

Bunbar's Tretis of the Tua Marrit Wemen and the Wedo

edited by Elizabeth Jones



A splendid poem in its own right, Dunbar's "Tretis of the tua marrit Wemen and the Wedo" casts an interesting light on the sex-war in late-Medieval early-Renaissance Scotland as presented from the female point of view. The author is, of course, male, but also a priest, ordained in 1504. "The Tretis" was written about 1508. Was it his own sardonic observation of the social scene in town and court that prompted this poem, in which three well-born ladies exchange bawdy confidences as to their disappointments with the state of holy matrimony, or was it, five years of hearing women's confessions?

It could be argued that this is just another of those savage satires in which women damn themselves out of their own mouths as rapacious feeders on men; taken out of context, this is the way in which the Widow, in particular, might appear. The poem makes clear, however, that the wives are victims of the customs of the time, married off for their relatives' convenience to old, depraved or inferior men. The only solution is to submit meekly, or, if they have any spirit at all, secretly turn the tables on their detested lords and masters and bring them into subjection. One may not admire, but one can appreciate in them, as does Dunbar, a fierce energy and a lust for life not usually regarded as feminine virtues.

These women are cousins to Chaucer's Wife of Bath, but they come from the North. Like their creator, they too are "possessed of a riotous and fantastic devil." (1) Like him they are artists in words, applauding one another, it is clear, for vivid virulence of style as well as for content. From their frustrations they create verbal entertainment. And they too might admit with Elizabeth Bennet that a good hate is such a spur to one's wit.

The aim of this modern version, abridged not expurgated, is to give some idea of Dunbar's vigorous, earthy view of the female condition. However, as to translate is to traduce, the interested reader is urged to return to the original with its masterly handling of hard-hitting clods of words in muscular alliterative rhythms. The Australian poet and scholar A.D. Hope has written a fascinating exploration of the background to the poem. His A Midsummer Eve's Dream, (2) opens up all sorts of vistas, historical and sociological, from which the poem can be viewed and reviewed. If this rendering prompts readers to turn to the original and to Hope's Variations, it will have been justified. (3)

Upon Midsummer Eve, merriest of nights,
I went out alone when midnight was past,
To a goodly green garden full of gay flowers
Hedged to a huge height with hawthorn trees.
In a green arbour three ladies were sitting
Garlanded round with lovely fresh flowers.
A handsome table was spread before them
With royal cups row upon row full of rich wines:
Two of these beauties were wedded to lords
And one was a widow of wanton habits.
They quaffed the strong wine that loosened their tongues;
Then spoke to the point without mincing matters.

-Tell me the truth, said the Widow, you young married women,
What mirth is in marriage since you've been men's wives?
Have you repented yet of that reckless condition?
Is it a blest bond which binds so fast
That none can undo it but Death alone?

Then one lively lady spoke up with much spirit:
-What you call the blest bond that binds so fast
Is bitter and baleful, a torment, a torture.
To force hearts together that can feel only hatred
Goes against Nature, kindness and love.
Birds' laws are far better than those of mankind:
Each year with new joy they enjoy a new mate
Find for themselves a fresh love constant, unspoilt,
And let old cock robins limp off where they please.
Dear Christ, if only that were this country's custom
We women would know what it is to be free.

I should be found at fairs looking out for new faces
At plays and preachings and great pilgrimages.
When I'd picked out the man who suited me most
Active and young to pull in yoke for a year
And he'd proved himself potent for the first pleasant month
I'd be casting about at church and at market
To get me a gallant against the next year,
One who'd keep at the work when the other one failed,

Always first and forward and forceful in harness
Neither feeble nor faint nor fatigued by labour
But as fresh in feature as flowers in May.

My husband's a wallidrag, a worm, a crawly caterpillar,
A worn-out hog good for nothing but poppycock,
A bumbler, a drone bee, a bag full of phlegm,
A scabby scrag, a scorpion, a stinking old fart,
With a beard as stiff as fierce boar bristles
But his poor prick as soft and supple as silk;
His two grim eyes are rheumy with matter
Crusted like two gutters thick with filth.
When the dirty boar has been shaved with a razor
He shoves out his snout and scratches my lips.
I shrink from the sharp scrape but dare not cry out
For fear of the threats of the bad-tempered wretch.

And the lecherous leers from his bleary eyes
Make me think that the devil is glowering at me.
He snivels and smirks with his foul filthy face
Like a randy old cart-horse that leers at a mare.
With that scrawny tom-cat there I can't glance at my lover:
He is filled with envy and spits out his venom,
Plotting and planning a thousand devices
To trick me and trap me in flagrante delicto.
He's so wasted and worn out in Venus's service
What he gives me in bed is not worth a bean.
I can itch all year long - - his rod never rises.

When that cannibal wants to climb on my belly
I withdraw and am sulky and hard to win round.
But when I've won a high price, then I let the old sluggard
Find his way through my thighs to feel me and fumble.
Though his prick provides poor payment in bed
His purse pays richly in recompense later.
Before he mounts my body, that feeble feeder on flesh,
I demand a high head-dress of finest fashion,
A gown of dyed cloth, trimmed with soft fur,
A ring with a royal stone, some other rich jewel,
Or else he can rest his rusty rod, however he rages.

Yet in spite of all bribes, when he clambers on top,
They seem dearly bought his work is so botched.
So I sell him solace, though it seem to me sour.
From such a master, sweet sisters, I pray God may save you.

When that lady had lightened her mind of this load,
They all laughed aloud in merry delight
And passed round the cup full of rich wines.

Then the Widow said to the other fair wife:

-Now, sister, it is your turn to speak your mind truly;
Bless or curse that bond, which seems to you best?

-Well, said the lady, if I tell you the truth,
You must keep a watch on your tongues. They both said they would;
With that her spirit sprang up a span higher.
I shall speak, said she, and not spare; there's no spy here:
Now the bile bursts forth that's been built up so long;
I'll give vent to the venom that has swollen my heart.
My husband, a whore-master, the greatest on earth,
Is a young man still eager though not in youth's flower,
For he is fast fading and feeble in strength.
A few years ago he was flourishing freshly
But has lechered so long he's exhausted his thrust.
His tool has grown limp and lies in a swoon;
After seven weeks' rest it can't knock even once.
He was worn out by women before he chose me as his wife;
Yet he swaggers about, bonnet rakishly tilted,
Winking at wenches who live in the town,
As courtly in clothing and careful coxcombery
As someone more valiant in Venus's chamber.
His looks long for love though he can't cut the mustard.
Like a dolt of a dog that's dampened all bushes
He lifts his hind-leg but with no urge to piss.
His looks have no lust, his life has no courage,
He has form without force, fair words without deeds.
He is ready to rant about riotous living,
Vaunts his bedroom behaviour, his randy uprisings.
But God knows what I think of such barren boasts,

How ill such salacious slaving suits him!
You with your old man aren't thoroughly cheated;
He's no worse than he seems at Venus's work.
I thought I'd a jewel but find it is jet,
He'd the glitter of gold, but turns out to be dross.
Though men may be fierce, when they fail in their manhood,
There's nothing but hatred and rage in their hearts.
Birds on the bough--they can sing of their bliss
When they flit free each year on St. Valentine's Day.
If I had the privilege to depart when I pleased,
To change and to choose, then adieu Chastity!
I'd have a fresh mate to take in my arms.
Keep a failed fellow may well be called folly.

I lie awake with my woes, tossing and turning,
And curse my wicked Kinsmen who cast me away
On that castrated creature who wed my young beauty
When so many brave knights emblazon the land.
I think of one gallant, who, to tell you the truth,
Is seven times better than my waning young man . . . I sigh--
Tenderly he turns with his withered person,
And, his yardstick all limp, makes a yoke of his arms,
Saying, "My sovereign sweet thing, you're sleeping so badly!
Have you a fever that's making you ill?"
"My honey," I say, "hold, don't handle me roughly.
I'm suddenly struck by a pain deep in my heart."
So I seem to swoon, though not subject to fainting,
And deceive my fine fellow with flattering words.
I cast him a crabbed look when daylight is dawning
Then make it a love-look when he glances back,
Turn a sullen scowl to a good-wifely gaze.

I wish that the bond you are pleased to call blessed
Could bind him to a beauty who could set fire to his wick,
While I made my bed with a love of my liking.

As soon as this lady had come to an end,
The others applauded her laughing aloud:
These merry wives were gamesome among the green leaves,
Drank away their sorrows under dark boughs.

Then said the Widow: There is no other way,
It is my turn to talk, my story comes next.
Hear my sage lesson and learn sense from me.
Though fierce as tigers, be gentle in love;
Be doves in your speech, though your tails may well itch.
Look sweet and meek and seem like angels
But sting like adders with terrible tails.

Now I've had two husbands who both loved me dearly.
I hated them both but they never found out:
The first, an old hog, always coughing up phlegm;
With kissing and fondling I made him quite foolish.
I could pat his bent back and comb his cropped noddle,
Stick my tongue in my cheek, boo him from behind,
Come round with a curtsy and blear his old eyes,
Put on a kind face to kiss withered cheeks,
In my mind mocking that mad old father
Who trusted I treated him out of true love.
I kept a secret lover to slake my desires,
Sure and discreet, who took care of my honour,
Whom I saw at certain times only and in safe places;
When the old man angered me with bad-tempered talk
I was glad to gaze on my gallant again.
And when the old brute scolded and grated his jaws,
I'd chuck at his chin, pat his cheeks, fuss over him so
He was ready to make my son his chief heir
Though the churl had turned chaste before the child was begotten.
As a wise woman I wrought and not as a fool
For I gained more by wiles than by strength of my hands.

Then I married a merchant, well-provided with goods,
But no match for me in kinship or class,
Which the fool always forgot as he had no sense of breeding.
I told him this so often that his heart grew angry,
Then I'd unleash my tongue, taunt him as a Pedlar.
I would teasingly talk about being twice married,
How my innocence ended with my old husband;
I looked very knowing before I'd quite grown,
So says the curate of our church who knew me when young.

My huckster obeyed me, there was no help for it,
For, though I say it myself, the gap was great
Between his bastard blood and my noble birth.
I kept it green in his mind that I was gracious to take him,
Taught him courtesy so he should know his position.
He dared not sit down unless at my order, ready to run
At my very first word, always cringing from blame.
The lower he cowered for my love the less I liked him.
When I was mistress of all and lorded it over him,
I crowed over that coward like a victorious cock;
I saw him crawl, carry out my commands,
And despised the low loon, loathed his limp ways.
I would have ridden him to Rome with a rope round his head,
If I'd given no thought to reputation and rumours.

Yet I never unstoppered the flask of my loathing
While there was something I willed, a wish he could grant.
But when I'd severed that sire of his earthly substance,
And his buildings and high houses belonged to my child,
The stopper burst out of my throat with such fury
He was stunned by the blow as by some steel weapon.
When bills and documents were all legally sealed,
I wrenched at the bridle and reared up my head,
The bit could not tame me nor hold my mouth in;
I stretched at the reins and pulled them apart.
I set the weakling to work on women's affairs.
Men's matters and manhood were laid to rest.
Then I'd say to my friends as we sat about chatting,
"See how I tethered that colt with a tight halter.
He once bucked off his load into the dunghill
And now pulls the cart patiently and wouldn't try rearing,
Doesn't start or take fright or shy to one side."
And so he escaped neither hurt nor scorn.
He clothed me in gay silks and goodly array
In gowns of dyed cloth and great golden chains
Until my renown rose high in the shire.
He was pillaged of profit to pay for my honour
And painted me like a peacock in the proudest of feathers.
I put him down, by Christ, and made him a cuckold.

I was the popinjay and he a plucked heron.
So he made a stalwart staff to strike himself down.
But I'll tell you briefly one joke about bed:
He'd been limp a whole year, was suddenly randy,
I was loth to be leaped by a nobbly nag.
While he was on top, I didn't look at him once,
Didn't let myself think he was piercing my thing,
Imagined I held another man there
And so got some joy of that sorry assault.

I brought up my children like baron's sons
And made mere louts of his first wife's fry;
I banished his brothers from the bounds of my presence,
Regarded his relatives as foresworn foes.
As you see, I could not love the man for himself,
Having no liking for churls of his blood.
Now that bankrupt is dead and deep in the ground.
With him died my doleful, my dreary thoughts.
Dismal nights are now ended, my dayspring's at hand.
Farewell, all my sorrows; now my pleasures begin.
I weep as though grieved but am happy henceforth.

When I go off to church in my black widow's weeds
Like a fox in lamb's fleece, I hide my expression.
Draw the hood of my cloak over my face
So I may peep unespied at those all around me.
I often cast by my book, break off my devotions,
Look for the lustiest, the best, most broad-shouldered,
The one built most powerfully to furnish a banquet
Valiantly not vainly in Venus's chamber.
The new moon all pale, downcast with change,
At times, shows her bright face through sable clouds
So I peep through my cloak and cast kind looks
At knights and clerics and courtly gallants.
When my husband's relations see me from afar
I have a water sponge for woe within my wide cloak
That I wilely wring and wet my cheeks
So my eyes water and tears welter down.
I cross myself like a saint and seem like an angel,

Start back offended when lewd tongues are loosened
I sigh, though sick neither in heart nor body,
Behave soberly because I'm wearing black weeds.

Wise women have ways and wonderful traditions
For hoodwinking jealous husbands with clever devices:
So quietly and craftily we manage our lives
That none of Christ's creatures knows what we do.
Faith has a fair name, but falsehood fares better.
Shame on her who can't feign to save her good name,
And fie on the virgin a hundred years old!

I have a discreet servant, most sober of tongue,
Who sees to my needs when I give him a sign.
Though I carry care under my cloak from bright day to night,
My nightdress hides comfort until it is light.
I am considered a good woman throughout the whole shire,
Piteous to the poor when many people are there.
I am proud to be seen in processions of pilgrims,
Though more for the crowds than to win any pardon.

Yet the best jest of all is when barons and knights,
Other bachelors blithe in the bloom of their youth
And all my true lovers throng in hordes to my house
Pour wine for me wantonly in weal and well-wishing:
Some whisper; some jest; some sing me love lyrics,
Some rattle on loudly in riotous talk;
Some plead for my favours; some praise my beauty.
Some kiss me, caress me, some offer me kindness,
One carves with ceremony, one fills up my cup;
One inflamed with desire steps valiantly forward
And thrusts a stiff upstanding thing in my fist.
By speaking them fair, I comfort them all:
He that sits by me, I give his finger a pinch,
Serve the man on my other side in similar fashion;
He who sits behind me, I lean on him hard,
As for the one in front of me, I press my foot upon his,
And greet those sitting far off with welcoming looks.
There is no man living of such low degree
That shall love me unloved, so loving am I.

My heart is so merciful, I pity all men:
My simple soul shall be safe when the Lord judges all.
Ladies, learn these lessons and don't be mere lasses:
This is my life's legend, though not writ in Latin.

When this eloquent widow had ended her discourse,
The others laughed loudly, praised her to the skies,
Said they'd follow the example of her sovereign lessons,
And act as she counselled, so well she advised.
Then they cooled their mouths with comforting drinks
And gossiped on happily as the cup went round.
Then these royal roses got up in their rich robes
And went home to their rest through the flowering sprays.
Secretly I sought my own pleasant arbour,
With my pen wrote the story of their merry games.

Now, honoured guests, who have given ear
To this strange happening of the three wanton women
That I witnessed one morning on Midsummer Eve,
Which would you take to wife, if you had to wed one?

NOTES

1. W.L. Renwick, The Beginnings of English Literature to Skelton, 1509 (London: Cresset Press, 1952).
2. A.D. Hope, A Midsummer Eve's Dream (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1976).
3. An earlier version of this "translation" was performed as an entertainment for the Acadia Medieval and Renaissance Society. Hilary Thompson, Ray Thompson and David Jones made many helpful suggestions, incorporated in this version, that gave lift and polish to the first rough outline.