
Marginalia

N. Lee Wood

Writing a review column doesn't mean reviewers have much control over what books come in the mail. And although I once wrote an academic paper on the historical connection between twelfth century Arabic poetry and troubadour poetry for the Leeds University Medieval Congress, I must confess I'm not really all that fond of the stuff itself. I couldn't explain the difference between unrhymed iambic hexameter and octosyllabic verse, nor do I much care. My personal taste in poetry tends to run to maudlin Rod McKuen-ish Hallmark cards, or begin with lines like "There was a young lady from Spain"... So I must also confess I was somewhat less than thrilled when the British publishing house Addison Wesley Longman, Ltd., sent me one of their brand new books in their Annotated Text series, "William Dunbar, Selected Poems", edited by Priscilla Bawcutt of the University of Liverpool. Well, thought I, I'll just wait a bit to see what else turns up. The what-else was yet another Longman book, this one from their Medieval and Renaissance Library series, "An Introduction to the Gawain-Poet" by Ad Putter of the University of Bristol. Oh, bugger. Two books on poetry means I have a theme for a column. And if Longman was considerate enough to send me books to review, the least I could do was give them a polite browse.

Surprise, surprise, I actually enjoyed them both!

I was already familiar with the Gawain-Poet, having many years ago read "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight" translated by Brian Stone for the Penguin Classics paperback series (1959) into readable modern English, but although the back blurb of Bawcutt's book states "William Dunbar is widely recognized as a major medieval poet, probably the most brilliant between Chaucer and Spencer", I'd never heard of him before. He does seem to have been quite an interesting character, and his poetry is genuinely fun to read, so this obscurity in the shadow of more widely celebrated poets such as Chaucer and Spencer, or even the anonymous Gawain-Poet, is unwarranted.

William Dunbar was born c.1460 in the Lowlands of Scotland, probably in the Lothian region, and grew up in the unpopular reign of James III. He spent a good many years living in Edinburgh, and likely is the same William Dunbar who attended St. Andrews University in the 1470's, earning himself a listing among the "licentiati", or masters, in 1479. While there's no indication that Dunbar had higher degrees in theology or law, it was common for educated Scottish laymen to serve in the courts as a procurator, or advocate for litigants, which Dunbar was doing in 1502. But between 1479 and 1500, however, there's no evidence as to where he was or what he was doing. Scholars have used his poems to speculate that he might have been a novice in a Franciscan order of friars, or that he was overseas as part of a delegation sent to France in 1491, or he was busy protecting the French king as a member of the Scots Guards. But by 1500, he was back in Scotland, drawing a royal household pension of ten pounds a year in the Court of James IV, and by 1510, he was making eight times that amount. There's not much mention of Dunbar after 1513, after his employer invaded England and was killed along with a goodly portion of his leading nobles and his army at the Battle of Flodden. What exactly Dunbar's duties were in the court of James IV isn't clear. He called himself a "makar" of poetry and a clerk, frequently complaining that his service had been long but his duties light. It's unlikely he was paid primarily to write poems, which seemed as undervalued a profession then as it is today. Most likely, he supplemented his literary endeavors with the more prosaic job of scribe and secretary. He is known to have been an envoy in England in 1501, conceivably on a diplomatic mission negotiating the marriage between James IV and Margaret Tudor.

Like many of those educated at university, Dunbar entered the Church. But although Dunbar had hopes of promotion in the church, mentioning his youthful aspiration of a bishopric, his ambition was doomed as his family was neither wealthy nor noble. His petitions were scaled back to a more modest request for a benefice or even a 'kirk scant coverit with hadder' [heather]. He got neither. He was in minor orders until March 17th, 1504, when he celebrated his first mass, presumably after being ordained as a priest. By 1509, he was a chaplain serving in either one of the chapels of St. Giles or in the royal household. His lack of advancement rankled, as did the fact that up until 1507, his annual

salary was smaller than those of masons, falconers, gunners, and other less educated members of the royal household.

Dunbar is invaluable to the medieval scholar, not so much for the literary qualities of his poetry, which are considerable, but for his eye-witness descriptions of life in the Scottish court, all the events, big and little, important and trivial, "daylie in court befor myn e [eye]." His world was not that of a glamorized elite decorating a brilliant Renaissance court such as the Medicis, as James IV had neither the Medici's money nor intellectual interests. He generously supported musicians and minstrels and other artists, but his main enjoyment was for more aristocratic hobbies such as falconry and hunting... and war. He loved tournaments and artillery contests and continually upgrading his navy. Nor was Dunbar's world confined to the select social elite; Edinburgh wasn't Paris or London, it was a small place where courtiers and craftsmen had equal access to the court and king. Okay, so that's Dunbar. What about his poetry? Being well educated, he studied the classical works of Homer and Cicero, and because he was a churchman he absorbed the hymns and liturgy as well as the less-devout Goliardic poetry. Because he traveled, he was familiar with the literature of France, particularly the popular dream allegories such as "Le Roman de la Rose" and Chaucer's "The Parliament of Fowls" and "Troilus and Criseyde". But the poetry Dunbar loved to write best was written in his native language, "Inglisch". Gaelic was spoken in the Highlands and in Galloway, while Lowlanders such as Dunbar spoke Lowland Scots which was closely related to the northern dialects of Middle English. And although he was Scottish and acutely aware of Scotland's own literary traditions, he was no anglophobe, owing much to the traditional poems of both England and Scotland. His preferred term for his own writing he called "ballatis", short, pithy and lyrical, and his range was considerable, mastering both high, courtly poems and colloquial verse forms. But the poems I like best are his humorous ones, everything from light witticisms to gloomy satire. While he makes the usual fun of friars and fools, he's also capable of poking a bit of fun at himself, usually bemoaning his financial state. And, like many churchmen, his humor about women is both misogynist and curiously ambivalent, while still quite funny for the modern reader.

But for me, the best part of Bawcutt's book is that she's made it ACCESSIBLE for the lay-reader. Nearly every line of Dunbar's original "Inglisch" is footnoted with translations. (I can remember having to struggling through my college-level Beowulf with no such handy assistance, which left me even less inclined to tackle medieval poetry just for the hell of it.)

Reading Dunbar aloud is not only the best way to appreciate it, but entertaining, this American lay-reader having had a great deal of fun trying to roll the Scottish r's and doing as ludicrous a job of a true Scottish accent as Christophe Lambert in "Highlander". I haven't read all the poems; that'll take some time. But this book is so reader friendly, I plan to do so... just for the hell of it. Here is but a very small sample from his longest and most renowned poem, "The Tretis of the Twa Mariit Wemen and the Wedo", the story of three women talking freely of sex, men and marriage.

Unto my lesson ye lyth and leir at me wit,
 Gif you nought list be forleit with losingeris untrew;
 Be constant in your governance and counterfiet gud maneris,
 Thought ye be kene, inconstant and cruell of mynd.
 Thought ye as tygris be terne, be tretable in luf,
 And be as turtoris in your talk, thought ye haif talis brukill.

Be dragonis baith and dowis ay in double forme,
 And quhen it nedis you, onone note baith ther stranthis.
 Be amyable with humble face, as angellis apperand,
 And with a terrebill tail be strangand as edderis.
 Be of your luke like innocentis, thocht ye haif evill myndis.

Be courtly ay in clething and costly arrayit-
 That hurtis yow nought worth a hen, yowr husband pays for all.

Longman Medieval and Renaissance Library, it says on the back of Putter's book, is a major new series of critical introductions to key literary and cultural topics from Old English to the late seventeenth century, and are designed particularly to meet the needs of students and the general reader. So just how student/general reader friendly is it?

Quite, actually. Bawcutt's "William Dunbar, Selected Poems" is marvelously straight-forward; here's the introduction and here's all the poems ever Dunbar wrote lavishly annotated with footnotes, whereas Putter's "An Introduction to the Gawain-Poet" is exactly what it claims to be, an introduction. With knobs on. The book is divided into five chapters, the first being "The Gawain-poet in Context", and the next four an overview of the only surviving works written by the Gawain-poet; "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight", "Pearl", "Cleanness" and "Patience".

These four poems were all contained in a single manuscript, the Cotton Nero A.x. Its first known owner was a minor Yorkshire gentleman, Henry Savile of Bank (1568-1617). Although it then was acquired by Sir Robert Cotton, the famous antiquary and book collector, he doesn't seem to have realized the value of the manuscript and had it bound with two unrelated Latin works. It was nearly lost forever when the Cottonian library burned in 1731, when many other manuscripts were destroyed. After the fire, the surviving manuscripts were transferred to the British Library where not until 1839 did "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight" first appear in print and rapidly became popular, within and without the academic community, continuing to inspire modern works such as Iris Murdoch's 1993 novel, "The Green Knight" and Harrison Birtwistle's 1994 opera "Gawain".

But the Gawain-poet comes with its own built-in mystery: Who was he? Where did he come from? What were his social circumstances and historical situation? The medieval author of these poems left no personal records of his existence, and Putter has a fairly wry sense of humor about this mystery:

"If in trying to answer these questions we were to limit ourselves to only the incontrovertible 'facts', this chapter would be very brief, for one of the surest facts about the Gawain-poet is that there are not many... Attempts to unmask the 'Gawain-poet' have so far failed to gain wide acceptance. The idea that the Gawain-poet might be a certain 'Massey' (a common Cheshire name) is the most recent conjecture and the only one with any serious support, but it depends on straining one's eyesight (and perhaps one's credulity) in order to see an anagram of the poet's name in selected works from the Pearl, or a signature in the doodles underneath an ornamental letter

in the manuscript". Putter then gives his own exhaustive hypothesis, with the additional warning up front that newcomers to the Gawain-poet might want to read the parts on his work, each of which is "an accessible and more or less self-contained study" before returning to the more speculative part of the book. It's quite interesting, actually, Putter's arguments are logically presented and clearly outlined, and no, I'm not being so churlish as to spoil a good mystery, you'll have to read it for yourself.

The following chapters are each one devoted to the four surviving poems. The first, and arguably the most famous, is "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight", an Arthurian romance popular with the fifteenth century high society. Anyone who was anyone in England were keen to stock their libraries with romances of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table, in Old French, naturally. Even those who had neither the money nor education were fascinated by Arthurian legends; English carpenters carved scenes depicting Arthurian scenes on the woodwork of parish churches. The Gawain-poet's own addition to the legends is a saga full of magic and adventure, elaborately embroidering on the Beheading Game in Chretien de Troyes's "Perceval". The Gawain-poet's story is full of clever deceptive twists and turns, magic and supernatural wonders, even more than a hint of torrid dalliances, realistic characters involved in fantastical situations. He manages to keep up the intensity of the plot while using that strength to promote some fairly serious moral concerns. Putter uses many examples from the original poem to present his points, while helpfully including literal rather than 'elegant' modern English translations, with the recommendation that they be used as an aid to the original rather than a substitute.

Where "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight" is mostly an adventure story with a moral point, "Patience" and "Cleanness" are retellings of Old Testament stories promoting Christian virtues. "Pearl" is a vision of heaven in which the Dreamer meets his lost daughter for a brief moment. As homilies, they lack the power and pizzazz of "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight", but Putter explores how the Gawain-poet's skillful use of colorful rhetoric saves it from being mere sermon; not of a lofty preacher lecturing down to his flock, but a poet speaking TO his audience. Again, these three poems are entertainment, albeit with a heavy moral point to them.

Putter's "An Introduction to the Gawain-Poet" is an excellent example of what academic writing should be: Exhaustive, intelligent, and practical, while still giving equal emphasis on being lively, witty and entertaining.

Much like the Gawain-poet's work, actually.

1 rue Maître Albert
Paris 75005



Monk in Kitchen

Musée national du Moyen Âge