

## Scottish Poets and English Stanzas: *Schir Thomas Norny* and Dunbar's Use of Tail-Rhyme

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It is a tradition almost amounting to a rule for literary critics to praise the late medieval Scottish poet William Dunbar for his great variety and mastery of poetic technique.<sup>1</sup> In terms of his exploration of stanzaic patterns, however, Dunbar is relatively conservative. In his shorter poems, he has a discernible preference for rhymed stanzas of four or five lines, usually made up of the four- or five-stress lines most prevalent in fifteenth-century English and Scottish poetry.<sup>2</sup> He does not invent new metrical schemes nor does he use an especially large range of them, considering the number of poems he wrote. He does, however, show an unusual flair for marrying form and sense. W. H. Auden comments admiringly, "He knows exactly the kind of verse which will suit any given subject, exactly what can be got out of a metre or a stanza form."<sup>3</sup>

It is Dunbar's ability to wring new meaning from old forms that sets him apart, or, as Joanne Norman puts it, "The conventions of the medieval poetic tradition provided the greatest stimulus to Dunbar's imagination and his originality lies in his new interpretation of those conventions."<sup>4</sup> The "medieval poetic tradition" most often

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1 Nonetheless, as his most comprehensive recent editor, Priscilla Bawcutt, observes wryly, "Dunbar has often been praised for his metrical skill and subtlety, but there exists as yet no comprehensive study of his practices or those of contemporary Scottish poets"; Bawcutt, ed., *Poems*, 1:15.

2 On the syllabic regularity or otherwise of Dunbar's verse, see the comments by Bawcutt, *Poems*, 1:14-15, and McClure, "Dunbar's Metrical Technique."

3 Auden, review of *The Poems of William Dunbar*, ed. Mackenzie, 677. Quoted in Bawcutt, *Dunbar the Makar*, 2.

4 Norman, "The Paradox of Tradition," 339.

studied in relation to Dunbar's poetry is that exemplified by the English poets Chaucer and Lydgate, writers whose influence Dunbar is keen to acknowledge.<sup>5</sup> In this he participates in a well established tradition among Older Scots poets,<sup>6</sup> keeping company with James I (assuming he is the author of *The Kingis Quair*), Henryson, Douglas, and Lyndsay. He also, however, experiments with some very different English poetic traditions in a way not really seen in these other writers. Critics have registered surprise at his use of the unrhymed alliterative long line for his *Tretis of the Tua Mariit Wemen and the Wedo* (B 3), a measure popular in Middle English poetry but virtually ignored in Scotland in favour of more complex rhymed-alliterative stanzas.<sup>7</sup> Another instance of exploiting English, rather than Scots, literary conventions is his use of tail-rhyme stanzas for a poem that, while not a romance itself, is deliberately associated with that genre through elements of its content and style. This is the brief *Schir Thomas Norny*, a mock-eulogy of a real member of James IV's household who is listed as a "fule" in contemporary Treasury accounts and occasionally also titled "Schir," although it is not certain whether this recognition of knighthood is entirely in earnest given his status as a fool.<sup>8</sup>

By the time Dunbar came to compose *Schir Thomas Norny* in about 1503-1506,<sup>9</sup> tail-rhyme had a long history of use in Middle English but was still seldom encountered in Older Scots poetry except in brief lyrics. In England, tail-rhyme had become strongly associated with the romance genre by the later fourteenth century: roughly a third of all surviving Middle English metrical romances are written in tail-rhyme,

5 Cf. *The Goldyn Targe* (B 59), ll. 253-70, and "I that in heill wes and gladnes" (B 21), ll. 49-52, in which Chaucer, "the monk of Bery," and Gower are the first three poets to be named. Since the titles of Dunbar's poems can vary from editor to editor, I cite the number assigned to each by Bawcutt in her now standard edition (from which all quotations are taken here).

6 I use the term 'Older Scots' here in the sense in which it is employed by *DOST*, i.e., the language of Lowland Scotland as derived from Northumbrian Old English from its earliest written records (in the fourteenth century) up to 1700; for discussion, see *DOST*, 12:xxix-clxii. Although Dunbar's language falls within the c.1450-1700 subdivision of Older Scots known as 'Middle Scots,' the potential for confusion with the very different temporal boundaries of Middle English (particularly when Dunbar calls his own language "Inglisch," see *The Goldyn Targe*, l. 259) makes the broader term preferable.

7 See discussion in Turville-Petre, *The Alliterative Revival*, 118-21; MacDonald, "Alliterative Poetry and Its Context," 265-66; and Bawcutt, *Dunbar the Makar*, 374.

8 *Schir Thomas Norny* ("Now lythis off ane gentill knycht," B 39). For Norny's appellations, see the *Accounts of the Lord High Treasurer of Scotland* for the years 1503-1512: III:155, 166, 375 and IV:184, 358 (as cited in Bawcutt, *Poems*, 2:370).

9 Bawcutt, *Poems*, 2:370.

including many of the most famous and popular examples.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, despite the otherwise heavy dependence of Middle English romance on Anglo-Norman and Continental French literature, romances in tail-rhyme seem to have been composed only in Middle English, and this would remain the case even when Scotland began producing its own romances. Thus, while romance was an international genre and the tail-rhyme stanza an internationally used verse form, 'tail-rhyme romance' seems to have been an exclusively English phenomenon. It was for this reason that Chaucer wrote in tail-rhyme for his spoof-romance *The Tale of Sir Thopas* in the *Canterbury Tales*: the verse form alone signalled immediately that his target was the particular type of romance popularized by Middle English poets.<sup>11</sup> Dunbar's *Schir Thomas Norny* is sometimes inaccurately described as a parody of romance written in direct imitation of Chaucer's parodic *Sir Thopas*. The relationship between Dunbar's poem and Chaucer's tale is more complex than this, however — particularly since Dunbar was writing in a Scotland that, as far as one can tell from surviving texts, knew tail-rhyme romance only as an English import. Although *Norny* represents his most famous use of tail-rhyme, Dunbar also uses varieties of tail-rhyme for three other poems, namely, the poem variously known as "Off Februar the fyiftene nycht" (B 47), as "Fasternis Evin in Hell" (Kinsley, K 52), or as two related poems entitled "The Dance of the Sevin Deidly Synnis" and "The Sowtar and Tailyouris War" (Mackenzie, M 57, 58) or "The Turnament," with stanzas mostly  $aa_4b_3cc_4b_3dd_4b_3ee_4b_3$  (subscript numbers represent the stress-count); secondly, "As 3ung Awrora with cristall haile" or *A Ballat of the Abbot of Tungland* (B 4), with stanzas  $aaa_4b_3ccc_4b_3$ ; and thirdly, the short lyric "Quha will behald of luve the chance" (B 50) or "Inconstancy of Luve" (Mackenzie, M 51), with stanzas  $aaa_4b_2aaa_4b_2$  with the same *a*- and *b*-rhymes through all three stanzas. The last lyric is part of a minor tradition of such brief tail-rhyme lyrics popular in fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century English literature and present also in Older Scots literature, with several examples to be found in the 1568 Bannatyne Manuscript.<sup>12</sup> The secular lyrics usually bemoan the 'variance' and 'inconstance' of lovers or Love itself,

10 On the history of tail-rhyme poetry and Middle English tail-rhyme romance, see Purdie, *Anglicising Romance*.

11 See Purdie, "The Implications of Manuscript Layout."

12 For English examples, see the selection collected by Wright and Halliwell in *Reliquiae Antiquae*: "O mestres whye" (1:255-56, edited from London, British Library, Harley MS 2252); "Men may leve all gamys," "What so men seyn," "Whoso lyst to love," and "Up son and mery wethir" (1:2-3, 23, 24, and 202, all edited from Cambridge University Library MS Ff.1.6). For later Older Scots examples from

while more spiritual ones, such as Alexander Scott's tail-rhyme translation "The fyifty pshalme,"<sup>13</sup> reflect the long tradition of using tail-rhyme for pious or didactic material stemming from the measure's close association with the Victorine sequence in Latin hymnody.<sup>14</sup> Dunbar's two longer tail-rhyme poems, however, participate in the same narrative tradition exploited by *Norny*. All three of these longer poems raise interesting questions about the significance of Dunbar's use of tail-rhyme.

Before these can be explored, however, a word is needed about the potential significance of a poet's choice of verse form in the first place. Broadly speaking, there are two ways in which the formal characteristics of a poem may contribute to its meaning. The first is what one might call a physical link, such as the linking of particular words through rhyme, the use of onomatopoeia, the correspondence of divisions in the metrical form with breaks in the sense, and similar features. Dunbar is skilled in effortlessly exploiting all of these effects, but it is the second and more general way in which the metrical structure of a poem may contribute to its meaning that is relevant to Dunbar's use of tail-rhyme, that is, its external literary associations. Thus, rhyme royal, or what King James VI calls "Troilus verse" in Chaucer's honour, is described in James's 1584 "Reulis and Cautelis" as being most appropriate for "tragicall materis, complaintis, or testaments": audiences encountering this verse form clearly had specific expectations which a poet could exploit.<sup>15</sup> There is nothing inherently "tragicall" about the seven-line rhyme royal stanza, but its powerful association with Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* lent it a gravity which was evidently still felt two hundred years after that poem's composition. The tail-rhyme stanza acquired its own late medieval literary associations, not from one overwhelmingly famous work but from the body of Middle English (as opposed to Scots) popular romance that employed it. Its use by a Scottish poet as metrically aware

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the Bannatyne Manuscript, see Alexander Scott's "Fra raige of youth the rink hes rune," fols. 280r-v (in MacQueen, ed., *Ballatis of Luve*, 113-15); "Ladeis be war," fols. 276v-277r (*The Bannatyne Manuscript*, 4:70-71); "ffavour is fair," fol. 251v (*The Bannatyne Manuscript*, 4:5-6); and the anonymous lyrics "My hairt is gone," fols. 267r-v (*The Bannatyne Manuscript*, 4:45-46); "Thair is no<sup>t</sup> ane winche pat I se," fol. 256r (*The Bannatyne Manuscript*, 4:16-17).

13 *The Bannatyne Manuscript*, 2:39-42 (fols. 16v-17v).

14 On the earlier use of tail-rhyme almost exclusively for pious or didactic material in Latin, French, and Middle English literatures, see Purdie, *Anglicising Romance*, 23-65. The Bannatyne Manuscript also contains several anonymous and rather dour moral lyrics in tail-rhyme, clearly continuing this older tradition: see "Man of maist fragilitie," fols. 69v-70r (*The Bannatyne Manuscript*, 2:170-72), and the run of such lyrics from fol. 74r-v, "In grit tribulatioun," "Serue thy god meikly," "Grund the in patience," "Meiknes and mesure," and "In world is no<sup>t</sup>" (*The Bannatyne Manuscript*, 2:180-82).

15 King James VI, "Ane Schort Treatise conteneing some revlis and cautelis," 1:222.

as Dunbar may, thus, further our understanding of, variously, the knowledge of English tail-rhyme texts in Scotland, of the way in which the use of tail-rhyme might reinforce the meaning of those poems employing it, of the likelihood that the 'Englishness' of tail-rhyme was recognized by Dunbar and his contemporary Scottish audience in the first place, and of Scottish reception of English poetic traditions more generally.

I will begin with the relationship between *Norny* and *Thopas*. The main study of this relationship has been a useful 1971 article by Elizabeth Roth Eddy, who calls *Norny* a "sustained and directly imitative Chaucerian piece [. . .] composed on the model of *Sir Thopas*,"<sup>16</sup> a view that had also been taken by Franklyn Bliss Snyder and later, with some qualification, by Gregory Kratzmann.<sup>17</sup> Perhaps it would help to begin by asking whether Dunbar *could* have written *Norny* without knowledge of *Thopas*. Given that Scotland does not appear to have produced any tail-rhyme romances of its own, how well did Dunbar know such works except by way of *Sir Thopas*? Both *Thopas* and *Norny* contain lists of fictional heroes to which their own protagonists are compared: this is a standard feature of both romance and heroic eulogy (*Norny* being better classified as a mock-eulogy than a mock-romance) and, thus, is not in itself proof that Dunbar is imitating Chaucer here. *Thopas* lists "Horn child," "Beves and sir Gy," and "Lybeux" (ll. 898-900), all of whose stories are extant in fourteenth-century Middle English tail-rhyme romances (*Horn Childe and Maiden Rimmild*, *Beues of Hamtoun*, *Guy of Warwick*, and *Lybeaus Desconus*, respectively). Of these heroes, only "Schir Bewis the knyght off Southe Hamptowne" is also listed in *Norny* (l. 35), and it is not certain by this date that the old partial-tail-rhyme version of this widespread narrative is the referent, given the availability of the couplet version by Dunbar's day.<sup>18</sup> What is more

16 Eddy, "Sir Thopas and Sir Thomas Norny," 401.

17 Snyder, "*Sir Thomas Norray* and *Sir Thopas*," and Kratzmann, *Anglo-Scottish Literary Relations*, 134-36. Kratzmann states that "it may be safely assumed that Dunbar knew and used [*Thopas*] as a model," and "Such a comparison [between *Norny* and *Thopas*] may well have been intended [. . .], but if so the audience would have been conscious as much of differences between the two poems as of their similarities"; Kratzmann, *Anglo-Scottish Literary Relations*, 134 and 135.

18 See the Appendix to Fellows, "The Middle English and Renaissance *Bevis*: A Textual Survey," in which she lists four prints of an English version of *Bevis* that was extant by the c.1503-1506 date of *Norny*. The late 15th-century manuscript Manchester, Chetham's Library, MS 8009 contains a hybrid of the print and manuscript textual traditions, but the whole is in couplets; see Fellows, "The Middle English and Renaissance *Bevis*," 93-94. For the date of *Norny*, see Bawcutt, *Poems*, 2:370. For evidence of the independent fame of *Bevis of Hampton* in 15th- and 16th-century Scotland, see Bawcutt, "English Books and Scottish Readers," 8 and n. 77.

notable is that there are no extant tail-rhyme versions of the other tales listed by Dunbar:

Was neuer vylde Robein wnder bewch  
 Nor 3et Roger off Clekniskleuch  
 So bauld a berne as he;  
 Gy off Gysburne na Allan Bell,  
 Na Simonis sonnes off Quhynfell  
 At schot war neuer so slie.  
 (ll. 25-30)

These tales focus on, respectively, Robin Hood and Guy of Gisbourne, known from English ballads and gestes of Robin Hood; an otherwise unknown Allan Bell, probably from the ballad of *Adam Bell, Clim of the Clough, and William of Cloudeley*;<sup>19</sup> and additional heroes — Roger and “Simonis sonnes” — now entirely unidentifiable but presumably also from ballad tradition (as suggested by the contrast of their names with the “*Schir Bewis*” of romance tradition).<sup>20</sup> Thus, while Chaucer cites examples of romances employing the precise poetic form he goes on to parody,<sup>21</sup> Dunbar’s references are to a more general type of narrative — though not because he knew no tail-rhyme romances. There is every likelihood that he knew the late fourteenth-century tail-rhyme romance *Sir Eglamour of Artois*, which had been printed in Edinburgh in 1508 by the same Chepman and Myllar who also printed some of Dunbar’s own poems. Dunbar’s contemporary Gavin Douglas mentions “The secrete wyse hardy Ipomedon” in his 1501 *Palis of Honoure* (l. 578), a probable reference to the Yorkshire tail-rhyme romance *Ipomedon*. There are in fact four known versions of the story of Ipomedon — the twelfth-century Anglo-Norman original and three separate Middle English translations — and all but the Middle English couplet version stress the hero’s bizarre love of secrecy. However, the sixteenth-century circulation of a Middle English *Ipomedon* in Scotland is almost certainly confirmed by

19 See *Adam Bell* and the many Robin Hood tales collected in Knight and Ohlgren, eds., *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales*. For evidence of the widespread popularity of Robin Hood in Dunbar’s Scotland, see Fisher, “The Crying of ane Playe.”

20 But note the reference in *Colkelbie Sow* to what appears to be meant as a dance tune, “Symon sonis of Quhynfell” (l. 314, in Laing, ed., *Early Popular Poetry of Scotland*, 1:179-211).

21 There is evidence that Chaucer also drew on the ballad tradition for *Sir Thopas*, although his primary target was clearly the tail-rhyme romance; see Burrow, “Sir Thopas in the Sixteenth Century,” 71-73.

another reference to “ypomedon” in the *Complaynt of Scotland* (c.1550): this polemical text has an avowed interest in the use of Scots for Scottish people, and the long list of tales supposedly told by shepherds appears to have been meant as a catalogue of the preferred leisure reading of contemporary Scots speakers, whether the texts themselves were Scottish or English.<sup>22</sup> The probability that it was the tail-rhyme version of *Ipomadon* that was known in Scotland is implied by *Norny* itself. Eddy was the first to point out<sup>23</sup> that the lines

This anterous knycht, quhar euer he went,  
At iusting and at tornament  
Euermor he wan the gre  
(ll. 31-33)

recall lines from the opening stanzas of the tail-rhyme *Ipomadon*:

Thereffore in þe world where euer he went,  
In Iustys or in tur[na]mente,  
Euer more the pryce he wan.  
(ll. 16-18)

As it happens, these particular lines could demonstrate knowledge of any number of Middle English tail-rhyme romances, including the aforementioned *Eglamour of Artois*, although the lines quoted below from *Horn Childe and Maiden Rimmild* (a text also known to Chaucer, though not quoted by him) are the closest of all:

At iustes & at turnament,  
Whiderward so þai went  
Euer þai gat þe gre.  
(*Horn Childe and Maiden Rimmild*, ll. 460-62)<sup>24</sup>

Into what stede þat þai went,  
To iustes oþer to turnament,  
Sir Amis & sir Amiloun  
For douhtiest in eueri dede,

22 *The Complaynt of Scotland*, ed. Stewart, 50. *The Complaynt* also lists the “seige of millan” (p. 50), which is almost certainly the c.1400 northern tail-rhyme romance *The Sege of Melayne*.

23 Eddy, “Sir Thopas and Sir Thomas Norny,” 405.

24 Text quoted from *The Auchinleck Manuscript*, ed. Burnley and Wiggins.

Wiþ scheld & spere to ride on stede,  
Pai gat hem gret renoun.

(*Amis and Amiloun*, ll. 123-28)<sup>25</sup>

Treuly efter myne entent  
In iustying na in turnament  
He sayde ws neuer nay  
Quhare ony deidis of armys were  
The gre he wynnys with honour clere  
Now help hym gyf thou may

(*Eglamour of Artois*, pp. 56-57)<sup>26</sup>

However, this is not the only parallel between *Nornny* and the tail-rhyme *Ipomadon*. After *Nornny* has been described as defeating members of the ferocious Clan Chattan, Dunbar quips, “This deid thocht na man kennis” (l.18). Although the sudden introduction of doubt works well as a joke on its own, the whole narrative of *Ipomadon* turns upon the fact that the exceptionally modest hero accomplishes every one of his splendid deeds of chivalry *incognito*: no other knight was “lother knowen for to be, / No whedure a better knyght þan he / Was no levand than” (ll. 22-24). This description comes from the second stanza of the poem, which is also the stanza containing the “in Iustys or in turnamente” lines cited above as a possible source for the version of this phrase in *Nornny*. Dunbar is clearly drawing upon his own knowledge of English tail-rhyme romances and ballads to construct a mock-eulogy in the narrative style of romance, rather than imitating the style of *Thopas* directly. This is confirmed by other details. For example, where Chaucer has “listeth” or “herkneth” at the beginning of each ‘fitt’ of *Sir Thopas*, *Nornny* opens with the command “lythis,” a common enough verb in Middle English or Scots romance and ballad, but not one used by Chaucer in *Thopas*.<sup>27</sup> Of texts apparently known to Dunbar, “Now lith and lysten, gentylmen” occurs in the extant version of *Adam Bell, Clim of the Clough, and William of Cloudesley* (l.17), and “Lythe and listin, gentilmen” is the opening line of *A Gest of*

25 Text quoted from *The Auchinleck Manuscript*, ed. Burnley and Wiggins.

26 Quoted from the Chepman and Myllar print, National Library of Scotland website “The First Scottish Books.”

27 “Listeth” (ll. 712 and 833) and “herkneth” (l. 893) in the *Riverside Chaucer*. Manly and Rickert record only “lysteneth” and “lestenyth” as variants for these lines; see Manly and Rickert, eds., *The Text of the Canterbury Tales*, 7:184-99, variants for their lines 1902, 2023, and 2083.

*Robyn Hode*.<sup>28</sup> “Lythe” also occurs in *Eglamour* (l. 522) in Richardson’s edition of the Thornton and Cotton copies. The section containing the relevant lines is missing from the very faulty Chepman and Myllar print of 1508, but of course this version postdates the composition of *Norny*; thus, if Dunbar knew this romance it would have been from an earlier and possibly less faulty copy. Interestingly, the other text in which Dunbar uses the verb “lyth” is *The Tua Mariit Wemen* (l. 257), mentioned above as another example of Dunbar’s borrowing an otherwise characteristically English metrical form.

Another English text which almost certainly lies somewhere behind Dunbar’s *Norny* is the tale of *John the Reeve*. In “Schir, ʒit remember as befoir” (B 68), Dunbar complains that everyone but he has been shown royal favour, even “Raf Coilʒearis kynd and Iohnne the Reif” (l. 33). *Rauf Coilʒear* is a Scottish romance in rhymed-alliterative stanzas, but the only extant version of the tale of *John the Reeve* is an English one in tail-rhyme dating from, at the latest, the first half of the fifteenth century.<sup>29</sup> *John the Reeve* is composed in the same six-line *aabccb* stanzas as *Norny* (in contrast to the twelve-line stanzas of the majority of Middle English tail-rhyme romances, *Sir Thopas* notwithstanding) and a distorted reflection of its theme can be seen in *Norny*. John the Reeve is a churl who hosts a mock-courtly night of feasting and entertainment for an *incognito* King Edward and his two attendants, who have lost their way in the countryside while hunting. Much is made of the comic violence of the dancing (“Then they began to kicke & wince, / Iohn hitt the king ouer the shinnes / With a payre of new clowted shoone,” ll. 550-52), which the famously long-legged king (“Edward with the long shankes was hee,” l. 17) enjoyed immensely. This may have been the inspiration for Norny’s own talent for dancing, otherwise somewhat unexpected in that there is no mention of it in *Thopas*, nor is it a standard feature in medieval romance:

28 For both texts, see Knight and Ohlgren, eds., *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales: A Gest of Robyn Hode*, 80-168; Adam Bell, *Clim of the Clough*, and William of Cloudesley, 235-67.

29 *John the Reeve*, in Laing, ed., *Early Popular Poetry of Scotland*, 1:250-83. Although it is preserved only in the 17th-century Percy Folio manuscript (London, British Library, Additional MS 27879), a date of composition in the first half of the 15th century is suggested by the poem’s assertion that the action takes place “In Edwards dayes our King” (l. 12) and that “Of that name were Kings 3; / But Edward with the long shankes [i.e., Edward I] was hee” (ll. 16-17). Unless its author were going to uncharacteristic lengths to add historical atmosphere, this would indicate that the tale assumed its present form before the accession of Edward IV in 1461.

At feastis and brydallis wpaland [i.e., upland, in the country]  
 He wan the gre and the garland,  
 Dansit non so on deis.

(*Norny*, ll. 19-21)

When the reeve is later summoned to court, attired in a rusting parody of knightly armour, he is thrilled to be rewarded with lands and money but, charmingly, horrified to find himself knighted as well. He clearly feels such social elevation is inappropriate for a churl such as himself. Earlier, at his own feast, he had responded to the compliment that he made a “comly knight” (l. 298) with the outraged cry, “‘A knight!’ quoth Iohn, ‘doe away ffor shame! / I am the King’s bondman’” (*John the Reeve*, ll. 301-302). For Dunbar, evidently chafing at the sight of the real Thomas Norny’s preferment at court, John’s conservative and firmly hierarchical views on exactly who does and does not belong at court must have made something of a bitter contrast with the real Norny, who appears to have experienced no qualms about accepting the generous patronage of James IV. If Bawcutt’s tentative suggestion that the fool Norny may have been knighted in some sort of mock-investiture is correct,<sup>30</sup> the parallel with *John the Reeve* will have been even more striking for both Dunbar and his immediate audience of courtiers.

To answer the question I asked earlier — could Dunbar have written *Norny* with no knowledge whatsoever of *Sir Thopas*? — the answer is an obvious yes. They differ even in the forms of tail-rhyme stanza used: Dunbar uses the looser rhyme-scheme of *aabccb* (as found in *John the Reeve*) as against the stricter *aabaab* pattern with which *Thopas* opens. Dunbar also ignores all of Chaucer’s specific metrical jokes relating to the random single-stress bob-lines of *Thopas*,<sup>31</sup> despite his own keen interest in verse form. If Dunbar were aiming to produce a literary parody in the manner of *Thopas*, one feels sure he could have done better than this. But *Norny* is not a parody of romance. It is a brief, mock-eulogizing character description (or rather, defamation) which borrows the poetic form and diction characteristic of English romance in order to further its aim of ridiculing a member of the court of James IV whom Dunbar considers to be as out of place in that setting as a eulogy to such a man is in a verse form associated with the courtly genre of romance. Or, to look at it from another angle, the character Norny is as out of place at court as the poem *Schir Thomas Norny*,

<sup>30</sup> Bawcutt, *Poems*, 2:370.

<sup>31</sup> Purdie, “The Implications of Manuscript Layout,” 266-68.

with its English tail-rhyme romance form and diction (already the butt of some humour in texts like *John the Reeve*), is among the literary works of a sophisticated Scottish writer such as Dunbar.

Thus far I have explored the relationship between *Norny* and Chaucer's *Sir Thopas*, but a comparison of *Norny* to Dunbar's other two extended satirical tail-rhyme poems helps clarify Dunbar's attitude towards the tail-rhyme stanza and provides a useful final gauge of the extent of Chaucer's influence on *Norny*. A similarity between *Norny*, *The Abbot of Tunmland*, and the "Turnament" half of "Off Februar"<sup>32</sup> is that all three works express Dunbar's blazing contempt for social climbers who enjoy what he deems to be undeserved privilege at court: Norny, the well-provided-for fool, and John Damian, the foreigner who was created Abbot of Tunmland,<sup>33</sup> as well as tailors and soutars who demonstrate their total incomprehension of what it means to be a knight. Jean-Jacques Blanchot has observed that although Dunbar makes fun of many members of the court, "he reserves mock-epic treatment to several characters who seem to share a common weakness: pretence."<sup>34</sup> I would suggest that a deliberate part of this "mock-epic treatment" consists of casting these poems in a verse form most strongly associated simultaneously with imported English romance and with comic texts such as *John the Reeve* which themselves depend for their humour upon the conventions of romance and its obsession with the notion of 'true gentility.'

At this point, however, *Norny* and Dunbar's other two tail-rhyme satires diverge. The first area in which they do so is that of language and linguistic register. Although Eddy's claim that *Norny* uses deliberately southernized English in order to recall Chaucer's *Thopas* is incorrect,<sup>35</sup> the language of *Norny* is indeed quite neutral in both dialect and register, and in this respect it contrasts with "Off Februar" and *The Abbot of Tunmland*. Of the nine stanzas in *Norny*, only two contain any items of vocabulary (as opposed to mere spelling variants) which could be considered distinctively Scottish or even distinctively northern.<sup>36</sup> Diction that is neutral in both dialect and register is not unusual in Dunbar's poetry as a whole — it is typical of many of his moral

32 "Off Februar" (B 47), ll. 121ff.

33 On which see Bawcutt, *Poems*, 2:295-97.

34 Blanchot, "Heroes and Anti-Heroes," 131.

35 Eddy, "Sir Thopas and Sir Thomas Norny," 403-405. For the counter-argument, see Bawcutt, *Dunbar the Makar*, 359-61.

36 Stanza 3 has "catherein" (highland robber: see *DOST katherane*, n.) at l. 13; "cummerid" (harassed: a Scots variant of ME "combren") at l. 14; and "dully glennis" (gloomy glens) at l. 15. Stanza 8 has "lychtleit" (scorned) at l. 45.

or devotional lyrics, for example — but it is unusual for his comic and satiric verse. For this, Dunbar normally follows Scottish literary tradition in writing in a far more markedly ‘Scots’ style, heavily alliterative and using a distinctive Scots vocabulary, the lower the register the better. (A substantial little glossary of ‘Rude Words in Older Scots’ could be compiled from Dunbar’s comic works alone.) Both “Off Februar” and *The Abbot of Tunland* are excellent examples of this use of language, but *Nornny* is not. Although all three poems deal with the idea of people moving out of their proper social spheres, “Off Februar” and *The Abbot of Tunland* fit more obviously into local Scottish traditions of comic and satiric writing. They also appear to draw from the tradition of the morality play as much as, if not more than, from the world of romance, though popular romance clearly underpins the mock-tournament in “Off Februar” and may have helped suggest the use of tail-rhyme there. Both are hideous dream visions, peopled with such capering Vices and demons (“sonis of Sathanas seid,” *Abbot*, l. 4) as are readily found in morality plays. This dramatic tradition may itself have supported Dunbar’s choice of tail-rhyme here, for although tail-rhyme came to be strongly identified with romance in later medieval England and this identification probably encouraged its occasional use for the speech of Vices in late medieval English and Scottish plays, the use of tail-rhyme in religious drama has an established Continental history that comprehensively predates the stanza’s association with English romance.<sup>37</sup> The Scottish comic-grotesque tail-rhyme poem *The Maner of the Crying of Ane Playe*, once attributed to Dunbar, also unites these dramatic and grotesque traditions in Older Scots literature, while Sir David Lyndsay would later give such characters as Wantonness and Placebo speeches in tail-rhyme in *Ane Satyre of the Thrie Estaitis*, although it should be noted that tail-rhyme is never entirely restricted to characters of low social station or dubious morals.<sup>38</sup> Despite their similar satiric intent, then, “Off Februar” and *The Abbot of Tunland* can be distinguished from *Nornny* both in terms of style and in terms of the literary traditions on which they draw. These two poems are, thus, much more fully integrated into Older Scots literary culture than *Nornny*, and it is in *Nornny*’s distinctiveness as revealed by this comparison that Chaucer’s influence may be detected, even as one must acknowledge that *Nornny* is otherwise far more independent of *Sir Thopas* than was once believed. Thus, although Dunbar evidently could have written such a satire

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37 See Purdie, *Anglicising Romance*, 62-65.

38 See McGavin, “The Dramatic Prosody of Sir David Lindsay,” 58-64.

without any knowledge of Chaucer's *Thopas*, it seems very unlikely that he did so. *The Canterbury Tales* is known to have circulated in sixteenth-century Scotland even if no contemporary Scottish manuscript or print survives, and *The Tretis of the Tua Mariit Wemen and the Wedo* seems to betray Dunbar's knowledge of the *Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale* and the *Merchant's Tale*.<sup>39</sup> It is not impossible that he expected at least some of his readers to recognize the parallels between *Thopas* and *Norry* even if those between *Norry* and *John the Reeve*, with its more relevant subject matter, are more significant.

This brings us to the last of the questions raised at the beginning of this essay: was the use of tail-rhyme for narrative recognized as characteristically English by Dunbar and his Scottish contemporaries and, if so, might Dunbar have intended to exploit such an association in *Norry*? Dunbar's own knowledge of English literary culture was not confined to what was available in Scotland: the Treasury Accounts for 1501 record a payment of a half-yearly pension to him "eftir he com furth of England," and his travels to (and association with) England are confirmed elsewhere.<sup>40</sup> His choice for *The Tua Mariit Wemen* of the English alliterative long line over the rhymed-alliterative stanzas favoured by other Scots poets has been noted already. In *The Flyting of Dunbar and Kennedie* (B 65), one of Kennedy's favourite insults is to associate Dunbar with England:

Thy forefader, maid Irisch and Irisch men thin,  
Throu his treson broght Inglise rumplis in.  
Sa wald thy self, mycht thou to him succede.

. . . . .

In England, oule, suld be thyne habitacione.  
Homage to Edward Langschankis maid thy kyn.  
In Dunbar thai ressaut hym, the false nacione,  
Thay suld be exilde Scotland, mare and myn.

. . . . .

Throu England, thef, and tak the to thy fute.

(ll. 350-52, 409-12, & 473)

39 See Kratzmann, *Anglo-Scottish Literary Relations*, 130-34; Bawcutt, *Poems*, 2:287-94, notes on lines 70ff., 79, 89-145, 105-108, 127, 183, 195, 316, 389, 413ff., and 462 of the *Tretis*.

40 *Accounts of the Lord High Treasurer of Scotland*, II: 95. Quoted in Bawcutt, *Dunbar the Makar*, 8.

Kennedy also calls Dunbar a “Tale tellar” (l. 551) and recommends that he “Tak [. . .] a fidill or a floyte, and geste” (l. 507), insinuating thereby that he is little better than a common “gestour” or minstrel. Both lowly and English — what could be worse? It is hardly surprising to discover that it was considered insulting to associate someone with England in this period (or arguably, in any period) of Scottish history, but it is interesting to see that such accusations were levelled at Dunbar himself, even if only in fun. This gives added resonance to his use of the English tail-rhyme romance style to mock Sir Thomas Norny. Where Chaucer creates a dummy *alter ego* who produces the execrable *Sir Thopas* as a comic demonstration of the kind of poet Chaucer definitely was not (but was perhaps worried some might accuse him of being), Dunbar may be deflecting criticism of his own perceived English leanings by allowing the English associations of tail-rhyme romance to add weight instead to the scorn he pours upon Norny and, to a lesser extent, John Damian in *The Abbot of Tunghland*. If it is correct to impute to Dunbar an awareness of the ‘Englishness’ of the tail-rhyme romance tradition (and associated comic imitations) that he exploits in these works of mockery, his simultaneous use and rejection of this one aspect of the English poetic tradition may represent an early stirring of a determination more clearly manifested in the next generation of Scottish writers to both exploit and move explicitly beyond English literary influence. Just over two decades later, Sir David Lyndsay, in his *Testament and Complaynt of our Soverane Lordis Papyngo* of c.1530, would relegate his praise of “Chawceir, Goweir, and Lidgate” to a mere four lines (ll. 11-14) before devoting forty lines to extolling the virtues of sixteen Older Scots writers (ll. 15-54). In this hymn to Scottish poetic talent, Lyndsay crowns Gavin Douglas the rose “in our Inglis rethorick” (l. 24), an accolade that Dunbar had earlier awarded to Chaucer — “rose of rethoris all” — in *The Goldyn Targe* (l. 253).

This nascent nationalist agenda is rather a lot of weight for the slight fifty-four-line *Schir Thomas Norny* to carry, and it can hardly have been Dunbar’s main focus even if one accepts its presence. Nevertheless, it is clear that Dunbar’s use of tail-rhyme for *Schir Thomas Norny* is only partially indebted to Chaucer’s *Tale of Sir Thopas*: his own direct knowledge of English tail-rhyme romances and comic tail-rhyme poems proves to have been at least as influential in its composition. Moreover, the English associations of tail-rhyme romance would seem to have been exploited by him in all three of his satiric narrative tail-rhyme poems (though principally in *Norny*) in a way that was self-evidently not available to Chaucer.

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