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David V. Harrington

The “Wofull Prisonnere” in Dunbar’s *Goldyn Targe*



William Dunbar’s *The Goldyn Targe*, from critical consensus, seems to earn only a qualified praise because of what is judged as extravagant artifice, on the one hand, and insufficient psychological insights, on the other. Still somehow it persists as one of Dunbar’s most popular and memorable poems. It thrusts itself upon us in spite of learned judgments against it. To try to explain this, I suggest that some critical interpreters must fail to see the complicated emotional experience dramatized therein; but perhaps just as great a number are reluctant to admit the importance of such experience, however they define it. All readers concede readily the beauty of Dunbar’s expression, especially in the early stanzas describing the narrator’s reaction to the lovely May morning. Very shortly after this reference to time, the poem becomes a dream vision mirroring a personal conflict. The spokesman records through personification allegory his efforts to defend himself with Reason, the “goldyn targe,” against the attractions of erotic love. In a spirited battle, he fights off wave after wave of feminine appeals, but eventually his defense breaks down. He yields himself “as a wofull prisonnere,” ending up with the longing for love he tried earlier to withstand, but with no satisfaction. The poem records a troubling defeat. In the concluding four stanzas, the narrator awakens again to nature’s beauty with bird songs, sweet wholesome vapors, and flowers. The poet praises Chaucer, Gower, and Lydgate, anyone of whom,

we might infer: "This matter could illuminit have full bright" (l. 258).¹ But he must apologize for the rude, bare language in his own "lytill quair."

In this paper, I offer a defense of the poem as a careful representation of a difficult emotional experience. The natural description, the narrator's humble apologies for himself, the dream vision, and the personification allegory all work together in accordance with well established traditions for late medieval poetry. In fact, the poet's allegory here offers an interesting lesson on the broad range of expression available to medieval poets using personification.

In critical theory, distinguished scholars encourage belief that allegory can communicate even the most subtle concerns. C.S. Lewis identifies personification allegory as the best instrument for Middle English writers to communicate what they feared to say more directly:

It is as if the insensible could not yet knock at the doors of the poetic consciousness without transforming itself into the likeness of the sensible: as if men could not easily grasp the reality of moods and emotions without turning them into shadowy *persons*. Allegory, besides being many other things, is the subjectivism of an objective age.²

More recently, Hans Robert Jauss extends this same principle:

Allegory for the medieval public could represent not only the virtues and vices, but also the newly discovered world of the passions.³

Dunbar comes three centuries later than the twelfth century writers Jauss speaks of; but in *The Goldyn Targe* the poet represents an intimate dilemma which does not appear very often in love poetry. The problem is not the usual one of falling in love with a particular woman; rather it is being aroused unwillingly to a longing for love and then finding no one who will reciprocate or satisfy such desire. Though affording family resemblances to other love allegories, Dunbar's treatment seems unique in special focus, is subtle in representation, and may even expose an intimate experience of his own, though virtually anyone could experience the problem narrated in the poem.

But uniqueness, subtlety, and intimacy are not the qualities emphasized in earlier studies of this poem. Too often, commentators deplore the poet's inability to rise above stereotypical fifteenth-century love alle-

¹All quotations of Dunbar's verses are from James Kinsley, ed., *The Poems of William Dunbar* (Oxford, 1979), with line numbers in parenthesis in the text.

²C.S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love* (Oxford, 1936), p. 30.

³Hans Robert Jauss, "The Alterity and Modernity of Medieval Literature," *New Literary History*, 10 (1979), 194.

gories. Both John Speirs and Patrick Cruttwell dismiss the poem outright.⁴ C.S. Lewis, in spite of his valuable general principles, does not deal justly with *The Goldyn Targe*. First he praises the dazzling language in the early stanzas, but then he rejects the allegory as "a mere catalogue of personifications." He says that the poem functions only for "purposes of pure decoration."⁵

The imagery, in places at least, is distractingly musical, even intoxicating. Any reader could single out favorite phrases as especially vivid: "The perly droppis schake in silvir schouris," "The skyes rang for schoutyng of the larkis," "A saill als quhite as blossom brak." The poem invites easy selection of passages like the following stanza, much in the "aureate" tradition, with its Latinate diction and classical allusion, but full of color and freshness just the same:

The cristall air, the sapher firmament,
The ruby skyes of the orient,
Kest beriall bemes on emerant bewis grene;
The rosy garth depaynt and redolent
With purpur, azure, gold, and goulis gent
Arayed was by dame flora the quene
So nobily that joy was for to sene;
The roch agayn the rivir resplendent
As low enlumynit all the leves schene.
(ll. 37-45)

Such profuse imagery tempts one to escape from responsible critical analysis, to cast aside the question of thematic relevance and call it pure or decorative poetry. What we need to see, however, is that the intoxicating, natural images function importantly in relation to the subsequent dream vision and allegory. We need to see that the introductory mood of the splendid May morning causes much of the narrator's difficulty and ultimate defeat.

These first five stanzas with all their sensory appeals quite plausibly lull the narrator into a mood of easy surrender, though the thought of surrendering to a person rather than to the flowers and music of nature has not yet occurred to him. Thus he gives himself up on "florais mantill" to sleep and to dream.

⁴John Speirs, *The Scots Literary Experience*, 2nd ed. (London, 1962), pp. 56-7; Patrick Cruttwell, "Two Scots Poets: Dunbar and Henryson," in *The Age of Chaucer*, ed. Boris Ford (London, 1954), pp. 175-6.

⁵Lewis, pp. 251-2.

The narrator's dream vision seems to be shaped in accordance with authoritative notions for one with love-longing. If we use Macrobius' *Commentary* as the authority, we must classify the dream in *The Goldyn Targe* as a nightmare or an example of *insomnium*, a type which he says has no prophetic significance. In nightmares, which are common for lovers according to Macrobius, the dreamer experiences "vexations similar to those that disturb him during the day." But such dreams "flee when he awakes and vanish into thin air."⁶ When Dunbar's dreamer awakes again to the songs of birds and beauties of nature, he offers, of course, no further observations on his dream. Thus such a dream must represent the lover's own mental or emotional distress. There is nothing enigmatic or prophetic about it. Its importance lies, rather, in its representation of a difficult state of feeling.

Poetically this lesser dream, by Macrobius' standards, purports to show Dunbar's narrator's current condition, in this case, that he suffers much like the person within the dream who tried unsuccessfully to ward off the desire for love. As to its reality for Dunbar the poet, no one can go further than Baxter in saying: "It is unknown whether the poem is based upon personal experience."⁷ What we can say, however, is that *The Goldyn Targe* records an emotional experience a great many people must have experienced at some time and probably with similar confusion and discomfort.

In medieval poetry, the adverse consequences of falling in love are warned against as commonly as the pleasures are celebrated. Chaucer's dreamer in *The Parliament of Fowls*, before passing through the gate into the garden of love, reads two sets of verses describing what he will find: perhaps a "blysfyl place," but just as likely he will encounter "the mortal strokes of the spere / Of which Disdain and Daunger is the gyde" (ll. 135-6).⁸ In *The Temple of Glas*, John Lydgate records the complaints of many who suffered from pangs of love: women grieve when men love them only for the "seisoun, whole that beaute floureth"; but men also must blame God and Nature:

⁶Macrobius, *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, tr. William Harris Stahl (New York, 1952), pp. 88, 89.

⁷J.W. Baxter, *William Dunbar: A Biographical Study* (Edinburgh, 1952), p. 103.

⁸The quotation from Chaucer is from F.N. Robinson, ed., *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 2nd ed. (Boston, 1957), with line numbers in the text.

That ever thei would on any creature
So mych beaute, passing bi mesure,
Set on a woman, to yeue occasioun
A man to loue to his confusioun,
And nameli there where he shal haue no grace.
(ll. 225-9)⁹

In Robert Henryson's "Robene and Makyne," Robene found himself desiring Makyne's love too late. He had turned away when she once had offered herself. Now it is his turn to suffer. Robene's plight anticipates the narrator's in Dunbar's poem as Robene, too, was rejected almost as soon as he fell in love: "he sichit sair, . . . In dolour and in cair" (ll. 124, 126).¹⁰ These warnings against the pains of love come frequently in Middle English and Middle Scots poetry. For Dunbar, personification allegory serves as an especially useful instrument to communicate such feeling.

Commentators on the poem dismiss its message too hastily, most commonly conceding that it has something to do with Reason being overcome by Beauty;¹¹ or, in desperation, reading the poem as a parody with its excesses of that which it so clearly represents: "the poetry of abstraction and of romantic love."¹² The allegory of feeling, at any rate, is harder to communicate—it certainly seems less definable—than allegory alluding to such a topical event as a royal wedding or an orthodox religious doctrine. The poem needs interpretation in accordance with the way in which sensory appeals harmonize with the personified abstractions.

Difficulty for many readers of personification allegory comes with their expectation that a personification to be effective as a character needs rather full development, richness, complexity. In studying *Piers Plowman*, they forget that realistic figures like Lady Meed, Envy, and Gluttony are exceptional. More common are the scores of lesser, vaguer, and more transient figures in virtually every passus. The many personifications in *The Goldyn Targe* come to us not as distinct personalities in themselves either, but as qualities one notices perhaps among those who pass us by, with whom we have only fleeting contact.

⁹The quotation from Lydgate is from J. Schick, ed., *Lydgate's Temple of Glas*, E.E.T.S., E.S. 60 (London, 1891), with line numbers in the text.

¹⁰The quotation from Henryson is from Denton Fox, ed., *The Poems of Robert Henryson* (Oxford, 1981), with line numbers in the text.

¹¹See Edmund Reiss, *William Dunbar* (Boston, 1979), p. 108; and Ian Simpson Ross, *William Dunbar* (Leiden, 1981), p. 254.

¹²Tom Scott, *Dunbar: A Critical Exposition of the Poems* (New York, 1966), p. 44.

Dunbar's personifications resemble those in parts of the anonymous *Death and Liffe*¹³ or Lydgate's *The Complaint of the Black Knight*¹⁴ in being simply identified abstractions whose major human attribute is participation in a group activity. In the first poem alluded to, Dame Death and Lady Liffe are elaborately detailed personifications, of course; but the two catalogues of knights in retinue—with such abstractions as Pride, Envy, Anger, and Mischief (*ll.* 185-8) in one group; Sir Comfort, Sir Hope, Sir Love, and Sir Courtesy (*ll.*, 98-105) in the other—communicate a dramatic effect only by virtue of being gathered together in support of Death or of Liffe. Similarly, Lydgate's Black Knight in his complaint refers to difficulties suffered by his lord Trouthe, who is oppressed by Malebouche, False Report, Misbelieve, and False Suspicioun (*ll.* 260-4); all of these are personifications whose vitality also only grows out of group identity. Dunbar's abstractions do not invite attention to themselves as distinctive characters either; they are vague enough to be associated with the narrator's uneasily defined, shifting states of response or feeling. His poem is not so much about falling in love, as unwillingly falling into a desire for love. Thus the variety of personifications—in a sense the one hundred ladies—records the various stages of appeal, resistance, and final capitulation. The setting and mood, however, are integral in contributing to the narrator's final surrender. The space devoted to the setting and the catalogue of classical gods and goddesses are therefore justified. Even the rather traditional device of the narrator spying secretly upon the assembly of people gathered in this lovely garden could be read as having more intimate personal significance; but we cannot learn enough about Dunbar's life to press for an autobiographical interpretation. The narrator, whose curiosity is aroused, wishes to observe while remaining uninvolved. The struggle of conflicting feelings described in terms of a military battle starts with the discovery by Venus of him hiding among the leaves.

The fair ladies begin their assault by letting their green mantles fall to the ground and approaching the narrator. The leaders in the first wave of attack—Dame Beauty, Fair Manner ("Fair Having"), fine Portraiture, Pleasance, and Lusty Cheer—are held off by the narrator's noble defender, Reason, holding the shield of gold (*ll.* 145-53). In the next attack, Tender Youth, Green Innocence, Shameful Abasing, Quaking Dread, and Humble Obedience similarly fail: "The Goldyn Targe harmyt thay no thing" (*ll.* 154-7). In these first two waves, the man, in effect, withstands outward attractiveness and then the appeal of feminine

¹³References to *Death and Liffe: A Medieval Alliterative Debate Poem* are from the edition by Israel Gollancz (London, 1930), with line numbers in the text.

¹⁴References to *The Complaint of the Black Knight* are from Henry Noble MacCracken, ed., *The Minor Poems of John Lydgate*, vol. II, E.E.T.S. 192 (London, 1934), with line numbers in the text.

passivity. The battle continues with the next wave led by Sweet Womanhood bringing with her the more mature domestic virtues of Nurture, Lowliness, Contenance, Patience, Good Fame, Steadfastness, Discretion, Noble Birth ("Gentrise"), Consideration, Becoming Company ("Levefull Company"), Honest Business, Benign Look, Mild Cheer, and Soberness. But Reason while holding the Goldyn Targe continues to defend the narrator from "all thair afull ordynance" (*ll.* 160-71).

The fourth attack brings with it promise of various worldly gains including High Degree, Estate, Dignity, Comparison, Honor, Noble Array, Will, Extravagance ("Wontonness"), Renown, Liberty, Riches, Freedom, and Nobility. Once again the narrator stands firm (*ll.* 172-80), and Venus must draw upon other resources to pierce through the Goldyn Targe. Thus Dissimulation is chosen to lead the final attack, and the more effective lady warriors that break through the defense include Presence, Fair Calling, Cherishing, Familiarity ("Dame Hameliness"), and Dame Beauty who is brought back to the field again. For a time Reason holds off this awesome host (*ll.* 181-98) but is finally overthrown as a result of unfair tactics:

Thik was the schote of grundyn dartis kene,
Bot Resoun with the Scheld of Gold so schene
Warly defendit quho so evir assayit;
The afull stoure he manly did sustene
Quhill Presence kest a pulder in his ene,
And than as drunkyn man he all forvayit;
Quhen he was blynd, the fule with hym thay playit
And banyst hym among the bewis grene;
That sory sicht me sudaynly affrayit.
(*ll.* 199-207)

The narrator, now with his defenses down, is sorely wounded and taken prisoner by Lady Beauty. Dissimulation, Fair Calling, and Cherishing, also have their effect upon him; but the narrator's love experience is given still another twist with the activity of additional personifications: with New Acquaintance, who embraces him awhile and then takes her leave never to be seen again; and with Haughtiness ("Dangere"), who looks at him "wyth ane fremyt fare" before delivering him to Heaviness, in whose control he remains (*ll.* 208-28). The narrator is left in this unhappy dejected state, as all of the lovely ladies return to their ship and sail away. They cut loose with a barrage of gunpowder making a racket that echoes throughout the firmament.

This closer analysis of the allegory¹⁵ is to underline the more complicated stages of a lover's ultimate surrender to and then abandonment by passionate appeals. The narrator is not just any lover; he is one equipped to withstand most varieties of feminine attraction which can be considered or identified in the abstract and thus withstood. In the first wave are qualities to be associated with outward beauty and grace; in the second those suggestive of tender innocence; in the third are qualities Kinsley identifies as "Womanliness"; and in the fourth are practical gains such as High Degree, Renown, and Riches. The fifth and last attack suffices to overwhelm even the most "reasonable" of men. Kinsley's classification of these personifications—in which he identifies Dissimulation, Physical Presence, Fair Greeting, Affection and Familiarity, Beauty and Acquaintance as "qualities of sexual appeal"—is not bad for a start on the problem. What needs emphasizing is the greater immediacy of Presence, "plicht ankers of the barge," and more intimate Familiarity ("Dame Hamelyness") in this last attack, qualities which insinuate themselves in spite of exercises in "reasonable" restraint. They are sexual appeals, yes; but so are most of the personifications in the earlier waves of attack. It is the appeals which overwhelm the senses, obliterating any chance for rational assessment, that finally defeat the narrator.

When we look at the narrator's final defeat by these more immediate sensual appeals, and then at his abandonment by such as "New Acquyn-tance," Haughtiness ("Dangere"), and "Hevynesse," we more easily grasp the relationship between the message in the allegory and the elaborate diction or seemingly exaggerated profusion of sensory images. *The Goldyn Targe* could properly be compared with such nineteenth century poems as Keats's "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" for its portrait of a lover swept up by an irresistible attraction and then left to bemoan the fact of his having been abandoned while still desiring continuation of the love affair; or Swinburne's opening chorus from *Atalanta in Calydon* ("When the hounds of spring are on winter's traces") for its piling on of sensual impressions, communicating the effect of "spring fever."¹⁶ In various ways, Dunbar's *The Goldyn Targe* anticipates both of these later poems.

But for the most interesting comparison with another allegorical poem, we should look at one of Dunbar's own, one in which he duplicates even the image of the "wofull prisonnere." This second poem, *Bewty and the Presoneir*, though sometimes associated with *The Goldyn Targe* as having

¹⁵Both Denton Fox, in "Dunbar's *The Goldyn Targe*," *ELH*, 26 (1959), 327-8, and James Kinsley, in the notes for his edition, p. 252, review the various groups of personified feminine qualities in somewhat similar terms, but not with the same conclusions.

¹⁶Susanne K. Langer offers such an interpretation of Swinburne's lyric in *Problems in Art* (New York, 1957), pp. 157-9.

similar allegorical purpose,¹⁷ deserves attention for its contrasting representation of the narrator's feelings about his status as prisoner. Unlike his counterpart in *The Goldyn Targe*, this speaker communicates in the early stanzas a willingness to submit himself as a "presoneir till hir that farest is and best" (l. 2). Unfortunately the terms of his submission at first entail his delivery into a dungeon by "Strangenes," who deems the lover "to pure a presoneir" for his lady. He is also fettered by "Comparesone," who similarly denigrates the "wofull presoneir." Moreover, the speaker is opposed by "Langour," the watchman, and "Scorne," the jester.

All these enemies of the prisoner are eventually driven off by more favorable personifications intent on ransoming the prisoner, such as Good Hope, Lowliness, Pity, Thought, and Business. In what proves to be a splendidly comic battle, we hear of losses on both sides:

And Langour lap and brake his nek...
Gud Fame was drownit in a sek. (ll. 84, 87)

But there is a happy conclusion for this poem, as "Matremony" resolves the dispute inducing friendship "betuix Bewty and the presoneir" (ll. 103-4).

I give this much space to *Bewty and the Presoneir* because with personification allegory as its form, unrequited love as its theme in part, and some duplication in phrasing, it invites direct comparison with *The Goldyn Targe*. In both poems, the narrator surrenders to feminine appeals and is treated disdainfully. In *Bewty and the Presoneir*, however, the narrator wants to fall in love and is willing to remain a prisoner. The struggle to gain more favorable regard from his lady is represented comically with the result that he ends up still a prisoner but happily married. The implications of being prisoner certainly contrast in these separate situations.

Both of the spokesmen in Dunbar's two poems experience suffering as lovers; thus they invite easy comparison with stereotypical courtly lovers, who are commonly expected to suffer. Medieval scholars are well prepared for such an equation. But suffering, as Georgia Ronan Crampton has pointed out, appears in multifarious forms as a sympathetic feature in literary heroic life as early as Homer's *Odyssey* and throughout the medieval period.¹⁸ Walter Scheps in a study of *The Goldyn Targe* properly warns us: "To dismiss anything in Dunbar's poetry as merely conventional is

¹⁷See Deanna D. Evans, "Dunbar's 'Goldyn Targe': A Neoplatonic Vision of Nature and Poetry," in *Actes du 2^e colloque de langue et littérature écossaises*, ed. J.J. Blanchot and C. Graf (Strasbourg, 1979), p. 366; and Scott, pp. 52-4.

¹⁸Georgia Ronan Crampton, *The Condition of Creatures: Suffering and Action in Chaucer and Spenser* (New Haven, 1974), pp. 1-10 *et passim*.

extremely dangerous."¹⁹ In spite of the traditional artifice in *The Goldyn Targe* and comic battle in *Bewty and the Presoneir*, the two narrators deserve sympathy for their suffering, though they do not fit most readers' expectations for lovers, courtly or otherwise.

More specifically in *The Goldyn Targe*, Dunbar expands the thematic range of love poetry with allegorical representation of psychological stages in a narrator's struggle to ward off sexual desire. He eventually gives in but with no prospective partner in sight. Dunbar's use of personification in a dream vision connects him with a rich medieval tradition; but these abstract nouns serve, in this case, not to clarify a philosophical, moral, or theological question, as is commonly acknowledged in the poetry of the fourteenth and fifteen centuries, but to contribute to the understanding of a lover's vulnerability and confusion. The poem illustrates no significant break with the tradition of courtly allegories; rather, it shows another extension of the infinite possibilities within the tradition.

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¹⁹Walter Scheps, "The Goldyn Targe: Dunbar's Comic *Psychomachia*," *PLL*, 11 (1975), 346.