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Deanna Delmar Evans

Ambivalent Artifice in Dunbar's *The Thrissill and the Rois*



Dunbar's splendid garden of allegorical figures in *The Thrissill and the Rois* constitutes a problem for many serious students because the dazzling imagery in a "landscape splashed with exuberant color"<sup>1</sup> seems to communicate little, to use the words of Legouis, that "touches the heart or the mind."<sup>2</sup> Moreover, even after one allows for permissible extravagance to announce a politically-arranged marriage, the poet's borrowed conventions of the traditional May morning, the dream vision, the lovely garden, the heraldic symbolism provoke many of his warmest admirers to decry the artificiality, the foreignness of the poem.<sup>3</sup> Its studied elegance turns

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<sup>1</sup>Albert C. Baugh, *A Literary History of England* (New York, 1948), p. 318.

<sup>2</sup>Emile Legouis, *A History of English Literature*, tr. Helen Douglas Irvine (New York, Macmillan, 1960; 1st pub. 1926), p. 169.

<sup>3</sup>For example, Tom Scott in *Dunbar: A Critical Exposition of the Poems* (Edinburgh, 1966), p. 48, contends that the poem suffers from excessive imitation of convention and calls it corrupted by "the decadence of the court poetry of the time"; Edmund Reiss, *William Dunbar* (Boston, 1979), pp. 48-9 observes that the poem is "excessive in the use of artifice" and urges the modern reader to be tolerant because aureate terms "were a way of poetic experimentation, a means of allowing the vernacular to participate in the high style and to equal the languages of Antiquity."

away readers who seek a more genuine Dunbar in poems with colloquial Scots language, political satire, and earthly realism. We may allay the “problem” of excessive artifice, however, by studying the poet’s tactics as he in fact encourages our awareness of the problem. The problem is part of his message.

By his very use of a dream vision, Dunbar invites us to wonder about the reliability of his description; his reluctant narrator persona complains of being asked to write about that which he does not believe in; contrasts in levels of language underscore this discrepancy. Moreover, the series of formal contracts in the three parliaments, allegorized as beasts, birds, and flowers, could be seen in light of preceding signals, not just as ennobled causes for celebration but also as warnings against wishful thinking. In short, there is ambivalence in this artifice.<sup>4</sup> While Dunbar, through the narrator, communicates a truly beautiful and idealistic scene which every Scotsman would like to believe is true, he also warns us to remember that all this loveliness gilds over the harsher reality of contemporary political and social life.

The important signal of rhetorical intention comes in the poor “slugird’s” response to Lady May’s command to wake up and write something in her honor about the beautiful day:

Quhairto, quod I, Sall I uprys at morrow  
 For in this May few birdis herd I sing?  
 Thai haif moir caus to weip and plane thair sorrow,  
 Thy air it is nocht holsum nor benyng;  
 Lord Eolus dois in thy sessone ring;  
 So busteous ar the blastis of his horne,  
 Amang thy bewis to walk I haif forborne.  
 (ll. 29-35)<sup>5</sup>

In this response, we find more than a homely, comic touch characterizing an inept poet persona. The references to foul weather alert us to the discrepancy between observable Scots reality and the glorified tone of what the lady asks for and receives. To awaken a questioning attitude in his audience as well, Dunbar combines the inevitable uncertainties of a dream

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<sup>4</sup>Professor David V. Harrington of Gustavus Adolphus College suggested the term *ambivalent artifice* to me after reading through an earlier version of this paper; I am grateful to him for this and other suggestions which I have incorporated into the present version.

<sup>5</sup>*The Poems of William Dunbar*, edited by James Kinsley (Oxford, 1979), pp. 141-6. This and all other line references to the poem are from this edition.

vision with a grouchy narrator who directly challenges the legitimacy of his writing assignment.

Parallel contrasts in diction further enhance this early signal of rhetorical design. The narrator ends his stanza describing the unpleasant god of the winds in homely, alliterative lines. In contrast, Lady May renews her demand for a song, this time in praise of the rose, finishing her stanza in concentrated aureate terms:

Go see the birdis how thay sing and dance,  
Illumynit our with orient skyis brycht  
Annamyllit richely with new asur lycht  
(ll. 40-42)

Dunbar, of course, cannot be accused of telling us that his narrator is right and Lady May is wrong. Rather, he shows us that a court poet is sometimes encouraged to describe things more favorably than seems natural in a grumpy, early morning mood.

Such was Dunbar's attitude towards the task he had at hand, praising the royal wedding of James IV and Margaret Tudor. Clearly its history was not the stuff of which drams are made, and Dunbar was neither hypocrite nor fool. Margaret Tudor was a child when her father, Henry VII, offered her to James as a bride in 1495. No doubt Henry's proposal was prompted by James' activity at the time, providing military support to Perkin Warbeck, a Yorkist pretender to Henry's throne. James, instead of accepting the proposal, collaborated with Henry's enemy—Margaret, Duchess of Burgundy and sister to the late Edward IV—and with her troops mounted an unsuccessful invasion of England. Only after suffering military defeat and ratifying a truce with Henry in 1499,<sup>6</sup> did James agree to the marriage proposal. In the fall of 1501, James sent a delegation to England, which seems to have included William Dunbar among its members,<sup>7</sup> to negotiate treaties for the marriage. Eventually three separate documents were drawn up and signed by the commissioners on January 24, 1502. The royal wedding took place on August 8, 1503 at Holyrood Abbey; then James waited yet another month to claim his bride so that Margaret would have attained the mature age of thirteen years and ten months.<sup>8</sup> By this time James was nearly middle-aged and notorious for

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<sup>6</sup>R.L. Mackie, *King James IV of Scotland: A Brief Survey of His Life and Times* (Edinburgh, 1958), p. 93.

<sup>7</sup>John W. Baxter, *William Dunbar: A Biographical Study* (Edinburgh, 1952), pp. 89; 91-2.

<sup>8</sup>Mackie, p. 97.

libertine activities. Indeed it was rumored that Margaret Drummond, one of his favorite companions, was poisoned so that he would have no second thoughts about entering the marriage.<sup>9</sup>

The royal wedding was performed with great pomp and ceremony. Perhaps, as in Chaucer's "Merchant's Tale," Venus laughed; for James did become a knight in armor for his bride, riding out to Dalkeith to meet her entourage as it journeyed north from England. There unhelmeted, with red hair and beard waving in the wind, he greeted Margaret with a kiss and escorted her to jousts, pageants, balls, and feasts held in their honor along the way.<sup>10</sup> Festivities continued throughout the time before the wedding and for five days thereafter.<sup>11</sup> A fortune was spent on dress,<sup>12</sup> feasts, music architectural renovations (such as new windows for Holyrood Palace adorned with thistles and roses),<sup>13</sup> at least one magnificent book of hours,<sup>14</sup> and no doubt a few commissioned poems.

*The Thrissill and the Rois* was Dunbar's contribution to the wedding festivities. For a poet inclined to satire, the task of honoring this arranged marriage must have appeared difficult. Dunbar need not have been part of the marriage delegation to discern the discrepancies in age and sophistication between James and Margaret. Indeed, we see hints of the January-May motif in the poem: in the introductory stanzas the personification of

<sup>9</sup>Ian Simpson Ross, *William Dunbar* (Leiden, 1981), p. 53; Ross also points out that shortly after the wedding James goes to visit Janet Kennedy, Drummond's replacement, at the Castle of Darnaway, which he had given to her (p. 58); Ranald Nicolson, *Scotland: The Later Middle Ages* (New York, 1974), pp. 553-5, discusses James' three favorites and his children by them.

<sup>10</sup>Baxter, pp. 116-7; Ross, pp. 54-5.

<sup>11</sup>Ross, p. 58.

<sup>12</sup>Ross, p. 58, indicates that James' two gowns cost £600 apiece; Leslie MacFarlane, "The Book of Hours of James IV and Margaret Tudor," *The Innes Review*, 11 (1960), 6, indicates that the cloth alone of Margaret's state dress cost £219.

<sup>13</sup>Baxter, p. 113; Ross, p. 56.

<sup>14</sup>This book is described in great detail by Leslie MacFarlane, pp. 3-21, who also provides several illustrations; presently it is housed in the manuscript collection in the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek in Vienna, Codex Lat. 1897; according to MacFarlane it "was almost certainly a gift to Margaret Tudor on the occasion of her marriage to James IV."

May is dressed in the Tudor colors<sup>15</sup>—"quhyt, reid, broun and blew" (l.19)—and thereby linked with Margaret; the older James, bold and impetuous, is suggested by the allegorical figure of the cold, blustery wind god Eolus who rings in his "sessone" (l.33). (A pun on *season/session* surely is intended here as a humorous comment on James' oratorical power in the Scottish Parliament.) Yet the joke is gentle, and Dunbar succeeds in creating a majestic epithalamium that offends no one. In this respect the poem is "a triumph of fruitful obedience to conventions," as C.S. Lewis once commented.<sup>16</sup> Dunbar's triumph, however, results not from slavish imitation of earlier courtly poems but from his innovative manipulation of diction and exploitation of the dream vision form. As A.C. Spearing observes, Dunbar uses the dream vision structure to explore ideas, especially to grapple with the problem of reality versus fiction: "In the more specific terms of this particular poem, the art of poetry merges into that of heraldry—both modes of artifice which convey meaning not by imitating the surface appearance of every day reality, but by stepping back from it, selecting certain objects, and transforming them into the symbols of ideas."<sup>17</sup> By mythopoeic transformation of real people and events into fictional personae and heraldic symbols, Dunbar depicts first his own struggles in writing the poems and then honors the marriage and Scotland's new queen without violating his artistic integrity. He does this by honoring the marriage for what it was intended to be—a peace treaty—and Margaret for her role in it—a peace token. Had he tried to present a young woman named Margaret as a peace symbol, he would have degraded her by ignoring all other aspects of her personality; however, by reducing her to the Tudor rose, he was able to focus on a single aspect of her existence. Similarly, he so reduced James and the marriage treaties. In the process Dunbar explained the political hopes for the marriage and included a brief lesson on kingship, possibly incorporating ideas garnered from *De regno, Ad Regem Cypri* by St. Thomas Aquinas.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Boutell's *Heraldry*, revised by C.W. Scott-Giles and J.P. Brook-Little (London, 1950; rev., 1966), p. 211, lists the Tudor colors and indicates also that the Tudor badge is a rising sun or half sun.

<sup>16</sup>*English Literature in the Sixteenth Century Excluding Drama* (Oxford, 1952; rpt. 1962), p. 91.

<sup>17</sup>*Medieval Dream-Poetry* (Cambridge, 1976), p. 195.

<sup>18</sup>J.C. Nitzche, "The Rose of Kingship in William Dunbar's *Thrissill and the Rois*," *University of Mississippi Studies in English*, 2 (1981), 25-35, argues that Dunbar incorporates Aquinas' ideas into the poem.

Only a master of ambivalent artifice could succeed in such a task. Dunbar carefully blends colloquial, heraldic, and aureate diction throughout the poem to convey multiple meanings. The opening lines of the poem demonstrate his verbal artistry:

Quhen Merche wes with variand windis past  
 And Appryll had with hir silver schouris  
 Tane leif at Nature with ane orient blast....  
 (ll. 1-3)

These lines are an obvious imitation of the opening lines of Chaucer's "General Prologue," but the final word, *blast*, is our signal that this poem is not another "Chaucerian" imitation. With onomatopoeic effect this colloquial word forces us to re-evaluate what we are reading. At the same time it is our first clue that the poem's narrator is an inept, reluctant, and uninspired poet. Simultaneously, the same lines prepare us for the heraldic allegory to follow. The modifier *orient* (which Dunbar places parallel to the word *silver* in the line before it) has a semantic relationship with *or*. Hence ambiguity enriches the first lines of the poem, subtly preparing the reader for the allegory to follow, while allowing Dunbar, through the voice of the reluctant narrator, to expose his own misgivings about writing the poem.

The portrait of the inept narrator is sustained throughout the introductory stanzas. His speaking vocabulary consists of homely single and disyllabic words and simple phrasing: "For in this May few birdis herd I sing" (l.30). Yet even such a line is not without artifice: the narrator's insistence on a specific time advises us that the poem is being written for a particular occasion. Moreover, the presence of allegorical personifications and the need to describe them in aureate and heraldic diction result in a kind of ambivalence that sustains the portrait of the uninspired narrator and, at the same time, prepares the reader for the heraldic allegory to follow. For example, in the first stanza Dunbar introduces a heraldic personification of May; as this figure enters the narrator's bed chamber, the narrator becomes aware of "the tendir odouris reid and quhyt" (l.6); the subtle presence of the Tudor colors here foreshadows the later appearance of the heraldic Tudor rose in the garden scene. Moreover, shifts in types of diction contribute to the action of the poem. Dunbar uses such a shift to signal the narrator's arrival in the garden "illumynit our with orient skyis brycht / Anamillit richely with new asur lycht" (ll.41-2), which is also the fictional narrator's moment of inspiration:

In serk and mantill eftir hir I went  
 In to this garth, most dulce and  
 redolent.... (ll.46-7)

In this couplet, the narrator's colloquial diction dominates until the word *garth*; the pair of aureate adjectives following indicates that when the narrator enters the garden, his vocabulary becomes inspired, creating a change of tone.

In the garden portion of the poem, the narrator's is no longer the dominant voice; Dame Nature, the handmaiden of God, is in charge. Her presence in the garden accounts for its being a type of Eden before the Fall: a perfectly ordered hierarchy governed according to uncorrupted Natural Law. The parliaments convened by Dame Nature suggest a way humans can achieve a harmonious political state where each person knows his place and all submit to a benevolent ruler who maintains the peace and governs according to the dictates of Reason. By introducing Dame Nature into the allegory, Dunbar idealizes the royal marriage. The presence of the Medieval literary goddess suggests that the English-Scottish marriage was prompted by Reason and blessed by God; consequently, the once inimical nations should flourish now in peace and harmony. Using aureate personification, Dunbar symbolizes the royal wedding day as the dawning of a new day in Scotland's history:

The purpour sone with tendir bemys reid  
In orient bricht as angell did appeir  
Throw goldin skyis putting up his heid,  
Quhois gilt tressis schone so wondir cleir  
That all the world tuke confort fer and neir  
To luke upone his fresche and blisfull face....  
(ll.50-55)

The action of the allegory begins when Dame Nature issues commands to her subordinates. Her summonses and injunctions allegorize the actual treaties that preceded the royal marriage; in this way Dunbar suggests that those diplomatic acts were motivated by reason. The first injunction commands the warring kings to make peace and reprimands those who encourage them in making war:

Dame Nature gaif ane inhibitioun thair  
To fers Neptunus and Eolus the bawld  
Nocht to perturb the wattir nor the air, (ll.64-6)

Scho bad eik Juno, goddes of the sky,  
That scho the hevin suld keip amene  
and dry. (ll.69-70)

In this passage Dunbar alludes to the peace treaty of 1499, signed after the Warbeck incident.<sup>19</sup> Henry, the royal commander of England's navy, is allegorized as Neptunus while James, who impetuously took up arms for Warbeck's cause, is "eolus the bawld." Margaret of Burgundy becomes Juno, an appropriate identification for the woman who actually bore this nickname at Henry's court because "she made trouble in heaven and in earth."<sup>20</sup>

Dame Nature's next activity is to summon the three parliaments. In these Dunbar uses allegory and heraldic diction to describe the contents of the three marriage documents drawn up in 1502.<sup>21</sup> Dame Nature, the voice of Reason, advises James of his obligations in each. The first, the peace treaty, is symbolized by the heraldic animal parliament with James being represented by the red lion on the Scottish arms.<sup>22</sup> His military prowess is suggested by the description: "awfull beist full terrible" (ll.92). The peace treaty provided for "a good, real, sincere, true, entire, and firm peace, band, league, and confederation on land and sea, to endure for ever."<sup>23</sup> In the fiction of the poem Dunbar translates these terms into poetry, having Dame Nature command: "Onto thi leigis go furth, and keip the lawis" (l.105). She further advises the lion to "Exerce justice with mercy and conscience" (l.106) and to "Do law elyk to aipis and unicornis (l.109).

The second parliament corresponds to the second treaty, the indenture against border warfare. In this treaty each king agreed to restrain the unlawful acts of his respective subjects and to turn over to each other's respective warden those malefactors taking refuge over the border. Subjects could be given the right of reprisal only if the provisions of the border treaty were not observed.<sup>24</sup> In allegorizing this treaty, Dunbar has Dame Nature sharpen the eagle's quills "as steill dertis" (l.21) so that this regal bird of prey, another heraldic symbol for James, can enforce the conditions; moreover, the eagle is urged to treat all his subjects alike:

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<sup>19</sup>Mackie, p. 93.

<sup>20</sup>Mary Clive, *This Sun of York: A Biography of Edward IV* (New York, 1974), p. 293.

<sup>21</sup>Baxter, pp. 91-2; R.L. Mackie, pp. 97-8.

<sup>22</sup>In two portraits of James, included in R.L. Mackie, facing p. 36 and facing p. 149, the former by Hugo van der Goes and the latter referred to as The Seton Armorial, the lion is depicted graphically exactly as Dunbar describes him: "Reid of his cullour...On feild of gold...With flour delycis sirculit lustely" (ll.96-8).

<sup>23</sup>Mackie, p. 98.

<sup>24</sup>Mackie, p. 98.

And bawd him be als just to awppis and owlis  
As unto pacokkis, papingais or crennis,  
And mak a law for wucht fowlis and for wrennis;  
And lat no fowll of ravyne do efferay  
Nor devoir birdis bot his awin pray. (ll.122-6)

It is noteworthy that Dunbar perhaps further enriches this part of the allegory by referring to the heraldic bird emblems of some of Scotland's noble families.<sup>25</sup>

The third parliament, the parliament of flowers, corresponds to the marriage contract. flowers are most appropriate here because the actual document was decorated in the margin with a border of roses, thistles, and marguerites.<sup>26</sup> Dunbar represents James as the Scottish thistle and Margaret as the Tudor rose. Perhaps Dunbar suspected that the ever-amorous James would find it difficult to honor his marriage vows, for Dame Nature gives the thistle a double set of instructions. first, he is told to conduct himself according to his station in his personal and family relationships:

And sen thow art king, thow be descreit;  
Herb without vertew thow hold nocht of sic pryce  
As herb of vertew and odor sueit....(ll.134-6)

Then she reminds him to "forsake all others":

Nor hald non udir flour in sic denty  
As the fresche Ros of cullour reid and quhyt...  
(ll.141-2)

When Dame Nature completes her advice to the king, she turns to the rose and offers her blessing.

At this point in the allegory Dunbar shifts his emphasis from the marriage contract to praise for Scotland's new queen and the hope she brings for peace. The remaining garden stanzas are all tributes to Margaret. The diction is more formal and considerably more aureate; the tone becomes reverent. The final stanza of the allegory resembles a medieval Latin

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<sup>25</sup>John Woodward and George Burnett, *Woodward's A Treatise on Heraldry British and Foreign* (Rutland, Vermont, 1969), pp. 258-67, list some of the following birds as heraldic emblems: the crane in the arms of the Scottish Lords Cranstoun, the Parrot (papingais) in the coat of Perdie, the peacock in the arms of Pawne, and the eagle in the arms of the Ramseys.

<sup>26</sup>Baxter, p. 114.

hymn in honor of the Blessed Virgin and concludes with a benediction for Margaret sung by “the commoun voce uprais of birdis small” (l.176). Their prayer is for Margaret’s well being:

Our perle, our pleasans and our paramour,  
 Our peax, our play, our plane felicite:  
 Chryst the conserf frome all adversite. (l.180-82)

There is a sharp contrast in diction and tone between this passage revealing the collective Scottish hope for the royal marriage and the final stanza of the poem wherein the narrator quite realistically and unimaginatively states that he was awakened. The sudden change in diction signals the re-entry of the narrator’s personality.

Than all the birdis sang with sic a schout  
 That I annone awolk quhair that I lay.... (ll.183-4)

The narrator’s awakening response to the bird motet of his vision contributes to the poem’s closure and at the same time links this frame stanza to the fictional allegory preceding it. The homely word *schout* awakens the reader as well as the narrator to the real world. Its onomatopoeic effect in this line parallels the function of *blast* in the first stanza. By thus enabling the reader to share the narrator’s waking experience, Dunbar emphasizes that the idealized world of Dame Nature’s garden is fiction. Once again Dunbar has used ambivalent artifice to call attention to the discrepancy between literature and life.

The diction and substance of the remainder of the final stanza sustain the realistic atmosphere. The disillusioned narrator appears to be as uninspired as he was in the early stanzas. Ostensibly grappling for words, he concludes his narrative in a plain, literal style:

And with a braid I turnyt me about  
 To se this court, bot all wer went away. (ll.185-6)

Here the narrator exhibits more than disappointment that his vision of a new Eden has vanished. He confesses that he is “halflingis in affrey” as he writes “Off lusty May upone the nynte morrow” (l189). His reference to a particular date is yet another indication that he is back in his real world.

The narrator’s literal and self-conscious statements have constituted an essential part of Dunbar’s ambivalent artifice throughout the poem. By having the narrator describe feelings of frustration, Dunbar subtly draws attention to his actual artistic achievement in the poem and simultaneously disguises his ambivalent feelings about its subject. The narrator’s confession of feeling “halflingis in affrey” reminds the reader that the poem’s lovely garden—an imaginative, idyllic picture of Scotland transformed by

the royal wedding—has not been realized. It is significant that the narrator's fear does not appear to result from his poetic activity but from his rude awakening; he seems upset that "all wer went away" (l.186). The persona of the anxious narrator enables Dunbar to express his genuine fear that Scotland's political hopes for the marriage are as unrealistic as the dream garden he has created. Dunbar, like his narrator, remains a pragmatist; he also understands human nature. While he undoubtedly hoped that the marriage would bring peace to Scotland, Dunbar apparently also realized that ideal kings governed by natural reason existed only in the fictitious gardens of poets' dreams. His experience had taught him that "fers Neptunus" and "Eolus the bawld" would have difficulty keeping even a temporary truce. Thus, Dunbar's skillful use of ambivalent artifice enabled him to honor a royal wedding with dignity and at the same time to express his own reservations about its success. In so doing, Dunbar carried on that ancient, bardic tradition of poet as prophet, for a decade later his worst fears were realized at flodden field.

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