

**‘BLAIT MOUIT BLAD3EANES WITH BLEDDER CHEIKIS’:  
DIRTY POLITICS AND THE PHYSICAL POETRY OF  
WILLIAM DUNBAR**

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The King of Scotland in the late fifteenth century, James IV (1473–1513), emerges from history as a figure of dependability, progression, and learning. This flattering appraisal has been shaped both through sadness at his tragic death at the Battle of Flodden and with reference to the many contributions he made to enhance the cultural and political landscape of Scotland while ensuring that the wealth and the stability of the powerful classes endured during the decline of feudalism in continental Europe. The achievements of this society under James are clear: a third university (Aberdeen) was established, the printing press was introduced, a navy consolidated, and all alongside a constant suppression of disorder and the stabilisation of government machinery.

However, if one is to examine a selection of the court *vignettes* composed by one of James’ courtiers, the Middle Scots poet William Dunbar, an atmosphere of progression and permanence is clouded by the observations of a figure keen to enter the service of the King and share in the successes of a linguistic, literary, artistic and scientific patron. In this lies the paradox of Dunbar’s courtly satires: in order to elevate himself beyond the mass of others who were also vying for James’ financial and personal attention, the poet had to set his poetic voice, along with a physical presence, against his contemporaries; he ridiculed his rivals while at the same time enhancing his own abilities.<sup>1</sup> Dunbar was to exploit the late medieval distrust of externals, along with the persistence of the devil as a twisted image of humanity, to reveal the baser, opportunistic falseness of fellow courtiers through imaginative juxtapositions of appearance, reality, respectability and corporeality. An early critic, Rachel Taylor, noted that ‘the grotesque, the hypocritical, the physically ignoble, fascinate [Dunbar]’, a ‘fascination’, it appears, with the blatant unsuitability of those around him and the ways in which he could use his own bawdy invective to combat the apparent injustice (53). Priscilla Bawcutt likewise appreciated a poetic physicality, ‘sensitive to the connotations of words and phrases’ and their emotive deployment, and this underpins all of Dunbar’s harsh yet carefully plotted satires (‘Dunbar and Douglas’, 75). The conventionally marginalised ‘engorging, farting, defecating and salaciously erect

bodies', so forcefully excluded by Church and society, are revealed at the very heart of courtly life and entertainments, manipulated and toyed with by this poet (Camille 74). Although it would be misleading to impose some coherent theory of corporeality or the *carnavalesque* upon Dunbar's verses, his ingenious, carefully balanced approach is subtly captured in one of his famous refrains: 'A mirrear dance mycht na man see'.<sup>2</sup> Not only was he revealing the 'merry dance' of the court around him but, in so doing, he set himself apart from the 'other men'—only could he 'see' the falsity, and this implicit awareness in itself makes Dunbar's voice worthy of regal, courtly, and critical attention.

In Dunbar's eyes the King's court is filled with players whose true natures must be revealed and, taking dance's dependence upon overt display, 'Schir Ihon Sinclair begowthe to dance' plays with the popularity of new choreographic sequences spreading from continental Europe in a 'merry' celebration of absurd courtly competition.<sup>3</sup> Ridiculous displays from the courtiers reveal their baser instincts, and possibly feeble sexual performance, as each stumbling fool seems to dance willingly into their own shocking revelations (Burness 212). These figures, we are to assume, would be familiar to Dunbar's contemporary audience, although not in this particular guise. Hence while 'Sir Ihon Sinclair' has learned the fashionable dances 'cum owt of France' (70: 1–2), he immediately fails: 'For ony thing that he do mycht/ The an futt 3eid ay onrycht/ And to the tother wald nocht gree' (70: 3–5).<sup>4</sup> Convoluting syntax mirrors his stumbling steps—the main verbal construction is retained as we search for a conclusion to rejoin Sir John's flailing limbs, only to be disappointed as they 'wald nocht gree'. Indeed, tetrameters are used throughout this poem to create a staggering rhythm across the stanzas, thereby performing the steps of the figures within while compounding the disparities between aspiration and reality. Likewise, the second figure to appear before us, 'maistir Robert Schau', 'leuket as he culd lern tham a' (70: 8–9); however, the appearance of an expert dance tutor collapses with 'He stackeret lyk an strummall awer'—he actually staggers like a clumsy old horse (70: 11).<sup>5</sup> In addition, this figure 'hopschackellet war aboin the kne', a highly emotive yet playful verb meaning 'hobbled', but which retains aspects of its etymology in 'schaik' to suggest 'shaking' and 'scattering' as the ridiculous man attempts to control his shuddering body (70: 12). The traditionally respected 'maister almaser' is particularly absurd, as his bouncing clumsiness is perfectly replicated in 'hommiltey iommeltey' (70: 15–16) which releases a blast of flatulence—'His hippis gaff mony hoddous cry' (70: 18). The line 'He is bedirtin, fye, fy!' offers enthusiastic commentary, as this explosion forms the finale to his coarse display

(70: 20). Ironically this is spoken by ‘the fule’, as the flatulent alms-giver is subordinated to the established orchestrator of courtly absurdity. Similar immodesty emanates from ‘dame Dounteboir’ as ‘An blast of wind son fra hir slippis’, yet here Dunbar adds a level of subtlety to his bawdy humour (70: 41). As Edmund Reiss and Tom Scott have noted, ‘Dounteboir’ has a comic and lascivious nuance: consequently, the audience is prepared for some overt display of sexual appetite with suggestive ‘morgeownis’ or ‘strange movements’ from ‘hir hippis’ (70: 38). However, these expectations are disappointed with a further reference to flatulence.

The teasing refrain ‘A mirrear dance mycht na man se[e]’ (70: 4 etc) calls attention to the importance of sight and revelation, while ‘mirrear’ defines this as both ‘silly’ and ‘strange’. Yet it also retains a familiar modern equivalent—‘merrier’. Dunbar delights in exposing his figures in these amusing and humiliating forms, particularly ‘The quenis Dog’ (70: 44), probably James Dog ‘The Keeper of the Queen’s Wardrobe’, who crashes in at the poem’s close. He has been given the physical behaviour that his canine name suggests and is not introduced as the others are (with the formula ‘Than cam in...’), but dashes into the dance—his frantic charging emphasised with ‘And of’, ‘And to’ as he slips from his ‘band’ and enters the floor (70: 45–46). However, curiously, we enjoy a similar sight of Dunbar’s own undignified performance with ‘Than cam in Dunbar the mackar’ (70: 22). Initially it appears that Dunbar is mocking *himself* as he ‘trippet’, yet this accident is from the loss of a slipper or ‘panton’, having been distracted by the beauty of the lady Musgrave (70: 27). Consequently although ‘He hoppet lyk a pillie wanton’, Dunbar remains distanced from the scatological physical humiliations of the other figures—he does fail, but for ‘luff’ (70: 25–26). In this respect, the poet Dunbar, like his performance in the dance, remains ‘frackar’ or ‘agile’: close enough to Dog and the other ‘dancers’ to reinforce his part in this world, but distanced from their overt displays of bawdy physicality to demonstrate his more worthy suitability (70: 23).

By emphasising his physical distinction from the ‘bodies’ of others Dunbar is often silhouetted against a seething, rapacious mass. The statement ‘Complane I wald, wist I quhome till’, although criticised by Scott as syntactically garbled (98), nevertheless portrays courtiers eagerly jostling for space in the King’s favour, replicated in frantic rhythms and alliterations:

Blait mouit bladzeanes with bledder cheikis,  
Clubfacet clucanes, with clutit breikis,

Chuff midding churllis, cuming off cart fillaris,  
 Gryt glaschewe hedit gorge millaris.<sup>6</sup> (9: 23–26)

Images collide to suggest exasperation as Dunbar surveys this mass of falsity and opportunism. Foul verbal diarrhoea rushes from ‘bladder-like’ mouths which alliterates with ‘Blait’ and ‘bladjeanes’ to imitate words being spat from great flapping lips. Developing this scatology are the yokels’ ‘breikis’ which, in their state of disrepair, mirror the previous line’s loose lips. After yokels come peasants on manure carts which add a stench to the scene, accompanied by ‘Gryt glaschewe hedit’ which bring the pungent aroma of the fish market, coupled with blank unintelligence from puffy fish ‘hedit’ (‘heads’). Dunbar is overwhelmed by the masses, who are literally ‘Sa far abowe him’ and seem to exert some physically restraining force upon more deserving individuals (9: 51). Significantly, the poet’s scorn falls upon one particular figure and his false appearance with ‘ane prelottis countenance’, one of several references to costume and deception including ‘panting’ (9: 50), ‘Fenzeing’ (9: 61), and ‘clais’ (9: 54). Ironically, while he is wearing the clothes of a prelate, Dunbar has him stripped and laid bare before allowing us to laugh at his feeble physique: his hands are ‘bausy’ and he has ‘lut schulderis and luttard bak’ (9: 56–57), possibly stooping under his head ‘lyk ane mortar stone’ (9: 60). Bawcutt believes the terms derive from ‘the world of the labourer’: ridiculing his physical appearance and implying the basic, bodily tasks for which he is better suited (‘Dunbar’s Imagery’, 195). However, elsewhere Dunbar stresses the equally physical work of his own poetry which allows it to endure—‘Al slang in mynd my work sall hald’ (67: 28).<sup>7</sup> In emphasising the prelate’s feeble physique, he simultaneously suggests that his ‘bausy’ hands are far less accomplished compared to the skill of our ‘maister’ poet (9: 45).

Another court satire, ‘Schir, 3e haue mony seruitouris’ similarly contrasts a bodily mass of undeserving figures with an initial list of those occupying a rightful place in the King’s service. Placing worthiness alongside clumsy unsuitability, the first catalogue offers more pleasing alliteration linked by recurrent internal sounds and rhymes: ‘Musicianis, menstralis and mirrie singlaris,/ Chevalouris, cawandaris and flingaris’ (67: 9–10; see Ebin 297). In contrast, the second group is marked by harsh alliterations and discordant tones of ‘Cryaris, craikaris and clatteraris’: the lilting music of singers and minstrels has degenerated into harsh chattering (67: 40). This latter crowd pushes its way into the surface texture of the lines and its raucous energy is made explicit as ‘Thrimlaris and thristaris’ ‘thrust’ themselves forward (67: 47). Crucially, groups are now classified by physical behaviour in contrast to

the previous delineation by respectable occupations of ‘Doctouris’ and ‘Astrologis, artistis’ (67: 4, 6). The uncouth physicality of these roguish ‘Kokenis’ is enhanced by the poem’s perspective: we survey the great cacophony of sound and bodily impatience from a position outside the court (67: 48). At this distance the view is quite bewildering as the brisk rhythm and breathless alliteration creates a scene of chaotic madness, emphasised through references to mental instability such as those who steal food ‘lyk out of mynd’ (67: 44) and the beggars pushing ‘as thai war woid’, or ‘as though they were mad’ (67: 47). It is this which leads Scott to see, in seeming contrast to James IV’s suppression of disorder and stabilisation of government authority, ‘a sick society on the brink of catastrophe’ (109). Yet again sight is of key importance, as Dunbar reveals opportunistic greed through bodies betraying the reality of their own selfish appetites. In essence the poet is not commenting on any specific political situation but exploiting an opportunity to showcase his skill, make his presence felt, and stir the King into action at seeing his court in such a state.

During this, Dunbar does not restrict his piercing ‘e’ to generalised overviews of the court, nor indeed to simple juxtapositions of appearance and reality. The infamous wardrobe master from the earlier dance, James Dog, suffers a more prolonged and complex physical attack in ‘O gracious princes guid and fair’, a poem probably in dialogue with ‘The wardraipper of Wenus boure’.<sup>8</sup> In the latter, Dunbar turns towards animal imagery, again punning on Dog’s name to make him ‘barkis’ and ‘girnīs’ at the poet (72: 6, 10).<sup>9</sup> The refrain ‘Madame, 3e heff a dangerous dog’ alerts the Queen to the savage beast currently in her employ: Dog’s name, ironically, has revealed his true identity as a snarling beast, lacking self-control and relieved of social niceties (72: 4 etc). However, in the companion piece, an additional layer of physicality is lurking beneath the dog’s coat—the body of an innocent lamb. Consequently, the new refrain ‘He is na dog, he is a lam’ answers the initial caveat (73: 4). Dunbar takes his own satirical invention, disproves it, before refashioning an image of innocence, goodness and obedience.<sup>10</sup> This poet can strip away contradictory layers of physicality to reveal the ‘real’ figure beneath the guise of stingy ‘wardraipper’ and then violent ‘dog’. Although affection might be supposed from the explicit ‘Do weill to lames, 3our wardraipair’ (73: 2), the tone of the poem gradually shifts from the lamb’s goodness to its subservience, particularly in the case of Dog’s married life: ‘The wyff that he had in his innis,/ That with the taingis wald braek his schinnis’ (73: 13–14). J.W. Baxter sees Dunbar mixing compliments with embarrassing ingredients here (210). Although master of personal property (‘his innis’), this contrasts with the definite

article introducing ‘wyff’: as a ‘lam’ he has no possessive marital authority. [T]aingis’ depicts the wife physically squeezing her husband while, symbolically, the implements used for handling hot coals (previously a sensible precaution with a ‘dangerous dog’) are now used to control a weak ‘lam’. Similarly, whereas Dunbar previously wished for Dog to be physically chained to ‘an hawye clog’ to restrain this violent beast, his verses must now defend the ‘wardraipper’ against assaults from his wife (72: 11). Ironically, those physical threats which previously emanated from the dog are now directed towards the wife as Dunbar compensates for Dog’s newly revealed corporeal impotence, threatening to ‘batteret with an barrou tram’, a piece of homely timber (the shaft of a wheelbarrow) well suited to the domestic situation (73: 19). Although a rude and dangerous dog allowed Dunbar to humiliate his target, he discovers even greater potential in making this dog ‘a lam’: from this, Dog’s initial denial of Dunbar’s new ‘doublet’ (72: 2), apparently the parliamentary expense of the day, becomes an image of humiliating subordination to the poet as ‘He hes sa weill doin me obey’ (67: 21).

The target of Dunbar’s greatest bodily humiliation is the alchemist and physician John Damian who, like the court dancers, willingly reveals his own physical falsities. John Read notes the great amounts spent on alchemical equipment and activities in the accounts of the Lord High Treasurer of Scotland, the same records in which Dunbar wished to see his own name feature more frequently (61). The situation was exacerbated by the secrecy which surrounded much alchemy, allowing Dunbar to imagine and expose the reality behind the expensive mysteries. In ‘As zung Awrora with cristall haile’ Dunbar delights in using appropriate corporeal imagery to illustrate Damian’s failings as a physician: ‘Vane organis he full clenely carvit’ (4: 21) suggests his careless slashing of patients’ vital arteries before ‘He fled away gud speid’ to new places and new victims (4: 24).<sup>11</sup> Witty syntactical games reveal Damian’s poor skills behind the ‘fenynt’ façade of ‘leiche’ (4: 17). That ‘he left nowthir seik nor sair’ might initially suggest his medical expertise (4: 19); however, the deliberately delayed verb ‘Vnslane’ reveals the reality of this statement—none are left ‘sick’ or ‘suffering’ as all are dead (4: 20). The term’s etymology, literally ‘un-killed’, is echoed in ‘murdreist’ and ‘medecyne’ (4: 30): this doctor always kills and never cures and his poor quality instruments ‘rude as ony rawchtir’ are symbolic of his overall ‘rude’ approach to medicine (4: 37). Along with blood from ‘vane organis’ he leaves a trail of other bodily fluids from his cure for ‘laxatyve’ (4: 40), enough to kill a ‘wicht’ or ‘strong’ horse (4: 42), and causing his patients’ ‘hippis zeid hiddy giddy’ with

obvious disgusting results (4: 44). This contrast between registers throws together medical technicalities ('laxatyve') with colloquialisms ('hiddy giddy'), just as beneath the respectable surface of 'leicecraft' we see Damian's victims drenched in blood and faeces (4: 33).

In his medical practices Damian is falsehood personified, yet through his alchemical experimentation he is shown to be 'falsehood at its most ludicrous' (Reiss 60). In the infamous attempted flight from Stirling Castle in 1503 wearing a suit designed for flight, Dunbar makes his 'fedrem' or 'feather-coat' a symbolic exaggeration of Damian's bodily falsity (Nicholson 591). In a playful echo of Chaucer, 'this usurper-bird [is] mobbed by the genuine creatures of the air' to reveal his bodily greed and ambition (Davenport 79).<sup>12</sup> As 'All fowill ferleit quhat he sowld be', behind the subjunctive of wonder lurks the birds' task—they will show how Damian 'sowld' be seen (4: 63). In a parody of the ordered social ranks from the *Parliament of Fowls*, birds dismember the alchemist across the lines with verbs of violence: 'rukis him rent, the ravynis him druggit,/ The hudit crawis his hair furth ruggit' (4: 70–71).<sup>13</sup> Moreover, once the human has been revealed beneath his 'pennies' or 'feathers', he is physically punished for his earlier bodily crimes and the current attempt to exceed his own corporeal limitations. The striking plosive blows of 'Beft him with buffetis quhill he bled' shed Damian's blood (4: 78), while the fierce talons of a buzzard or 'bissart' that 'was so cleverus of hir clvik/ His bawis he nicht not langer bruik' (4: 85–87), recalls the victims he had 'full clenely carvit' (4: 21). This mid-air castration adds to the comic humiliation taking place, developed by the dry understatement 'he nicht not langer bruik'; with a wry smile we learn that he 'may' no longer have the 'enjoyment' of these sexual organs. Similarly, 'A stanchell hang in ilka lug' stretches the abbot by his ears: a hopeless figure is now displayed before us, surrounded by his feathered attackers in the same manner as the dancers were revealed earlier, the empty floor now re-modelled as sky (4: 82). Echoing Chaucer's line 'And, Lord, the blisse and joye that they make' that rouses his Dreamer in the *Parliament*, these birds rejoice 'with noyis and cry' (4: 93) as an audience is similarly urged to enjoy this spectacle of Damian's 'lyfe...in to dowt' (4: 96). Grotesquely, Damian defecates with fear:

For feir vncunnandly he cawkit,  
 Quhill all his pennies war drowned and drawkit.  
 He maid a hundredth nolt all hawkit  
 Beneth him with a spowt. (4: 101–4)

Having drenched himself in excrement we see true bodily reality beneath feathered glory, simultaneously recalling his earlier treatments for ‘laxatyve’ (4: 41). Ironically, in his attempt to assume avian qualities, he masters only one—the ability to defecate in the air as he covers one hundred cattle with a violent ‘spowt’. Yet, with such scatology vies the language of courtly romance: ‘gaif him dynt for dynt’ (4: 76) and ‘straik ay but stynt’ (4: 84; see Bawcutt, ‘Tooth and Claw’ 101). These increase the ridiculous disparity in the scene as a chivalric exchange of blows is delivered to the flailing abbot covered in his own excrement. Moreover, the slaughtering surgeon performs an act of self-mutilation as ‘He schewre his feddreme’—he is forced to reveal his true physicality by his own hand (4: 105). This prefigures his final bodily humiliation in his graceless fall to ‘a myre vp to the ene’, with no heroic death to equal the birds’ chivalric contests, simply a hopeless figure falling into a stagnant pool (4: 107).<sup>14</sup> As Bryan Hay suggests, the pool becomes symbolic of Damian’s own pursuits (225), particularly ‘He did with dirt him hyde’ (4: 120). Ostensibly the verb refers to the ‘Thre dayis’ he ‘hid’ in the bog until it was safe to emerge; yet, as a noun, it recalls the many skins or ‘hydes’ Damian has worn and which have been stripped from him during the poem (4: 119). Bawcutt notes the allusion to diabolic shape-shifting as Damian flits between physician, alchemist and religious man; however, we have also seen the skin of a physician removed to reveal the butcher beneath and, finally, the flying alchemist flayed by the birds to expose a pathetic figure in the ‘myre’ (*Dunbar the Makar*, 274).<sup>15</sup> In ‘hiding’ here, Damian now bears his real skin—that of the dirt and stench of falsity and over-zealous ambition.

Although it is tempting to examine the specifics of Dunbar’s bodily imagery, such as the symbolism of blood in relation to the four humours, this is misleading: indeed, it is not Dunbar’s aim here to make such allusions beyond ridiculing the obsessions of alchemy and primitive medicine. Instead, the force comes from the contrast with Dunbar’s other poetic talents, namely the ability to produce beautifully enamelled allegories to celebrate the King’s marriage to Margaret Tudor in 1503. The power comes from the adaptability of Dunbar’s tongue: the current, more physical imagery adds force to a poet not simply begging for aid, but threatening similar exposure of these grotesque sights just as he celebrated the court’s elaborate medieval pageants (see Spearing 205). If we set the two approaches alongside one another, we understand Dunbar’s nauseous revulsion at the bodily displays of the courtiers who are occupying his rightful place and cluttering the court: a ‘vennim’ surges within and will ‘ische all out’ to gush into the ears of the King’s critics (67: 87, 85). James has the ‘trayackill’ to provide a financial

curative ‘To swage the swalme of my dispyt’, yet he must act quickly as in this ‘swalme’ we feel Dunbar’s imagination swelling and pulsing with satirical poison (67: 87–88). The art of ‘flyting’ provides an ideal opportunity for Dunbar to showcase the potential of his verses in a form that celebrates absurdity alongside the materiality of poetic expression. An arena for poetic and rhetorical flair, Dunbar’s celebrated example of the tradition is aimed at Walter Kennedy, a Highland poet unlike the Lowland Dunbar. Although the seriousness of each insult has to be questioned—this was, it is to be remembered, an entertainment and exercise—it nevertheless offers a distillation of Dunbar’s technique in his more serious and financially motivated verses.

At one point during the flyting the bodily force of Dunbar’s invective even threatens to overpower his own poetic voice as he rants ‘Fy, tratour thief, fy, Ganzelon, fy, fy!’ (65: 83). However, this vitriol is channelled into an image which is spat out in disgust: ‘feyndly front far fowlar than ane fen’ (65: 84).<sup>16</sup> Dunbar has previously compared Kennedy to Ganelon, the figure who betrayed Roland at the Battle of Roncesvalles, yet it is felt that this afforded Kennedy too great a comparison. Dunbar instead returns to bawdiness, depicting the poet’s forehead smeared with manure—the muck’s placement emblematic of his opponent’s lowly poetic ingenuity. Recalling the mastery over aureate diction which can be seen elsewhere in Dunbar’s corpus, he mocks Kennedy’s assumption that he too possesses such ‘goldin lippis’; the Highlander’s attempts at beauty fail as words tumble from the mouth of a ‘gaipand fule’ (65: 97–98). Indeed Kennedy is told, ‘Thow art bot gluntoch with thy giltin hippis’: that which began as enamelled words pouring from ‘goldin lippis’ is reduced, by its answering rhyme, to Kennedy’s ‘hippis’, smeared with the yellow stains of defecation (65: 99). Although Ian Ross believes ‘gluntoch’ to stem from the Gaelic *glundabh* meaning ‘black’, it is more likely to be related to the Gaelic *glùn* (‘knee’) and *tòc* (‘swelling’) to give an impression of Kennedy’s large knees which are revealed by his Highland dress, while also drawing us down his torso towards the dirty ‘hippis’ (Ross 188).<sup>17</sup> Again, Dunbar plays with the body’s natural disguise: his ‘skolderit skyn’ is blistered but also ‘skyre and skrumple’ (65: 122); its pre-wrinkled state makes it relatively easy for Dunbar to strip it away poetically in a remarkable dissection of Kennedy’s anatomy which is carried out with almost surgical precision (Bawcutt, *Dunbar the Makar* 229). This parody of the *memento mori* tradition sees Dunbar flaying Kennedy to reveal ‘thy gryslie piteous port’ (65: 163) with ‘Thy rigbane rattillis and thy rabbis on raw’ (65: 180).<sup>18</sup> There is a macabre fascination with his opponent’s bones which rattle in the alliteration:

Kennedy now has life shaken from him. His musculature dictates that he sits crouched ‘with hukebanis harth and haw’, with hip bones rough and blue with cold, illness, or even death, while his ‘lymis’ are thin ‘as ony treis’ (65: 181–82). The poetic consequences of the bodily humiliation are that, like his ‘laithly lymis’, Dunbar believes he can similarly ‘brek thy gaw’—a metaphor for Kennedy’s poetic ‘spirit’ (65: 183). Moreover, the position of the body in ‘cry mercy on thy kneis’ relates these physical insults to artistic inferiority—Kennedy, stripped bare on his ‘kneis’, has been subordinated to Dunbar physically and, now, intellectually (65: 184).

Appropriately, Dunbar’s physical imagery and rhetoric pursues Kennedy’s fleeing body from the flyting, chased ‘lyk ane howlat’ by a gang of boys through the streets of Edinburgh (65: 219). The boys are a swarm of bees (‘as beis owt thrawis’), developing the frantic energy as Kennedy is harangued at every turn (65: 217): first by ‘brachis’ or ‘hounds’, then ‘carlingis’ or ‘old women’ who blame him for stealing their washing (65: 220–21). The clamour is deafening as the hounds ‘dois bark’ (65: 220) and boys and women ‘cryis owt’, emphasised by the intrusion of direct speech: “‘Hay, heir cumis our awin qyueir clerk’” (65: 218). Dunbar’s imagery toys with Kennedy’s body, bringing it into the streets only to be pursued from them amidst the cacophony. This tactic becomes increasingly important later on, asserting the physical power of Dunbar’s poetry while simultaneously silencing that of his opponent. To accomplish this, the poet summons ‘all the toun’ (65: 226) as his forms develop from singular to the plural ‘We sall’ (65: 215): like Dunbar at court, Kennedy is becoming increasingly outnumbered. Similarly, there is a clamour of other noise from the clattering of ‘coillis and creilis’ spilled from a cart, the ‘skillis and skeillis’ thrown down by fishwives, and ahead of them all the ‘rattling of thy butis’ as Kennedy attempts, in vain, to flee from his opponent’s inventive attacks (65: 229–31). Although earlier Dunbar alluded to his verses metaphorically wounding Kennedy’s poetic mantle, stating ‘thy croun sall cleif’ (65: 88), finally his images, now concrete in the earthy streets of Edinburgh, collide with the Highlander: ‘Sum claschis the, sum cloddis the on the cutis’ (65: 232). Ironically, the romantic ‘croun’ has disappeared: Kennedy is eventually struck on his ankles by common ‘Fische wyvis’, forcing him to hobble to a halt (65: 231).

Once immobilised, Dunbar releases his final physical attack upon this poor body as dense alliteration, imagery, and rhyme asserts a domineering and impenetrable poetic force against the lame Kennedy:<sup>19</sup>

Mauch muttoun, byt buttoun, peilit gluttoun, air to Hilhous,  
 Rank beggar, ostir dregar, flay fleggar in the flet,  
 Chittirilling, ruch rilling, lik schilling in the milhous,  
 Baird rehator, theif of nator, fals tratour, feyindis get,  
 Filling of tauch, rak sauch, cry crauch, thow art oursett!  
 Muttoun dryver, girnall river, zadswyvar, fowl fell the!  
 Herretyk, lunatyk, purspyk, carlingis pet,  
 Rottin crok, dirtin dok, cry cok, or I sall quell the! (65: 241–48)

Many of these colloquial compounds, or ‘burlesque kennings’, are of Dunbar’s own invention and must be carefully unravelled for meanings to emerge (Bawcutt, ‘Art of Flyting’ 14). Sheep are ‘Mauch’ and riddled with disease alongside an obscure ‘biting button’ image—both bearing some relation to gluttonous appetites, developed by a reference to the extravagant Sir John Sandilands, Laird of Hillhouse (Bawcutt, *Selected Poems* 416–17). Appetites continue to dominate in dredging ‘ostir’: of course, a way in which to fish for the molluscs but, for Dunbar, the action becomes one of desperate greed eventually exaggerated into Kennedy chasing, or maybe scratching, fleas ‘in the flet’, or ‘in the hall’ (Bawcutt, ‘New Light’ 89). As Dunbar’s invective reaches its crescendo, his eager delight increases as compound constructions are truncated into smaller explosions of insult: ‘Herretyk, lunatyk, purspyk’—internal rhymes offering Kennedy no respite as he is chastised for religious, mental, and moral offences. Such immoderation explodes with a ‘carlingis pet’, Dunbar again turning to the grotesque as Kennedy becomes an expulsion of old woman’s flatulence and, eventually, the accompanying ‘dirtin dok’ (65: 248).<sup>20</sup> The fellow poet has now been reduced to the lowest possible level, almost obscured by Dunbar himself and his talent for such revelations and poetic power.

Yet ‘I sall quell the!’ looks towards future invective, a sense of inexhaustible poetic energy and inventiveness which Dunbar’s satires have implied. Although we cannot know whether the poet’s success in obtaining his desired financial support was as direct result of these particular satirical verses, his other more pathetic appeals to the King, or his highly wrought allegorical celebrations of royal events, Dunbar *did* eventually achieve some measure of success—a benefice was finally secured. In concluding with a ‘flyting’ the temptation is to cast all Dunbar’s complaints as the enthusiastic verbiage of a poet hurling physical insults at immediate rivals without any real artistic meditation save for inventiveness and variety. However, as we have seen, this was coupled to a deeper awareness of the physical effects of poetry itself, aligned with a subtle and pre-meditated desire to set his body, and his

poetic voice, above those around him. Moreover, such was his work's strength and confidence that he could manipulate figures, placing them in scenes of undignified filth or laughable failure. As others fall around him, Dunbar rises as the greater man who has pushed his rivals, like Damian, into the mire. It is somewhat ironic that Dunbar's voice still struggles to be heard at any great volume in syllabuses and anthologies of other medieval courtly writers who were either earlier or relatively more successful, yet often nowhere near as vital or energetic. We should further acknowledge the achievements of a decidedly medieval and vehemently Scottish writer who could reveal the court's 'merry dance' alongside his simultaneous desire to enter the floor and join the display.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The most thorough reconstruction of Dunbar's life is that of Baxter. Scholars are now largely agreed that Dunbar was born c.1456 and graduated *licentiate* from St. Andrews University in 1479. After this his name appears in Treasury Records, receiving payments and pensions from James IV. The final mention of Dunbar in official records is in the Treasurer's Accounts on 14 May 1513, and it is to be assumed that he died soon after the death of James IV at the Battle of Flodden on 9 September 1513.

<sup>2</sup> Dunbar, 'No. 70: Sir Ihon Sinclair begowthe to dance', in Bawcutt, *Selected Poems* 233. All subsequent references to Dunbar's poems will be to this edition using Bawcutt's numbering and titles. This poem appears in The Maitland Folio (MF) (Cambridge, Pepys Library, Magdalene College MS 2553) pp.340–1 and The Reidpath MS (R) (Cambridge, Cambridge University Library MS Ll.v.10) f.45r–45v.

<sup>3</sup> See Michel 117–23. Michel examines the increased freedom in dance creation and relates this trend to the dance manuals which were coming out of Italy such as those for the *bassa danza* in 1455 by Antonio Cornazano.

<sup>4</sup> Sir John Sinclair frequented the court throughout James' reign, and is recorded as being invited to enjoy recreational activities with the King such as bowls and cards.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Shaw was a court physician, part of Dunbar's mistrust of the medical and scientific professions at court which were to explode in his attack upon the alchemist John Damian.

<sup>6</sup> This poem appears in MF pp.16–18 and R ff.13r–14r.

<sup>7</sup> This poem appears in MF pp.196–98.

<sup>8</sup> Both manuscripts that contain the poems place them as a pair.

<sup>9</sup> This poem appears in MF p.339 and R f.44r–44v.

<sup>10</sup> This poem appears in MF pp.339–40 and R. f.44v–45r.

<sup>11</sup> Frequently referred to as ‘A Ballat of the Abbot of Tungland’. This poem appears in The Bannatyne MS (B) (Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland MS Adv. I. I.6, ff.117r–18r and The Arundel MS (Ar) (London, British Library MS Arundel 285), ff.211v–12r (lines 1–69 only).

<sup>12</sup> Dunbar’s account of Damian’s attempt has clear resonances with Chaucer’s *Parliament of Fowls* (particularly in the ordered attack by the birds). For a detailed discussion of the birds to which Dunbar is possibly referring see Bawcutt, ‘Tooth and Claw’ 93–105.

<sup>13</sup> In Chaucer’s *Parliament of Fowls* the birds speak in order of social hierarchy: beginning with the eagles, and culminating with duck, goose and cuckoo.

<sup>14</sup> See Wormald 56. Wormald also records the reason Damian provided for his spectacular failure—that someone had mixed hens’ feathers with the eagles’ wings of his ‘fedrem’ which were clearly never meant to be used for such a flight.

<sup>15</sup> The possibility of Damian’s diabolic origins is made explicit in the opening stanza’s reference to ‘Sathanis seid’ (4: 4).

<sup>16</sup> This poem appears in B ff.147r–154r, in MF pp.53–4, 69–72, 77–80, 59–63, in R ff.58v–64v, and in the Chepman and Myllar print (Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland), which includes lines 316–552 only.

<sup>17</sup> It is also possible that the term may have associations with ‘Glundubh’ as a nickname for Niall, the High King of Ireland in the early tenth century, and the supposed ancestor of Kennedy’s (assumed) Argyllshire clan lineage. See Murison 80.

<sup>18</sup> This late medieval tradition sought to inspire piety through evoking fearful emotions by dwelling on the repulsive appearance of the dead body.

<sup>19</sup> There are other examples of medieval Scottish poets choosing to conclude with a volley of internal rhymes, such as Robert Henryson in ‘Ane Prayer for the Pest’ and Gavin Douglas in the ‘Palis of Honour’, two poets frequently grouped with Dunbar as ‘Scottish Chaucerians’.

<sup>20</sup> The phrase has been glossed as ‘old woman’s favourite’, suggesting a domestic pet or spoilt child; however, given Dunbar’s fondness for scatology, it is more likely to mean flatulence as in French *pet*.

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