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DUNBAR'S PERFECTION: THE STILL MOVEMENT OF AUREATE POETICS IN *THE THISTLE AND THE ROSE*

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Aeneadum genetrix, hominum divumque voluptas,
alma Venus, caeli subter labentia signa
quae mare navigerum, quae terras frugiferentis
concelebras, per te quoniam genus omne animantum
concipitur visitque exortum lumina solis:
te, dea, te fugiunt venti, te nubilia caeli
summittit flores, tibi rident aequora ponti
placatumque nitet diffuso lumine caelum.
nam simul ac species patefactast verna diei
et reserata viget genitalibilis aura favoni,
aeriae primum volcres te, diva, tuumque
significant initum perculsae corda tua vi. . . .
quae quoniam rerum naturam sola gubernas
nec sine te quicquam dias in lumine oras
exoritur neque fit laetum neque amabile quicquam,
te sociam studeo scribendis versibus esse
quos ego de rerum natura pangere conor. . . .
effice ut interea fera moenera militiai
per maria ac terras omnis sopita quiescant.
nam tu sola potes tranquilla pace iuvare
mortalis, qoniam belli fera moenera Mavors
armipotens regit, in gremium qui saepe tuum se
reicit aeterno devictus vulnere amoris,
atque ita suspicens terti cervice reposta
pascit amore avidos inhains in te, dea, visus,
eque tuo pendet resupini spiritus ore.
hunc tu, diva, tuo recubantem corpore sancto
circumfusa super, suavis ex ore loquelas
funde petens placidam Romanis, incluta, pacem.

Womb of the Aeneadan line, delight of gods and men,
Mother Venus, floating down from the heavens
you care for ship-bearing seas and the fruit-bearing
earth, through you every living kind is conceived
and once born, turns to the light of the sun:
It is you, goddess, your coming chases blasts
and storms from the sky, for you the sweet artistry
of earth drives forth the flower, calm seas smile

on you and peaceful heaven shines with light.
For on the day when Spring shows her face
and, set free, the gentle breezes of Zephyrus inspire
growth, the birds call first on you, goddess,
so priketh hem your virtú in hir corages. . . .
Since only you rule the nature of things;
without you nothing is born into the luminous
world, nor would anything be joyful or beautiful,
I pray that you befriend my verse-making,
in which I try to set down the nature of things. . . .
Meanwhile, make this savage commerce of war
on sea and land lie still and sleep, for you alone
can help mortals find quiet peace, war-strong
Mars often throws himself upon your lap,
conquered by an eternal love-wound
and arching his neck, gazing up he feeds
eyes eager for love on you, goddess,
and the breath of Mars conquered hangs on your lips.
Mars rules this savage commerce of battle
embrace him, goddess, stretched across your divine body,
and negotiate for your Romans a tranquil peace.

(Lucretius De rerum natura Book 1,
lines 1-25, 29-40, my translation)

Written for the occasion of the marriage of James IV to Margaret Tudor, William Dunbar's *Thistle and the Rose* (c.1503) narrates an epithalamic pageant of rare beauty and optimism designed to crystallize the competitive tensions of Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls* into an image of serene permanence. Dunbar borrows heavily from the *Parliament*: the rhyme royal stanza, the theme of Nature's call for a parliament of creatures, the allegorical representation of estate politics, the elusive search for "common profit," as well as the staple ending of encomiastic birdsong that wakes the dreamer from within his dream. Still the two are radically different poems. Dunbar's version offers a supplemental transformation of the *Parliament* which provides solutions to its perplexities and a fulfillment of its promises. The world of negotiation, of competing interests and personal choice, namely the courtly and political world of the *Parliament*, is shut out of Dunbar's poem. His imitation sublimates and purifies Chaucer's vision-debate of all divisiveness. If the *Parliament* is marked by a contestive spirit and irresolution,[1] the *Thistle and the*

[1] In another of Dunbar's debates, *The Merle and the Nychtingall*, which perhaps owes as much to Clanvowe's *Cuckoo and the Nightingale* as it does to Chaucer's poem, the two birds contend over the relative merits of sensual and charitable love. The Merle whose refrain is "A lusty lyfe in luves service been" (8 etc.) flits with an angelic Nightingale who invariably responds with some version of the line : "All luve is lost bot upone God allone" (16, etc.). However this debate is far from irresolute, it is solved when the Merle admits his mistake, "This frustir luve all is but vanite" (98), and

Rose presents a *fait accompli*. If Chaucer's poem depicts the oddly unnatural failure of Nature to couple the formel eagle in the raucous arena of political maneuvering, in Dunbar's imitation she is a triumphant marriage broker and a magisterial ruler of parliaments. Nature directs and orders all creation, unimpeded by class strife: the threefold parliament of birds, beasts and flowers receives her stipulations meekly, without squabbling. Indeed Dunbar's counterpart to the final, euphonious roundel with which Chaucer's contrary fowls celebrate the end of wintry nights, "Now welcome, somer, with thy sonne softe,/ That hast this wintres wedres overshake,/ And dreuyne away the longe nyghtes blake!" (680-682, etc.), occurs immediately upon Dunbar's dreamer's entrance into the garden of Nature: "O luvaris fo, away thow dully nycht,/ And welcum day that confortis euery wight" (60-61). The hard-won euphonies of the end of Chaucer's poem are never threatened in the *Thistle and the Rose*. The unity of this "blisfull soune of cherarchy" (57) is echoed in the varied encomiastic hymns for the Rose at the end of the poem.[2] Dunbar's vision begins where Chaucer's leaves off; the unity of *Parliament*'s conclusion is manifest throughout.[3]

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joins the Nightingale in praise of God (105-112). All quotations of Dunbar are from *The Poems of William Dunbar* ed., James Kinsley.

[2] The poem's concern with harmony and order is represented numerologically. A list, by no means exhaustive, follows. Dunbar's composes the poem in the seven-line, rime-royal stanzas of Chaucer's *Parliament*. The prime number 7 is also the number of the stanza in which the dreamer enters the earthly paradise. There are 21 stanzas taken up with the description of the earthly paradise. There are a total of 27 stanzas in the poem, a number divisible only by 9 and 3. Nine is the number of hierarchies (Dunbar's "cherarchy") of angels: "the ix ordouris Angell, archangell throni dominaciounis principatus potestates virtutes cherubin & seraphin Thrys thre the thrinfald celestiale cherarchijs." (*Asolan MS* "Ane Extract of the Biblill", quoted in Kinsley *The Poems of William Dunbar* 331-32). The song of the birds that imitates this "cherarchy" occurs in stanza 9. We might note too that the events of the poem are said to occur on May 9th: "Off lusty May upone the nynte morrow" (189) is the last line. The number 3 along with the obvious theological associations it would have had for Dunbar's readers is also a crucial part of the poem's imagery. King James IV is symbolically crowned in three heraldic representations, the Lion, the Eagle and the Thistle in the presence of the three estates of birds, beasts and flowers. Bawcutt (1998, p. 395) notes that the central, fourteenth stanza describes the lion rampant in the Royal Arms of Scotland.

[3] There is a near contemporary Scottish analogue to Dunbar's transformation of the *Parliament* in which a newer, happier ending is manufactured for Chaucer's poem. A Scottish version of the *Parliament* exists in the Selden Arch. B. 24 (c. 1488-1500) manuscript that excises the final 14 stanzas of Chaucer's poem. It replaces Nature's postponement of the formel's decision and the final roundel with a conclusion in which the "worthiest" Eagle is allowed to choose the formel for his mate. Of course this defeats the idea of feminine choice that is so much a part of the courtly world of Chaucer's version and makes the ending an epithalamium rather than a meditation

The Scot creates an ideal world wherein fractious politics and love's multiform contradictions are transcended by choral harmonies, sanctifying a perfect union to which all of creation joyfully assents. Indeed, the overarching metaphor of the poem is that of antiphonal Church music sung in response to the behests of Nature, rather than the fractious power struggles of Chaucer's debate or Lydgate's imitation of it in *The Horse, Goose and Sheep*. It is the fulfillment and perfection of what Chaucer's turbulent commonwealth could not accomplish: the harmonious cooperation of all created things under the aegis of Nature. Both Chaucer and Lydgate depict the messiness of achieving consensus, the world of their poems is in process, with all the attendant difficulties and struggles of a process, Dunbar's is an image of an achieved unity, Murray Krieger's "still movement"[4] which represents divine and ceremonial sanction. The comic dystopia of the *Parliament* is succeeded by an icon of paradise regained; Natura, the *vicaria Dei*, perfects her fallen realm and deliberately weeds her garden, restoring the pre-lapsarian state of man and woman.

Chaucer had chosen to capture and to figure the *frisson* of dissent which rules the real world of parliamentary decision-making; he establishes a forum for both satire and optimism. But Dunbar continually emphasizes the artificiality of the world he depicts. Indeed the naturalistic descriptions of his creatures seem always on the verge of hardening into ekphrases. Note the transformative metallurgy in this exemplary instance of the poem's poetics (92-98):

> This awfull beist full terrible wes of cheir,
> Persing of luke and stout of countenance,
> Rycht strong of corpis, of fassoun fair but feir,

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on the sweet pain of delay. The chaos of the debate is stilled not by Nature but by a peacock, the goddess coyly bites her lip and assents to the bird's demand that the Eagle be given *his* choice. And the bawdiness into which Chaucer's poem descends just at the place where the Scottish forger takes over is replaced by the theme of chaste marriage: "Euerich foule for his owne ladies sake/ Eche foule his love there gan take/ To loue and serue alwey fro yere to yere/ And neuer mor to change his lady dere" (648-651). Roderick Lyall maintains that this manuscript collection of love poems was gathered for the marriage of Lord Sinclair to Margaret Hepburn in 1489. It is not unlikely that Dunbar knew this spurious ending to the *Parliament*. If so, it certainly provides an intermediary stage in Dunbar's transformation of Chaucer's poem into an epithalamium. For an edition of the unique ending of the *Parliament* in the Bodleian Library manuscript Selden Arch. B. 24, see Furnivall, ed., *A Supplementary Parallel-Text Edition of Chaucer's Minor Poems* and Boffey and Edwards *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* (facsimile). See also Roderick J. Lyall, "The Court as Cultural Centre" and Louise Olga Fradenburg, *City, Marriage, Tournament*, 129-130.

[4] Krieger uses the phrase to describe the trope of ekphrasis, which is the dominant trope of Dunbar's poem. See Murray Krieger *The Play and Place of Criticism* and *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign*.

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

What begins in as naturalistic a tone as the poem ever achieves ends in the gold and precious stones of James' royal coat of arms. Indeed all the figures in the poem slip back and forth over the line between the still world of the margin or the textual hiatus (the space of manuscript illumination) and the talking, animated text. Dunbar's aureate style manufactures a version of *ut pictura poesis* in which poetry aspires to the stasis and artificiality of painting (specifically heraldry) not its mimetic qualities.[5] In this poem as in a work of Dunbar's with which it often paired, *The Golden Targe*, the description of Nature is itself gilded with 'ars poetical' terms (40-42):[6]

Go se the birdis how thay sing and dance,
Illumynit our with orient skyis brycht
Annamylit richely with new asur lycht.

To learn to love Dunbar's aureate style we must cultivate an appreciation for the stylized over-cultivation of a sensibility that thinks of gilded lilies and painted skies as being more real than the mutable world of human experience. His vision, like that of Adso of Melk's in Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, is constructed from memories of images in manuscript illuminations.

Another purpose served by the poem's aureate style is to be found in its adherence to the definitions of beauty in late medieval aesthetics that stem from Saint Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas enumerates three criteria for beauty: *consonantia*, *integritas* and *claritas* (proportion, integration and brilliance). Dunbar's whole poem is an extreme iteration of these aesthetic criteria. The poem's concern with

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[5] As Lois Ebin (74) has argued at length, Dunbar's vision of the aureate poet's craft is basically that of an "'enluminer' (or enameller) who transforms his matter with color and light" by a process of ornamentation usually described in terms of metaphors drawn from manuscript illumination and metal-work through which the poet lights the images of the poem as the sun makes resplendent the world of nature. Spearing (*Medieval to Renaissance*, 206) felicitously dubs the poem "a verbal fiction corresponding to heraldic pageant."

[6] The conjunction of the elegant diction with the arts of Nature' was already an integral part of the twelfth century Latin arts of poetry. Note particularly the dream vision that opens Matthew of Vendôme's section on the "Elegance of Words" wherein he sees the "bonds of wintry idleness... being broken" and flowers bursting forth everywhere, most fully near "those citadels of learning." The *colores* of rhetoric, of course, are to follow Nature's own mean between abundance and wastefulness—a stricture which aureate poetry in its studied excess, admittedly, disobeys. *Matthew of Vendôme: The Art of Versification* 63.

a proportionally ordered creation, its symmetries and harmonies, accords nicely with Aquinas' call for *consonantia* in art (see note 2). *Integritas* is also reflected in the poem's concern with symmetry, comprehensiveness and unity. Unlike Chaucer's *Parliament*, Dunbar's vision is lacking in nothing; the Scot produces a form that is complete, whole, finished, and perfected wherein all the parts are in concert and nothing remains to be narrated. Aquinas' third criterion, *claritas*, is the most determining stylistic feature of the poem. Light and color illumine the world of Nature's garden as the heavenly rays of the sun enliven paradise (50-56):

> The purpour sone with tendir bemys reid
> In orient bricht as angell did appeir
> Throw goldin skyis putting up his heid
> Quhois gilt tressis schone so wondir cleir
> That all the world tuke confort fer and neir
> To luke upone his fresche and blisfull face,
> Doing all sable fro the hevynnis chace.

Indeed the whole poem is suffused with solar and man-made light, from the dawn which awakes the dreamer at the beginning of the poem to the "coistly croun with clarefeid stonis brycht" (155) which is placed on the head of the virgin Rose and "all the land illumynit of the licht" (157). The Aquinian aesthetics of the poem are particularly suited to its purpose because the effect of beauty produced according to these criteria is peace. As Umberto Eco (92) has argued about Aquinas' theory of beauty:

> All of this supreme order, this ordered life of a dynamic multiplicity, owes its unity to the principle of measure (*mensura*). For this reason, it generates the notion of peace, understood as the tranquility of order (*tranquillitas ordinis*). Order is identical with life, but the order which controls life's energy is identical also with peace. There is a passage in the *De veritate* which identifies peace with beauty, the reason being that peace is the stable perfection which exists when proportion is fully realized.

The beautiful icon of order, harmony, light and perfection that Dunbar constructs is homologous with the peace that the marriage of James and Margaret was calculated to bring about. Like the marriage ceremony itself, the poem is designed to represent and also to create peace.

Critics have tried to rescue the poem from its tendencies towards reification by reading the dream frame as an ironic commentary on the ideal world depicted within.[7] Despite the golden brilliance of his

[7] Gregory Kratzmann, *Anglo-Scottish Literary Relations 1430-1550*, maintains that the "primary effect" of the frame "is to distance the poet from the idealized celebration

vision the narrator's reactions seem confined to lethargic reluctance, confusion, and fear. Some have found in the opening an intimation that Dunbar was hesitant to write an openly patriotic poem, that he saw it as a duty or as the fulfillment of a promise (see lines 38-39).[8] In the fright he reports at the end of the poem when the beautiful garden suddenly vanishes, critics also have found a representation of his anxiety about the precarious peace struck between the countries of James and Margaret, a peace which was to be shattered only a decade later on Flodden Field. But it is willful to read the prophecy of a golden age as a forecast of doom. The apparent tension between the ideal, artificial world of poetry and the real world of a political marriage has been misappropriated.[9] The glorious new age which the Scot depicts is as self-assured and oracular as that of the Virgil's prophetic fourth eclogue which confidently proclaims: "*Iam redit et Virgo, redeunt Saturnia regna*."[10] Dunbar's role is not simply that of a reluctant courtly maker, providing a ceremonial poem for a state occasion—or rather we must recognize that ceremonial poetics are not always servile legitimation but sometimes serve as a verbal act

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of the vision and finds the same "note of disquiet... sounded at the end of the poem" (138). A.C. Spearing who has written twice on the poem, *Medieval Dream Poetry* (192-197) and *Medieval to Renaissance in English Poetry* (206-215), concludes the latter discussion: "Dunbar's insubstantial pageant is literally a dream; and it is prepared to acknowledge both the gorgeousness and the insubstantiality of the system of ideas that it symbolizes" (215). Somewhat more balanced is Priscilla Bawcutt's *Dunbar the Maker* (103): "The dream form indeed enables Dunbar to juxtapose two poetic voices-- that of the solitary, slightly recalcitrant, narrator, and the 'commoun voce' of public ritual."

[8] In perhaps the most engaging work on the poem to date Fradenburg, *City Marriage, Tournament*, claims the poem's "irreality is purchased… at the price of a radical decarnation" (147) of the poet himself. And goes on to insist that the end of the poem "charts the sacrifice of the court poet's will" (148). The whole thrust of my approach to the *Thistle and the Rose* attempts to expose the willfulness of such a reading. We "decarnate" Dunbar when we deem the spiritual world of visions unreal; the Platonist allegories from which his poem derives depend on a very different notion of "reality." Also, any definition of "court poet" which does not include the possibility of genuine excitement or hope runs the risk not simply of anachronism but of absurdity. But see my discussion of Dunbar's anxieties in the final section of this essay.

[9] I suspect that this misappropriation grows out of our unwillingness, even now, to valorize the dizzying proliferation of styles and attitudes expressed in Dunbar's *oeuvre*. In this he is more like Chaucer than any other late medieval poet. However, ironic readings should not be marshaled to create a uniformly skeptical poet; Dunbar could be excitedly optimistic as well, and his optimism tends to find appropriate expression in poems in the aureate style.

[10] Line 6 of the Fourth Eclogue was among the strongest evidence medieval readers had for judging Virgil a prophet of the coming revelation of Christ. *P. Vergili Maronis: Opera* ed. R.A.B. Mynors.

designed to *transform* the 'real world' by means of ideal representations. The *Thistle and the Rose* is an ambitious poem; it is nothing less than a resolute attempt to make life obey art.

If the artificiality of the poem has been consistently foregrounded it is only because readers have failed to identify Dunbar's manipulation of his sources and the aesthetic presuppositions that underlie the ordered, resplendent world of his vision. The dream-vision frame could bear yet another look. Dunbar's first stanza is a climatologically accommodated imitation of Chaucer's most famous lines, the *reverdie* of the *General Prologue* to the *Canterbury Tales*:

> Quhen Merche wes with variand windis past
> And Appryll had with hir silver schouris
> Tane leif at Nature with an orient blast;
> And lusty May, that muddir is of flouris,
> Had maid the birdis to begyn thair houris
> Amang the tendir odouris reid and quhyt,
> Quhois armony to heir it wes delyt. (1-7)

In the belatedness of the Scottish *reverdie* and in the dreamer's reluctance to obey the *alba*-like call, "Awalk, luvaris out of your slomering/ Se how the lusty morrow dois up spring (13-14), we may construe a reflection of Scotland's own cultural belatedness as well as Dunbar's sense of himself as an ambivalent latecomer, burdened by the magnificent inheritance of European poetry in general and in particular by the sweet eloquence of Chaucer whose most famous sentence haunts the beginning of Dunbar's poem with its inspiring and debilitating presence. The language of Dunbar's *descriptio temporis* constructs an uneasy marriage of Chaucer's revolution in English poetry with the harsher realities of Scottish weather just as it weds aureate and eldritch terms:[11] The "shoures soote" of the opening lines of the *General Prologue* are frozen, gilded by northern weather (and by the aureate style), becoming "silver shouris" and an "orient blast" blusterously intrudes upon the decorum of the *reverdie* in opposition to the sweet westerly breezes which inspire growth in the softer climes of England. Chaucer genders the inter-animation of spring; April is an unconventionally masculine force that pierces the drought of March to the root with a "licour... Of which vertu engendred is the flour" (4). Nature in Dunbar's poem, though, is almost completely de-sexualized, *Natura pronubans* rather than *Natura procreatrix*: her attendant goddess May, "muddir of flouris," rather than pricking corages inspires the birds to sing the canonical hours. Venus, whose

[11] On the two styles of poetic diction see John Leyerle, "The Two Voices of William Dunbar."

dangers play so great a role in the *Parliament*, is present in the garden of the *Thistle and the Rose* but she is given nothing to say or do. She exists side by side with Nature—a conjunction that alludes to the time before Venus' betrayal of Nature (narrated by Alain of Lille in *De planctu Naturae*)[12] when Venus was still a "*subvicaria*" to Natura, the "*vicaria Dei*." Venus' silent and domesticated presence in the garden marks the control of destructive desire, desire that comes to be associated figurally with stormy weather and failed imperium. Indeed as I will discuss below, the poem represses venereal desire because it is associated with the failure of imperial marriage.

The opening does seem to stress the distance between 'poetic' (i.e. English) springtime and the realities of northern weather. Readers have also detected in the dreamer's reluctance to rise from his bed a genuine diffidence in Dunbar himself about his role as a court propagandist for an arranged state marriage. It accords with our assumptions about Dunbar—and about late medieval poets, indeed about all poets—that optimism and patriotism are feigned, state-sponsored attitudes and that the 'real Dunbar' is, like most court poets we admire, really a skeptical and uneasy herald of imperialist grandeur. As it happens Dunbar's dream framework and the persona of his dreamer reveal more about his knowledge of central *topoi* from the tradition of medieval philosophical vision poetry than about his disquietude over James IV's coming marriage or about the weather in Edinburgh on the morning of May 9, 1503. That year may well have featured a particularly blustery spring but if this was indeed the case, it is merely a felicitous conjunction of reality and convention, or an instance of nature holding a mirror up to art. Nature's garden is traditionally described as being set off from the harsh, changeable climates of the earth. Indeed, the earthly paradise is usually defined in opposition to a world of inclement weather and seasonal change in which a man like Dunbar's narrator would rather stay in bed. Alain of Lille's *Anticlaudianus* provides the description of the *locus secretus* that is the source for Dunbar's *hortus conclusus* and the supposedly ironic tension between ideal and real weather.

> Est locus a nostro secretus climate longo
> Tractu, nostrorum ridens fermenta locorum
> Iste potest solus quicquid loca cetera possunt;
> Quod minus in reliquis melius suppletur in uno;
> Quid prelarga manus Nature possit et in quo
> Gracius effundat dotes, exponit in isto,

[12] At this moment in Alain's allegorical chronology of the fall, Venus was still the chaste bride of Hymenaeus before her adultery with Antigenius begat Jocus and perverted human desire.

In quo, pubescens tenera languine florum,
Sideribus stellata suis, succensa rosarum
Murice, terra nouum contendit pingere celum.
Non ibi nascentis expirat gracia floris
Nascendo moriens; nec enim rosa mane puella
Vespere languet anus, sed uultu semper eodum
Gaudens, eterni iuueniscit munere ueris.
Hunc florem non urit hyems, non decoquit estas.
Non ibi bacchantis Boree furit ira, nec illic
Fulminat aura Nothi, nec spicula grandinis instant. . . .
Non uulgus uerum, uerum miracula gingens
Sponte nec externo tellus adiuta colono,
Nature contenta manu Zephirique fauore,
Parturit et tanta natorum prole superbit.

There is a secret place, a climate far removed from ours,
scorning the tumult of our habitations:
this place itself contains all that's possible everywhere else;
all that's lacking elsewhere fills up this one better place;
what the generous hand of Nature may do and where
she may pour forth more gracious gifts, here she exhibits them,
in this place, blooming with the soft down of the flowers,
like unto a starry heaven sprinkled with her own stars,
aglow with the blush of roses, the earth struggles to paint a
new heaven. Here the nascent flower's grace, dying in being born,
never expires; nor does the rose, girlish in the morning,
languish, an old crone at night, but always rejoicing
with the same face, she grows young by the gift of an eternal spring.
Winter doesn't blast this flower, nor does summer burn it.
Nor does the frenzied Boreas' rage run riot, nor does
the south wind bring lightening here, nor darting hail. . . .
Engendering nothing ordinary, believe it, but engendering miracles
at will, earth unaided by any surface tillage
content with the hand of Nature and with Zephyr's favoring breeze
gives birth and glories in so great a harvest of children.[13]

Beyond the intrinsic beauty of this *locus* there are good reasons for quoting at such length. The earthly paradise is defined synchronically, which makes such a place discoverable in the present. Not an Eden lost diachronically *in illo tempore*, but somewhere that exists even now. Its characteristics are delineated by negation: here the rose is unchanging, here winds and storms do not threaten. The garden into which Dunbar's waking narrator is led by the personified month of May is *not* otherworldly—it just seems so—the *locus amoenus* is an image of *this* world about to be redeemed.

[13] Translation is mine, original in *Alain de Lille: Anticlaudianus*, ed. R. Bossuat, lines 55-70, 77-80. Peter Dronke, "Dante's Earthly Paradise: Towards an Interpretation of *Purgatorio* XXVII" comments perceptively on this passage: "Alain's paradise is not negligible as poetry: his images are far more than decorative—they attempt to embody the idea of eternity-in-time, a living but perpetual source of forms for a transient world" (393).

It is often noted that Chaucer's *Parliament* relies heavily upon Alain's earlier work *De planctu Naturae* for the description of Nature and her garden. What is typically ignored or glossed over is Chaucer's praeteritic footnote which substitutes for a description of the goddess (316-318):

> And right as Aleyn in the Pleynte of Kynde
> Deueyseth Nature of aray & face,
> In swich aray men myghte hire there fynde.

The absence of so conventional a description and so rich a source of imagery from the *Parliament* figures, metatextually, the conspicuous absence of the most notable features of Nature's appearance: the tears which streak her face and, particularly, the "parenthesis-like rent" in her tunic which signifies man's unnatural couplings. The silent parenthesis which Chaucer opens in his text may be a version of decorum since Alain associates the "rent" with unnatural behavior like homosexuality, but I do not think so. It is a central tenet of high medieval naturalism that only man disobeys or perverts Nature's wishes. In Chaucer's poem unnaturalness is depicted comically in several forms of counter-transference. The avian kingdom takes on foibles that are the species-specific traits of human beings. While Chaucer certainly meant no disrespect to Richard II, his prospective bride or the parliament, their feathered counterparts in the poem do what in fact only mankind does: decide to defer coitus. Nature's ratification of this decision may therefore be an early example of the naturalization of human and social "perversions"—understood psychoanalytically *stricto sensu*. At any rate, the Nature whom Chaucer footnotes (however kindly the events of the poem) exists in a fallen garden, in competition with the destructiveness of venereal desire, her will is frustrated by the "injuries and insults" of man.[14]

The example for Dunbar's sequel to Chaucer's *Parliament* was provided by the relationship between the two works of Alain of Lille best known in the late middle ages: the *Planctus* and the *Anticlaudianus*. The *Planctus*, Alain's earlier work, which Chaucer had imitated in the *Parliament*, depicts fallen Nature and her extended complaint about man's stubborn denial of her directives. In the later poem, *Anticlaudianus*, Alain provides a continuation of the work of his youth in which *Natura* seeks, with the aid of a team of other feminine personifications, to create a *novus homo*, a perfect new man, free of humanity's corruptions. Such a being is created and the virtues

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[14] For the extended allegoresis of her torn garment see *Alan of Lille: The Plaint of Nature*, translation and commentary. James J. Sheridan (142ff). The scholarly text of the original is *De planctu Naturae*. ed. Nikolaus M Häring.

conquer the vices in an allegorized psychomachia to keep this new man free from sin. The poem ends, as does Dunbar's vision, with a messianic celebration of a triumphant Nature, a new age of peace.

> Virtus succumbit Vicium, Natura triumphat,
> Regnat Amor, nusquam Discordia, Fedus ubique.
> Nam regnum mundi legum moderatur habenis
> Ille beatus homo, quem non lasciuia frangit,
> Non superat fastus, facinus non inquinat, urget
> Luxurie stimulus, fraudis non inficit error.
>
> Virtue overcomes Vice, Nature triumphs,
> Loves rules, Discord vanishes, everywhere Peace-Treaty.
> Now that blessed man, whom lust does not ruin,
> Pride does not conquer, steers the kingdom of the world
> With the reins of law, iniquity does not corrupt him, the spur of
> luxury does not tempt him, the folly of guile does not stain him.[15]

The passage bears a strong analogy to Dunbar's poem that celebrates the Treaty of Perpetual Peace between the English and the Scots, wherein Nature enjoins the Lion and the Eagle to rule by law and the Thistle to forsake all other flowers but the Rose.

The Nature of the *Thistle and the Rose* also engages in the creation of a *novus homo*, James IV. Indeed, Nature the "maker" of the marriage between James and Margaret Tudor is the reason[16] for the change in weather. The chaotic history of James' sexual adventures and Scotland's troubles are linked allegorically to a biographical narrative of temptation, errantry, marriage and imperium which medieval readers thought figured in the story of the wanderings of Aeneas. At the beginning of the *Aeneid*, the hero's destiny and the creation of imperial Rome are pushed off course by the malevolence of *saeva Juno*, who has *Aeolus* unleash a storm that casts Aeneas onto Dido's shores. The destructiveness of the storm represents the eruptions of rage and lust that Aeneas fitfully tries to control throughout the poem. In Book 4, inclement weather intervenes again, this time to drive the lovers into a cave where sham marriage rites performed by Juno and Venus sanctify illicit sex. The *Aeneid* thus equates storms with unwed lovemaking and dangers to the *translatio imperii* from Troy to Rome. Passion as a particularly stormy and dangerous emotion made its way into the medieval French *Roman de Eneas* and numerous English

[15] *Anticlaudianus*, Book 9, 285-390. Latin text Bossuat, translation mine.

[16] The implicit pun suggesting the connection of Nature and Reason is intended. In Chaucer's *Parliament*, Nature can only advise the formel as 'if' she were Reason, but in Dunbar's poem Nature *is* reasonable: she provides a determining *ratio* and as a redeemed goddess admits no difference between herself and Reason.

romances and hence had a kind of symbolic currency throughout the high Middle Ages.[17] Dunbar directly evokes the opening scene of the *Aeneid* when Nature commands the divine world to be clement (64-70):

> Dame Nature gaif ane inhibitioun thair
> To fers Neptunus and Eolus the bawld
> Noucht to perturb the wattir nor the air,
> And that no schouris nor blastis cawld
> Effray suld flouris nor fowlis on the fold;
> Scho bad eik Juno, goddes of the sky,
> That scho the hevin suld keip amene and dry.

The career of the young King James which (from the perspective of imperial marriage) had included not a few Didos is thus swept up into the figure of climatologic and destined change wherein the storms of infidelity and passion are stilled—all that remains is to unite him to a Lavinia-like virgin, establishing fidelity, peace and empire (see Fradenburg 141). Nature enjoins him to "be discreit" (134), to prefer "no wyld weid full of churlichnes" (139) and to love no other flowers over the Rose: "For yif thou dois hurt is thyne honesty" (143). He is particularly warned against a dynastic marriage he had already

[17] It is useful to compare Gavin Douglas' ethical commentaries on the storm scene in his *Eneados* (1513). His gloss on the figure of King Aeolus, borrowed from Boccaccio's *Genealogy of the Gentile Gods*, runs: "Iohn Bocas, be Eolus set hie in his chare to rewle and dant the windis, ondirstandis raison set hie in the manis hed, quhilk suld dant, and includ the law in the cave or boddum of the stomak, the windis of peruersit appetyte, as lord and syre set be God almychty therto." Douglas glosses the simile at *Aeneid* I, 148-55 comparing Neptune's calming of the storm to "sum man of gret autorite" stilling a riot in terms of the transition from the active life of youth to the contemplative life of the just and perfect man pursuing the *sumum bonum*: "Cristoferus Landynus, that writis moraly apon Virgill, says thus: Eneas purposis to Italy, his land of promyssion; that is to say, a iust perfyte man entendis to mast soueran bonte and gudnes, quhilk as witnessyth Plato, is situate in contemplation of godly thyngis or dyvyn warkis. His onmeysabill ennymy Iuno, that is fenyeit queyn of realmys, entendis to dryve him from Italle to Cartage; that is, Avesion, or concupissence to ryng or haf warldly honouris, wald draw him fra contemplation to the actyve lyve; quhilk, quhen scho falis by hir self, tretis scho with Eolus, the neddyr part of raison, quhilk sendis the storm of mony warldly consalis in the iust manis mynd. Bot, quhoubeyt the mynd lang flowis and delitis heirintyll, fynaly by the fre wyll and raison predomynent, that is, ondirstand, by Neptun, the storm is cessit, and, as followis in the nyxt c(hapter), arryvit in sond havin, quhilk is tranquilite of consciens; and fynaly Venus, in the vi c. following, schawis Ene his feris recouerit again, quhilk is, fervent lufe and cherite schawis the iust man his swete meditationys and feruour of deuotion, quham he tynt by warldly curis, restorit to hym again, and all his schippis bot on, be quham I ondyrstand the tyme lost." The gloss is paraphrased from Christoforo Landino's *Disputationes Camaldulenses*. For Douglas' glosses to the *Eneados*, see Coldwell, *Virgil's Aeneid Translated into Scottish Verse by Gavin Douglas*.

avoided with the French "lilly" (140).[18] James' indiscretions become part of a heroic pattern, an inglorious youth followed by the assumption of duty. He shares Aeneas' historical imperatives—his random indiscretions are swept up into a typology of rule which sees the infidelities not as flaws but as a part of a destinal biography of kingship, rather like Shakespeare's use of the type of the inglorious youth to structure the biography of his ideal king, Henry V. The venereal passions that threaten imperium are, like stormy youth, a thing of the past.

The new man James is symbolically crowned in a triune heraldic representation: the Lion, charged as the "chief protector" to "keip the lawis" (104-5); the Eagle, a law giver, enjoined to protect the weak and to make laws which are just for all species; and the "awfull Thistle" whose "busche of speiris" makes him "able for the weiris" (130-131). If the world of *realpolitik* sneaks into the poem at any time, it is here. Chaucer had represented three suitors of the formel eagle, but Dunbar represents his kingly suitor as threefold but single and divinely chosen, not determined by popular election. The role of the estates is also vastly reduced in Dunbar's poem. The beasts, birds and flowers do not retard the action of the poem but are called by Nature as a way of formalizing the assent of all creation to the match. This may be a representation of the way in which James IV seems to have used (or rather avoided using) parliaments. The uniformity and obedience of all the estates has a political analogue in the near abolition of parliaments within his reign. James' reluctance to call parliaments doubtless stems from the fact that representative government in his experience had been an unwieldy and dangerous phenomenon. According to his most recent biographer Macdougall:

> When he took control of government in 1495, therefore, James IV's experience of parliaments—his own and the last two summoned by his father—had hardly been happy. Parliaments in the late 1480s and early nineties were either forums for the expression of political dissent, or unrepresentative bodies struggling none too successfully to cope with violent responses to the policies they themselves had initiated. Indeed, in the decade before 1495, successive Scottish parliaments had presided over, sanctioned, or helped to stimulate, one regicide, three major rebellions. . . six failed embassies and a coup d'etat. It was not a good model for future government. (173)

[18] James was at this time still having 'an affair' with the notorious 'Janet bair ars' or Janet Kennedy, daughter of John, Lord Kennedy, as well as someone called "L.A." or "M.L.A." See Kinsley (333n) and citations therein as well as Norman Macdougall, *James IV* (114, 162-63). James' frequent assignations are the topic of Dunbar's comic romp: *The Wowing of the King quhen he wes in Dumfermling*, in Kinsley, #37 (112-114).

James' response to the rebelliousness of the assemblies was simply to let sleeping dogs lie. He did not convene a representative government in Edinburgh for nearly eight years, from June 1496 until March 1504. When Dunbar wrote his poem, almost certainly sometime in1503, there had not been a sitting parliament in recent memory. The governance of the *Thistle and the Rose* thus reflects the realities of James' heavy reliance on councilar government and absolutism. The lack of debate and the dutiful, monologic assent is what James' curtailment of formal, public "sessions" had in fact tried to accomplish in Scottish politics.

Little scholarly agreement exists on the precise signification of these representations, but the general outlines are clear. Nature enjoins the kingly representatives of the worlds of beasts, birds, and flowers to administer their realms peacefully. The Lion seems to represent royal justice tempered with mercy. She commands him to "keip the lawis" (105), "exerce justice with mercy and conscience" (106) and to protect the small from the great. Dunbar macaronically translates and paraphrases the Latin maxim: (*Parcere prostatis scit nobilis ira leonis*) in proverbializing James' royal mercy, "Quhois noble yre is *parcere prostratis*" (119). The Eagle is likewise instructed to be just: "be als just to awppis and owlis/ As unto pacokkis, papingais or crennis" (122-123). (Lydgate's twofold representation of monarchic power is shared between the Lion and the Eagle in *The Horse, the Goose and the Sheep*, where the former represents the martial capacities of kingship and the latter its divinity.) Dunbar also preserves some distinction between the two. While the Lion represents the fair administration of law, the description of the Eagle may hint at the King's far from uncontested powers to write statutes. His "pennis" (from medieval Latin, *penna*—feather and quill) are sharpened ("scherpit") by Nature and she asks him to "mak a law" (124) which is the same for both the weak and the strong. Both representations of kingship are in keeping with the poem's justification of the expanding powers of Jacobean absolutism in domestic rule.

The Lion and the Eagle, though, remain uncoupled: only the royal Thistle (who seems to have represented protection from foreign invasion) is married to the Rose, appropriately so since in marrying the Tudor princess James was helping to insure the safety of his subjects. Dunbar's use of this final pair of heraldic signs is accomplished. His transformation of the Thistle from an armorial emblem of the monarch's protection of his people from foreign (often English) incursions to a sign of James' husbandly duty to shield his English spouse from harm mirrors the hoped for transformation of Anglo-Scottish relations from threat to cooperation. When, in the iconography of political

marriages, Margaret Tudor *becomes* England she is now to be cherished rather than feared. Scotland's overmatched monarchy can now take on the husbandly duty of 'protecting' England (presumably against James' once and future allies, the French), whose embodiment within Scotland was a fourteen year-old girl. The outside has become the inside, fear turns to worship, dangerous adversary to a beloved, dependent spouse.

At the end of the vision with the crowning of the red and white Tudor Rose, Dunbar abandons political allegory for anagogy, toward which the poem has been tending all along. The vagaries of politics are succeeded by theological verities. The Rose is called forth by Nature to be crowned in terms deliberately evoking the beloved in the *Song of Songs* (148-154):

> Than to the Ros scho turnit hir visage
> And said, O lusty dochtir most benyng,
> Aboif the lilly illustare of lynnage,
> 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.

As is generally recognized, Dunbar's language echoes *Canticum Canticorum* (4: 6,7): "*Tota pulcra es amica mea et macula non est in te/ Veni Libano sponsa veni de Libano veni coronaberis*." Like ceremonies and like anagogy, the marriage of Margaret and James collapses time and difference. Medieval commentators traditionally interpreted the espousal in the *Song of Songs* anagogically as the union of Christ and his Church, although this particular imagery often served to represent the virginal brides of Christ such as in the *Pearl*-poet's: "precious perle wythouten spot" or the Virgin of Lydgate's Marian lyrics or Dunbar's own *Ballat of Our Lady*. Indeed as Priscilla Bawcutt (*Dunbar the Makar*, 94) suggests, these lines from the *Song of Songs* came to be linked with the Assumption and the Coronation of the Virgin. The poem's image of marital union, the rose encircled by the thistle, also has an anagogic referent in the metaphorics of praise for the Virgin Mary in which she is called: *rosa inter spinas* to signify her purity even in the presence of sin.[19] In keeping with the transformation of the Rose into a goddess or demi-deity, Dunbar makes the birds address their final euphonious hymn not to Nature—as Chaucer does in the *Parliament*—but rather to the Rose herself. The nightingale dubs her "Naturis suffragene" (assistant, intercessor), a

[19] On this conceit see Douglas Gray, *Themes and Images in the Medieval Religious Lyric* (89).

revealing phrase that Dunbar adapts from Alain of Lille's job title for Venus in the *Anticlaudianus* (*subvicaria Naturae*). This Edenic Venus was Nature's handmaiden before she betrayed her mistress and the chaste marriage bed of her husband, Hymenaeus. The anagogy suggests the dawn of a new age in which Nature's work of procreation will be carried out under the mediation of the chaste Queen Margaret, the loyal "suffragene" of Nature and the anagoge of the Virgin Mary.

It is precisely because the narrator's vision ends in theological rather than simply political allegory that I am suspicious of the way most critics read the final stanza of the poem. Dunbar's endings, especially the endings of the dream visions, are notoriously abrupt and unsettling: a drum-roll followed by a deafening crash of cymbals—punctuations so abrupt they threaten to cast a pall over all that has come before. His awakenings are often rude and disorienting affairs for both dreamer and reader, unexpected things happen: earthquakes, demonic transformations, cruelly transient illusions. The final emotion the dreamer experiences is often fear; he is a man at the mercy of his imagination, an imagination which tends toward the macabre: "*Timor mortis conturbat me*." The ending of the *Thistle and the Rose* imitates Chaucer's ending in that it is the birdsong within the dream that awakes the dreamer (183-189):

> Than all the birdis song with sic a schout
> That I annone awoilk quhair that I lay,
> And with a braid I turnyt me about
> To se this court, bot all were went away.
> Than up I lenyt, halflings in affrey,
> And thus I wret, as ye haif hard to forrow,
> Off lusty May upone the nynte morrow.

The poet's fear at finding his vision evaporated has seemed to many readers to mark Dunbar's ambivalence about a state marriage between a very young girl and a king whose affairs were legend. If Dunbar did indeed harbor such feelings, a poem celebrating James' marriage would be a very impolite (and impolitic) place for such cynicism or 'realism.' There must be a better explanation. The dreamer's fearful confusion is motivated not by what the future might bring but by the divine vision he has just experienced. Witness to an epiphany, his response is appropriate to this vision. Indeed the final stanza of the *Thistle and the Rose* is closest in language and function to the final stanza of Dunbar's *Passioun of Crist* (136-144):

> For grit terrour of Chrystis deid
> The erde did trymmill qhuair I lay,
> Quhairthrow I waiknit in that steid
> With spreit halflings in effray;
> Than wrayt I all without delay

> Richt heir as I have schawin to yow,
> Quhat me befell on Gud Fryday
> Befoir the crose of sweit Jesu.

The two stanzas share the phrase "halflings in effray," the author's assurance that what we have just read is a faithful transcription of his dream, and both end by dating the poem. Like his vision of Christ on the cross, the dream-vision epithalamium is a pageant that details the subtler meanings only implicit in the static sign. If Dunbar's aureate style gilds theological signs, it also animates them. Emblems are made to enact narratives of self-exegesis so profound that they prevent the dreamer and his audience from lapsing into a cynical familiarity with images. Dunbar's trust in the power of images is never reduced to tendentious fears about the lies of art. The poet of the *Thistle and the Rose* thought his work could move souls.

George Economou (125) sees in Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls* the "last medieval work in the tradition of the goddess Natura [that] shows a remarkable awareness of the European literary tradition." But it is precisely this element that Dunbar selects in his revision of Chaucer. As I have suggested throughout this essay, the Scot inherits and masterfully adapts to his own ceremonial purposes the "new science"[20] of philosophical allegory practiced by poets from Lucretius and Prudentius down through twelfth-century Platonists like Alain de Lille and Bernardus Silvestris. Indeed, the messianic anagogies and celestial harmonies of the poem symbolize a return to a pre-lapsarian moment in which society obeys Nature's laws and devotes itself to common profit; a society in which like Lucretius' hymn to Venus, she and Natura are indistinguishable. Dunbar musters a confidence and an oracular tone (worthy of poets like Lucretius and Virgil) which Chaucer himself never attempted.

While Dunbar shares Chaucer's respect and fascination for the "new science," he figures the world of indecision and divisiveness as something on the verge of being overcome, imagining his own age standing at the end of a historical process that has achieved the ideal of peace at home and abroad. In this sense, the *Thistle and the*

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[20] The phrase, of course, is Chaucer's own: *Parliament*, line 25. Bawcutt (*Dunbar the Makar*, 96) suggests that Dunbar probably knew Alain's earlier work, *Plantus Naturae*, but insists "there is nothing very original or recondite about Dunbar's ideas." I would suggest that in responding to Chaucer's poem and its evocation of the *Plantus* by embedding references to Alain's *Anticlaudianus*, casting James as a *novus homo*, domesticating Venus, and valorizing peace and harmony like Alain's later poem, Dunbar is both recondite and original. His poem serves as a response to and completion of Chaucer's work, just as Alain's *Anticlaudianus* completes and transcends the fallen world of Nature's plaint.

Rose both complements and completes Chaucer's *Parliament*: the marriage contested and deferred in the earlier poem is ultimately consummated in Dunbar's continuation and its promise of a new golden age subsumes dissent through an ecstatic vision of unity. While many late medieval imitations of the *Parliament* tend toward closing and monologizing Chaucer's open-ended, polyphonic debate, only *The Thistle and the Rose* succeeds in making us feel that Chaucer's noisy poem has been transcended.

Epilogue: Anxiety and Time

Like much of Dunbar's work *The Thistle and the Rose* is an occasional poem, inspired by particular historical, even personal circumstances. I have argued that Dunbar's epithalamium has been poorly served by readings seeking to cast the poet's anxiety as evidence of his pessimism about the success of a marriage between James and Margaret Tudor. In regarding the poem as a deliberate attempt to 'outdo' Chaucer, to transcend the fractious estate politics of the *Parliament*, I have emphasized its descent from scholastic aesthetics and neo-platonic allegories in which the aureate style works to create an image of serene permanence, a return to a time before the corruptions of human desire and the serpent of division. Yet the timing of the poem itself allows us to distinguish more precisely the form of anxiety expressed in the final stanza. The last line dates the poem precisely: "Off lusty May upone the nynte morrow" (189).[21] Scottish ambassadors had finalized the Treaty of Perpetual Peace in January 24, 1502, but James and Margaret would not be married until August 8, 1503 at Holyrood House, Edinburgh. Dunbar, then, dates his spousal poem exactly three months before the marriage ceremony upon the feast day celebrating the translation of the relics of St. Nicholas to Bari, Italy in 1087. As a boy miraculously elected bishop St. Nicholas is especially associated with bishops, perhaps even a kind of patron saint for those like Dunbar seeking the position. The famous story of Nicholas' generous provision of dowries also made him the patron

[21] For the date May 9th see Bawcutt's commentary (*The Poems of William Dunbar*, 400 n188-9) and her more extensive discussion in *Dunbar the Makar*, 74-5: "In the Church calendar this day was associated principally with the Translation of St. Nicholas. It was so identified in the records of Glasgow University (1462), when the date was chosen for the annual Faculty feast, at which there was a banquet, procession, and a short play. But what may be more relevant for the *Thrissill and the Rois* is that the date was sometimes regarded as the first day of summer…. (John) Leslie saw the marriage in this light: it promised 'perfyte peace and sincere amity keipit betrix the twa realmes.'"

saint for women seeking husbands.[22] Of course both attributes of the saint are apropos of the situation that Dunbar, his king, and his Queen-to-be faced at the beginning of summer in 1503. Dunbar's suit for a bishopric had been repeatedly frustrated by the influence peddling of James' court. At whatever level he may have been involved in the marriage negotiations, Dunbar perhaps rightly saw the coming union as the best chance to advance his cause. Though he was ultimately denied advancement in the Church, the coming of Margaret certainly coincides with an upturn in Dunbar's fortunes; he may ultimately have become the queen's private chaplain. The poem then is a preview of a new order in Scotland in which Dunbar hopes to play an increasingly larger role. But the poet deliberately casts his dream as an ephemeral vision that vanishes abruptly and leaves him "halflingis in affrey" (187). The anxiety may well stem from Dunbar's worries about whether the whole thing would come off as planned. Such marriage plans had failed before: his model Chaucer's *Parliament* recounts just such a failure and the plans to unite James and Margaret had been scuttled once already when James received Perkin Warbeck, the pretender to the English throne.

And yet dating his poem on St. Nicholas Day also allows Dunbar to encode within the marriage poem exactly the sort of banter that James actually seems to have encouraged among his "servitours." St. Nicholas is usually pictured with three purses or gold balls, signifying the most famous of his acts of charity. It seems that a poor father had three daughters who could not get married because he was unable to afford their dowries. Under the cover of night Nicholas throws three bags of gold coins through the man's window, so that the daughters' dowries may be richly paid. In other versions Nicholas throws the bags on three consecutive nights or over three consecutive years, as each of the daughters comes of marriageable age. Surely James would have caught the joke which no modern critic has: Henry had promised to pay his daughter's dowry in three yearly installments, a total of 10,000 (30,000 Scots)—which he duly did over the next three years, the last installment paid in full by July 1505.

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[22] For the legends surrounding St. Nicholas see: McKnight *Saint Nicholas* and Siefker *Santa Claus, Last of the Wild Men*, 7-15. For a modern English version of the golden legend see Hamer and Stace, eds. *Jacabo di Voragine, The Golden Legend: Selections*, 11-17.

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