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Deanna Delmar Evans

Bakhtin's Literary Carnavalesque and Dunbar's "Fasternis Evin in Hell"

"Few modern critical concepts have proved more fertile and suggestive, more productively polymorphous, than the Bakhtinian notion of carnival."¹ Thus begins a recent article by literary critic Terry Eagleton. Indeed, the theory of carnival developed by the late Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World* has resulted in a re-examination of much medieval and Renaissance comic literature, for Bakhtin steered criticism in a new direction when he asserted that Rabelais' novels must be understood "as part of the stream of folk culture, which at all stages of its development has opposed the official culture of the ruling classes and evolved its own conception of the world, its own forms and images."² As Bakhtin's biographers have observed, *Rabelais and His World* is a study of how the social and the liter-

¹Terry Eagleton, "Bakhtin, Schopenhauer, Kundera," *Bakhtin and Cultural Theory*, ed. Ken Hirschkop and David Shepherd (Manchester and New York, 1989), p. 178.

²*Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (1965; rptd. Bloomington, 1984), p. 473; all citations of Bakhtin's text are from this edition. Bakhtin (pp. 17-8) summarizes his contribution to Rabelais studies as follows: "All the influences . . . analyzed have been known to scholars and . . . studied by them . . . [but] have been examined separately, . . . severed from their maternal womb—from the carnival, ritual, and spectacle, [and, as a result] the studies have been pursued outside the unit of folk culture . . . [so that] the scholars did not see the one deeply original humorous aspect of the world, presented in isolated fragments . . . the influences were interpreted in the light of cultural, aesthetic, and literary norms of modern times . . . which means that they were subject to a false evaluation."

ary interact."³ Consequently, recent studies suggest that "folk culture" has largely been ignored in other pieces of comic literature from the late medieval and Renaissance periods.⁴ I myself have marched in this parade, having argued elsewhere that there is a carnival subtext to the *Tretis of the Tua Mariit Wemen and the Wedo* by William Dunbar.⁵

Some cultural and literary theorists now caution that at times Bakhtin's carnival theory has been misunderstood or appropriated too simplistically. Indeed, challenges to and clarifications of Bakhtin's carnival theory abound. Eagleton, in the article quoted at the beginning of this essay, chides "those liberal humanists who have now enlisted the joyous, carnivalesque Bakhtin to their cause. . . ."⁶ Another critic, Ken Hirschkop, finds fallacies in the way critics sometimes perceive the carnival notion of democracy. "The democracy of carnival," he says, "is indeed a collective democracy, grounded in civil society, in which the abstract identity of the citizen or subject is replaced by that of one who eats, drinks, procreates and labors."⁷ Even among those literary critics most influenced by Bakhtin's concept of "folk culture," there is an occasional quarrel with Bakhtin on particular points.⁸

Certainly such studies are valuable, for they enable us to understand the Bakhtinian theory more accurately but to use more discretion in adopting it. Nevertheless, the purpose of this session is to consider the influence of modern literary theories on studies of Middle Scots literature, and I maintain that Bakhtinian carnival theory holds the key to most of Dunbar's comic and satiric poems. I will argue this point by examining the carnivalesque ele-

³Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin* (Cambridge, MA, 1984), p. 299.

⁴See, for example, Carl Lindahl, *Earnest Games: Folkloric Patterns in the Canterbury Tales* (1987; rptd. Bloomington, 1989).

⁵"Dunbar's *Tretis*: The Seven Deadly Sins in Carnivalesque Disguise," *Neophilologus*, 73 (1989), 130-41.

⁶Eagleton p. 183, who argues further: "Unless the carnivalesque body is confronted by that bitter, negative, travesty style of carnivalesque thought which is the philosophy of Schopenhauer, it is difficult to see how it signifies any substantial advance on a commonplace sentimental populism, of a kind attractive to academics."

⁷Ken Hirschkop, "Introduction," *Bakhtin and Cultural Theory*, ed. Ken Hirschkop and David Shepherd (Manchester and New York, 1989), p. 35.

⁸Lindahl (p. 85) finds that Bakhtin "in emphasizing freedom . . . distorts the nature of the game," and explains: "*Relative* license was indeed extended to the lower classes during carnival . . . absolute, ungoverned freedom was not" [Lindahl's italics].

ments in Dunbar's "Fasternis Evin in Hell," a poem that has medieval carnival as its subject.

"Fasternis Evin in Hell" is printed as a three-part poem in the Kinsley edition,⁹ although earlier editors usually treated each part as a separate poem.¹⁰ Part A, "The Dance of the Sevin Deidly Synnis," is the most famous. Part B describes the burlesque tournament between a cobbler and a tailor, and Part C is an ironic "Amendis" to the unknightly pair. I believe that application of Bakhtin's theory to this poem unlocks a hidden carnival subtext, thereby enabling modern readers to understand both the poem's grotesque humor and the poet's intentions more fully.

Early in his study of Rabelais, Bakhtin undertakes a history of laughter in which he defines the "culture" of medieval folk humor:

In the Middle Ages folk humor existed and developed outside the official sphere of high ideology and literature, but precisely because of its unofficial existence, it was marked by exceptional radicalism, freedom, and ruthlessness. Having on the one hand forbidden laughter in every official sphere of life and ideology, the Middle Ages on the other hand bestowed exceptional privileges of license and lawlessness outside these spheres: in the marketplace, on feast days, in festive recreational literature. (pp. 71-2)

Bakhtin identifies three distinct manifestations of this "culture": "ritual spectacles," with carnival pageantry being an example; "comic verbal compositions," including "parodies both oral and written, in Latin and in the vernacular"; and, finally, "various genres of billingsgate," namely, "curses, oaths, popular blazons" (p. 5). While Dunbar's "Fasternis Evin" is an example of the second, "comic verbal composition," the poem's narrative incorporates literary depictions of the other two: carnival pageantry in Parts A and B and "billingsgate" in Part C.

According to Michael Holquist, Bakhtinian "carnival must not be confused with mere holiday, or, least of all, with self-serving festivals fostered by governments, secular or theocratic" because "the sanction for carnival derives ultimately not from a calendar prescribed by church or state, but from a

⁹James Kinsley, ed., *The Collected Works of William Dunbar* (Oxford, 1979), pp. 150-59. All citations of the poem are from this edition unless otherwise noted.

¹⁰See, for example, *The Poems of William Dunbar*, ed. W. Mackay Mackenzie (London, 1932), pp. 120-27, where the poems are listed separately as #57 "The Dance of the Sevin Deidly Synnis," #58 "The Sowtar and Tailyouris War," and #59 "Amends to the Telyouris and Sowtaris." Moreover, Tom Scott, *Dunbar: A Critical Exposition of the Poems* (Edinburgh, 1966), pp. 231-2, suggests that the last stanza of "The Dance," the stanza in which Mahoun calls for a Highland pageant, be treated as a separate poem as well.

force that preexists priests and kings and to whose superior power they are actually deferring when they appear to be licensing carnival."¹¹ Bakhtin finds that medieval carnival ideas are conveyed by their own symbolic language "filled with the pathos of change and renewal, with the sense of the gay relativity of prevailing truths and authorities" as well as "a characteristic logic, the peculiar logic of the 'inside out' (*à l'envers*), or the 'turnabout,' of a continual shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear, of numerous parodies and travesties, humiliations, profanations, comic crownings and uncrownings" (p. 11). Manifestations of medieval folk culture, Bakhtin finds, eventually come to be incorporated into the literary mainstream:

In the Renaissance, laughter in its most radical, universal, and at the same time gay form emerged from the depths of folk culture; it emerged but once in the course of history, over a period of some fifty or sixty years . . . and entered with its popular (vulgar) language the sphere of great literature and high ideology. . . . This thousand-year-old laughter not only fertilized literature but was itself fertilized by humanist knowledge and advanced literary techniques . . . [Thus,] medieval laughter became at the Renaissance stage of its development the expression of a new free and critical *historical* consciousness. (pp. 72-3)

Dunbar, only a generation older than Rabelais, appears to be writing at this critical moment in literary history. Influenced by humanistic ideas¹² and himself a maestro of poetic craftsmanship, Dunbar uses "the language of what was living speech in his 'locale,'"¹³ to express freely a critical, historical consciousness. Such language, Bakhtin contends, exhibits "victory over linguistic dogmatism" (p. 473) and conveys a political message: "This laughing truth, expressed in curses and abusive words, degraded power. The medieval clown was also the herald of this truth" (pp. 92-3).

To illustrate Dunbar's success as a "herald of truth," it is necessary to turn to the poem itself. Surely its laughing narrator enables Dunbar to play

¹¹"Introduction," *Rabelais and His World*, p. xviii.

¹²J. W. Baxter, *William Dunbar: A Biographical Study* (Edinburgh, 1952) in Chapter 2 describes the kind of education Dunbar probably received, and R. L. Mackie, *King James IV of Scotland: A Brief Survey of His Life and Times* (Edinburgh, 1958), p. 166, indicates that James was so interested in the humanistic ideas of the day that he sent his son Alexander to Padua to study with Erasmus.

¹³John Speirs, *The Scots Literary Tradition: An Essay in Criticism*, 2nd edn. (London, 1962), p. 55, contends that Dunbar's comic and satiric poems are "the core of his living achievement" because the language in these poems is informed by life. Bakhtin (p. 466) describes the language of carnivalesque literature as "the language of life, of material work and mores, of the 'lowly,' mostly humorous genres, . . . the free speech of the marketplace."

the role of carnival clown, and he sets the poem at a particular moment in history, 13 February, demonstrating a sense of "historical consciousness." The narrator relates that he lay in a "trance"¹⁴ on that Fastnacht Eve and experienced a vision of heaven and hell. What he describes, however, takes place only in the latter location. The experience for the narrator is primarily visual; he does not participate in any of the dream activities and, indeed, his presence seems to go unnoticed by those he describes. The carnivalesque logic of reversal prevails. Hell would seem an unlikely place to hold a pre-Lenten festival. Mahoun, a non-Christian prophet transformed by Dunbar into a devil,¹⁵ is not likely to participate in any event that recognizes the Church calendar; yet, he is the "Lord of Misrule"¹⁶ at this celebration. First, the narrator watches Mahoun call for a dance of the seven deadly sins and then for a Highland pageant. The narrator notes the absence of music, a result of hell's having only one minstrel "that slew a man" and hence was there "be breif of richt" (A106, 108). Further, the reference to hell's lonely minstrel is a tongue-in-cheek compliment to the poet's profession.

In his portraits of the seven deadly sins and their human retainers, Dunbar makes extensive use of grotesque realism, that special literary manifestation of carnival.¹⁷ Since these portraits have been explicated extensively in other studies,¹⁸ only a few examples will be noted here, primarily to demon-

¹⁴It is significant that Dunbar chooses the word *trance* rather than *dream* to describe the experience, for what the narrator witnesses does not require his participation as a conventional "dream vision" experience would; moreover, the word *trance* was associated with prophetic visions and parodies of them as in Chaucer's "Miller's Tale" where Nicholas pretends to be in a trance when he is warned about the "flood."

¹⁵Bakhtin (p. 393) observes that "in the Middle Ages the carnival processions . . . were interpreted as the march of the rejected pagan gods. . . . The antique gods played in these parades the role of the saturnalian uncrowned king," and (pp. 391-2) mentions "one of the oldest descriptions of carnival . . . a mystic vision of the underworld" written in the eleventh century by Norman historian Orderic Vital.

¹⁶C. L. Barber, *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy: A Study of Dramatic Form and its Relation to Social Custom* (1959; rept. Cleveland, 1963), pp. 24-30 discusses the significance of this carnivalesque role in which "Abuse predominates over Invocation" and "The winter lord of the feast reigns chiefly at night."

¹⁷Clark and Holquist (p. 299) credit Bakhtin with identifying in *Rabelais and His World* "two subtexts: carnival, which is a social institution, and grotesque realism, which is a literary mode."

¹⁸See Scott pp. 229-34, who describes Dunbar's art as "closer to caricature than to comedy" in the portraits, and Ian S. Ross, *William Dunbar* (Leiden, 1981), pp. 171-5, who

strate Dunbar's technique and his carnivalesque intention. The followers of "Cuvatyce" (A62), for instance, shoot "hett moltin gold" out of their throats even as the fiends promptly refill them with gold coins, an activity exhibiting folk justice which demands that the punishment fit the crime. Some grotesque images target particular types of individuals found in the aristocracy or the church. Pride, for example, "is represented by the boldly-sketched figure of a nobleman with wild hair and extravagant dress, whose frantic self-assertion consumes property. . . ,"¹⁹ and in Pride's entourage are priests with "bair schevin nekkis" (A28), whose unexpected presence elicits riotous laughter and mocking gestures from the fiends. Ian Ross also believes that two fiends called "Blak Belly and Bawsy Broun" are "identified by colours which mock the black habit of the Dominicans and the brown of the Franciscans"²⁰ Surely such images convey a carnivalesque political consciousness, for they degrade those in authority.

Perhaps the most quintessential of carnivalesque images in the entire poem is the last sin portrait, "the fowll monstir Glutteny / Off wame unsasiable and gredy" (A91-2). Here the image of the belly dominates. Even the retainers of this sin, "mony fowll drunckart" and "mony a waistles wally-drag," are described as having "wamis unweildable," which the fiends continue to force feed with hot lead (A94-102). Bakhtin stresses the importance of the belly image in carnivalesque literature²¹ and, in fact, points out that a typical carnivalesque image of hell itself is that of a huge belly. Even in this instance, the image carries with it the idea of renewal: "Carnival's hell represents the earth which swallows up and gives birth . . . the monster, death, becomes pregnant. Various deformities, such as protruding bellies . . . are symptoms of pregnancy or procreative power" (p. 91).

Dunbar's dance has sometimes distressed readers who cringe at the idea of tortured humans being the subject for laughter and conclude then that Dunbar's purpose must be moral.²² But the tortured humans add to the sense

also notes similarities between Dunbar's verbal descriptions and those of the sins found in the visual arts.

¹⁹Ross, p. 172.

²⁰*Ibid.*

²¹Bakhtin (pp. 298-303) links the belly image, a grotesque body image, with the "victorious banquet image."

²²Edmund Reiss, *William Dunbar* (Boston, 1979), p. 80 observes that Dunbar's technique is to show each of the "Deadly Sins . . . in terms of its human manifestations and its consequences"; Ross (p. 172) observes: "Dunbar's aim in exploiting the allegorical grotesque to depict the Sins is to show the monstrosity of evil, to bring its disgusting and

of grotesque realism. As C. S. Lewis has explained, "Dunbar and his contemporaries seriously believed that such entertainment awaited in the next world those who had practiced (without repentance) the seven deadly sins in this."²³ The humor of the dance may be compared to that of the late medieval "diableries," which, according to Bakhtin, were common on festival days and illustrated a "victory of laughter over fear" (p. 90).²⁴ Hence, a more carnivalesque reading of the "dance" including this notion of "laughter over fear" is that offered by A. D. Hope: "The deadly sins appear there with all the conventional characteristics they possess in other medieval allegories, in ugliness and horror enough to satisfy any moralist. But to the expected elements Dunbar adds a phantasmagoria of enormous energy and hilarious travesty which has the effect of making a good-humoured parody of the whole notion of mortal sin. Sin becomes not deadly but ludicrous, to the rhythm of a Highland reel."²⁵

Another important feature of Bakhtinian carnival is, of course, the participation of "the folk." But this poem is set in hell, a grotesquely "realistic" hell complete with torture, so "the folk" are represented by those humans who belong there "be breif of richt," such as the "menstrall that slew a man" (A106, 108). These first are identified generically as "schrewis that wer nevir schrevin" (A7) and then, among them, wild Highlanders foolish enough to have followed "Makfad3ane," the famous traitor of the *Wallace*.²⁶ (He is said to reside in the far north of the devil's kingdom, so that at least

horrifying nature to the surface, and at the same time to show its intrinsic meanness and destructiveness." Apparently a moral interpretation was sought in the nineteenth century too, for Baxter (p. 157) mentions that "Lowell [as cited by the STS editor Mackay] is wide of the mark when . . . he seems to assume some serious moral purpose behind *The Dance*."

²³ *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century Excluding Drama* (Oxford, 1954), p. 95.

²⁴ Bakhtin (pp. 90-91) notes: "The diableries were legalized and the devils were allowed to run about freely in the streets . . . to create a demonic and unbridled atmosphere . . . It was the victory of laughter over fear that most impressed medieval man . . . It was the defeat of divine and human power, of authoritarian commandments and prohibitions, of death and punishment after death, hell and all that is more terrifying than the earth itself. Through this victory laughter clarified man's consciousness and gave him a new outlook on life."

²⁵ *A Midsummer Eve's Dream* (New York, 1970), p. 259.

²⁶ Kinsley (p. 339) calls it "a type-name . . . perhaps suggested by Blind Hary's account of the campaign against Makfad3an in *Wallace*."

momentarily Dunbar's hell bears a remarkable likeness to Scotland.)²⁷ In the description of the Highlanders, Dunbar's lowland prejudice surfaces, for his narrator comments: "In hell grit rowme thay tuke" (A114). Yet, in a distorted way, these treacherous Highlanders do provide a version of the "familiar speech" of the marketplace: "Full lowd in Ersche [they] begowth to clatter" (A116). Their noisy babble proves too much for even the devil, for he subsequently smothers them all with smoke and drives them into the deepest part of hell.

"Nixt that a turnament was tryid" (B1), and indeed it was a farce. As Thomas Ross observes, "The combatants fart more than they fight."²⁸ While some believe that Dunbar displays here a snobbish attitude toward the tradesman class,²⁹ modern critics also recognize that at least part of Dunbar's purpose is to parody chivalry. Edmund Reiss notes that "with its anal images, [the tournament is] a denigration of everything ostensibly noble and grave."³⁰ Furthermore, Tom Scott asserts: "It is not merely that in this poem two tradesmen confront each other; the reality is that two worlds, two classes, two codes of value confront each other, and the despised 'lower' one is destined to oust the other from social domination, for ever, and for better."³¹ If Scott is correct, then surely there is a hint here of that Bakhtinian concept of democracy. In any case, Mahoun's bestowing of knighthood upon the tailor is yet another example of carnivalesque reversal, and perhaps

²⁷Scott (p. 237) points out: "'Hell' is remarkably like the ordinary human world: 'Hell' is society." Bakhtin (p. 410) discusses the carnival idea of "negation," that is, "the other face" or "inside out" of an object; it seems probable that in this poem, Dunbar, with his placement of Makfadzan, presents a carnivalesque "other face" of Scotland.

²⁸"Taboo-Words in Fifteenth-Century English," *Fifteenth-Century Studies*, ed. Robert F. Yeager (Hamden, CT, 1984), p. 146.

²⁹Baxter (p. 158) observes, "Whatever personal grudge Dunbar may have harboured against the two crafts is not now to be discovered, but others also of his poems show his love of pouring ridicule on tailors and soutars." Scott (p. 236), pointing out that "it is always master-tradesmen" Dunbar has in mind, suggests Dunbar's point is to prove "they have no honour—the great and real virtue of the chivalric code."

³⁰Reiss (p. 83) finds the combatants being "knighted by Mahoun . . . a perversion of the concept of knight as soldier of Christ, *miles Christi*." V. A. Kolve, *The Play Called Corpus Christi* (Stanford, 1966, p. 195) points out that a metaphor often used in literature associated with the Harrowing of Hell is that of a knight jousting in tournament.

³¹Scott (p. 236) finds "the object of Dunbar's laughter" to include "the code of chivalry and the custom of jousting."

also a parody of those actual mock tournaments James IV loved so well.³² In fact, it seems probable that here in the guise of carnival, Dunbar tweaks James for bestowing special recognition upon the undeserving. As the narrative continues, the contenders and their retainers are "quitt" by Mahoun, who after repaying them in kind with his excrement, deprives them of their knighthood and sends them into a dungeon. The narrator, finding all this "Sa gud ane bourd" (B 220), is overcome by laughter and wakes up. But this section of the poem is not over until he pulls his audience into the game: "Now trow this," gif 3e list."

Afterwards the narrator is visited by "ane angell cam fra hevin" (C2), but what an angel! Just as he was specific about the date of the "trance," the narrator is now specific about the time: "Betuix twell houris and ellevin" (C1). Since time does not run backward, except in a carnival world of "topsy-turvy," the time reference teases the reader and suggests that since the time is impossible, so is the vision. Hence, nothing in this part of the poem is to be taken seriously. Irony, which Reiss finds "the main voice in Dunbar's poetry,"³³ certainly controls this "angelic" voice that praises tailors and cobblers for perfecting God's work. Cobblers "with schone weill maid and meit" can mend the "faltis of illmaid feit" (C 13-4), and tailors "with weilmaid clais / Can mend the werst maid man that gais" (C 21-2). Hence, even the benediction of the refrain, "Tal3ouris and sowtaris, blist be 3ie," rings with ambivalence.

This brief overview of the poem reveals that "Fasternis Evin in Hell" is controlled by carnivalesque language, images, themes, and logic. Yet, remembering that Bakhtin's theory demonstrates "how the social and the literary interact," I now wish to suggest that the carnival of the poem goes beyond its form and content and extends into Dunbar's real world. Many scholars have suggested that events described in the poem could have been inspired by actual court festivities.³⁴ I will go a step further and submit that Dunbar not only parodies such events, but perhaps satirizes a personal enemy

³²Dunbar memorializes one such tournament in "Ane Blak Moir" (Kinsley #33) where the "prize" apparently was a black woman; Kinsley (p. 308) observes that the mock tournament was held in 1507 and "repeated more elaborately in 1508."

³³"The Ironic Art of William Dunbar," *Fifteenth-Century Studies*, ed. Robert F. Yeager (Hamden, CT, 1984), p. 322.

³⁴For example, Morton W. Bloomfield, *The Seven Deadly Sins: An Introduction to the History of a Religious Concept, with Special Reference to Medieval English Literature* (1952; rptd. East Lansing, MI, 1967), pp. 237-8, observes: "It is quite likely . . . that Dunbar needed only the stimulation of the Scottish court masques and dances before Ash Wednesday to give him the novel underlying idea of the dance of the Sins."

as well. I believe that in his depiction of Mahoun, Dunbar satirizes John Damian, "the French or Italian 'medicinar' and alchemist, whom James IV made abbot of Tunland in March 1504" and who without success attempted "to flie with wingis' in 1507."³⁵

To argue this point, I must direct attention to some earlier editorial information. The specific date given in the poem, 13 February, has been seen as evidence for dating the poem. According to J. W. Baxter, there are "three calendrical possibilities," but "only 1506-7 is at all likely."³⁶ (It should be noted that more recently Matthew P. McDiarmid has re-examined the evidence and has argued that the poem must have been written in 1491, the only time Shrove Tuesday occurred on 15 February during the reign of James IV.)³⁷ Baxter goes on to note that Aeneas Mackay, Dunbar's nineteenth-century biographer for the STS edition, supported this date, but "largely on the unsatisfactory ground that, when Dunbar says the Devil bids his followers 'kest gamountis in the skyis / That last come out of France,' he is referring to the attempted flight from Stirling Castle of the Frenchman, John Damian in that year."³⁸ Baxter then argues that Damian's flight was in September or October, a date after that chosen by Mackay for the poem, and "Besides, the lines quoted refer only to the latest dances from France."³⁹ Baxter also points out that the STS editor notes "a payment on 16th February 1506-7, 'To Wantonness, that the King fecht and gert hir sing in the Quenes chamir,'" but counters that such a payment does not "justify the suggestion that Dunbar was directing a moral satire against the King and his courtiers, who would probably, it is added [by the STS editors], be the last to see any

³⁵Kinsley p. 343, poem #54.

³⁶Baxter (p. 156) notes that the other possible dates, 1495-6 and 1517-8, are much too early and too late respectively.

³⁷"The Early William Dunbar and His Poems," *Scottish Historical Review*, 59 (1980), 136. Although the speculative argument that I make in the following paragraphs is strengthened by Baxter's date and weakened by McDiarmid's, I am not convinced that it is possible to date the poem at all from "internal evidence." The narrator's observation that he fell into a trance on 15 February is not hard evidence that Dunbar wrote the poem in a particular year; surely the trance is fiction, and the date mentioned, a likely (realistic) time for Shrove Tuesday, may be yet another touch of "grotesque realism."

³⁸Baxter, p. 156.

³⁹*Ibid.*

reflection on themselves."⁴⁰ While Baxter's argument is sound, I believe, nevertheless, that Mackay was on the right track.

First, there is no doubt that Dunbar disliked John Damian and considered him a fraud; after all, Damian is Dunbar's target in two satiric poems.⁴¹ In one of these, "The Antechrist," Dunbar lists Mahoun as Damian's sire. Moreover, Ian Ross cites evidence that in 1504 "John Damian . . . seems to have supervised the morris dance" at one of James's court festivities.⁴² While there is no reason to connect that dance with a Fastnacht celebration held some two years later or even several years earlier, it does prove that Damian sometimes served as a leader of "revels" at a court festivity. While Dunbar no doubt resented the patronage Damian received from the king, his attacks seem well founded. John Leslie's *Historie of Scotland* notes that Damian "had sa craftie and curious ingin to begyl, that he persuadet the king of his gret cunning in al thing natural, chieflie in that politik arte . . . bot his intentioun only was to milk purses."⁴³ Hence, I find it tempting to believe that John Damian, whom Dunbar elsewhere transforms into the "antichrist" and the "feigned friar of Tungland," inspired the portrait of Mahoun in this poem, even if his ill-fated flight was still on the drafting board.

There also is a piece of evidence suggesting "The Amendis" was written for a festive occasion. The colophone to the poem in the Maitland Folio reads: "Quod Dunbar quhone he drank to 3e Dekynnys (Deacons, elected heads of trade guilds) for amendis to the bodeis of thair craftis."⁴⁴ Ian Ross surmises, "We can perhaps imagine a convivial occasion among the burgesses of Edinburgh for this purpose."⁴⁵ My scenario, however, is of a court audience which has just finished laughing at the tournament when the

⁴⁰Baxter, p. 158.

⁴¹Kinsley (pp. 159-64) lists these as #53 "The Antechrist" and #54 "Ane Ballat of the Fenzeit Freir of Tungland."

⁴²Ian Ross, p. 65; Rachel Annand Taylor, *Dunbar: The Poet and His Period* (1931; rptd., Freeport, NY, 1970), p. 60, without citing her source, describes John Damian as "master of entertainments." Barber (p. 28) indicates that a description of a morris dance "typically included the skirmishing, curvetting hobbyhorse, the Besse or Maid Marian who dressed himself up in women's clothes, and the fool, usually the leading dancer, often in regalia which carried bawdy suggestions."

⁴³As cited by Kinsley, p. 341.

⁴⁴As quoted by Ian Ross, pp. 176-7.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*

poet, with sober face, himself reads this colophone and then begins the "Amendis." Without cracking a smile, he describes the vision of the angel and soberly comes to the concluding lines:

In erd 3e kyth sic mirakillis heir,
In hevin 3e salbe sanctis full cleir
Thocht 3e be knavis in this cuntre:
Tel3ouris and sowtaris, blist be 3ie. (C 37-40)

Surely this was enough to bring the house down.

It is difficult for me to imagine anyone leaving an oral presentation of this poem in a sober, penitential mood. Not only does the poem present carnivalesque events but, with its carnival subtext, becomes one.⁴⁶ While this paper does not provide a radically new interpretation of "Fasternis Evin," it does, with the aid of Bakhtin's theory, enable us to perceive the poem as a kaleidoscope of carnivalesque elements. At the same time, in the ambivalent way of carnival, it mocks court festivities and their participants. Finally, the poem perhaps enables Dunbar, through his clownish narrator, to expose a charlatan like John Damian and to offer oblique criticism of the king who wasted money rewarding such "devils." If James commissioned the poem, which is not unlikely, then Dunbar's carnival intent may run even deeper, the poem echoing his own sentiments in Mahoun's: "Now haif I quitt the" (B 208). If nothing else, Bakhtin's carnival theory enables us to read Dunbar's whole poem, including its "hidden" subtext. Thus, we can understand more fully all that the poet intends. Unless, of course, he meant to play the joke on us.

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⁴⁶Joanne S. Norman, "Sources for the Grotesque in William Dunbar's 'Dance of the Sevin Deidly Synnis,'" *Scottish Studies*, 29 (1989), 55-75, offers an excellent study of the iconographic images in the poem and then concludes, as I do, that the poem is an example of Bakhtinian carnival; unfortunately, I was not aware of Norman's article until after I had completed the present study.