

2007

# Reconsidering Dunbar's *Sir Thomas Norny* and Chaucer's Tale of *Sir Thopas*

Deanna Delmar Evans  
*Bemidji State University*

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

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

---

### Recommended Citation

Evans, Deanna Delmar (2007) "Reconsidering Dunbar's *Sir Thomas Norny* and Chaucer's Tale of *Sir Thopas*," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 35: Iss. 1, 444–454.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol35/iss1/33>

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 [dillarda@mailbox.sc.edu](mailto:dillarda@mailbox.sc.edu).

*Deanna Delmar Evans*

Reconsidering Dunbar's *Sir Thomas Norny*  
and Chaucer's Tale of *Sir Thopas*

In recent years the term "Scottish Chaucerian" has fallen into disfavor. This label, applied to a number of late medieval and early modern Scottish poets writing in the Middle Scots dialect, was the brainchild of early twentieth-century scholarship and was prevalent in criticism of the earlier Scottish poets for most of that century. Previously, critics such as Æneas J. G. Mackay who wrote the Introduction for the great nineteenth-century Scottish Text Society edition of Dunbar's poetry, were more cautious about naming Chaucerian influence on Dunbar.<sup>1</sup> Yet by 1898, Dunbar had been described as Chaucer's "greatest disciple,"<sup>2</sup> and soon afterwards, G. Gregory Smith, in the influential *Cambridge History of English Literature*, referred to Dunbar and the other

---

<sup>1</sup>*The Poems of William Dunbar*, ed. John Small, Æ. J. G. Mackay, W. Gregor, Scottish Text Society, First Series, 2, 4, 16, 21, 29 (1884-93), III, cxlvi; Mackay indicates that only two poems by Dunbar display evidence of "Chaucerian imitation," and they are the *Tretis of the Two Mariit Wemen and the Wedo* and the lines on the empty purse.

<sup>2</sup>T. F. Henderson, *Scottish Vernacular Literature: A Succinct History* (London, 1898), p. 185; he qualifies this designation, however, by noting that Dunbar "could be truly great neither as a Chaucerian nor as a Scoto-Frenchman, but as essentially a Scottish poet," p. 185.

early Scottish poets as the "Scottish Chaucerians."<sup>3</sup> Thus was the direction of Dunbar criticism established for approximately the next seventy-five years.<sup>4</sup>

The development of critical theory in the late twentieth century has resulted in a reassessment of the achievements of Dunbar and the other Scottish poets. The revised perception is seen in the definition of "Scottish Chaucerian" in recent editions of *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, for it contains a cautionary note: "the debt [to Chaucer] is now regarded as negligible or indirect in most cases."<sup>5</sup> Yet the term "Scottish Chaucerian" continues to be used, albeit with less frequency, and primarily for the purpose of classification. Yet whenever it is used, it still suggests the possibility of Chaucerian influence or imitation.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, old attitudes die hard. Thus the onset of the twenty-first century seems an opportune time to re-examine the appropriateness of the Chaucerian label for Dunbar. And what better way to do so than to re-examine what has been called "the *one* poem of Dunbar's which we can say with confidence is derived from his own careful reading of Chaucer"<sup>7</sup> [emphasis added]. In this statement Elizabeth Eddy is referring to Dunbar's short narrative poem, *Schir Thomas Norny*, which has long been perceived as a conscious imitation of Chaucer's comic tale of *Sir Thopas*, the tale told by the fictional narrator of the *Canterbury Tales*.

As a preface to our new examination of the *Norny* poem and the *Thopas* tale, it is worth reviewing the primary reasons that convinced earlier critics that Dunbar's poem is in some way imitative of Chaucer's tale, or at the very least,

---

<sup>3</sup>A. W. Ward and A. R. Waller, eds., *The Cambridge History of English Literature*, 15 vols. (New York, 1908), II, 272.

<sup>4</sup>A few critics disagreed, most notably C. S. Lewis, who in *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century Excluding Drama* (Oxford, 1954), p. 97, asserts that the "Chaucerian" epithet should be removed from the Scottish poets, especially Dunbar, since Dunbar lacks what is best in Chaucer and vice versa.

<sup>5</sup>Margaret Drabble, ed., *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* (Oxford, 1998), p. 187.

<sup>6</sup>Upholding this viewpoint is Douglas Gray, "Some Chaucerian Themes in Scottish Writers," in *Chaucer Traditions: Essays in Honour of Derek Brewer*, ed., Ruth Morse and Barry Windeatt (Cambridge, 1990), p. 81, who comments that the "title of 'Scottish Chaucerian'...always did more harm than good, not only because it suggested an exaggerated degree of dependence, but also because by focussing [sic] attention on what is simply one strand—although an important one—in the Scottish literary tradition, it distracted attention from the extraordinary variety of that tradition."

<sup>7</sup>Elizabeth Roth Eddy, "Sir Thopas and Sir Thomas Norny: Romance Parody in Chaucer and Dunbar," in *Review of English Studies*, New Series, 22 (1971), 402. Henceforth Eddy.

thought to have been inspired by it. Certainly, both works are anti-chivalric, and so both works have been considered romance parodies in which a bourgeois knight is the comic hero. The works also share some basic structural similarities, including a minstrel incipit and "tail-rhyme" stanzas. In 1910 F. B. Snyder offered the first significant comparative study of the two and based most of his argument on these facts. He contends that Dunbar "was consciously imitating *Sir Thopas*," and that the two writers shared a "similarity of satirical purpose."<sup>8</sup> Subsequent critics of the *Norny* poem have continued to compare it with *Sir Thopas*. Yet, as Priscilla Bawcutt comments: "The comparison has proved unfortunate for Dunbar," seeming "to imply that his poem is merely second-hand and derivative."<sup>9</sup> Bawcutt, believes, however, that "the first seed for *Norny* was undoubtedly planted in Dunbar's mind by *Sir Thopas*" (*Makar*, p. 208).

To be sure, Dunbar occasionally honors Chaucer in a poem, as did most of his contemporaries. It was a common thing to do, a way to indicate one's own place in the history of poetry. Dunbar's best-known tribute to Chaucer is found in the envoi to *The Goldyn Targe* where Dunbar praises the English poet as "reuerend Chaucere, rose of rethoris all" (59, l. 253).<sup>10</sup> But Chaucer is not the only earlier poet Dunbar praises in that envoi; he also mentions "morall Gower and Ludgate laureate," both of whom he finds to possess "sugurit lippis and tongis aureate" (ll. 262-3). Dunbar's praise of the three earlier English poets,<sup>11</sup> while no doubt sincere, also serves an ulterior motive. Dunbar follows the practice of many poets of his day who, by inviting comparisons with established poets, subtly draw attention to the merits of their own poetry.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup>F. B. Snyder, "Sir Thomas Norray and Sir Thopas," in *Modern Language Notes*, 25 (1910), 78-80.

<sup>9</sup>*Dunbar the Makar* (Oxford, 1992), p. 208. Henceforth *Makar*.

<sup>10</sup>This and all other quotations from Dunbar's poetry cited in this essay, unless otherwise noted, are from *The Poems of William Dunbar*, ed. Priscilla Bawcutt, 2 vols. (Glasgow, 1998), and will be noted parenthetically in the text of this essay by poem numbers and line numbers. Henceforth *Poems*.

<sup>11</sup>*Poems*, II, 430. In her commentary to the poetic passage, Bawcutt states, "This eulogy of the trio of great medieval English poets shows Dunbar embracing the poetic traditions associated with Chaucer."

<sup>12</sup>Denton Fox, "The Scottish Chaucerians," in *Chaucer and the Chaucerians*, ed. Derek S. Brewer (University, AL, 1966), p. 168, argues that "the 'Scottish Chaucerians' grew in personal stature by acknowledging a debt to Chaucer, Gower, and Lydgate for such acknowledgment implies that they are 'modern, sophisticated and technically skillful poets.'"

Critical theorist Harold Bloom, during the last quarter of the twentieth century, has revolutionized thinking about ways to assess poetic influence. Bloom argues that the history of poetry is essentially the history of influence.<sup>13</sup> However, Bloom's concept of the nature of poetic influence is quite different from that of traditional critics like Snyder. According to Bloom, "The profundities of poetic influence cannot be reduced to source-study, the history of ideas, or to the patterning of images" (*Anxiety*, p. 7). Instead, Bloom argues, "poetic strength comes only from a triumphant wrestling [by a "strong poet"] with the greatest of the dead, and from an even more triumphant solipsism."<sup>14</sup> Surely Dunbar, who addresses "reuerend Chaucere" in his solipsistic envoi, did "wrestle" with his great precursor. But is there evidence of such a struggle with the master in the comic *Norny* poem?

Elizabeth Roth Eddy, in what is probably the most thorough critical study of the two works (although published more than thirty years ago), points out the many ways in which Dunbar's poem is quite different from Chaucer's *Sir Thopas* even as she attempts to explain how it is indebted to the tale. She offers several convincing details to illustrate the differences between Chaucer's tale and the *Norny* poem. She notes that "the 'doggerel' element is less pronounced in Dunbar's burlesque," the balance between social and literary satire is different since "Norny, Quenetyne, and Curry [all named in the poem] were real members of the court," and the *Norny* poem is "more enclosed in the occasion for which it was written."<sup>15</sup> For the latter two reasons, she believes that Dunbar's poem grew out of a real argument.

Like Eddy, I find many differences between the two works, and, therefore, I find little justification for any claims that Dunbar in his *Norny* poem intentionally imitated Chaucer the Pilgrim's *Sir Thopas* tale. Although it is likely that Dunbar knew Chaucer's tale, as would any literate poet of his time, there is no reason to assume that it directly influenced his poem. The present study, unlike earlier ones described above, dispenses with the assumption that the poem is undeniably indebted to Chaucer's tale and instead will continue to explore the many differences between the two works.

One crucial difference that tends to be ignored by earlier critics of the Scottish Chaucerian mindset, is that there is no evidence of conscious self-par-

---

<sup>13</sup>Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence* (Oxford, 1973), p. 5. Henceforth *Anxiety*.

<sup>14</sup>*A Map of Misreading* (Oxford, 1975), p. 9. Henceforth *Map*.

<sup>15</sup>Eddy, pp. 406-8; she adds to her argument by providing linguistic evidence, noting that there are words of "Southern and archaic colouring" in *Norny* not present in other poems by Dunbar surrounding it in the Maitland MS; however, Bawcutt, in *Makar*, effectively destroys that argument, and a similar one made later by J. A. Burrow; Bawcutt, p. 360, observes that "the only southern features...are a few spellings, such as *non* and *evermore*, which were common in late sixteenth-century copies of Scottish texts."

ody in Dunbar's poem. His purpose, it would seem, is not to satirize a literary tradition or to poke fun at himself but to make fun of some other individuals, real people, whom he possibly but not necessarily disliked, and who in all probability contributed to festivities at the court of James IV. As Eddy explains, Dunbar's short poem is a local poem written to honor a known court jester, a real person who played a role in some court festivity, particularly those carnival activities of the Christmas and Easter seasons. At such times a court fool may well have been elected "lord" of the dance/masque. In support of this claim, Eddy noted an entry in the *Accounts of the Lord High Treasurer of Scotland* for the years 1511-12 in which both the name and a significant epithet appear: "Thomas Norny, fule."<sup>16</sup> This piece of evidence effectively eliminates the earlier suggestion of J. W. Baxter who had theorized that Norny perhaps was not "a professional jester" but "a braggart, whom Dunbar skillfully ridiculed."<sup>17</sup>

In her insightful discussion of the *Norny* poem, Priscilla Bawcutt emphasizes the need to evaluate Dunbar's poem on its own merits rather than according to how it compares with Chaucer's *Thopas*. By approaching it in this way, Bawcutt endorses James Kinsley's suggestion, made in his edition of Dunbar's poetry, that the poem is not a "burlesque romance," but a "mock-eulogy."<sup>18</sup> Bawcutt describes the technique as follows: "Dunbar...repeatedly calls him [Norny] a knight, and sings his praises, with enthusiasm but mounting absurdity, as if he were a hero," (*Makar*, p. 207). She also points out that while Chaucer refers to many medieval romances in his burlesque romance, Dunbar uses different literary models and many "were much closer to hand" including Scottish songs, poems, ballads, and *The Gest of Robyn Hode* (*Makar*, p. 209). Thus Bawcutt offers a different vantage point for viewing the *Norny* poem, one more Scottish and more contemporaneous with Dunbar.

The suggestion by Kinsley and reinforced by Bawcutt that the *Norny* poem belongs to a different genre than Chaucer's helps pave the way for a revisionist reading of Dunbar's poem. (Here I use the term as Harold Bloom defines it: "The revisionist strives to see again, so as to *estime* and *estimate* differently, so as then to *aim* 'correctively'" [Bloom's *Map*, p. 4]. If the *Norny* poem is not a "burlesque romance" but a "mock eulogy," then it belongs to the kind of poetry that is Dunbar's *forté*—satiric poetry directed at real persons, not types. As such, we can conclude that instead of being a romance parody,

<sup>16</sup>Eddy, pp. 406-407; Bawcutt, *Makar*, pp. 60-61, in her discussion of this poem, provides a detailed discussion about fools and other entertainers at the court of James IV.

<sup>17</sup>J. W. Baxter, *William Dunbar: A Biographical Study*. (Edinburgh, 1952), p. 129.

<sup>18</sup>*The Poems of William Dunbar*, ed. James Kinsley (Oxford, 1979), p. 300. Henceforth Kinsley.

as *Sir Thopas* is, the *Norny* poem is one of several short, humorous poems Dunbar frequently wrote to celebrate events and individuals at court, such as the famous *Flyting* with Walter Kennedy. Instead of being identified as a Chaucerian imitation, the *Norny* poem should be linked with Dunbar's own work in this genre.

One such poem begins "Sir Ihon Sinclair begowth to dance" (No. 70). In the fourth stanza of this poem, Dunbar comically describes himself as a dancer:

Than cam in Dunbar the mackar:  
 On all the flwre thair was nan frackar,  
 And thair he dancet the dirrye dantoun.  
 He hoppet lyk a pillie wanton,  
 For luff of Mwsgraeffe, men tellis me.  
 He trippet quhill he tint his panton.  
 A mirrear dance mycht na man see (*ll.* 22-8).

This cameo self-portrait is as close as Dunbar comes to creating anything like Chaucer's comedic self-portrait in *The Canterbury Tales*. In fact I would argue that the paucity of jokes at his own expense is yet another difference between Dunbar's writing and Chaucer's.

While Dunbar seems critical of James IV in some poems, it seems clear that he most certainly did not write the *Norny* poem to upset the social order of James's court. Edmund Reiss's speculation that the poem "may be even more an oblique criticism of chivalry, at least as it existed at James's court"<sup>19</sup> seems without warrant. Bawcutt, who also disagrees with Reiss in this instance, is on target when she observes, "Dunbar's other poetry does not support the idea that he was sympathetic to social mobility, or found chivalry farcical" (*Makar*, p. 21). Concurring with Bawcutt, I find nothing in *Norny* to suggest that King James should refrain from sponsoring extravagant tournaments.

If the *Norny* poem and Chaucer's tale belong to different genres, then differences in authorial intent should also be evident. And indeed they are. As a part of *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer's *Sir Thopas* was written to parody a literary form, the knightly romance, and also to add to the portrait of its fictional narrator, who in the telling of his borrowed tale, is humorously revealed as what one critic calls an "artless transcriber."<sup>20</sup> Dunbar, on the other hand, provides no textual clues to his narrator's identity. We must assume that the narrator is the poet himself rather than some fictional persona. In addition, the targets of criticism in the two poems are very different. Chaucer's *Sir Thopas* is a fictional character, and Chaucer's attack is directed less toward the knight per se than it is toward the genre that produced absurd romance heroes; more-

<sup>19</sup>William Dunbar (Boston, 1979), p. 52.

<sup>20</sup>Lisa J. Kiser, *Truth and Textuality in Chaucer's Poetry* (Hanover, NH, 1991), p. 117.

over, with comic self-abasement, Chaucer alludes to his own writing as little more than the retelling of other people's tales. But in Dunbar's poem, a finger is pointed at a living person other than the narrator, perhaps as Eddy pointed out, the "fule" documented in the Scottish Treasurer's *Accounts*.

While earlier critics have provided lengthy comparisons of the two poems, especially of their verbal similarities, close scrutiny indicates only a few verbal similarities and these could well be coincidental. Bloom asserts that "Poetic influence...has almost nothing to do with the verbal resemblances between one poet and another," (*Map*, p. 19). If this statement appears radical, we need only recall that there are indeed "verbal similarities" between Chaucer's *Sir Thopas* and Dunbar's dignified elegy written in honor of the respected Scottish knight, Bernard Stewart, the Lord of Aubigny (No. 23). Thopas and Stewart are both called "the flour of chevelrie" (l. 8) and the red gemstone, the carbuncle, is used in both works to symbolize knightly worthiness. Bawcutt, for a similar illustrative purpose, makes a brief comparison of Dunbar's *Nornay* and the Stewart elegy, and points out that while such images invite laughter in *Thopas*, they generate respect for Stewart in the elegy (*Makar*, p. 208). These comparisons should create wariness about the reliability of the evidence of verbal similarities.

One example of a verbal similarity in the *Nornay* poem and in the *Thopas* tale is the description of the main character. Thopas is called "fair and gent" (VII, 715),<sup>21</sup> while Nornay in the first line is said to be "ane gentill knyght...." But could Dunbar not also in this instance be parodying the tradition of bourgeois romances just as Chaucer had? Certainly the verbal similarities do not convey the same message in the two poems. This is evident in the way Chaucer and Dunbar construct the genealogies of their respective knights. Sir Thopas is depicted as the son of a free man of Flanders, a reference clearly denoting his middle-class origins. Thopas displays a middle-class mentality when he sets out to seek "the queene of Fayerye" (VII, 814) for his lover. This inappropriate quest object indicates that he is too dense to understand the fairy lore of aristocratic romances. Dunbar's Sir Nornay, on the other hand, is given no less than supernatural origins: he is the son of a giant and of the "farie queyne" (ll. 4-5). The unlikely pairing of these two groups may also reflect Nornay's bourgeois misunderstanding of medieval fairy lore. Finally, as Bawcutt points out, "giants and elf-queens...are hardly unique to Chaucer" (*Makar*, p. 209).

Another point that the main characters, Sir Thomas and Sir Thopas, have in common is that both "knights" show skill in middle-class sports rather than in aristocratic war games like jousting. But again there are differences in the

---

<sup>21</sup>This and all other quotations of Chaucer's *Sir Thopas* are taken from *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry Benson, 3rd edn. (Boston, 1987), and will henceforth be noted in the text by fragment number and line number.



way their skills are described. Chaucer's narrator says that Thopas is "a good archeer" and has no peer at wrestling (VII, 739-40). Dunbar instead provides an illustration of Norny's behavior at public wrestling exhibitions:

He hes att werslingis bein ane hunder,  
Ȝet lay his body neuer at wunder (*ll.* 22-23).

As an archer, Norny is said to surpass the great champion

Was never vyld Robein wnder bewch,  
Nor Ȝet Roger off Clakniskleuch  
So bauld a berne as he;  
Gy off Gysburne na Allan Bell,  
Na Simonis sonnes off Quhynefell  
At schot war neuer so slie (*ll.* 25-30).

Chaucer does not allude to the heroes of popular ballads even if he perhaps has knowledge of them; instead, since his intention was romance parody, he compares Sir Thopas with heroes of popular fourteenth-century romances: "Horn child," "Ypotys," "Beves," "sir Gy," "sir Lybeux and Pleyndamour" (VII, 898-900). Dunbar, on the other hand, alludes to only one romance hero; he compares Norny with "Schir Bevis the knyght off Southe Hamptowne" (*l.* 35), and, as Bawcutt points out, that romance was still being told in Scotland during the reign of James IV (*Makar*, p 208).

In both works the apparent purity of the respective knights is called into question, but in quite dissimilar ways. Sir Thopas is described as possessing a kind of feminine beauty; indeed, Chaucer's description of him would be more suitable for a romance heroine. Thopas has "lippes rede as rose" and, like his narrator's fellow pilgrim, the Prioress, "a semely nose" (VII, 726 & 729). Then with skillful "verbal coordination,"<sup>22</sup> a rhetorical device that helped him provide many of the comic high points of this tale, Chaucer casts doubt upon Thopas's maiden-like chastity:

But he was chaast and no lechour,  
And sweete as is the brembul flour (VII, 745-6).

Such feminine characteristics are absent from Dunbar's description of Norny. Rather than asserting his knight's maidenly purity, Dunbar denies charges to the contrary, charges apparently made by a person called Quenetyne:

---

<sup>22</sup>Walter Scheps, "Sir Thopas: the Bourgeois Knight, the Minstrel and the Critics," *Tennessee Studies in Literature*, 11 (1966), 38, explains Chaucer's use of this technique in the tale.

Thairfoir Quenetyne was bot a lurdane,  
 That callit him ane full plum iurdane,  
     This wyse and worthie knycht.  
 He callit him fowlar than a full,  
 He said he was ane licherus bull,  
     That croynd baith day and nycht (ll. 37-42).

Norny is called a "full plum iurdane" [a full chamber pot], and if that image were not explanatory enough, some three lines later Quenetyne is quoted as having called him a lecherous bull that groaned both day and night. Taken together, these images leave little doubt about Norny's sexual preference and appetite.

A further indication of dissimilarity between the two works is the fact that Dunbar makes mention of Quenetyne and of Curry, both persons who apparently held positions at James's court. Chaucer's *Sir Thopas* makes no reference to real people. It seems safe to assume that the people Dunbar names would have been known by his intended audience. According to Kinsley, Quenetyne, who is named in the lines cited above as Norny's character assassin, may be the poet "Quintyne Schaw" referred to in Dunbar's *Flyting* (No. 65, l. 131) and "apparently the author of an earlier skit on Norny" (Kinsley, p. 302). If so, then it also seems likely that Dunbar was engaged in some type of court flyting with Quenetyne and that the *Norny* poem is a response to some previous poem. A third person, Curry, is named in the eighth stanza, and he is accused of having "befyld tua" saddles (l. 48). Although hardly a flattering image, it is not inappropriate when we note that several critics agree that Curry was a "court fool" as was his wife "Daft Anne of Linlithgow."<sup>23</sup>

Also not found in Chaucer's tale are Dunbar's many less than complimentary allusions to Highlanders. These, along with references to real people of James's court, also contribute to the localized nature of Dunbar's poem. Perhaps the real Norny was from a region north of Edinburgh, and Dunbar, with his customary Lowland prejudice, turned this fact into a source of ethnic humor. Norny is said to excel in "Rois and Murray land" (l. 12) and to have chased "Full mony catherinein" and "cummerid mony Helland gaist" among "thay dully glennis" (ll. 13-15). Norny also is accused of having "drawe as oxin" twenty score "off the glen Quhettane" (ll. 16-17), "a clan," according to Kinsley, "which 'hevely trublit' the north, and was one of the combatants in the battle of the clans at Perth in 1396" (Kinsley, p. 301).

Finally, closure in the two poems is quite different. Chaucer's *Thopas* remains deliberately incomplete, for in that "greater poem" of which it is a part, this "tale" so infuriates that fictional exponent of middle-class literary tastes, Harry the Host, that the recitation is stopped and evaluated as being "nat worth

---

<sup>23</sup>Kinsley, p. 302; see also Ian S. Ross, *William Dunbar* (Leiden, 1981), p. 65, 182.

a toord!" (VII, 930). Such self-mockery is absent in Dunbar's poem; instead, as illustrated above, Dunbar ridicules three people while remaining at a distance, a suggestion of his superiority to them. Moreover, unlike "Chaucer the Pilgrim," Dunbar is able to conclude his poem effectively. In the last stanza he appoints Norny to serve as a kind of "master of ceremonies" for fools who participate in Christmas and Easter, especially pre-Lenten, celebrations:

Quhairfoir euer at Pesche and 3ull  
I cry him lord of euere full  
That in this regeone duellis;  
And verralie that war gryt rycht,  
For off ane hy renowned knyght  
He wantis no thing bot bellis (ll. 49-54).

The final line indicates that Norny lacks only a jester's cap with bells. This line, although bringing closure to the poem, could also be serving as an introduction to some court event. It seems to introduce Norny to an audience assembled for some type of festive performance. Its tone is that of mocking carnival humor.

This brief study in contrasts illustrates how much Dunbar's *Norny* poem differs from Chaucer's tale of *Thopas*. There are differences in authorial intent, in genre, and in content. Dunbar's method of characterizing his bourgeois knight is very different from Chaucer's. While Chaucer's Sir Thopas is effeminate, Dunbar's Sir Thomas has the sexual urges of a lecherous bull. While Chaucer looks to literary models to sustain a literary parody, Dunbar, when he uses literary allusion, looks to popular, often Scottish, poems and ballads, and his purpose is less to parody a kind of literature than to attack real people, individuals known to his intended audience. In other words, Dunbar clearly was writing for some specific occasion.

We can never fully appreciate Dunbar's humor at the expense of persons he names, for they remain as mere names to us. At best we can search for their names in official court documents and perhaps learn that they were the recipients of a royal gift. But even if such evidence were to be found, we can never know the personalities or personal histories of Norny and Quenetyne, and thus, we are prevented from experiencing fully the impact of Dunbar's satire. Dunbar's joke remains private, and in this respect the *Norny* poem differs most noticeably from Chaucer's *Thopas* tale.

Yet when evaluated on its own merits, Dunbar's poem contains much that is admirable. Dunbar has managed to incorporate real people into what appears to be a fictional narrative and by so doing has diminished the people. He has used a mock-eulogy to disparage living persons. Moreover, the last stanza of the poem suggests that Dunbar could have written the *Norny* poem for a particular court festivity and that the poem itself was to be part of the entertainment. In spite of the outrageous charges made about Norny in the poem,

most of the insults fall into the category of hearsay, hence Dunbar's attack on Norny is relatively benign. Perhaps the poem should be compared with the contemporary tradition of well-known personalities being honored by a "roast," a festive, public event in which popular celebrities are "honored" by their peers who toast them with insulting but funny speeches.

Unless some new documentation is discovered, it is not likely that we will ever know the occasion for which Dunbar wrote the *Norny* poem. But this re-examination of the relationship between the *Norny* poem and the *Thopas* tale indicates that Dunbar's Sir Thomas Norny is not the literary heir of Sir Thopas, even if Dunbar was familiar with Chaucer's tale of *Sir Thopas* (as he undoubtedly was). Instead, the many important differences between the two works, including authorial intent, genre, and content, when taken together, indicate that there is no justification for assuming that Dunbar wrote the *Norny* poem to imitate Chaucer. It is far more likely that Dunbar had some immediate reason, no doubt related to some organized activity at James's court, to write the *Norny* poem.

*Sir Thomas Norny* will continue to stand on its own merits even as it continues to entertain, and modern critical theorists, such as Bloom, can help us better understand an earlier poet's intention. I would conclude that the work is not derivative of Chaucer's except, perhaps, in the Harold Bloom sense of derivation. Perhaps Dunbar conceived of a model for the *Norny* poem from his reading of Chaucer's *Thopas*—that would be evidence of the continuation of the history of poetry through influence as Bloom has described such influence. However, since Dunbar's work is in the poet's own voice, that voice boldly naming Sir Norny as "lord of evere ful," Dunbar shows that he is not tied to his literary model. In the *Norny* poem Dunbar reveals himself as a poet strong enough to take an invention of the master and to make it his own by re-inventing it as a mock eulogy, a form clearly better suited for Dunbar's talent and also more fitting for his local and presumably festive purpose. Thus, in composing his poem, Dunbar abandons Chaucer's techniques: the *Norny* poem evidences his triumphant solipsism—a degree of victory for Dunbar over Chaucer's influential model.

*Bemidji State University*