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Pamela K. Shaffer

Lexical and Syntactic Cohesion in Dunbar

As the most self-conscious stylist of all the Middle Scots poets, William Dunbar often uses types of parallel structure to display his virtuosity with the language. Two poems which illustrate to an extreme degree Dunbar's use of parallel structure are "Ane Ballat of Our Lady" and *The Flyting of Dunbar and Kennedie*. Often, when scholars discuss "Ane Ballat of Our Lady," they will, in the same breath, so to speak, bring up *The Flyting of Dunbar and Kennedie*. For instance, John Leyerle cites the "technical similarity" of these poems,¹ and Ian Simpson Ross connects the two in saying that "The strings of abusive epithets [of the Flyting] . . . have their counterpart in . . . the highflown praise of Dunbar's 'Ballad of Our Lady.'"² Edmund Reiss calls "Ane Ballat" the "epideictic counterpart" to *The Flyting*,³ and Tom Scott says that the "muscle-bound rhyming" of "Ane Ballat" reminds one of *The Flyting*.⁴ In fact, although they are opposite in their purposes—one to praise,

¹John Leyerle, "The Two Voices of William Dunbar," *UTQ*, 31 (1961), 337.

²Ian Simpson Ross, *William Dunbar* (Leiden, 1981), p. 192.

³Edmund Reiss, *William Dunbar* (Boston, 1979), p. 95.

⁴Tom Scott, *Dunbar: A Critical Exposition of the Poems* (New York, 1966), p. 304.

the other to blame—they are "both at the same end of the spectrum and represent poetry at its most artificial."⁵

Although the yoking of the two poems has become customary, the assumption that they are similar in technique has not been examined in any great depth. Scholars note their similarities in predominant sound parallelisms and the series of epithets. Indeed, Denton Fox finds them "useful because they demonstrate, in an exaggerated form, the rhetorical and metrical prestidigitation which, used less obtrusively, is important to all of Dunbar's work."⁶ However, their differences in syntax and semantics have not been sufficiently identified. Accordingly, this paper will closely examine different types of cohesion within particular passages: sound parallelism, of course, but just as important, the morphological, syntactic, and lexical features which contribute to cohesion within each poem.⁷ Further, by a close examination of the interplay among phonological, morphological, and syntactic elements, this paper will identify one of the means by which Dunbar creates such different effects with apparently similar poetic devices.

Based on Latin hymns in praise of the Virgin, "Ane Ballat of Our Lady" employs traditional images of Mary and heavily Latinate diction. The form used in this poem is a 12-line stanza with alternating tetrameter and trimeter lines rhyming *abababab*, the Latin refrain *Ave Maria, gracia plena*, then a wheel rhyming *bab*. Dunbar's use of a series of epithets in praise of Mary is similar to the technique used in his other panegyric poems, but here Dunbar further reveals his virtuosity in employing internal and end-rhyme.

Critical response to this poem has ranged widely. Arthur K. Moore has said that in "Ane Ballat" Dunbar takes internal rhyme and aureate diction to an "abominable limit."⁸ Scott considers "the intellectual content reduced to a minimum," and noting the prominent sound patterning, he calls this "poetry of sheer lovely verbal noise for its own sake."⁹ Yet in order to go beyond these observations to probe Dunbar's artistry in this poem, let us consider

⁵Denton Fox, "The Scottish Chaucerians," *Chaucer and Chaucerians*, ed. D. S. Brewer (Tuscaloosa, AL, 1966), p. 181.

⁶*Ibid.*

⁷M. A. K. Halliday and R. Hasan, *Cohesion in English* (London, 1979), p. 304, define cohesion as relatedness of form, reference, and connection within a text. Types of cohesive links that are the focus here are grammatical and lexical.

⁸Arthur K. Moore, *The Secular Lyric in Middle English* (Lexington, KY, 1951), p. 198.

⁹Scott, p. 304.

sound patterning, diction, and syntax separately and then as they interact with one another in this poem.

To start with the most obtrusive element, "Ane Ballat" has pervasive phonological cohesion. The principal means of phonological cohesion in "Ane Ballat" is the internal and end rhyme; although alliteration is used occasionally to link lines with and without internal rhyming, sounds in medial and terminal positions provide the primary sound linkage. In addition, those medial and terminal sounds which constitute the internal and end rhymes are more often *continuant* (i.e., nasals (m, n, ng), liquids (l, r), and fricatives (f, v, s) rather than *stop* consonants. The nature of these sounds allows them to blend quite readily with each other and with vowel sounds, helping to create in "Ane Ballat" what Scott calls the effect of "a peal of bells."¹⁰

This impression of a "peal of bells" results from the repeated rhyming words in the *a* lines and alliteration in most of the *b* lines. For example, in the first stanza of "Ane Ballat of Our Lady," Dunbar uses the *-erne* ending in the medial and end positions in the *a* lines, creating a sound which resonates throughout the stanza:

Hale, sterne superne; hale in eterne
 In Godis sicht to schyne;
 Lucerne in derne for to discerne
 Be glory and grace devyne;
 Hodiern, modern, sempitern,
 Angelicall regyne:
 Our tern inferne for to dispern
 Helpe, rialest rosyne.
Ave Maria, gracia plena:
 Haile, fresche floure femynyne
 3erne us guberne, virgin matern
 Of reuth baith rute and ryne. (ll. 1-12)¹¹

In fact, in some lines, like line 5, every word ends with *-erne*. Of course, a different rhyme predominates as the *a* rhyme in each stanza, creating differing echoing sound effects. As might be expected, given the difficulty of the rhyme scheme, the Latinate suffixes make the rhyming easier and serve to make the lines cohere. In his use of aureate diction and internal rhyme, Dunbar follows a conventional pattern in hymns to the Virgin and

¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹*The Poems of William Dunbar*, ed. James Kinsley (London, 1979). The following passage and all subsequent citations are from this edition.

one which was popular with the French *rhetoriqueurs*.¹² In each stanza, one kind of suffix will dominate; for example, in lines 61-72, *-ice*, the feminine agent-noun suffix predominates:

Empryce of prys, imperatrice,
 Bricht polist precious stane;
 Victrice of vyce, hie genitrice
 Of Jhesu lord soverayne;
 Our wys pavys fro enemys
 Agane the Feyndis trayne;
 Oratrice, mediatrice, salvatrice,
 To God gret suffragane;
Ave Maria, gracia plena:
 Haile, sterne meridiane;
 Spyce, flour delice of paradys
 That baire the gloryus grayne. (ll. 61-72)

Further evidence of Dunbar's poetic skill in this stanza is his use of works with identical sounds through different morphological endings (nominative singular *prys* (l. 61), *vyce* (l. 63), *pavys* (l. 65), *spyce*, *flour delice*, *paradys* (l. 71) and nominative plural *enemys* (l. 65)). Thus the feminine agent noun suffix *-ice* seems to reverberate throughout the entire stanza.

In "Ane Ballat," one observes a wealth of synonyms and near-synonyms, what Pamela Gradon calls "semantic saturation," a feature of style common in Latin poetry.¹³ The resulting "close texture," or lexical cohesion, is brought about by the series of epithets which refer to various traditional attributes of the Virgin. These epithets refer to Mary's regal qualities (*qwene serene* (l. 37), *hevinlie hie emprys* (l. 38)), qualities which refer to a sense of light, brightness, or simply sight (*Lucerne in derne* (l. 3), *schene unseyne with carnale eyne* (l. 39)), and metaphors of Mary as flower or vegetation (*fresche floure femynyne* (l. 10), *fair fresche floure delyce* (l. 42), *grene daseyne* (l. 43)), and to Mary as locative, places of protection and refuge: *Alphais habitakle* (l. 14); *Imperiall wall, place palestrall* (l. 73); *Tryumphale hall* (l. 75); *Hospital riale* (l. 77). Although the words which carry both the lexical and metrical stress are nominals and not verbs, many of the epithets of the Virgin refer to functions of Mary—that is, agent nouns—for example, *puttar to flicht* (l. 29); *humile oratrice* (l. 48); *Victrice of vyce, hie genitrice*

¹²Janet M. Smith, *The French Background of Middle Scots Literature* (Edinburgh, 1934), pp. 75-6.

¹³Pamela Gradon, *Form and Style in Early English Literature* (London, 1971), pp. 18-19.

(l. 63); *Oratrice, mediatrice, salvatrice, / To God gret suffragane* (ll. 67-8). Yet in spite of the underlying verbal structure of these epithets, the nominals here are abstract rather than concrete and contribute to the diffuse, static quality of "Ane Ballat."

In this poem, the epithets take various forms: 1) attributive adjective-noun constructions; 2) suffixed agent noun constructions; 3) noun-prepositional phrase constructions; the following are some examples: adjective-noun constructions: *sterne superne* (l. 1); *Hodiern, modern, sempitern* (l. 5), *Angelicall regyne* (l. 6); *rialest rosyne* (l. 8); *fresche floure femynyne* (l. 10); *fair fresche floure delyce* (l. 42); *grene daseyne* (l. 43); agent-noun constructions: *puttar to flicht* (l. 29); *imperatrice* (l. 61); *genitrice* (l. 63); *Oratrice* (l. 67); *suffragane* (l. 68); 3) noun-prepositional phrase constructions: *Lucerne in derne* (l. 3) *qwene of hevyn* (l. 52); *ros of paradys* (l. 40).

Most of the nominal constructions above consist of metaphors of Mary as various flowers, as the sun or source of light, and as queen—all traditional images. Other suffixed agent nouns present Mary in her various traditional functions. Yet the key to the overall effect of this poem lies with the dominance of the sound patterning and the absence of verbs. In fact, in the limited semantic range, in the lexical density, and in the uniformity of the syntactic patterns, the techniques used in this poem resemble those in the other panegyric poems. However, in "Ane Ballat," internal and end rhyme are much more obtrusive, differing in degree rather than kind from techniques used in other poems. In fact, what contributes to the static effect of this and other panegyric poems are parallel grammatical patterns, the absence of verbs, and the limited lexical range of the epithets. All these poetic elements tend toward uniformity and all reinforce each other.

Now, let us consider *The Flyting of Dunbar and Kennedie*, the purpose of which is to blame rather than to praise. As a genre in Scottish literature, a flyting is often "a kind of intellectual game in which two highly trained contestants engage in a battle of wits."¹⁴ According to John Leyerle, the object of such a game is "not to out-argue, but to silence with abuse, scorn, a sheer volume of noise, a cascading Niagara of sound so engulfing that the opponent can only wonder speechless at the roar."¹⁵ This "piling up of defamatory variants"¹⁶ has its antecedents in poems as far back as Ovid, and the

¹⁴Kurt Wittig, *The Scottish Tradition in Literature* (Edinburgh, 1958), p. 75.

¹⁵Leyerle, p. 334.

¹⁶Edwin Morgan, "Dunbar and the Language of Poetry," *Essays in Criticism*, 2 (1952), 149.

genre is found among French, Italian, Anglo-Saxon, and Celtic poets.¹⁷ But here, *The Flyting of Dunbar and Kennedie* is a verbal contest between Dunbar and his fellow poet Walter Kennedy, consisting of sixty-nine stanzas of irregular pentameter lines rhyming *ababbccb* or *-cbc* having internal rhyme and heavy alliteration. In alternating speeches consisting often of obscene language, each poet attacks the other's ancestry, intelligence, moral character, appearance, and so on. To consider closely the language of this poem, I have chosen to examine the last two stanzas in which one finds "language thistled with alliteration, filled with internal rhymes, noun-dense and specific, seething with unruly energy and power."¹⁸ In this "valedictory word-drubbing,"¹⁹ Dunbar compresses the epithets into "a word or two, thus giving to each phrase an immense amount of controlled energy. The disciplined extravagance of the matter is . . . paralleled by the form, which is baroque and exuberant, with its multiplicity of rhymes, but is also stiff and formalized, because its involved pattern is so perfectly regular."²⁰

It is what Fox terms "disciplined extravagance" and the regularity of the pattern that interests us here. To examine the lines more closely is to see that, regarding sound patternings, it is certainly true that the "involved pattern is so perfectly regular." In both stanzas, each line contains three rhyming words, with the last metrical foot consisting of one or more stressed syllables having rhymes different from the others in the line. This last rhyme is, of course, part of the end rhyme. To illustrate:

1	1	1	a
Loun	lyk	Mahoun,	be boun me till obey,
2	2	2	2 b
Theif,	or in greif	mischief	sall the betyd;
3	3	3	a
Cry	grace,	tykis	face, or I the chece and fley;
4	4	4	b
Oule,	rare and	zowle—I	sall defowll thy pryd;
5	5	5	b
Peilit	gled,	baith	fed and bred of bichis syd
6	6	6	c
And	lyk	ane	tyk, purspyk—quhat man settis by the!
7	7	7	b
Forflittin,	countbittin,	beschittin,	barkit hyd,

¹⁷Florence H. Ridley, "Middle Scots Writers," *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English 1050-1500*, ed. Albert E. Hartung, 4 (Hamden, CT, 1973), 1009.

¹⁸Leyerle, p. 336.

¹⁹Morgan, p. 148.

²⁰Fox, "The Poetry of William Dunbar," *Diss.*, Yale Univ., 1956, pp. 150-51.

8 8 8 c
 Clym *ledder*, fyle *tedder*, foule *edder*: I defy *the*!
 (ll. 233-240)

1 1 1 a
 Mauch *muttoun*, byt *buttoun*, peilit *gluttoun*, air to *Hilhous*,
 2 2 2 b
 Rank *beggar*, ostir *dregar*, foule *fleggar* in the *flet*,
 3 3 3 a
 Chittirilling, ruch *rilling*, lik *schilling* in the *milhous*,
 4 4 4 b
 Baird *rehator*, theif of *nator*, fals *tratour*, feyindis *gett*,
 5 5 5 b
 Filling of *tauch*, rak *sauch* — cry *crauch*, thow art *oursett*;
 6 6 6 c
 Muttoun *dryver*, *girnall ryver*, *zadswyver* — fowll fell *the*;
 7 7 7 b
 Herretyk, lunatyk, purspyk, carlingis *pet*,
 8 8 8 c
 Rottin *crok*, dirtin *dok* — cry *cok*, or I sall quell *the*.
 (ll. 241-48)

As is apparent in these stanzas, each line is unified by a predominant internal rhyme. Like "Ane Ballat," *The Flying* exhibits little alliteration and predominantly internal and end rhyme as the means of phonological cohesion. The fact that there is no repetition of internal rhymes within the stanza attests to Dunbar's skill. Indeed, the sequence of internal rhymes in each line implies a climactic movement, yet because a different internal rhyme predominates in each line, and because semantically, there is little cohesion between lines, the movement within each line is artificially climactic. The regularity of the phonological pattern is very much apparent. However, with phonology the regularity ends.

Lines 233-4 constitute a syntactic unit largely because of the conjunction *or* linking them. Line 235 is also linked to 234 through its syntactic pattern of alternative (*or*) and to line 236 in being end-stopped. Line 237 consists of a series of embedded verbal structures, all past participle constructions. Line 238 presents variation through a simile and an exclamation. The series of past participles in line 239 reinforces the sound parallelisms. Line 240 offers the greatest syntactic variety and ambiguity. The first two units may be imperatives, the third an adjective-noun combination, with the last being a declarative exclamation similar in form to that in line 236. However, the first two units may be epithets with underlying verbal structure: one who should climb the (hangman's) ladder, one who would defile the hangman's rope. Thus, while the internal and end rhyme is regular and predictable, the syntax of lines 233-40 offers variation which cuts across the phonological parallelism.

Further, examining the syntax of the last stanza results in seeing that other than in sound the pattern is not "perfectly regular" at all. The first four lines of the stanza consist of a series of epithets, all nominals, with no verbs. Yet lines 245, 246, and 248 vary the pattern established in the stanza, by means of imperative tags:

—*cry crauch, thow art oursett;*
 —*fowll fell the;*
 —*fry cok, or I sall quell the.*

In the epithets of the last stanza one finds various nominal constructions: 1) attributive adjective-noun constructions; 2) suffixed agent noun constructions; 3) object-verb/agent-noun constructions, and 4) verb-object constructions. Illustrations of these various types include the following:²¹ adjective-noun constructions: *Mauch muttoun* (l. 241) ("Maggoty mutton"); *peillit gluttoun* (l. 241) ("destitute glutton"); *foule fleggar* (l. 242) ("foul flatterer (?"); *ruch rilling* (l. 243) ("rough shoes"); *Baird rehatour* (l. 244) ("wicked bard"); *fals tratour* (l. 244) ("gallowsbird"); *Rottin crok* (l. 248) ("old ewe affected with sheep-rot"). Some of the modifiers are past participle forms which have underlying verbal structures. Other types include: agent-noun constructions: *Herretyk* (l. 247); *lunatyk* (l. 247); *purspyk* (object-verb) (l. 247); object-verb/agent-noun construction: *ostir dregar* (l. 242) ("oyster dredger"); *muttoun dryver* (l. 246) ("sheep herder"); *girnall ryver* (l. 246) ("granary plunderer"); *gadswyver* (l. 246) ("mare-buggerer"); verb-object construction: *byt buttoun* (l. 241) ("button biter"); *lik schilling* (l. 243) ("chaff-eater").

Although on the surface few verbs are apparent, the lines of the last stanza consist largely of nominal constructions which have underlying verbal structures. Here phonological regularity is played against syntactic variety. the accumulation of sounds, along with the underlying verbal structure of the nominals creates a sense of compression and intensity. In fact, to examine as we have the structure of the epithets is to account more completely for the "energy" of these stanzas.

But we can go one step further and look at the semantic range and density of the passage. Like "Ane Ballat of Our Lady," these stanzas of *The Flyting* have a limited semantic range. For example, in these stanzas, Kennedy is labelled variously as a thief: *Theif*, *purspyk*, *theif of nator*, *girnall ryver*. Also attributed to him are various low-life occupations: *Rank beggar*, *ostir dregar*, *foule fleggar*; *Muttoun dryver*; *Baird rehatour*. He is

²¹The meaning of the following phrases is derived from the Glossary of the Kinsley edition of Dunbar's poems, cited above.

called by various animal names—and even by names of parts of animals: *tykis face*; *Oule*; *gled: tyk*; *edder*; *rak sauch*; *Rottin crok*. Further, Kennedy is called by the names of inconsequential inanimate objects: *ruch rilling* ("rough shoes"); *barkit hyd* ("hide hardened as if tanned"). Kennedy is referred to as the Devil and his offspring: *Mahoun*; *feyndis gett*. Finally, throughout this passage past participle forms of concrete, action verbs imply Kennedy in the patient or "receiver," role:²² for example, in line 239 (*Forflitten, countbitten, beschütten, barkit hyd*), the words are semantically unrelated, yet the sound parallels of the past participle forms make the line cohere. According to Geoffrey Leech, one way of interpreting syntactic parallelism is that "if there are more than two phases to the pattern, it moves towards a climax."²³ Yet here that does not seem to be true. What does seem apparent in this line is that the order of the epithets is governed less by a deliberate intention of ranking them than by an awareness of their sound parallelisms. In fact, within the individual lines, there is little lexical redundancy, but within and between stanzas there is a great deal of redundancy which serves as one device of cohesion. The phonological regularity—that is, alliteration and internal and end rhyme—contrasts with the underlying syntactic patterns, and this interplay contributes to the sense of "energy" and compression throughout the passage.

The purpose of this paper was to identify various types of cohesion in "Ane Ballat of Our Lady" and *The Flyting of Dunbar and Kennedie* and to identify the means by which Dunbar achieves such different ends by apparently similar means in both poems. As was mentioned earlier, scholars' continual yoking of the two poems is justified in that the two poems employ obtrusive sound parallelisms, along with series of epithets. Yet their differences have not been adequately identified. Syntax subtly contrasts with the sound patterning in *The Flyting*. While both passages consist largely of epithets, the underlying structure of a number of the constructions in *The Flyting* consists of concrete action verbs, whereas the structure in "Ane Ballat" consists of attributive adjectives and abstract, non-action verbs. Further, the variety of syntactic patterns is much greater in *The Flyting* than in "Ane Ballat." In fact, these differences help account for the impression of energy and dynamic compression which is apparent in *The Flyting* and also for the diffused, static quality of "Ane Ballat."

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²²For definitions of various role types, see Charles J. Fillmore, "The Case for Case," *Universals in Linguistic Theory* (New York, 1968), pp. 24-5.

²³Geoffrey Leech, *A Linguistic Guide to English Poetry* (London, 1980), p. 68.