

William Dunbar Biography

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Biography

The Scottish poet and courtier William Dunbar (ca. 1460-ca. 1520) wrote satirical, occasional, and devotional works. Although he is conventionally numbered among the Scottish Chaucerians, he owed a great deal to the traditions of French poetry.

Very little is known about William Dunbar's family or early life. He received a master of arts degree from St. Andrews University in 1479. In 1500 he was granted an annual pension of £10 by James IV, most likely in recognition for his services as a court poet. Dunbar was probably in England during the winter of 1501 in connection with the negotiations for the marriage between King James and Princess Margaret.

Dunbar's most famous poem is perhaps "The Thistle and the Rose," an allegory in the Chaucerian manner, probably written in 1502 to celebrate the impending marriage between James and Margaret. The poet took holy orders in 1504 and may have written "In May as that Aurora did upspring" at about this time. This poem, which is in the form of a debate between a merle and a nightingale, celebrates love for God. The following years produced a number of occasional poems--one on the birth of Margaret's first child, petitions to the King for increased aid, and a satire on a court physician and alchemist.

In 1507 Dunbar's pension was increased to £20 and in 1510 to the substantial sum of £80. There is no record of the poet after the Battle of Flodden (1513), and he probably died a few years after that disaster for the Scottish court. During his last years he may have written his devotional poems, some of which, like the Christmas poem "Rorate celi desuper" and the aureate hymn to the Blessed Virgin "Hale, sterne superne, hale in eterne," are extremely effective.

Among Dunbar's more famous longer pieces is the satire *The Tretis of the Tua Mariit Wemen and the Wedo*. The poet overhears a nocturnal conversation among three attractive ladies whose tongues have been loosened by wine. The two married women describe the shortcomings of their husbands in very frank language, and the widow, who bears some resemblance to Chaucer's Wife of Bath, reveals her wiles. One of the more attractive moral pieces attributed to Dunbar, reminiscent of Chaucer's "Truth," is "Without glaidnes avalis no tresure," in which the poet assures his readers that if they are just and joyful, Truth will make them strong.