

Classic Poetry Series

William Dunbar
- poems -

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William Dunbar(1460 - 1522)

William Dunbar, was born around the time of 1460, he has left vivid images of Scotland in the reign of James IV, yet much in his own life, including the dates of his birth and death, remains obscure. The *Flyting*, a verse quarrel between Dunbar and another poet, Walter Kennedy, offers information as to his ancestry, character and personal appearance, but in this type of poem it is difficult to determine how much truth lies beneath the scurrilous insults. Dunbar, however, was certainly a lowlander, from the Lothian region, and spent many years in Edinburgh. He was well educated, and took a bachelor's degree at the University of St Andrews in 1477 and a master's degree in 1479. Nothing definite is known of his activities between 1480 and 1500, although he may have been abroad: some of his poems imply familiarity with Denmark and France, and in the winter of 1500-1501 he was apparently in England.

The best-documented period of Dunbar's life is from 1500 to 1513; during this time he received a "pensioun", or annual salary from James IV, as a member of the royal household. By 1504 he had taken priest's orders, and is later referred to as a "chaplain"; several poems voice his hopes for a benefice, yet he is not known ever to have obtained even a humble parish kirk. Well-educated churchmen at this time carried out many of the tasks of government, and it is likely that Dunbar had some role in the royal secretariat, as a clerk or envoy. His poems reveal familiarity with legal usage and terminology, and he occasionally acted as a procurator, or advocate, in the law courts. The last mention of Dunbar in the court records is on 14th May 1513, but there is a gap in these records following the battle of Flodden (September 1513), in which the King died; Dunbar may have survived into the reign of James V, but there is no positive evidence that he did so.

The Scottish court provided Dunbar with his livelihood and also his primary audience. Many of his poems are addressed to the king or queen, or refer to fellow-courtiers, ranging from humble fools to powerful officials, such as the Treasurer. The *Thrissill and the rose* celebrates the wedding of James IV to Margaret Tudor in 1503, and other poems are concerned with festive events of this reign, such as the Tournament of the Black Lady (1507), the arrival of the French envoy Bernard Stewart in 1508, and the Queen's visit to Aberdeen in 1511. But many of Dunbar's poems cast a more satiric eye at the activities of James IV's court, and convey an uneasy atmosphere of self-seeking, envy and distrust.

Dunbar's favourite term for his own writings was "ballatis", a word that then

usually connoted short, often lyrical poems. Dunbar indeed stands out from other late medieval poets for the brevity and compression of his verse. He also called himself a "makar", a term that lays stress on the poet as a skilled and versatile craftsman. Dunbar is famed for his virtuosity, and was ready to write on almost any subject, from a painful headache to a highly technical treatise on penance. He experimented with many popular genres - elegy, panegyric, love epistle, beast fable, satiric testament - but shows particular fondness for the medieval tradition of dream poetry. His dream poems are characteristically varied: the most famous is the Goldyn targe, a complex courtly allegory, in which love triumphs over reason; another is a devout vision of the Crucifixion, whose tone recalls the Mystery plays; and several others, grotesque in style and satirical in purpose, might better be described as nightmares. Dunbar is also an accomplished metrist. The Twa mariit wemen and the wedo shows his mastery of alliterative verse, but he also employs a variety of stanzas, ranging from rhyme royal to the popular carol. Many of his poems make a witty use of refrains.

The degree of self-expression in Dunbar has been much debated. His few love poems are highly conventional, and the "I" of several didactic pieces seems largely a mouthpiece for orthodox morality. But poems such as In to thir dirk and drublie days and I that in heill wes (often called The Lament for the makaris) communicate, simply yet very poignantly, Dunbar's personal response to death:

sen he [Death] has all my brether tane
He will naught lat me lif alane;
On forse I man [must] hys nyxt pray be:
Timor mortis conturbat me.

Although Dunbar is not a profoundly autobiographical poet, his most intimate-sounding voice is heard in the petitions, a small group of verse epistles, addressed chiefly to the King. Their tone is characteristically half-humorous, and half-melancholy; in one of the most successful Dunbar adopts the persona of an old horse to convey his sense of rejection by the King.

Many of Dunbar's most original poems are sardonic and mocking in tone. His targets include the familiar butts of late medieval comedy, such as friars or tailors, but also extend to himself, his friends, and fellow-courtiers. Perhaps the blackest comedy is to be found in The Twa mariit wemen and the wedo in which three young women talk uninhibitedly of love, men and marriage. Much influenced by the traditions of anti-feminist satire, this is Dunbar's longest and most ambitious work. Dunbar also had a talent for parody and burlesque, best illustrated by The Testament of Master Andro Kennedy, and The Dirige, a small comic masterpiece.

Dunbar is master stylist. Bold and self-confident in his use of language, he is highly sensitive both to the sound and the connotations of words. He ranges from the high, often Latinate style of *The Goldyn Targe* to the low, colloquial, vulgar diction of *The Flyting*. He seizes the reader's attention by arresting first lines, such as the explosive opening to his fine poem on the Resurrection: "Done is a battell on the dragon blak". Dunbar's verse abounds in unusual imagery, and is rich in irony, puns, and other forms of word-play.

Dunbar is not a learned or intellectual writer, but he is the most brilliant of the early Scottish poets. Despite the lapse of five centuries he retains a power to move, to entertain, and even to shock his readers. It is not surprising that when Hugh MacDiarmid sought a new model for modern Scottish poetry - tough, witty, and unsentimental - he adopted as his slogan, "Not Burns - Dunbar!"

Lament For The Makers

I THAT in heill was and gladness
Am trublit now with great sickness
And feblit with infirmitie:--
 Timor Mortis conturbat me.

Our plesance here is all vain glory,
This fals world is but transitory,
The flesh is bruckle, the Feynd is slee:--
 Timor Mortis conturbat me.

The state of man does change and vary,
Now sound, now sick, now blyth, now sary,
Now dansand mirry, now like to die:--
 Timor Mortis conturbat me.

No state in Erd here standis sicker;
As with the wynd wavis the wicker
So wannis this world's vanitie:--
 Timor Mortis conturbat me.

Unto the Death gois all Estatus,
Princis, Prelatis, and Potestatis,
Baith rich and poor of all degree:--
 Timor Mortis conturbat me.

He takis the knichtis in to the field
Enarmit under helm and scheid;
Victor he is at all mellie:--
 Timor Mortis conturbat me.

That strong unmerciful tyrand
Takis, on the motheris breast sowkand,
The babe full of benigntie:--
 Timor Mortis conturbat me.

He takis the campion in the stour,
The captain closit in the tour,
The lady in bour full of bewtie:--
 Timor Mortis conturbat me.

On The Nativity Of Christ

RORATE coeli desuper!

 Hevins, distil your balmy schouris!
For now is risen the bricht day-ster,
 Fro the rose Mary, flour of flouris:
 The cleir Sone, quhom no cloud devouris,
Surmounting Phebus in the Est,
 Is cumin of his hevinly touris:
 Et nobis Puer natus est.

Archangellis, angellis, and dompnationis,
 Tronis, potestatis, and marteiris seir,
And all ye hevinly operationis,
 Ster, planeit, firmament, and spheir,
 Fire, erd, air, and water cleir,
To Him gife loving, most and lest,
 That come in to so meik maneir;
 Et nobis Puer natus est.

Synnaris be glad, and penance do,
 And thank your Maker hairtfully;
For he that ye nicht nocht come to
 To you is cumin full humbly
 Your soulis with his blood to buy
And loose you of the fiendis arrest--
 And only of his own mercy;
 Pro nobis Puer natus est.

All clergy do to him inclyne,
 And bow unto that bairn benyng,
And do your observance divyne
 To him that is of kingis King:
 Encense his altar, read and sing
In holy kirk, with mind degest,
 Him honouring attour all thing
 Qui nobis Puer natus est.

Celestial foulis in the air,
 Sing with your nottis upon hicht,
In firthis and in forrestis fair

Sweet Rose Of Virtue

Sweet rose of virtue and of gentleness,
delightful lily of youthful wantonness,
richest in bounty and in beauty clear
and in every virtue that is held most dear?
except only that you are merciless.

Into your garden, today, I followed you;
there I saw flowers of freshest hue,
both white and red, delightful to see,
and wholesome herbs, waving resplendently?
yet nowhere, one leaf or flower of rue.

I fear that March with his last arctic blast
has slain my fair rose of pallid and gentle cast,
whose piteous death does my heart such pain
that, if I could, I would compose her roots again?
so comforting her bowering leaves have been.

William Dunbar

The Dance Of The Seven Deadly Sins

I.

Of Februar the fiftene nicht
Full lang before the dayis licht
I lay intill a trance
And then I saw baith Heaven and Hell
Me thocht, amang the fiendis fell
Mahoun gart cry ane dance
Of shrews that were never shriven,
Agains the feast of Fastern's even,
To mak their observance.
He bad gallants gae graith a gyis,
And cast up gamountis in the skies,
As varlets do in France.

II.

Helie harlots on hawtane wise,
Come in with mony sundry guise,
But yet leuch never Mahoun,
While priests come in with bare shaven necks;
Then all the fiends leuch, and made gecks,
Black-Belly and Bawsy Brown.

III.

Let see, quoth he, now wha begins:
With that the foul Seven Deadly Sins
Begoud to leap at anis.
And first of all in Dance was Pride,
With hair wyld back, and bonnet on side,
Like to make vaistie wanis;
And round about him, as a wheel,
Hang all in rumples to the heel
His kethat for the nanis:7
Mony proud trumpour with him trippit;
Through scalding fire, aye as they skippit

They girmed with hideous granis.

IV.

Then Ire came in with sturt and strife;
His hand was aye upon his knife,
He brandished like a beir:
Boasters, braggars, and bargainers,
After him passit in to pairs,
All bodin in feir of weir;
In jacks, and scryppis, and bonnets of steel,
Their legs were chainit to the heel,
Frawart was their affeir:
Some upon other with brands beft,
Some jaggit others to the heft,
With knives that sharp could shear.

V.

Next in the Dance followit Envy,
Filled full of feud and felony,
Hid malice and despite:
For privy hatred that traitor tremilit;
Him followit mony freik dissemlit,
With fenyeit wordis quhyte:
And flatterers in to men's faces;
And backbiters in secret places,
To lie that had delight;
And rownaris of false lesings,
Alace! that courts of noble kings
Of them can never be quit.

VI.

Next him in Dance came Covetyce,
Root of all evil, and ground of vice,
That never could be content:
Catives, wretches, and ockeraris,
Hudpikes, hoarders, gatheraris,

All with that warlock went:
Out of their throats they shot on other
Het, molten gold, me thocht, a futher
As fire-flaucht maist fervent;
Aye as they toomit them of shot,
Fiends filled them new up to the throat
With gold of all kind prent.

VII.

Syne Sweirness, at the second bidding,
Came like a sow out of a midding,
Full sleepy was his grunye:
Mony swear bumbard belly huddroun,
Mony slut, daw, and sleepy duddroun,
Him servit aye with sonnyie;
He drew them furth intill a chain,
And Belial with a bridle rein
Ever lashed them on the lunyie:
In Daunce they were so slaw of feet,
They gave them in the fire a heat,
And made them quicker of cunye.

VIII.

Then Lechery, that laithly corpse,
Came berand like ane baggit horse,
And Idleness did him lead;
There was with him ane ugly sort,
And mony stinking foul tramort,
That had in sin been dead:
When they were enterit in the Dance,
They were full strange of countenance,
Like torches burning red.

IX.

Then the foul monster, Gluttony,
Of wame insatiable and greedy,

To Dance he did him dress:
Him followit mony foul drunkart,
With can and collop, cup and quart,
In surfit and excess;
Full mony a waistless wally-drag,
With wames unweildable, did furth wag,
In creesh that did incress:
Drink! aye they cried, with mony a gaip,
The fiends gave them het lead to laip,
Their leveray was na less.

X.

Nae minstrels played to them but doubt,
For gleemen there were halden out,
Be day, and eke by nicht;
Except a minstrel that slew a man,
So to his heritage he wan,
And enterit by brieve of richt.
Then cried Mahoun for a Hieland Padyane:
Syne ran a fiend to fetch Makfadyane,
Far northwast in a neuck;
Be he the coronach had done shout,
Ersche men so gatherit him about,
In hell great room they took:
Thae tarmigants, with tag and tatter,
Full loud in Ersche begoud to clatter,
And roup like raven and rook.
The Devil sae deaved was with their yell;
That in the deepest pot of hell
He smorit them with smoke!

William Dunbar

To The City Of London

London, thou art of town{.e}s A per se.
Soveraign of cities, semeliest in sight,
Of high renoun, riches, and royaltie;
Of lordis, barons, and many goodly knyght;
Of most delectable lusty ladies bright;
Of famous prelatis in habitis clericall;
Of merchauntis full of substaunce and myght:
London, thou art the flour of Cities all.

Gladdith anon, thou lusty Troy Novaunt,
Citie that some tyme cleped was New Troy,
In all the erth, imperiall as thou stant,
Pryncesse of townes, of pleasure, and of joy,
A richer restith under no Christen roy;
For manly power, with craftis naturall,
Fourmeth none fairer sith the flode of Noy:
London, thou art the flour of Cities all.

Gemme of all joy, jasper of jocunditie,
Most myghty carbuncle of vertue and valour;
Strong Troy in vigour and in strenuytie;
Of royall cities rose and geraflour;
Empresse of town{.e}s, exalt in honour;
In beawtie beryng the crone imperiall;
Swete paradise precelling in pleasure:
London, thow art the floure of Cities all.

Above all ryvers thy Ryver hath renowne,
Whose beryall stremys, pleasaunt and preclare,
Under thy lusty wallys renneth down,
Where many a swanne doth swymme with wyngis fare;
Where many a barge doth saile, and row with are,
Where many a ship doth rest with toppe-royall.
O! towne of townes, patrone and not-compare:
London, thou art the floure of Cities all.

Upon thy lusty Brigge of pylers white
Been merchauntis full royall to behold;
Upon thy stretis goth many a semely knyght

In velvet gownes and cheyn{.e}s of fyne gold.
By Julyus Cesar thy Tour founded of old
May be the hous of Mars victoryall,
Whos artillary with tonge may not be told:
London, thou art the flour of Cities all.

Strong be thy wallis that about the standis;
Wise be the people that within the dwellis;
Fresh is thy ryver with his lusty strandis;
Blith be thy chirches, wele sownyng be thy bellis;
Riche be thy merchauntis in substaunce that excellis;
Fair be thy wives, right lovesom, white and small;
Clere be thy virgyns, lusty under kellis:
London, thow art the flour of Cities all.

Thy famous Maire, by pryncely governaunce,
With swerd of justice the rulith prudently.
No Lord of Parys, Venyce, or Floraunce
In dignytie or honoure goeth to hym nye.
He is exemplar, lood{.e}-ster, and guye;
Principall patrone and roose orygynalle,
Above all Maires as maister moost worthy:
London, thou art the flour of Cities all.

William Dunbar