William Dunbar is a poet whose works are not nearly so well-known as they deserve to be. He was a figure in the court of James IV (r. 1488-1513), and he wrote poems ranging from the serious to the comic, from the pious to the obscene. For students of literature, Dunbar’s works provide a wealth of interesting words and forms from Middle Scots, a northern dialect of Middle English. For students of Scottish history, they provide a vivid, often ribald, glimpse into court culture and society in Scotland. For those more simply interested in Scotland’s languages and Scotland’s past, the poems delight and amuse, shattering many assumptions about this colourful period in Scottish history sometimes called the later Middle Ages, sometimes called the Renaissance.

This edition of Dunbar’s poems is the latest volume in the series of Middle English texts published by The Consortium for the Teaching of the Middle Ages (TEAMS) in association with Medieval Institute Publications, out of Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, Michigan. The goal of this series is “to make available to teachers and students texts which occupy an important place in the literary and cultural canon but which have not been readily available in student editions.” This book accomplishes its goals very nicely: it makes the poetry of Dunbar available to a wide audience while delivering excellent value,
scholarship, and entertainment. John Conlee, professor of English at the College of William and Mary, has done an outstanding job as editor and his edition of Dunbar’s works has much to recommend it.

All of Dunbar’s known surviving works are included, allowing readers to appreciate the full spectrum of the Scottish Makar’s wit and insight. Conlee has arranged the poems into groups according to something like tone mixed with subject matter. The advantage to this system is that it encourages the reader to see connections among related poems while appreciating the wide diversity of subjects and styles in the Dunbar canon. The organization of the book is discussed in the introduction and indicated clearly in the table of contents, but unfortunately there is nothing in the main body of the book to indicate where one section ends and another begins. So the reader going through all the poems in order is not alerted to when one theme is being left behind and another is beginning, an oversight that can lead to some jarring moments: just as we think we know what Dunbar is all about, suddenly we are thrown in a completely different direction and we seem to be reading a poet with completely different values and tastes from what we had come to expect. Perhaps, however, this is not such a bad thing. One of the most valuable lessons from Dunbar’s poetry taken as a whole is the reminder that the society in which Dunbar lived was not afraid to mix the sacred with the profane, the serious with the silly.

The first group of poems in Conlee’s edition, “Poems Devotional and Moral,” includes Dunbar’s religious and moral poems. These show a poet who is concerned with living a moral life and worried about the fate of his soul after death. The touching poem “The Lament for the Makars,” a poem both devotional and moral, combines a description of Dunbar’s sadness at the passing of so many of his fellow poets with a dark fear of his own death, expressed in the Latin chorus, “Timor mortis conturbat me” (“The fear of death distresses me”). Dunbar’s clerical and pastoral side comes through in this section, as he guides his readers through Christian sacraments and ethics.

The second group of poems is called “Poems Public and Private.” Here are found the poems relating to Dunbar’s life as a member of the royal court of King James IV. Among the “public” poems are Dunbar’s petitionary poems, in which the poet asks the
King for more money. Other poems in this section describe the court and its fashions, such as the mocking of the latest dance styles in “A Dance in the Queen’s Chamber.” Among the “private” poems is “The Headache,” which begins “My heid did yak yester nicht,” and goes on to explain that Dunbar has been unable to write a poem because of his disabling “magryme.” Anyone with personal experience of migraine headaches will appreciate Dunbar’s description of his affliction: “Perseing my brow as ony ganyie [arrow], | That scant I luik may on the licht.”

The third section comprises “Poems in the Courtly Tradition”, in which are found poems about courtly love. These elegant pieces range from the aureate and very complex “The Golden Targe” to the much simpler and sweet “Sweet Rose of Virtue.” Finally comes the section entitled “Poems Comic, Satiric, and Parodic,” which Conlee admits is “a sprawling and rather heterogeneous” set of poems. They are also the funniest works in the book. Poems in this section range from the bawdy “In a Secret Place,” to the realistic “To the Merchants of Edinburgh,” to the frankly grotesque “The Dance of the Seven Deadly Sins.” A very tongue-in-cheek look at religion is given in “Of the Tailors and Shoemakers,” where Dunbar recounts his vision of an angel announcing the special place in heaven for these notorious rogues, a place above the saints and next to God Himself, earned because they hid God’s little mistakes. “Dunbar’s Dirge” takes a similarly good-humoured/irreverent approach by being a parody of the solemn Office of the Dead, in this case praying that people be delivered from the Purgatory that is Stirling to the Paradise that is Edinburgh. This section concludes with that masterful heaping of alliterative abuses, “The Flyting of Dunbar and Kennedy,” and Dunbar’s longest and most provocative poem, “The Tretis of the Tua Marii Wemen and the Wedo.”

Words that are likely to be unfamiliar to a modern audience are translated beside the poems; a longer section of explanatory notes is found at the back of the book. These notes (all 223 pages of them!) are extremely helpful to anyone seeking some cultural background to the poems or a longer discussion of the meanings of words or phrases than what can be provided next to the poems themselves. They include commentary on each poem as a whole and on individual lines, and contain information on the structure of the poems, the poetic devices employed, and examples of what
other scholars have said about Dunbar’s works. They also point out similarities between Dunbar’s poems and the poems of other writers such as Geoffrey Chaucer, Robert Henryson, and Sir David Lindsay, something useful both to those who know the works of these other writers better than they know the works of Dunbar, and to those who wish to trace Dunbar’s possible influences in what was, after all, a very international community of artists.

This book is certainly worth owning. For anyone not yet convinced, most of its contents can be found online, for free, at www.lib.rochester.edu/camelotteams/conlee2.htm

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