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A Benefice for the Prophet: William Dunbar's Petitionary Poems

An unsuspecting reader of William Dunbar's numerous petitionary poems could not be blamed for assuming that the poet was living in abject poverty, ignored by his patrons and hard on the edge of starvation, with little hope of ever attaining any degree of economic security. Dunbar apparently finds this perceived indigence especially galling since others are clearly much more successful in gaining financial stability even though their claim to royal patronage is no better than his—if, indeed, as good. Thus, Tom Scott, adopting Dunbar's point of view, sees him writing "Schir, ze haue mony seruitouris"¹ "out of the intense suffering not merely of poverty, but of the artist in a society in which there is no correspondence between real value (talent, virtue, any sort of real gift) and the arbitrary perversions of value conferred by fashion."² It might also be tempting to assume that the lighter, wittier petitionary poems were written early in his career and that the less hopeful and more intensely pleading ones belong to a later period, when Dunbar might have become more and more

¹Poem 67. All references are to Priscilla Bawcutt's edition *The Poems of William Dunbar*, 2 vols. (Glasgow, 1998). Poems are identified by their first line together with their number assigned by Bawcutt. Henceforth Dunbar.

²Tom Scott, *Dunbar: A Critical Exposition of the Poems* (Edinburgh, 1966), pp. 107-108. Henceforth Scott.

disillusioned with both the royal court and the Church.³ However, in the absence of external evidence such intuitive dating seems at best questionable, and it is salutary to remember that far from being more and more neglected by James IV and becoming increasingly impoverished, Dunbar in fact saw his annual pension raised from an initial sum of £10 granted in 1500 to £20 in 1507 and finally to £80 in 1510, and he also received various payments in cash and in kind, such as £5, paid on 27 January 1506, in lieu of a new "gown" at Yule, and, on 23 January 1512, some black and crimson fabric for his Yule livery,⁴ as well as £3 10s on 26 June 1508, possibly for the two poems honoring Bernard Stewart.⁵ To be sure, Dunbar never received the benefice he refers to so often (and the eventual bestowal of which is implied in the proviso that his pension be paid until he be preferred to a benefice more valuable than his current pension), but he was hardly as poverty-stricken as he likes to depict himself. Yet he clearly feels hard done by, indeed singled out for shabby treatment by his lord and by the court in general.

But his complaint is not confined to such personal grievances. On the contrary, the poet often presents himself as the voice of conscience, of justice, and of fairness, and as the loyal servant raising his voice of warning to alert and sometimes even scold the King in order to protect him from those who would take advantage of his generosity and trusting nature. In effect, the poet frequently portrays himself as the truth-teller, the *soothsegger*, who dares tell uncomfortable truths where others take the safer (and more lucrative) route of flattering the prince. The result seems almost inevitable: the poet depicts himself as having to pay dearly for this desire for justice by not getting his well deserved reward. Not only are his "ballatis" scorned by his fellow courtiers, but his long and loyal service is disregarded by his lord. He comes across as seeing himself in the role of a prophet crying in the moral wilderness of the royal court, but a prophet whose position is severely compromised by the fact that his stern tone of warning all too often modulates to a clamor for personal

³Such suggestions are made, for example, by Scott, pp. 92 and 96, and by James Kinsley, ed., *The Poems of William Dunbar* (Oxford, 1979), p. 278. (Henceforth Kinsley.) In contrast, Bawcutt finds it "probable that those [petitionary poems] that express particular anxiety and depression...belong to the period before November 1507" (Dunbar, p. 2).

⁴Ian Simpson Ross, *William Dunbar* (Leiden, 1981), p. 60. Henceforth Ross.

⁵Priscilla Bawcutt, *Dunbar the Makar* (Oxford, 1992), p. 81. (Henceforth Bawcutt.) However, it must be acknowledged that in 1505, while Dunbar's pension still stood at £10, other members of James's household with comparable positions received considerably larger amounts: "Patrick Paniter [the King's secretary] received £50 a year; the chapel clerks received £40; Walter Merlioun, the master mason, £40; Hans, the Danish 'gunnar,' £19. 13s. 4d; Hannay, the falconer, £20; and even Nannik, the 'broudstar,' or embroiderer, received £13. 4s. 8d." (Bawcutt, p. 108).

recognition and increased material reward and notably for the economic autonomy and stability which a benefice would provide.

The petitionary pieces form roughly one quarter of Dunbar's extant corpus of just over eighty poems. The tone of these poems ranges from wry humor and playful impertinence to (mock-)jubilation at Dunbar's having received his "pensioum most preclair" (Dunbar 22, l. 27) to meditative and even austere sobriety, frequently and unexpectedly switching to other topics and moods. Often, a refrain serves to drive the point home: it is "ane pane"—twenty-four times over—to be made to wait indefinitely for one's reward (Dunbar 79). The refrain of the capricious "Schir, for 3our grace, bayth nicht and day" (Dunbar 63) insistently presents the speaker's audacious wish that "3our grace" King James were "Iohne [Joan] Thomsounis man": if only the King were temporarily under his wife's thumb, then Queen Margaret, Dunbar's best advocate, might be successful in her solicitations and more largesse might be forthcoming. The poem playfully employs the *topos* of the "world upside-down," with its wish that the dynamic and enterprising King James surrender his power to his young wife, thus ruling neither the kingdom nor his own household nor, indeed, even himself. However, this poem is an exception. Especially the more meditative poems characteristically offer conventional reflections on the deplorable state of society but soon modulate to considerations of the equally grievous state of the poet's material provisions, especially his perpetually empty purse and his continuing lack of a benefice. Others, such as "Schir, 3it remember as befoir" (Dunbar 68), are brooding, and "some are sombre and deeply melancholy."⁶ What exercises Dunbar especially is that he appears to be singled out for this perceived impoverishment and the accompanying indignity of being passed over while watching others receive generous rewards for service which, to his mind, does not merit such recognition. When he finds that others are treated with greater yet apparently undeserved favor—when they appear to have wormed their way into the King's good graces—his poems become vituperative, and in such passages his generally informal style switches from an easy-flowing, colloquial, and sometimes urbane tone to in-vective phrased in the densely alliterative diction of flyting.

Although a few of the petitionary poems are general reflections on the injustice of a world—and especially of a court—where such inequitable distribution of rewards seems all too common, many begin with a direct address to a specific patron, most often to the King (especially those opening with "Schir") and occasionally to the Queen (Dunbar 73) or to the Lord Treasurer (Dunbar 22) or to the Exchequer Lords (Dunbar 36). As Priscilla Bawcutt points out, "They are essentially verse letters, conveying a request...to persons of higher

⁶Priscilla Bawcutt, ed., *William Dunbar: Selected Poems* (London, 1996), p. 9. Henceforth *Selected Poems*.

rank than the poet" (*Selected Poems*, p. 9).⁷ While the object of Dunbar's requests can sometimes be no more than the new doublet already promised by the Queen (Dunbar 72) or the new Christmas livery customarily provided by the King (Dunbar 66), more often the appeals are for some unspecified financial reward and, by a wide margin, for a benefice. John MacQueen finds that these "poems [are] written in the confidence, for the most part, rather than the hope, that a well-turned stanza would ultimately bring its own reward."⁸ Yet no matter how small or large the request, there is often a strong sense of injustice—that the poet has been overlooked when Christmas liveries were distributed, and that the keeper of the queen's wardrobe is ignoring his lady's written instructions to provide Dunbar with a new doublet, and that rich rewards are heaped on those who already have their share or who do not deserve any, and, worst of all, that additional benefices are given to pluralists who clearly cannot do justice to all their various appointments while Dunbar himself cannot even secure a poor "kirk, scant coverit with hadder" (Dunbar 79, l. 86).⁹

Behind this sense of general injustice and personal injury lies a strong perception of the precariousness of the poet's economic situation, entirely subject to his patrons' continued favor. As Joanne Norman observes, "Dunbar's many requests for support . . . all stress his direct personal dependency on the king, and

⁷Reiss doubts the sincerity of Dunbar's many petitionary poems on the grounds that "several other poems . . . speak against man's desire for earthly goods and against the 'covetice' that is the way of the world"; see Edmund Reiss, *William Dunbar* (Boston, 1979), p. 40. But, of course, one person may hold different views at different times and in different states of mind. Nor would I agree with Reiss that "Dunbar's attitude towards earthly wealth is essentially ironic" (Reiss, p. 410) or that the very conventionality of the genre argues against the sincerity of individual petitionary poems as Reiss claims in "Dunbar's Self-Revelation and Poetic Tradition," *Actes du 2^e colloque de langue et de littérature écossaises (moyen âge et Renaissance)*, eds. Jean-Jacques Blanchot and Claude Graf (Strasbourg, 1978), p. 336. Dunbar may well be advising, in the refrain to Poem 44, that "In asking sowld discretioun be," but that does not mean that he would necessarily heed his own advice. J. A. Burrow, on the other hand, argues for the primacy of the practical petitionary purpose of these poems, which determines the amount of autobiographical detail and "largely dictates [their] dark tones and gloomy pose"; see J. A. Burrow, "The Poet as Petitioner," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 3 (1981): 66.

⁸John MacQueen, "The Literature of Fifteenth-Century Scotland," *Scottish Society in the Fifteenth Century*, ed. Jennifer M. Brown (New York, 1977), p. 195. Henceforth MacQueen.

⁹Dunbar's claim that royal patronage allows others to advance much faster is not unfounded. For example, Patrick Paniter, who became the King's secretary in 1505, was given a number of "subsequent preferments [which] included becoming archdeacon then chancellor of Dunkeld, archdeacon of Moray, rector of Tannadice, and abbot of Cambuskenneth" (Ross, p. 35).

his sense of frustration and insecurity.”¹⁰ No matter how humorous his self-depiction may be, “he always conveys very powerfully his fear of poverty and old age, and a sense of rejection or exclusion from the king’s favour” (*Selected Poems*, p. 9). Yet even before his pension was first increased, his financial position was comfortable. As MacQueen notes, “Dunbar’s grievance was simply that he had never been provided with a benefice” (p. 196). Nonetheless, Dunbar’s insistence on the image of the perennially ignored and slighted bystander moves Scott to comment, somewhat hyperbolically, on “Schir, ze haue mony seruitouris” that

we are convinced of the essential rightness of his [Dunbar’s] case. This power of Dunbar’s to convince us by a hard core of reason and sound sense of values under the torrent of rage is the main reason why his witness against his age and James’s court is so damning: he speaks as a witness, a martyr who bears witness of truth: and we know that fundamentally he is right (Scott, p. 108).

But no matter how much truth there may be to Dunbar’s specific grievances, his most habitual charges are also part of the common vocabulary of complaint. In essence, these recurring tropes are as follows: (1) long and faithful service is not rewarded while (2) the undeserving receive rewards, and, partly as a result, (3) the distribution of rewards (especially with regard to benefices) is unjust. These charges are not specific to Dunbar but are deeply human tropes rooted in a much more general psychology of complaint. Even his tendency to depict himself as the overlooked victim of others’ disregard and of his own innocence is hardly individual to him.

Many of Dunbar’s petitionary poems sound the general theme that long and faithful service is not rewarded. “He that hes gold and grit riches” (Dunbar 17), for example, a fairly short poem of twenty-five lines, presents a “sardonic comment on human stupidity” (*Selected Poems*, p. 91). The fourth stanza bitterly comments on the sheer folly of loyally and devotedly serving one master rather than looking out for one’s own advantage:

And he that with gud lyfe and trewth,
But varies or vder slewth,
Dois evir mair with ane maister dwell,
That nevir of him will haif no rewth,
He wirkis sorrow to him sell (*ll.* 16-20).

The implication, of course, is that Dunbar himself made just this mistake in serving James IV, who apparently has shown little “rewth,” yet the poem re-

¹⁰Joanne S. Norman, “William Dunbar: Grand Rhétoriqueur,” *Bryght Lanternis: Essays on the Language and Literature of Medieval and Renaissance Scotland*, ed. J. Derrick McClure and Michael R. G. Spiller (Aberdeen, 1989), p. 181. Henceforth Norman.

mains on the level of general applicability without an *explicit* connection to the poet's own situation. "This waverand warldis wretchidnes" (Dunbar 79) similarly begins with a general complaint of the times, especially denouncing hypocrisy and lamenting the waste of human effort, time, and service vainly expended on "frutles bissines" (l. 2), not only in Scotland but also in a slew of other named kingdoms. Chaos in the human sphere is seen to pollute the air and infect even the ground itself, especially, it is implied, in Scotland, where trust and good faith are already gone (l. 25) and "Gud rewle is banist our [across] the Bordour" (l. 29). But almost inevitably, these general observations modulate to reflections on the poet's own situation, with the initial passages on the pervasive depravity of the world and especially on ecclesiastical corruption being followed by "painful" observations on the poet's own long and so far fruitless wait for a benefice. In "Off benefice, sir, at everie feist" (Dunbar 43), "the movement is the converse" of that in "This waverand warldis wretchidnes" (Dunbar 79; Kinsley, p. 318). Rather than moving from the universal to the personal, "Off benefice" begins with comments on the poet's personal suffering under the injustice of the court and moves on to bitter reflections on the injustice and unfairness of the world in general, ending with a final warning that those who have the most in this world will repent it most sorely in the next (l. 29).

Often, Dunbar applies the themes of long and faithful service going unrewarded directly and only to his own situation, starkly spelling out the dire consequences in "Quhom to sall I compleine my wo" (Dunbar 54):

For lang service rewarde is none,
And schort my lyfe may heir indure,
And losit is my tyme bygone (ll. 7-9).

In "Off benefice, sir, at everie feist" (Dunbar 43), he describes the same problem again, but this time in metaphorical language—in terms of the feast of rewards of which others at court partake, while he himself faces a famine and stands in a corner, watching and starving—before shifting back from the metaphor to a literal expression of his grievance:

Sum swelleis swan, sum swelleis duke,
And I stand fastand in a nwke
Quhill the effect of all thai fang thame.
Bot lord! how petewouslie I luke,
Quhone all the pelfe thai pairt amang thame (ll. 6-10).

Here and elsewhere, he portrays himself as a "suffering bystander" while undeserving rivals gorge themselves on a glut of unmerited recognition (Scott, p. 102). As Norman notes, Dunbar depicts himself as "constantly beset by rivals in [his] ongoing quest for preferment" (Norman, p. 183). Again and again, he implies that his rightful place has been usurped by court parasites, and claims

that he simply wants to be treated as “vtheris” are (Dunbar 68, *l.* 39; 12, *l.* 24) and to be included “amang the laif” (Dunbar 5, *l.* 21; 79, *l.* 53; 67, *ll.* 25 and 74); although he despises them for their methods, he wants to share in their good fortune.

Both “Schir, ʒit remember as befoir” (Dunbar 68) and “Schir, lat it neuer in toune be tald” (Dunbar 66) similarly contend that his service has failed to bring its proper reward. In both poems, Dunbar portrays himself as having grown old in the King’s service yet being excluded from royal favor. Clearly, the speaker feels that his selfless service has put the King both financially and morally in his debt:

Schir, ʒit remember as befoir
 How that my ʒouthe is done forloir
 In ʒour seruice with pane and greiff.
 Gud conscience cryis reward thairfoir (Dunbar 68, *ll.* 1-4).

James owes him some appropriate recognition, or has to risk that it “in toune be tald” that he is an ungracious master callously exploiting his loyal and devoted servants. Dunbar’s uncharacteristic self-deprecation in these two poems helps make him appear touchingly forlorn and woebegone. The relatively light touch derives from his depicting himself in terms of various unflattering animal metaphors: in “Schir, lat it neuer in toune be tald” (Dunbar 66) as the worn-out old horse, with all its strength spent and now turned out to waste away in the barren and wintry chill of his master’s neglect while “Gryt court hors” (*l.* 11) are occupying his proper place; and in “Schir, ʒit remember as befoir” (Dunbar 68), first as a molting hawk (*ll.* 7-9) and later, implicitly, as a nightingale, who, though singing true notes, is so unassuming as to visually attract no attention but meekly fades into the background—in contrast to others who are likened to the thieving magpie, successfully clamoring for attention with its shrill voice and flashy plumage and filching the poet’s just reward for his true song (*ll.* 16-19). In all these instances, Dunbar portrays himself as unjustly slighted in favor of court parasites who are continually drawing undeserved attention to themselves, thereby ousting him from his rightful position and cheating him of his proper reward.

It is only a short step from the complaint that “my own faithful service isn’t rewarded” to the universalized charge that “at this court, loyal service isn’t rewarded.” In “Quhom to sall I compleine my wo” (Dunbar 54), for example, Dunbar presents a conventional but astonishingly blunt complaint of the times. Some of the specific grievances are that long service goes unrewarded (*l.* 7), that the court despises virtue (*ll.* 11-12, 21), that churls rise above nobles (*ll.* 22-23), that layabouts receive benefices (*l.* 24), that princes have no compassion (*l.* 29), and that flattery and falsehood are common and get others ahead while truth and honor are exiled (*ll.* 36-44). As is typical of such complaints of the times, the poem lays its charges in absolute terms: there is *no*

reward for long service (*l.* 7), *none* but the rich gain renown (*l.* 16), *none* but just men suffer injuries (*l.* 18), *all* the “gentrice and nobilite / Ar passit out of hie degre” (*ll.* 26-7). Qualifications and modifications are absent, but here these unqualified accusations have a personal application and thus amount to an indictment of the poet’s own lord, James IV, and the injustice which apparently pervades *his* court.

At the same time, Dunbar is acutely aware that others seem to have a far easier time securing their rewards—and consequently, his theme undergoes another variation, to “the undeserving are rewarded.” This trope occurs with great frequency and lends itself to being developed at great length and in great detail. “Schir, ze haue mony seruitouris” (Dunbar 67), for instance, is constructed around the contrast between those servants who are “to 3our hienes profitable” (*l.* 20) and those who are “nocht sa profitable” (*l.* 38), but who are apparently far more numerous, occupying twenty-four lines (*ll.* 37-60) rather than the fourteen lines cataloguing the useful servants (*ll.* 3-16). Yet exasperatingly to the poet, it is exactly the unworthy servants—“this nobill cunning sort” (*l.* 61) ranging from “Fen3eouris, fleichouris and flatteraris” (*l.* 39) to “Schulderaris and schowaris that hes no schame” (*l.* 49) and to “Fantastik fulis, bayth fals and gredy” (*l.* 57)—who receive the recognition. So vexing is it to the speaker to see these undeserving hypocrites rewarded while he goes wanting that he throws decorum to the winds:

Bot quhen the vther fulis nyce
That feistit at Cokelbeis gryce
Ar all rewardit, and nocht I,
Than on this fals world I cry fy!
My hart neir bristis than for teyne,
Quhilk may nocht suffer nor sustene
So grit abusioun for to se
Daylie in court befoir myn e (Dunbar 67, *ll.* 65-72).

Having earlier switched into the ingeniously onomatopoeic diction of flying, he is now ready to turn language into a weapon and “lat the vennim ische all out” from his pen (*l.* 85) as a result of outraged virtue—ostensibly not on his own behalf but on behalf of his King, who is being taken advantage of by cunning freeloaders defrauding both him and his honest servants. One may wish to see this, with Scott, as evidence of the absence of a Golden Age under James IV and as an “indictment of the age” (Scott, pp. 12 and 20), but Dunbar’s poem also insinuates that James, for all his generosity, lacks good judgment and is incapable of distinguishing between loyal, productive servants who deserve his favor and worthless hangers-on whose only service is to inflate his self-image through their flattery.

Similarly, “Be diuers wyis and operatiounes” (Dunbar 5) is almost exclusively devoted to the theme that rewards are unfairly distributed to those who don’t deserve them while others who would be worthy of reward go empty-

handed. This poem presents the whole spectrum from diligent, profitable servants to those who benefit without particular merit from royal largesse, with the middle range remaining ambiguously unassigned: do the singers, dancers, and entertainers belong to the first or to the second category? While one line is given to unquestionably good servants—those whose “service and diligence” (*l.* 3) draws the King’s attention—the next seventeen lines of this short poem of only twenty-six lines catalogue various types of freeloaders at court. In lieu of providing any kind of service,

Sum standis in a nuk and rownes,
 For covetyce ane vthair neir swownes.
 Sum beris as he wald ga vud,
 For hait desyr off varldis gud.
 Sum at the mes lewes all devocion,
 And besy labouris for premocione.
 Sum hes thair aduocattis in chalmir,
 And takis thame selff thairoff no glawmir (*ll.* 13-20).

Nonetheless, this petition ends with a light, witty touch. In mock self-effacement, the poet resigns himself in the final lines to relying on the King’s “grace” (a pun on “the King’s person addressed by the honorific title” and his “favor”) for some minimal token of acknowledgment. He will content himself with looking at his majesty’s countenance—preferably, no doubt, as depicted on the numerous coins which ought to come his way:

My sempillnes, amang the laiff,
 Wait off na way, sa God me saiff,
 Bot with ane hummble cheir and face
 Refferis me to the kyngis grace.
 Methink his graciows countenance
 In ryches is my sufficiance (*ll.* 21-6).

The implied pun in the final lines allows the poet to strike back at those who clutter the royal hallways: coins with the King’s visage will be quite enough for him; there is no need for him to linger in the palace, let alone pay advocates to solicit on his behalf.

What especially rankles with the poet is that he sees others get ahead who, in his view, are nothing but manipulative court parasites, who find advancement on the basis of flattery rather than real service. This recurring theme finds its way into numerous poems:

Sum flirdis, sum fen3eis and sum flatteris (Dunbar 5, *l.* 9).

* * *

Flattrie weiris ane furrit govñ,
And Falsate with the lordis dois rovn (Dunbar 54, ll. 36-7).

* * *

Ane vthir sort more miserabill,
Thocht thai be nocht sa profitable:
Fen3eouris, fleichouris and flatteraris (Dunbar 67, ll. 37-9).

Dunbar speaks of flatterers with nothing but contempt, and it is vexing to him to be passed over for preferment in favor of those whom he regards as leeches and sycophants. Significantly, in the allegorical "This hinder nycht, halff sleiping as I lay" (Dunbar 75), he depicts himself as the sole protégé of Reason, Discretion, and Patience, in a court which is dominated by Blind Affection and where Importunity gloatingly claims to have ultimate power even over the king. In this profligate environment, Reason and Discretion, the two qualities which Dunbar so often claims for himself, stand out as the poet's advocates, advising the king to be more judicious by finally rewarding his lowly and long-suffering servant:

'For tyme war now that this mane [the dreamer] had sumthing,
That lange hes bene ane seruand to the king,
And all his tyme neuir flatter couthe nor faine,
Bot humblie into ballat wyse complaine
And patientlie indure his tormenting' (ll. 66-70).

Here and elsewhere, Dunbar stresses that he "neuir flatter couthe"—a point of pride with him. In fact, he habitually portrays himself as an embodiment of disregarded virtue: he scorns the use of flattery, indeed is quite incapable of it, and therefore ends up not receiving any kind of recognition. This wallflower syndrome also informs a sizeable portion of "Schir, 3it remember as befoir" (Dunbar 68):

In sum pairt of my selffe I plein3e:
Quhone vtheris dois flattir and feyn3e,
Allace, I can bot ballatis breif.
Sic barnheid leidis my brydill reyn3e.
Exces of thocht dois me mischeiff.

I grant my seruice is bot lycht.
Thairfoir, of mercye and not of rycht,
I ask 3ou, schir, no man to greiff,
Sum medecyne gif that 3e mycht.
Exces of thocht dois me mischeiff (ll. 46-55).

It is impossible to take seriously this image of childlike innocence in the midst of James's court. Rather, these stanzas—like much of the rest of this poem—

exude self-righteousness, a sense of unrecognized virtue, and self-pity, a not uncommon blend of sentiments in Dunbar's petitionary poems. Far from expecting to receive as much as he deserves, the poet asks in "Schir, 3e haue mony seruitouris" (Dunbar 67)—with choice modesty—for only a small reward:

And thocht that I amang the laif
 Vnworthy be ane place to haue
 Or in thair nummer to be tald,
 Als lang in mynd my work sall hald,
 Als hail in everie circumstance,
 In forme, in mater and substance,
 But wering or consumptioun,
 Roust, canker or corruptioun,
 As ony of thair werkis all,
 Suppois that my rewarde be small (*ll.* 25-34).

Again, in all these instances the explicit object of Dunbar's criticism is the clique of his rivals at court, but flatterers can, of course, succeed only if allowed to—and the responsibility for this must rest with James himself.

Any modesty—affected or otherwise—vanishes when Dunbar becomes the self-appointed spokesperson for the higher nobility and, thus, the advocate of conservative social order. While flatterers are Dunbar's main target for special opprobrium, he is also no friend of those whom he considers social climbers and upstarts. In "Complane I wald, wist I quhome till" (Dunbar 9), the poet shows considerable chutzpah, speaking sanctimoniously on behalf of the great nobles of the realm¹¹ and especially their sons, who might expect to be preferred to episcopacies and inherit other positions of authority and—at least as importantly—of large income, but who are thwarted in their expectations by men of lesser birth. The iniquity of social climbing infuriates him, and he grows increasingly indignant as he develops the image of a lout who clearly does not fetch his descent from the Scottish peerage but has managed to invade the ranks of his social superiors:

Saying his odius ignorance
 Panting ane prelottis countenance,
 Sa far abowe him [the peer's son] set at tabell,
 That vont was for to muk the stabell:
 Ane pykthank in a prelottis clais,
 With his wawill feit and virrok tais,

¹¹Kinsley, p. 325, seems too kind when he writes that "Dunbar opens sarcastically on behalf of nobles and other men of merit who receive no justice from the king." Given Dunbar's derogatory references to those of lower birth in this poem, the opening here seems perfectly straightforward and devoid of sarcasm.

With hoppir hippis and hences narrow,
And bausy handis to bere a barrow,
With lut schulderis and luttard bak,
Quhilk Natur maid to beir a pak,
With gredy mynd and glaschane gane,
Mell hedit lyk ane mortar stane,
Fenȝeing the feris off ane lord

* * *

Nobles off bluid he dois dispys
And helpis for to hald thame downe
That thay rys neuer to his renowne (Dunbar 9, ll. 49-61; 64-66).

Such an individual is clearly marked by his physiognomy as a laborer whose place in creation is to do menial work, not to overturn the "natural" social order by depriving the sons of earls of their due. Yet any one of these upstarts now "on no wayis content is he / 'My lord' quhill that he callit be" (ll. 37-8). Benefices, in the poet's opinion, are too often given to the wrong people, with the result that the world is being turned upside down:

And carlis of nobillis hes the cure,
And bumbardis brukis benefys (Dunbar 54, ll. 23-4).

Here the outrage ostensibly is not a personal one; the alleged damage is of a social kind. The social elite is eclipsed by lowly, sponging idlers usurping the rightful prerogatives of the nobility. The same perceived affront to social order informs parts of "Schir, ȝit remember as befoir" (Dunbar 68), where the country yokel who is now in possession of several livings is so ignorant of the proper purpose of a benefice that he can think of the accumulation of benefices as comparable to a game of cards; a little trickery, a false card up his sleeve—no doubt flattery again—is more effective than all Dunbar's poetry:

Iok that wes wont to keip the stirkis
Can now draw him ane cleik of kirkis,
With ane fals cairt in to his sleif,
Worthe all my ballatis vnder the byrkis (ll. 66-9).

A very similar idea is also expressed in the subsequent stanza. Again, the uncouth rustic, still smelling of manure and certainly unqualified for the care of souls, arrogates to himself the privileged position which has so far escaped Dunbar despite his education and credentials as a cleric:

Twa curis or thre hes vplandis Michell,
With dispensationis in ane knitchell,

Thocht he fra nolt had new tane leif.
He playis with totum and I with nychell (*ll.* 71-4).

What makes it worse is that "vplandis Michell" seems so ignorant that he does not even realize what has fallen into his lap. For him two or three benefices are like toys to play with, and he is aware neither of the spiritual responsibility that comes with a cure nor, apparently, of the extent of the material benefits attached to them.

It might be said, of course, that by fulminating against those whom he perceives to be ignorant, odious, greedy, and fawning upstarts getting ahead in the Church and at court without respect for their social betters, Dunbar invites the same charge to be leveled against himself. He too could have been considered an upstart if he had been as well rewarded as he seems to consider his due or if he had in fact been appointed to the bishopric his nurse dreamed of:

I wes in 3outhie on nwreice kne
Cald dandillie, bischop, dandillie.
And quhone that age now dois me greif
A sempill vicar I can not be (*Dunbar 68, ll.* 61-4).

As one who cannot rely on bloodlines but has to depend on his own talents to carve out a living for himself, Dunbar might well be considered one of the hated climbers and upstarts himself, even without an advancement into the episcopacy. He would join this group only too willingly, but being prevented from doing so, he raises his public voice as poet to denounce such a destabilizing breach of class barriers.

Even among this sub-group, Dunbar has a particular target for his derogatory remarks. John Damian, James IV's Franco-Italian alchemist and would-be flying abbot, is not named, but Dunbar clearly refers to him in "Lucina schyning in silence of the nycht" (*Dunbar 29*) as the major stumbling block in his own pursuit of a benefice. In this burlesque dream vision, Lady Fortune advises the dreamer that he will never be at peace or be in possession of a benefice until an abbot flies among the birds (*ll.* 21-5). While the companion piece, "As 3ung Awrora with cristall haile" (*Dunbar 4*), vividly describes the grotesque consequences of this Icarus-like attempt at flight off the walls of Stirling castle, the ill-conceived experiment here heralds the end of the world by causing an apocalyptic spectacle in the sky; yet its failure also signals the termination of any hopes Dunbar may entertain:

'Thy trublit gaist sall never be degest
Nor thow in to no benefice possest,
Quhill that ane abbot him cleythe in eimis pennys
And fle vp in the air amang the crennys,
And as a falcoun fair fro eist to west.

'He sall ascend as ane horrible griphoun.
Him meit sall in the air ane scho dragoun.
Thir terribill monsturis sall togiddir thrist,
And in the cluddis get the Antechrist,
Quhill all the air infect of thair poyssoun' (Dunbar 29, ll. 21-30).

In the last stanza the dreamer resigns himself to the idea that his fortunes will not improve until the abbot flies around the moon, an obviously impossible condition:

Within my hert confort I tuke full sone.
'Adew,' quod I, 'My drerie dayis ar done.
Full weill I wist to me wald never cum thrift
Quhill that twa mvnis wer first sene in the lift
Or quhill ane abbot flew abone the moyne' (ll. 46-50).

Despite the recognition that his material situation is not likely to change, ridiculing his rival transforms the speaker's resentment into comedy and thus exposes as risible the false pretenses which form the basis for the advancement of such impostors.

Other poems, too, seem to contain sly barbs directed at this hated favorite of James's. In the list of unprofitable servants in "Schir ze haue mony seruitouris," Dunbar scorns those who dabble in alchemy and mislead others (including the King himself) with their false promises of easy enrichment.¹²

In quintiscence eik ingynouris ioly,
That far can multiplie in folie,
Fantastik fulis, bayth fals and gredy,
Off toung vntrew and hand ewill diedie.
Few dar of all this last additioun
Cum in Tolbuyth without remissioun (Dunbar 67, ll. 55-60).

Dunbar also seems to allude to John Damian, the foreign alchemist, in "Sanct saluatur, send siluer sorrow" (Dunbar 61), where he declares that he would pay any conjurer of any nation to fill his purse with silver, but that only the King can really help. True well-being, then, derives from the correct applica-

¹²Kinsley, p. 325, quotes Bishop John Leslie's late sixteenth-century *Historie of Scotland... 1436-1561*, according to which John Damian "causet the king to believe that he, be multiplyinge [increasing the precious metals by transmutation of the baser metals] and utheris his inventions, would make fine gold of uther metall, quhilk science he callit the quintassence; quhairupon the king maid greit cost, bot all in vaine." Bawcutt quotes this passage at greater length, including Leslie's account of Damian's attempt to fly from the wall of Stirling Castle (Dunbar, II, 296).

tion of royal authority, not from the illusions created by those who would pull the wool over James's eyes.

Elsewhere, the widespread corruption within the Church and the routine misappropriation of benefices through clerical pluralism are seen not only as the causes for the poet's lack of preferment but also, as indicated above, as the root of social injustice. As mentioned earlier, "Schir, at this feist of benefice" (Dunbar 62) makes this point by means of its controlling image of feast and famine. The central metaphor refers to benefices as a banquet: benefices should be distributed widely, just as food and wine should be presented to *all* dinner guests, not just to those who are already sated. As Tom Scott observes, "Dunbar tries the 'sweet-reasonable' approach. The King should consider...that a little goes a long way, and that fair shares for all should content men of reason" (Scott, p. 100), although he also reminds James of the inevitable disgruntlement of those left unprovided:

Schir, at this feist of benefice
 Think that small partis makis grit service,
 And equale distributioun
 Makis thame content that hes ressoun,
 And quha hes nane ar plesit na wyis (ll. 1-5).

The companion piece, "Off benefice, sir, at everie feist" (Dunbar 43), though darker in tone and less witty, uses the same metaphor to reiterate the idea that those who already have much will greedily ask for more: "Off benefice, sir, at everie feist / Quha monyast hes makis maist requeist" (ll. 1-2).

Skilled at dressing the same theme in many different guises, Dunbar makes this complaint again in the form of a *Piers Plowman*-like dream vision with personification allegory in "This hinder nycht, halff sleiping as I lay" (Dunbar 75). Rather than appealing for more equitable allocation, this poem takes a satirical approach to the perceived unfair distribution of benefices and towards clerical pluralism. While most characters in the allegory are simple personifications of abstract concepts, one is given a type-name, Schir lohne Kirkpakar, a personification of the greedy pluralist who hopes to add another four benefices to the eleven he already holds and who explains his macabre hunt for additional livings:¹³

Thane com anon ane callit Schir lohne Kirkpakar,
 Off many cures ane michtie vndertaker.
 Quod he, 'I am possest in kirkis sevin,

¹³Kinsley gives the second stanza to another type-named character, Sir Bet-the-Kirk, punctuating as follows: "And then, Sir Bet-the-Kirk: Sa mot I thryff, / I haif of busie servandis foure or fyve" (p. 149).

And ʒitt I think thai grow sall till ellevin,
Or he be seruit in ane, ʒone ballet maker.

'And then, schir, bet the kirk, sa mot I thryff!
I haif of busie servandis foure or fyve,
And all direct vnto sindrie steidis,
Ay still awaiting vpoun kirkmenes deidis,
Fra quham sum tithingis will I heir belyff' (*ll.* 86-95).

While Reason points out the injustice of pluralism—"The ballance gois vnevin" (*l.* 96)—Patience counsels the poet-dreamer to humbly rely on his Prince, whose intention is noble and who—the poet is being assured ironically¹⁴—would rather give up the "rent," or revenues, deriving from a bishopric than leave him unrewarded (*ll.* 106-110). Dunbar's perceived injuries are here explicitly depicted as the result of others' positive malice, as Schir Iohne Kirkpakar scornfully observes that he will have his eleven benefices well before Dunbar, "ʒone ballet maker," receives even a single one. None of the characters in the dream seems to be under any illusion that such an accumulation of benefices has anything to do with pastoral care; it is understood that high ecclesiastical positions are simply a means to an excellent income. Furthermore, the King is implicated in this abuse. Rather than the usual harmonious birdsong rousing the dreamer, here it is a cannon blast that rudely awakens the dreamer and abruptly brings the vision to an end. The dreamer remains out of sorts with his social environment, and harmony fails to be restored to his disjointed world, in which the King indulges himself by playing with artillery instead of restoring social justice.

Similarly, in "This waverand warldis wretchidnes" (Dunbar 79), the poet makes no bones about his feeling that the general practice of pluralism has disadvantaged him; while others enjoy several livings, he doesn't have even one:

I knaw nocht how the kirk is gydit,
Bot beneficis ar nocht leill devydit.
Sum men hes sewin and I nocht ane,
Quhilk to consider is ane pane (*ll.* 45-8).

¹⁴As Norman MacDougall shows in *James IV* (East Linton, 1997), p. 156, the sums deriving from the temporalities of vacant sees were substantial: during the sixteen years of the minority of Alexander Stewart, James IV's illegitimate son provided to the archbishopric of St Andrews in 1504, James's income from this source alone ranged from nearly £1100 to close to £1900 per annum. Given the magnitude of such receipts and the large number of vacancies, the comment that the King would rather forego such income than leave the poet without reward must be intended ironically and perhaps even as a challenge.

In the preceding and the following stanzas, Dunbar bitterly comments on other forms of ecclesiastical corruption which go hand in hand with pluralism—"Kirkmen" are satirically described as being "so halie...and gude / That on thair conscience, rowme and rude, / May turne aucht oxin and ane wane" (*ll.* 41-3); moreover, some worldly churchmen may scorn all but the highest ecclesiastical offices while the poet cannot even attain a modest one:

And sum vnwourthy to browk ane stall
 Wald clym to be ane cardinall.
 Ane bischoprik may nocht him gane (*ll.* 49-51).

Yet there seems to be no self-awareness on the part of the speaker that his own desire for a benefice is not essentially different, but that the difference is simply a matter of degree and not of kind. In "Off benefice, sir, at everie feist" (Dunbar 43), the famished speaker would be satisfied if he could but join everybody else and partake of the general feast; though the poem is brimming with contempt for corrupt clerical pluralists whose sole aim is "the pelffe to pairt amang thame" (*l.* 5) while the speaker knows he will "gat na thing amang thame" (*l.* 15), the poet is after the same "pelffe," or plunder, as the pluralists, just less of it, and there is nothing to indicate that he would turn down a second or third benefice if it were offered. Never does he suggest that ecclesiastical offices should go to those with the best theological or spiritual qualifications, but merely that they be apportioned evenhandedly. There is clearly no spiritual dimension to the "feast" of benefices. As the poet points out, "Swa thai the kirk haue in thair cure, / Thai fors bot litill how it fure /.../ Thai pans not of the prochin pure" (*ll.* 21-4); only the final line here acknowledges that certain pastoral obligations are attached to a living.

Elsewhere, too, Dunbar is exercised about the crass materialism of those who enjoy important ecclesiastical appointments. In "Complane I wald, wist I quhome till" (Dunbar 9), the appointment in question is, exceptionally, not a regular benefice but that of the head of a priory, but ironically the office holder seems no more qualified for the position than "Iok" and "vplandis Michell" (Dunbar 68) are for theirs:

Sum causes clekis till him ane cowll,
 Ane gryt conuent fra syne to tys,
 And he him selff exampill of vys,
 Enterand for geir and no devocioun.
 The dewill is glaid off his promocioun (Dunbar 9, *ll.* 28-32).

What becomes perfectly clear in this poem is that benefices are treated entirely as sources of income or as patronage appointments for useful servants or as paths towards social advancement. Particularly the latter practice makes a mockery of the institution of spiritual appointments:

And sum that gaittis ane personage
Thinkis it a present for a page,
And on no wayis content is he
'My lord' quhill that he callit be (*ll.* 35-8).

Yet while castigating others, Dunbar himself exhibits the same materialistic attitude. In "This waverand warldis wretchidnes" (Dunbar 79) he even likens himself metaphorically to a merchant anxiously waiting for his richly laden cargo ship to come home after a long and uncertain voyage, just as Dunbar eagerly waits for a benefice to come into his hands. This poem also expresses Dunbar's personal disappointment and bitterness at his continued failure to receive the long-awaited position, and thus the speaker's attitude toward this type of appointment here is positive and uncritical, even though the primary concern with material advancement is just as naked as in the passages from other poems cited above. Tom Scott surely is not much overstating the case when he remarks that

It never enters [Dunbar's] head that the whole business of giving benefices at all—the right...of sorning off the peasantry under the guise of caring for their souls—is a racket. Nor does he question the King's authority in 'spiritual' matters: there is a tacit acceptance of the fact that this is a matter of economics and not 'spiritual' at all, although elsewhere he does denounce clerical incompetence (Scott, pp. 100-101).

However, Dunbar was perhaps not unjustified in expecting that he too would eventually receive his preferment. As Ian Ross points out, "Throughout his reign James [IV] exerted church patronage vigorously, making over two hundred nominations or presentations, and pensions were supplied until a benefice became available in a number of cases" (Ross, p. 50). Since James knew how to take advantage of such vacancies by delaying the next presentation and meanwhile allowing the temporalities to revert to the crown (Kinsley, p. 335), Dunbar's own materialism clearly accords with the spirit of his time.

"This waverand warldis wretchidnes" leaves no doubt that Dunbar was well aware that benefices were at the King's and Queen's disposal. Nonetheless, the long desired living is still out of Dunbar's reach, and even though he says he is sure that his benefice has already been provided (*l.* 81), the wait is long and tiresome (*l.* 82): it might sooner arrive from India or elsewhere overseas (*ll.* 61-80) than from Edinburgh or Holyrood, and the distance between himself and "his" benefice cannot be bridged:

It cumis be king, it cumis be quene,
Bot ay sic space 'is ws betwene,
That nane can schut it with ane flane (*ll.* 57-9).

His impatience seems to be mounting, and he acknowledges with studied modesty, self-effacement, and resignation that “Vnwourthy I, among the laif / Ane kirk dois craif and nane can haue” (*ll.* 53-4). Eight short stanzas later, the mixture of emotions becomes more extravagant, combining impatience with both exaggerated humility and irritation at being kept waiting so long. By the end of the stanza, the tone is sulking, as if the speaker were angrily unable to comprehend what to him seems most exasperatingly unfair treatment:

Greit abbais grayth I nill to gather
 Bot ane kirk, scant coverit with hadder,
 For I of lytill wald be fane,
 Quhilk to consider is ane pane (*ll.* 85-8).

The reference to the “Great abbais” which the speaker does not desire ironically recalls “Schir, ʒit remember as befor” (Dunbar 68) and the hope of his infancy, when his nurse saw the speaker as nothing less than a future bishop. This hope has already given way to disappointment and the bitter recognition that now that he is aging, he cannot even be a “sempill vicar” (*l.* 64) while others are accumulating a whole “cleik of kirkis” (*l.* 67). In this poem Dunbar portrays himself as having grown old in the King’s service (*l.* 2), and although the King owes him some proper reward (*l.* 4), he is unjustly excluded from royal favor (*ll.* 7-14; 34-6)—simply because he refuses to join the ranks of flatterers and toadies (*ll.* 46-7) even though that would ensure his advancement. His profession of ignorance when it comes to flattery is perhaps disingenuous but certainly conventional; instead, he has to rely on his supposedly meager but honest talents at making short little “ballatis” (*ll.* 47-8) to serve his King. What this amounts to is not only a condemnation of court parasites but also a denunciation of the King himself, who is allegedly so blinded by false adulation that he fails to recognize the poet’s moral integrity and undervalues his contributions, artistic and otherwise. However, the pouting demand for “ane kirk, scant coverit with hadder” (Dunbar 79, *l.* 86) also recalls the warning expressed in “To speik of gift or almous deidis” (Dunbar 45): a reward, if delayed too long or if too small, will not be met with the gratitude which the giver might expect (*ll.* 16-25).

While Dunbar’s petitionary poems sometimes show touches of humor and occasionally some ironic detachment from his perceived predicament, the dominant strain is one of morally compromised self-righteousness. Even as he covets the material benefits that stem from royal patronage, Dunbar takes the moral high road of presenting himself as the objective and incorruptible soothsayer who dares tell uncomfortable truths and who is suffering in consequence. But if Dunbar expected to receive a benefice for being the voice of conscience prodding his king, he was disappointed. All the poet can do is to pray for divine favor to guide King James in ruling in peace and justice, as we see in “My prince in God, gif the guid grace” (Dunbar 37). But it doesn’t hurt to add the

hope that God might also take better care of the poet-prophet than does the King, and meanwhile send James “Hie liberall heart and handis not sweir” to grant the poet “many Fraunce crownes” (ll. 18-19).

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