The Scottish poet William Dunbar lived during the final decades of the fifteenth century and the initial decades of the sixteenth. Although his early years and final years are shrouded in uncertainty, throughout much of his adult life he was closely associated with the royal court of James IV of Scotland (r. 1488-1513), a court that provided the social backdrop as well as the specific impetus for many of Dunbar's poems. Dunbar belongs to a significant group of late-medieval Scottish poets who are generally known as the Middle Scots Poets or the Scottish Makars, a group that includes the author of The Kingis Quair (possibly James I of Scotland), Richard Holland, Robert Henryson, Gavin Douglas, and Sir David Lindsay. Henryson and Dunbar are usually considered the two major writers from among the Middle Scots Poets and are often viewed as being two of the most important figures in fifteenth-century British literature. Dunbar, moreover, may lay claim to being the finest lyric poet writing in English in the century and a half between the death of Chaucer in 1400 and the appearance of Tottel's Miscellany in 1557.

Dunbar's poems offer vivid depictions of late-medieval Scottish society and serve up a striking paean of colorful figures at James IV's court. Some of these figures are portrayed favorably but more often they are targets of the poet's satire, satire that tends to be scornful and derisive rather than bemused and good-natured. Several of Dunbar's poems also offer hints and suggestions about the poet himself, suggestions that have sometimes been used as a basis for speculations about Dunbar's life. But the truth is that we possess very little information about William Dunbar that can be verified by external documentation. What information we do possess comes primarily from three sources: the Acta of the University of St. Andrews, The Register of the Privy Seal, and, most importantly, The Treasurer's Accounts (Accounts of the Lord High Treasurer of Scotland), which contain the records of expenditures for the royal household during James IV's reign.

The date and place of the poet's birth are not known, but there is little doubt that William Dunbar was a Lowland Scot whose origins were in the Lothian area of southeastern Scotland. Perhaps the poet actually grew up in or near the town of Dunbar, which is located on the North Sea midway between Berwick-upon-Tweed and Edinburgh. It is very likely that William Dunbar the poet is the same William Dunbar who attended St. Andrews University, "determining" (receiving his bachelor's degree) in 1477, and becoming "licentiate" (receiving his master's degree) in 1479. If this is so, and if Dunbar was about twenty years old when he received his first degree from St. Andrews, then he was probably born in the late 1450s. For the first decades of Dunbar's adulthood, 1480 to 1500, no documentary evidence has come to light. Several of his poems suggest that at some period during his life he engaged in extensive foreign travels, and it is possible that those travels would have occurred during this time. The historical records do indicate that during 1500-01 Dunbar was in England, for the Treasurer's Accounts show that a payment was made to him in 1501, "after he com furth of Ingland" (2.95). It is quite possible that Dunbar was among the group of Scots who were making arrangements for the marriage of James IV to Princess Margaret, the daughter of the English monarch Henry VII. It is also possible that Poem 29, for which the Maitland Folio colophon reads "Quod Dunbar at Oxinfurde" (i.e., Oxford), was written about this time.

For the years 1501 to 1513, when the poet was serving in the court of James IV, many entries in the Treasurer's Accounts refer to Dunbar. Most of these entries record payments made to him such as his pension (his annual pay), his livery (a clothing allowance he periodically received), and other minor gifts and remuneration. During this period Dunbar was clearly a "servitor" at the court of James IV, although we can not be certain about the specific capacities in which he served. Very likely he was employed within the royal secretariat as a scribe, secretary, or envoy (quite possibly some combination of these things), and perhaps he also served during this time as a court chaplain. It is even possible that for some portion of this time Dunbar may have served as either the king's or the queen's personal priest. Dunbar's petition poems (Poems 37-53), which were almost certainly written between 1501 and 1510, offer some of the best internal evidence for Dunbar's activities during this period. These poems reflect very clearly the poet's intense desire to be granted a benefice, an endowed church office that provided its holder with a secure, and sometimes substantial, annual income. They also suggest that Dunbar had long aspired to attaining a position of prominence within the church, but it appears that this last aspiration was never fulfilled. The records do show, however, that Dunbar's pension was doubled in 1507 to £20 a year, and that in August of 1510 it was raised yet again, this time to the very substantial sum of £80 a year.

The final mention of Dunbar in the historical records occurs in May of 1513. In the following September the reign of James IV came to a tragic end at the Battle of Flodden, where the Scottish king and 9,000 of his fellow Scots, including many earls, bishops, and abbots, perished at the hands of the English army. It is possible that Dunbar was one of those who died at Flodden Field on that early fall day in 1513, but most scholars incline to the view that he survived on into the reign of James V. There is no documentary evidence to prove that this was so because the Treasurer's Accounts for the period from August of 1513 until June of 1515 no longer exist. It is possible that Poem 34, which was written to provide comfort for a grieving widow, is Dunbar's expression of sympathy for Queen Margaret following James IV's death; if so, it would indicate that Dunbar was alive at the Battle of Flodden. But Poem 34 is one of the poems of disputed authorship (Priscilla Bawcutt excludes it from her recent edition), and, furthermore, the poem does not identify the widow who is being addressed, and there were many widows of Scottish noblemen following the Battle of Flodden (if indeed her widowhood is meant to be tied to that event). We can be certain, however, that Dunbar died sometime prior to 1530, when Sir David Lindsey wrote his Testament of Papyngus, for, in the opening verses of that poem, Lindsey laments the deaths of the great Scottish poets, including Dunbar.

Dunbar's Poetry

 Scholars and editors agree that William Dunbar is the author of slightly more than eighty poems. Although Dunbar's possible authorship of a small number of poems continues to be a matter of debate, on the whole there is a good deal of consensus about which poems comprise the Dunbar canon. The principal difficulty for modern editors in establishing the poet's canon stems from the fact that the Bannatyne Manuscript and the Maitland Folio, two of the most important early witnesses of Dunbar's poetry, sometimes disagree in their attribution of poems. In several instances one of these sources will credit a particular poem to Dunbar when the other source considers that same poem to be anonymous or even attributes it to some other poet. In fact, there are a few poems that Dunbar's editors believe to be his that are not actually attributed to him in any of the early witnesses. But at this point Dunbar's canon has been established with a good deal of certitude, and we can be confident that the eighty-three or eighty-four poems usually attributed to him are
Dunbar's poems are remarkable both for their diversity and variability and for their multiplicity of voices, styles, and tones. They treat a wide range of subjects and themes and reflect the characteristics of many different literary genres, forms, and modes. They range from the sacred to the profane, including devotional poems of the greatest seriousness and rarified beauty, and comic and parodic poems of extreme salaciousness and scatological coarseness. Many of them are highly traditional and conventional, while others are highly innovative and experimental. Some are backward looking and thoroughly medieval, and some seem completely imbued with the spirit of the English Renaissance.

Dunbar's poems praise and sometimes imitate his great English predecessors -- Chaucer, Gower, and Lydgate -- and it is accurate to say that his poetry represents the culmination of medieval poetic practice. At the same time, it is also appropriate to point out that some of his poems seem to anticipate the poetry of such sixteenth- and seventeenth-century poets as Wyatt and Donne, Herbert and Milton, and, in Scottish literary tradition, the poetry of Robert Burns.

The great variety of poems within Dunbar's canon includes religious hymns of exaltation, moral poems on a wide range of serious themes, general satires against the times, and satires with much more specific targets, often a single individual. Dunbar's canon also includes allegorical poems and dream visions, poems that celebrate or critique or repudiate courtly love, laudatory poems and panegyrics, poems of vitiuperation and invective, and precatory poems (poems of request, or petition poems) addressed to the king or queen.

There are also wildly exuberant comic poems and various kinds of literary burlesques and parodies, and there are a few longer poems that are more narrative than lyrical. Clearly, pinning labels to Dunbar's poems is not always easy; many of them reflect simultaneously the distinctive characteristics of several poetic sub-categories, and the classification of some of his poems remains a matter of scholarly dispute.

But perhaps above all else Dunbar is a satirist. A large number of his poems are undoubtedly satiric in intent and fall clearly within this mode. Others that are not so obviously subversive in their intentions contain satiric elements and asides. It is the poet's impulse towards satire that is perhaps the single most common feature of his literary art, and for Dunbar that mode is usually tinged with the darker emotional hues -- often suggesting the poet's own sense of anger, frustration, disappointment, and disillusionment. Thus the satire in Dunbar's poems more often tends to be derisive and scornful rather than light-hearted and gently mocking, and several of his poems appear to have been written with the explicit intention to expose and humiliate. They are much more akin to the darker and more cynical tone found in a work such as Swift's Gulliver's Travels than they are to the subtler varieties of satire seen in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales and Dunbar, in contrast to Chaucer, rarely works by indirection. He does occasionally employ irony, but he is usually overt and direct in his comic subversions. Dunbar rarely leaves any doubt in his satiric poems about the thoughts and emotions in his mind and heart.

Dunbar's poems reflect several distinctive voices and styles. One of the voices often sounded in his moral poems, for example, is that of a stern preacher who is admonishing his hearers to attend to their spiritual and moral needs. Many of Dunbar's petition poems, on the other hand, seem to reflect a very personal voice, a voice that gives every appearance of being the poet's own voice. Stylistically, Dunbar's poems are marked by the use of several highly contrastive forms of diction. The most distinctive feature in several of his poems is what scholars call aureation or aureate diction, a very formal and artificial diction that uses many words of Latin derivation, some of which appear to be original coinages. A term that Dunbar himself might use for such language is annamalit ("enameled"), which aptly describes the brilliant, glossy surface so characteristic of these poems. Dunbar's aureate diction is found in several of his formal, ceremonial poems (e.g., "The Thistle and the Rose" -- Poem 30), in some of his courtly love poetry (e.g., The Golden Targe -- Poem 65), and perhaps most prominently in his poem in praise of the Virgin, "A Ballad of Our Lady" (Poem 4). Contrasting with Dunbar's aureate diction is his use of the language of colloquial insult; indeed there can be little doubt but that Dunbar has mastered the fine art of name-calling. Several of his poems, both from among his petition poems and from among his satiric poems, reflect his genius in this regard. "To the King" (Schir, ye have mony servitouris -- Poem 46) is one of the best examples, as is The Flying of Dunbar and Kennedy(Poem 83). An especially intriguing example of it occurs in "In a Secret Place"(Poem 72), in which the catalogue of extremely colloquial names the speakers apply to each other are meant to be terms of endearment rather than degrading insults.

Another important characteristic of Dunbar's versatility may be seen in the poet's metrical virtuosity. A few of his poems are written in rhyming couplets (Poems 5, 45, 46, and 81) and one, The Tretis of the Tua Marit Wemen and the Wedo(Poem 84), is written in the Middle English alliterative long line. The vast majority of his poems, however, are written in short stanzas with complex rhyme schemes. In most of these poems the stanzas contain anywhere from four to eight verses, with most of them having refrains. One of Dunbar's favorite forms is the five-line stanza rhyming aabba, a form he uses sixteen times. Nearly as common is his use of quatrains rhyming abab with the final line being a refrain, a form he uses eleven times. In the case of these two much-favored stanzaic forms, there does not appear to be any common denominator -- regarding such things as theme or tone or subject matter -- that would logically group them together. But that does seem to be the case with some of the other verse forms that Dunbar employs. For example, all the poems written in the seven-line stanza with the ababcbb rhyme scheme are pieces of comic or satiric verse (Poems 56, 60, 69, 72, and 74). Similarly, all of the poems written in the seven-line stanza form known as rhymed iambic pentameter poems with an ababbbcc rhyme scheme are serious and/or courtly poems, in accordance with established practice in the later Middle Ages. Another form Dunbar uses for serious and/or celebratory poems is the ballade, an eight-line stanza rhyming ababccbd in which the final line is a refrain; he employs this verse form in sixteen poems. The only exception to this general rule is The Flying of Dunbar and Kennedy(Poem 83), where he uses the ballade form (though without the refrain) for comic purposes. A final stanzaic form that Dunbar sometimes employs is the tail-rhyme stanza. Although he only uses it a few times (Poems 54, 55, 67, and 77), when he does, it is always for comic or satiric purposes.

The Arrangement of the Poems

Most previous editors of Dunbar's poetry have tended to arrange the poems according to their subject matters or their formal characteristics or some combination of the two. Although such arrangements are inevitably subjective and somewhat arbitrary, there are few attractive or feasible alternatives. Priscilla Bawcutt, Dunbar's most recent editor, has chosen to present the poems alphabetically according to the first word of the first line. This neutral arrangement has a distinctive advantage in that it "permits poems to be read without over-explicit labeling of their subject or 'kind'" (Bw 1.21). Certainly, such an ordering of the poems has much to be said for it, but in practical terms it also has some very significant drawbacks; Bawcutt herself recognizes this when in a handful of instances she is forced to deviate from her own plan. Indeed, perhaps the advantages to such a "neutral" ordering of the poems are offset by the inconvenience to the reader who wishes to view Dunbar's poems in relationship to each other. For that simple reason it seems better to do what other editors have done and attempt to arrange the poems into logical groupings. A second reason to do this is that many of Dunbar's poems are obviously companion pieces to each other, and there are even several short sequences of poems that are directly interconnected. It makes little sense not to place such poems adjacent to one another. Furthermore, it makes a good deal of sense to print all of Dunbar's petition poems together as a group, and to print all of his courtly love poems as a group. To do this is not to deny that there will always be differences of opinion in regard to which of his poems actually are his petition poems or actually do pertain to courtly love.

The plan adopted here is to begin with Dunbar's serious poems and to end with his comic ones. Within this scheme Dunbar's poetry has been divided into four large categories. The first of them includes Dunbar's religious and moral poems, which comprise about a third of his canon. The second sub-grouping includes the poems that directly relate to the poet's life as a figure in the court of James IV. This group is followed by the small number of poems that Dunbar wrote in the medieval tradition of fin'amor -- his poems pertaining to courtly love. The final group is a sprawling and rather heterogeneous set of poems that are comic, satiric, and parodic, and in the case of some of them, scatological and obscene.
About a third of the poems in the Dunbar canon provide serious treatment of religious or moral topics. Poems 1-3 -- which have many of the characteristics we associate with church hymns -- celebrate biblical events of great importance to medieval Christians: the Nativity, the Crucifixion, and the Resurrection. "A Ballad of Our Lady" (Poem 4), similarly, reflects the medieval theme of the Adoration of the Virgin Mary. "In Praise of Women" (Poem 5) is less specifically religious in nature and appears to celebrate women in general and mothers particularly, yet it is also clearly intended to venerate the Holy Mother of God. Indeed, it is possible that the poem as we have it is the opening section of what was once a much longer poem celebrating the Virgin.

Among Dunbar's devotional poetry is a small group of penitential poems, Poems 6-9, works closely associated with the liturgical season of Lent. These poems are especially concerned with the spiritual preparation Christians should make prior to going to confession during Holy Week. The speaker in "The Manner of Going to Confession" (Poem 6) admonishes his audience to search their consciences and reflect upon their sins in order to achieve the spiritual condition known as contrition, while the speaker in "The Table of Confession" (Poem 7) provides a comprehensive guide to the sins and reminds its audience of the fundamental tenets of medieval Christian doctrine. "All Earthly Joy Returns to Pain" (Poem 8) and "Of Man's Mortality" (Poem 9) focus on Ash Wednesday, the day that initiates the Lenten season; this pair of poems also introduces us to the poet's concern with human mortality and earthly mutability, but their main focus continues to be on penitence, contrition, and confession. In "An Orison" (Poem 10), a brief and simple devotional poem, the speaker acknowledges his sensual desires but also expresses his heartfelt wish to atone for his sins. "Of the World's Vanity" (Poem 11), one of Dunbar's most conventional expressions of the theme of earthly mutability, is not explicitly about confession, but that concern is perhaps implied. In this poem, as in several others, the speaking voice is that of a preacher who is admonishing his listeners to heed his words.

A few of Dunbar's moral poems are concerned with "the four last things" -- Death, Judgment, Heaven, and Hell. "Of Life" (Poem 12) suggests that we can experience a short-lived torment and an everlasting bliss, or a short-lived joy and an everlasting sorrow. "Of the Changes of Life" (Poem 13) focuses on the alternation of joy and woe in this life but offers no suggestions about how to achieve a more lasting joy when this life ends. Two of Dunbar's most acclaimed moralities are "The Lament for the Makars" (Poem 14) and "A Meditation in Winter" (Poem 15). "The Lament for the Makars" is a poignant meditation on the inevitability of death in the memento mori tradition. The speaker tells us that Death comes for everyone, regardless of social class or professional accomplishments, and no exception is made for poets. Despite the poem's somber tone, however, there is a slight upswing at the end when we are reminded that life in this world should be viewed as preparation for the life to come. In "A Meditation in Winter" the speaker's melancholy stems from the oppressive winter weather with its long nights and dark, cheerless days; in this case the speaker is able to dispel his dreary thoughts by contemplating the joyful return of spring.

Boethian elements appear in many of Dunbar's moral poems but are especially prominent in Poems 16-22, works that share some similarities with the Chaucerian lyrics "Truth," "Fortune," and "Lak of Stedfastnesse." "None May Assure in this World" (Poem 16), one of Dunbar's more intriguing moral poems, reflects the characteristics of several poetic types including the Boethian lyric (it specifically recalls Chaucer's "Lak of Stedfastnesse"), while Poems 17-19 are more narrowly concerned with achieving consolation in this world in the face of life's adversities. These poems counsel their hearers to be content with their lot, despite the apparent unfairness of life. "Best to Be Bliithe" (Poem 17) is imbued with a strong sense of the speaker's personal pain, while "Without Gladness No Treasure Avails" (Poem 19), the most cheerful of these poems, encourages the listener to be merry and to enjoy what life has to offer. "His Own Enemy" (Poem 20) is one of Dunbar's more problematic moral poems, for while it seems to be advising its audience to enjoy what they are fortunate enough to possess, there is a sardonic quality to the poem that sets it apart from the others.

"Spend Thine Own Goods" (Poem 21) and "Of Covetise" (Poem 22), while reflecting many conventional elements of the poem of moral advice, also begin to reflect the elements of courteous satire that seem to lie at the heart of the final sub-group of Dunbar's moral poems. The advice these poems offer is more secular and practical and concerns how to survive in the complex and often hostile environment existing at court. Several of Dunbar's moral poems focus on the importance of money and worldly goods and thus may be closely related to Dunbar's petition poems. "Of Deeming" (Poem 23) offers advice about how to cope with malicious gossip (ignore it and live as virtuously as you can); "How Should I Conduct Myself" (Poem 24) offers practical advice about how to conduct oneself; and "Rule of Oneself" (Poem 25), one of the most sententious in the Dunbar canon, suggests more broad-based counsel on how to cope with the uncertainties of life at court. Poems 26-28 are a series of interconnected poems that consider the "discretion" one should possess in regard to asking, giving, and taking. The three poems in this sequence share a common poetic form and employ similar refrains, yet each of them has a distinctive flavor. "Dunbar at Oxford" (Poem 29) is the final poem in this section. Here the moral advice is directed specifically at scholars, who are urged to pursue their intellectual achievements while maintaining a strong moral grounding.

Poems Public and Private

The poems in this section reflect Dunbar's life and his professional responsibilities at court during the reign of James IV of Scotland. Some grow out of the poet's important public responsibilities at court, and a great many more of them stem from his more personal inter-actions with members of the court, including the king and the queen. The first group of poems, Poems 30-36, are occasional poems written to commemorate important public events. In some cases, as in "The Thistle and the Rose" (Poem 30), which concerns the royal marriage of James to Margaret Tudor in 1503, these were events of national consequence. These celebratory poems suggest that Dunbar was often called upon to provide poems for special occasions. That appears to be the case in the group of the poems addressed to Queen Margaret (Poems 31-34) and in the two poems written in praise of Bernard Stewart (Poems 35 and 36). These great display pieces of public celebration contrast sharply with Dunbar's many other poems that concern the court of James IV, poems that are probably intended for a much more selective audience and whose purpose is primarily comedic and/or satiric rather than celebratory (Poems 50-60).

Far less easy to fathom, however, is the extensive group of poems comprising Dunbar's petitions. There are more than a dozen of these poems, many of which are addressed to "Schir" -- undoubtedly King James IV himself -- and most of them are direct or indirect appeals for the king's financial and professional support. It is also likely that the king was not their exclusive audience and that they were circulated among a small circle of the poet's friends, though just how private or public they actually were is impossible to determine. Some readers of Dunbar have found these poems unseemly and embarrassing, both because there are so many of them and because they often seem self-serving and sometimes self-pitying. These poems are intriguing because of the various suggestions they make about the poet's relationship to the king. Also within this group are a few poems of considerable artistic merit. Dunbar scholars generally agree that "To the King" (Schir, ye have mony servitouris -- Poem 46) is one of the poet's most subtle and artful poems; and every reader of Dunbar has been intrigued by the brief, somewhat enigmatic, and apparently highly personal poem often called "The Headache" (Poem 43). One of the poems in this group that especially appeals to the editor of this volume is "To the King" (That I suld be ane Yowillis yald -- Poem 49), which develops and sustains a clever metaphorical comparison involving men and horses.

Poems 51-60 focus on a variety of people who were associated with the royal court. Some the poet admires, some he humorously satirizes or mocks, and some he scorns and viciously maligns. Poems 51-53 stand in close relationship to Dunbar's petition poems and once again testify to the poet's difficulties in securing the financial support he feels he deserves, and also to his worries about managing money once he has some. "To the Lord Treasurer" (Poem 52) and "To the Lords of Chalker" (Poem 53) are addressed to important financial officers of the court, the Lord Treasurer and the Lords of Chalker. The first of this pair of poems expresses the poet's delight at the treasurer's speedy return to
Edinburgh, which means that he will be able to receive his pension without further delay. The second comically reveals to the Lords of Chalker, who were the auditors of the exchequer, that he is unable to account for the sudden and mysterious disappearance of the funds he had received. “The Antichrist” (Poem 51) and “A Ballad of the Friar of Tungland” (Poem 54) heap scorn and ridicule upon John Damian, a colorful and flamboyant figure at James’ court whom Dunbar considered a fraud and a charlatan, but who nonetheless received substantial support from the king, to Dunbar’s considerable chagrin. Poems 56–58 concern figures belonging to Queen Margaret’s personal entourage, and these poems may suggest that Dunbar was himself attached to the queen’s service. And three of Dunbar’s poems about figures at court -- Poems 55, 59, and 60 -- are apparently denunciations of actual people against whom Dunbar felt particularly aggrieved.

Poems in the Courtly Tradition

The eight poems in this small group are all concerned with fin’amor (or “courtly love”), a pervasive and influential literary phenomenon that flourished from the twelfth century into the sixteenth. Fin’amor was an elaborate code of behavior and discourse that established guidelines for the conduct of amorous relationships between the sexes. It is a complex and controversial literary phenomenon and one that appears in many guises and permutations throughout the Middle Ages. In brief, it posited the sovereignty and superiority of the lady, whose male wooer was expected to perform long service and endure great suffering before his suit could be entertained or his amorous desires reciprocated. Some medieval writers seem to take the doctrines of fin’amor very seriously and others, particularly in the later Middle Ages, are more inclined to satirize them. One group of Dunbar’s poems appears to celebrate fin’amor (Poems 61–64), while another clearly repudiates it (Poems 66–68). Posed between these two starkly contrasting attitudes is Dunbar’s The Golden Targe (Poem 65), which critics have variously interpreted, although it seems quite likely that the poem is more negative in its attitude toward courtly love than positive.

Dunbar wrote relatively few poems in the courtly love tradition, but two of them -- “Sweet Rose of Virtue” (Poem 61) and The Golden Targe -- are often ranked among his most impressive works.

Poems Comic, Satiric, and Parodic

The sixteen poems in this group, although extremely heterogeneous, are all essentially comic. And, while they surely reflect a wide range of purposes and intentions, one of the central intentions in each of them is to provide amusement. Indeed, several of them were almost certainly written for public performances at court (Poems 71, 77, 83, and possibly 84). Several of them focus on various kinds of sexual comedy (Poems 69, 70, 72, 73, and 84), several humorously satirize members of the non-noble classes within Scottish society (Poems 74, 75, 76, 77, 78, 79, and 82), and several are essentially literary parodies (Poems 71, 72, 80, and 81). By far the most celebrated poem within this group is The Tretis of the Tua Marit Wemen and the Wedo (Poem 84), which Dunbar critics and scholars, without exception, consider one of his most important works. There is far less consensus on the literary merits of the poem which here precedes the Tretis, Poem 83, a poem containing Dunbar’s war of words with his fellow poet Walter Kennedy -- The Flying of Dunbar and Kennedy There can be little doubt, though, that these two final poems represent the most extreme and outrageous examples of excremental humor and sexual obscenity to be found within the Dunbar canon.

The Early Texts and Manuscripts

The texts of Dunbar’s poems are preserved in a small number of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century witnesses. Five of these early sources -- a pair of printed texts, the Aberdeen Sasine Register, the Aslano Manuscript, and the Arundel Manuscript -- all date from the poet’s own lifetime or shortly thereafter. These sources, however, contain only a small number of Dunbar’s poems. Far more are preserved in the three great Renaissance anthologies commonly known as the Bannatyne Manuscript, the Maitland Folio, and the Reidpath Manuscript. An additional source is the late sixteenth-century Osborn Manuscript, which contains the text of just one poem.

1. The Early Printed Texts

   A) Chepman and Myllar (Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland).
   The texts of three of Dunbar’s poems (Poems 35, 65, and 83) are contained in a series of small booklets that were printed in 1508 by Walter Chepman and Andrew Myllar, Scotland’s first printers.

   This early print also contains three of Dunbar’s poems (Poems 14, 80, and 84); it is undated and typographically distinct from the Chepman and Myllar prints. Kinsley called it “the Rouen print,” but some scholars believe that it was printed in Edinburgh rather than on the continent, possibly by Myllar before he and Chepman began their collaboration.

   Also called “The Aberdeen Minute Book,” this multi-volume work, which was begun in 1484, is primarily a record of property transactions for the royal burgh of Aberdeen. In the margins and on some originally blank pages other writings are recorded, including several vernacular poems. Three of them (Poems 19, 33, and 82) are attributed to Dunbar; they are found in Volumes II and III (for the years 1502–07 and 1507–13, respectively).

3. The Aslano Manuscript (Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland MS 16500).
   This large miscellany, which contains works in both prose and verse, was probably compiled between 1515 and 1525. It bears the name of its primary scribe, John Aslano (or Sliane), a public notary in Edinburgh from the 1490s to the early 1530s. It contains the partial texts of three Dunbar poems (Poems 2, 54, and 77). It is especially important for preserving the only extant text of Poem 4, one of the finest examples of Dunbar’s use of the aureate style, and his only poem written exclusively in praise of the Virgin Mary.

   This manuscript, which probably dates to about the middle of the sixteenth century, is a fairly homogeneous collection of devotional pieces -- poems, verse meditations, and prayers. It contains the texts of three of Dunbar’s religious poems (Poems 2, 6, and 7).

5. The Bannatyne Manuscript (Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland Advocates’ MS 1.1.6).
   The compiler of this important manuscript collection of early Scottish poetry was George Bannatyne (1545-1608), an Edinburgh merchant. Bannatyne states that he assembled his anthology in 1568, during a “tyme of pest.” This extensive collection is in two parts. The main section contains 375 leaves, and the shorter section, which is either a partial draft or a partial duplicate copy, contains fifty-eight. The contents of the manuscript are quite varied, including both Scottish materials and English materials, and materials derived from both manuscript sources and early printed sources. Its overall design is indicated by Bannatyne’s decision to arrange his materials in five major sections (each of which has several sub-sections), sections to which he gave the titles “ballatis of moralite,” “ballatis mirry,” “ballatis of theologie,” “ballatis of luse,” and “tabillis.” Each of Bannatyne’s sections includes poems attributed to Dunbar, and in all, the Bannatyne MS preserves the texts of about forty of Dunbar’s poems, nearly half the poet’s canon.
6. The Maitland Folio (Cambridge, Pepys Library, Magdalene College MS 2553). This great miscellany of 366 pages was compiled between 1570 and 1586. It contains poems by many poets, including a large number written by Sir Richard Maitland (1496-1586) and many others that were written in honor of Maitland. Interspersed throughout the folio are fifty-two poems that are specifically attributed to Dunbar, and ten more poems that Bannayne had attributed to Dunbar. Thus the Maitland Folio preserves the texts of more than sixty Dunbar poems -- nearly three-quarters of the entire canon. At one time this manuscript had contained even more of Dunbar’s poems, as the Reidpeth MS indicates.

7. The Reidpeth Manuscript (Cambridge, Cambridge University Library MS Li.v.10). This manuscript, which is named for its copyist John Reidpeth, is a partial transcript of the Maitland Folio. It is a folio volume of sixty-nine leaves, and as the copyist indicates, was begun in December of 1622. It contains fifty poems that scholars attribute to Dunbar. The special importance of the Reidpeth MS, however, is that it is the only one of the earliest witnesses to preserve the texts for eight of Dunbar’s poems. These poems were copied from a gathering of the Maitland Folio that is now lost. They are Poems 33, 36, 37, 42, 43, 52, 53, and 75.

8. The Osborn Manuscript (New Haven, CT, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, Music MS 13). Also called the “Osborn Commonplace Book” and the “Braye Lute Book,” this late sixteenth-century miscellany of fifty-seven leaves has been of particular interest for the music it preserves for the lute. In addition, this small quarto volume contains various written items, including recipes and about a dozen poems. One of these is a version of Dunbar’s “In a Secret Place” (Poem 72).

The Presentation of the Texts

Modern conventions for punctuation and capitalization have been followed in presenting the texts of Dunbar’s poems. The early witnesses contain many abbreviations that have been silently expanded. The refrains in the texts of many of the poems, which are often abbreviated after the initial stanza, are printed in full. In a small number of instances, the spelling conventions of the original texts have been altered for the convenience of the modern reader with the assumption that the revised spelling reflects the original pronunciation of the word more accurately than the orthographic convention of the day:

1) w/w: observance is here printed as observance; vpoun is printed as upoun.

2) w/i: hevinlie is here printed as hevinlie; ws levit is printed as ws levit.

3) i: jugis is here printed as jugis; ludas is printed as Judas.

4) The only archaic letter that regularly appears in the early witnesses is yogh; it is here printed as y or g in most instances, though in a few instances as z, as in Lazarus.

5) In several of the poems there are personified figures such as “Trewth” or “Honour.” They have been treated as proper names and thus capitalized.

6) The second person familiar pronoun is here printed as thee /pei/ in order to distinguish it from the article the, which was pronounced /pe/.

7) Titles: Medieval lyrics rarely possess titles, and the titles by which we may know them are more often than not the creations of modern editors. The same is true for the poems of William Dunbar. Many of Dunbar’s poems, however, are widely known by their various popular titles -- e.g., “The Lament for the Makars,” The Golden Targe, and “The Thistle and the Rose” -- titles which for the most part were given to the poems by Dunbar’s eighteenth- and nineteenth-century editors. Because these titles have been in common usage for some time, there is value in preserving them. The “titles” of Dunbar’s poems given here attempt to follow such current practice, but also provided in brackets for some poems is a secondary set of titles that might include other familiar titles or briefly descriptive titles (such as refrains) that may make it easier for users of this volume to identify particular poems. An index of first lines is provided in the back of the volume for additional ease of cross-referencing.

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Ancient Scottish Poems, Never Before in Print, but Now Published from the Ms. Collections of Sir Richard Maitland, of Lethington, Knight, Lord Privy Seal of Scotland, and a Senator of the College of Justice; Comprising Pieces Written from about 1420 till 1586, with Large Notes, and a Glossary; Prefixed Are: An Essay on the Origin of Scottish Poetry; A List of All the Scottish Poets, with Brief Remarks; and an Appendix is Added, Containing, among Other Articles, an Account of the Contents of the Maitland and Bannatyne Mss. Ed. John Pinkerton. 2 vols. London: C. Dilly, 1786.


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I think I should scarcely trouble the reader with a special appeal in behalf of this book, if it had not specially appealed to me for reasons apart from the author's race, origin, and condition. The world is too old now, and I find myself too much of its mood, to care for the work of a poet because he is black, because his father and mother were slaves, because he was, before and after he began to write poems, an elevator-boy. These facts would certainly attract me to him as a man, if I knew him to have a literary ambition, but when it came to his lit

1 For a discussion of Dunbar's use of alliterative conventions in his poetry, see A. A. MacDonald, "Alliterative Poetry and Its Context: The Case of William Dunbar."