Poetic Imagery: a point of comparison between Henryson and Dunbar

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That two of the Middle Scots poets, Henryson and Dunbar are writers of considerable stature, each with a clearly defined individuality within a convention, is a fact that has sometimes been overlooked by such critics as have worked in these comparatively untried fields, because they have so often been pre-occupied with the poets' relations to English writers, to the exclusion of a consideration of their poetic individuality.¹ When we cease to compare these Scottish poets primarily with Chaucer and his followers and view their work together and as an individual contribution to literature, a very interesting comparison presents itself, particularly in the field of figurative writing (or poetic imagery) which, in medieval poetic includes description ("descriptio") and moral sayings ("sententiae"). Concerning the lives of Robert Henryson and William Dunbar very little is known for certain though some assumptions have been made but, in the corpus of their poetry, their personalities stand out clearly and appeal to the twentieth century reader by qualities which are frequently complementary. It is, again, pointless to enter the contest over which of these two poets is, in fact, the greatest, for this is a matter of taste and therefore not to be disputed, but there is no doubt that each is a great poet in a way which is, ultimately, entirely individual, once we have made allowance for their indebtedness to the medieval common stock of concepts and terms. Some of these shorter examples may be illustrated here and now and the poets' work within the field of the longer conventional "descriptio" and "sententiae" will be examined later in this article.

¹ See, for example, P. H. Nichols "William Dunbar as a Scottish Lydgateian," PMLA, XLVI, 214-224 and "Lydgate's Influence on the Aureate Terms of the Scottish Chauccrians," PMLA, XLVII, 516-522.
Of the shorter common stock figures used by both poets we have for example:

O, fair Creisseid! the flour and \textit{A per se}
Of Troy and Grece, \ldots \textsuperscript{2}

London, thou art of townes \textit{A per se}.
Soveraign of cities, semelies in sight,\textsuperscript{3}

\textit{Lyke to ane Bair qubeting bis Taskis kene},\textsuperscript{4}

Agane thi tirvit him bak and syde,
\textit{Als brim as ony baris wold},\textsuperscript{5}

And till hir hoill scho wente \textit{as fyrre on fliat}:\textsuperscript{6}

The sparhalk to the spring him sped,
\textit{Als ferc as fyrre of flynt}.\textsuperscript{7}

\textit{Lyke till a flour that pletandly will spring},
\textit{Quhilk fadis sono, and endis with marweing}.\textsuperscript{8}

Thy lustye bewte and thy yth
\textit{Sall seid at dois the somer flouris};\textsuperscript{9}

Beyonde this Mure he fand a farefull stree,\textsuperscript{9}
\textit{Myrk at the nycht}, to pass rycht dangerous,\textsuperscript{10}

The sone obscurit of his licht;
The day woxt \textit{dirk as ony nycht}.\textsuperscript{11}

For thay at sad as \textit{Widdercok in Wind}.\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{2} Henryson, "The Testament of Cresseid," ll. 78-79. Quotations throughout are from the S.T.S. editions of the Poems of Henryson and Dunbar, unless otherwise stated. Italics are mine throughout. Some letters have been normalized, e.g. "th" for the thorn character and "y" for the yoke and the Middle Scots "v" has been changed to "u" where necessary and "i" to "j."

\textsuperscript{3} Attributed to Dunbar. "London, Thou Art of Townes A Per Se;" ll. 1-2.

\textsuperscript{4} Henryson, "The Testament of Cresseid," l. 193.

\textsuperscript{5} Dunbar, "Ane Ballat of the Passioun of Christ," ll. 57-58.

\textsuperscript{6} Henryson, "The Two Mice," l. 328.

\textsuperscript{7} Dunbar, "Of the Fenyet Freir of Tungland," ll. 79-80.

\textsuperscript{8} Henryson, "Orpheus & Eurydice," ll. 90-91.

\textsuperscript{9} Dunbar, "Mementu, Homo, Quod Cinis Er;" ll. 25-26.

\textsuperscript{10} Henryson, "Orpheus & Eurydice," ll. 303-304.

\textsuperscript{11} Dunbar, "Ane Ballat of the Passioun of Christ," ll. 84-85.

\textsuperscript{12} Henryson, "The Testament of Cresseid," l. 567.
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Of this fals falwey and walcid I tyre,
That ever more flytie lyk ane phoenix.\[13\]

In these examples we see that Henryson and Dunbar, like many other medieval poets, such as Chaucer and the anonymous authors of secular and religious lyrics and the lengthy romances, used these common stock comparisons neatly but with very little individuality. In these examples we shall look in vain for the characteristic stamp of one author or another. They might well have been written by any medieval poet, English or Scottish. For an individual, contrasting and complementary use of imagery or figures of speech in our two poets we must look further.

In a comparison of the work of Henryson and Dunbar, we find that their achievements lie within a certain clearly defined poetic territory. In justly appreciating Henryson’s work, one needs to be really familiar with the whole of it as, unlike Dunbar, he does not produce brilliant pyrotechnic displays in individual poems, although he can attain to considerable achievements of a different kind in the Fables and The Testament of Cressida. Henryson’s achievement consists of the sum total of the Testament, the individual Fables from Aesop and the other moralizing poems, including Robene and Makyne, The Bludy Serk and The Thre Deid Polis. Here we have nothing akin to the variation between aureate, vernacular, secular and religious poems such as we find in Dunbar. Henryson is more all of a piece, with hardly any marked contrasts of tone or style. Henryson uses, too, fewer figures of speech or images than does Dunbar and this seems to be one of the outstanding and significant differences between these two poets. Dunbar’s poems are crowded with figures which are often clearly visualized, vigorous and marked by an effect of glittering light and dazzling colour. Henryson’s figures, though they have their own particular charm, seem generally less visual and lack the blaze of colour so characteristic of Dunbar’s work. This is no doubt due to the fact that there are also fewer passages of description in Henryson’s poems and less of the aureate language than in Dunbar’s work, but this in itself is simply another aspect of the difference between the two poets so clearly manifested in their use of images. It is difficult to illustrate this point in a comparatively short article but a fair comparison of characteristic examples can be made. Both poets use the common stock phrases to express colour, such as “as white as whale bone,” “as wan and wallowed as the leid;” “red as Rois” and “Roys red and quhit.” Henryson also has “als quhYTE as milk” and “quhYTEr than the snow”\[13\]

\[13\] Dunbar, “Of the Waridis Instabilitie,” II. 94-95.

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and "grene as leif" but he seldom shows the wild delight in light and
colour which is characteristic of Dunbar. For example, Henryson has:

Exempill tak be thir Jolie floris,
Richt sweet of smell and plesand of colouris,
Sum grene, sum blew, sum purpur, gubite, and reid,
This distribute be gift of his godheid.14

This passage is one of conventional description and not much more
than that. We find the same common stock description in Dunbar but
with a difference:

Me thocht fresche May befor my bed upstrade,
In weid deepyn of mony divers hue,
Sobir, benyng, and full of manuerude,
In brycht atteir of floriris forgot new,
Hevinly of color, gubis, red, brown and blew,
Balmit in dew, and gilt with Phebus bemy,
Quhill all the houss illumynit of hit lemys.15

In this aureate description of May, for example, Dunbar does not
simply enumerate the colours of the flowers as does Henryson but adds
the rays of the sun and the effect of light in "brycht," "gilt," "bemys,
"illumynit" and "lemys." Furthermore, there is nothing in Henryson's
work like the first six verses of The Goldyn Targe where gold, silver,
crystal, beryl, pearl, ruby, sapphire and emerald burn, with red,
white, purple, green, rose, azure and gold colours, in a blaze of light,
as one figure merges into another. Henryson's characteristic figures
have their own individual beauty and poetic power in a softer and
sadder tone:

Quhen that aurora, with hir curcheis gray,
Put up hir heid betuix the nicht and day.16

and:

The morrow come, and phebus with his bemis
Consumit had the mistie cluddis gray;
The ground was grene, and als like gold it glemis,
With gres growand gittle, gude, and gay;
The spye they spreid to spring on everte spraye;
The lark, the mavis, and the merle full hie,
Sucitlie can sing, trippand fra tre to tre.17

14 Henryson, "The Swallow and the Other Birds," ll. 1646-1649.
17 Henryson, "The Trial of the Fox," ll. 858-864.
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We may compare with this Dunbar’s setting of a similar scene in the same convention:

The purpour sone, with tendir bemy reid,
In orient bright as angell did appeir,
Throw goldin skyes putting up his heid,
Quhois glict tressis schone so wondir cleir,
That all the world tuke conforit, far and neir,
To lake upone his fresche and blisfull face,
Doing all sable fro the heynnis chase.18

In Henryson’s lines the figure is obviously little more than a conventional phrase. “Phebus” could be translated into “the sun” without making any difference to the rest of the stanza which is restrained in its description of the sunbeams touching with gold a grey-green landscape. Dunbar, however, obviously develops the personification with far more delight in the opportunity which it affords for the interweaving of colour, movement and the atmosphere of youthful freshness and tenderness which prevails throughout the poem, in honour of James IV and the Princess Margaret. In these set pieces of “descriptio,” each poet achieves a poetic effect which is individual while it is within the convention. Were they anonymous one might surmise that the first in its unsophisticated and sober colouring was by Henryson, the second with its energy and bursting radiance by Dunbar. And in noting this we must conclude that the individuality of tone and the essential poetic achievement is ultimately more important than the Chaucerian or other influences which lie behind it. We note the debt to the convention while going on to enjoy the creation from it of poetry which is successful in its own right, as distinct from the uninspired copying of Chaucer’s stock expressions by such less gifted writers as Lydgate.

The images based by Henryson on the medieval common stock in which the time and season and weather are personified or depicted have a particular quality which is a part of Henryson’s poetic genius and distinguishable from that of any other medieval writer, English or Scots. In another stanza we find an equally subdued and tender descriptive figure, in the same style.

‘Na,’ quod the taid, ‘that proverb is nocht trew;
for fair things oftymes ar fundin faikin.
The blaberryis, thocht thay be said of hew,
Ar gadderit up quhen paymerois is forsaikin.’19

The whorteberries and primrose of the last figure are also part of

18 Dunbar, “The Thistle and the Rose,” ll. 50-56.
19 Henryson, “The Paddock and the Mouse,” ll. 57-60.

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the more simple country setting of Henryson's poems which contrasts with the predominantly urban life of Dunbar's settings and the lovely subdued colouring is akin to that of a much later treatment of the same theme, in a similar stock convention, some lines which were set to music at the end of the sixteenth century:

Brown is my Love, but graceful;
And each renowned whiteness
Matched with thy lovely brown loseth its brightness.

Fair is my Love, but scornful;
Yet have I seen despised,
Dainty white lilies, and sad flowers well prized.\textsuperscript{29}

Henryson's berries are "sad" of hue too and his whortleberries and primroses are not just conventional. As we have remarked, the background of Henryson's poetry is rural and this element of country life may be traced in many of his images and descriptions. These figures, indeed, form some of his most beautiful lines and represent a quality in Henryson's poetry which is neither medieval nor modern but ageless: as, for example, in the following:

In Metaphisik Aristotell sayis
That mannis Saul is lyke ane Bakkis Ee,
Quhilk lurkis still als lang as licht of day is,
And in the gloming cummis furth to fle;
Hir Ene ar waik, the Sone scho may not se:
Sa is our Saul with Fantasie opprest,
To knaw the thingis in nature manifest.\textsuperscript{21}

and in the description of the month of June:

Thus passit furth quhilk lune, that ialic tyde,
And seilds that war sawin of beforne
Wer growin hie, that hailis micht thame hide,
And als the qualitye craikand in the corn.\textsuperscript{22}

which has none of the literary formality of the conventional medieval "May morning" descriptions and is obviously based upon a loving observation of the passage of the seasons. There are too, in Henryson's poetry, a few figures which are drawn from the seasonal labours of

\textsuperscript{20} The Oxford Book of Sixteenth Century Verse, p. 845, No. 428, Song set by Nicholas Yonge.

\textsuperscript{21} Henryson, "The Swallow and the Other Birds," ll. 1628-1634.

\textsuperscript{22} Henryson, "The Swallow and the Other Birds," ll. 1768-1771.
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gardeners or farmers though they may owe something to convention as well; as, for example, the figure of grafting:

   Fals titlaris now growis up full rank,
   nocht ympit in the stok of cheretie;\textsuperscript{23}

and the figure of the weeds, or "vetches" in the corn:

   Freindis, ye may find, and ye will tak heid,
   In to this fabill ane gude moralitie;
   As fychis myngit ar with noble seid,
   Swa intermynglit is aduersitie
   With eirdlie Joy; . . . \textsuperscript{24}

and of the seed killed by frost; from The Testament of Cresseid:

   The seid of lufe was sawin in my face,
   And ay grew grene throw your supplie and grace.
   Bor now, allace, that seid with frost is slane,
   (ll. 137-139)

These figures and descriptions, with their delicate and knowledgeable observation of the bat, hares, quails, wildflowers and the seeds and frost of the Scottish countryside are characteristic of Henryson's work.

It is interesting to note now that Dunbar's naturalistic images, like his aureate or conventional ones, are rather different. They range from the exuberance of the simile describing "James Dog, Kepar of the Quenis Wardrop":

   Quen that I speik till him freindlyk,
   He barkis lyk ane midding ryk,
   War chassand cattell through a bog:\textsuperscript{25}

and of another simile describing the "Maister Almaser," who danced in the Queen's Chamber "Lyk a stirk stackarant in the ry,"\textsuperscript{26} through the frank and vigorous lines describing the unfortunate husbands of the "Tua Mariti Wemen and the Wido":

   He feppolis like a farcy aver, that flyrit on a gillot.\textsuperscript{27}

and

   He dis as dotit doog that damys on all bussis.\textsuperscript{28}

\textsuperscript{23} Henryson, "Aganis Haisty Creedence of Titlaris," ll. 1-2.
\textsuperscript{24} Henryson, "The Two Mice," ll. 365-370.
\textsuperscript{26} Dunbar, "Of a Dance in the Quenis Chalmer," l. 17.
\textsuperscript{27} Dunbar, "Tua Mariti Wemen and the Wedo," l. 114.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., l. 186.

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to the beauty of the new moon (a figure which is used with no
romantic intention but which is, nevertheless, very lovely):

And, as the new mone, all pale, oppressit with change,
Kyth is quhils her cleir face, through cluddis of sable,
So keik I through my cloakis, and cassis kynd lukis
To knychits, and to cleirkis, and courtly personis. 29

and of the conventional comparison of the blossoming bough:

I saw approach again the orient sky,
A sail, als quhite as blossom upon sprays. 30

The coarseness and vitality of the first four of these figures and
the lovely effects of light and shadow of the last two, with their evidence
of Dunbar’s intense delight in visual beauty, are quite unlike the tender
delicacy of those of Henryson’s figures which are drawn from nature, of
which we have examined seven examples and to which we may add the
following to demonstrate the point more fully:

In lyke maner as throw the boustious eird,
Swa it laubourit with grit diligence,
Springis the flouris and the corn e abreir,
Halisum and gude to mannis sustenence,
Swa dois sprig ane morall sweet sentence
Out of the subrell dyse of poetry,
To gude purpois, quha culd it weill apply.

The nattis schell, thoicht it be hard and teuch,
Haldis the kirn, and is delectabil,
Sa lyis thair ane doctrine wyse aneuch,
And full of frute, vnder ane feinyet fabill. 31

In these figures, from the “Prolog” to the Moral Fables we find an
attitude to nature and the life of the countryside and the figurative
parallels and illustrations which may be drawn therefrom which is
characteristic of Henryson and quite different from Dunbar’s approach.
For instance, Henryson’s “boustious” or “rough” or “fresh” earth has to be
“laubourit” or tilled with devotion before natural flowers and corn can
“spring” from it. In Dunbar’s more conventionally aurate, though equally
beautiful and effective figurative descriptions, the beauties of the earth
in their energy and richness are not those of the naturalistic Scottish

29 Ibid., II. 432-435.
31 Henryson, “Prologue to the Fables,” II. 8-18.
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countryside which we have found in Henryson’s poems and the examples from them already quoted, but are rather akin to the medieval illuminations from calendars and Books of Hours, showing the labours of the Seasons in fields and gardens where Nature is fecund indeed and rather idealistic than naturalistic. Everything burgeons but in a conventional fashion and we are no longer conscious, as we are with Henryson, of the painful tillage of the earth to produce this abundance. This may be illustrated by the following lines from Dunbar’s “The Tretis of the Tua Marit Wemen and the Wedo”:

Apon the Midsummer ewin, mitriest of nichtis,
I muiit furth allane, nei as midnicht wes past,
Besyd ane gudlie grene garth, full of gay flouris,
Hegeit, av ane hughe hicht, with hawthorne treis;
Quhaire ane bird, on ane bransche, so brist out hir noris
That neuer ane blythfuller bird was on the beuche haide:
Quhat throw the saugarat sound of hir sang glaid,
And throw the sauar santau of the suer flouris,
I drew in dervie to the dyk to dirkin eftir mythid;
The dew donkit the daill, and dynart the foulis. (ll. 1-10)

This passage of figurative “descriptio” and the lines which follow comparing the “thre gay ladeis” in their beauty to flowers:

Thair mantillis grein war as the gress that grew in May sessoun,
Fetrit with thair quhyt fingsaris about thair fair sydis:
Off tertiulf fyne favour war thair faccis melk,
All full of flouris fairheid, as flouris in June;
Quhyt, seimlie, and soft, as the sweet lilies;
New upspreit vpon syrapy, as new spynist rose,
Arrayit ryalie about with mony rich wandour,
That nature, full nobillie, annamalit fine with flouris
Off alkin hewis under hewen, thant ony heyd knew;
Fragrant, all full of fresche odour fynest of smell, (ll. 24-33)

are formalized, conventional and idealistically un-natural and they contrast strongly with Henryson’s laboriously tilled earth and his tough-shelled nuts with their sweet kernels in the “Prolog” to the Fables or with the Country Mouse’s hole, in the very realistic, cold, harsh countryside, which was nevertheless “Als warme as woll.” There are no such homely, small creatures as field mice in Dunbar’s poems, though he refers to dogs and “stirks,” and “Als warme as woll” is a comparison typical of Henryson’s close and loving observation of a daily life, even that of a mouse, in the small town and a countryside which knew nothing of the court. The primroses and violets, too, of one of Henryson’s more conventional “descriptio” are also markedly different from
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Dunbar’s roses and lilies of the aureate figurative passage which we have examined already:

In middis of Joun, that swete season,
Quhen that fair Phebus, with his bemis bricht,
Had dryit up the dew fra dail and doune,
And all the land maid with his bemis licht;
In ane morning, betweix mid day and night,
I Raits, and put all sleuth and sleip aside,
And to ane wod I went alone but gyde.

Swete wes the smel of flouris, quyhte and reid,
The noyes of birds rich delitious,
The bewis braid blomit abone my heid,
The ground growand with gers gratis;
Of all plesance that place wes plenteous,
With swett odouris and birdsis harmonie,
The Morning Myld: my mirth wes nairst for thy.

The Rosis reid arrayit on Rone and Rycz,
The Prymetos, and the Purpor Uiola;
To heir it wes ane poyn of Paradice,
Sic Mirth the Mavis and the Merle couth ma;
The blossumis blyth brak up on bank and bra;
The smell of Herbis and of foultis cry
Contending quha suld haill the victorie. \(^{32}\)

This, again, is the conventional “May” or “June” morning passage of “descriptio” but, in distinction from those of Chaucer and Dunbar, we notice in Henryson’s lines again a more homely and naturalistic element. His flowers are conventionally “quhyte and reid” but his roses grow on “Rone and Rycz,” real thickets and twigs of brushwood, his primroses and violets owe little or nothing to convention and his birds however conventional are also real thrushes and blackbirds, unlike the usual anonymous “fowls” of these aureate “descriptions,” just as, in another spring “descriptio,” he has a homely flower, a columbine, growing in real clay soil:

Syne cummis Uer, quhen winter is away,
The Secretar of Somer with his Seill,
Quhen Columbie up ketis throw the clay,
Quhilik fleit wes befoir with frostis fell.
The Mavis and the Merle beginnis to melli;
The Lark on loft, with uther birds is small,
Than drawis furth fra derne, over doune and dail. \(^{33}\)

\(^{32}\) Henryson, “The Lion and the Mouse” (Prologue), ll. 1313-1333.

\(^{33}\) Henryson, “The Swallow and the Other Birds,” ll. 1698-1704.

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and notes the condition of the earth with a countryman's shrewd eye
for these things when he adds:

I passit furth, syn lekit to and fro,
To se the Soill that wes richt seasonabill,
Sappie, and to resaif all seidis abill.34

and goes on to comment upon the seasonal work of the countryside.
Few medieval poets indeed have made so much local and homely use of
the "May morning" "descriptio" as has Henryson. Dunbar's are more
brilliant and he has certainly energized this romance convention, as we
have seen, with his dazzling colour effects but Henryson has succeeded
in a different achievement, that of giving the conventional description
"a local habitation and a name" in the Scottish countryside of his daily
observation.

His poems are also not without their coarseness and harshness (as,
for example, the conclusion of the fable of The Paddock and the
Mouse), but it is not apparent in the figures which attain their effect
less through dynamic energy and visual clarity than by a kind of faithful
and loving power of observation of the aspects in the countryside which
are in a minor key or which are observable by one who was at heart a
countryman.

It is interesting to note, though, that, in another field, that of
the moralizing figures of the type of "pulvis et umbrae sumus" and
"dust unto dust and ashes unto ashes," Henryson has his own vigorous
note to strike and it is one which is more macabre and arresting than
that of Dunbar, fine as are his achievements in this line. Both poets
provide the conventional type of imagery or figurative description:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{peurte and riche, sal be but differens,} \\
\text{Turnit in ass, and thus in end translait.}35 \\
\text{Remembrit that thow art bor ass,} \\
\text{And sal in ass return agane;}36 \\
\text{Memento homo, quod cinis es!} \\
\text{Think, man, thow art bor erd and ass!37} \\
\text{Now cled in gold, dissolvit now in ass;} \\
\text{So doth this world transitore go.38}
\end{align*}
\]

34 Ibid., ll. 1709-1711.
36 Dunbar, "All Erdly Joy Returnis in Pane," ll. 6-7.
38 Dunbar, "O wreche, be war! this world will wend the fro," ll. 22-23.

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In the first of Dunbar's "sententiae" he makes use of repetition and this is perhaps a use of the biblical figure in the simplest form, but the alliteration of the "a's" makes it sonorous and effective. In the second example from Dunbar we find that he quotes the Latin phrase and follows it with the vernacular version and this again is effective with its contrasted re-iteration and suggestion of an inescapable fate. In the last example, we find another innovation: ash is contrasted with gold; the bright, hard, rich metal and the dull, soft, worthless substance. But although, in this particular instance, Dunbar has made a greater use of the "memento mori" "sententia" than Henryson, we find that Henryson deals with a similar theme in a very different but extremely effective series of figures:

Allace! quhat cair, quhat weiping is and wo,
Quhen saule and bodie depairetic ar in twane;
The bodie to the wormes keitching go,
The saule to fire, to everestrand pane.
Quhat help is than this calf, thir guidis vane,
Quhen thow art put in luciferis bag,
And brocht to hell, and hangit be the crag.39

and similarly in the following lines:

Richt swa this world with vane gloir for ane quhile
Platteris with folk, as thay suld faislye never,
Yit suddandie men seis it oft dissever;
With thame that trowis oft to fill the sek,
Deith cummis behind and nippis thame be the nek.40

There is nothing quite like this in Dunbar's poetry, though he has many figures representing Death and Satan, and here, for a change, Henryson's tone and style is more striking and immediate. His images, "the wormis keitching," "luciferis bag," and the "hanging by the neck" seem to belong to the same tradition as the more literal and macabre passages of the miracle and mystery plays, as for example:

Ther is none so stryf on stede,
Ne none so prowde in prese,
Ne none so dughy in his dede,
Ne none so dere on deese,
No kyng, no knyght, no wight in wede,
ffrom deede have maid hym seece,
Ne flesh he was wonte to fede,
It shall be Wormes meye.41

40 Henryson, "The Fox, the Wolf, and the Cadger," ll. 2212-2216.

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from Lazarus in the Towneley cycle. The same quality is apparent in the many “memento mori” lyrics of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries:

For beo ur mouth cromned with clay,
Wormes blake wol us embrase — 42

which (as Carleton Brown has remarked of the Marian Laments and complaints of Christ, in his collection of fifteenth century lyrics) may well have been influenced by the religious drama. Dunbar’s figures of Death, Hell and the Devil, though they may have been drawn from similar sources, seem to lack the almost crude, unsophisticated but extremely effective dramatic quality so apparent in Henryson’s figures. In Dunbar’s poems there are many images of Death devouring and pursuing and of Satan with his snares, as for example:

Done is a battell on the dragon blak, 43

and

O duifull death! O dragon dolorous!
Quhy hes thow done so dulfullie devoir . . . 44

and again in the following lines:

Syne Deid castis up his yetis wyd,
Saying, “Thir oppin sail ye abyd;
Albeid that thow were never sa stout,
Undir this lynsall sail thow lowt;
Thair is nane uther way besyd.”45

But despite this insistence on the mortality of man and on the constant pursuit by Death and Satan, in Dunbar’s figures there is none of the macabre dwelling on the corruption and decay of the body which is characteristic of many medieval artists including Henryson. We find this throughout the latter’s work as, for example, in such images as those of The Thre Deid Polis:

Behold oure heidis thre,
Oure holkit ene, oure peilit polis bair:

(ll. 3-4)

and in The Reasoning Betwixt Deth and Man:

Dispone thy seli and cum with me in by
Edderis, askis, wormes meit for to be;

(ll. 37-38)

42 Religious Lyrics of the Fourteenth Century, ed. Carleton Brown, p. 129, no. 95, ll. 113-114.
43 Dunbar, “Done is a Battell on the Dragon Blak,” l. 1.
45 Dunbar, “Meditatioun in Wynstir,” ll. 36-40.
and in the strain which runs through *The Testament of Cresseid*:

Heir I beteche my Corps and Cairoun
With Wormis and with Tailis to be rent;

(ll. 577-578)

But if this grim, macabre element is especially characteristic of some of Henryson's figures, so too is its counterpart, an ingenuous humour which is quite different from Dunbar's own well-developed but again more sophisticated jesting. This humour can be clearly seen in the poets' handling of commonplace or conventional figures. Henryson uses a conventional tag in a delightfully humorous juxtaposition in his fable of the "repentant" fox.

Me think that hennis ar sa honie sweit, 46

a characteristically dry Scots humour, in which the conventional phrase "honie sweit," so unexpected in relation to "hens," exactly expresses the Fox's "repentance" which consists only of regret that he had not committed the crime more frequently. Another example of this delightful form of humour can be found in a similar use, by Henryson of another conventional figure, that of "the sleep of God":

I may tak hennis and caponis weill aneuch,
For god is gane to sleip; as for this nicht,
Sic small thingis ar not sene in to his sicht; 47

A figure which Henryson can also use seriously and with effect in another context:

Quaikand for cauld, sair murnand ay amang,
Kest up his ee unto the hevinis hicht,
And said: 'lort god, quhy sleptis thow sa lang?
Walk, and decerne my caus, groundit on richt;
Se how I am, be fraude, maistrie, and slicht,
Peillet full bair: 'and so is mony one
Now in this wairld, richt wonder, wo be gone! 48

In his edition of the poems, Harvey Wood has remarked, in a note on the former passage, that "the Sleep of God was a common expression for times of hardship and oppression" and he quotes, from the Peterborough Chronicle "... the land was al fordon mid suilce daedess, and hi saiden openlice that Christ slep and his halachen." The humour of Henryson's use of the figure, in the first instance, lies in the application of this solemn expression to the affairs of the Fox, while in the second

46 Henryson, "The Fox and the Wolf," l. 692.
47 Henryson, "The Fox, the Wolf, and the Husbandman," ll. 2324-5.

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passage there is no humour; the Sheep who laments "the Sleep of God" is too closely identified with the suffering peasant whom he represents and there is no jesting on this subject.

Dunbar's humour, in his use of figures, is quite different in temper though it is sometimes created from similar material, that is from conventional figures and tags used in a slightly unexpected sense, as, for example, the description of "Myne awne deir cusing," in The Testament of Mr. Andro Kennedy:

Qui nunquam fabricat mendacia,
Bot quhen the holyne growis grene. (ll. 63-64)

or of the appearance of the "fullis nyce" who were present at "Colkclie's feast" amongst those who were rewarded by the King, while Dunbar himself was neglected. The humour of these lines and of Dunbar's poems in general, is more sophisticated and ironic and has none of the dryness nor the tenderness which we have found to be characteristic of Henryson's humorous use of conventional figures. This distinction will be found, moreover, to apply not only to the poets' use of figures but to their poetic achievement as a whole.

Although "Maister Robert Henrisoun" is included in Dunbar's list of dead poets, there is no trace of any direct influence by Henryson on the younger poet. As we have seen, they share the common stock material of medieval imagery but achieve their own characteristic effects in accordance with their individual poetic genius. Dunbar's figures of speech differ from Henryson's in being more numerous, more clearly visualized and, if we examine them as a whole, of a somewhat wider range.\(^{49}\) Henryson's figures are generally more subdued, more naturalistic and, sometimes, more homely and dramatic. It is evident that Dunbar's poetic genius found greater scope in the field of imagery than did Henryson's. But Henryson has impressed his own individual quality upon most of the figures which he has used. In the work of these two poets then differences of temperament and creative ability are marked and these differences are nowhere to be seen more clearly defined than in their use of figures of speech.

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\(^{49}\) We find, for example, such vivid and wide ranging figures as "Reisit and crynit as hangit man on hill," "gorget lyk two gutaris that war with glat stoppit" (of eyes), "And merchands at the stinkand Styll/ At hamperit in ane hony came," "Kirkmen so halie ar and gude,/ That on their conscience, rowme and rude,/ May turn auct oxin and ane wane" and in general a far wider range and more extensive use of figure than appears in Henryson's poems.

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