

2007

Dunbar and his Readers: From Allan Ramsay to Richard Burton

Priscilla Bawcutt
University of Liverpool

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Bawcutt, Priscilla (2007) "Dunbar and his Readers: From Allan Ramsay to Richard Burton," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 35: Iss. 1, 362–381.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol35/iss1/27>

This Article is brought to you by the Scottish Literature Collections at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studies in Scottish Literature* by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact digres@mailbox.sc.edu.

Priscilla Bawcutt

Dunbar and his Readers: From Allan Ramsay to Richard Burton

It is curious that no full and detailed examination exists of a topic that is intrinsically interesting: the fluctuations in Dunbar's reputation. No "Critical Heritage" volume has been devoted to Dunbar, or indeed to any of the Makars. There do exist selective studies: an article by Elizabeth Roth in 1981 surveyed changing critical attitudes to *The Twa Mariit Wemen and the Wedo*, and my own *Dunbar the Makar* examined how differently people have responded, over the centuries, to his comedy or his language.¹ An article by Jean Jacques Blanchot has the promising title "Dunbar and his Critics," but consists largely of statistical tables and lists of titles. Bibliographical aids, however, such as Blanchot's article and the substantial works by Geddie, Ridley, Scheps and Looney, and Gray,² should not be despised; they are the essential starting-point for serious study of this subject.

¹See E. Roth, "Criticism and Taste: Readings of Dunbar's *Tretis*," *Scottish Literary Journal*, Supplement, 15 (1981), 57-90; and P. Bawcutt, *Dunbar the Makar* (Oxford, 1992). Henceforth *SLJ* and Bawcutt.

²See J. J. Blanchot, "Dunbar and his Critics: a Critical Survey," in *Scottish Language and Literature, Medieval and Renaissance*, ed. Dietrich Strauss and Horst W. Drescher, *Scottish Studies*, No. 4 (Frankfurt, 1986), pp. 303-36; William Geddie, *A Bibliography of Middle Scots Poets*, *Scottish Text Society, First Series*, 61 (1912), henceforth *Geddie and STS*; Florence H. Ridley, "Middle Scots Writers," in *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English 1050-1500*, ed. A. E. Hartung, IV (New Haven, 1973); Walter Scheps and J. A. Looney, *Middle*

My title refers to readers rather than critics, because the former term is far more inclusive—it permits one to mention the textual decisions of editors, the choices of anthologists, and the obiter dicta of poets, all of which can be extremely influential. I shall not adopt a strictly chronological approach, but explore several separate yet inter-related themes. The names Allan Ramsay and Richard Burton were chosen, in part, to indicate the time-span of the article, which is largely concerned with Dunbar's impact not on his contemporaries in the sixteenth century, but on readers during the last three centuries. But the names also have symbolic significance. It was the poet Allan Ramsay who restored Dunbar to the literary map of Scotland after a century and a half of neglect, buried, as John Pinkerton put it, in "a night of Gothic darkness."³ It was Ramsay who in 1724 published a large body of Dunbar's poems in *The Ever Green*, a poetic anthology largely based on the Bannatyne manuscript of 1568. The actor Richard Burton, with his mellifluous voice, represents a different type of reader. In 1970, when he was living with Elizabeth Taylor in Mexico, Burton revealed how well he knew and loved one poem of Dunbar's:

Words that had been written 500 years ago surfaced astonishingly through the drunken torpor of the mind of a Welsh actor sitting on a balcony overlooking the Pacific... One stanza, a second, a third... And after each stanza, the sonorous Latin refrain sounded somehow darker with each repetition: *Timor mortis conturbat me!*⁴

This anecdote shows how widely Dunbar's reputation has spread. In a way that would have probably been unimaginable in 1724, he now has readers throughout the world, though his audience is still likely to be small and limited to the highly educated.

Allan Ramsay and the Eighteenth Century

Judged by commercial standards, *The Ever Green* was not nearly as successful as another of Ramsay's poetic anthologies, *The Tea Table Miscellany* (1723-37). But from the viewpoint of literary history, it had an incalculable

Scots Poets: A Reference Guide to James I, Robert Henryson, William Dunbar and Gavin Douglas (Boston, 1986), henceforth Scheps and Looney; and Douglas Gray, "William Dunbar," in *Authors of the Middle Ages: English Writers of the Late Middle Ages*, ed. M. C. Seymour (Aldershot, 1996), pp. 179-94.

³See Preface to *Ancient Scottish Poems Never Before in Print*, ed. J. Pinkerton, 2 vols. (London, 1786), I, iv. Henceforth Pinkerton. On Pinkerton, see Patrick O'Flaherty, "John Pinkerton (1758-1826): Champion of the Makars," *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 13 (1977), 159-95. Henceforth O'Flaherty.

⁴See John David Morley, "Brief Encounter with the Burtons," *Sunday Times*, 27 January, 1985, Colour Magazine, p. 20.

influence, and led to a surge of interest in early Scottish poetry among scholars and antiquaries. It was followed, in the second half of the eighteenth century, by further and more scholarly editions, such as Lord Hailes' *Ancient Scottish Poems* (1770), and it provoked a search for other manuscript sources of early poetry. One important consequence was John Pinkerton's publication of poems from the Maitland Folio and Maitland Quarto in *Ancient Scottish Poems never before in Print* (1786). *The Ever Green* also attracted the attention of critics: the most important and influential of these was Thomas Warton, who showed particular interest in Dunbar in his *History of English Poetry* (1778). For all this we owe a profound debt to Ramsay, who brought the riches of the Bannatyne Manuscript to public notice when it was still in private possession, and might well have been destroyed, or lost, as appears to be the case with the "Bannatyne Memorial Buik."⁵

Ramsay's attitude to earlier poetry, however, was extremely cavalier, and he took extraordinary liberties with the texts of Dunbar. Some of the changes may be the result of misreading the manuscript (which is understandable), but others were deliberate re-writings, omissions and additions of his own. His treatment of what is probably Dunbar's most famous poem is notorious. Ramsay lopped off its very first stanza, opening not with Dunbar's explicitly personal reflection:

I that in heill wes and gladnes,
Am trublit now with greit seiknes.⁶

but with a commonplace:

Our plesance heir is all vane glory.

Even more startling is the Postscript of three stanzas, which prophesies the coming of a "Lad," i.e. Ramsay himself, who will revive Dunbar's "Fame and Memorie." Dunbar had gravely concluded:

Sen for the ded remeid is none,
Best is that we for dede dispone,

⁵For information on the contents and history of this manuscript, see *The Bannatyne Manuscript*, ed. W. Tod Ritchie, 4 vols., STS, Second Series, 22, 23, 26, Third Series, 5 (1928-34); and *The Bannatyne Manuscript* [a facsimile], introd. D. Fox and W. A. Ringler (London, 1980).

⁶*The Poems of William Dunbar*, ed. P. Bawcutt, 2 vols., Association for Scottish Literary Studies (Glasgow, 1998), I, No. 21. References to Dunbar poems are to this edition, by number of poem, together with title or first line.

Efter our deid that lif may we:
Timor mortis conturbat me.

The Postscript, however, jocularly but insensitively substitutes for the last two lines:

Then sen our Warks sall nevir die.
*Timor mortis non turbat me.*⁷

Dunbar would surely have hated this. We know, from "Schir, I complane off iniuris" (No. 64), that he keenly resented the mutilation of his poems. Ramsay, in accordance with eighteenth-century taste, also supplied "I that in heill wes" with a long, descriptive title: "On the Uncertainty of Life and Fear of Death, or a Lament for the Loss of the Poets." Later abridged by Lord Hailes to "Lament for the Deth of the Makkaris," this was eventually shortened to "The Lament for the Makaris"—still its popular but misleading title. Another well-known title, "The Thistle and the Rose" (No. 52), originated not with Dunbar but with Ramsay, and slightly misrepresents the emphases of that poem. The final lines seem to have displeased Ramsay, who completely re-wrote them, substituting

Callt to my Muse, and for my Subjeck chose
 To sing the Ryal Thistle and the Rose

for Dunbar's own ending:

And thus I wret, as ye haif hard toforrow,
 Off lusty May vpon the nynt morrow.

Ramsay's couplet was adopted by Lord Hailes, who called Dunbar's own conclusion "bald and prosaic,"⁸ and it appeared in almost all subsequent editions of the poems until that of David Laing (1834). In these and several other respects, such as speculative additions to his canon, Ramsay shaped the way Dunbar was read for generations.

⁷See *The Ever Green: Being a Collection of Scots Poems Wrote by the Ingenious before 1600*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh, 1724); citations are from the reprint (Glasgow, 1874). For criticism of Ramsay, see Geddie, pp. lxvi ff.; a more sympathetic assessment, "Ramsay the Antiquary," occurs in *The Works of Allan Ramsay*, ed. J. B. Martin, J. W. Oliver, A. M. Kinghorn and A. Law, STS, Third Series, 19, 20, 29; Fourth Series, 6, 7, 8 (1954-74), IV, 128-52. Henceforth *Works*.

⁸See David Dalrymple, Lord Hailes, *Ancient Scottish Poems from the Bannatyne Manuscript* (Edinburgh, 1770), p. 226. Henceforth Dalrymple.

Why did the rediscovery of Dunbar cause such excitement in the eighteenth century? Partly perhaps because of his sheer unfamiliarity at that time, partly because of the contrast he presented to those few early Scottish poets who had managed to survive in the collective Scottish memory: Gavin Douglas, Bishop of Dunkeld, admired for his classical learning; Sir David Lyndsay, viewed as a precursor of the Reformation; and the patriotic chroniclers Barbour, Wynthoun and blind Hary. Dutiful tributes were paid to these worthies, but none excited the imagination like Dunbar. It should be recalled that Henryson, odd though it may seem today, did not impress the eighteenth century. Lord Hailes found his *Fables* "rather tedious," and *The Testament of Cresseid* was rarely mentioned; the one poem regularly singled out for admiration was *Robene and Makyne*, which was styled "the most beautiful of his productions," and the work of "an ingenious pastoral poet."⁹ Something of Dunbar's appeal in that period is conveyed in a brilliant analogy used by the nineteenth-century writer Alexander Smith: "He is the Pompeii of British poetry."¹⁰ Readers encountered in Dunbar a novel and long-buried world, containing brilliant colors and lively portraits, in verse that was by turns humorous or solemn, but always vivid and varied.

Darling of the Scottish Muses

Dunbar's rise was meteoric. By the opening of the nineteenth century he had shot to an exalted place in the Scottish pantheon. There was virtual consensus that he was: "chief of the ancient Scottish poets" (1786);¹¹ "at the head of the ancient poets of his country" (1814);¹² "finest of all our Scottish poets" (1819);¹³ and, in the words of Sir Walter Scott, "darling of the Scottish Muses" (1829). Scott, who was well read in the Elizabethan poets, seems here to recall

⁹Cf. Dalrymple, p. 280; David Irving, *The History of Scottish Poetry* (Edinburgh, 1861), p. 224; and Langhorne, cited in Geddie, p. 176.

¹⁰*Dreamthorp* (London, 1863), p. 92. Henceforth *Dreamthorp*.

¹¹See an anonymous review of Pinkerton in *Gentleman's Magazine*, LVI (February 1786), 149; cited in O'Flaherty, p. 185.

¹²Samuel Egerton Brydges, in *The British Bibliographer*, 4 (1814), 304; cited in Scheps and Looney, p. 126.

¹³William Motherwell, *The Harp of Renfrewshire* (Paisley, 1819), p. xvii; cited in Scheps and Looney, p. 127.

George Peele's praise of Christopher Marlowe as "the Muses' darling."¹⁴ In 1822 Scott introduced Dunbar's poetry to George Crabbe, who is said to have exclaimed: "I see that the Ayrshire bard had one giant before him"¹⁵—thus initiating the long-running comparison between Dunbar and Burns. In 1884 John Merry Ross asserted: "When we consider the originality, strength, and richness of Dunbar's genius, we have no scruple in assigning him the highest place after Burns in the ranks of Scottish poets." Significantly, Ross went on to link this with his Scottishness, claiming that "Dunbar is the first Scot in whose literature we recognise the distinctive features of the national character"; he later remarked upon "a certain unique intensity of feeling and pith of language that give [his writing] a peculiarly national stamp."¹⁶

In the twentieth century Hugh MacDiarmid, seeking for a witty, sophisticated, and, above all, unsentimental model for modern Scottish poets, issued the famous rallying call: "Not Burns—Dunbar!"¹⁷ MacDiarmid had clearly read Ross, and seems to have lifted from him the phrase about Dunbar's "unique intensity of feeling"; but he viewed Burns very differently. Asserting that the influence of Burns had been bad, "producing little save puerile and platitudinous doggerel," he proclaimed that Dunbar "stands at the opposite pole of the Scottish genius from Burns," and that he "is in many ways the most modern, as he is the most varied, of Scottish poets."¹⁸ MacDiarmid was using Dunbar's name for his own polemical purposes—how much of his verse he then knew is doubtful—but these and similar remarks, in *Albyn* (1927) and his other journalism at this time, undoubtedly contributed to a renewal of interest in Dunbar among poets and intellectuals.¹⁹ His powerful voice confirmed Dunbar's status as *the* great national Scottish poet. But to be, in effect, an icon of Scottishness is not necessarily a comfortable position. In Dunbar's case I think that it tended to raise expectations too high among readers, and inevitably some were disappointed, especially those who had their own strong views on what constituted good poetry or Scottishness.

¹⁴For the context of this phrase, see below, p. 9. See also George Peele, Prologue to *The Honour of the Garter*.

¹⁵See the letter from J. G. Lockhart, in *The Poetical Works of the Rev. George Crabbe: With his Letters and Journals*, ed. George Crabbe, 8 vols. (London, 1834), I, 278.

¹⁶See J. M. Ross, *Scottish History and Literature to the Reformation* (London, 1884), pp. 212, 214 and 215.

¹⁷See *Albyn, or Scotland and the Future* (London, 1927), p. 35. Henceforth *Albyn*.

¹⁸*Albyn*, pp. 12, 43, and 39.

¹⁹See, for instance, "Not Burns—Dunbar," *Spectator*, 144 (31 May 1930), 893-94.

One of these was Rachel Annand Taylor, who contributed a brief study of Dunbar to the Faber series "Poets on the Poets" in 1931. She referred to the enthusiasm for Dunbar kindled by MacDiarmid "among the young Scots of the new Renaissance," but found it incomprehensible: "nobody could call Dunbar a nationalist"; he was too pro-English and anti-Celtic; he was not an "essential" Scot. Taylor wanted him to be more of a Romantic, comparing him unfavorably to Keats and Shelley, and the ballad-writers. She was also deeply affronted by his petitionary poems: "The reader feels that as a poet, and, much more, as a Scot, Dunbar should not have begged in so many tones, and so persistently."²⁰ On this point one of her reviewers, James Reeves, also a poet, was more perceptive. He noted that "the frustration of his desire for a benefice was in fact the motive force of some of Dunbar's best poetry."²¹ Many would surely agree that the petitions, such as "Quhom to sall I compleine my wo" (No. 54), or "Schir, lat it neuer in toun be tald" (No. 66), are indeed among Dunbar's finest and most deeply personal poems.²²

Essentially Taylor was out of sympathy not just with Dunbar but with his age, and the nature of poetry in the late Middle Ages. To some extent this was true also of Tom Scott, who in 1966 wrote a massive book: *Dunbar: A Critical Exposition of the Poems*. On the last page he confesses that he rather disliked Dunbar when he started: "I have had great difficulties of spiritual antipathy to overcome." Again and again one can see that what Scott really wanted was that this late medieval poet, who was an orthodox Catholic, with hierarchical views on society, should be more like himself: democratic, nationalist, socialist. He found *The Thrissill and the Rois* (No. 52) "forced, contrived, unreal, unconvincing, spurious"; and called *The Passion of Crist* (No. 1) "brutal and crude in its insistence on the physical details of the Crucifixion." At one point, contrasting him with Sir David Lyndsay, he says: "Dunbar—it is perhaps my most fundamental judgment of him—missed the greatness of a national reforming poet which his gifts thrust upon him." Again, although Scott recognized that "I that in heill wes and gladnes" (No. 21) is one of Dunbar's finest poems, Scott found the last stanza "weak and conventional," and questioned: "did he really believe faithfully in the after-life?"²³

Perhaps because of his prominence as a sort of national icon, Dunbar has suffered, more than most poets, from the attention of readers who want him to

²⁰*Dunbar: The Poet and his Period* (London, 1931), pp. 29, 31, and 64.

²¹See *The Criterion*, 11 (January 1931), 331-3.

²²Cf. Bawcutt, pp. 103-30.

²³See Tom Scott, *Dunbar: A Critical Exposition of the Poems* (Edinburgh, London and New York, 1966), pp. 348, 48, 286, 102 and 250.

be other than he is—rather than accepting his poetry and attempting to define what is distinctive in it. Those who have castigated him for his perceived deficiencies include some Scottish historians, who seem to feel that court poets should be eulogists and propagandists, but never satirists. Ranald Nicholson was aggrieved that Dunbar praised London (he seemed unaware that there is no certainty that “To London” was written by Dunbar), but poured scorn upon Edinburgh in “Quhy will ye merchantis of renoun” (No. 55).²⁴ Norman Macdougall likewise complained that Dunbar’s views of king, court and Scotland were “bitter and jaundiced”; elsewhere he refers to Dunbar’s “studied obsequiousness” towards Henry VII, for which, in fact, the poems provide no evidence whatsoever.²⁵ Even more curious are the occasional attempts to turn Dunbar into an utterly different kind of poet. This was a process which started as early as the sixteenth century, when some copyists gave his religious poems a Protestant slant. Probably the most striking recent example is the moralized Dunbar depicted by the critic Edmund Reiss. He turns Dunbar upside down, giving solemn interpretations to the comic poems, and reproving the melancholy speaker of “In to thir dirk and drublie dayis” (No. 26) as essentially “wrong-headed.”²⁶

Dunbar and Chaucer

Readers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were not aware of the full extent of medieval poetry, either Scottish or English. It is thus hardly surprising, that when they wished to “place” Dunbar, in relation to other poets or poetic traditions, they turned to the few names that were then familiar. Thomas Warton, who was Dunbar’s most discerning critic in the eighteenth century, interestingly noted that the sunrise in *The Thrissill and the Rois* is “described in the luminous language of [John] Lydgate,” and compared the satiric portraits in *The Dance of the Sevin Deidly Sins* to those of William Langland.²⁷ But Chaucer was by far England’s most famous medieval poet. Comparison between Dunbar and Chaucer was almost inevitable; so too was the slide from comparison to rivalry. This is well illustrated by Pinkerton in 1786, discussing the recently discovered *Twa Mariit Wemen and the Wedo* and *The Friars of Berwick*, for whose attribution to Dunbar he was responsible:

²⁴Cf. R. Nicholson, *Scotland: The Later Middle Ages* (Edinburgh, 1974), p. 565.

²⁵N. Macdougall, *James IV* (Edinburgh, 1989), pp. 288 and 249.

²⁶E. Reiss, *William Dunbar* (Boston, 1979), pp. 133-5.

²⁷Thomas Warton, *History of English Poetry from the Twelfth to the Close of the Sixteenth Century* (1778), ed. W. Carew Hazlitt, 4 vols. (London, 1871), III, 206 and 218.

These tales place Dunbar in quite a new and more important light; for it is believed they will be as much preferred to his *Goldin Terge and Thistle and Rose*, tho these pieces have an elegance and opulence which Chaucer nowhere attains, as Chaucer's *Tales* are to his allegorical poems. Dunbar having a genius at least equal to Chaucer, and perhaps more original; and having the advantage of living a whole century after him, when the language was more rich and expressive; it is no wonder that he should excell that venerable poet in every point, but in the length of his pieces, a most dispensable quality.²⁸

Later and lesser men repeated similar notions. In 1807 O. Gilchrist wrote of Dunbar: "in knowledge of life and of human character, he is little inferior to Chaucer" and in 1815 "Scotus" felt that Dunbar "seems to rank on an equality with Chaucer" (Schepps and Looney, pp. 126 and 127).

The thought, however, was most powerfully expressed by Sir Walter Scott in his *Memoir of George Bannatyne* (1829):

This darling of the Scottish Muses has been justly raised to a level with Chaucer... In brilliancy of fancy, in force of description, in the power of conveying moral precepts with terseness, and marking lessons of life with conciseness and energy, in quickness of satire, and in poignancy of humour, the Northern Maker may boldly aspire to rival the Bard of Woodstock.²⁹

Scott returned briefly to the subject in 1830, when he coined the memorable phrase: "Dunbar the Scottish Chaucer."³⁰ Despite occasional rumbles of disagreement—from the ballad scholar W. E. Aytoun, for instance³¹—the nineteenth-century saw growing recognition of Chaucer's importance to his fifteenth-century followers, not only in England but in Scotland also. Hugh Haliburton wrote a sonnet, entitled "Chaucer," which opens: "Father of English verse! Of Scottish too!"³² The phrase "English Chaucerians" was in circulation by the late 1890s, and in 1900 "the Scottish Chaucerians" is first

²⁸John Pinkerton, *Ancient Scottish Poems Never Before in Print, But now Published from the MS. Collections of Sir Richard Maitland*, 2 vols. (London, 1786), Preface, I, xi.

²⁹Walter Scott, *Memorials of George Bannatyne* (Edinburgh, 1829), p. 14.

³⁰Walter Scott, *History of Scotland*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh, 1830), I, 333.

³¹Aytoun deprecated the habit of comparing Dunbar to Chaucer: see his edition of *The Ballads of Scotland*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh, 1858), I, lxiv.

³²James Logie Robertson, under the pseudonym Hugh Haliburton, *Excursions in Verse and Prose* (London, 1905), p. 126.

recorded, apparently coined, it should be noted, by the distinguished Scottish scholar George Gregory Smith.³³

The phrase "Scottish Chaucerians" is a curious phenomenon: little loved, yet still in common use, it has had its critics from the very beginning, English as well as Scottish. Indeed, when used, it tends to be followed by a ritual disclaimer: the Scottish poets are regularly said to be better than their English contemporaries, and are never slavish imitators, but bold, original and innovative. Florence Ridley remarked that comparison of these poets with Chaucer had led to "persistent underestimation of their achievement."³⁴ But this is far from the truth. The appropriateness of calling Dunbar a Chaucerian, however, is sometimes questioned today, and it has become a critical truism that "no two medieval poets [are] more unlike than Chaucer and Dunbar."³⁵ Hugh MacDiarmid was particularly annoyed by what he called "the absurd appellation 'Scottish Chaucerian,'" and in his selection of Dunbar for a Saltire volume, published in 1952, he deliberately omitted the more courtly (and more Chaucerian) poems, such as *The Goldin Targe*.³⁶ Interestingly, the same practice may be observed in the selection of Dunbar's poems chosen by Roderick Watson for his anthology *The Poetry of Scotland* (1995).

Distaste for the term "Scottish Chaucerian" is not always disinterested, but often fuelled by nationalism, and this has had bizarre consequences. Attempts to repudiate English influence on medieval Lowland Scots culture have been accompanied by gross exaggeration of other literary influences, particularly French and Gaelic. This is particularly the case with Dunbar: in the past he was occasionally called "The Scottish Villon";³⁷ more recently it has been

³³George Gregory Smith, *The Transition Period* (Edinburgh, 1900), pp. vii and 40.

³⁴Florence Ridley, "A Plea for the Middle Scots," in *The Learned and the Lewed: Studies in Chaucer and Medieval Literature*, ed. Larry D. Benson, Harvard English Studies, 5 (Cambridge, MA, 1974), p. 177.

³⁵Gregory Kratzmann, *Anglo-Scottish Literary Relations 1430-1550* (Cambridge, 1980), p. 129; see also Denton Fox, "The Scottish Chaucerians," in *Chaucer and Chaucerians*, ed. D. Brewer (London, 1966), p. 186.

³⁶Hugh MacDiarmid, ed., *Selections from the Poems of William Dunbar* (Edinburgh, 1952).

³⁷See A. M. Kinghorn, "Dunbar and Villon: A Comparison and a Contrast," *Modern Language Review*, 62 (1967), 195-208; and Jean-Jacques Blanchot, "William Dunbar and François Villon: The Literary Personae. Towards a Methodology of Comparison in Literature," in Adam J. Aitken, Matthew P. McDiarmid and Derick S. Thomson, eds., *Bards and Makars: Scottish Language and Literature, Medieval and Renaissance* (Glasgow, 1977), pp. 72-87.

claimed that "Dunbar is neither a Scottish Chaucer nor a Scottish Lydgatian, but a corresponding member of that Continental fellowship, the *grands rhétoriciens*."³⁸ Yet, despite repeated attempts to discover such influences or analogies, no French parallel or source for any of Dunbar's poems has been established.³⁹

More ludicrous are attempts to turn Dunbar into a bard. These are essentially a feature of the twentieth century, and are characterized by wishful thinking and extreme vagueness. They seem to start with William Power, author of *Scotland and the Scots* (1934), and *Literature and Oatmeal* (1935). The third chapter of *Literature and Oatmeal* is entitled "Back to Dunbar," demonstrating the influence of MacDiarmid. In *Scotland and the Scots* Power discerns in Dunbar what he calls a "Celtic feeling for nature," and asserts of the opening of *The Goldin Targe*: "Only a Celt could have been so keenly aware of the clear stones in the sunlit water."⁴⁰ Kurt Wittig continues this theme, remarking that Dunbar "evidently had Celtic blood in his veins" and "not a little of the Gaelic temperament."⁴¹ The portrayal of Dunbar in Roderick Watson's *The Literature of Scotland* (1984) is no less startling: it is asserted that his aureate poems reveal a debt to Gaelic bardic verse, that "Ane Ballat of Our Lady" (No. 16) is the verbal equivalent of the Book of Kells, and that *The Flyting* derives from the oral contests in Gaelic verse.⁴² Such claims are unsubstantiated. What is more, they disregard, almost willfully, Dunbar's avowed contempt for "sic eloquence as thay in Erschry use" (*Flyting*, l. 107), and his envoi to *The Goldin Targe*, where he enthusiastically embraces the

³⁸See R. J. Lyall, "'A New Maid Channoun'? Redefining the Canonical in Medieval and Renaissance Scottish Literature," *SSL*, 26 (1991), 13; see also J. Norman, "William Dunbar: Grand Rhétoricien," in *Bryght Lanternis: Essays on the Language and Literature of Medieval and Renaissance Scotland*, ed. J. D. McClure and M. R. G. Spiller (Aberdeen, 1989), pp. 179-93. Henceforth *Bryght Lanternis*.

³⁹See P. Bawcutt, "French Connections? From the Grands Rhétoriciens to Clément Marot" in *The European Sun: Proceedings of the Seventh International Conference on Medieval and Renaissance Scottish Language and Literature*, ed. G. Caie, R. J. Lyall, S. Mapstone and K. Simpson (East Linton, 2001), pp. 119-28. Henceforth *European Sun*.

⁴⁰William Power, *Scotland and the Scots* (Edinburgh, 1934), p. 181.

⁴¹Kurt Wittig, *The Scottish Tradition in Literature* (Edinburgh and London, 1958), pp. 60-61.

⁴²Roderick Watson, *The Literature of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1984), pp. 54-5 and 58.

poetic traditions associated with Chaucer:⁴³

O reuerend Chaucere, rose of rethoris all
 (As in oure tong ane flour imperiall)
 That rais in Britane ewir, quho redis rycht,
 Thou beris of makaris the tryumph riall,
 Thy fresch anamalit termes celicall
 This mater coud illumynit haue full brycht.
 Was thou noucht of oure Inglisch all the lycht,
 Surmounting ewiry tong terrestriall,
 All fer as Mayes morrow dois mydnycht? (*ll.* 253-61)

Dunbar and the Language of Poetry

The passage of time has seen amusing reversals of critical opinion concerning Dunbar's language. Allan Ramsay, for instance, said of Dunbar: "In language he may fail, but not in thocht" (*Works*, III, 185). What constituted failure of language, in the opinion of an eighteenth-century reader? It is easy to find out, if one analyses Ramsay's copious and silent re-writings of Dunbar's text. In the first place are words that today may seem innocuous, but struck him as blasphemous or irreverent. In "The Dirige" (No. 84) Ramsay thus omits the whole of line 29: "The fader, the sone, the holie gaist"; in retrospect, it may seem strange that he was prepared even to include a poem that jested about sacred things. In "The Amendis to the Tailors and Soutaris" (No. 48) several references to God are omitted, and all of the seventh stanza. Even more obvious, in poems like "The Abbot of Tungland" (No. 4) and *The Flying* (No. 65), is the bowdlerization of words that Ramsay found coarse or vulgar: one instance is *bawis*, "testicles," which is represented by "b-s". Lord Hailes too, who prided himself on being a far more faithful editor than Ramsay, nonetheless replaced by a row of asterisks the line "Gif I do ocht bot drynk and swyfe" (Dalrymple, p. 33). This occurs in stanza 13 of the dream poem, "This nycht in my sleip I wes agast" (No. 78 B). To it he added an explanatory note: "This line is omitted on account of its blunt course [sic] style" (Dalrymple, p. 242).

Yet not all eighteenth-century scholars approved of such practices. Bishop Percy, who annotated his own copy of *Ancient Scottish Poems*, criticized Lord Hailes for his treatment of this line:

At this rate half the book might have been expunged. By leaving out the Line in question, the whole Stanza has its meaning annihilated... I cannot help thinking that

⁴³For fuller discussion, see Bawcutt, *Dunbar the Makar*, pp. 21-5.

the insertion of Asterisks &c often sets the mind to form worse Ideas to itself, than the insertion of the old words would have done.⁴⁴

On the issue Sir Walter Scott also showed his robust good sense. In 1828 he wrote to David Laing concerning his projected edition of Dunbar:

It is a great national work. I hope you do not design to make castrations. I observe one or two in the Dance of the Deadly Sins... Such a classic as Dunbar cannot be indecent more than a naked statue.⁴⁵

Laing and some Victorian editors, however, seemed to think that the occasional obscurity of Dunbar's language provided a useful "veil" of its indecency.⁴⁶ The Scottish Text Society edition of Dunbar, for instance, does not omit the erotic dialogue "In Secret Place" (No. 25), but provided no commentary whatever on it.⁴⁷ Even as late as 1938 the first edition of *The Oxford Book of Light Verse* ran into problems, because its compiler, W. H. Auden, included not only passages from *The Flyting* but also "In Secret Place." As Auden explained in a letter:

I've had to cut a beautiful love poem of Dunbar's out of the second English edition because the travellers said it dished the book with the girls' schools. It's all the fault of the learned Oxford ninny who did the glossary, and was so conscientious he translated all the naughty words.⁴⁸

Times have changed. Recent editors of Dunbar have conscientiously tried to explain the "naughty words," puns, and *double entendres* in this poem and others, though some still remain intractable. Another sign of the change in

⁴⁴See *The Percy Letters, IV: The Correspondence of Thomas Percy and David Dalrymple, Lord Hailes*, ed. A. F. Falconer (Baton Rouge, LA, 1954), pp. 163-4. Percy's annotated copy is owned by the National Library of Scotland (Ry. 1v. f.4).

⁴⁵*The Letters of Sir Walter Scott*, ed. Herbert J. C. Grierson, 12 vols (London, 1932-37), X, 495.

⁴⁶*The Poems of William Dunbar*, ed. D. Laing, 2 vols (Edinburgh, 1834), I, 57.

⁴⁷*The Poems of William Dunbar*, ed. John Small, Æ. J. G. Mackay and W. Gregor, STS, First Series, 2, 4, 16, 21 (1884-93), II, 247-9.

⁴⁸See further, Edward Mendelson, in *Times Literary Supplement* (14 July 1978), p. 798, and "Light and Outrageous," in *New York Review of Books* (12 August 2004), pp. 52-4. The "nanny" can be identified as the distinguished medieval scholar J. A. W. Bennett. Henceforth *TLS*.

social mores is the publication of academic articles with titles such as “Dunbar’s Bawdy” or “Dunbar and the Nature of Bawdy.”⁴⁹

Ramsay made other alterations to Dunbar which may seem surprising to a modern reader. What did he find offensive about line 114 of “The Thrissill and the Rois”: “All kynd of beistis in to thair degre”? And why did he replace it with: “All kynd of Quadrupeds in thair Degree”? I suspect that in this case (and many others) Ramsay failed to understand Dunbar’s metrics—“beistis” in this line has two syllables—and that he was not sufficiently familiar with the pronunciation of Scots in the early sixteenth century or with certain licenses then permitted in verse.

Another striking reversal of opinion may be briefly mentioned. Dunbar’s contemporaries particularly esteemed and imitated his poems in a high style. In a roll call of Scottish poets, at the opening of *The Testament of the Papyngo*, Sir David Lyndsay referred admiringly to “Dunbar, quhilk language had at large, / As maye be sene in tyll his *Goldin Targe*” (ll. 17-18).⁵⁰ *The Goldin Targe* and *The Thrissill and the Rose*, as exemplars of this elevated, aureate style, continued to be highly admired in the eighteenth century. But in the mid-twentieth century this style became the focus for criticism. John Speirs found more vitality in Dunbar’s comic and satiric poems, and contrasted their language—“essentially the language of what was living speech”—with that of the court poems, which he stigmatized as “at a remove from living speech...rootless, without actuality.”⁵¹ Patrick Cruttwell voiced a similar view, simplifying and sharpening the contrasts: “within it [Dunbar’s poetry] there are immediately apparent two styles, two dictions...two poets. The one is ornate, artificial, and English; the other colloquial, natural and Scottish.”⁵² Such an extreme polarization—between art and nature, English and Scots—is simplistic, and fails to convey the range and flexibility of Dunbar’s style.⁵³

A Poet’s Poet

The poet Edwin Morgan, who has written illuminatingly of Dunbar’s language, remarks: “What is immediately noticeable in his work is the *display* of

⁴⁹Lois Ebin, “Dunbar’s Bawdy,” *Chaucer Review*, 14 (1979-80), 278-86; and Edwina Burness, “Dunbar and the Nature of Bawdy,” in *Bryght Lanternis*, pp. 209-20.

⁵⁰*Sir David Lyndsay: Selected Poems*, ed. J. Hadley Williams (Glasgow, 2000), p. 58.

⁵¹John Speirs, *The Scots Literary Tradition* (London, 1940), p. 37.

⁵²Patrick Cruttwell, “Two Scots Poets,” in *The Age of Chaucer* (Harmondsworth, 1954), p. 175.

⁵³See “Language at Large” in Bawcutt, pp. 374-82.

poetic energy in forms that have considerable technical and craftsmanly interest.” He comments also on “a certain effectual brilliance that may commend him more keenly to the practising poet than to the ordinary reader—an agility, a virtuosity in tempo and momentum, a command of rhythm.”⁵⁴ These words are borne out by the response of many such practising poets. Dunbar’s first critics were the poets of his own age: Sir David Lyndsay, for instance, and Gavin Douglas, who placed him among the followers of the Muses as one of only three representatives “of this [i.e. Scottish] natioun.”⁵⁵ Again and again it has been poets (Ramsay, Scott, and MacDiarmid are by no means the only examples) who have stimulated a new interest in Dunbar, after a period of neglect. They have paid tribute in a variety of ways, ranging from brief comments to full-length books, and sometimes, even more revealingly, embedded echoes or allusions in their own writings.

There is little evidence of familiarity with Dunbar in the greatest eighteenth-century Scottish poets, Robert Fergusson and Burns. Burns makes no explicit mention of Dunbar, although it is possible that in his “Poem on Life,” written in 1796, an image and a rhyme derive from the fourth stanza of “I that in heill wes and gladnes” (No. 21):

Oh! flickering, feeble and unsicker
I’ve found her still,
Ay wavering like the willow wicker.⁵⁶

Since Burns was then close to death, Dunbar’s poem might have had particular poignancy for him. Awareness of Dunbar is more apparent in minor poets. In *Genius and Valour* (1763), John Langhorne illustrates the eighteenth-century predilection for *The Thrissill and the Rose*, particularly among supporters of the Union:

In nervous strains Dunbar’s bold music flows,
And Time yet spares *the Thistle and the Rose*.⁵⁷

⁵⁴Edwin Morgan, “Dunbar and the Language of Poetry,” in *Essays* (Cheadle Hulme, 1974), p. 89.

⁵⁵*The Palice of Honour*, 1. 922, in *The Shorter Poems of Gavin Douglas*, 2nd. edn., ed. Priscilla J. Bawcutt, STS, Fifth Series, 2 (2003).

⁵⁶*The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, ed. James Kinsley, 3 vols. (Oxford, 1968), II, 809.

⁵⁷John Langhorne, *Works*, 2 vols. (London, 1766), I, 21.

James Beattie, in his "Epistle to Mr Alexander Ross" (1768), lists Scottish poets in a manner that might seem reminiscent of Dunbar's own list of makars; but in this "skreed o' names" he gives foremost place to Douglas and Dunbar is relegated to sharing a single line with "Scot, Hawthornden, and mae."⁵⁸

In the nineteenth century one of the most interesting essays on Dunbar was written by Alexander Smith, in *Dreamthorp*. Using vivid imagery, ranging from Tantallon Castle to Pompeii, he conveys Dunbar's vitality but also his antiquity: "He is present to the imagination, and yet remote" (*Dreamthorp*, p. 80). Smith was the first to voice a longing (still felt today) for the small biographical particulars, such as letters and anecdotes, which would lessen Dunbar's remoteness. Hugh Haliburton made many attempts to bring Dunbar to a wider public at the end of the century, including a poem in his honor, several critical essays, and *Dunbar: Being a Selection from the Poems of an Old Makar* (1895). Dunbar's poems are paraphrased very freely—something of their flavor is suggested by this title for "Sir Iohne Sinclair begowthe to dance" (No. 70): "Hy-jinks at Holyrood!" Haliburton's critical style may seem old-fashioned, yet he sometimes poses questions that, a century later, are still valid: why, for instance, does Dunbar still remain so little known in Scotland among the general population?⁵⁹

Twentieth-century poets quote or echo Dunbar more often than any other medieval Scottish poet. This testifies to his verbal genius, his gift for coining phrases which delight, and startle, and impress themselves upon the mind. The powerful responses to Dunbar of poets such as Hugh MacDiarmid, Rachel Anand Taylor, and Tom Scott have already been mentioned. Violet Jacob too, in a brief article for *The Scots Magazine* (1928-9), was among the first to recognize Dunbar as a craftsman, and "a master of rhythm and metre." But whether she always understood the sense of his poems is doubtful; she certainly seems adrift in one which she mistakenly calls "The Throssil and the Rose," and which, it is said "pours out like the notes of a thrush."⁶⁰

Of all the twentieth-century Scottish poets, however, it was Robert Garioch who was most responsive to Dunbar. He explicitly acknowledged that he was "influenced by the sixteenth-century makars, above all Dunbar, who, like

⁵⁸J. MacQueen and T. Scott, eds., *The Oxford Book of Scottish Verse* (Oxford, 1966), p. 341.

⁵⁹For the poem on Dunbar, see *Ochil Idylls* (London, 1891); see also "Our Earlier Burns," in *In Scottish Fields* (London, 1890), pp. 200-46; and "Dunbar in Burns," in *Furth in Field* (London, 1894), pp. 272-80. See also A. A. MacDonald, "Dunbar in Paraphrase," in *A Day Estivall: Essays on the Music, Poetry and History of Scotland*, ed. A. Gardner-Medwin and J. Hadley Williams (Aberdeen, 1990), pp. 112-23.

⁶⁰"James IV and his Poet," *The Scots Magazine*, 10 (1928-9), 282, 281.

him, was master of a variety of styles and metres.”⁶¹ Garioch drew upon Dunbar’s portrait of the Deadly Sin of Wrath in the second line of *A Fisher’s Apology*: “Whit fir dae ye mannaice my nets, boden in fier of weir?” In a note on another poem translated from Pindar, *The Hierodules*, Garioch says that it was suggested to him that “Pindar might be suited by a medieval-sounding aureation.” He therefore chose rhyme royal for his stanza, studded the poem with phrases like “beryall firmament on hie” and “gentill and amene,” and closely echoed line 41 of *The Goldin Targe* in the first line: “In Corinth glittering wi gowld and gules.” Probably Garioch’s most daring use of Dunbar, however, occurs in *Ghaisties*, which, like “I that in heill wes and gladnes,” is a meditation on death. Dunbar had written:

This fals world is bot transitory,
The flesche is brukle, the fend is sle.
Timor mortis conturbat me. (ll. 6-8)

But Garioch turns this sober statement into defiance of mortality:

whit tho the flesche be bruckle, and fiends be slee,
the joys of the solid earth we’ll pree or they dwine.
we’ll lauch at daith, and man and the fiend, aa three,
afore we dee.⁶²

It is hardly surprising that the poets to whom Dunbar particularly appeals have much in common with him, and indeed with each other. They delight in the formal aspects of poetry, and are technically versatile; they do not disdain occasional poetry; and many of their best poems are short, witty, humorous or satirical. The most distinguished English example is W. H. Auden, who in 1933 responded to what he called “the extravagant praise of those who have a Scottish axe to grind” with a brief assessment of Dunbar, which is meant to startle (as in the comparison to Prior), but is shrewd and perspicacious:

Dunbar is a drawing-room poet, the same kind of poet as Prior and in a literature where prophets of large ideas and vague language are common, but such poets very rare, a good one—and Dunbar is very good indeed—is particularly welcome... Whatever your taste, pious, gay, melancholy, bawdy, he will write a poem for you,

⁶¹James B. Caird, “Robert Garioch—a Personal Appreciation,” *SLJ*, 10, No. 2 (1983), 76.

⁶²Quotations are from Robert Garioch, *Collected Poems* (Loanhead, 1977), pp. 139, 145, and 14.

apt and elegant. The first gift of such a poet is verse technique, and Dunbar is unfailingly brilliant.⁶³

Auden admired *The Flying of Dunbar and Kennedy*, including two extracts in *The Oxford Book of Light Verse*; he was evidently thinking of this work when he referred to flying as “sheer, high-spirited fun” in his “Ode to the Medieval Poets.”

T. S. Eliot liked *The Flying*, comparing Dunbar’s powers of invective to those of Byron.⁶⁴ Another admirer of Dunbar was the witty Australian poet A. D. Hope, who in 1970 published an eccentric book about *The Twa Mariit Wemen and the Wedo*; he disarmed criticism by calling it not a work of scholarship, but “a tribute of love and admiration to a brother poet.”⁶⁵ A poet with an evident affinity to Dunbar was Gavin Ewart: the opening line of his poem “In a London Bookshop” is: “There’s a Scots poet called Dunbar,” and in it Dunbar is praised as “a master of the lovely line.” Elsewhere Ewart described *The Twa Mariit Wemen and the Wedo* as “530 lines of inspired poetry”; and transferred a phrase from this work, “An old man with his sary lume,” to a bawdy poem of his own called “Magic.”⁶⁶

There can be no question as to which of Dunbar’s poems has been most popular with readers of all kinds, not only poets. Long before Richard Burton, a much greater man, towards the end of his life, recited it from memory. J. G. Lockhart testified how Sir Walter Scott, on an excursion to Douglasdale in July 1831, repeated “almost every stanza of Dunbar’s elegy on the deaths of the Makers.”⁶⁷ This poem is still being quoted by other imaginative writers, including novelists as varied as Michael Innes, George Turner, and Barbara

⁶³Auden’s review of W. Mackay Mackenzie’s edition of Dunbar in *The Criterion*, 12 (1933), p. 677.

⁶⁴T. S. Eliot, *On Poetry and Poets* (London, 1957), p. 206. See also P. Ackroyd, *T. S. Eliot* (London, 1984), p. 194.

⁶⁵A. D. Hope, *A Midsummer’s Eve Dream: Variations on a Theme by William Dunbar* (Edinburgh, 1970), p. 6.

⁶⁶Quotations are, respectively, from *Collected Poems 1980-1990* (London, 1991), p. 272; *TLS*, 19 September, 1980; and *The Deceptive Grin of the Gravel Porters* (London, 1968), p. 55.

⁶⁷John Gibson Lockhart, *Memoirs of the Life of Sir Walter Scott, Bart*, 10 vols. (Edinburgh, 1856-7), X, 85.

Pym.⁶⁸ David Jones's work about the First World War, *In Parenthesis* (1937), includes Dunbar, along with Malory and Chaucer, in a web of literary echoes, largely to do with comradeship in war, and death. It is possible to trace Jones's source quite precisely, through a reference by one of his characters, Private Ball, to an anthology "on India paper," i.e. the first *Oxford Book of English Verse*, edited by Arthur Thomas Quiller-Couch.⁶⁹

Edwin Morgan drew attention to an unexpected reminiscence of Dunbar in Kenneth Rexroth's "Thou shalt not kill: An Elegy for Dylan Thomas" (d. 1953). In this work Rexroth "laid out his own lament for the roll-call of twentieth-century American makars, and, as in Dunbar, he includes well-known names like Ezra Pound and Hart Crane and Vachel Lindsay, together with others that might need a footnote:"

What happened to Robinson,
Who used to stagger down Eighth Street,
Dizzy with solitary gin?

* * *

Timor mortis conturbat me.⁷⁰

Louis MacNeice likewise placed his own tribute to Dylan Thomas within this tradition which Dunbar inaugurated; Canto XVIII of his long "Autumn Sequence" (a section devoted to Thomas) begins with the words 'Lament for the Makers.'⁷¹

Most memorable of all is David Harsent's "The Makers" (1998), which is haunted by Dunbar's poem, along with "The Lyke wake Dirge." The ghosts of Sandy Traill and Blind Harry appear in it, transformed into the modern poet's friends, "friends in drink that night, / that ae night, every night." Death here is imagined as:

the Old Man, larger than life, his eye
like a raptor's, raw and quick, who took

⁶⁸See, respectively, the detective story *Lament for a Maker* (London, 1938); the science fiction novel *Yesterday's Men* (London, 1983), whose hero is called Dunbar; and *Some Tame Gazelle* (London, 1950), p. 191.

⁶⁹David Jones, *In Parenthesis* (London, 1969), p. 95.

⁷⁰E. Morgan, "The Legacy of the Makars," in *European Sun*, p. 91.

⁷¹Louis MacNeice, *Collected Poems* (London, 1979), p. 402.

Bacon that day in Spain, who took Soutine
And Schiele and Rouault, three who knocked me flat

* * *

And took John Keats in a room by the Spanish Steps.

Harsent says, rather curtly, that his poem “trades off” Dunbar, and this is apparent not merely in close echoes of phrasing—“as with the wynd wavis the wicker”—but in the poem’s very structure, a roll-call of the dead.⁷²

In a single article it is impossible to give a comprehensive account of the curious ebb and flow in Dunbar’s reputation over three centuries. Little has been said here, for instance, of the extent to which modern scholarship—more particularly in historical, textual and linguistic studies—has refined our understanding not only of Dunbar but of other early Scottish poets. My purpose in this article has been to call attention not only to the most striking changes in the way readers have perceived Dunbar over the centuries, but also to some important continuities. Dunbar died long ago, but, as Allan Ramsay prophesied, his words still live, particularly, it seems, in the minds of modern poets.

University of Liverpool

⁷²See David Harsent, *A Bird’s Idea of Flight* (London, 1998), pp. 43-9.