William Dunbar's Urban Dilemma

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William Dunbar (c.1460 - c.1513), court poet to James IV of Scotland, was very much a man of the city. In his case the city was Edinburgh, which plays a prominent role in his work. In one poem, 'We that are heir in hevins glory', Dunbar describes Edinburgh as 'parradyis' (4), and a place 'Quhair welth and welfair is' (70). Yet in another, 'Quhy will ye, merchantis of renoun', he chastises the citizens who have not taken their civic duties seriously, saying, 'May nane pas throw your principall gaittis / For stink of haddockis and of scattis, / For cryis of carlingis and debaittis' (8-10). What accounts for this dichotomy?

As one may expect from a court poet, Dunbar's work exhibits disdain for things of the country, which was associated for him, as for many other medieval writers, with casual physicality and ruddy manners untouched by any civilizing force. For example, in 'The Flyting of Dumbar and Kennedie', Dunbar vilifies his fellow poet Walter Kennedy, who in fact was a graduate of Glasgow University and the son of Lord Gilbert Kennedy of Dunure, as a highlander whose countrified way 'bringis the Carrik clay to Edinburgh cors, / Upoun thy botingis hobland, hard as horne. / Stra wispis hingis owt, quhair that the wattis ar worne' (211-213). Clearly the idea of rustic bungler is to Dunbar an insult surpassing all others. In another piece, 'In secreit place this hyndir nycht', he describes the courtship of two inept lovers whose grassy origins encourage them to mimic the verbal intensity if not the refinement of their courtly counterparts: For example, the country lass responds to her lover: 'My belly huddrun, my swete hurle bawsy / My huny gukkis, my slawsy gawsy, / Your musing waild perse ane harte of stane' (38-40).

With Dunbar's love of city and dislike of country in mind, it is a challenge to explain poems like 'Ane murelandis man of uplandis mak', in which a man from the country who has gone to the city to the highest law court in the land and just returned home is asked by his neighbor to tell about his adventure. His tale of the hypocrisy and moral corruption he found there is an indictment of the court, the city, and the people who inhabit it. In another poem, 'This nycht in my sleip I wes agast', a dreamer sees a cross section of city folk tempted by the Devil. The courtier, merchant, goldsmith, taylor, brewer, and so forth, all damn themselves unawares. This piece is again a judgement against the evils that seem to prevail

in city life.

Although Dunbar's verbal guffaws at various hayseed countrymen are unflattering, their fundamental crime has to do with social status and perhaps an overly apparent libido. His descriptions of city people, and by extension of city life, however, often turn out to be condemnations of serious moral crimes. Certainly consistency is not required in a poetic corpus. Yet, Dunbar's ambivalence in his attitude toward the city represents more than artistic variation. He is living during a period of change in the growth of the medieval Scottish city. Historian Michael Lynch writes that 'in the three quarters of a century after 1450 the larger Scottish towns seemingly underwent the greatest change since their legal foundation two or three centuries before.' ('Social and Economic Structure' 261) Although Dunbar's admiration for the city is clear, his struggle with the evils attached to city life form the subject matter for many of his poems. He is certainly the first Scottish poet to be confronted with the problem of urbanization, and certainly the first to write about it.

Two works show clearly the poet's contrasting views. One, 'We that ar heir in hevynnis glorie', is a parody of the Matins and Lauds sections of the Office of the Dead. Dunbar begins with an Epistle, then follow *Lectio prima, secunda, tertia*, each followed by a *Responsio*; the piece concludes with a part poetic, part prose parody of the conclusion of Lauds. The premise is that the King has gone to nearby Stirling, which he was wont to do on occasion for various reasons, among them a religious retreat, and it may be to one of these that the poet refers here. Internal evidence suggests the advent season, but does not demand it. The poem begins:

> We that ar heir in hevynnis glorie
> To you that ar in purgatorie
> Commendis us on hartlie wys:
> I mene we folk of paradys,
> In Edinburgh with all merynes,
> To yow at Striveling in distres,
> Quhair nowdir plesour nor delyt is,
> For pietie this epistell wrytis. (1-8)

Here Dunbar writes an epistle on behalf of himself and others in Edinurgh to the King, in Stirling, in which he refers to Edinburgh as heaven and to the other city as purgatory. He goes on to describe hermits and anchorites who suffer penance at table, their punishment increased without the company of knights and lords and others at court, and offers an assurance that those in Edinburgh will help to bring James out of his painful state. The poet continues to address the King:

> To bring yow to the blys and glorie
> Of Edinburcht, the myrie town,
> We sall begin ane cairfull sown,
> Ane dirige, devoit and meik,
> The lord of blys doing beseik,
> Yow to delyver out of your noy
> And bring yow sone to Edinburgh joy,
> For to be merye amangis us. (20-27)

In this section, Dunbar's enthusiasm for the outright happiness of the city is almost contagious: he describes a coterie of merry, singing, altogether congenial people. In the *Lectio prima*, still addressing the King, he asks that 'all the hevinlie court divyne'

> Sone bring yow fra the pyne and wo
> Of Striveling, everie court mans foo,
> Agane to Edinburchtis joy and blys,
> Quhair wirschip, welthe and weilfair is,
> Play, plesance eik and honestie. (32-37)

In these lines the poet lists among the city's excellences 'wirschip' meaning 'honor', wealth and welfare, 'Play', or 'entertainment', pleasure, and last of all 'honestie', which Priscilla Bawcutt glosses as 'good repute' (William Dunbar, *Selected Poems* 344) and Kinsley as 'virtue' or 'goodness' (433). Dunbar's enthusiasm does not wane. In the *Lectio secunda* he encourages James saying:

> Ye may in hevin heir with us dwell,
> To eit swan, cran, peirtrik and pluver,
> And everie fische that swowmis in rever,

To drink withe us the new fresche wyne
That grew apone the revar of Ryne,
Fresche fragrant claretis out of France,
Of Angeo and of Orliance,
With mony ane cours of grit daynte. (52-59)

The gustatory aspect of Edinburgh described in these lines suggests a sophisticated court accustomed to luxury. Most luxury items were not home grown and had to be brought into Scotland from abroad, which was possible because of the country's successful trade ventures. And throughout the poem, alongside lines extolling Edinburgh's glory are those lamenting the King's sojurn in purgatorial Stirling. For example, the *Lectio tertia begins*:

We pray to all the sanctis in hevin,
That ar abuif the sternis sevin,
Yow to delyver out of your pennance:
That ye may sone play, sing and dance
And in to Edinburgh mak gud cheir,
Quhair welthe and weilfair is, but weir. (69-74)

The praise directed toward Edinburgh in this piece is clearly lavish. The descriptions of Stirling describe the King's stay there as stark, a little gloomy, and above all designed to encourage abstinence. Yet, considering the fact that the King went there for religious retreat, things are pretty much as they should be for him. What, then, is Dunbar saying in this poem? Well, he of course expresses sympathy for James in his penitential retreat, yet the King's religious exile is, after all, self-imposed. He contrasts Edinburgh and Stirling, heaven and purgatory, in a fine parody of a religious service, and the varied implications of the comparison would have been clear enough to his medieval audience.

Historian Jenny Wormald writes that 'Edinburgh did not finally emerge as the capital of Scotland until the reign of James III [d. 1488]; hitherto, Perth and Stirling had been equally important centers of government.' (14) Thus Dunbar compares two worthy rivals, and when all is said and done Stirling is not depicted as bad, just dull. Although Dunbar compares two cities here, he is really writing about only one, Edinburgh. He hails the company, the wealth and welfare, the entertainment, the food and drink, the virtue, the goodness, and the unabated joy that characterize Scotland's capital city. In so doing he praises the court of James, and thus the poem becomes a grand compliment to an exemplary monarch with the self-discipline to abandon its enticements for a time and turn to God. The greatness of James IV is thus reflected in his court and its environs. Although this poem is certainly about court life as opposed to life on the street, the word Dunbar

uses over and over again is 'Edinburgh.' If he had meant only to call attention to the court of James, as he has done elsewhere in his work, his intention would be reflected in his language.

One word in the poem that merits special attention is 'honestie'. As indicated above, in the *Lectio prima* Dunbar describes Edinburgh as a place of 'Play, plesance eik and honestie' (37). 'Honestie' can of course mean the obvious, but can also mean 'good repute', as indicated above. Perhaps Dunbar means to suggest both meanings in the poem, but certainly he means to label Edinburgh a city of 'good repute.' The idea of good repute, of a town's reputation, was of significant importance then as now to a nations's rulers, and the late Stewart kings were surely no exception. In Scotland as elsewhere, most cities, or burghs, were from the earliest times founded on the idea of trade. By the late-fifteenth century Scotland's trading abilities throughout Europe, including the Baltic area, were as competent as was necessary to supply what was needed, especially luxury items, at home. With the expansion over time of Scotland's trading expertise went the spread of the country's reputation. Although medieval Scotland was not a wealthy country, it was not an unusually poor one either. Not beset by expensive wars and the ponderous taxes that accompany them, and not weighted down by an unwieldy and expensive government structure, and despite its out-of-the-way location, Scotland under the Stewarts strove to take its place among the enlightened nations of Europe and in many ways it succeeded. Scotland had what Wormald aptly calls a 'determination not to be ignored' (4). Just as James IV brought in artists, entertainers, craftsmen, and scholars from other countries to fashion his court after the finest in Europe, he wanted the reputation of an enlightened Scotland to spread throughout the world. When William Dunbar writes in verse to James at Stirling, he describes the excellences of Edinburgh and, by extension, of its King and his kingdom.

In this poem the *idea* of 'city' and all that it represents is held forth. Medieval Scotland was mostly rural with a handful of moderately large cities located mostly in the southeast where, predictably, most of the trading took place. The distinctions between city and country were certainly clear enough from a geographical perspective but in day to day activities each was dependent upon the other. Stereotypes about city and country folk proliferated then as now, and literary tradition has made as much of the mud-spattered country bumpkin as of the street-wise city-slicker too confident for his own good. Indeed these images appear often, sometimes with satiric vehemence, in Dunbar's work. But the idea of the city in this poem is inextricably bound with the idea of Edinburgh as a capital as great as any in Europe, and the sense of place has to do in this instance as much with Edinburgh's place in the world as with its prominence in Scotland.

Dunbar's eclectic attitude toward life in this city suggests the awareness of the importance of overseas trade that characterized the second half of the fifteenth

century in Scotland, along with the ensuing economic growth and political power of the merchant class, the greater prominence of crafts in the city and their increasing role in city life, and the central place in world politics that the Stewart kings sought to achieve for Scotland. As Michael Lynch has said, 'James IV was a participator . . . [he] is rightly celebrated as a builder of palaces and ships rather than of monasteries, for he sought earthly rather than heavenly glory.' (*Scotland* 159). James IV's determination to achieve an international reputation for Scotland is evident, for example, in his zeal to build a navy that could defend the country, come to the aid of its allies, and protect trading interests. As his biographer, Norman Macdougall, explains:

> What the figures . . . show is that over the twenty-five years of a reign during which royal income approximately tripled, expenditure on ships and their maintenance increased more than sixty times, with the huge rise in costs coming in the second half of the reign. This vast outlay reflects a close personal interest in the development of a royal navy by the king himself, and taken together with other record evidence it suggests that James IV saw the possession of a fleet, including some vessels of considerable size, as a means of conferring international prestige on himself and his dynasty. (228)

This idea of expansive growth at sea mirrored the personal life of the king who, perhaps more than any before or after, himself travelled the length and breadth of his own country in order to demonstrate a personal concern for his countrymen, to offer a singular display of independence with an eye toward demonstrating political power, and most probably to satisfy an unquenchable intellectual curiosity.

That said, in another poem, 'Quhy will ye, merchantis of renoun', Dunbar presents a view of Edinburgh that differs from the one just described. Here he addresses the merchants of the city saying:

> Quhy will ye, merchantis of renoun
> Lat Edinburgh, your nobill toun,
> For laik of reformation
> The commone proffeitt tyine and fame?
> Think ye not schame
> That onie uther regioun
> Sall with dishonour hurt your name?
>
> May nane pas throw your principall gaittis,
> For stink of haddockis and of scattis,
> For cryis of carlingis and debaittis,

For feusum flyttingis of defame.
Think ye not schame,
Befoir strangeris of all estaittis,
That sic dishonour hurt your name? (1-14)

The very first line, addressed to 'merchantis of renoun', unites the ideas of commerce and reputation. Dunbar continues by asking the merchants if they will allow the 'commone proffeitt' and, to the point here, the 'fame' of Edinburgh to be lost by their unwillingness to pursue reform. Dunbar admonishes them with the shame that would result 'That onie uther regioun / Sall with dishonour hurt your name' (7-8)? Here the poet is concerned in the very first stanza with what people in other countries will say about Edinburgh.

After pointing out a few of the city's unfortunate sensual aspects in the second verse, the discordant noise and the agressive smells, Dunbar again indicates the shame that would ensue 'Befoir strangeris of all estaittis, / That sic dishonour hurt your name' (13-14) should reform not be undertaken. The idea of 'strangeris of all estaittis' suggests Edinburgh as an international city visited by travellers who will carry news about both it and Scotland back to their own countries. This poem has eleven stanzas, each one ending in a similar refrain, each one ending with the same word, 'name.' For example, 'Sall with dishonour hurt your name' (7), 'In hurt and sklander of your name' (21), 'To win yourselff ane bettir name' (42), 'Ye will decay and your great name' (63), and so forth. Dunbar's sense of the city's reputation is furthered by lines that directly invoke the international element: 'Your foirstairis makis your housis mirk, / Lyk na cuntry bot heir at hame' (17-18). It was customary in Scottish towns for houses to have forstairs that went from the ground to the first floor. These constructions on each side of the street often added to congestion, especially as cities grew in population before they grew in size, which often occurred. The poet continues:

At your hie Croce, quhar gold and silk
Sould be, thair is bot crudis and milk,
And at your Trone bot cokill and wilk,
Pansches, pudingis of Jok and Jame.
Think ye not schame
Sen as the world sayis that ilk,
In hurt and sclander of your name? (22-28)

Croft Dickinson explains that, 'The general plan of almost every Scottish burgh was one main street—the High Street, or Market Street—with a number of smaller and narrower streets, or perhaps only closes or vennels, running off it at right angles.' (292). In the instance of Edinburgh, the High Street ran from the

castle to Holyrood Palace, home of the king. In the High Street were the tolbooth, the trone, and the market-cross. As Dickinson also writes, 'The cross was the symbol of the burgh's jurisdiction and its market peace, and was thus its legal centre.' (293) The trone, as the public weighing apparatus, was thus an integral part of the marketplace. Here the poet complains that at the cross, where there should be gold and silk—items imported and indications of a significant and wealthy cultural climate—there are only curds and milk, what one would expect to find in a small village. At the trone there are but cockles and whelks, tripes and sausages, also village fare. The implication here is that where a thoroughbred would be expected a draft horse has been delivered. In this stanza Dunbar also points out that the entire world is talking, causing damage to the city's reputation, and he goes on to ask the merchants to welcome both 'strangeris and legis' (64), not to over charge them on food, and to make certain both extortion and fraud are punished.

Although Dunbar's address to the King at Stirling and his address to the merchants of Edinburgh point out contrasting elements of the city, the impulse behind both works is the same: Edinburgh must take its rightful place as a world capital. Yet along with the poet's pride-filled enthusiasm is his practical assessment of its evils. For example, in another poem he describes the alarm felt by a man from the country who has just visited Edinburgh's Court of Sessions, the highest court in the land. The piece begins:

Ane murlandis man of uplandis mak
At hame thus to his nychtbour spak:
'Quhat tythingis, gossope, peace or weir?'
The uther roundit in his eir:
'I tell yow this, undir confessioun.
Bot laitlie lychtit of my meir,
I come of Edinburgh fra the Sessioun.' (1-7)

When asked by his friend what he saw there he responds, 'Keip this in secreit, gentill brudir. / Is no man thair, trowis ane udir' (10-11), and then gives a list of crimes so extensive that no level of society is left unscathed. A few lines will provide an idea of what the poet says:

Sum castis summonis and sum exceppis,
Sum standis besyd and skayld law keppis,
Sum is continewit, sum wynnis, sum tynis.
Sum makis thame myrre at the wynis,
And sum putt out of his possessioun,
Sum hyrreit and on credence dynis.

Sic tythingis hard I at the Sessioun.

Sum sweiris and sum forsaikis God,
Sum in ane lamb skyn is a tod,
Sum on his toung his kyndnes tursis,
Sum kervis throittis and sum cuttis pursis.
To gallows sum gais with processioun,
Sum sanis the Sait, and sum thame cursis.
Sic tythingis herd I at the Sessioun. (29-42)

What Dunbar describes here is far from the bliss he celebrated in the poem about Edinburgh and Stirling, and more morally damaging than what he says about the city's merchants. It also does not contain any sense of the underlying affirmation of the city's greatness that forms a leitmotif in the poem addressed to the city's merchants. In fact, the piece ends with an indictment of 'young monkis of het complexioun' (50) and their more than cordial relationships with women. In this poem the speaker is a man of the country, naive and honest enough to wonder at the invidious elements of the city and its legal system. Here the contrast between the rural innocence of the poem's speaker and the urban decadence of what he describes provides an uncomfortable panorama of daily life in Edinburgh.

In another piece in which Dunbar dreams that he sees the devil going through the city's marketplace and tempting people, Edinburgh's population is again indicted. For example, the poem begins:

This nycht in my sleip I wes agast:
Me thocht the Devill wes tempand fast
The peple with aithis of crewaltie,
Sayand, as throw the mercat he past,
Renunce thy God and cum to me. (1-5)

Of note here is the fact that Dunbar chooses the marketplace, probably the location offering the broadest cross-section of people available anywhere in Scotland at the time. The people being tempted are listed in hierarchical order: priest, courtier, merchant, goldsmith, tailor, showmaker, baker, butcher, maltster, brewer, smith, minstral, dice-player, thief, and fish-wife. The merchants have a prominent position here, third on the list after priest and courtier, which bespeaks the wealthy merchant class living in Edinburgh at the time. Dunbar writes:

Ane merchand his geir as he did sell
Renuncit his pairt of hein and hell;
The Devill said, Welcum mot thow be,

Thow salbe merchand for my sell;
Renunce thy God and cum to me. (16-20)

This poem's message is fairly standard—beware what you say, you will be held accountable eventually. The poet's addition to this traditional theme, and what adds spice to it, is its mercantile aspect, because it reflects the concerns of the time.

Dunbar's ambivalent reactions to and reflections on his contemporary Edinburgh are indications of a city in the process of change. Social currents of this nature are more evident today and their progress perhaps easier to chart in retrospect than they would have been to an observer in late fifteenth-century Edinburgh. Dunbar wrote for a small, almost intimate, audience composed of people associated in some way with the court of James IV. Scholars have been generally puzzled by what seems a lack of coherence in his work. Perhaps his most emminent reader today, Priscilla Bawcutt, writes that 'Dunbar is a poet of enormous variety. He speaks with almost too many voices.' (*Dunbar the Makar* 1) Indeed, Dunbar is a lyric poet who wrote, in many instances, about what he observed in his daily life. His many voices can be attributed not only to the complexity of a fine poetic mind that demonstrates both room for and an appreciation of the infinite variety of human experience, but also to the inquisitive vigor of a man in a period of change trying to understand and analyze what he saw and, finally, to write about it. William Dunbar's kaleidoscopic vision provides a glimpse at the complexities of late fifteenth-century Edinburgh that we would expect today from a social historian secure in the understanding that societal change is rarely linear, always complex, and generally uncomfortable for those living through it. Thus, his approach to Edinburgh encompases the untidy reality of entrails and fish bones thrown in the street and the unnerving fact of cutpurses and libidinous Carmelites, as well as the idyllic bliss of an earthly paradise, home of an enlightened, if singular, monarch, and a court lavish in sumptuous pleasures and overflowing luxury that would rival many in Europe.

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