

The Golden Targe (The Golden Shield)

a courtly dream-vision poem

by William Dunbar

A glance at the notes in the standard editions of Dunbar's poems by Kinsley or Bawcutt ¹ demonstrates at once Dunbar's debt to a host of earlier authors for nearly every feature of this poem. He even names some of them: Cicero, Chaucer, Lydgate. But there is ample proof of other extensive debt to a tradition of such courtly dream vision poems: the *French Roman de la Rose*, and the work of home grown Scottish poets Henryson and Douglas. The Roman classics are there too, almost ostentatiously, in the parade of gods and goddesses. Indeed this poem would serve as a good example of intertextuality.

It exhibits its relationship to the genre of allegories of love in its adherence to most of the established conventions of the genre: the lovely Spring / Summer setting (*locus amoenus*), the dreaming poet, the personifications; and in its ornate and artificial language: the sun is the "candle matutine," the dew drops are "silver showers;" the "crystal air and sapphire firmament" canopy the "enameled" landscape, though when the trees are "o'ergilt" with "silver slops" somehow we may feel that something has gone slightly awry.

An allegory is really an extended metaphor, and if one puts as much weight on a metaphor, as allegory often does, one exposes its mere figurativeness. To mention Cupid or Venus shooting an arrow at a lover and wounding him is acceptable, but here, it must be confessed, the extension of that metaphor into a full scale military image is not a success, partly because the fierce warrior archers have unlikely names like Dame Homeliness and Cherishing.

The parade of classical gods and goddesses seems designed primarily to display the poet's learning, rather like an even longer list in Henryson's *Testament* where it really holds up the narrative for an unduly long time. Both demonstrations show that Scottish poets are as learned in the classics as any others, and that the "obligatory" display of poetic humility at the end is just that, a conventional nod to one's literary "betters." Chaucer may be the "rose of rhetors all," but Dunbar nevertheless puts himself in his company, as Chaucer had done with Dante, Virgil and Statius at the end of *Troilus and*

¹ James Kinsley, **The Poems of William Dunbar** (Oxford, 1979). Priscilla Bawcutt, **The Poems of William Dunbar** (Assoc. For Scottish Lit. Studies:Glasgow, 1998), 2 vols.

Criseyde.

The average modern reader has less trouble with the “aureate” language of a poem like this than with the vernacular Scottish idiom of poems like the *Flyting of Dunbar and Kennedy* or *The Treatise of the Two Married Women and the Wedo* which are so heavily dialectal that even the expert commentators are rather often at a loss. Still considerable difficulty is presented by the Scottish spelling even of this poem:

Ourgilt the treis branchis, lef and barkis
is a line that does not present an insuperable obstacle, but requires quick deciphering into word-forms that make more immediate sense:

O’ergilt the trees’ branches, leaf and barks
Consider

Quhare that I lay, ourhelit wyth leuis ronk
or

All throu a luke, quhilk I haue boucht full dere

Every single line of the poem needs the kind of instant decipherment required here, and the effort provides an unnecessary strain for most readers, who may indeed be tempted to decide that the benefit does not justify the effort. This is a pity, because Dunbar is a poet of considerable power, and while this may not be his finest poem, it is an extended and in places impressive demonstration of the breadth of his poetic abilities extending from deliberate but accomplished artificiality at one pole; torrential and original dialectal inventiveness at another.

The margins provide glosses for words or phrases that are likely to cause difficulty for a modern reader. In this poem, unlike the other Scottish poems, I have tried retaining the Scottish noun plural ending **-is**, since here it seems at least as good as **-és**; sometimes the vowel is simply dropped. However, the **-it** ending of past tense verbs has been changed to **-ed**. The present participle ending **-and** is generally changed to **-ing**.

I have depended heavily throughout on the standard editions of Dunbar by Priscilla Bawcutt and James Kinsley, and have benefited from the glossed version on the Teams website edited by John Conlee.

The Golden Targe

by William Dunbar

A lovely morning in May

Right as the star of day began to shine, sun
When gone to bed were Vesper and Lucine, *evening star & moon*
I rose and by a rosere did me rest. *rose garden*
Up sprang the golden candle matutine *morning*
With clear depurèd beamis cristalline
Glading the merry fowlis in their nest.
Ere Phebus was in purple cape revest *dressed*
Up rose the lark, the heaven's minstrel fine,
In May into a morrow mirthfullest.

2.

10. Full angel-like these birdis sang their hours *canonical hours (prayer)*
Within their curtains green into their bowers *into = in, inside*
Appareled white and red with bloomis sweet;
Enameled was the field with all colours.
The pearly droppis shook in silver showers,
While all in balm did branch and leavis flete. *flow (with dew?)*
To part from Phoebus did Aurora grete *weep*
Her crystal tears I saw hang on the flowers,
Which he for love all drank up with his heat.

3.

For mirth of May with skippis and with hops
20. The birdis sang upon the tender crops *Choirboys*
With curious note, as Venus' chapel clerks. *buds*
The rosis young, new spreading of their knops,
Were powdered bright with heavenly beryl drops
Through beamis red burning as ruby sparks.

The skies rang for shouting of the larks,
The purple heaven, o'erscaled in silver slops,
O'ergilt the trees' branchis, leaf, and barks.

streaks ?

4.

Down through the ryce a river ran with streams
So lustily against those lykand leams
30. That all the lake as lamp did leam of light,
Which shadowed all about with twinkling gleams.
The boughs bathed were in second beams
Through the reflex of Phoebus' visage bright.
On every side the hedges rose on hight,
The bank was green, the brook was full of breams,
The stanners clear as stars in frosty night.

*bushes
pleasant glows
glow*

*fish
pebbles*

5

The crystal air, the sapphire firmament,
The ruby skies of the orient,
Cast beryl beams on emerald boughis green.
40. The rosy garth, depaint and redolent,
With purple, azure, gold, and gulis gent
Arrayèd was by Dame Flora, the queen,
So nobily that joy was for to seen
The rock against the river resplendent,
As low enlumined all the leavis sheen.

*yard, garden
noble red*

As if a flame ... shining

The narrator falls asleep and dreams

6

What through the merry fowlis' harmony
And through the river's sound that ran me by,
On Flora's mantle I slept as I lay;
Where soon into my dreame's fantasy
50. I saw approach against the orient sky
A sail as white as blossom upon spray,
With merse of gold bright as the star of day,

ship's crows-nest

Which tended to the land full lustily,
As falcon swift desirous of her prey.

approached rapidly

7.

And hard on burd unto the bloomèd meads
Among the greenè rispis and the reeds
Arrivèd she; wherefrom anon there lands
A hundred ladies, lusty into weeds,²
As fresh as flowers that in May up spreads,
60. In kirtles green, withouten kell or bands.
Their bright hairs hung glittering on the strands
In tresses clear, wyppèd with golden threads,
With pappis white and middles small as wands.

*close beside
clumps of sedge*

in lovely garments

*w'out caps
glinting
wrapped
breasts*

8.

Describe I would, but who could well endite
How all the fieldis with those lilies white
Depaint were bright, which to the heaven did glete?
Not thou, Homer, as fair as thou couldst write,
For all thine ornate stylis so perfite.
Nor yet thou, Tullius, whose lippis sweet
70. Of rhetic did into termès flete.
Your aureate tonguis both be all too lite
For to compile that paradise complete.

Glint, shine

*Cicero
(over)flow*

*He sees in his dream a parade of mythical and
classical female deities*

9.

There saw I Nature and Venus, queen and queen,
The fresh Aurora and Lady Flora sheen,
Juno, Apollo, and Proserpina,
Diane, the goddess chaste of woodis green,

shining, bright

² “Lusty” in this poem is a wide-purpose word, generally signifying approval: “lovely, pleasant,” though it is also applied to one battle.

My Lady Cleo, that help of makers been,³
Thetis, Pallas, and prudent Minerva,
Fair feigned Fortune, and lemand Lucina.

Muse of history

shining

80. These mighty queens in crownis might be seen
With beamis blithe, bright as Lucifera.

As Lucifer (feminized) or evening star

10.

There saw I May, of mirthful monthis queen,
Betwix April and June her sisters sheen,
Within the garden walking up and doun,
Of whom the foulis gladdeth all bedene.⁴
She was full tender in her yearis green.
There saw I Nature présent her a gown
Rich to behold and noble of renown,
Of every hue that under the heaven has been
90. Depaint, and broid by good proportion.

Because of whom all the birds are very glad

Embroidered

11

Full lustily these ladies all in fere
Entered within this park of most pleasure,
Where that I lay o'erreled with leavis rank.
The merry fowlis blisfullest of cheer
Salute Natúre, me thought, on their mannér;
And every bloom on branch and eke on bank
Opened and spread their balmy leavis dank,
Full low enclining to their queen so clear
Whom of their noble nourishing they thank.

happilytogether

covered ...plentiful

moist

12

100. Syne to Dame Flora on the samen wise
They sálute and they thank a thousand syse,
And to Dame Venus, lovè's mighty queen,
They sang balládes in love, as was the guise,

*Then to
times*

custom

³ Clio is the muse of history not of poetry ("makers" = poets). Chaucer calls on Clio to help him tell the tale of Troilus and Criseyde (II, 8), but then as a story of Troy, it might claim to be history of a sort. Apollo (78) does not belong properly in this grouping.

⁴ Orig has "Quhome of"

With amorous notis lusty to devise
As they that had love in their heartis green.
Their honey throatis, opened from the spleen,⁵
With warbles sweet did pierce the heavenly skies,
While loud resounded the firmament serene.

spleen = heart

There follows a train of male deities

13

Another court there saw I consequent
110. Cupid the king, with bow in hand y-bent
And dreadful arrows grounden sharp and square.
There saw I Mars, the god armipotent,
Awfull and stern, strong and corpolent.
There saw I crabbèd Saturn, old and hoar
His look was like for to perturb the air.
There was Mercurius, wise and eloquent,
Of rhethoric that found the flowers fair.

following

big and strong

founded

14

There was the god of gardens, Priapus,
There was the god of wilderness, Faunus,
120. And Janus, god of entry delitable.
There was the god of floodis, Neptunus,
There was the god of windis, Aeolus,
With varying look right like a lord unstable.
There was Bacchus, the gladder of the table,
There was Pluto, the eldritch incubus,
In cloak of green; his court usèd no sable.

W. changeable countenance

unearthly

black

15

And every one of these in green arrayed.
On harp or lute full merrily they played,
And sang balládes with mighty notès clear.
130. Ladies to dance full soberly assayed,
Endlong the lusty river so they mayed.

Along ... welcomed May

⁵ We sould say *from the heart* rather than *from the spleen*.

Their observance right heavenly was to hear.
Then crept I through the leavis and drew near {has he forgotten that he is in a dream? See ll. 46-9}
Where that I was right suddenly afraid,
All through a look which I have bought full dear.

*The Queen of Love sees the dreamer and tries to seduce him
with the gentler aspects of Love. But Reason protects him with a golden targe.*

16

And shortly for to speak, by lovè's queen
I was espied. She bade her archers keen
Go me arrest, and they no time delayed.
Then ladies fair let fall their mantles green,
140. With bowis big in tressed hairis sheen [meaning?}
All suddenly they had a field arrayed. *Arrayed in battle formation?*
And yet right greatly was I not afraid,
The party was so pleasing for to seen.
A wonder lusty bikkir me assayed. *Assault*

17.

And first of all with bow in hand y-bent
Came Dame Beauty, right as she would me shent. *Destroy*
Syne followed all her damoisels yfere, *Thentogether*
With many diverse awful instrument. ⁶
Unto the press Fair Having with her went,
150. Fine Portraiture, Pleasance, and Lusty Cheer. *Charming Manner*
Then came Reason with shield of gold so clear,
In plate and mail as Mars armipotent.
Defended me that noble chevalier.

18.

Syne tender Youth came with her virgins young,
Green Innocence, and shameful Abasing, *modest shyness*
And quaking Dread with humble obedience.
The golden targe harmèd they nothing.
Courage in them was not begun to spring,

⁶ To judge by the DOST, the singular after *many* or *diverse* is unusual but not unique.

Full sore they dread to do a violence.

160. Sweet Womanhood I saw come in preséncé
Of ártillry a world she did in bring,
Servéd with ladies full of reverence.

19

She led with her Nurtúre and Lowliness,
Continence, Pacience, Good Fame, and Steadfastness,
Discretion, Gentrise, and Considerance,
Levefull Company, and Honest Busyness,
Benigné Look, Mild Cheer, and Soberness: ⁷

Chastity ... Good name

Gentillesse

lawful company

All these bore ganes to do me grievance.

Arrows

But Reason bore the targe with such constáncé,

170. Their sharp assayès might do no duress

To me, for all their awful ordinance.

Artillery

20.

Unto the press pursuéd High Degree:

rank

Her followèd ay Estate and Dignity,
Comparison, Honor, and Noble Array,
Will, Wantonnes, Renown, and Liberty,
Richesse, Freedom, and eke Nobility.

Wit ye they did their banner high display.

Know you

A cloud of arrows as hail shower looséd they,

And shot till wasted was their ártillry,

180 Syne went aback rebuted of their prey.

Then ...disappointed

Venus changes tactics and uses different "troops" to prevail over the Dreamer

21

When Venus had perceivéd this rebute,

rebuff

Dissimulance she bade go make pursuit

Deception

At all power to pierce the golden targe;

w. full force

And she, that was of doubleness the root,

⁷ Like King Lear, Dunbar clearly thinks this collection of virtues an "excellent thing in woman," but unlikely except in allegory, as his "Treatise of the Two Married Women and the Widow" shows at considerable unallegorical length. Why Reason would reject Patience, discretion and the others is not really clear.

Askèd her choice of archers in refute.
Venus the best bade her go wale at large.
She took Présence, plight anchor of the barge,⁸
And Fair Calling, that well a flayn could shoot,
And Cherishing for to complete her charge.

For the attack
Choose freely
chief anchor = chief weapon
an arrow

22.

190. Dame Homeliness she took in company,
That hardy was and hende in archery,⁹
And brought Dame Beauty to the field again
With all the choice of Venus' chivalry.
They come and bikkered unabashedly
The shower of arrows rappèd on as rain.
Perilous Presence, that many a sire has slain,
The battle brought on border hard us by.
Th'assault was all the sorer, sooth to sayn.

Familiarity
handy, expert

attacked

Physical Closeness ... many a man
brought up close

23.

Reason is finally overcome and the Dreamer becomes a prisoner of love
whose joys prove to be illusory.

Thick was the shot of grounden dartis keen,
200. But Reason with the shield of gold so sheen
Warily defended whosoe'r assayed.¹⁰
The awfull stour he manly did sustain,
While Presence cast a powder in his eyne;
And then as drunken man he all forvayed.

sharply pointed arrows

battle
in Reason's eyes
stumbled

⁸ The commentators suggest that Presence here means something like physical proximity. If so, "plight anchor of a barge" seems an inappropriate figure of speech at this point. In the following line "Fair Calling" corresponds to the French Bialacoil, a character friendly to the lover in the *Roman de la Rose*. Skill in arrow shooting does not seem especially appropriate for Fair Calling.

⁹ Again, expertise in archery somehow seems an inappropriate proficiency in "Homeliness."

¹⁰ "Whosoe'r assayed" is not the object of "defended." The syntax seems to be: "whoever assayed, i.e. attacked, Reason defended (the intended victim)."

When he was blind, the fool with him they played
And banished him among the boughs green.
That sorry sight me suddenly affrayed.

Frightened me

24.

Then was I wounded to the death well near,
And yielded as a woeful prisoner

surrendered

210. To Lady Beauty in a moment space.

Me thought she seemed lustier of cheer
(After that Reason tynt had his eyes clear)

lost his clear sight

Than of before, and lovelier of face.

Why wast thou blinded, Reason, why, alas?

And gert a hell my paradise appear,¹¹

and made

And mercy seem where that I found no grace.

25.

Dissimulance was busy me to sile,
And Fair Calling did oft upon me smile,
And Cherishing me fed with wordis fair.¹²

mislead

220 New Acquaintance embracèd me a while

And favored me, while men might go a mile,

Sine took her leave, I saw her nevermore.

Then

Then saw I Daunger toward me repair.

approach

I could eschew her presence by no wile,

no ingenuity

On side she lookèd with a fremèd fare.

Aside ... hostile look

26.

And at the last Departing could her dress,

Departure arrived (!)

And me delivered unto Heaviness

For to remain, and she in cure me took.

into her care

By this the lord of windis with wodness,

vehemence

¹¹ “And made what was actually a Hell appear to be Paradise.” Witout Reason Love *seems* to be a paradise (mistakenly), and the lady’s favor (grace) is an illusion.

¹² Deceitfulness has blinded Reason, and the Dreamer has surrendered to Beauty. He experiences brief “Cherishing” but shortly Daungier arrives, the personification of the cold shoulder from the Beloved. Parting abandons him to Heaviness (Depression), and Paradise becomes the Hell of line 215.

230. God Aeolus, his bugle blew I guess,
That with the blast the leavis all to-shook.
And suddenly in the space of a look
All was hyne went ; there was but wilderness,
There was no more but birdis, bank, and brook.

trembled

hence

27.

In twinkling of an eye to ship they went,
And swithe up sail unto the top they stent,
And with swift course atour the flood they frak.
They firèd guns with powder violent
Till that the reek rose to the firmament.

*quickly ... they spread
across the sea they sped*

240. The rockis all resounded with the rak,
For rede it seemèd that the rainbow brak.
With spirit affrayed upon my feet I sprent
Among the clews, so carefull was the crack.

*racket
noise
jumped
craggs ...so frightening*

28.

And as I did awake of my sweving,
The joyful birdis merrily did sing
For mirth of Phoebus' tender beamis sheen.
Sweet were the vapours, soft the morrowing,
Wholesome the vale depaint with flowers ying,
The air attempered, sober, and amene.
250. In white and red was all the field beseen
Through Nature's noble fresh enameling
In mirthfull May, of every month [the] queen.

*dreaming
bright, shining
the mist
young
and pleasant
arrayed*

The poet humbly addresses his eminent predecessors

29.

O reverend Chaucer, rose of rhetors all,
As in our tongue a flower imperial
That rose in Britain, whoever reads aright,
Thou bears of makars the triúmph royall,
Thy fresh enameled termès celicall
This matter could illumined have full bright.
Wast thou not of our English all the light,
260. Surmounting every tongue terrestrial,
As far as Mayè's morrow does midnight?

*of poets
heavenly*

30.

O moral Gower and Lydgate laureate,
Your sugared lips and tonguis aureate
Been to our earis cause of great delight.
Your angel mouthis most mellifluate
Our rude language has clear illuminate,
And fair o'ergilt our speech that imperfite
Stood ere your golden pennis shope to write.
This isle before was bare and desolate
270. Of rhetoric or lusty fresh endite.

imperfect
your pens started to write
this isle = Britain
writing

The author takes leave of his poem, a "little quire."

31.

Thou little quire, be ever obedient,¹³
Humble, subject, and simple of intent
Before the face of every cunning wight.
I know what thou of rhetoric has spent.
Of all her lusty rosis redolent
Is none into thy garland set on hight.
Eshame thereof and draw thee out of sight.¹⁴
Rude is thy weed, distainèd, bare, and rent;
Well aught thou be afearèd of the light.

little book

e. knowledgeable person

Be ashamed
thy dress ...torn

¹³ This stanza is meant to be reminiscent of the "Go, little book" passage at the end of Chaucer's **Troilus and Criseyde**.

¹⁴ He is still addressing his poem, his "little quire."