

DONALD OURE AND BERNARD STEWART:  
RESPONDING TO A VILLAIN AND A HERO IN  
WILLIAM DUNBAR'S POETRY

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The world of most of Dunbar's poetry is the court of James IV at Edinburgh. James's reign, from 1488 to 1513, encompassed Dunbar's poetic career so exactly that in one sense it is only fitting for the court. . .to provide the great bulk of the particulars in his writing. . . . But, even more significantly, Dunbar's view of the world was from the vantage point of the court; it influenced his vision and his perspective. . . . He looked at the world outside the court through its critical eyes. (46)

So comments Edmund Reiss, hardly the first Dunbar scholar to observe that Dunbar's poetic career, as we know it, begins and ends during the reign of Scotland's James IV, and that many of his poems convey an "official" voice. Nowhere perhaps is this more apparent than in those three poems under consideration here: "The Ballade of Barnard Stewart lord of Aubigny" and "Elegy on Bernard Stewart Lord of Aubigny," the pair of ballades glorifying the military hero Bernard Stewart; and their counterpart, "Epetaphe for Donald Oure," a terse satirical poem cursing Donald Oure, a political prisoner and alleged traitor to the crown.<sup>1</sup> In all three of these poems Dunbar expresses the official

sentiment towards two public figures of his day, and by providing appropriate textual symbols, he encourages his readers to adopt the same attitude.

The "Epetaphe for Donald Oure," written in terse, bob-wheel, tail rhyme stanzas, differs drastically from the two Stewart "ballades" in tone, diction, and poetic form, so that the three poems together demonstrate nicely what John Leyerle has called "the two voices of William Dunbar." In spite of such obvious contrasts stemming from differences in official attitudes toward their human subjects, as public poems the three have much in common. All three are well-written, displaying well chosen diction, careful phrasing, strict adherence to stanzaic pattern, and rhyme scheme. In fact, each in some way fits Albert Friedman's description of "broadside ballads," those late medieval and Renaissance poems designed to convey political sentiment on "broadsheets" (107). As political poems, they add to our historical understanding of the "official attitudes" of those supporting James IV.

It is not difficult to trace the historical events underlying the poems, for Dunbar's editors in their notes accompanying these poems provide all the history needed for understanding them. Yet, Dunbar's purpose in the three poems is not so much to convey history as to create a kind of fiction about real men, a fiction he wants his audience to accept and to act upon as though it were fact. Hence, he presents Bernard Stewart as a legendary hero and ideal Christian knight, but casts Donald Oure as a treacherous monster for whom hanging is too good. This realization of Dunbar's purpose led to my asking several questions about these "minor" poems: questions about Dunbar's audience, his perception of that audience, and his selection

of poetic media through which he could direct that audience's response. It then seemed obvious that audience-response criticism would be a useful tool for examining these poems.

Many recent studies in literary theory have stressed the importance of audience response and the writer's consciousness of it. Walter Ong has argued convincingly that all writers, including writers of non-fiction, write for a specific, fictive audience--the writer's imagination "casting them in a made-up role and calling on them to play the role assigned" (17). It is this "fictive audience," Ong says, that "fires the writer's imagination" (10), and he argues that it is not a modern phenomenon. He observes: "Audience readjustment was a major feature of mature medieval culture, a culture more focused on reading than any earlier culture had been" (16). Certainly Scotland at the time of James IV was experiencing such a cultural revolution, and the establishment of its first printing press during this period made reading an important part of that culture. While it would be absurd to pretend to know Dunbar's mind, it seems likely that his fictive audience for the three public poems under consideration here included the king and/or Scottish citizens loyal to the crown.

To understand how Dunbar was able to direct the attitudes of his audience, the reader response theory of Wolfgang Iser is helpful, for Iser's theory shows the importance of the reader to the text. As R. Holub points out:

Iser's merit is that he has forced us to recognize that we cannot forgo an analysis of our own involvement with a text if we are to understand what literature is about. Nor can we any longer ignore that texts are

constructed to be read, that they dictate the terms of their readability, and that these terms are enabling constructs rather than dogmatic strictures. (106)

Iser indicates the role of the reader's imagination in making a text come alive, in becoming "involved in events which, at the time of reading, seem real," even though "in fact they are very far from the...[reader's] own reality" (278-9). For Iser, "The literary work is neither completely text nor completely the subjectivity of the reader, but a combination or merger of the two" (Holub 84). To explain this interactive process, Iser uses the term "implied reader," which, he says, "incorporates both the prestructuring of the potential meaning by the text, and the reader's actualization of the potential through the reading process" (xii).

Iser introduces the concept of the "wandering viewpoint" which he conceives as "a means of describing the way in which the reader is present in the text" (Holub 89). Commenting on Iser's concept of "wandering viewpoint," Holub observes, "It is meant to overcome the external reader-text relationship; for the unique quality of literature, according to Iser, is that the object is grasped from the 'inside'" (89-90). Iser observes that when the reader confronts various signs or schemata of a text, the reader tries to establish connections between them that lend coherence to their activity. Iser assumes that a reader then will form Gestalten in the process of participating in meaning-production" (Holub 90). This results in the reading process being a continuous "dialectic between illusion-making and illusion-breaking" as well as a related "oscillation between involvement and

observation" (Holub 90). Iser points out: "The author of the text may, of course, exert plenty of influence on the reader's imagination . . . but no author worth his salt will ever attempt to set the whole picture before his reader's eyes . . . it is only by activating the reader's imagination that the author can hope to involve him and so realize the intentions of his text" (282). Evenso, the relationship between text and reader is not equally balanced but asymmetrical, for "the reader is unable to test whether his/her understanding of the text is correct" and "there is no regulative context between text and reader to establish intent; this context must be constructed by the reader from textual clues or signals" (Holub 92). Communication takes place when these imbalances are "aligned or realigned through an interactive give-and-take" (Holub 92). There is unique character to this "give-and-take," for "the reader must be guided and controlled to an extent by the text, since it is unable to respond spontaneously to remarks and questions by the reader. The manner in which the text exerts control over the dialogue is thus one of the most important aspects of the communicatory process . . ." (Holub 92).

While the texts of Dunbar's poems are constructed so as to exert control over the dialogue between the poems and their intended audience, modern audiences without emotional loyalties to James IV are likely to miss Dunbar's signals and, consequently, will not respond as Dunbar intended. A brief description of the subjects of these two poems will enable a modern reader to recognize more easily signs or schemata in the poems Dunbar intended for his fictive audience.

Of the two subjects, the villain Donald Oure is the more pathetic and perhaps the victim of

defamation. He was from the family of the Macdonalds, the Lords of the Isles, who had been virtually independent of the Scottish kings until the reign of James IV. His father was Angus Og, the natural son of John, eleventh Earl of Ross and Lord of the Isles. This notorious grandfather was "forfeited for treasonable communication with England in 1475, restored in 1476, and again forfeited in 1493" (Kinsley 309). After the last forfeiture of the Lordship of the Isles, Donald was held at court in the service of James IV and, as Kinsley speculates, Dunbar must have been acquainted with him personally (309). Oure escaped in 1501 and in 1503 became leader in a formidable insurrection of most of the island clans against the severe measures of the king, which broke out in 1503. This uprising took two years to suppress; then Oure was imprisoned again in 1505 and held in Stirling Castle in 1507, about the time that Dunbar wrote this poem (Kinsley 309; Mackenzie 211).

Far different was the life of the subject of the two "ballades," Bernard Stewart, Lord of Aubigny, a popular hero of the time. The Chepman and Myllar print of the poem contains a prose preface which lists several titles Stewart held. (Both Mackenzie and Kinsley include this preface in their editions.) Bernard Stewart was not unlike sons from many Scottish aristocratic families who in the fifteenth century gave distinguished service to the kings of France. He was a grandson of Sir John Stewart of Darnley, Renfrewshire, who commanded the Scots in the service of Charles VII of France and received the fief of Aubigny in Berry. Bernard, as Lord d'Aubigny, led the French auxiliaries who fought on the side of Henry Tudor at Bosworth and became Captain of the Scots Guard in France. He served Charles VIII as ambassador

to Scotland and Rome and as governor of Calabria and Naples, where he was imprisoned after his defeat by the Spaniards at Seminara. In 1508, Stewart was sent to Scotland by Louis XII ("Illuster Lodovick" in Dunbar's elegy) to confirm the French alliance; he was welcomed to the court of James IV on 9 May 1508, but unexpectedly became ill and died in Scotland on 11 June 1508 (Scott 261).

Dunbar wrote two poems in honor of Bernard Stewart. James Kinsley indicates that Dunbar's Ballade "was probably written and published as part of the official reception of Aubigny in May 1508" (310) and the Elegy composed after Aubigny's untimely death (312). Hence, the poems were written only a month or so apart. In both, Dunbar uses the pseudo-ballade form and very formal, aureate diction. Modern critics tend to treat them as a pair. In commenting on the "welcome" poem, Edmund Reiss observes that it demonstrates how "Dunbar functioned as something of an official panegyrist, who would praise and celebrate for the king and the court," but he adds that its aureate language is "too full of hyperbole to appeal to modern tastes" (47). Tom Scott, who finds the poem to resemble a trumpet voluntary, suggests that it "was probably recited between actual trumpet voluntaries when Stewart, Lord D'Aubigny came to court on 9 May 1508" (261). Whether or not it was actually so performed, Dunbar's audience would have recognized such verbal signals and certainly would have concluded that Stewart was an important man, worthy of praise. In the course of the poem, Dunbar compares Stewart to several of the nine worthies--"the secund Julius," "ferse Achill," "invincible Hector," "vallyeant Arthur," "bold Henniball"--and also casts Stewart's horoscope as a prophecy of knightly prowess: "Hie furius Mars the good

armipotent / Rong in the hevin at thyne nativite" (73-74). Dunbar climactically closes the poem with an acrostic on the Latin letters of Stewart's given name, B A R N A R D V S. As Scott observes, the entire poem is "a paeon of courtly welcome" (260).

Dunbar creates a counterpart to the "welcome" poem in the elegy for Stewart, an elegiac ballade conveying public sorrow at the untimely death of a military hero. Reiss comments that the language of the elegy "may . . . strike our ears as excessive . . . but shows Dunbar's mastery of rhetorical traditions . . ." (47-8). Dunbar's audience, however, would not have objected to the excess but instead would have responded to the rhetorical signals as indications of how respectable citizens should react to Stewart's death. Dunbar's poem opens with the name of the French king, "Illuster Lodovick," and then describes Stewart as his knight. Later in the stanza Dunbar indicates that Stewart's death affects the readers directly, who should respond appropriately: "now may thow weir the sabill" (7). He symbolically depicts Stewart as the epitome of the Christian knight by alluding to him as "the charbuckell" (ruby), and at the end of the first stanza, Dunbar refers to him as "the flour of chevelrie," a phrase used again as a final refrain in two later stanzas including the last. Ian S. Ross finds Dunbar's use of this epithet to be a special compliment to Stewart with historical precedent, having been used in Deschamps' "balade" on the death of du Guesclin, Constable of France under Charles V (152-153). All of these examples illustrate how Dunbar uses rhetorical signals to convey the idea that the whole Scottish nation has suffered a loss.



In this elegy Dunbar may also be guiding his audience to a moral conclusion. Scott observes that the Stewart poems "are almost examples, drawn from life, of the theme of vanitas vanitatum" (260), and he suggests that Dunbar makes an exemplum out of Stewart's life. The vanity theme is, of course, a favorite in Dunbar's moral poetry, so Scott's suggestion is certainly plausible. Ross also finds a kind of exemplum in these poems, but for him, the lesson is the nobility of Stewart's life. Ross argues that Dunbar presents his "Sieur d'Aubigny" as a moral type of the Christian knight. Observing that Dunbar "welcomes his heroic figure in aureate language of a liturgical cast," Ross makes a comparison between the way Dunbar presents Stewart in the poem and the Knights of Christ found on the inner panel of the left-hand shutter of the Ghent altarpiece entitled "The Adoration of the Lamb" painted by the Van Eyck brothers (150). Ross adds that other features in the poem further contribute to its didactic meaning: he believes that Dunbar writes the poem in "twelve encomiastic stanzas" because "there were 12 peers of France and 12 apostles" (150-151). For the more sophisticated members of Dunbar's intended audience, such features possibly provided additional signals. Indeed, reader response criticism helps us to see that through such signals, Dunbar guides his readers to conclude that Stewart was a "most Cristin knight" and an exemplary model of behavior.

In the Oure Epetaphe, Dunbar uses textual signals to create the opposite effect. While he made Stewart appear to be a legendary hero and a model of the Christian knight, he makes Oure appear to be a monster, a being less than human. As Ross observes, in the Oure poem Dunbar "flytes against one of the King's enemies" (183). Much of its effectiveness owes to its

form which Dunbar knew his intended audience would associate with satire: "The emphatically rhythmical stanza, with its alliterative phrases below the four-stress lines, is related to rime couèe. It is admirably suited to the precipitate violence of Dunbar's feelings" (Kinsley 309). As a signal that this poem is to plead a case, the poem begins as a kind of legal argument, another rhetorical form Dunbar's audience would have recognized. As Ong points out, writers of treatises from Augustine and Aquinas "generally proceeded in adversary fashion, their readers being cast as participants in rhetorical contests or in dialectical scholastic disputations" (19). The first line of the *Oure Epetaphe* states a proposition which the rest of the poem supports. The general premise is that Oure excels in vice most vicious. The second line is an extension of the proposition, naming the vice as treason. The remainder of the first stanza shows Oure to be a person never to be trusted while the rest of the poem offers the proof and proverbial lessons.

The eight stanzas of the poem are balanced between showing Oure as a subhuman creature, the most hateful of villains, and general moralizings about treachery. To degrade the man, Dunbar compares him with a loathsome bird, "ane owle . . . sa filthy . . . and fowle." Kinsley notes that the owl is "the type of the unnatural rebel and usurper" and finds literary precedent for Dunbar in Holland's "Buke of the Howlat" (309-310). In the third stanza from the end, Dunbar draws another animal analogy: Oure is like a fox. While the animal images of the owl and the fox dehumanize Oure, making him appear less than human, Dunbar sustains this impression with additional features. In the second and fourth stanzas, Dunbar attacks Oure

directly, calling him a traitor, a thief, and an evil beguiler. He observes that even dead on the gallows tree, such a traitor will "glowir" with evil. The final stanza with its two proverbs makes a generalization about the folly of trusting traitors and accordingly provides clear signals to the reader that Oure can never be trusted and deserves execution:

The murtherer ay murthour mais,  
And evir quhill he be slane he slais;  
Wyvis thus makis mokkis,  
Spynnand on rokkis--  
Ay rynniss the fox  
Quhill he fute hais. (43-48)

In spite of such carefully supplied verbal signals, not all informed readers have responded as Dunbar intended. Some modern readers with knowledge of the history of the poems, find Dunbar's signals distressing. They argue that the historical facts do not explain why Dunbar hated Oure enough to call for his execution. As Mackenzie observes: "The whole tone of the poem is unnecessarily malignant towards one who had known no personal freedom save for the few years he was 'out' against the government. He was partly the victim, partly the instrument of higher powers" (211). Tom Scott is yet harder on Dunbar. Scott recognizes the poem's artistic merits, pointing out that "technically . . . it is very good . . . another example of his [Dunbar's] happiness in a tight, short, dancing measure" (264). But Scott finds the poem to violate his personal Highland sympathies: "Dunbar, as the descendant of the traitor Corspatrick, has some authority indeed to speak of treason: his family was rooted in it" (262). Scott challenges Dunbar's appeals to logic in the poem: "Dunbar's nature-analogy works

against his own case: the fox has as much right to the hens as man has, by nature, and as much right to be true to its nature as any other creature: and the Gaels have as much right to Scotland as any thieving Anglo-Norman barons organised as a 'government'--the gang that grabs the power to make the laws fit its own desires" (263). Scott argues that the definition of the word "treason" is relative, dependent upon the loyalties of the person using the term. "'Treason'," he says, "in other words, means pretty well anything that people want it to mean. To Scottish Home-Rulers today, Scotland is run by quislings and traitors under the English central government . . ." (263). Then Scott passes judgement on Dunbar's purpose in the poem: "Dunbar too easily assumes that he knows what treason is, and reveals that he doesn't. More thought would have produced a very different poem--but, of course, he is merely playing to an audience, as usual, and no doubt hoping to advance his own cause at court by howling for the blood of a clansman: there was more than a little of the despicable in Dunbar's character" (264).

Whether we agree with Scott or not, or with his attack on Dunbar's personal morality, his emotional response to a poem written nearly five hundred years ago demonstrates the validity of employing reader response criticism to political poems written in specific historical contexts. Indeed, verbal signals provided by Dunbar so long ago continue to affect the emotions of his readers and demonstrate in yet another way his poetic genius.

Evans

NOTE

1. James L. Kinsley, ed., The Collected Poems of William Dunbar, Oxford, 1979, 107-111, lists these as #34 "Epetaphe for Donald Oure," #35 "The Ballade of Barnard Stewart lord of Aubigny," and #36 "Elegy on Bernard Stewart Lord of Aubigny." All line references to Dunbar's poetry quoted in the text are from this edition.

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Evans

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