

THE FRAKAR MAKAR: SELECTED TRANSLATIONS OF WILLIAM DUNBAR'S POETRY

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Than cam in Dunbar the mackar
On all the flure thair was nan frackar

The works of William Dunbar (c. 1460-1513) taken as a whole resemble nothing so much as the carnivalized spaces of Bosch or Dürer, where the eye darts back and forth between grotesque details and the enormity of the whole canvas, in which skirmishes are waged everywhere between order and inclusiveness, pomp and pathos, idealizing allegory and the crassest satire.¹ More than any other late medieval poet, Dunbar dazzles readers with his technical brilliance and the sheer variety of meters, genres and tones in which he writes. For those familiar with the ironized conventionality of late medieval narrating personae, the difficulty we have in drawing any firm conclusions about Dunbar from the "I" in his poems will not be surprising.² But one conclusion worth considering begins by finding a common aspiration in his various guises: Scottish Chaucerian,³ religious poet, court poet, satirist or poet of the macabre. No matter which mask he wears, it is always Dunbar's goal to excel brilliantly: the poet that emerges from the poems is one in search of absolute mastery.⁴ This

¹ My translations of Dunbar have benefited from the faithful collegiality of members of "The Reading Circle" whose comments on two presentations, "Dunbar's Macabre" and "Dunbar's Dames" in the academic year 1998-1999 sharpened and encouraged my work. In particular I want to thank Nandita Batra, the organizer of these sessions. Stavros Deligiorgis and José Irizarry listened patiently and criticized frankly. The countless infelicities of expression and conceptualization remain stubbornly mine.

² For a balanced and extensive discussion of narrating personae in late medieval literature, see Ebin. The classic treatment of this question is still Donaldson, 1-12.

³ The most recent brief introduction to Chaucer's influence on late medieval Scottish poetry is Fradenburg 1998, 167-176.

⁴ W.H. Auden's appreciation of Dunbar is still trenchant: "Whatever your taste, pious, gay, melancholy, bawdy; he will write a poem for you, apt and elegant. The first

quality of striving for a conspicuous perfection in all forms provoked C.S. Lewis to predict that Dunbar would be “more admired than loved” and to praise his “sweep and volume of sound and assured virility . . . which makes other poets seem a little faint and tentative and half-hearted.” It also provoked him to warn: “If you like half-tones and nuances you will not enjoy Dunbar; he will deafen you” (98). Lewis is wrong when he suggests that nuance is absent from Dunbar and when he implies that only the soft-spoken are capable of subtlety. Dunbar’s poetry *is* loud; it foregrounds the extremely self-conscious facility of a “makar” simply “frakar” (more skillful, more agile and lively) than anyone else. Stepping back to view the whole canvas of his work, one cannot help but marvel at the astonishing variety of his achievement.

Dunbar was a court poet first and always. His career coincides chronologically, and in a number of other ways as well, with the reign of James IV (1488-1513).⁵ Many of his poems are occasional—in the loosest sense of the term—growing out of real occasions such as dynastic marriage, regal tournaments, John Damian’s abortive attempt at flight (see *The Antichrist*, below), ephemeral courtly entertainments, parodies and satires of his contemporaries, begging poems and complaints. Criticism of Dunbar’s work, perhaps inevitably with such a versatile poet, relies heavily on generic distinctions to lend a rather suspect order to what are certainly *rime sparsa*. Despite the tailored similarities between George Bannatyne’s sixteenth century categories and ours, such uses of genre arouse false expectations of generic decorum and partially obscure what should be most striking about Dunbar’s finest work, its intricate modulations of style and convention.⁶

gift of such a poet is verse technique, and Dunbar is unfailingly brilliant” (quoted in Bawcutt 1996, 1).

⁵ See Bawcutt 1992 and Fradenburg 1991 for analyses of the intricate relationships between James’s court and Dunbar’s poetry. For an introduction to the world of the court poet see Green 1980. The best, albeit dated, introduction to late medieval arts and culture is still Huizinga. A good, brief introduction to medieval Scotland is available in Webster. The most recent biography of James IV is Macdougall.

⁶ Generically oriented treatments of his work perhaps stem ultimately from early editors like George Bannatyne. The Bannatyne Manuscript (National Library of Scotland, MS Adv. 1. 1.6) is a poetic miscellany c. 1568 which divides poems attributed to Dunbar and others according to a loose generic scheme, including such categories as “ballatis of moralitie” and “ballatis of love” (Bawcutt 1996. 11). More recently, though, both of Kinsley’s editions (the student edition of 1958 and the standard edition of 1979) rely on generic divisions such as “Divine Poems,” “Poems of Love,” and “Visions and Nightmares” to organize the poems. There is a certain prejudice in such categories, however, and they have had a profound influence on critical writing on Dunbar,

The fundamental dichotomy which underlies all generic criticism of Dunbar is that between “aureate” and “eldrich” styles. Aureate style is characterized by brightly polished Latinate diction, erudite coinages—particularly in imitation of Chaucer’s revolution in poetic diction; it is a self-reflexively serious and high style, mostly associated with devotional or courtly poetry. The extreme limits of such a style are reached in Dunbar’s hymn to Mary (“Hale, sterne superne, hale in eterne/ In Godis sicht to schyne:/ Lucerne in derne for to discerne/ Be glory and grace devyne”) and in the invocation of Chaucer at the end of *The Golden Targe*:

O reverend Chaucere, rose of rethoris all,
 As in oure tong ane flour imperiall,
 That raise in Britane evir, quho redis rycht,
 Thou beris of makaris the tryumph riall;
 Thy fresch anamalit termes celicall
 This mater coud illumynit have full bryht.
 (Oh esteemed Chaucer, the rose of all writers, and in our
 language an imperial flower which blooms in Britain evergreen
 [for whomever reads him correctly] you bear the palm of poets;
 your freshly gilded words celestial could have illuminated this
 material very brightly.)⁷

Eldrich style relies conversely on rude language and is associated with low comedy, satire, bawdry, and carnivalesque parody, often employing Gaelic terms, and metrical or incidental alliteration. Dunbar’s two longest poems, *The Flytyng of Dunbar and Kennedie* and *The Tretis of Twa Marit Wemen and the Wedo*, are scatological masterpieces, yet even here the generic distinction between aureate and eldrich does not hold. The surprising clash of stylistic registers in *The Tretis* is akin to taking a Sunday stroll in the park only to find an armed revolt in progress. The poem opens with a gilded description of nature typical of the beginnings of aureate poems like *The Golden Targe* or *The Thistle and the Rose* and moves on to a portrait of the three ladies whose beauty is of a piece with the resplendent garden.

Upon Midsummer’s Eve, the merriest of nights,
 I went alone in a meadow as midnight was passing,
 Fast by a fresh green garden, full of gay flowers,
 Hedged high with huge hawthorn trees,

including such important studies as those of Ross, Spearing and, most recently, Bawcutt 1992. Bawcutt’s edition of 1996, however, follows the more salutary editorial practice of printing the poems alphabetically.

⁷ All my translations are based on Kinsley’s 1979 edition. Recent readings of Dunbar’s aureate style in court poetry include Spearing, 206-215; Fradenburg 1991, 123-512; and Haydock, 71-96.

Where a bird on his branch so burst out his song
 That no more blissful a bird on bough was ever heard....
 I saw there three joyful ladies lying in a green arbor,
 All girded with garlands of good fresh flowers.
 Like glittering gold were their gilt tresses,
 And the garden gleamed with their glowing colors.
 Their fair hair combed prettily and cutely dressed
 Fell in shining pools over their shoulders,
 Kerchiefs knotted therein of fine thin fabric.
 Their cloaks were as green as the grass which grows in May,
 Fettered with their white fingers about their fair sides
 Their meek faces fanciful, fine and well-favored,
 Full of blossoming beauty like the flowers of June—
 White, sleek and soft like the sweet lilies,
 Now springing on the spray like the newly sprung rose,
 Robed royally in the rich verdant green
 That Nature had nobly enameled with flowers,
 And with every hew ever seen under heaven,
 Fragrant with perfumes of the freshest kind.

(lines 1-6; 17-33)

But these aureate beauties have eldrich mouths. The narrator overhears three raunchy recitals, part complaint and part competition, about who has the worst husband and the best lovers. The first wife's description of her husband provides a good example of the exuberance of their execrations:

I have a slob, a slug, a sleazy old churl,
 A worn-out waste of a man, worthless and loud,
 A lazy bully, a droning bumblebee, a bag full of snot,
 A scabby scavenger, a scorpion, with a leaky behind.
 To see him scratch his own skin unsettles my stomach.
 When that clod kisses me, then sorrow creeps in.
 His beard is as stiff as the bristles on a mad boar,
 But soft and supple as silk is his sorry little thing.
 He may well to the sin give assent, but it never serves.

(lines 90-97)

The second wife's husband looks more promising but is in fact just as comically inadequate:

Like a dumb dog that has pissed on too many plants,
 He lifts his leg high but there is nothing left.
 He has the leer but no lust, life but no desire.
 His form lacks real force and his bones all marrow,
 He's all words without works, worthless indeed.
 For ladies in love he's a right lusty shadow,
 But in the dark at the deed his dong only droops.
 He blusters and boasts with big words,
 Always lying about length— and length of time.

(lines 185-194)

The artistry of *The Tretis* lies in its weaving of stylistic incongruities: the ribald and courtly, and the eldrich and the aureate (see Spearing, 215-223). The trappings of the courtly love vision frame the discourse of the three women, a rollicking conversation which mocks the gaze of a male audience that attempts to see women in terms of idealizing or antifeminist stereotypes. Male impotence is the shared if somewhat open secret which trumps all masculine prerogatives, even the power of men to choose their wives. The poem's closing *questio amoris* hints at precisely this contradiction:

Of the three wanton wives I've written of here,
Which would you want as a wife if you must wed one?"
(lines 529-530)

If a masculine irony reasserts itself here at the end, it is only that of a masculine voice trying, unsuccessfully, to laugh away its own embarrassment. The bantering camaraderie of men who rank women has been thoroughly deflated by the revelation that wives also talk about their husbands.

The poems translated below share this characteristic of being, in one way or another, double-voiced. The first, *The Antichrist*, is apocalyptic and bathetic, mixing a petitionary complaint with satirical invective against one of James IV's favorites, John Damian, whose attempt at flight was in reality unsuccessful. *When Dunbar Was Called to be a Friar*, like *The Antichrist*, parodies the consolatory dream vision. Here, a devil pretending to be St. Francis provides the vehicle for some rather conventional anti-fraternal satire. In a sense the poem might be called a comic *apologia pro vita sua*, but just as in *The Antichrist*, the bathos never quite dispels the clouds of menace and melancholy. The third poem, *Renounce Thy God and Come to Me*, combines conventions of the *danse macabre* with those of estates satire. Its ruthless ironies work off the counterpoint between the exuberant sins of the different vocations and the Devil's droll democracy of the damned.

The last two poems, *The Dance of the Seven Deadly Sins* and *The Black Lady* probably take their cue from James' lavish tournaments. *The Dance* is a raucous vision of hell followed by a second part which includes a mock tournament between tailors and cobblers (not translated). *The Dance* relies on a long tradition of portraiture of the Seven Deadly Sins in art and literature (see for instance, Chaucer's *The Parson's Tale* 386-955 and Langland's *Piers Plowman*, B-Text, lines 60-461). Unlike Chaucer or Langland, however, Dunbar emphasizes the grotesque realism of the personifications and their followers, an emphasis which greatly vitiates their theological

importance. We get the impression that Dunbar is not only making fun of sinners, he is also making fun of sin. The final poem translated below, *The Black Lady*, is in many ways the most troubling. It clearly refers to James' Tournament of the Black Lady held in June of 1507 and again in May of 1508. Contemporary accounts record the splendid nature of these tournaments, attended by nobility from all over Europe, and even mention the lavish costume provided the "blak moir." Dunbar's poem certainly mocks the African woman, but his satire aims more explicitly at the men who evidently contended for the honor of being her knight (see Fradenburg 1991, 244-264). Typical of Dunbar is the sense we get in reading the poem that the intent is both to mock and to celebrate a court that takes its absurdities seriously. As a parodic *blazon* of a woman's beauty, this poem bears comparison with Shakespeare's sonnet "My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun," although its humor is decidedly less delicate. The animal imagery and the misdirected kiss place it squarely within the carnivalesque world of grotesque realism.

The Antichrist

Lucinda shining in the silent night,
The heavens full of stars gleaming bright,
I went to bed, but there took I no rest;
Troubled thoughts my sleep so sore oppressed
That I prayed for day's first light.

I complained of Fortune bitterly
How contrarily she stood against me;
And at the last, when I had turned oft,
For weariness in me a slumber soft
Stole with a dreaming and a fantasy.

I dreamed Lady Fortune with an unhappy cheer
Stood before me, and cried loud in my ear:
"You don't complain when you're doing well,
Don't you dare now to spurn my wheel
Which every worldly thing does turn and steer.

"Many a man I raise up high
And just as many full low must lie;
On my steps before you ascend
Trust well your troubles are near an end,
Mark the signs and steer your life thereby.

"Your troubled spirit shall never find rest,
Nor shall you with a benefice be blessed,
In times when an abbot plumed in eagle's feathers
Flies up in the air, testing the weather,
Soaring like a falcon from east to west.

“He shall lift off like a horrible griffin;
And in the air will couple with a she-dragon;
There the terrible monsters will fuck
While the air grows infected with their muck,
And in the clouds give birth to Satan.

“He’ll meet under Saturn’s fiery guiding
Simon Magus with Mohammed siding,
And Merlin by the moon will be hiding,
And Jonet the Widow on a broom riding,
With her eerie company of witches biding.

“And then they’ll descend with smoke and fire
And preach on earth the Antichrist’s empire;
By then near will be the world’s end.”
With that this lady from me did wend;
Awake or asleep I never get what I desire.

When I woke, my dream I thought mere din,
So that from everyone I hid it like a sin
Till I should hear told by many a truthful guy
That an abbot had flown up into the sky
His feathered coat made not by God but by him.

Within my heart I comfort took anon;
“Alas,” I said, “My lean days must go on;
Well I know to me money shall never come
Until two moons loom up in the sky,
Or until the abbot-bird goes flying by.

When Dunbar Was Called to be a Friar

Last night before the dawning clear
I dreamed Saint Francis did to me appear
With a Franciscan habit in his hand,
He said, “Clothe thyself in this, join thee my band;
Renounce the world, for thou shalt be a friar.”

Of him and of the habit both I was afraid
Like unto the victim of ghostly raid;
In my dream he covered my body with the habit,
But I leapt to the floor quick like a rabbit,
I wouldn’t come near it, far back I stayed.

Said he, “Why shunest thou this holy weed?
Clothe thee therein for thou hast great need,
Thou hast too long practiced Venus’ laws to teach
Now shalt thou be a friar and in this habit preach:
Delay not, it must be done with great speed.

“My brothers have often made thee supplications
By epistles, sermons and protestations
To take up the habit, but thou didst postpone;
Without further wrangling thou must atone,
Put by all excuses and rationalizations.”

I replied, “Dear St. Francis, I love you still,
And you ought to be thanked for your good will—
You who with your clothes are so kind,
But wearing them never came into my mind:
My sweet confessor, take not this ill.

“Of holy legends have I heard seven
Times more bishops made saints than friars, praise heaven;
Very few friars have been made saints as I read;
Therefore why not bring me a bishop’s weeds
If it is your wish that my soul go to heaven?”

“If ever I were to be made a friar, dear,
That day is past full many a year;
For in every burgh in riot and play
All over England, from Berwick to Calais,
Have I in your habit made good cheer.

“In a friar’s robe quite often have I begged;
In it I have gone to the pulpit and preached
In Darlington Church and also in Canterbury;
In it I went to Dover and on the ferry
Through Picardy, and there the people taught.

“While I did bear the mark of a friar
On me, by God, I was a thief and a liar;
I had in me a great yearning to flatter
Whom I could soak with not-so-holy water—
Quick with a con, when I found a buyer.”

This so-called St. Francis looked every bit the part,
But was in fact a fiend robed in the friar-devil’s art;
He vanished in a plume of stink and fiery smoke,
Taking down the house wall with his hoax.
At last I woke still at war in my heart.

Renounce Thy God and Come To Me

Last night in my dream I was unsouled:
The Devil came down tempting the fold.
He swore the people to oaths of cruelty,
And through the marketplace he called,
“Renounce thy God and come to me.”

I dreamed as he went his way
That a priest to our Father began to pray
Where at the altar the blood and bread had he;
“Thou art my clerk,” the Devil then did say,
“Renounce thy God and come to me.”

Then swore a courtier swimming in pride
“By Christ’s wounds bloody and wide,
And by the gory fruit hanging on the tree;”
Then whispered Satan suddenly him beside,
“Renounce thy God and come to me.”

A merchant as he his wares did sell,
Stopped believing in heaven or hell;
The Devil said, welcome shalt thou be,
Thou shalt now sell sins for free;
Renounce thy God and come to me.

A goldsmith said, “Gold is so fine
No harm if with my own it may combine—
May the Fiend steal my soul if I lie:”
“Talk on,” said the Devil, “now art thou mine;
Renounce thy God and come to me.”

A tailor said, “In all this town
Should anyone make a better gown,
I’ll knit my soul to the Fiend for free;”
“Gracias, tailor,” said the Hound,
“Renounce thy God and come to me.”

A cobbler said, “Oh what the heck,
May I be hanged by the neck
If better leather boots there be:
“Hell,” said Satan, “you smell like dreck;
First wash yourself and then come to me.”

A baker said, “I forsake God
And all his laws, even and odd,
If my loaf doesn’t always rise for me:”
The Devil laughed and to him did nod,
“Renounce thy God and come to me.”

A butcher swore by the sacrament,
By the blood of Christ most innocent,
“A juicer cut of beef you will not see:”
The Devil said, “Thy knife is bent,
Renounce thy God and come to me.”

The brewer says, “God I thee forsake,
And I pray to Satan my soul to take
If any thicker malt there be,

Or any brew more worthy of a stake:—”
“Renounce thy God and come to me.”

.....

The smith swore, “Hanged or crucified,
Into a gallows may I glide
If in ten days I earned pennies three,
In my craft I’ll no more abide:—”
“Renounce thy God and come to me.”

A minstrel sang, “May Satan me barbecue
If ever I do anything but drink and screw;”
The Devil said, “Don’t stop for me!—
Just keep on doing what you do,
Renounce thy God and come to me.”

A gambler prayed with words of strife
That the Devil would stick him with a knife,
Unless the dice came up boxcars three:
“That was the last roll of your life;
Renounce thy God and come to me.”

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The rest of the crafts swore pledges dear,
That their work and craft had no peer,
Each one on himself bragged he;
The Devil says, “line forms to the rear;
Renounce thy God and come to me.”

I dreamed that devils black as a tick
Came swarming like bees as thick;
Ever tempting folks not to flee,
Whispering to Robin and to Dick,
“Renounce thy God and come to me.”

The Dance of the Seven Deadly Sins

In February the fifteenth night,
Still long before day’s first light,
I fell into a trance;
And then I saw both heaven and hell:

I dreamed that among the devils fell
Mohammed called for a dance
Of shrews never shriven,
For the feast of Fastern’s Even—
A fitting form of reverence.
He bade gallants prepare a masque on high,
And threw pretty streamers across the sky
Just arrived from France.

“Let’s see,” said he, “Now who shall begin?”
At that the foul seven deadly sins
Began their merry revelry.

And first of all in the dance was Pride,
With wild hair back, hat cocked to the side
 His looks desolate and scary,
And round about him spoked like a wheel
Hung in folds all the way to his heel
 A mantle that swished awry;
Many a proud imposture with him danced—
Through scalding fire they pranced,
 Screaming with hideous cries.

Uppity rascals in haughty wise
Came in many a sundry guise,
 But still laughed not Satan
Till priests came in with their necks shaved bare—
The fiends laughed and at them did swear,
 Even Black Belle and Batty Brown.

Then came in Anger with storm and strife;
His hand resting aye upon his knife—
 He growled like a bear.
And following after him like cattle
All fully armed in case of battle
 Went braggarts, brawlers and stealers
In shirts, pants and hats of steel,
Their legs wore chain mail to the heel,
 Men swilled in beer.
Some bashed friends with their swords
Some stabbed their chums to the hilt
 With daggers sharp and sheer.

Next to follow in the dance was Envy
Stuffed full of hate and felony,
 Hiding malice and spite;
With secret hatred that traitor trembled:
Behind him many a man who dissembled
 With feigned words white,
And those who suck up to men's faces,
And backbiters from sundry places,
 Lies their sole delight,
And whisperers of untrue things—
Alas, in the courts of noble kings
 Free of them we'll ne'er be quite.

After him in the dance came Avarice,
Root of all evil and ground of vice,
 Who would never be content;
Crooks, cons and money-lenders,
Misers, beggars, and embezzlers,
 All with that warlock went;
Out of their throats each puked on his son
Hot molten gold, at least a ton
 Like lightning fervent;

And when they'd vomited their golden slop
Devils filled them up again to the top
 With gold they gladly lent.

Then Sloth on the second try
Came forth like a sow out of a sty—
 Low slouched his snout;
Many a lazy fat-bellied glutton,
Many a dirty slattern and sleepy sloven,
 Served him round about:
He harnessed them with a chain
And Belial with a whip took the reins
 Lashing the asses of all the rout.
In the dance they were so slow
The devils used fire to make 'em go
 Which they did at last with a shout.

Then Lechery that loathsome rapscallion
Came trotting forth, hung like a stallion—
 And Lazy Wantonness him led:
Hanging round him was an ugly group
Many a rotting corpse that smelled like poop
 Who died having sex in bed.
When they entered into the dance
They grew flushed in their countenance
 Like branding irons fiery red;
Each led his fellow by the prick
As if in their ass they wanted it to stick:
 For lechers by their pricks are led.

Then the foul monster Gluttony
Of womb insatiable and greedy
 To the dance did himself address:
There followed many a drunkard
With cup and mug, pint and quart,
 In surfeit and excess;
Full many a worthless lollygag
His potbelly forth did drag
 In a basket filled with the mess:
“Drink!” they cried with gaping gullets—
The fiends gave them hot lead to gulp—
 Yet they drank no less.

There were no minstrels there to play
For troubadours kept far away,
 No poets sang day or night—
Excepting only a poet homicide
In tune with his harp he cried
 For he belonged by right.

Then Mohammed called for a highland pagan:
And a fiend ran quick to fetch MacFaddan

Far in north from his cave.
When he the roll call did shout
Irishmen gathered in such a rout
That hell more space did crave.
These Tervengant bullies in rags and tatters
In booming Gaelic began to chatter
And crow like rooks and ravens.
The Devil grew so deaf from their yell
He smothered them with the smoke of hell;
Deep in the pit at last they were grave.

The Black Lady

Long did I write of ladies white,
Now shall I of a black one indite,
Just come ashore from the ships,
Whose portrait I must get just right,
My Lady of the Thick Lips:

How like an ape her lips protrude,
And how her skin feels like a toad,
And how her short cat nose uplifts,
And how she shines like a bar of soap,
My Lady of the Thick Lips.

When she is clothed in rich apparel,
She gleams as bright as a tar barrel,
When she was born the sun suffered eclipse,
Night gladly champions her quarrel,
My Lady of the Thick Lips.

Whoever for her sake with spear and shield
Proves himself most worthy in the field
Shall hold her in his arms and kiss,
And thenceforth her love shall wield,
My Lady of the Thick Lips.

But he in the field who wins naught but shame
And forfeits there his noble name
Shall come from behind her arse to kiss
And ever after make no further claim
On my Lady of the Thick Lips.

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