Sources for the Grotesque in William Dunbar's 'Dance of the Sevin Deidly Synnis'

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At a 1985 conference on the The Bible in the Middle Ages, Nigel Morgan of the Index of Christian Art in a plenary session on the iconography of thirteenth-century Old Testament illustrations once again emphasised the importance of literary sources in the creation of unusual pictorial detail in medieval art. His lecture is but one recent example among many that show how the primacy of the verbal text is accepted without question in studies of the sources for medieval iconography. Yet the possibility of reversing the process successfully to trace the influence of pictorial images on a particular literary text only tantalises students of medieval literature. That connection seems much more elusive, and we must often content ourselves with rather vague and frequently problematic analogies between a literary text and the visual arts. Only rarely do we find more specific details in a text that point directly to a particular image. Such an unusual example, I believe, is to be found in a poem by the fifteenth-century Scottish court poet, William Dunbar. In this instance, visual images may provide a key to some of the problems of interpreting this rather enigmatic poem.

Dunbar's 'Dance of the Sevin Deidly Synnis' is one of his most popular and familiar poems, yet if one were to choose the single adjective most often applied to the work, it would be 'grotesque' uttered in tones of disgust, approbation, or amusement. For example, three important and extensive studies of Dunbar's poetry, by C. S. Lewis, Ian Ross, and James Kinsley, all use the word repeatedly in referring to the 'Dance', although they differ in assessing the intention and effect of the poem (Lewis 1954: 95; Ross 1981: 126–7 and 168–73; Kinsley 1958: xix). Both the term and the mixed response are logical reactions to a highly original work in which once familiar ideas and images are suddenly transformed into something new and strange. The combined shock and recognition arouse varying degrees of laughter and horror, acceptance and rejection. Consider the response to one of the hybrid creatures commonly called 'grotesques' that inhabit margins of medieval manuscripts and obscure corners of gothic cathedrals: the parts are easily identifiable, but the combination produces a unique monster that may be comic, terrifying, or both. Similarly, Dunbar's poem is a 'hybrid' whose recognisable parts are changed by the unusual juxtaposition of diverse motifs and the ironic interaction between them. And the sources for both the ideas and the style are not to be found in literary conventions of the time but in contemporary visual images.

A short summary may be useful to remind readers of this particular work. Although the 'Dance of the Sevin Deidly Synnis' has usually been treated as a complete and independent text, more recent critics and editors, observing the evidence of the manuscripts, now consider it as part of a longer work consisting of the 'Dance' itself, 'The Turnament of the Tailliour and the Sowtar' and the 'Amendis' (Kinsley 1979: 335). All three poems form a trilogy that parodies court entertainment and chivalry. 'The Dance of the Sevin Deidly Synnis' is the first one of these burlesques and in it the poet recounts a dream vision that occurred to him on Shrove Tuesday night, 'Fasternis evin'. In the dream he watches the festivities in the 'court' of Hell presided over by Satan or Mahoun. The Devil commands his devotees, those who were never shriven, to dance. Each of the seven deadly sins, appearing as a demon, takes a turn in leading a group of sinners in a parody of court dances that are actually tortures. There is only one minstrel, a murderer, available to play for the dancers, so Satan next commands a highland dance to be accompanied by a piper. At this point a great crowd of Highlanders appears and their noise so annoys the Devil that he ends the entertainment by smothering them in smoke. The poem then goes on to present a mock tournament between a tailor and a shoemaker followed by a tongue-in-cheek apology to the bourgeois targets of Dunbar's satire in the tournament.

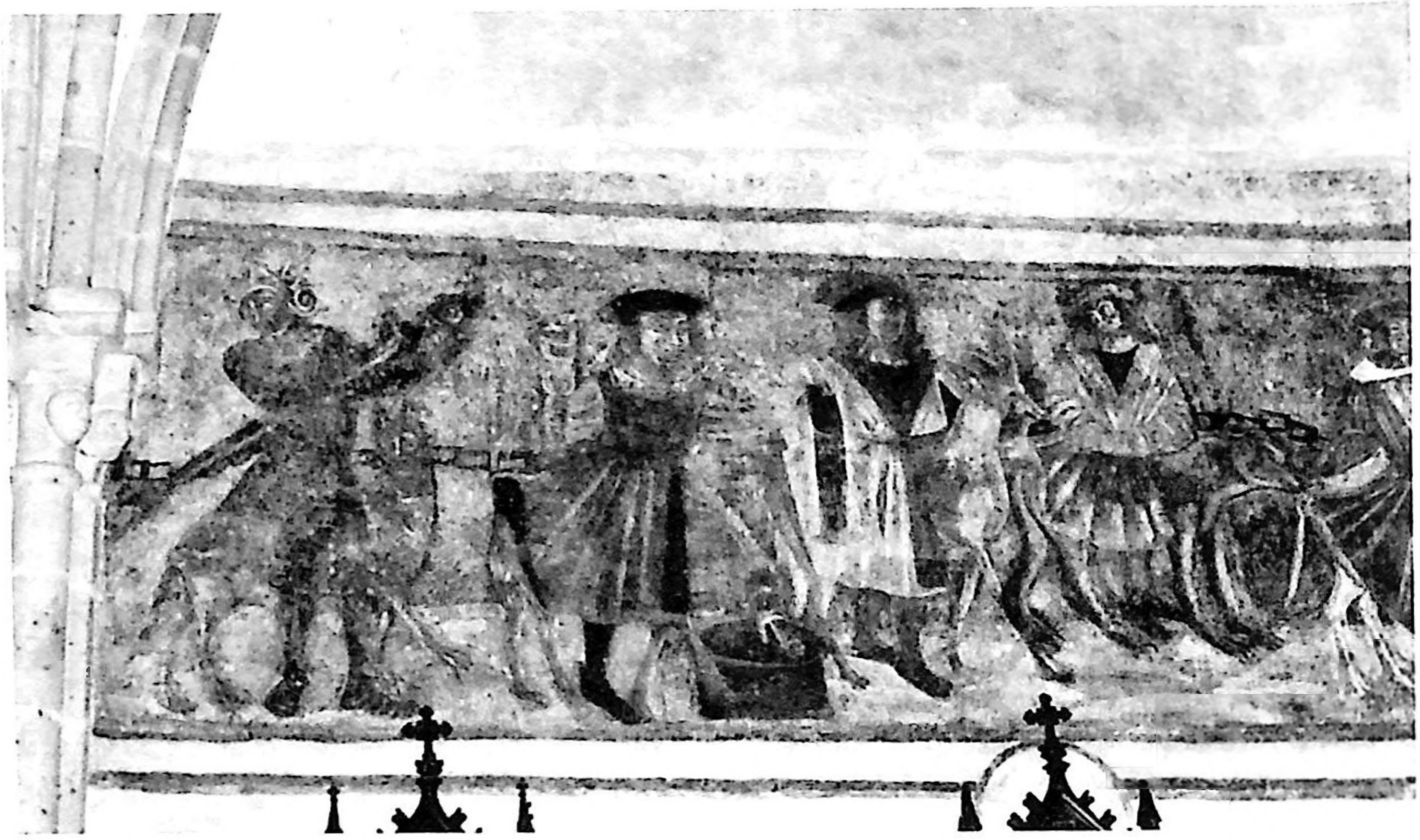
The commonly used title of the first part of the trilogy, 'Dance of the Sevin Deidly Synnis,' neatly comprehends the basic irony of that poem and poses the primary question of its intention.[1] The title refers to two great moral themes that became popular motifs in both art and literature of the Middle Ages: one was the dance of death and the other the personification of the seven deadly sins. Dunbar's poem has been called a variation on the dance of death, but a careful reading of the text quickly shows that its theme has nothing to do with the *danse macabre*. Indeed, as James Kinsley and Ian Ross, among others, have pointed out, Dunbar's 'Lament for the Makars' is a much closer parallel to the traditional mode of the dance of death, and there the theme is treated simply and seriously without a trace of black humour. What Dunbar's 'Dance' does share with the *danse macabre* is the use of the metaphor of a dance as the controlling structural device which becomes the basic source for grotesquerie in both texts.

Dunbar, however, introduces a totally different subject, the seven deadly sins, into this framework. Now the seven deadly sins, through their primary use in the preachers' handbooks, penitential manuals, and moral treatises that proliferated after the fourth Lateran Council (1215), had become a familiar concept in medieval literature as well as theology.[2] The Sins often appeared in a fixed, logical order, such as that set out by Gregory the Great, that may have originated as a mnemonic device. Later schemas also developed the idea, prominent in later treatises, that each Sin leads inevitably to the next (Wenzel 1968: 4). Such sequential arrangements in a literary work not only express this moral concept but also provide a ready-made structure or form (Wenzel 1968: 15).

One of the clearest metaphors used to convey such a concept was a more or less orderly procession of personified individual sins dressed in symbolic costumes and mounted upon appropriate animals. As an example, the modern reader may recall the procession of the seven deadly sins in Book I of Spenser's *Faerie Queene*. The 'Dance' follows this concept in a general sense because the Sins of the poem are the traditional group of seven arranged in a linear sequence suggesting a formal procession. However, the fame of both Spenser's and Dunbar's works has tended to obscure the fact that there are relatively few allegorical processions of sins in literature. The use of *exempla* and dramatised confessions of typical sinners, such as those in Langland's *Piers Plowman* and Chaucer's *Parson's Tale*, derived from the homiletic tradition, are more typical portrayals of the seven deadly sins. They were more popular presumably because they provided more scope for narrative development and psychological analysis than the rigid scheme of a procession of personifications. Spenser's poem, of course, is too late to be considered as a source of Dunbar, and the commonly cited sources for his allegory are somewhat problematic. Of all the sources suggested by Ian Ross, for example, and his list is the most exhaustive, only the *Miroir de l'omme* has a procession of sins (1981: 128; 168–71). John Gower's *Miroir de l'omme* (*c.* 1374–8) has been cited as a source for both Spenser and Dunbar (Kinsley 1979: 336, n. 14), but the very limited dissemination of this poem (Fisher 1965: 91–2) and Gower's declining influence in the fifteenth century in which he was 'more respected than read' (Pearsall 1977: 208) suggests that the *Miroir* is an unlikely source for either poet.

In any event, neither Spenser nor Gower nor any of their known sources contain a *dance* of sinners led by a Sin without an animal symbol. The English plays suggested by Ian Ross (1981: 69–70) as possible parallels to Dunbar's poem are either titles of plays whose contents are completely unknown, or plays whose plot involved the common personifications of the Sins without any action or physical representation that corresponds to Dunbar's dance/procession. Instead, the closest parallels to Dunbar's poem are to be found in the religious drama and actual penitential processions or dances of Spain (Whyte 1931: 75–7). The Corpus Christi play, *Danza de los Siete Pecados* by Diego Sanchez de Badajoz, is perhaps the most famous of these, but records indicate there were a number of such representations, some of which were apparently still performed in modern times.[3] The play by Diego Sanchez has Adam lead a procession of personified seven deadly sins who then form a circle to dance. Adam dances with each Sin in turn until each manages to make him fall down. Finally, he repents and is able to drive off the Sins. According to Whyte (1931: 76–7), the source for the Spanish versions, which are all much later than Dunbar's poem, is ultimately France. She dismisses the suggestion that Sanchez was responsible for amalgamating the dance of death with the seven deadly sins by stating that the 'dance of sins has its own tradition' and cites Dunbar as evidence for this 'tradition'. In view of the lack of any other examples of this 'tradition', it seems more likely that two major writers familiar with the same sources would hit independently upon the idea of combining the two themes.

Although the cavalcade of sins was not a common theme in the literature of Dunbar's



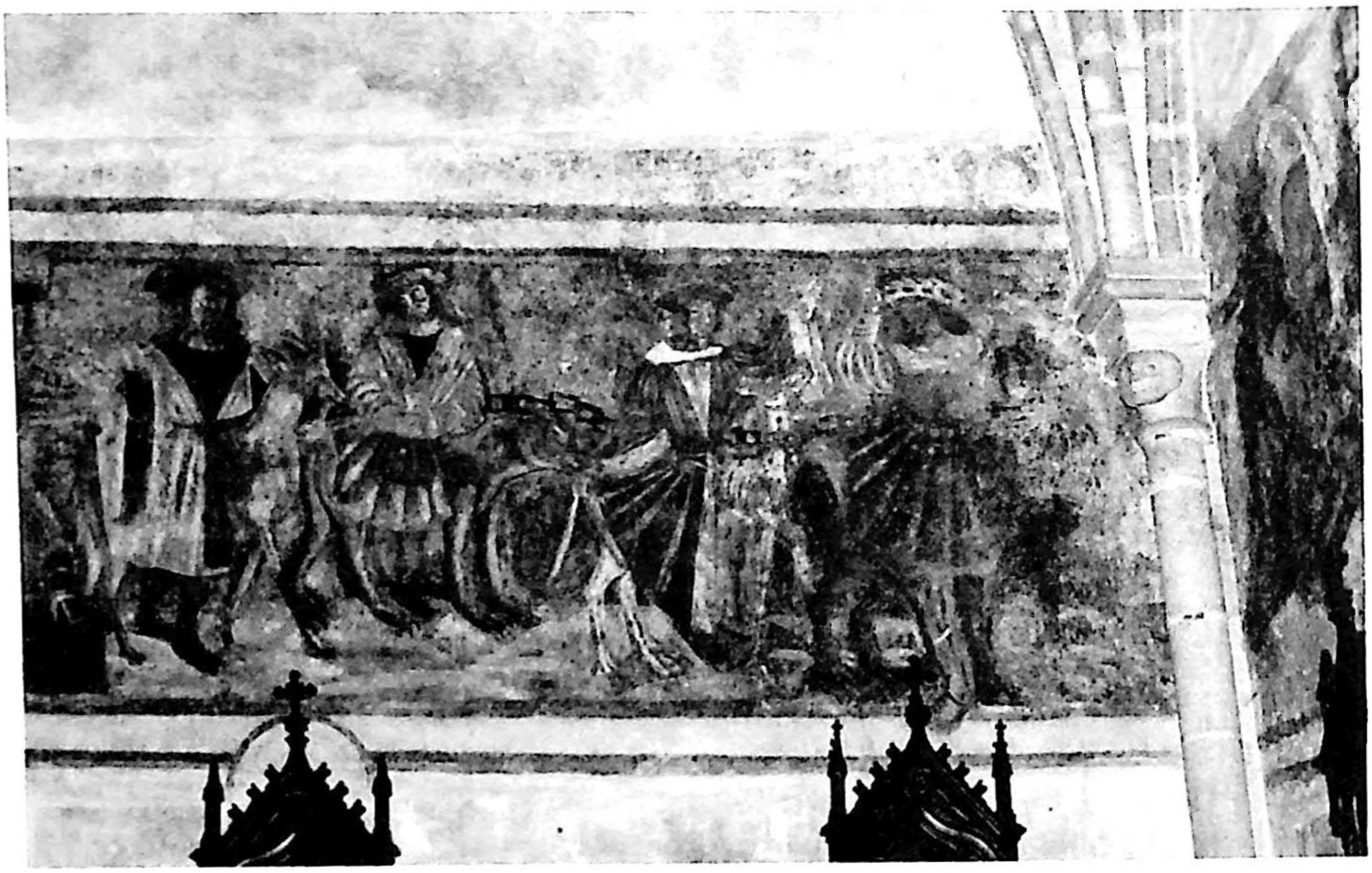


Fig. 1a & 1b Pommeraie-sur-Sèvre. Procession of the seven deadly sins (left to right): (a) Anger, Gluttony, Lust, Avarice. (b) Lust, Avarice, Envy, Pride. [Photographs: author]

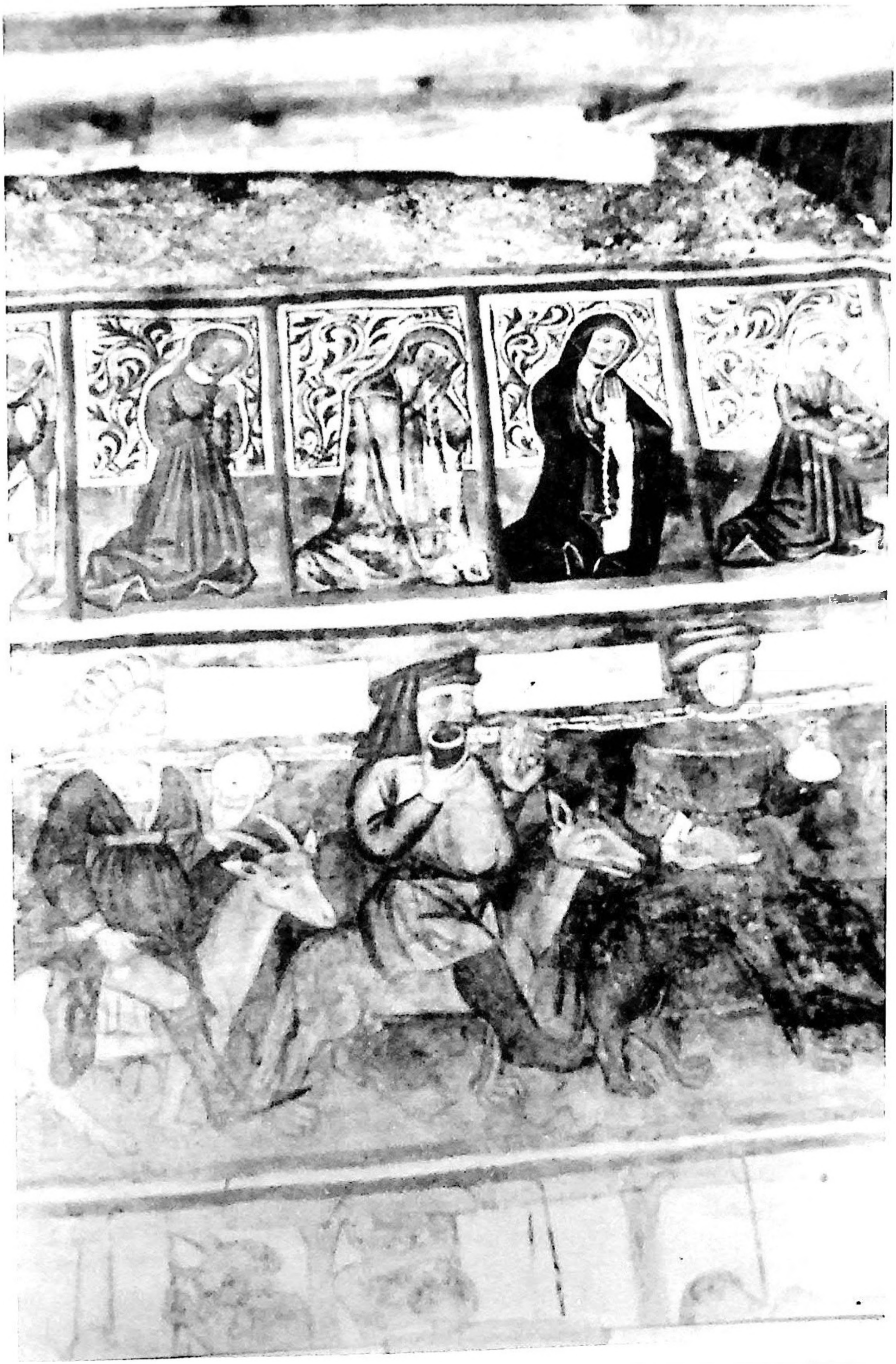


Fig. 2 Plampinet (Hautes-Alpes). Procession of the seven deadly sins (left to right): Lust, Gluttony, Avarice. [Photograph: author]

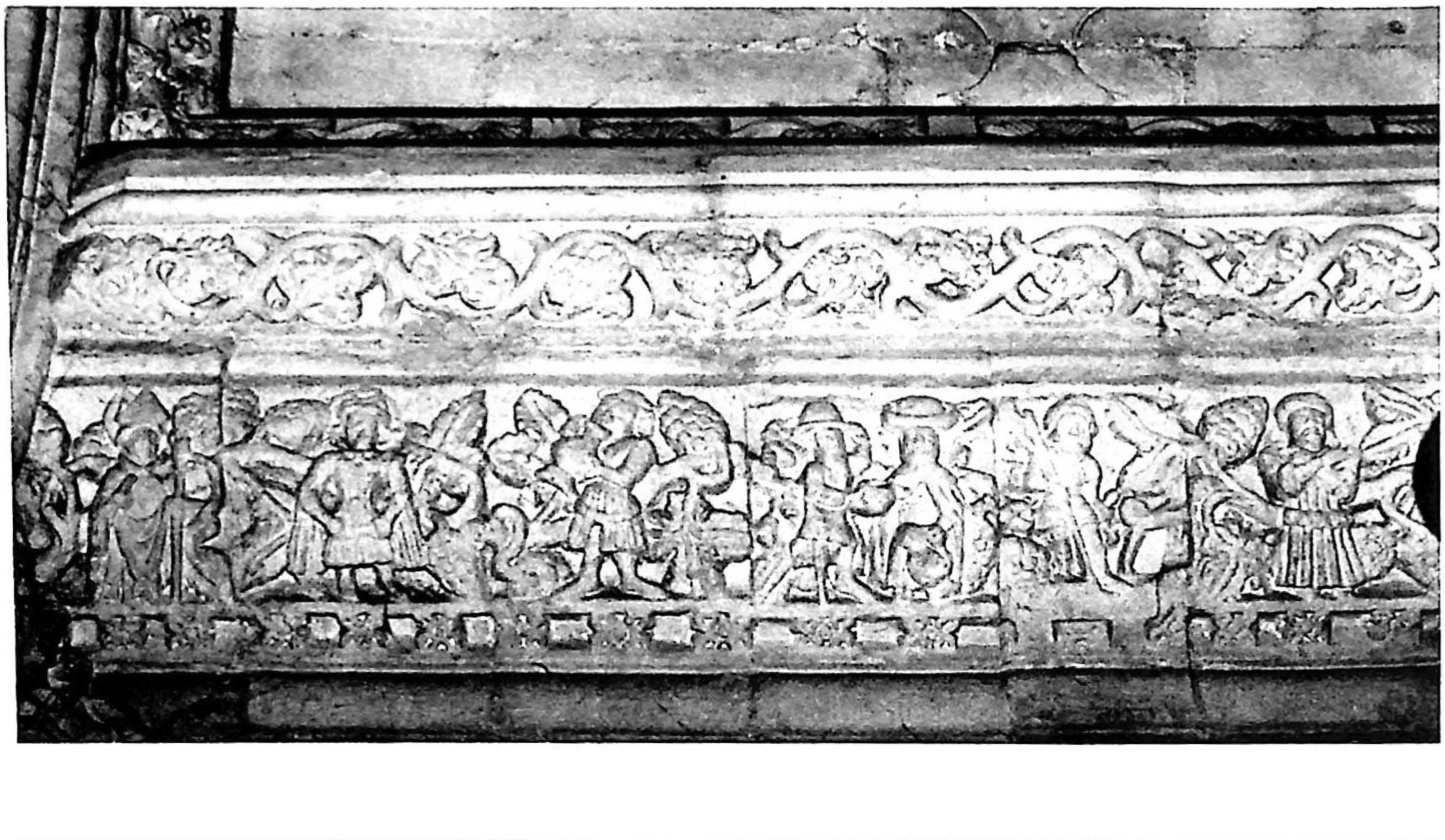


Fig. 3a & 3b Roslin Chapel. Procession of the seven deadly sins (left to right): (a) Pride, Gluttony, Charity (misplaced for Avarice), Anger. (b) Envy, Sloth, Lust. [Photographs: author] time, it was certainly a very popular motif in French art between 1480 and 1530. The dance of death poems, too, were always associated with illustrations in some form and may even have been derived from pictures. Therefore, it seems more likely that the primary inspiration for the 'Dance of the Sevin Deidly Synnis' can be found in contemporary visual arts rather than in literary models. James Kinsley in his notes on the background of the poem refers generally to the pictorial tradition of representing the seven deadly sins and suggests visual analogues for some of the details. Ian Ross makes much more extensive use of the visual arts in interpreting Dunbar's poetry as a whole and draws a number of interesting parallels between later Flemish paintings and Dunbar's work. But however illuminating such background studies may be, they are limited to pointing out general similarities of tone and style between poetry and pictures representing common themes. It is usually impossible to find specific works that the poet might have seen that also deal with the appropriate ideas. Kinsley, for example, refers to pictures that are too obscure (Felsted Church) or too late (Flemish) to have had any direct impact on Dunbar. Ross confines himself by and large to major Flemish painters who were at least contemporary and well-known to Dunbar, but his basis of selection is also impressionistic. However, in the case of 'Dance of the Sevin Deidly Synnis' at least, much closer parallels in both theme and style can be found in works of art, particularly wall paintings and sculpture, that were contemporary, popular, and accessible to Dunbar. Most of these, with one significant exception, are French.

Paintings at Pommeraie-sur-Sèvre (Indre-et-Sèvre) and at Plampinet (Hautes-Alpes) may be considered as representative examples of an iconography introduced in the last quarter of the fifteenth century that remained remarkably consistent throughout France. The paintings represent seven sins, each mounted on a symbolic animal and performing an appropriate action (fig. 1a and 1b). At Plampinet, the series includes Pride on a lion, Avarice on a boar, Gluttony on a wolf, Lust on a goat, Anger on a leopard, Envy on a greyhound, and Sloth on an ass (fig. 2). Each Sin reveals his nature by an appropriate action. Pride holds a flower (usually a sceptre or sword in other paintings), Avarice clutches a purse, Gluttony holds a chicken and drinks from a cup. Lust holds a mirror and lifts her dress, Anger stabs himself, Envy crosses his arms, and Sloth droops over her mount and holds a begging bowl. These Sins are chained together around the neck and a devil pulls on the chain as he leads the procession towards a gaping monstrous Hell-mouth. Although at least twenty examples of the motif are still extant in France, the motif of the procession of the seven deadly sins was almost never adopted in Britain. Conventional English visual representation of the sins was usually that of a tree or wheel.[4]

Only the Chapel of Roslin, a few miles outside Edinburgh, built between 1446 and 1484 by William, first Lord Sinclair and third Prince of Orkney, contains an apparently unique example in Britain of a procession of the seven deadly sins carved on a stone lintel[5] (fig. 3a and 3b). The personified Sins are easily recognised from their French counterparts: Pride, a young court gallant in extravagant dress; Gluttony, a guzzler

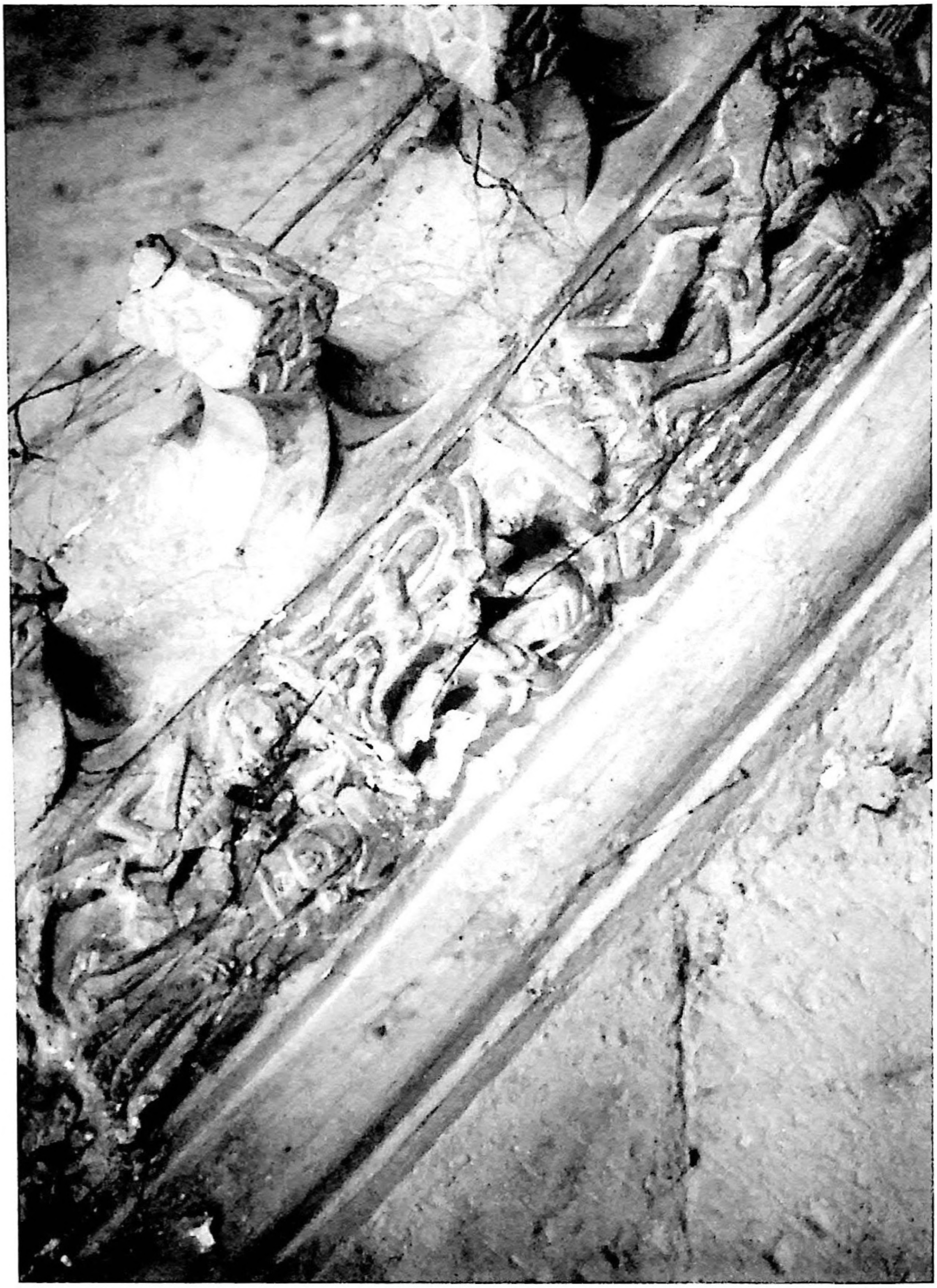


Fig. 4 Roslin Chapel. Dance of death. [Photograph: author]

draining an outsized flagon; Avarice, a respectable burgher hung about with moneybags; Anger, an armed soldier; Envy, a courtier with arms crossed to indicate his double-dealing; Sloth, a beggar in rags; and Lust, two lovers embracing. At the far right a devil with a fork issues from a monster Hell-mouth to escort the Sins home. The presence of French iconography at Roslin is consistent with the style of the Chapel as a whole. Richardson considers it possible that a French master mason who worked on Melrose Abbey was also employed at Roslin (1964: 37) and according to George Hay, 'Its exotic plan and architecture suggest Iberian or southern French origins' (1974: 57). The Sinclair family were notable literary patrons and the first Lord Sinclair seems to have had cultivated and cosmopolitan taste. He not only commissioned translations from the French but also directly supervised the plans and drawings for his chapel, causing 'artificers to be brought from other regions and forraigne Kingdomes'.[6] Therefore, he may very well have decided to import iconography as well as style from the Continent.

The Roslin figures represent only three significant deviations from the French model. Although the figure of Anger is somewhat damaged and its details obscure, the soldier is not stabbing himself, as Anger usually is represented. His armour and weapon are clearly shown while he brandishes something else in his left hand. Descriptions of the sculpture suggest that he is stabbing an infant (Rosslyn [N.D.]: 34 and notes handed out on the site) and it seems probable that some act of pillage is intended, although the soldier-figure at Pommeraie-sur-Sèvre is also a possible parallel. Lust is represented by a man and a woman embracing rather than by a single woman in a fashionably *décolleté* gown who coquettishly exposes her leg. Both these changes bring the conception of those sins closer to Dunbar's characterisation of them in the 'Dance' where Anger appears brandishing a knife and followed by armed sinners and where Lust is shown by obscene couplings (ll. 31–42; 79–90). The most noticeable change is the absence of symbolic animals so that the Sins proceed on foot rather than ride. The posture of the figures has become potentially closer to that of a dance.

Another prominent motif in the sculptural programme of Roslin Chapel, however, is directly connected with dancing, and that is the fairly extensive *danse macabre* series on the vault ribs of the eastern chapels (fig. 4). Unlike the procession of the seven deadly sins, the dance of death was well known in Britain in both painting and literature, the most famous example being that of the murals in Old St Paul's cathedral accompanied by Lydgate's translation of the verses from the inscriptions of the *danse macabre* of the Cimetière des Innocents in Paris of 1424. France is usually considered to be the source of this theme, and certainly the Paris version was the most influential as it was used by Guyot Marchant in his famous 1485 printed edition (Kurtz 1934: 42). The simple and effective idea of the *danse macabre* remained consistent in all its versions.[7] Human figures representing particular social classes or positions are suddenly confronted by a figure representing death who compels them to accompany him in a dance to the grave. At Roslin there are fourteen typical pairs arranged in order of social importance: king, prince, cardinal, bishop, abbot, deacon, minor canon, nun, monk, scholar, hunter, gardener, woodman and ploughman (Richardson 1964: 50). The figures of death are shown as corpses rather than skeletons and have no musical instruments, although these frequently appear in other versions.

Roslin Chapel thus displays two allegorical motifs drawn from French sources that became increasingly popular towards the end of the fifteenth century. The choice of themes may perhaps reflect the founder's intentions which seem to have been both penitential and educational (the original plan called for a collegiate church), but the juxtaposition of a dance of death and a procession of the seven deadly sins is rare in the visual arts. So far I have located only one monument other than Roslin that contained a variation of both motifs. A chapel in Kermaria-en-Isquit (Côtes-du-Nord) had paintings of both virtues and animal vices and a dance of death. However, the virtues and vices were a version of the psychomachia iconography, not a procession, while the dance of death was a copy of the Paris painting. The two themes were painted at different times using different sources and were not part of a unified programme as at Roslin (Kurtz 1934: 77–8 and Thibout 1949: 71–81). Only one other art form also includes both allegories in close association. Printed illustrations in some of the popular books of hours published in Paris by Simon Vostre and Pigouchet included both a procession of the seven deadly sins and the dance of death, following iconography already established in earlier French wall paintings (Whyte 1931: 79; Claudin 1900: II. 512 and Pollard 1897: 430–73).

Although William Dunbar could have known either the procession of the sins or the dance of death in their original French forms through his visits to France (MacDiarmid 1980: 126–39), it seems more likely that his novel idea of converting the procession of the seven deadly sins to a dance may have originated in a visual perception suggested by the carvings of Roslin Chapel. The building was easily accessible to Edinburgh and its founder had been both a literary patron and an important member of the royal court.[8] The Chapel was only completed in 1484 when Sir William's son abandoned his father's more ambitious project, so it would still have been relatively modern and a justly famous landmark at the time Dunbar came to write his poem[9]. While the books of hours would also be a possible source for Dunbar, they are not so directly linked to the Scottish court and may be later than the poem. Furthermore, the format of the books does not provide a coherent iconographical design, nor does it allow for the direct physical juxtaposition of the motifs, both of which occur at Roslin.

However, while the iconography of the sins has been changed in some details at Roslin, the two allegories remain clearly distinct and basically follow the conventional forms established in France. Dunbar's 'Dance of the Sevin Deidly Synnis' goes much further in that it transfers the form of one allegory to another to produce a substantially different theme. Such a wholesale conversion argues that Dunbar recognised in each allegory common elements that are more easily seen in their simplified visual representations. Although each motif had developed independently, art historians have discerned in the painted procession of sins 'une grande analogue d'intention avec les danses des morts . . .' (Roman 1880–81: 22) This is borne out in the inscriptions that accompany the procession of the sins at Notre-Dame-du-Bourg in Digne (Haute-Provence) where each sin figure is given a line of verse to introduce itself and its animal. Paresse (Sloth) refers to the procession of which she is a part as a dance:

Peresa soy que poc avansa
La sauma e yeu en la dansa.
(Inscription quoted by Roman 1880: 32)

Another example is a panel painting that portrays Death as an archer shooting his unsuspecting victims as they dance with gay abandon, each led by a little demon ready to catch the unshriven soul (Debidour 1961: 124; pl. 39; Saugnieux 1972: 309–12).

The fundamental characteristic in these visual allegories that Dunbar recognised and exploited in his own poem is the grotesque. Various modern definitions of the term demonstrate the difficulty in giving verbal expression to a quality that is essentially pictorial.[10] Yet despite widely divergent points of departure, there seems to be a consensus that the grotesque style is based upon a dramatic contrast between what is accepted as a norm, an ideal, or rational order; and its irrational and distorted opposite. A mixed response of fear and laughter is evoked by this spectacle that may be cathartic in purpose, an 'attempt to invoke and subdue the demonic aspects of the world' (Kayser 1943: 188).

Dunbar fits easily into this definition when he explicitly calls forth the beatific world and the demonic in a vision:

I lay in till a trance;
And than I saw baith hevin and hell [3–4]

Traditional visionaries like Tundal and St Peter were usually granted a mystical tour of both. In a similar way, the painted processions of sins form part of a complete scheme that incorporates both the beatific vision of heaven as well as an extended view of hell. The demonic scene includes not only the mandatory Hell-mouth as the ultimate goal of the procession, but a systematic representation of physical torments that are linked to the individual sins. A typical example of such a programme exists in Notre-Dame-de-Bourg in Digne (Haute-Provence) on the south wall of the nave (fig. 5). Here the personified Virtues stand against their opposed Vices who are linked by a chain that pulls them unresisting towards Hell. In the bottom register are represented the various tortures of the damned, each formally joined to the appropriate Sin of the middle register and surrounded by flames: a man hangs with a stone around his neck (Pride), a man has coins forced down his throat (Avarice), a woman is suspended by ropes piercing her breasts (Lust), a man is bound and roasted on a spit (Anger), a man is whipped (Envy), and a man hangs by his feet while a demon forces him to swallow something

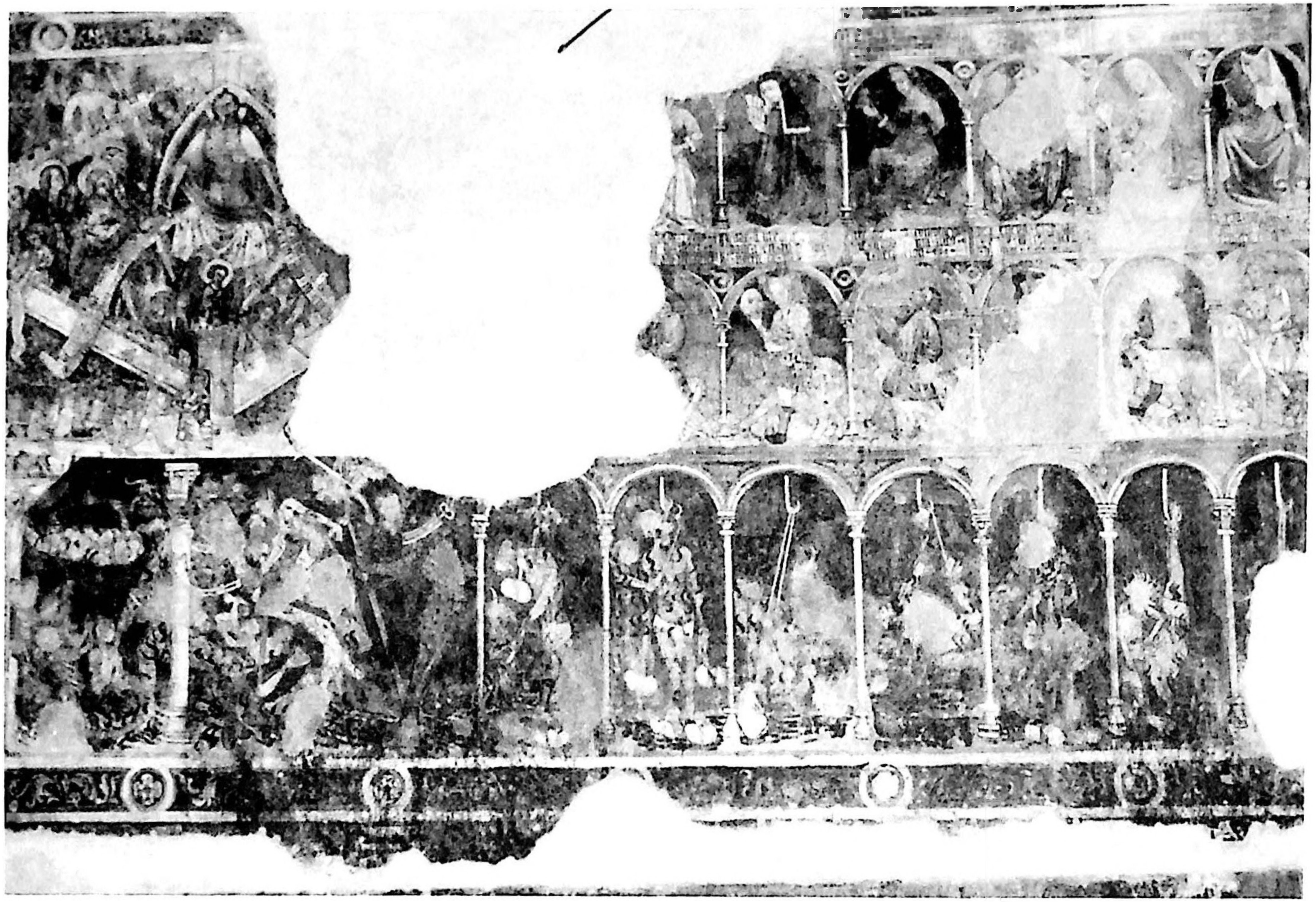


Fig. 5 Notre-Dame-du-Bourg, Digne. Procession of the seven deadly sins. [Photograph: author]

(Gluttony). (The punishment for Sloth has been defaced.) The entire painting is arranged in such a way as to be read both horizontally: series of Virtues, Sins, and punishments; and vertically: remedial virtue, deadly sin, appropriate punishment. However, unlike both the literary visions and the paintings, and despite his introduction, Dunbar's poem is confined strictly to the netherworld and its demonic inhabitants.

It is easy to recognise that the sinners in Dunbar's poem suffer remarkably similar tortures to those of the painting in Digne: 'skaldand fyre,' 'knyvis that scherp cowd scheir,' 'hett moltin gold . . . fild . . . up to the thrott,' 'hait leid to laip,' and 'Bellial . . . evir lascht thame on the lun ie'. This is not surprising in view of the fact that both Dunbar and the anonymous French painter are drawing upon the same ancient sources such as the *Visio Pauli*, the *Vision of Tundal*, the *Vision of the Boy William*, and *St Patrick's Purgatory*. All these visions, both in Latin and in later vernacular translations and their imitators, insisted upon graphic descriptions of physical torments that included variations on most of the punishments described by Dunbar. There is a broad attempt to 'make the punishment fit the crime' in these visions and very early on the popular scheme of the seven deadly sins was used as an organising principle. Apparently the *Vision of Lazarus* (Owen 1970: 244) in a pseudo-Augustinian homily of the twelfth century was the first to link specific torments to the sins, but Dante, of course, was also a major influence in this area. All the visions were copiously and frequently illustrated, so that the pictorial tradition was also firmly established. One of the most popular works contemporary with Dunbar's poem that deals with this theme is the *Traité des peines de l'Enfer*, a treatise published in 1492 in Paris and widely disseminated as part of the *Calendrier des Bergers*. This work contains yet another survey of hell (Owen 1970: 245-46) and features a series of woodcuts depicting traditional hell punishments directly related to the seven deadly sins. Among the most famous scenes of Hell that classify and punish the damned according to the deadly sin they have committed are the fresco in San Gimignano collegiate church (1320), the tabletop by Hieronymus Bosch (1450-1526), and the frescoes in Albi Cathedral (Tarn, *c.* 1480-1500).[11] In the light of all these notable paintings that were created either before or at about the same time as Dunbar's poem, let alone the long tradition of illustrated hell visions that preceded them, it seems strange that Kinsley (1979: 338, nn. 61-6) is unable to find a 'clear iconographical illustration' of such a common theme.

One characteristic of these infernal visions that is much more apparent visually than in the rather prosaic style of the treatises is an underlying movement towards parody and black comedy. As was mentioned before, most visions included both heaven and hell so that the Hell became a negative image of Heaven, an inverted version of divine order. The compartmentalised scenes of San Gimignano and Albi that suggest a hierarchy of demons with Satan as ruler in infernal majesty clearly recall the formal symmetry of the beatific vision. Yet these frames barely contain the frantic activity that replaces the serene immobility of the heavenly host.

Similarly in Dunbar's poem, there is a deliberate formal ordering of the demons and their followers presided over by Satan in his role of false god, as the name 'Mahoun' suggests. Yet that order barely controls the chaos that erupts as large groups pass before our eyes, each caught up in frenzied movement. In fact, Dunbar does not employ much visual imagery in this poem, nor does he actually build up pictures of each sin such as one finds in DeGuileville's *Pèlerinage de vie humaine* or in Spenser. It is action that reveals both the nature of the vice and its appropriate rôle in the demonic world. Dunbar's emphasis on movement rather than on static pictorial qualities evokes more exactly the essential nightmare quality of those writhing bodies and grimacing faces of the damned that populate the crowded hells of the painters.

Another aspect of the infernal visions that is equally disturbing to the viewer is the transformation of commonplace objects and basic human activities such as eating, drinking or excreting, into instruments of torture. The rationale of making the vehicle of the sin the source of punishment remains, but its expression has become monstrous. This form of parody reached its apotheosis with Hieronymus Bosch and his sinners who are competently roasted and basted on spits like domestic fowls or strung on gigantic harps for a hellish concert. The dance steps performed by the followers of Dunbar's 'sevin deidly synnis' are similarly grotesque. Throughout the poem, each group of dancers is described in terms of a normal courtly recreation. Satan, like any ordinary Christian prince, commands:

> . . . gallandis ga graith a gyis
> And kast up gamountis in the skyis
> That last came out of France. [10-12]

The various 'courtiers' are sinners whose capers are a caricature of actual court entertainment:

> Mony prowd trumpour with him trippit—
> Throw skaldand fyre ay as thay skippit . . . [22-3]

Irony lies in the recognition that these dances are, in fact, tortures; while the carefully controlled tone of the narrator with his sardonic comments precludes any sympathy for the sufferers:

> Quhen thay wer entrit in the dance
> Thay were full strenge of countenance
>   Lyk turkas birnand reid;
> All led thay uthir by the tersis,
> Suppois thay fycket with thair ersis
>   It mycht be na remaid. [85-90]

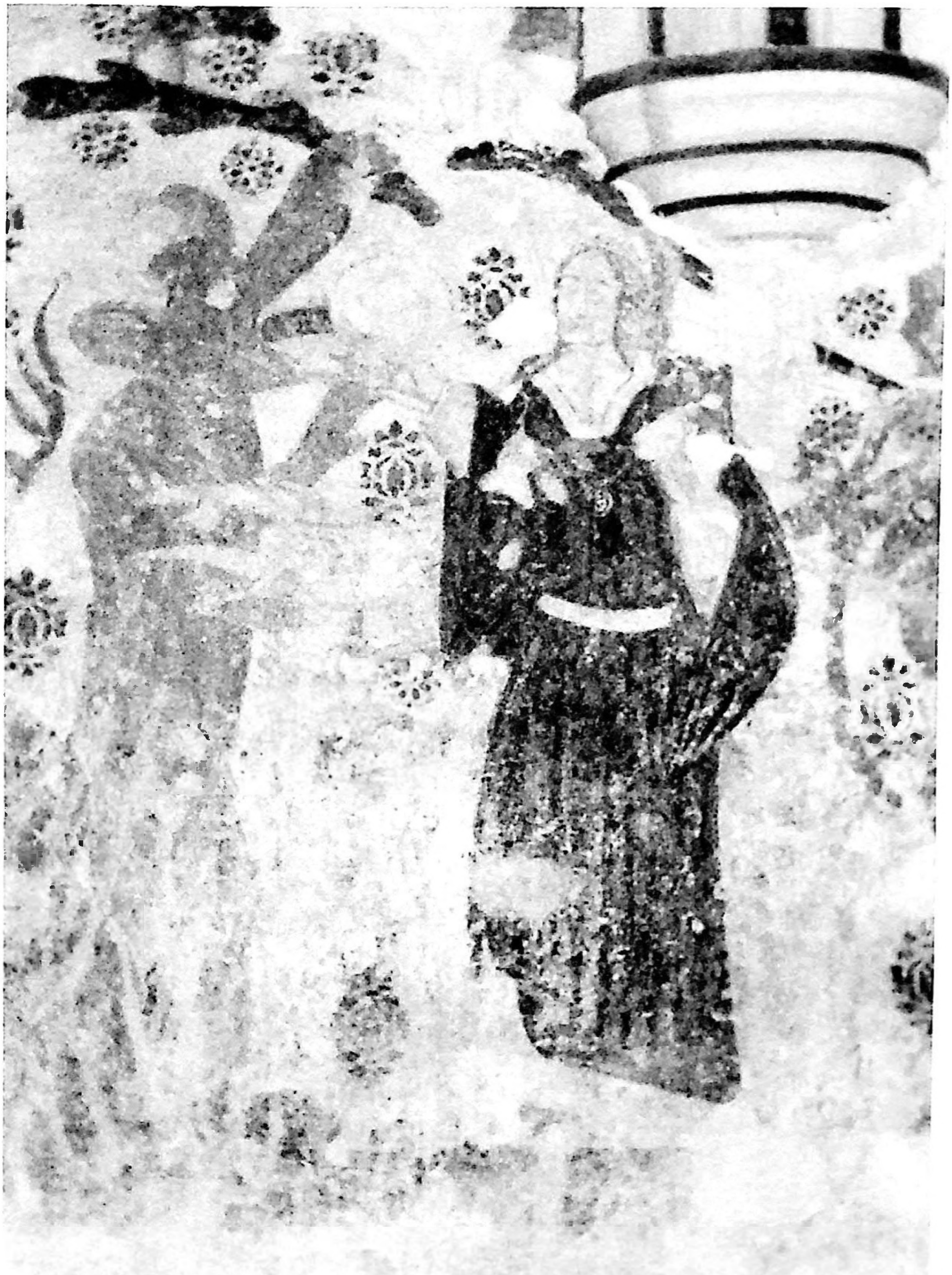


Fig. 6 Pervillac. Sin (Lust) with attendant devil. [Photograph: author]

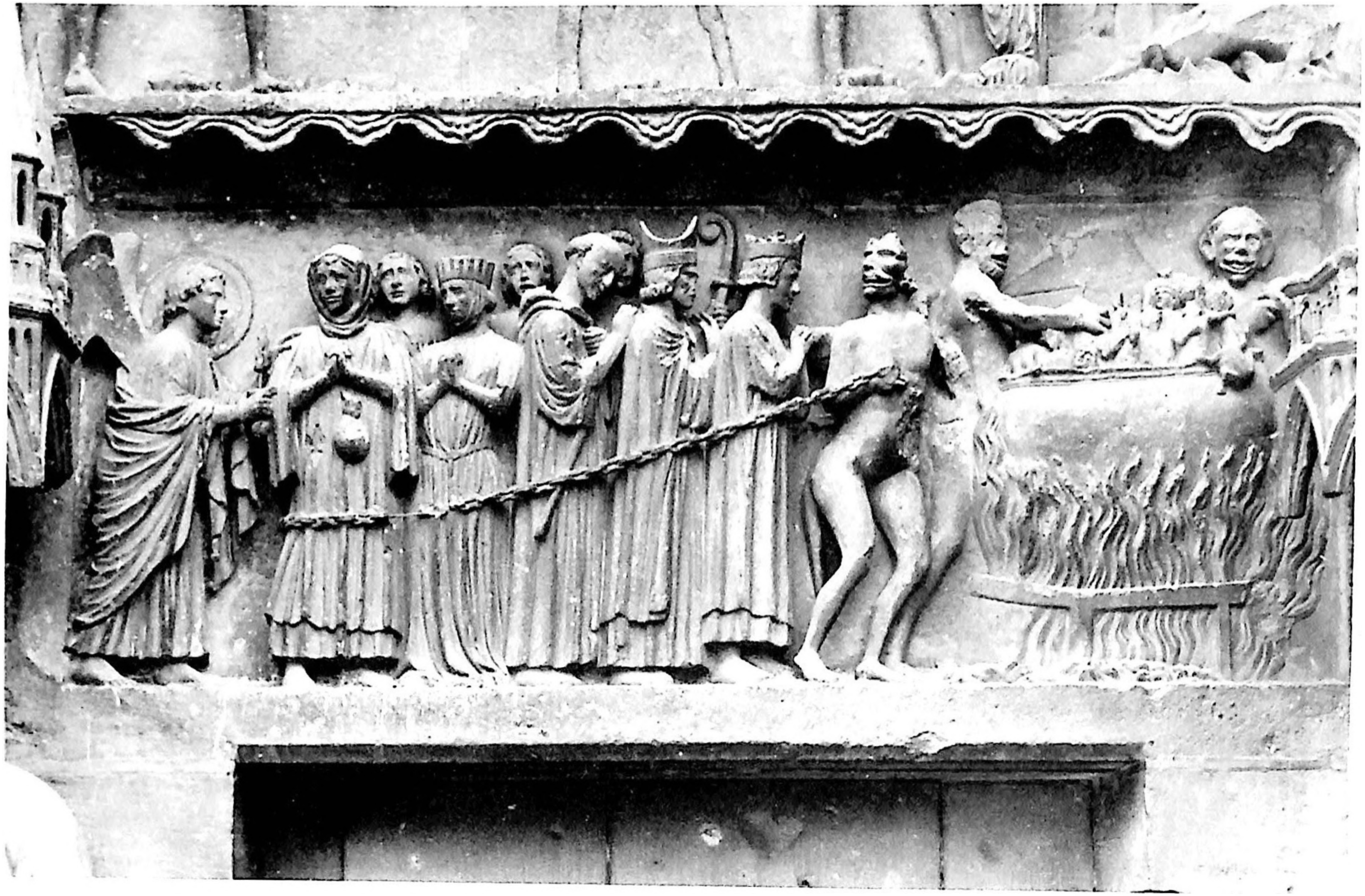


Fig. 7 Reims Cathedral, west facade. Hell scene. [Photograph: Lauros-Giraudon]

Yet the laughter aroused by the antics of these unfortunate 'schrewis that wer nevir schrevin' is essentially demonic and becomes a travesty of the joy of heaven.

Thus the dance motif is the primary vehicle for the grotesquerie of Dunbar's poem, a function which it also performs in the dance of death. In the 'Dance of the Sevin Deidly Synnis' each Sin is a demon who actively draws his hapless followers into the infernal dance: 'He (Sweirnes) drew thame furth in till a chen ie . . .' [73], but does not suffer torture himself. The reference to a chain, of course, recalls the linked Sins of the wall paintings of south-east France. Other examples, however, make a more explicit parallel in that each personified Sin is accompanied by an individual demon who lures his prey down the primrose path, as in the frescoes of the valley of the Lot (fig. 6, Pervillac).

In the conventional dance of death a similar grotesque contrast conveys the essential irony of the theme. Various living persons are arrested in the midst of their routine human occupations and confronted by a supernatural power that mocks them. With one or two exceptions, the response of each victim is one of pain, fear, and horror which contrasts with the unfeeling laughter of the corpse-skeletons. The antics of these agents of death as they cavort before their unwilling partners is a perversion of the earthly delights that they have come to interrupt just as their corpse-like forms are a parody of the human body. Again the primary effect is created by the movement of the figures and is more clearly seen in the illustrations of the *danse macabre* than in the text.

Both the dance of death and the procession of the sins had seized upon formal patterns of order and hierarchy to present disorder and anarchy. There is something basically subversive about such a technique that may have appealed to Dunbar with his penchant for stylistic experimentation and elaboration that often expressed itself in parody and satire. In the dance of death, the representation of the fixed estates of society is essential to its theme of the vanity of worldly power and success (Mohl 1962: 261–62). Death appears as the great leveller before whom popes and beggars must bow down. Each estate has an essential weakness or sin which is pointed out by Death so that death is seen more as a punishment than as a disinterested natural process. Whyte (1931: 51) brings this out in her study, and a broad survey of the best-known versions confirms her conclusion. In fact, only those who are without worldly pretensions, such as a sincere religious or an honest peasant, are able to join the dance of death with a sense of peace or resignation. A similar rôle of social equaliser is played by the Devil, who, until the fourteenth century, had commonly been associated with death in Christian imagery following Augustine's identification, '*diabolus auctor mortis*' (Meyer-Baer 1970:222, 271). Under his direction in the procession of sinners the rich and powerful finally achieve their proper place in the supernatural economy. For example, in the vision of Hell carved on the west facade of Reims Cathedral, a devil loops his chains around all classes of men to drag them towards their final destination (fig. 7). In the processions of sins, each class is singled out by its dominating vice: the proud nobleman, avaricious merchant, envious courtier, choleric soldier, and lazy beggar. But they are all headed in the same direction. Dunbar's vision, too, neatly classifies its sinners according to their social vices and suggests the various estates from which they come. In fact, this cataloguing of actual sins is the only serious and unambiguous note in the entire poem.

For after all consideration of the two themes in the visual arts, the dance of death and the procession of the sins, and the parallels to them that exist in Dunbar's 'Dance of the Sevin Deidly Synnis,' it must be admitted that the combination of the two effected by the poet creates a new and different perception of reality. His poem apparently reflects some aspects of pre-Lenten court entertainment in which burlesque and parodies of chivalry played a leading part (MacDiarmid 1908: 137 and Kinsley 1979: 335–9). European courts had continued a long tradition of comic plays and dances centred on major festivals, such as Shrove-tide; and the Scottish court, following the lead of these courts, especially that of Burgundy, used such entertainments as a way of developing the image of the court as a centre of power (Wormald 1981: 18). Paradoxically, such festivities served both to perpetuate the values of the community, in this case the personal authority and rule of the king, and to criticise the political order (Davis 1975: 97). Contemporary Shrove-tide plays in Nuremburg, for example, incorporated various social estates, representing a variety of fools, in the morris dance; and Dunbar's own 'Dance in the Quenis Chalmer' is an imaginary morris dance performed by courtiers in a grotesque parody of court life (Jung 1987). Thus the licence of carnival allowed a vision of Hell that was not only the antithesis of Heaven but also a comic inversion of James IV's court, the external world of both poet and audience.

It was precisely this sense of 'le monde à l'envers' that Dunbar recognised in the popular visual themes. At the same time, the sense of alienation and absurdity is extended by the conspicuous absence of any real order or purpose. Although the narrator says he saw 'baith hevin and hell,' there is no reference to divine order or mercy, no tranquil virtues to balance the obscene activity of the sins. Instead, we have the ridiculous entrance of Macfadyne and the joke about the Erschemen that defuses whatever fear and horror may have been aroused by the earlier part of the poem. On 'Fasternis evin' not even Hell is to be taken seriously. In earlier traditions the purpose of the infernal vision was doubtless to encourage repentance on the part of sinners and to demonstrate the ultimate triumph of good over evil. The grotesque was subordinated to a broader frame of Christian teaching. However, in Dunbar's poem, as in the paintings of Bosch, that frame was gradually distorted and lost, releasing the grotesque images to form a world of their own. The 'Dance of the Sevin Deidly Synnis' comes close to a triumph of evil.

Both the dance of death and the procession of the sins with their essentially pessimistic and anti-establishment messages contain the seeds of this revolt. Perhaps the fear of political and economic chaos that haunted Europe in the fifteenth century encouraged a perception of an ambiguity and disillusionment rooted in human experience. Although Scotland in fact enjoyed a period of political and economic stability during the fifteenth century, she was not immune to common social changes that included both increased pressures on the nobility and a disequilibrium produced by the emergence of a new and powerful middle class (Brown 1977: 1–9). Her reliance on the personal power of the king rather than on centralised institutions to maintain order, and the repeated minorities of the Stewart kings (Brown 1977: 50), would have underlined the potential chaos underlying the fragile surface of peace and prosperity. The 'official' response to potential anarchy in Europe was to emphasise conservative values, to uphold moral and political authority (Bakhtine 1970: 17–18). Not surprisingly, this high seriousness and dogmatism provoked a popular reaction that sought at least a temporary release from the restrictions of the real world by the abolition of hierarchical order and its replacement by the grotesque and the comic. That is the reason why Dunbar's hell is truly a carnival in which sin is a joke while cosmic fear and horror are dissolved in laughter. By combining two commonplace moralities of his time and exploiting the irony and parody implicit in them, Dunbar has essentially undermined their original message. The 'Dance of the Sevin Deidly Synnis' is a mockery of conventional order that perceives an inhuman world of alienation and moral anarchy. The demonic has been invoked but scarcely subdued.

NOTES

1 The text used is *The Poems of William Dunbar*, ed. James Kinsley 1979. Kinsley's title, 'Fasternis Evin in Hell,' is based on the first line of the poem.

2 The definitive study of the development of this concept in the Middle Ages is Bloomfield 1952. The influence on literature in general of the new emphasis on penance stemming from the Lateran Council is discussed on pp. 90, 143 and 429. The place of Dunbar's poem within the whole tradition is outlined on pp. 237–8.

3 Helena Shire, Robinson College, Cambridge, had reliable first-hand reports by Berta Gallart of Palafrugell of such processions in Catalonia in the 1960s.

4 Bloomfield 1952: 376 n. 158 and 379, n. 310 cites examples of these images in English buildings and manuscripts.

5 For the history and description of this monument, see Rosslyn [N.D.]; Richardson 1964: 37–51; MacGibbon and Ross 1896: 151–79; Cruden 1986: 186–204. At some point during restoration or repair part of the lintel was reversed accidentally to place the figure of Avarice among the works of mercy (!) on the east side of the lintel and Charity among the seven deadly sins.

6 Family historian, Father Richard Augustine Hay 1700, quoted by Richardson 1964: 37. MacGibbon and Ross 1896 warn against accepting at face value this statement by Father Hay (170), but they emphasise elsewhere (vii) the 'abundant evidence' that French master-masons were employed by James IV and James V, including a regular court appointment held by several Frenchmen. These men would provide another potential source for the introduction of French iconography within the circle of the Scottish court.

7 Comprehensive studies of the dance of death motif in art and literature are to be found in Batany 1984, Clark 1950, Meyer-Baer 1970, Saugneiux 1972, Whyte 1931.

8 Sir William St. Clair became Lord Chancellor of Scotland in 1454 (Rosslyn [N.D.]: 25).

9 A re-evaluation of the chronology of Dunbar's work by MacDiarmid 1980: 126–29 gives 1491 as the most likely date of the 'Dance'.

10 For a representative survey of the various meanings and aspects of the grotesque in art and literature see Kayser 1943, Mermier 1977, Saugnieux 1972, and Sheridan and Ross 1975.

11 The San Gimignano fresco is described by Hughes 1968: 32–33; the Bosch paintings by Gibson 1973; and the Albi frescoes by Mesuret 1967: 233.

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