

Illness in literature: an example in Middle Scots

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ABSTRACT Few poets have written on medical topics, but one who did was William Dunbar, an eighteenth century Scots poet who wrote of his headache. His headache was severe enough to confine him to his house, and may have been migraine, but this remains uncertain. Scotland's king at that time was James IV who was well-educated and interested in medicine. He awarded Dunbar a salary, probably as a secretary in his household, which may reflect his general support for education and the arts.

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INTRODUCTION

Illness is not among the prime themes of literature, although Virginia Woolf (1882–1941), who suffered from a bipolar disorder, published an essay entitled *On being ill*.¹ Although several accounts of various diseases are not to be found in a number of author's works, there are no novels on influenza or typhoid fever, and no odes to scarlet fever or pneumoconiosis. However, there are addresses to whooping cough,² and to toothache (by the two Scottish poets, Robert Burns (1759–1796),³ who suffered from whooping cough,⁴ and by the Skye poet Uilleam Ross (1762–1790), about a friend's toothache⁵). The most memorable ode is by the English poet, John Milton (1608–1678) who addressed his blindness in a sonnet.⁶ Perhaps less well known is the poem by the fifteenth and sixteenth century Scottish poet, William Dunbar (c1460–c1520), entitled, *On his heidake*.⁷

My heid did zak zester nicht,
This day to mak that I na nicht.
So sair the magryme dois me menzie,
Perseing my brow as ony ganzie,
That scant I luik may on the licht.

And now, schir, laitle eftir mes
To dyt thocht I begowthe to dres,
The sentence lay full evill till find,
Vnsleipit in my heid behind,
Dullit in dulnes and distress.

Full oft at morrow I wpryse,
Quhen that my curage sleipeing lysis.
For mirth, for menstrallie and play,
For din nor dancing nor deray,
It will not walkin me no wise.

The consonant³ (typed above as a 'z') is 'g' in old German and old English orthography, but 'j' or 'y' in Scots or English.⁸ The words in the first verse with this consonant are in modern texts: 'yak', 'yester', 'menyie', and 'ganyie'.⁹

The poem in modern English is as follows. The translation is literal, not poetic:

My head did ache last night,
This day to make that I not may.
So sore the migraine commits me (to be)
housebound, Penetrating my forehead as any arrow,
That hardly I may look on the light.

And now, sir, latterly after mass
To poem thought I began to prepare,
The sentence lay full utterly to find,
Not having slept in my head behind,
Made dull in torpor and sorrow.

Very often at dawn I get up,
When that my inclination sleeping lies.
For joy, my music-making and sport,
Despite loud noise neither dancing nor revelry,
It will not waken me not at all.

COMMENT

Comparatively little is known of the author, William Dunbar, although it is believed he was born in East Lothian, and took a Bachelor of Arts degree at St Andrews University in 1477, becoming a 'maister' two years later.^{10,11} He may have acted as secretary to the Scottish Embassy in France in 1491, and was probably in London to take part in discussions of the marriage of Margaret Tudor (1489–1541), daughter of Henry VII Tudor (1457–1509) of England, to James IV of Scotland

(1488–1513), in 1500.¹⁰ In 1500, William Dunbar was awarded a 'pensioun', a salary, from the king for serving as a servitour, or member of the royal household, probably as a secretary. The 'pensioun' was for £10, which in 1507 was increased to £20, and finally in 1510 to £80.¹⁰

Sir Walter Scott (1771–1832) considered that the times of James IV were rude and barbarous,¹¹ commenting in his poem *Marmion* on 'rude Scotland' and a 'barbarous age'.¹² This is surprising, since James IV, according to a Spanish visitor Pedro de Ayala, spoke Latin very well, and also five different European languages. He was interested not only in medicine and surgery, but also dentistry, and it was during his reign that King's College (named after him) was founded in Aberdeen in 1500, and the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh received its Charter in 1506.¹³ Perhaps less known is the fact that King James IV enacted the first compulsory Education Act in 1496, and founded the New College of St Leonard's at the University of St Andrews in 1512. King James IV promoted alliances with European powers, other than France which was a matter of course, and even negotiated for a 'treaty of perpetual peace' between Scotland and England in 1502. He brought peace and stability to his own nation, and attempted a peaceful settlement in the Isles at a meeting at Caisteal Dun Staffhinis with Iain Mòr MacDhomhnuill, Dun Naomhaig, and his son Iain Cathanach, in 1493. This failed and both father, son and two grandsons were hanged on the Boroughmuir of Edinburgh in 1499.¹⁴ Although James IV's private life was no model life (he had five illegitimate children, by four different mothers) his court in Edinburgh was one of splendour, where poets such as Robert Henryson (c.1420–c.1490), Gavin Douglas (1460–c.1513) and Sir David Lindsay (c.1486–1555) flourished.¹³ King James IV was a popular king, whose untimely death at the Battle of Flodden (1513) was mourned by all the people of Scotland, with the exception of those of the Western Isles and Highlands.

Although the title of the poem in modern anthologies is *On his heid-ake* it should be noted that titles of poems have no early authority, most being invented by editors, in the eighteenth and nineteenth century.⁷ The language of the poem is that of Older Scots, i.e. that prior to 1700.⁹ Older Scots has conveniently been divided into three types: Preliterary, up to c.1375, Early, i.e. c.1375–1450, and Middle Scots, i.e. 1450 to 1700.¹⁵ John Barbour (c.1320–1345) who composed the long poem, *The Brus* (c.1375) was the principal writer of Early Scots. William Dunbar and his contemporaries such as Robert Henryson, Gavin Douglas and Sir David Lindsay wrote in what is defined as middle Scots.^{9,11} In the later period of Middle Scots, John Knox (c.1514–1572)¹⁶ and King James VI (1566–1625)¹⁷ anglicised the language.^{9, 11, 18} The language was first called Scots in 1494, previously being referred to as 'Inglis'.^{9, 15}

The description of the poet's headache, described as 'magryme', could well have been migraine, although none of the other features is described, such as affecting one side of the head, nausea and vomiting, visual and sensory prodromata, loss of field of vision, bright or coloured lights (fortification spectrum) or tingling of the lips and hands. The headache was of sufficient severity however to make him incapable of leaving the house, and to be scarcely able to 'luik ... on the licht.' In the second verse the poet has difficulty in remembering a sentence, this having, 'vnsliepit in my heid behind.' The posterior part of the brain was considered traditionally the seat of memory (*memoria*), while the imagination (*phantasma*) occupied the anterior portion, and cogitation (*discursus menti*) the middle, as defined by Theophilus Protopatharius (fl1630).^{7, 9} The last verse suggests the poet may have suffered from depression, the reason why he found himself unable to 'wpryse', i.e. get up. Many of Dunbar's other poems suggest he might have suffered from mood swings between exultation and depression, i.e. a mild bipolar disease.

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