

The Flyting of Dunbar and Kennedie

Flyting wis popular in Aulder Scots. Twa poets wad get thegither and hae a competition tae see wha coud insult the ither maist effectively in verse. The insults were veecious but the verse wis weel-craftit. It wis a bit like rap. James IV and his queen nicht weel hae listened tae this efter their denner, been stammygastert by the skill o the poets and haed a guid lauch at some o the ruder bits.

Lines fae *The Flyting of Dunbar and Kennedie*

Thow Lazarus, thow laithly lene tramort,
To all the world thow may example be,
To luk vpoun thy gryslie, peteous port;
For hiddowis, haw, and holkit is thyne ee,
Thy cheikbane bair and blaiknit is thy ble.
Thy choip, thy choll garris men for to leif chest;
Thy gane, it garris ws think that we mon de.
I coniure thee, thow hungert Heland gaist.

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Mauch muttoun, byt buttoun, peilit gluttoun, air to Hilhous,
Rank beggar, ostir dregar, flay fleggar in the flet.
Chittirlilling, ruch rilling, lik schilling in the milhous,
Baird rehator, theif of nator, fals tratour, feyindis gett,
Filling of tauch, rak sauch – cry crauch! Thow art oursett.
Muttoun dryver, girnall ryver, yadswyvar, fowll fell thee!
Herretyk, lunatyk, purspyk, carlingis pet,
Rottin crok, dirtin dok – cry cok, or I sall quell thee!

Translation

Thir twa sample stanzas illustrate Dunbar's virtuosity. Altho this is vulgar, it is gey clivver. Some o the references hae been tint ower time but here is a literal translation in English:

You Lazarus, you loathsome, lean, corpse
To all the world you may be an example
To look upon your grisly, pitiful appearance,
For hideous, livid and hollowed out is your eye,
Your cheekbone bare and pallid is your complexion.
Your jaw, your jowl make men leave off jesting,
Your face makes us think that we must die.
I conjure you, you famished Highland ghost.

Maggotty mutton, button-biter, skinny glutton, heir to Hillhouse
Outright beggar, oyster dredger, flea frightener in the hall,
?Pig guts, rough shoe, licker of husks in the millhouse,
Villainous bard, natural thief, false traitor. offspring of the fiend,
Filling of tallow, gallows bird, - cry 'surrender'! You are defeated.
Mutton driver, grain-store thief, person who does unspeakable things to old mares, may bad things happen to you!
Heretic, lunatic, pick-pocket, old woman's fart,
Rotten old ewe, dirty bum, cry surrender or I shall destroy you!

Notes on the text

Ye can tell by the soond o it that this is insultin.

Whilk soons mair vitriolic, the Scots vairsion or the English vairsion? (Help wi the pronunciation is gien ablow.)

Whit maks a better insult – ane wi a basis in truth or a doonricht lee?

Ye can tell fae thir stanzas that Kennedy wisnae a weel man. He wis thin and his skin wisnae a guid colour. In mony o the ither stanzas Dunbar maks it clear that Kennedy haed jaundice and affa diarrhoea and aften dirtied hissel. As if that wisna bad eneuch, he accuses him o haein leprosy. It wis still aboot in Scotland at thon time and it wis a terrible social stigma. They thocht it wis a sexually transmittit disease. Lepers were ostracised and Lazarus wis the saint particularly associatit wi them. Sae tae cry somebody 'Lazarus' wis tae cry them a leper.

Dunbar maks muckle o the fact that Kennedie haes hielan connections. Tae you an me, it micht be a great thing tae be cried a bard – but tae lowland Scots o the time it reeked o an unfremmit tradition. Kennedie gies as guid as he gets.

Dae ye think Dunbar and Kennedie wis still freins efter this?

The vocabulary is no that hard gin ye yaise yer lugs mair not yer een. Ye ken a lot o words fae Modern Scots, but ye maun still tak tent. While ye come across a wurd ye think ye ken – like *pet*. Here it means something verra different. Wird like this are cried 'fause freins'. Whit wis sae bad aboot bein a button-biter or heir tae Hillhouse, we dinna ken noo.

Tae find whit Kennedie haed tae say about Dunbar, ye'll need tae read the poem. The best ane is in *The Poems of William Dunbar* (2vols) editit by Priscilla Bawcutt, Association for Scottish Literary Studies, Glasgow 1998.

When ye come tae read the hale poem, remember that in aulder Scots
quh is the same as modern wh
sch is the same as modern sh

There is mair on whit wey tae read aulder Scots at

<http://www.scuilwab.org.uk/sections/view/27/145>,

<http://www.scuilwab.org.uk/assets/TheTailOfThePaddockAndTheMous-1.pdf>

and especially

<http://www.scuilwab.org.uk/sections/view/27/113>

Gie it laldy and enjoy the soond.

This is a poem that maun be read oot. Whit follaes is a bit o a guide tae pronunciation. It is no jist as Dunbar wad hae said it – we dinna ken that for sure- but it's near eneuch. Twa actor did a performance o The Flyting in Mary King's Close in Edinburgh as pairt o *Previously..Scotland's History Festival*. Maist o the audience unnerstood the feck o the performance and haed a braw nicht, but tae stert wi the actors didna find it easy tae pronoonce. We gaed throu the text thegither, wi them chyngin the spellin whiles tae mak it clearer for them. Sae the 'pronunciation' text ablow haes some 'unreal' spellins.

ch is pronounced as in *loch*

At this period *u* as in *but*, *button* etc is aye pronoonced as *oo* (sae moottin, bootin and glootin wad nivver really be written like that)

Wirds which in English are pronounced like *house* keep the aulder *hoose* vowel.

In this version *au* is pronoonced as in *caught*, *oh* is pronoonced as in *boat*, *ay* is pronoonced as in *say*, *ai* is pronoonced as in modern *traitor*, *ive* is pronoonced as in modern *driver*.

Ither words which are familiar fae baith modern Scots and English are left untouched.

Mauch moottin, bite boottin, peelit gloottin, heir to Hillhoose,
Rank beggar, ohstir dreggar, flay fleggar in the flet.
Chittirlilling, rauch rilling, lick shilling in the millhoose,
Bard rehaitor, thief of naitor, false traitour, fiendis gett,
Filling of tauch, rack sauch – cry crauch! Thoo art owersett.
Moottin driver, girnall river, yadswiver, fool fell thee!
Heretic, lunatic, pursepick, carlings pet,
Rottin crock, dirtin dock – cry cock, or I sall quell thee!

(This isna 'Scots'in ony wey – it is jist an actor's lairnin vairsion)

Extract from The Golden Targe

Ryght as the stern of day begouth to schyne,
Quhen gone to bed war Vesper and Lucyne,
I raise and by a rosere did me rest.
Up sprang the goldyn candill matutyne
With clere depurit bemes cristallyne
Glading the mery foulis in thair nest.
Or Phebus was in purpur cape revest

Up raise the lark, the hevyns menstrale fyne,
In May intill a morow myrthfullest.

This is a swatch o anither poem by Dunbar in a completely different register. Whaur the flyting is colloquial and aftimes plain coorse, this is formal and decoratit wi a fouth o Latin an French wirds. In fact, is is sae gildit that it is referred tae as the **aureate** style. Dunbar wis able tae dae baith heich an laich styles and awthing in atween.