd heir *standis* sickir.
As with the wynd *wavis* the wickir,
So *waueris* this warldis vanite:
Timor mortis conturbat me.

(48) And all my luffaris lele my lugin *persewis*,
And *fyllis* me wyne wantonly with weilfair and ioy:
Sum *rownis*; and sum *ralzeis*; and sum *redis* ballatis;
Sum *raiffis* furght rudly with riatus speche;

The first person singular displays a different behaviour in the present tense paradigm, because it takes an unmarked verb (the lack of the ending may also be treated as a person marker, when confronted with the rest of the present paradigm), unless it is removed from the verb. In the poems the verb was always adjacent to the pronoun (as in [46]), so no overt marking was observed:

(46) Be this the lord of wyndis with wodenes,
(God Eolus) his bugill blew, I *gesse*,
That with the blast the leuis all toschuke.

Tharfor I *hait* him with my hert, sa help me our Lord.

12 For a recent investigation of the origins of the Northern Subject Rule on the basis of the Northumbrian gloss to the *Lindisfarne Gospels*, see Cole (2012); cf. de Haas (2008).

To sum up, since the only form which displays a different marking in the present tense is the first person singular, depending on the syntactic position, it is justifiable to grant Dunbar's language a 0.25 score for this feature.

5. Conclusions: Is Dunbar's Scots a 'middle' or an 'early modern' Germanic tongue?

The intention of the present paper was to situate the writings of William Dunbar, written in a period traditionally labelled as '(Early) Middle Scots', against a wider Germanic background, with special attention paid to the linguistic features displayed by Middle English texts. The discussion was based on the structural linguistic criteria put forward by Lass, designed to measure the degree of archaism in a given Germanic language-state. Using these criteria, Lass drew attention to the fact that Middle English is not a homogenous entity and that Chaucer's language displays quite modern features. The language of Dunbar scores even lower on the archaism scale, see Table 1.

TABLE 1. Archaism matrix for four Middle English texts (Lass 2000: 32-33) and Dunbar's poems

	<i>Orm</i>	<i>O&N</i>	<i>KS</i>	<i>Ch</i>	<i>Dunbar</i>
a	1	0	0	0	0
b	0	0	0	0	0
c	1	1	0	0	0
d	0.5	0.5	0.5	0	0
e ¹³	1	1	1	0.5	0.25
f	1	1	1	1	0.25
g	0.5	1	1	0.5	0
h ¹⁴	1	1	1	0	0
i	1	1	1	1	0.25
j	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.25
TOTAL	0.75	0.70	0.60	0.35	0.1

Scots at the beginning of the sixteenth century hardly deserves the label 'middle' on structural grounds. Out of the ten archaic features, only four were present in Dunbar's poems, and that to a mild degree. Adjectival inflection cannot be seen as a productive and regular pattern, however the final <e> still appears, albeit in a rather random fashion (score 0.25). Nouns in the oblique case behave in a similar way (score 0.25). Two features of verbs are also debatable: the use of a relic marker on the infinitive was observed only in a handful of cases (score 0.25) and the presence of separate endings for persons in the present is not really the case either (unless we take 1 person singular with the adjacent verb, hence the score 0.25). All in all, Scots is quite advanced in shedding the archaic structural baggage and should perhaps be referred to with a less anachronistic label.

J. Derrick McClure has recently drawn a comparison between the language of Barbour and Chaucer and the language of Caxton and Douglas, contemporary with

¹³ Lass's feature (h), see above.

¹⁴ Lass's feature (e), see above.

Dunbar, saying that the latter writers ‘showed a greater degree of mutual distinctiveness, the natural result of a century of steady independent development’ (2010: 100). Barbour and Chaucer are linguistically closer. Chaucer’s writings have proven most advanced in Lass’s tests, so we may expect Barbour’s *Bruce* to behave similarly. The distinctiveness of English and Scots writings one century later suggests that the history of Scots should be considered independently of English. Dunbar’s poetry, on structural grounds, is as far removed from the Germanic complexity as Modern English or Afrikaans (cf. Lass 2000: 28). What label would then be appropriate for Dunbar’s language?

Language-internal criteria, assessed across a wider spectrum of Germanic language-states, suggest that the sixteenth-century Scots is already in the ‘modern’ group. The linguistic features of his poetry place Dunbar clearly in the Renaissance, and not in the Middle Ages. Nevertheless, the lack of full standardisation on all levels of language, from spelling to lexicon, taints the modernity of Dunbar’s Scots. Lass’s criteria could, of course, be modified and fine-tuned to reveal less abrupt grading on the way from the ‘middle’ to the ‘modern’ stages, and standardisation could become one of the new criteria. Still, it seems adequate to call Dunbar’s Scots ‘early modern’, in view of its structural features studied here and its distance from ‘middle’ Germanic language-states. The extra-linguistic factors, ‘inelegant’ or ‘pathetic’ in language periodisation as some may see them (Malkiel 1969: 534), may add yet more substance to this argument.

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