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*Shaun McCarthy*

“Syne maryit I a Marchand”  
Dunbar’s *Mariit Wemen* and their Audience



Dunbar's poems have in the past almost invariably been discussed as literary texts, but my object here is to discuss the relationship of a particular "court poem"--*The Tretis of the Twa Mariit Wemen and the Wedo*--to a particular oral tradition. This last is a highly ambiguous term, and may be taken either to mean the "word-of-mouth" tradition--that invoked, for instance, by the folk romance or ballad--or "the literature created by a particular method of composition derived from the exigencies of the nonliterate state."<sup>1</sup> Such a method of composition, which is that of the court poem, may reveal many of the rhetorical subtleties that we associate with a literature designed to be "read" in the modern sense; and in asserting that this is demonstrably the method of Dunbar, I do not imply that to approach his poetry as we would a modern text is, critically speaking, an altogether misguided procedure. Such an approach, however, linked as it must be to certain conceptions of *unity* and *integrity* as criteria, will create certain problems and difficulties that some past commentators have tended to solve draconically; and such solutions are unsatisfactory.

Kinsley summarizes the content of the *Tretis* as follows:

The poem is formally a *débat* on love. Three ladies

are discovered in a decorated garden bower, celebrating the festival of Midsummer Eve. The poet...creeps up and *en cachette* behind a hedge listens to their conversation. In the midst of the feast, the Wedo assumes the role of president of the court, and sets her companions a *demande d'amour*: 'Bewrie...quhat mirth ye fand in maryage'; 'think ye it nocht ane blist band?' The ladies take up the question in turn, answering it from their marital experience. When the Wedo has made her contribution, the discussion is resolved in wine and laughter and the trio 'rake hame to their rest'. The poet turns to the reader with a satiric *demande* of his own: which of these three 'wantoun wiffis', if any, would you take as yours?<sup>2</sup>

In fact it is not immediately clear what form of unity the author has imposed upon this work. Certainly it is not that of simple narrative form--no *story* is told by any of the women, on the Boccaccian or any other model. Nor is the unity, as Kinsley suggests, truly that of the logical or allegorical debate, explicable in terms of *ars predicando*; the experiences related by the women are remarkably repetitive; the character of their husbands is differentiated, but the reaction of all three women to the "blist band" of matrimony is identical and is conveyed in very similar terms. I find, *pace* some other commentators, this to be true even of the Widow; in her case--since she has buried two husbands--the experiences are duplicated, but my own reading does not establish her as being in any real sense a mentor or guide to the younger women (as Dunbar himself implies); her advice merely confirms them in their previous opinions.

The unity, in short, at first sight seems to be that of near-maniac repetitiveness, and editors (including Kinsley himself) have recognized this by cutting the text very extensively.<sup>3</sup> Mediaeval audiences could, as we know, put up with a good deal of recapitulation; but where the unity of an admitted masterpiece can only be established in terms of what, to the modern reader, is a considerable technical fault, a justification can be made for this most drastic of all forms of criticism; it does not seem enough to ask the reader to take into account "changes of taste," "conventions of the period," and so on, still less to treat of the poem simply as a philological curiosity. This would all be true, were it simply a literary text. But the fact that it is a *court poem* is to my mind central to its proper appreciation; since this is to say that if it is a masterpiece, and evidently a literary masterpiece, it is not hence necessarily a literary masterpiece in the generally accepted modern sense.

To say that it was primarily intended to be read *aloud* to a physically present audience is perhaps to stress the obvious--though this is not always a pointless pursuit. What is less obvious, and is indeed a subject of dispute, is the nature of the relationship between the reader (Dunbar himself) and his audience, or in other words the precise role of Dunbar at the court of King James. I believe that it will profit us to view Dunbar's role as comparable to that of the traditional court juggler or jester rather than to that of the "court poet"--as this term is generally and vaguely understood. In this respect he stands beside other figures who, though aware that they were practicing a new art form vastly superior to that of the itinerant juggler, nevertheless saw themselves also as public entertainers and were prepared, as such, to employ the vernacular language and plebeian forms of speech. The common characteristic of these poets is indeed a certain confusion as to their role; thus on the one hand the author of the *St. Fanuel* insists, like Dunbar, ("wonder laith wer I to be ane baird"), that he is *not* a juggler--"*je ne suis mie enfantomeres / ne ne chant pas comme jongleres*"--and this claim is echoed further afield by the erudite Spanish translator<sup>4</sup> of the *Book of Alexander*:

Mester trago feroso, non es de jogleria,  
Mester es sen peccado, ca es de clerezia...<sup>5</sup>

while, on quite the other hand, their verses demonstrably abound in all the technical tricks of the juggler's trade (hence, of course, these protestations) and even so venerable a figure as Gonzalo de Berceo is able to speak of himself without irony as "the juggler of St. Domingo":

Quierote por mi misme, padre, merced clamar,  
ca ovi grant taliento de seer tu juglar...<sup>6</sup>

In this way, a new awareness of the dignity of the maker's office is clearly not, with Dunbar, incompatible with a grim experience of the humiliations traditionally associated with the juggler's office; he chooses to separate himself from the musicians and minstrels attendant upon the court,

Musicianis, menstralis, and mirrie singaris,  
Chevalouris, carvouris, and flingariss...

in a complaint that emphasizes the general precariousness of his situation, while his knowledge that the court jester is, as of convention, to be richly attired at his master's expense

clearly inspires his well-known address to the king and the subsequent *responsio regis*:

Gar hows him now aganis this Yuill  
And busk him lyk ane bischopis muill...

We should, in short, concede that Dunbar was not a "court poet" in quite the same sense that Chaucer may be accounted such; this is a fact that the conventional view of the "Scots Chaucerians" tends to obscure. And it is equally misleading to describe him, with Harvey Wood, as "a determined hanger-on" at James's court;<sup>7</sup> it is as a "servitour and officiar" that Dunbar would have regarded himself--occupying a difficult and in some ways dangerous position, but one of which the difficulties, dangers, and--certainly--discomforts were clearly delineated and established by several centuries of tradition. We should regard him as in this way sustaining a dual role, a role relating (as is logical) as much to a preceding tradition as to that succession of self-conscious literary artists who come after him; and we should also, I believe, attribute something of this same dual quality--and something of a consequent precariousness--to James IV's court itself.

De Ayala's glowing account of the cultural peaks attained by the king and his entourage is rightly nowadays viewed with some suspicion; we should seek to visualize, rather, the court of a small late-mediaeval kingdom on the outermost fringes of Roman Europe, conscious, certainly, of the existence elsewhere of highly artificial and "civilized" courtly nexi--most notably in France--and striving to emulate them, but finding the effort to *aprender la cortesía* and to inculcate the virtues of gentility something of a strain. The function of the Court poet, in such circumstances, will predictably be at once to adorn--through the production of elaborate metric verses in the accepted aureate style, properly embellished with allegorical allusion and with courtly sentiment--and in another vein to amuse, providing his audiences with more relaxing material, *verba jocularia*, often in the forms established by popular entertainers and employing the better-loved--because more familiar--vernacular. Hence the "two distinct vocabularies" that Grierson and many other earlier critics have duly observed. In a few works, of which the *Tretis* is an example, the poles of this duality are reconciled and an appeal to sophisticated taste is made within a distinctively loose and plebeian framework, this to considerable ironic effect.

"Dunbar is professional through and through; the accomplished master of one tradition that goes back to *Beowulf*, and of another that goes back to the Troubadours."<sup>8</sup> He is indeed

a professional in that modern sense in which Chaucer should, perhaps, be accounted an amateur; he composed, as did the jugglers, with the needs of a specific audience in mind, and that audience was not as limited by restrictions of education and class as might be supposed; the basic likes and dislikes of courtly and of plebeian audiences were not, as much evidence indicates, very far removed. It may hence be unjust to speak--again with Harvey Wood--of the "sniggering indecency" of such pieces as *In secret place this hyndir nicht*: what is probably aimed at here is a deflationary effect that can ultimately be accounted satirical; and with the *Tretis*, which may also display this same quality to a lesser degree, one may say what J.H. Martin has said of the *Celestina*--Dunbar here, like Fernando de Rojas, "deals the most cruel blow to the courtly convention by revealing its potential for concealing common lust."<sup>9</sup> So, at least, we may see it in retrospect, though arguably Dunbar's intention was no more than to deride the cultural pretensions of James's courtiers by demonstrating the gulf separating the kind of literature they most enjoyed from the kind which they knew they were *supposed* to enjoy, and, similarly, that separating the language they knew and loved the best from that "dulcet speche" which they were required to employ in the formal parlance of the court. The hypocrisy thus pilloried is of a mild and excusable kind, and we may be sure there was no intent to give deliberate offense; the juggler's *mester* is in some large part that of adapting his themes to suit his audience's taste, and Dunbar's verses, like those of so many of his predecessors, abound in pleas for this, that or the other form of material support--support which the victims of any truly vicious satire would be most unlikely to give.

One last point should be made before we turn to the text of the poem. Although Dunbar may be held in this way to stand at the end of a long line of public *makars* as much as at the head of that later succession of Scottish poets (Henryson and Douglas, Rolland and Lyndsay) with which he has in the past been somewhat too naively associated, there can be no denying the vehemence of his break with the earlier tradition in its most vital aspect--that of the essential *impersonality* of the literary composition (revealed chiefly by the native ballads, but also by the epic works of Barbour and of Blind Harry). The break is not as total as has been sometimes suggested; Dunbar's poems do not demonstrate "moodiness and deep depressions contrasting with bouts of exuberant exultation," much less a "manic-depressive temperament,"<sup>10</sup> but rather the conventional determination of the professional practitioner of verse to explore to the full the emotional limits of his medium, as to experiment as widely as possible with a wide range of metrical

forms. Yet that within such forms, and in the context of such a medium, an individual voice speaks is incontrovertible; it is in this rather intangible way that he reminds us so powerfully of Villon,<sup>11</sup> as also at times of the Archpriest of Hita, who--for all his allegiance to the goliardic tradition--has been not unfairly called the only individual stylist of the Middle Ages.<sup>12</sup> The concept of style is here related to a context to which the "poet," as now defined, does not properly belong; the context of literary compositions created for, and accepting the cultural dictates of, a non-literate society.

Such compositions will characteristically be "written," and yet "heard" rather than "read"; so does the author of the *Cursor Mundi* protest that

Frankis rimes here I redd,  
Comunlik in ilk a sted...<sup>13</sup>

and Sidney, some three hundred years later, claims that men must be glad "to hear the tales of Hercules, Achilles, Cyrus, Aeneas," because "hearing them, [they] must needs hear the right description of wisdom, valour and justice." In Dunbar's work the references to oral practice are multifarious:

And all the divillis of hell for redour quaik  
To heir quhat I sould wryt with pen and ynk...

and the most often-quoted of all Dunbarian lines needs to be (but rarely is) interpreted in just this light:

O morall Gower, and Ludgate laureate,  
Your sugurit *lippis* and *tongis* aureate  
Bene to oure *eris* cause of grete delyte;  
Your angel *mouthis* most mellifluate  
Oure rude langage has clere illumynate,  
And fair ourgilt oure speche, that imperfyte  
Stude, or your goldyn *pennis schupe* to wryte...

This view of the pen as a kind of MacLuhanesque extension of the tongue is most difficult for us to entertain; yet it is the work of such authors as Dunbar, Skelton and Villon--who straddle, so to speak, the literate and non-literate worlds--who can furnish us with the most valuable of interpretative clues.<sup>14</sup>

The first thing to be noted, then, when we turn to the *Tretis* itself is the ingenuity with which the conventions of public poetry are observed and employed. One of the distinctive features of this poetry is that mode of direct address to

an audience which establishes a living communicative link between speaker and hearer; Dunbar reserves this effect for his final rhetorical question,

Ye auditoris most honorable, that eris has gevin (527)  
 Oneto this uncouth aventur quhilk airly me happinit:  
 Of thir thre wantoun wiffis that I haif writtin heir,  
 Quhilk wald ye waill to your wife, gif ye suld wed one?

"That eris has gevin..." Is this indeed a rhetorical effect, or should we interpret it literally? At least we can take it as an assurance that the poem is to be read in relation to an oral rather than to a not-yet-existent written tradition; an assurance which is necessary because Dunbar elsewhere uses his considerable professional skill to conceal the fact, and has chosen a form that, more than most others, enables him to do so. He has, of course, no need to interlard his narrative with the usual interlocutory forms of address--"lystonneth, lordynges," "cavallier, datz mi cosselh," "amigos, direivos mas"--because his characters perform this function on his behalf; in addressing one another, they address their audience also. "'Bewrie,' said the Wedo, 'ye woddit wemen ying'..." "'Now, fair sister, fallis yow but fenyng to tell'..." "'Unto my lesson ye lyth, and leir at me wit'..." He attains, in brief, what we now call a theatrical effect, which should remind us to what considerable extent the late mediaeval theatre derives from the entertainments of the jugglers and minstrels;<sup>15</sup> to compare this poem, however, with those Tudor "interludes" it somewhat resembles is to perceive more clearly the innovatory force of Dunbar's genius.

Let us consider a second and rather more subtle detail.

Apon the Midsummer evin, merriest of nichtis,  
 I muvit furth allane neir as midnicht wes past...

We are to witness, it is implied, a "midsummer night's dream," a traditional play or masque, but from a somewhat unusual point of vantage. To observe that Dunbar's *en cachette* device is borrowed from French originals is a critical commonplace, but the *effect* of the device has been most inadequately examined. Briefly, again, it serves to ensure that if the characters whose conversations are overheard are placed in an invidious position, that of the listener/author is no less so, being essentially that of the peeping Tom or eavesdropper. It further ensures a measure of identification of the author, not with his characters, but with the larger audience, who are placed by him in precisely this situation also. The implica-



tions of this simple device are surprisingly far-reaching, since through it both author and audience are *distanced* from the characters in a way impossible to achieve through a more direct narrative means.

It is this effect which renders the often-made comparison between the Widow and the Wife of Bath ultimately absurd;<sup>16</sup> there is a fundamental opposition between characters that are comprehended by their authors--characters through whom the creative compassion and humanity of their inventors are granted a fictional expression--and characters who remain merely observed--in this present case, spied upon. To say of Dunbar's three women that they are caricatures is to confirm this distinction, but is not, of course, to explain the subtle, though simple, means through which this effect is achieved; and to turn the comparison to Dunbar's disfavor is certainly unjust--the effect is deliberately aimed at and skilfully secured, and is one altogether proper to the oral tradition, which is concerned with bold light-and-shade effects--one might almost say with exaggeration--rather than with chiaroscuro. "Know whether she [Nature] have brought forth so true a lover as Theagenes; so constant a friend as Pylades; so valiant a man as Orlando; so right a prince as Xenophon's Cyrus; so excellent a man every way as Virgil's Aeneas?" Sidney is observing here on the common mediaeval tendency to make of its heroes and heroines truly insupportable mirrors of perfection (as the modern reader will feel); Dunbar's heroines, the "wantoun wiffis," show the obverse of this medal and, in so doing, caricaturize effectively this "caricature-mode" itself. Chaucer's irony, prodigious in its range, encompasses this kind of satire also, but in general is of a very different--a more humane and, in a sense, less strictly professional--stamp.

These mediaeval idealizations of which Sidney (in 1595) was still able emphatically to approve have a non-secular counterpart in those poeticized and interminable "Lives of the Saints" commonly then regarded as constituting, on purely moral grounds, the apex of the juggler's art. It is to such compositions (we should note in passing) that the Widow ironically refers at the conclusion of her "confession":

Ladyis, leir thir lessonis and be no lassis fundin;<sup>17</sup>  
 This the legeand of my lif, thought Latyne it be nane...<sup>18</sup>  
 (504)

From her earlier remarks, however, we may deduce that devotional reading is not among her preferred pursuits:

Than lay I furght my bright buke one breid one my kne  
 With mony lusty letter ellumynit with gold,  
 And drawis my clok forthwart our my face quhit,  
 That I may spy, unesyit, a space me beside (427)

and safely further conclude that her familiarity with these "legeands" has been gained through having them read to her; in other words, through the conventional practice of the oral tradition in its moralistic aspect--which here, again, is ingeniously and indirectly derided; neither the *gesta principum* nor the *vitas sanctorum* escape Dunbar's pillory. That the *Tretis* in this way both stands within, and most effectively lampoons, the oral literary traditions that constituted so important an element in courtly culture and education perhaps need now be no further demonstrated.

Of the conventional use of the direct form of address, however, one remark should here be added. As a purely rhetorical device, it has of course survived the transition from a non-literate to a literate social context with surprising success, though when used merely to alert the reader's attention (like a phrasal exclamation mark) as in Charlotte Bronte's, "Reader, I married him..." the effect secured may nowadays be accounted quaint--presumably because archaic. With Elizabethan prose, however, it is often difficult to determine whether the effect aimed at is deliberate or is intended as a formal genuflection towards the forms of speech proper to the oral utterance. In general, it would seem that the marvellous flexibility and vivacity of this prose is a consequence of its nearness to the vernacular achievements of the jugglers; the poetry of Dunbar and of Skelton may be held in some respects to prefigure it.

We should now reconsider the poem's structure--or professed lack of it. We can say at once that its outward apparent allegiance to the *débat* form is denied by its content, not its tone; an ironic or even satiric discussion (of the kind variously reproduced in, for example, Chaucer's Merchant's Tale) would have been both permissible and acceptable. Given the initial *question de amour*, the first wife certainly attempts to couch her answer in terms of a reasoned *explicatio*:

It is agane the law of luf, of kynd, and of nature, (58)  
 Togiddir hairtis to strene, that stryveis with uthir;  
 Birdis hes ane better law na bernis, be meikill,<sup>19</sup>  
 That ilk yeir, with new joy, joyis ane maik,  
 And fangis thame ane fresche feyr, unfulyeit and  
 constant...

The "laws" she invokes I take to be those governing the courtly *ars amatoris* (*luf*), those governing human behavior

(*kynd*), and those governing the behavior of all living things (*nature*); and in making such a threefold division she conforms well enough to the pattern nominally required of the introduction to a late mediaeval sermon or disputation, wherein the theme is usually stated in relation to a tripartite *schema*. The argument, as far as it goes, is neither irrationally conceived nor unintelligently presented. But it certainly does not go far enough; virtually from the end of the introduction onwards, the first wife interprets the Widow's question,

"Think ye it nocht ane blist band that bindis so fast  
That none undo it a deill may bot the deith ane?" (48)

as an injunction to recount the many and adequate reasons why she detests her husband, and the second wife duly does exactly the same. A topic which in a mediaeval courtly society forms a perfectly normal and usually somewhat abstract theme for conversation and argument is discussed in an anything but abstract--some may say a refreshingly uninhibited--way. The Widow also seeks at the outset of her monologue to establish a broad moral, or amoral, principle, and in so doing has unmistakable resource to the conventional rhetoric and imagery of the pulpit:

Unto my lesson ye lyth, and leir at me wit, (257)  
Gif you nought list be forleit with losingeris untrue:<sup>20</sup>  
Be constant in your governance and counterfeit gud  
maneris,  
Thought ye be kene, inconstant, and cruel of mynd;  
Thought ye as tygris be terne, be tretable in luf,  
And be as turtoris in your talk, thought ye haif talis  
brukill;  
Be dragonis baith and dowis ay in double forme,  
And quhen it nedis yow, onone, note baith ther  
stranthis;  
Be amyable with humble face, as angellis apperand,  
And with a terrebill taill be stangand as eddiris...

In spite of this pretense at impersonality, her arguments against the matrimonial condition take the same subsequent form as those of the younger women and are equally subjective in bias. The general effect here is that of a particular formal attitude--that proper to the debater or preacher, "full of hy sentence"--and a particular formal approach being in all cases abandoned as not worth the pretence of keeping up; hence the paradoxical sincerity with which all three women advocate a callous hypocrisy as the only feasible answer to an intoler-

able situation.

Dunbar does not, as I have said, avoid repetitiveness; he may even seem--through his characters--to glory in it. Spearing, noting the "repetitive patterning" of the mediaeval sermon, observes that such effects "which would offer aesthetic pleasure to the upper layers of such an audience would also serve to hammer home the main points of the preacher's message to the lower layers";<sup>21</sup> nor, of course, should we forget that delight in vocabularizing for its own sake which is so characteristic of the period and which finds another outlet in the work of the notorious "inkhorn" scholars:

I hafe ane wallidrag, ane worme, ane auld wobat carle,  
A waistit walroun, na worth but wourdis to clatter;  
Ane bumbart, ane dron bee, ane bag full of flewme,  
Ane skabbit skarth, ane scorpioun, ane scutarde behind...

I have hypothesized for this poem a courtly audience,<sup>22</sup> but one prepared--like the characters in the poem--to abandon, at least in moments of relaxation, many of the more tedious requirements of courtly culturizing "as not worth the pretence of keeping up"; such an audience would find Dunbar's prolixity satisfying on both of Spearing's counts simultaneously. And I would further hypothesize a by no means silent audience; the reading of the poem would, one imagines, no doubt have been punctuated by laughter in recognition of the shrewder of Dunbar's jibes, by ribald interjections and by whispered speculation. In such a situation, repetitiveness, as in the modern television comedy, serves a useful and evident rhetorical purpose.

To turn, lastly, from considerations of form and content to the language of the poem is to see how admirably Dunbar's choice of vocabulary supports his general aim, when thus interpreted. The strangely contrasting admixture of courtly and plebeian terms balances the implied underlying contrast of courtly and of popular (or should we say idealistic and realistic?) concepts of marital relationship; this is evident even when we consider points of detail, such as the unchivalrous--not to say uncouth--expressions used by Dunbar to describe the ladies' drinking habits--"swapit," "swanquhit," "wauchtit." Similarly a contrast is established between the alliterative poetic technique--which favours the employment of a sturdily native vocabulary--and the apparent thematic artificiality of the *débat* form; within this context, Dunbar is enabled to run through a whole series of parodic effects, showing on the one hand (as we have seen) much skill in the ironic employment of the worn rhetorical coinage of the pulpit and, on the other, deflating the pretentious terminology of the *amour courtois*--

"merciful," "danger," "honour," "discretion"--by relating it so closely to the predatory philosophy of his three amatory mercenaries. It is on the appreciation of numerous nice points such as these that his contemporary audience's approval must have depended.<sup>23</sup>

How is Dunbar's practice in these respects to be related to that of Chaucer? We may say that his debt, in a paradoxical sense, is deeper than has been suspected, since it transcends the merely linguistic. The central device of the *Canterbury Tales* can also be seen as an ingenious and very successful means of linking the oral methodology to a literary technique, since the pilgrims--in addressing each other--inevitably also address the reader's audience and can hence freely employ all those forms of direct rhetorical address sanctioned by the oral tradition; Dunbar, as we have shown, solves this problem in a rather similar way. Nor can it be denied that Chaucer's domination of the rambling monologue form, notably revealed in the Wife of Bath's prologue, has influenced Dunbar in directions distinct from that of mere verbal borrowing. Of even greater interest in this connection, however, is that Tale which many commentators have accounted the most cynical and unpleasant of them all and which Chaucer, with total appropriateness to this present context, ("Syne maryit I a marchand...") gives to the Merchant.

A whole network of loose analogies links this story to the *Tretis*: the crux of the action also occurs on or near mid-summer day,<sup>24</sup> also takes place before an eavesdropping audience (Pluto and Proserpine), while the brutal contrast between expressed sentiment and revealed action is of a kind perfectly to have illustrated the contentions of the Widow, had Dunbar chosen to employ a fictive mode. Equally significant is the pattern of ironic argument linking these two works; it is notable, for instance, that Dunbar's first wife, in a passage earlier quoted, reproduces January's opinions on the matrimonial state in precise reverse. Bachelors, he says,

...lyve but as a bryd or as a beest, (37)  
 In libertee, but under noon arreest,  
 Ther as a wedded man in his estaat  
 Lyveth a lyf blisful and ordinaat,  
 Under this yok of marriage ybounde.  
 For who can be so buxom as a wyf?  
 Who is so trewe, and eek so ententyf  
 To kepe hym, syk and hool, as is his make?  
 For wele or wo she wole hym nat forsake...

It is this somewhat over-optimistic viewpoint that the

Widow (in words) and May (in action) are concerned ruthlessly to dismantle; he has forgotten, amongst other things, the feminine capacity for "pitee," explicated by the Widow thus--

Thar is no liffand leid so law of degre<sup>25</sup> (497)  
 That sall me luf unluffit, I am so loik hertit;  
 And gif his lust so be lent into my lyre quhit,<sup>26</sup>  
 That he be lost or with me lig, his lif sall nocht  
 danger...

and attributed to May in one of the most notoriously chilling of Chaucerian echoes--

"Certeyn," thoghte she, "whom that this thyng displese,  
 I rekke nocht, for heere I hym assure [(738)  
 To love hym best of any creature,  
 Though he namoore hadde than his sherte."  
 Lo, pitee renneth soone in gentil herte!<sup>27</sup>

From this comparison a point of some interest may emerge. In spite of the many verbal and structural resemblances that link the *Tretis* with certain of the *Tales*, Dunbar's poem differs in one important--indeed, vital--respect from any of Chaucer's; it differs precisely in that it does *not* tell a tale. The diatribes of the three women are not basically dissimilar to those of that merchant's wife of whose mishaps the Shipman tells us:

"Myn housbonde is to me the worste man (161)  
 That evere was sith that the world bigan...

As helpe me God, he is nocht worth at al (170)  
 In no degree the value of a flye,  
 But yet me greveth moost his nygardye..."

yet they remain *simply* diatribes; they are not related to *specific* mishaps, to a story, are not illustrated through action. And this, as I began by saying, constitutes in the eye of the modern reader a considerable defect. Yet arguably in rejecting the narrative format Dunbar grants to his women, and to the questions they pose, a kind of semi-documentary reality; they exist, in relation to their audience, in a different way to Chaucer's May and January. These questions, after all, are far from new, and the popular *fabliaux* had for long been giving them satirical answer; the earliest English *fabliau* of which we have knowledge, generally known as the story of the "Weeping Bitch," derides the courtly tradition as a mask of feminine "virtue" and exposes its ultimate absurdi-

ties much as does Dunbar, though it precedes the *Tretis* by more than two hundred years.

If over those two centuries the obsolete courtly tradition obstinately refused to be smiled away, it is because the *fabliaux* and even, for that matter, Chaucer's satiric tales can be given no very high degree of credence, either. The *Merchant's Tale*, the *Shipman's Tale*, the *Franklin's Tale*, the *Miller's Tale*--these are all in the last resort *stories*, literary exercises, fictions; we cannot imagine a valid social criticism as emerging from them. Thus the questions that January asks, "For who can be so buxom as a wyf?" have ready-made answers inherent in the ironic fabric of the story; and when the Franklin concludes his tale of Arveragus and Aurelius with a rhetorical question identical in form to that of Dunbar:

Lordynges, this question, thanne wol I aske now,  
Which was the moste fre, as thynketh yow?

any hypothetical answer must be inwards-directed, couched of necessity in the chivalric terms proposed by the content of the story. But Dunbar's final question seems to be not of this kind. The answers to it, however deeply unsatisfying to the male ego, are open; it is a *real* question, because he has not permitted his women to establish a genuine narrative context narrowing and sharpening its application.

How, then, are we to reply to this final question? Old habits, of course, die hard; in a sense the question is the same as that proposed by the knight's wife in the *Wife of Bath's* tale--is a true, but ugly, wife to be preferred to one who is beautiful but unfaithful? We can argue in this way that the *Widow's* initial *question de amour* leads to another, and can answer, if we wish, in terms of literary analogue and reference, treating the *Tretis* as if it were a story. But in fact, as I have tried to show, all that precedes this last question and the tone in which it is put forbids us to examine it in quite this way, and it is the impossibility of so doing which compels us to see how in this poem the whole concept of the "love debate" has been insidiously wrecked.

Certainly the question appears to be rhetorical, in that in the matter of deceit and carnal depravity there is little to choose between the three women. But to speak of their "bestiality" or "animality" is beside the point. Within the oral epic tradition, genuine savagery is rather the characteristic of the true aristocrat; one might cite the case of that Queen of Castile who personally hacks to pieces the noble gentleman who has annoyed her (his execution is granted her as a special treat on her wedding day), or that of the mother of the In-

fants of Lara, who stoops to drink the blood of a murdered brother for whom she has conceived a special dislike. This form of aplomb is of course inherited by the Italianized heroines of the Jacobean drama, who arrange the dispatch of husbands, lovers, brothers and fathers with splendid gusto and unconcern. To make the comparison is to see at once how far the characteristics of the three wives are specifically bourgeois, in the modern sense of the term. The spectacular sins are not for them; not one of them proposes murder as a practical solution to the marital problem. The Widow, indeed, can fairly be called a snob:

For thocht I say it myself, the severance was mekle  
Betuix his bastard blude and my birth noble.

and ultimately it is not the moral depravity of Dunbar's women that repels but their gross materialism.

It is, as it were, in the name of this new materialism that the great idealistic citadel of courtly culture is in this poem scorned and derided; the *Tretis* can indeed be regarded as an important document in that series which records one of the great historical turning-points in the Middle Ages--that in which the spirit of mediaeval asceticism is in its decadence confronted with a new and vigorous spirit of mundanity, the old Christian concept of *el buen amor* faced with a rough and energetic carnality, *el amor lascivo*. In consequence of this confrontation, the great didactic impulse that reached its peak in the twelfth century succumbs to the new dynamic of the fictional narrative; the *Decameron*<sup>28</sup> celebrates the advance of the amoralistic flood, the *Confessio Amantis* and the *Lucanor* mark the ebb of the didactic tide, while Chaucer in the *Canterbury Tales* attempts to contrast and to reconcile these two great forces. Without seeking for profundities that Dunbar did not intend, it is not difficult in this wider context to detect in his ironies a sense of an imminent and tremendous final collapse, transcending even that great national catastrophe wherein those formal chivalric tournaments with which James IV "brocht his realme to great manheid and honouris" came to a tragic conclusion on the bitter field of Flodden. The feeling of incipient disaster is not unlike that which, a very few years later, a *maker* of the English court would seek more directly to convey:

Few right do love and wrong refuse;  
Pleasure is sought in every state;  
Liking is lust; there is no choose;  
The low give to the high checkmate.



Order is broke in things of weight,--  
 Measure and mean, who doth not flee?  
 Two things prevail, money and sleight;  
 To seem is better than to be...<sup>29</sup>

These last two lines offer indeed a summary of the Widow's "soverane teching" on which it would be difficult to improve. And that which her "teching," properly interpreted, would seem to signal is the end of chivalric culture and of the oral tradition that supported it, of the whole vexed question of "soveranety" that so perplexed Chaucer and his pilgrims, of idealism itself, and the corresponding approach of a new humanistic materialism, later to be associated with the reign of the Tudors. This is the historical fulcrum upon which the other oppositions inherent in the *Tretis*, satirical and social, are ultimately balanced.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>David Buchan, "The Scottish Ballads," *Oral Tradition, Literary Tradition* (Odense, 1977), p. 56, q.v. for further discussion.

<sup>2</sup>James Kinsley, Introduction to *Dunbar: Poems* (Oxford, 1958), p. xvi.

<sup>3</sup>Kinsley prunes the text of a total of 284 lines; Margaret Muriel Gray in her *Scottish Poetry from Barbour to James VI* (London, 1935) omits the first 295 lines in their entirety; in each case less than half of the poem survives. I follow here A.M. Kinghorn, *The Middle Scots Poets* (London, 1970).

<sup>4</sup>The Scottish translation of the *Alexander*, it may be noted, was made by that Sir Gilbert Hay mentioned in the *Lament for the Makars*.

<sup>5</sup>"I practise a beautiful art, not that of the jugglers, / An art devoid of sin, since it is of the clerisy." I follow *El Libro de Alexandre*, ed. A. Moral-Fatio (Madrid, 1906).

<sup>6</sup>"I wish to thank you Father, / For granting me the talent to be your juggler." Gonzalo de Berceo, *Vida del Abad de Silos*, in *Clasicos Castellanos*, 4th ed. (Madrid, 1952). Sordello views the juggler as a plagiarist: "Ben a gran tort,

car m'apele joglar / C'ab autre vau, et autre ven ab me." (He's wrong to call me a juggler; he follows others, others follow me.) *La Poésie*, ed. Marco Boni (Bologna, 1954), No. 24. The reference occurs in the troubadoursque equivalent of a *flyting*; Dunbar, I think, would approve the spirit of this comment.

<sup>7</sup>See H. Harvey Wood, *Two Scots Chaucerians* (London, 1967), pp. 27-8.

<sup>8</sup>C.S. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century* (Oxford, 1954), p. 97.

<sup>9</sup>As, certainly, also does Chaucer in *The Merchant's Tale*, of which more will later be said.

<sup>10</sup>Maurice Lindsay, *A History of Scottish Literature* (London, 1977), p. 48.

<sup>11</sup>See A.M. Kinghorn, "Dunbar and Villon: A Comparison and a Contrast," *Modern Language Review*, 62 (1967), 195-208.

<sup>12</sup>The judgment is disputed by Menendez Pidal on the grounds that the evident linguistic archaism of these writers makes a bond between them that blinds us to their many stylistic differences. The point is taken but does not, I think, invalidate that which follows. See *Poesía Árabe y Poesía Europea* (Madrid, 1941), p. 150.

<sup>13</sup>The italics here, and in those quotations that immediately follow, are of course my own. See the prologue to *Cursor Mundi*, ll. 160-1.

<sup>14</sup>This element in Chaucer's work has been stressed by Derek Stanley Brewer in his chapter on *Troilus and Criseyde* in the *History of Literature in the English Language* (London, 1970), especially I, 195-201.

<sup>15</sup>Cf. Sidney's strictures on the popular drama of his time: "Now ye shall have three ladies walk to gather flowers, and then we must believe the stage to be a garden...." *The Defence of Poesie* (London, 1595).

<sup>16</sup>Though I do not deny the many obvious specific points of resemblance, nor the extent to which Dunbar may have profited from a study of Chaucer's mastery of the sustained monologue mode.

<sup>17</sup>"Don't be proved to be inexperienced girls."

<sup>18</sup>That there is a direct verbal echo here of the Merchant's Wife in the *Shipman's Tale*--a lady whose morality in marital matters is clearly of the shakiest--"Thanne wolde I telle a legende of my lyf, / What I have suffred sith I was a wyf" (145-6)--demonstrates the intricacy of the texture that Dunbar here and elsewhere achieves.

<sup>19</sup>"Birds have a better law by far than human beings."

<sup>20</sup>"If you don't want to be abandoned by false deceivers."

<sup>21</sup>A.C. Spearing, *Criticism and Mediaeval Poetry* (London, 1964), p. 76.

<sup>22</sup>The fact that a number of Dunbar's court poems are addressed to the Queen rather than to King James encourages one to speculate that the *Tretis* might have been originally read to an audience composed uniquely of ladies--the Queen's entourage; many of the incidental ironies would, in these circumstances, gain added point. This is to argue *ignotum per ignotius*; but the evidence of the last four lines of the poem is not convincingly to the contrary. Even the high culture of the *gay saber* permitted the incursion of "low humour"--even of a Villonesque type--to amuse a courtly audience: vd. e.g. Sordello, "Mas car als crois si taing dompna savaia / Trobas la pot sus el castel Babon" (*op. cit.*) (Since for such churls a worthless love is apt, let him find one such in Babon's castle), i.e. a Marseilles stew of the time.

<sup>23</sup>I am inclined to suspect a certain parodic intention even in such of Dunbar's poems as the famous *Hale, sterne supreme*, widely quoted (e.g., in Albert Baugh's *History of the English Language*) as an extreme example of the aureate style. Dunbar's professionalism is such as to render a certain tongue-in-the-cheek quality quite compatible with a basic sincerity.

<sup>24</sup>See A.D. Hope, *A Midsummer Eve's Dream* (Canberra, 1970), for an elaboration of this theme. Dunbar's opening line describes midsummer eve as "mirriest of nichtis," and the words "merry" and "mirth" have unmistakable carnal connotations in the *Tales*: Alison and Nicolas are engaged "in bisynesse of myrthe," Daun John and the merchant's wife are in similar case, since "in myrthe all nyght a bisy lyf they lede," while with the miller's wife and clerk John, "so myrie a fit ne hadde she nat ful yoore." The saturnalian element in the *Tretis* may be more important than has been supposed.

<sup>25</sup>"No man alive is so low of degree."

<sup>26</sup>"be directed towards my white flesh"

<sup>27</sup>Rosemary Woolf rightly sees the *Tua Mariit Wemen* as appendant to the *Femme mal mariée* tale in the *History of Literature in the English Language* (London, 1970), I, 282; and the brutal anti-feminism that seems to counterbalance the troubadours' adoration of the *dompna* is apparent in many mediaeval texts--notably in *The Seven Sages of Rome*, which makes of the duplicity and treachery of women its linking theme. It should also be remarked how often, in both these groups of stories and indeed also in Chaucer, the deceived husband is a wealthy "burgess" of the type to which the husbands of Dunbar's women also belong; but these are points that have been widely recognized and that hence I need not here stress.

<sup>28</sup>At the conclusion of which Boccaccio gives thanks to God for permitting the author to complete a book full of "excellent teaching." Cp. the lines from Berceo earlier quoted, and also the conclusion to *Troilus and Criseyde*.

<sup>29</sup>Anonymous; included in Richard Tottel's *Songs and Sonnets* (London, 1557); reprinted in J. William Hebel and Hoyt H. Hudson, *Poetry of the English Renaissance* (New York, 1947), p. 47. The tone of this and other comparable poems has, I think, to be distinguished from that of traditional mediaeval palinodes on the *all is vanity* theme; but one encounters something very similar in the work of the late troubadours--notably Peire Cardenal and Guiraut Riquier--and also, of course, elsewhere in Dunbar's verse. Particularly notable are the poems *Ane muirlandis man of uplandis mak* and *Doverrit with dreime, devysing in my slummer* ("Now sic hunger, sic cowartis, and sic cummer / Within this land was nevir hard or sene"). Undoubtedly this tone derives from that of estates satire, but the relationship is not as clear as it might seem to be.