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Why was Agnes Randolph 'Black'?

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Abstract

This study focuses on Agnes Randolph (1312–1369), famous for her defence of Dunbar Castle in 1338, and the origins of her nickname, 'Black Agnes'. Nearly without exception, authors of the last two centuries explain the name as a reflection of her physical appearance, stating that she had a dark complexion. But is this explanation anachronistic? This article argues that the nickname 'Black Agnes' would have had significantly different connotations in the fourteenth century, with 'black' carrying political, literary, and even folkloric nuances. Arguing from detailed analyses of evidence adduced from literary sources, contemporary chronicles, medieval agnominal practices, and overlooked manuscripts, this article casts new light on the many shades of meaning that combine to constitute Agnes's 'Black'.

In the recent blockbuster exhibition at the British Library, 'Medieval Women: Voices & Visions', a folio from Andrew Wyntoun's fifteenth-century *Orygynale Cronykil* was featured with the verse account of the defence of Dunbar Castle in 1338 by 'Black Agnes'. This was a reference to the Scottish woman, Agnes Randolph, Countess of Dunbar (1312–1369).[1] In the exhibition catalogue, four paragraphs outlining her famous story begin with this sentence: 'Agnes, countess of Dunbar (known by the sixteenth century as "Black Agnes", perhaps on account of her dark complexion or her fierce reputation) held a strategic key castle on the coast of south-east Scotland'.[2] The account continues by describing her efforts to thwart the English siege of the coastal castle of Dunbar, mounted from January to June 1338 on the orders of Edward III in his efforts to subdue Scotland.[3] Agnes was alone without a significant military presence to defend the keep, and her husband was absent. The English forces were led by Sir William Montagu, the first Earl of Salisbury (1301–1344), who mounted attacks with war engines and siege tactics.[4] Through creative countermoves and no small amount of flair, drama, and grit, Agnes managed to keep her small castle from falling to the English.

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[1] Rory MacLellan, 'Black Agnes and the Siege of Dunbar', in *Medieval Women: Voices & Visions,* ed. Eleanor Jackson and Julian Harrison (British Library, 2024), 110–111. Andrew Wyntoun's *Orygynale Cronykil*: Royal MS 17 D XX f. 238v.

[2] MacLellan, 'Black Agnes', 110.

[3] For more on Edward III's motivations and a detailed analysis of this moment in military history, see Iain A. MacInnes, *Scotland's Second War of Independence, 1332–1357* (Martlesham: Boydell & Brewer, 2016); and Ranald Nicholson, *Edward III and the Scots: the Formative Years of a Military Career, 1327–1335* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965).

[4] R. J. M. Pugh, *A History of Dunbar: Swords, Loaves and Fishes* (Balerno: Harlaw Heritage, 2003, repr. 2015). Putting this siege in historical perspective, Pugh writes (107): 'The siege of Londonderry in 1689 lasted 105 days and the population was reduced to eating cats, dogs and even rats; Dunbar had held out for an incredible 155 days, bettered only by another famous siege – Baden-Powell's 187 days at Mafeking during the Boer War in 1899–1900. The defenders of Dunbar appear to have been well-fed throughout most of their siege however.'

The British Library's spotlight on Agnes Randolph exemplifies how Agnes and the Siege of Dunbar are discussed across publications and other media. However, remarkably little scholarship exists in publications to date, and there is much more to uncover about Agnes and the Siege of Dunbar. The aim of my larger project is to critically reconsider the chronicles' accounts, to reframe the discussions around the Siege of Dunbar, and to highlight not only the extraordinary courage of this singular woman but also place her within her historical moment. But to begin, let us start with her nickname, which is the sole focus of this article. Why is Agnes Randolph 'Black'?

Introductions to Agnes printed in the last two hundred years invariably explain her nickname with a description of her hair, eyes, skin, or complexion as 'dark'.[5] Her description in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* reads: 'Dunbar, Agnes, Countess of Dunbar and March (1312?–1369), known from her swarthy complexion as Black Agnes, is celebrated for her spirited defence of Dunbar Castle in January 1337–8'.[6] Nearly 130 years later, *The New Biographical Dictionary of Scottish Women* describes her in virtually identical language: 'Known as "Black Agnes" because of her dark complexion, Agnes Randolph was a member of a family active in the cause of Scottish independence'.[7] Reina Pennington's biographical dictionary of women in military roles, *Amazons to Fighter Pilots,* includes this description: 'Agnes of Dunbar…also known as Agnes Randolph, "Black Agnes" because of her dark complexion'.[8] The explanation given in *The Story of Scotland* is a bit shorter: 'She was called Black Agnes because she was so dark'; and Mairi Kidd takes a little imaginative license in her *Warriors and Witches*: 'Black-haired, black-eyed Agnes was born around 1312 to Thomas Randolph, Earl of Moray and Isabel Stewart of the Stewarts of Bonkyll'.[9] Finally, in Goring's *Scotland, Her Story*: 'Known as Black Agnes because of her dark hair and complexion, she is an inspiration and not just to those of us raised in Dunbar'.[10]

That Agnes was 'black' because of her personal appearance is universally taken for granted, but what does it really mean to call a fourteenth-century woman 'black'? Are we interpreting this nickname correctly? What evidence supports the idea of a dark complexion? Was this nickname given in her lifetime, and by whom? What does it mean? This paper will argue that, in the case of Agnes, 'black' does *not* primarily refer to her appearance. It will demonstrate that the idea that she was 'swarthy' likely comes from a single source written two hundred years after her death, from what appears to be an arbitrary comment by the author. This idea – not only unfounded, but also unbalanced

[5] See the British Library's blogpost on Agnes here: https://blogs.bl.uk/digitisedmanuscripts/2025/01/black-agnes-and-the-siege-of-dunbar.html.

[6] Alsager Vian, 'Dunbar, Agnes, Countess of Dunbar and March', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1888).

[7] Elizabeth Ewan and Rose Pipes, *The New Biographical Dictionary of Scottish Women*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 359–60.

[8] Elizabeth Ewan, 'Agnes of Dunbar', in *Amazons to Fighter Pilots: A Biographical Dictionary of Military Women*, ed. Reina Pennington (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2003), 7.

[9] Henrietta Marshall, 'David II. – The Story of Black Agnes' in *The Story of Scotland* (Moorestown, NJ: Perennial Press, 2018). Mairi Kidd, *Warriors and Witches and Damn Rebel Bitches: Scottish Women to Live Your Life By* (Edinburgh: Black & White Publishing, 2020), 15.

[10] Rosemary Goring, *Scotland, Her Story: The Nation's History by the Women who Lived it* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2020), 20.

and anachronistic – is overdue for closer analysis. Even if Agnes had dark hair, eyes, and skin, it seems clear that 'black' in this case carries political, literary, and even folkloric nuances, and that these are far more significant.

This article will offer a new approach to Black Agnes and her nickname, framing the discussion with a fresh consideration of medieval agnominal practices, primary sources, and the literature informing our understanding of the events in Agnes's life. It will offer a new perspective not only on her nickname but on how she may have been perceived by her contemporaries and beyond, and it will forge new trails into frustratingly enigmatic texts, in order to consider the many shades of meaning that combine to constitute Agnes's 'Black.'

Medieval *agnomina*

From Æthelred the Unready to Richard III 'Crookback' and everything between, the annals of medieval British history do not suffer from a lack of creative or intriguing nicknames. These include *cognomina* and epithets (appended to someone's name, 'William the Conqueror') and sobriquets (typically names given to someone by others, or an 'exonym', such as Queen Victoria, 'Grandmother of Europe'). The creation and use of nicknames is a nearly universal human phenomenon, but naturally there are no hard and fast rules about nickname formation – it is an organic and evolving process. P. H. Reaney writes that nicknames can be simply 'bynames that emphasise a notable characteristic or experience of an individual'.[11] Nicknames can refer to personal qualities or specific events; they can quantify public feelings toward an individual or a group of people; and some suggest no logical reasoning whatsoever. Thus the significance of nicknames is slippery, and doubly so for people who lived hundreds of years ago. It is not aporetic to attempt to tease out possible interpretations of nicknames, however, because they carry valuable fragments of history.

Determining culturally specific 'meanings' of medieval nicknames is hardly straightforward. Nicknames (or *agnomina*) must be carefully handled when they concern historical figures of all stripes. In particular, the colour black is one of the most common *agnomina* in the British Middle Ages, and carries an enormous variety of potential 'meanings.' But while the origin and 'meaning' of historical nicknames may be difficult to pin down, how nicknames function in society is easier to assess. Social historians of the last century have constructed working theories about the roles of nicknames in social networks.[12] In his recent doctoral thesis, Tristan Alphey formulates a compelling socio-onomastic approach to medieval agnominal practices.[13] His work focuses primarily on early medieval Britain (400–1000 CE), but his methodology can be successfully applied to the later Middle Ages as well. Alphey proposes three primary ways in which nicknames may function in medieval social networks:

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[11] P. H. Reaney, *The Origin of English Surnames* (London: Routledge, 1967), 218.

[12] See Terhi Ainiala and Jan-Ola Östman, *Socio-Onomastics: The Pragmatics of Names* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2017), introduction; Carole Hough, *The Oxford Handbook of Names and Naming* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); A. G. Akselberg, 'Socio-onomastics – A Critical Approach', *Namn og Nemne* 29/1 (2012): 107–18.

[13] Tristan K. Alphey, 'Nicknames in early medieval England: a socio-onomastic study of *agnomina* before the twelfth century' (PhD diss., University of Oxford, 2025).

1. Nicknames may play a role in the active construction and deconstruction of power or reflect social status.[14] Positive nicknames may praise those in power, or conversely, impugn them.[15] Nicknames may empower or belittle and, in this way, they carry social currency.
2. Nicknames play a role in defining, and enforcing, group membership.[16] They can be a method of delineating familial relationships or social positions.
3. Nicknames are also a method of reinforcing social norms, attitudes, and values of a specific group.[17]

These concepts will help shape this discussion about Black Agnes, particularly because they lend a guiding vocabulary to the social functions of nicknames. In some ways, nicknames are a type of artefact which come to us decontextualized and 'silent' in their modern forms; but in an historical era where women were universally and almost exclusively defined by their relationships with men, a nickname can be a powerful artefact indeed.[18]

Nicknames and sobriquets are most often attached to men in history's written chronicles, with far fewer women by comparison. Cecily Clark's scholarship has shown that, while given names were bestowed by a daughter's parent(s), women's second names were most often dictated by marriages, birthplace, titles by inheritance, or sometimes their occupation.[19] A review of available sources (which by their nature cannot be comprehensive) suggests that there were no other records of a 'Black Agnes' before Agnes Randolph in Scotland or England, although other women carried the name after her, as we shall discover.[20]

As mentioned earlier, 'black' is a common sobriquet in medieval Britain, but it did not carry a uniform meaning. The particulars matter. For example, let us compare two men known as 'Black': Edward the Black Prince (or Edward of Woodstock, 1330–1376), and 'The Black Douglas' (Sir James Douglas, 1286–1330). It is perfectly acceptable to refer to Edward of Woodstock as 'The Black Prince' in publications today, but he may not have been referred to as such in his lifetime at all.[21] Chronicles

[14] Alphey, 'Nicknames', 39.
[15] M. Adams, 'Power, Politeness, and the Pragmatics of Nicknames', *Names* 57/2 (2009): 81-91.
[16] Alphey, 'Nicknames', 40; also 27–28.
[17] Alphey, 'Nicknames', 40. See also Eyo Mensah, 'Proverbial Nicknames among Rural Youth in Nigeria', *Anthropological Linguistics* 59/4 (2017): 414.
[18] Alphey, 'Nicknames', 42. See also L. R. Binford, *For Theory Building in Archaeology: Essays on faunal remains, aquatic resources, spatial analysis, and systemic modeling* (New York: The Academic Press, 1977), 7; M. Garrison, 'The Social World of Alcuin: Nicknames at York and at the Carolingian Court', in *Alcuin of York: Scholar at the Carolingian Court: Proceedings of the Third Germania Latina Conference held at the University of Groningen, May 1995*, ed. L. A. R. J. Houwen and A. A. MacDonald, (Groningen: University of Gronigen, 1998), 59.
[19] Cecily Clark, *Words, names and history: selected writings of Cecily Clark,* ed. Peter Jackson (Martlesham: D. S. Brewer, 1996), 66–67.
[20] One peculiar instance, and likely entirely unrelated to Agnes of Dunbar, is 'Black Annis' of Leicester. She is a mythical witch with a misty provenance, and most likely a kind of folk memory of a late medieval anchorite, Agnes Scott, demonised after the Reformation. See: Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 274–275.
[21] A decade after the Prince's death an epic biography was commissioned and written by Chandos Herald, the *Life of the Black Prince*, but it was titled thus at a later date, and nowhere in the text is Edward called 'the

contemporary with the prince only refer to him as Edward IV (anticipating his succession) or Edward of Woodstock (referring to his birthplace).[22] After his death, however, these references became confusing, and he needed a new name. He was first called 'the Black Prince' in print in John Leland's *Collectanea* written in the first half of the sixteenth century.[23] Richard Barber suggests that the true origin of the 'black' for Edward may be in pageantry, 'in that a tradition had grown up of representing the prince in black armour'.[24] Edward's famous heraldic shield is also a likely reason (sable, three ostrich feathers argent), in which sable (a black field) symbolises bravery.[25] 'Black' in his case is a positive nickname, one that promotes his social status, stresses his martial strengths and victories, and helps delineate the line of succession.

The 'Good' Sir James Douglas (1286–1330) also carries the nickname 'Black' ('The Black Douglas'). He is usually introduced in texts first as a knight of great renown, Robert the Bruce's right-hand man.[26] About his 'black,' most authors in the last century described it firstly as a fearsome monicker given by his English enemies, and secondly as a description of his hair colour.[27] His entry in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* reads: 'The women of the English borders silenced their children with the threat that mewling would bring the Black Douglas upon them. The name is not derived from his coat of arms, so presumably refers to the colour of his hair.'[28]

Almost without doubt James Douglas was black-haired, but his nickname accrued different meanings for different groups of people. John Barbour describes him as black-haired in *The Brus* (c. 1375, at I.381–4): [29]

Bot he was nocht sa fayr that we	But he was not so good-looking that we
Suld spek gretly off his beauté.	should say much of his beauty. His face
In vysage wes he sumdeill gray,	was somewhat pale, and, as I heard it,

Black Prince'. See: Mildred K. Pope and Eleanor C. Lodge, *The Chandos Herald: Life of the Black Prince* (Cambridge, Ontario: In Parentheses Publications, Middle French Series, 2000).

[22] Richard W. Barber, *Edward, Prince of Wales and Aquitaine: a biography of the Black Prince* (Martlesham: Boydell & Brewer, 1996), 243.

[23] John Leland, *Collectanea*, vol. 2, 3rd edn, ed. Thomas Hearne (London: Apud Benj. White, 1774), 307, 479.

[24] Barber, *Edward*, 242.

[25] For more on Edward's heraldry, see William Hunt, 'Edward the Black Prince' in *Dictionary of National Biography*, vol. 17, ed. Leslie Stephen (London: Smith, Elder & Co. 1889), 92.

[26] See, for example, A. A. M. Duncan, 'Douglas, Sir James [called the Black Douglas]', *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), where the introduction to the entry reads: 'Douglas, Sir James [called the Black Douglas] (d. 1330), soldier, was the son of Sir William Douglas…and of Elizabeth, daughter of Alexander, the steward of Scotland; she had died by 1289'.

[27] David Ross does not immediately discuss his hair colour: 'Sir James the Good, one of the finest soldiers Scotland ever produced, is better known by the name given to him by the English – the "Black Douglas". And they gave him this name with some justification. He terrified the northern shires of England throughout the King Robert the Bruce years of the Wars of Independence.' David R. Ross, *James the Good, the Black Douglas: Robert the Bruce's champion and Scotland's fiercest Warrior – the Man of England's Nightmares* (Glasgow: Bell & Bain, 2008; 2010), Preface.

[28] Duncan, 'Douglas, Sir James'.

[29] John Barbour, *The Brus*, ed. & trans. A. A. M. Duncan (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1997), 64–65.

And had blak har, as Ic hard say,	he had black hair, but he was well made
Bot off lymmys he was weill maid,	in his limbs, with strong bones and
With banys gret and schuldrys braid;	broad shoulders. His body was well
His body wes weyll maid and lenyé	made and lean, as those who saw him
As thai that saw hym said to me.	told me.

This description seems straightforward: those who had seen the Black Douglas described him to the poet as broad-shouldered, strong, with black hair and a grey complexion, and of course this description may have been accurate.[30] There is no reason to doubt that Barbour may have consulted with living witnesses to the events he recounts. Rhiannon Purdie describes Barbour's primary audience as 'a Scottish court of the 1370s composed of people a mere generation or so away from the events narrated, and even a few elderly eyewitnesses'.[31] Douglas's own illegitimate son, the powerful Archibald Douglas 'the Grim', was a member of Barbour's audience and perhaps one of Barbour's eyewitnesses.[32]

In describing Douglas, Barbour consciously invokes the image of the romantic hero, consistently presenting Douglas as a legendary chivalric knight – a politically advantageous representation for Barbour's contemporaries in the 1370s.[33] The driving purpose for *The Brus,* as Michael Brown describes it, was to create

> the image of an heroic age for the Scottish nobility, serving their king in defence of Scotland, which...acted as an ideal of loyalty to the crown which the new Stewart king must have sought to encourage.[34]

Because the Scotland in which Barbour's audience lived had been formed directly by the previous generation and by the actions of Robert I, *The Brus* provided a sort of founding legend, casting James Douglas as a type of Lancelot to Robert's King Arthur, or Hector to Robert's Priam.[35] The text

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[30] On instances when Barbour reports statements with the caveat 'as was said to me', see Duncan's discussion in his edition of Barbour, *The Brus*, 14.

[31] Rhiannon Purdie, 'Medieval Romance and the Generic Frictions of Barbour's *Bruce',* in *Barbour's Bruce and its Cultural Contexts: Politics, Chivalry and Literature in Late Medieval Scotland,* ed. Steve Boardman and Susan Foran (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2015), 52.

[32] Archibald apparently earned his nickname on the basis of his military successes; see Michael Brown '"Rejoice to Hear of Douglas": The House of Douglas and the Presentation of Magnate Power in Late Medieval Scotland', *Scottish Historical Review* 76/202 (1997): 174. See also Michael Brown, 'Archibald the Grim (1358–1388)', in *The Black Douglases: War and Lordship in Late Medieval Scotland, 1300–1355* (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 1998); and S. Vathjunker, 'A Study of the Career of Sir James Douglas: the Historical Record versus Barbour's *Bruce*' (PhD diss., Aberdeen University, 1990).

[33] The dual focus of *The Brus* on both Robert I and James Douglas is one of the most significant aspects of the text; see discussion in Barbour, *The Brus*, ed. Duncan, 25.

[34] Brown, '"Rejoice to Hear,' 166.

[35] Duncan writes, 'There can be no doubt that Barbour wrote to please Robert II, about the deeds of his grandfather[.]'; see Barbour, *The Brus*, ed. Duncan, 14. Also Antonia Gransden, *Historical Writing in England ii, c. 1307 to the Early Sixteenth Century* (London: Routledge, 1996), 81–83; and James Goldstein, *The Matter of Scotland: Historical Narrative in Medieval Scotland* (University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 141–2.

[35] Barbour, *The Brus*, ed. Duncan, 65.

confirms the justice of their cause, and shines a highly favourable light on the Scottish side of the Wars of Independence. Barbour's comparison of James Douglas to the Trojan champion Hector (I.395–406) begins with a physical description:[36]

To gud Ector of Troy mycht he	He could be likened to good Hector of Troy
In mony thingis liknyt be.	in many respects. Hector had black hair, as
Ector had blak har as he had,	he had, and strong well-made limbs
And stark lymmys and rycht weill maid	

By likening James Douglas to Hector of Troy, Barbour's lines reflect the prevailing popularity of connecting British history to a fabled Greco-Roman past, a feature of many late fourteenth-century texts.[37] This passage, however, is less directly influenced by classical texts than it is by twelfth-century romances. Purdie persuasively argues that this description is derivative of Benoît de Sainte-Maure's *Roman de Troie* (c. 1165), and perhaps 'buttressed' by 'Les voeux du paon' in *The Buik of Alexander*.[38] In this instance, then, Barbour bolsters Douglas's role as the chivalrous knight by comparing his appearance to that of Hector – even if no other sources describe Hector as dark-haired.[39]

What goes mostly unnoticed, however, is that Barbour never refers directly to James as 'The Black Douglas' in the poet-narrator's voice. Throughout the text, Barbour calls him "gud Schyr James off Douglas" (I.29), or "lorde (of) Dowglas" or only "James" or "Douglas(s)." James the "blak Dowglas" is only spoken in the voice of others obliquely in quotation, as in this famous passage:

The drede of the lord of Douglas	…fear of the lord Douglas, and his
And his renoune sa scalit was	reputation was so spread throughout
Throu-out the marchis of Ingland	the marches of England that those who
That all that war tharin wonnand[40]	dwelt therein feared him like the devil
Dred him as the fell devill of hell,	[out] of hell. Even now I have heard it
And yeit haf Ik hard otfsys tell	often said that he was so greatly feared
That he sa gretly dred wes than	then that when women wanted to scold
That quhen wivys wald childer ban	their children, they would consign them
Thai wald with rycht with ane angry face	with a very angry face to the Black
Betech thaim to the blak Douglas.	Douglas, for in their story, he was more
*For, with thair taill he wes mair fell	dreadful than was any devil in hell.
*Than wes ony devill in hell.	Because of his great valour and courage
Throu his gret worschip and bounté	he was so feared by his foes that they

[36] Barbour, *The Brus*, ed. Duncan, 65.
[37] See Marion Turner, 'New Troy' in *Chaucer: a European Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).
[38] Purdie, 'Medieval Romance', 60.
[39] Matthew P. McDiarmid and J. A. C. Stevenson, *Barbour's Bruce: A fredome is a noble thing!* 3 vols (Scottish Texts Society, 1980–85), 45. Purdie comments, 'McDiarmid and Stevenson observe in their note to these lines that black hair does not feature in any other known description of Hector: it almost certainly describes Douglas's real appearance'; see Purdie, 'Medieval Romance', 63, fn 42.
[40] Mackenzie's edition reads 'duelland' here.

Sua with his fayis dred wes he That thaim growyt to her his name.[41]	were terrified by the mention of his name.

Here we see evidence that the 'Black Douglas' was coined by the English to reflect James's terrifying reputation along the border country. James is as black as a "devill of hell," with folkloric dimensions in the image of a mother warning her child against a bogeyman, underscored by rhyming "with ane angry face" with "the blak Douglas." Later in *The Brus*, another Englishman, quaking in terror, calls James 'the Black' in a conversation with his host of fellow soldiers: "For I dred sar for the blak Douglas."[42] These passages build the image of James as the ultimate knightly figure: among his own he is the 'Good' Sir James, but to his enemies he is 'the Black Douglas.'[43] His reputation is upheld elsewhere in history; it is evident that he was a cunning guerilla fighter and loyal to Robert I.

'Black' could thus carry positive or negative connotations when used as a nickname. Edward of Woodstock's 'black' is generally positive, connected to his coat of arms, military achievements, and pageantry. Negative examples of 'black,' however, generally outnumber the positive in medieval accounts.[44] Specifically, in Barbour's *Brus*, the evidence suggests that James Douglas indeed may have been black-haired, but that this is not the primary reason for his agnomen, and neither is it explicitly connected to it.[45] Rather, 'the blak Douglas' is a fearful nickname in the mouths of the opposition, and in this way it increases James's martial prestige and functions in the text to reinforce the values of a specific group – in this case the Scottish nobility of 1370s.

Both 'The Black Prince' and 'The Black Douglas' were roughly contemporary with Agnes Randolph, but can their nicknames illuminate how hers was formed and perceived? Was Agnes Randolph's 'black' a positive, negative, or a neutral agnomen? Did 'black' carry specific social valence, as in the case of Edward and James? How does gender inflect meaning on a nickname? To approach these questions, the following section outlines where the name 'Black Agnes' appears chronologically in the textual record, and examines the authors who wrote about her.

Who says what when?

The first mention of Agnes Randolph in connection with the siege of Dunbar Castle occurs in *The Chronicon de Lanercost*, compiled before 1346.[46] This is a history of Scotland 1201–1346, written by an anonymous (but probably Franciscan) cleric during Agnes's lifetime. The oldest manuscript copy (BL Cotton Claudius D. vii, folio 230) records that in 1338 the Castle of Dunbar was soundly

[41] Barbour, *The Brus*, ed. Duncan, ll. 542–556, p. 578–9. Mackenzie's edition, Book XV.555–565, p. 579. Lines indicated with an asterisk (*) appear only in St. John's College, Cambridge, MS G.23, not in Advocates' Library, Edinburgh: Adv.MS.19.2.2(i).

[42] Barbour, *The Brus*, ed. Duncan, 19.556, p. 727.

[43] The Gaelic meaning of 'Douglas' itself may have influenced the nickname 'black': the family name derives from the Valley of Douglas with a tributary of the Clyde: Gael: *dubh glas*, 'black water'. Barbour, *The Brus*, ed. Mackenzie, 408.

[44] For other examples from early medieval Britain, see Alphey, 'Nicknames', 195–7.

[45] Ross, *James the Good*, introduction.

[46] Joseph Stevenson, ed., *Chronicon de Lanercost* (Edinburgh: Bannatyne Club, 1839). This document, the product of many writers, was appended to the work of Roger of Hoveden.

defended by the 'comitissa de Dunbar, quæ fuit principalis custos castri'.[47] Here Agnes is noted only as the countess of Dunbar, principal defender of the castle. None of the details that embellish later accounts appear here. The only other extant historical source from the fourteenth century mentioning the siege is John of Fordun's *Chronica Gentis Scotorum*, written before 1384.[48] Fordun does not mention Agnes at all, stating only that William of Montagu employed huge siege engines and other 'contrivances of warcraft', and that he left his 'task undone'.[49] Fordun's is a delicately short and dry version of the events which spares Montagu and the English from embarrassment.

The fifteenth century saw the production of three important sources for medieval Scottish history: Andrew Wyntoun's *Orygynale Cronykil of Scotland* (1420–24), Walter Bower's *Scotichronicon* (1440s, building upon John of Fordun's work), and the *Liber Pluscardensis* (c. 1461, an abridgement of Bower).[50] Andrew Wyntoun's *Cronykil* includes the work of an anonymous contributor writing c. 1390, whom Stephen Boardman describes as probably a secular cleric passing on well-known oral tales, working for an aristocratic lord.[51] Agnes plays a pivotal role in the anonymous contributor's account of 1332–1338; in fact, her defence of the castle at Dunbar is the climax which leads the Scots to victory. David J. Parkinson notes that, remarkably, 'a woman [is] depicted taking the crucial role in resisting the English, not so much by force as by wit and watchfulness'.[52]

Neither Wyntoun, nor presumably the anonymous contributor, describes Agnes as 'Black'. Rather, she is referred to as: 'gud Dame Agnes of Dunbar'.[53] In this way the narrator's voice is like that of Barbour, who refers to James as 'gud Schyr James'.[54] Also like Barbour's account of Douglas,

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[47] Stevenson, ed., *Chronicon de Lanercost*, 296.

[48] Thomas Gray's *Scalacronica* covers the periods between 1066–1363, and was written in the fourteenth century, but the Siege of Dunbar does not appear meaningfully in the chronicle, and Agnes is not mentioned; see Herbert Maxwell, *The Scalacronica of Thomas Gray,* (Glasgow: University of Glasgow Press, James Maclehose & Sons, 1907), 104.

[49] Mentioned in 'Andrew of Moray besieges Strivelyn (Stirling) Castle', in William F. Skene, ed., *John of Fordun's Chronicle of the Scottish Nation* (Edinburgh: Edmonston and Douglas, 1872), 354.

[50] Walter Bower, *Scotichronicon*, A. B. Scott and D. E. R. Watt, eds (Aberdeen University Press, 1996). Andrew of Wyntoun, *Orygynale Cronykil of Scotland*, ed. David Laing (Edinburgh: Edmonton and Douglas, *Historians of Scotland Series*, vol. II, III IX, 1872–79); Felix J. H. Skene, ed., *Liber Pluscardensis / The Book of Pluscarden* (Edinburgh: William Paterson, 1880).

[51] Stephen Boardman, 'Chronicle Propaganda in Fourteenth-Century Scotland: Robert the Steward, John of Fordun and the "Anonymous Chronicle"', *The Scottish Historical Review* 76/201, part 1 (1997): 28. See also: Rhiannon Purdie, 'Malcolm, Margaret, Macbeth and the Miller: Rhetoric and the Re-Shaping of History in Wyntoun's *Original Chronicle*.' *Medievalia et Humanistica* 41 (2015): 45–63.

[52] David J. Parkinson, 'The *Carping* of Wyntoun's Anonymous Contributor: Episodic Recovery in 1330s Scotland', *The Mediaeval Journal* 10/1 (2020): 35.

[53] Wyntoun, *Orygynale Cronykil*, ch. 32, ll. 4845–4856, folia 238r-v, 431: 'Bot gud Dame Annes off Dwnbare'. F. J. Amours, ed., *The Original Chronicle of Andrew of Wyntoun*, (Scottish Text Society, 1903–14), Ch. CLXVIII, 80: 'gud Dame Agnes of Dunbar', and Ch. XXVIII, 80: 'Dame Annes of Dunbar'.

[54] On Barbour's influence on Wyntoun, see David Coldwell, 'Wyntoun's Anonymous Contributor', *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 58/1 (1959): 39–48. On Wyntoun's favourable view of the Dunbar family, see Elizabeth Ewan, 'The Dangers of Manly Women: Late Medieval Perceptions of Female Heroism in Scotland's Second War of Independence', in Sarah M. Dunnigan, C. Marie Harker, and Evelyn S. Newlyn, eds, *Woman and the Feminine in Medieval and Early Modern Scottish Writing* (London & New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 3–18, esp. 9.

it is the English who give Agnes a derogatory name, as witnessed in a song reputedly sung by the retreating English soldiers:

> I wöwe to God, scho [mais gret stere]
> The Scottis wenche ploddere
> Come I are, [or] come I late,
> I fand Annot at the yhate.'[55]

Here, as recorded in the Cotton manuscript, Agnes is derided as 'the thieving Scots wench' and certainly not a 'gud Dame', as David Parkinson notes.

In the history chronicles, it is not until Walter Bower's account that 'Black Agnes' appears. On fol. 288v of Cambridge Corpus Christi College MS 171, it states: 'Quod quidem castrum viriliter defendebat comitissa**,** Black Annes vulgariter / However, the countess, who was commonly called 'Black Agnes,' defended this castle courageously'.[56] And then later he refers to her as 'Blak Annot comitissa / Countess Black Agnes'.[57] There is no mention whatsoever of the reasoning for the appellation 'Black,' only that is 'vulgariter', or commonly used. Whether it was commonly used in Bower's time or Agnes's is not specified. The footnote provided by the editors, however, states without supporting evidence: 'The appellation "Black" was probably derived from the countess's appearance'.[58]

A 1461 abridgement of Walter Bower's *Scotichronicon* by an anonymous writer, the *Liber Pluscardensis*, copies Bower's comment that the countess is 'commonly called Black Annes of Dunbar'.[59] Hector Boece, in his mid-sixteenth century history of Scotland, includes nothing new; he refers to Agnes as 'Contes of Marche, calht Blak Anna', as does his translator, John Bellenden.[60] In summary: no extant source written before Bower in the 1440s mentions the nickname 'Black Agnes'; and there are no fourteenth- or fifteenth-century sources that explicate the 'meaning' of the nickname or connect it to her appearance.

The first chronicle-writer to include anything about Agnes's physical appearance is Robert Lindsay of Pitscottie (d. 1580).[61] His *Cronicles of Scotland* (written 1576–1579?) covers the years 1436–1565, but he naturally also refers to earlier episodes in Scottish history.[62] He writes about the

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[55] Wyntoun, *Orygynale Cronykil of Scotland*, ll. 4997–5000, 436. This is as it is recorded in the Cotton MS Nero D XI, British Library, London. Elsewhere it is recorded as the Scottish wench *and* her 'ploddeill,' a band of robber-thieves, see Parkinson, 'The *Carping*,' 51.
[56] Bower, *Scotichronicon*, vol VII, book XIII, 127–131.
[57] Bower, *Scotichronicon*, vol VII, book XIII, 128.
[58] Bower, *Scotichronicon*, 230.
[59] Skene, *The Book of Pluscarden*, 216; also Christine McGladdery, 'Liber Pluscardensis', in *Encyclopaedia of the Medieval Chronicle*s (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill, 2016).
[60] Hector Boece, *Scottorum Historiae* published for King James V in 1527, and translated into Scots by John Bellenden in 1533. John Bellenden, *The History and Chronicles of Scotland: written in Latin by Hector Boece, Canon of Aberdeen*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: W. and C. Tait, 1821), vol. 2, 433.
[61] Robert Lindsay, *The Chronicles of Scotland, by Robert Lindsay, of Pitscottie. Published from Several Old Manuscripts*, vol. 1 (London: Printed by G. Ramsay for A. Constable, 1814).
[62] Francesca L. Mackay, 'Reading Pitscottie's *Cronicles*: a Case Study on the History of Literacy in Scotland, 1575–1814'. (PhD diss., University of Glasgow, 2016). Æ. M., 'Robert Stewart, Bishop of Caithness, and the

Randolph family, and about Thomas Randolph he states: 'He had also dochteris: The oldest was called Blak Annas, be reason of hir skine. This Annas was ane voman of gritt spirit, more nor came ane woman to be; quho was married upoun Patrick, earle of Merch'.[63] There is no clear reasoning for Pitscottie's comment that Agnes was 'black' because of her skin, and as we have shown, there are no extant precedents for such a description.[64] The evidence suggests that this is the author's own observation.

It is of course possible that Pitscottie was working from sources that are lost to us. For example, it is likely that there once existed a 'Life' of Thomas Randolph, Agnes's father and nephew to Robert I, which may have included information about his daughter, but it has been lost to time.[65] However, because no other text notes anything about Agnes's 'skine', this seems unlikely. All that can be stated is that Pitscottie is the first to discuss her appearance in textual record, and he offers no basis for it.

Despite the dubious nature of Pitscottie's comment, nearly without exception later writers follow his example and state that Agnes is called 'Black' because of her appearance.[66] This is likely an example of how nicknames have shifted through time, rather than a valid explanation of her nickname's origin. As we saw with the example of James Douglas in *The Brus*, he was not nicknamed 'Black Douglas' because of his hair colour – Barbour never suggests such an explanation – but rather because he was devilishly terrifying to the English. Pitscottie may therefore be viewing Agnes's agnomen through the lens of his own time, re-etymologizing it within a different cultural framework. Pitscottie's comments have thus altered the interpretation of Agnes's nickname and given it a different meaning than it would have had in its original medieval context. We should, therefore, beware of how we interpret her nickname today.

To contextualize Agnes's nickname to this point we have only considered texts that self-identify as historical chronicles – those texts allegedly recording historical events in Latin, Middle English and Old Scots, in verse and prose. However, there is another medieval source that mentions Black Agnes of Dunbar by name, but does so in the context of fairy tales, romances, and prophecies. These are the texts, extant in three manuscripts, associated with Thomas of Erceldoune (or Ercildoun/ Astledowne, alternately Thomas the Rhymer/Rymour/Rimmer, True Thomas, Thomas Learmont, or Tòmas Rèumair).[67] Like most recorded prophecies tied to specific places, times, and people, those of

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date of Lindsay of Pitscottie's *Chronicle*', *The Scottish Antiquary, or, Northern Notes and Queries* 12/45 (1897): 1–4.

[63] Lindsay, *The Chronicles of Scotland*, 65.

[64] The interpretation of the word 'skine' in sixteenth-century Scots is generally the same as how 'skin' is used today. See the entry for 'Skin n.' in *The Dictionary of the Scots Language*, (Scottish Language Dictionaries Ltd., 2004). https://dsl.ac.uk/entry/dost/skin_n.

[65] Bower, *Scotichronicon,* 69.

[66] On the impact on Pitscottie's history on later writers generally, see Grace G. Wilson, 'History and the Common Reader? Robert Lindsay of Pitscottie's *Cronicles*', *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 29/2 (April 1993): 97–110.

[67] On Thomas's name, see Victoria Flood, *Prophecy, Politics and Place in Medieval England: from Geoffrey of Monmouth to Thomas of Erceldoune* (Martlesham: D.S. Brewer, 2016), 112–113. On the relationship between 'Thomas the Rhymer' and 'Thomas of Erceldoune,' see Emily Lyle, *Fairies and Folk: Approaches to the Scottish Ballad Tradition* (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2007), section 1.5. For scholarship on texts associated

Thomas of Erceldoune are nearly impenetrable to all but experts in the field. Vatic texts by their nature are opaque and strange, which may partially explain why this source has been largely overlooked by scholars considering Black Agnes. Even so, within this Gordian knot of peculiar language and obscure allusions there are relevant and potentially useful clues that may shed light on the social valence of Agnes's 'Black.'

The Thomas of Erceldoune texts and authorship

Someone named Thomas of Erceldoune (today's Earlston, on the Scottish borderlands) lived approximately 1225–1297, and was popularly regarded as a poet in his own time or at least within thirty years of his death.[68] What he may have actually authored is uncertain and a matter of debate.[69] Thomas of Erceldoune enters the manuscript record decisively in the 1330s, specifically in a prophecy titled 'Thomas de Essedoune's Reply', which is preserved in British Library MS Harley 2253 (compiled *c*. 1340).[70] This prophecy records a dialogue between Thomas and 'La countesse de Donbar', who asks him when the Anglo-Scottish wars will end.[71] Thomas then offers what Helen Cooper terms 'a cheerfully contradictory mixture of the inevitable and the impossible'.[72] This Countess of Dunbar is not Agnes Randolph, however, but a predecessor from the end of the thirteenth century. Most scholars tend to think that an earlier form of this text existed in which Thomas addresses the *Earl* of Dunbar, but that his interlocutor was named as the Countess in this manuscript, perhaps

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with Thomas of Erceldoune, see Helen Cooper, 'Thomas of Erceldoune: Romance as Prophecy,' in Corinne Saunders, ed., *Cultural Encounters in the Romance of Medieval England* (Cambridge, 2005), 171–187; Ingeborg Nixon, *Thomas of Erceldoune* (Copenhagen: Akademisk forlag, 1980); Rossell Hope Robbins, 'Poems Dealing with Contemporary Conditions', in *A Manual of Writings in Middle English 1050-1550,* ed. Albert R. Hartung, 5 vols (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), 1524–8; Josephine M. Burnham, 'A Study of Thomas of Erceldoune', *Periodical of the Modern Language Association* 23 (1908): 375–420; Rupert Taylor, *The Political Prophecy in England* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1911), 65–72; and Alois Brandl, *Thomas of Erceldoune* (Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1880). On the significance of the Gaelic Tòmas, see Diarmad Macpherson, "Tòmas Rèumair." *An Gàidheal* 5/58 (1876), 295–8.

[68] See Hugh Cheape, 'Evidence and artefact: utility for protohistory and archaeology in Thomas the Rhymer legends', in *Ancient Lives: Object, people and place in early Scotland. Essays for David V Clarke on his 70th birthday,* Fraser Hunter and Alison Sheridan, eds (Leiden: Sidestone, 2016), 152; Walter Scott, *The Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border,* ed. T. F. Henderson (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1932); J. Geddie, *Thomas the Rymour and his Rhymes* (Edinburgh: The Rymour Club, 1920); James A. H. Murray, *The Romance and Prophecies of Thomas of Erceldoune*, *Printed from Five Manuscripts* (Early English Texts Society 61. London: Trübner, 1875), xxiii; and Henry Richard Tedder, 'Erceldoune, Thomas of' in *Dictionary of National Biography,* ed. Leslie Stephen, vol. 17 (London: Smith & Elder, 1889).

[69] Thomas of Erceldoune may have authored a version of *Sir Tristrem*, but this could also be the work of the Anglo-Norman 'Thomas'; see G. P. McNeill, *Sir Tristrem [ascr. To Thomas of Ercildoune]* (Scottish Text Society, William Blackwood and Sons, 1886); also the introduction to *Sir Tristrem* in Alan Lupack, *Lancelot of the Laik and Sir Tristrem* (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1994).

[70] Cooper, 'Thomas of Erceldoune', 174. Susanna Fein, *Studies in the Harley Manuscript: The Scribes, Contents, and Social Contexts of British Library MS Harley 2253* (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, Western Michigan University, 2000), 8.

[71] Murray, *The Romance and Prophecies*, xviii–xix. See also the excellent discussion in Flood, *Prophecy, Politics and Place*, chap. 3.

[72] Cooper, 'Thomas of Erceldoune', 174.

because of the later fame of Black Agnes.[73] We are likely missing several episodes from the Thomas stories, which will also become apparent later.

Beyond this first example in Harley 2253, five imperfect manuscripts and one printed version of a poetic fairy tale followed by prophecies are attached to Thomas of Erceldoune's name.[74] These were first collated in James Murray's 1875 edition, *The Romance and Prophecies of Thomas of Ercildoune*. The fairy tale in fytt 1[75] enjoyed many later adaptations, most famously 'The Ballad of Thomas the Rhymer' in Sir Walter Scott's *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (1803), later included in Francis James Child's 1857 collection, *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* as 'Thomas Rhymer', ballad number 37.[76]

The earliest manuscript versions of the Thomas of Erceldoune texts were written not in Scotland but in the north of England, based on Scottish traditions.[77] Nevertheless, many twentieth-century writers have considered Thomas of Erceldoune to be Scotland's first high medieval 'poet'. *The Oxford Book of Scottish Verse* of 1966, for example, presents Thomas's romantic narrative as the first instance of homegrown Scots poetry.[78] By the end of the twentieth century this view had shifted to include a greater number of poetic examples of Scots before the thirteenth century, embedding them within a wider Celtic context.[79] Today, our view of medieval poetry in Scotland is even more comprehensive, reflecting a more complex view of literature; Thomas is, however, still included as a key figure.[80]

Each extant manuscript begins with the 'romance' portion, the tale of the narrator, Thomas, who meets a fairy queen along the banks of the Huntley River. They embark on a fiery love affair and subsequently Thomas leaves the world of men behind and travels to the subterranean realm of the fae.[81] He is forbidden to speak or eat anything in the fairy realm, and he is eventually forced to leave. Before they part forever, the character Thomas pleads for a boon from his lover to prove to his neighbours that he was indeed absent on a supernatural excursion. The Queen grants him the gift of prophecy, along

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[73] Flood, *Prophecy*, *Politics and Place*, from 128: 'The addressee of the Harley prophecy, the countess of Dunbar, suggests a modification of the Scottish legend involving the earl of Dunbar…During this period, the reference to the countess potentially also suggests another more contemporary frame of reference. During the 1330s Dunbar was an infamous Bruce-faction centre of resistance. The substitution of the earl by the countess might allude to the role played by an equally infamous countess of Dunbar, known as Black Agnes (d. 1369), during the late 1330s.' See also Murray, *The Romance and Prophecies*, xi.

[74] Murray, *The Romance and Prophecies*, introduction; also Burnham, 'A Study', 375–377.

[75] 'Fytt' or 'fytte' is an obsolete form of 'fit', meaning a section of a poem or ballad.

[76] Walter Scott, *The Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (Edinburgh: Archibald Constable, 1803); Francis James Child, *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, 5 vols (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1882–1898). This romance is also possibly the inspiration for works such as John Keats's *La belle dame sans merci* and Washington Irving's *Rip van Winkle*. Scott built Abbotsford near the very spot where Thomas reportedly had his first encounter with the Elf queen, on the banks of the Huntley River.

[77] Lyle, *Fairies and Folk*, 7; also Matthew P. McDiarmid, 'The metrical chronicles and non-alliterative romances', in *The History of Scottish Literature. Volume I: Origins to 1660*, ed. R. D. S. Jack (Aberdeen, 1989), 27–38.

[78] John MacQueen and Tom Scott, eds, *The Oxford Book of Scottish Verse* (Clarendon Press, 1966).

[79] For example, David McCordick, *Scottish Literature: an Anthology* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1996).

[80] Robert Crawford and Mick Imlah, *The New Penguin Book of Scottish Verse* (London: Allen Lane, 2000).

[81] Richard Utz, 'Medieval Philology and Nationalism: the British and German Editors of *Thomas of Erceldoune*', *Florilegium* 23/2 (2006): 27–45.

with the inability to tell a falsehood.[82] In the final part of the text, Thomas asks a series of questions, generally political enquiries into the outcomes of battles in the Wars of Independence.

The prophecies which follow this narrative revolve around the crisis of Scottish kingship.[83] They were likely written later than the romance, and most scholars place their composition in the early fourteenth century.[84] Victoria Flood argues that the *Romance and Prophecies* 'were composed in northern England between the 1310s and the 1380s or 1390s, although they draw on Scottish background traditions that potentially go back as early as 1286'; Ingeborg Nixon suggests they were written between 1338–1369.[85] The vatic portions were evidently well-known in the fourteenth century, as they are mentioned in passing in Barbour's *Brus*, Wyntoun's *Cronykil*, Fordun's *Scotichronicon*, and Gray's *Scalacronica*.[86] Whatever a living Thomas may have written at the end of the thirteenth century, and whoever authored and copied the fourteenth-century texts, their attribution to 'Thomas of Erceldoune' lent the prophecies a kind of legendary authority that may have little to do with authorship as we define it today.[87]

The narrative portion of the Thomas of Erceldoune texts has been the subject of excellent scholarship since Murray's edition. The relationship between the narrative and the prophecies is a subject of debate, as is the relationship between the manuscripts and the later ballads, and whether the narrative can be termed a 'romance' at all.[88] Altogether this is an unwieldy, compilatory text, with many unanswered questions and avenues of research. For the purposes of this article, however, our concentration is singly on the final prediction made by Thomas, where Black Agnes of Dunbar is mentioned at the conclusion of fytt 3.

She will die in a ditch: the false prophecies of True Thomas

Omens and prophecies swirled around the Wars of Independence, likely as a reaction to the trauma of war, famine, and uncertainty of the time, in what Flood calls a 'genuinely pan-insular literary-political phenomenon'.[89] Cheape points out that prophecy was 'a cultural resource in an

[82] Cooper, 'Thomas of Erceldoune', from 184: 'The fairy narrative of *Thomas of Erceldoune* offers a sexually active woman as its heroine, but she bears no offspring: instead, it is as if the encounter begets the prophecies, a verbal continuation into the future – a pattern of future history rather than the people of future history.'
[83] Murray, *The Romance and Prophecies*, xxiii; Taylor, *The Political Prophecy*, 65–66. Flood, *Prophecy, Politics and Place*, 116. See also the prophecy in Bower, *Scotichronicon*, V; and in Barbour, *The Brus*, ed. Duncan, II. 86–90, p. 83.
[84] Flood, *Prophecy, Politics and Place*, 112. Murray, *The Romance and Prophecies*, xxiv; and Howard C. Miller, 'A Study of Thomas of Erceldoune' (PhD diss., Lehigh University, 1965), who discusses 'Evidence that Fytte I once Existed as a Romance Separate from the Prophecies'.
[85] Flood, *Prophecy, Politics and Place*, 110. Nixon, *Thomas of Erceldoune*, 40.
[86] E. B. Lyle, 'Thomas of Erceldoune: the Prophet and the Prophesied', *Folklore* 79/2 (1968): 114.
[87] Cheape, 'Evidence and artefact', 152: 'In the context of conventional scholarship and sustained separation of disciplines, Thomas the Rhymer seems to be marginal or invisible on the cusp of history and prehistory or times beyond documentation'.
[88] Cooper, 'Thomas of Erceldoune', 172–182.
[89] Flood, *Prophecy, Politics and Place*, 111; see also Taylor, *The Political Prophecy*, 48; Utz, 'Medieval Philology', 27–45.

uncertain world.[90] Prophecies as a genre also provided a conduit for political commentary and a response to social and cultural angst.[91] About Thomas's prophecies, Flood writes that their primary concern is with the balance of power along the Anglo-Scottish border, and that they are 'highly topical'.[92] She further writes that the 'Countess of Dunbar' is a 'notable point of accretion to the Erceldoune legend', and the prophecy concerning Black Agnes is one of these accretions.[93]

What, then, do the Erceldoune prophecies say about Black Agnes? In short, they predict that she will never prosper despite her worldly wealth, that nothing good comes from her, and that she will die a violent, ignominious death, specifically in a ditch in London. The fact that none of the prophecies came to pass supports the idea that they were written down before she died, likely soon after 1338. The prophecy is recorded in three of the five extant manuscripts [*Fig. 1–3*].[94] In each of the transcripts we have, for clarification, included a space and quotation marks separating Thomas's question and the Lady's answer, although the source texts make no such clear distinction beyond virgules and line breaks. The italics in the primary texts are Murray's, and the translations in the right column are ours.

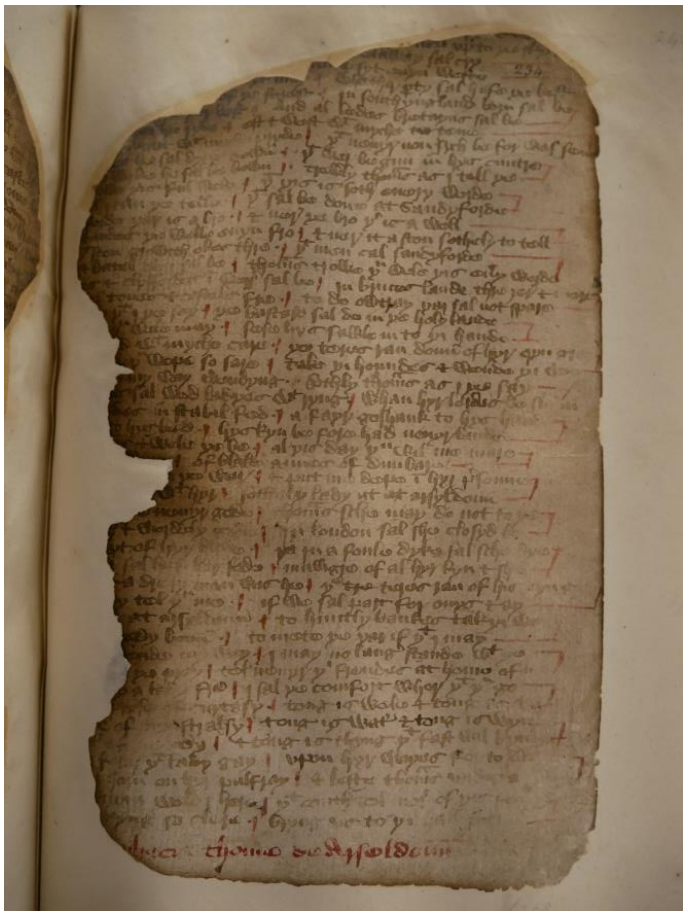

Figure 1a. **British Library: Cotton MS Vitellius E. X, p. 24** [310 × 250 mm], Thomas of Erceldoune portion written c. 1450. The prophecies appear in two columns of thirty lines each. That this document probably existed for a time as an independent booklet is evident both from the evidence of wear and from the type of paper it is written on, which differs from the paper in adjoining sections. Fire damage was caused in 1731. (Photo: Author)

[90] Cheape, 'Evidence and artefact', 154. See also E. J. Cowan, 'The discovery of the future: prophecy and second sight in Scottish history', in *Fantastical Imaginations: the Supernatural in Scottish History and Civilisation*, ed. L. Henderson (Edinburgh: John Donald, 2009), 1–28.
[91] John of Bridlington's *Prophecies,* written before 1379, provide another example; see Michael J. Curley, 'Versus Propheciales, Prophecia Johannis Bridlingtoniensis: an Edition', (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1973); Thomas Wright, *Political Poems and Songs*, Rolls Series (London 1859), I.123–215; and A. G. Rigg, 'John of Bridlington's Prophecy: a New Look', *Speculum* 63/3 (1988): 596–613.
[92] Flood, *Prophecy*, *Politics and Place*, 128.
[93] Flood, *Prophecy*, *Politics and Place*, 128.
[94] The Thorton and Landsdowne MS include the romance and prophecies, but the sections about Agnes of Dunbar have been excised or lost.

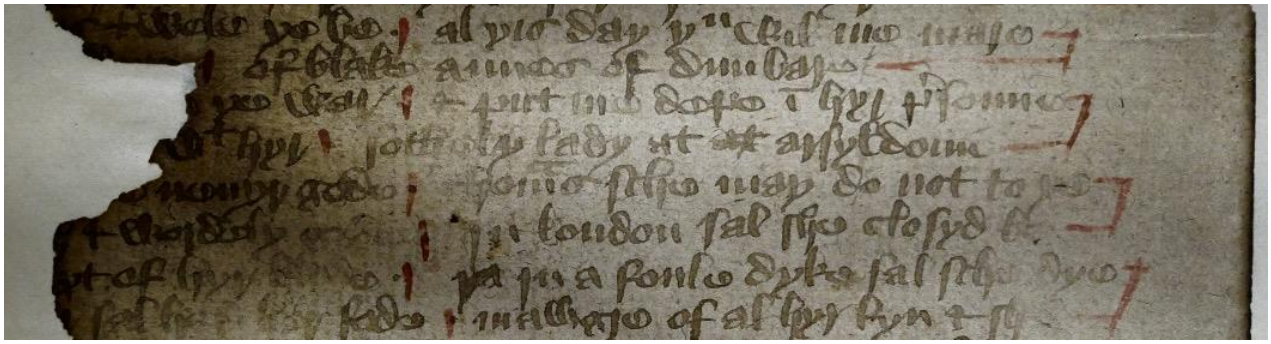

Figure 1b. **British Library: Cotton MS Vitellius E. X, p. 24** [310 × 250 mm], Thomas of Erceldoune portion written c. 1450, detail of lines 659–672, significant portions of which are missing. (Photo: Author)

'al þis day þou wil me mare	'All this day you tell me more
…of blake aunes of Dunbare	…of Black Agnes of Dunbar
…þe war & put me depe in hyr prisoune	…? and put me deep in her prison
…with hyr	…with her
sothely lady at arsyldoun.'	truly the lady at Arsyldoun [Erceldoune].'
'…e] neuyr gode	'…never good
thomas sche may do not to þe	Thomas she may do naught to thee
…& wordely gode	...and worldly good
In London sal she closyd be	In London shall she be enclosed
…xt of hyr blode	…of her blood
In a foule dyke sal sche dye	In a foul dike shall she die
…r sal hafe her fode	…shall have her for food
mawgre of al hyr kyn & she.'	Despite of her and her kin.'

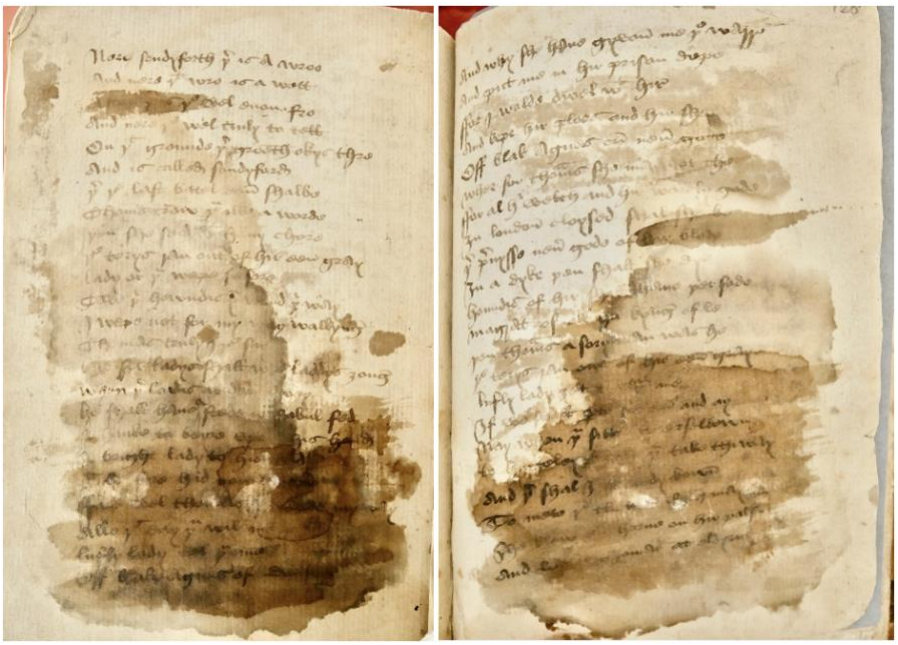

Figure 2a. **Cambridge University Library MS Ff. 5.48, p. 127b-128a [215 x 149 mm]**. Thomas of Erceldoune portion written c. 1450s. The prophecies appear in a single column, approx. 23 lines each. These pages are badly damaged by water and an infusion of galls. (Photo: Author)

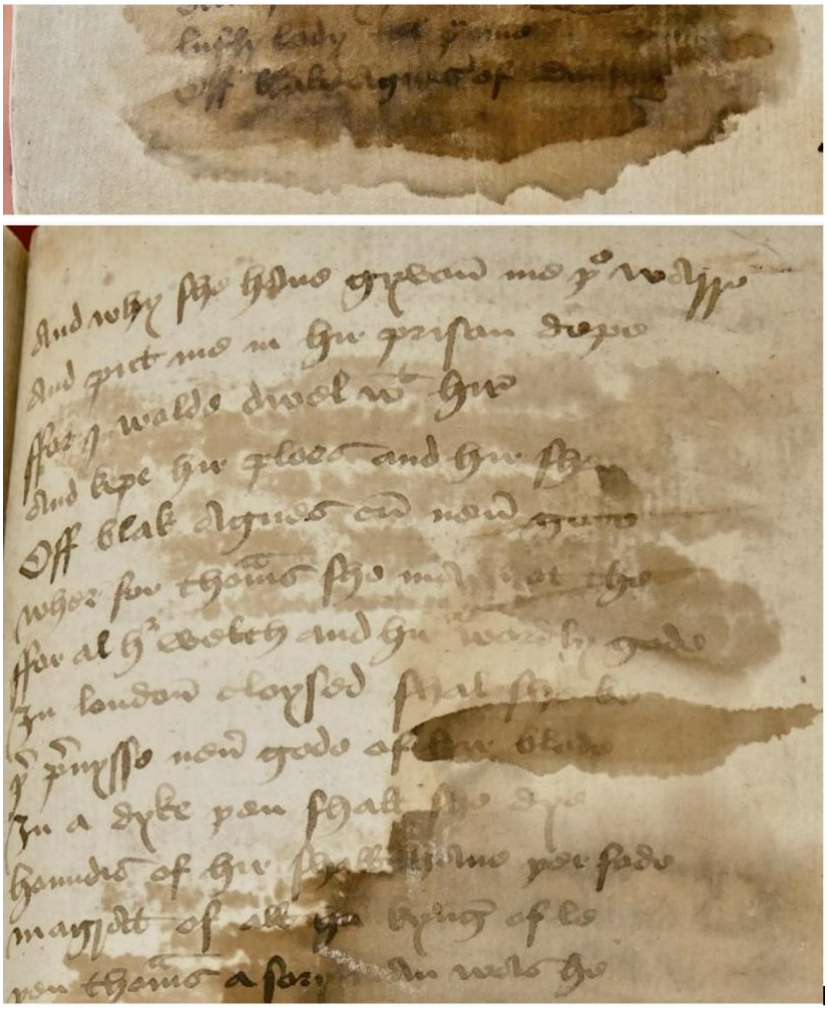

Figure 2b. **Cambridge University Library MS Ff. 5.48, p. 127b-128a [215 x 149 mm].**[95] Detail of lines 659–672. (Photos: Author)

‘Lufly lady, tel þou me,
Off blake Agnes of Don[bar];
And why she haue gyven me þe warre,
And put me in hir prison depe ;
ffor I wolde dwel wit*h* hir,
And keep hir ploos and hir she[pe].’

‘Lovely lady, tell thou me,
of Black Agnes of Dunbar
and why she has set her face against me
and put me in her deep prison,
for I would dwell with her
And keep her [horses?][96] and her sheep’

[95] For more on this manuscript, see J. Y. Downing, ‘A Critical Edition of Cambridge University MS Ff.5.48’, (PhD diss., University of Washington, 1969); and T. H. Ohlgren, ‘*Robin Hood and the Monk* and the Manuscript Context of Cambridge University Library MS Ff.5.48’, *Nottingham Medieval Studies* 48 (2004), 80–108.

[96] ‘Ploos’ does not seem to appear in Middle English or Scots. There is evidence, however, that it may be a Scots term for a type of horse; see George Brice Cumming, *A’anside Lilts and Other Poems* (Banff: *Banffshire Journal*, 1925). This evidence comes five centuries later, however, so clearly the translation is problematic. ‘Ploos’ could also possibly refer to a plough, but this is uncertain.

'Off blak Agnes cu*m* neue*r* gode:
Wher for, thom*a*s, she may not the
ffor al h*ir* welth and h*ir* wordly gode,
In london cloysed shal she be.
þ*er* p*re*uisse neue*r* gode of hir blode ;
In a dyke þen shall she dye ;
Houndis of hir shall haue þer fode,
Magrat of all hir kyng of le.'

'Of Black Agnes comes never good,
wherefore, Thomas, she will not prosper
despite all her wealth and her worldly goods.
In London she shall be enclosed [and]
there perish; never good [comes] from her
blood.[97]
In a dyke then shall she die,
Hounds shall have her for food
Despite of her and all her kin.'

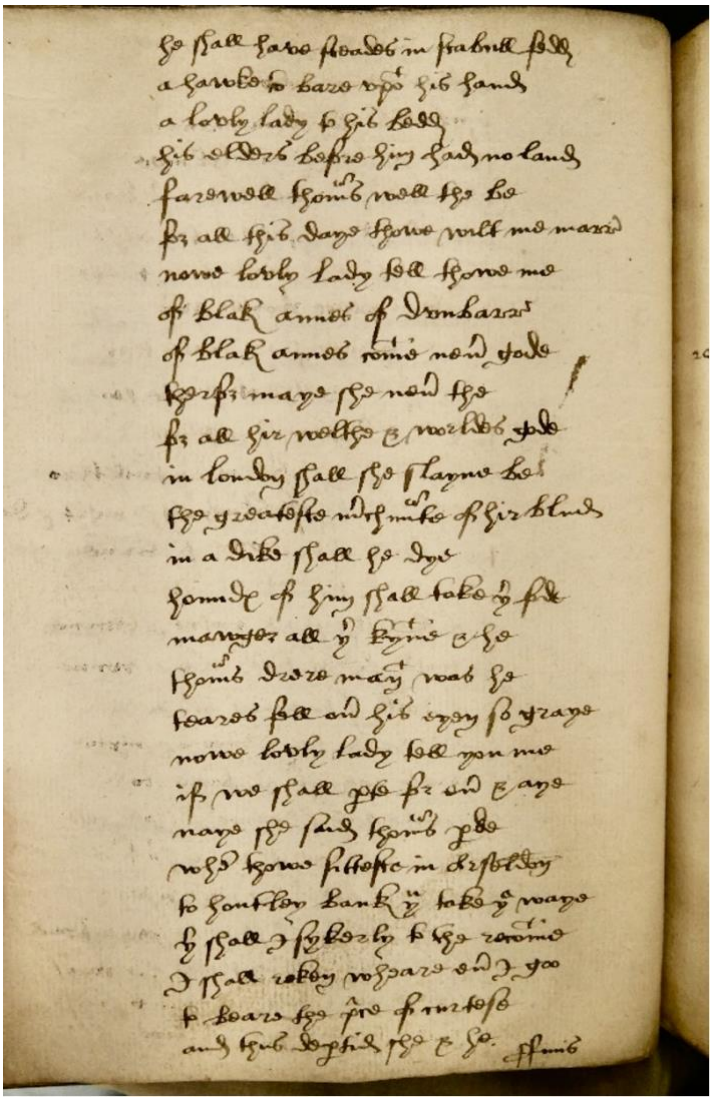

Figure 3a. **British Library: MS Sloane 2578, p. 11b [203 x 152 mm].**[98] Thomas of Erceldoune portion written c. 1547. The prophecies appear in one column, approximately twenty-eight lines each. (Photo: Author)

[97] Murray records 'p*re*uisse' here, but another look at the text in the MS shows a word closer to 'peruysse,' which we may interpret as a Middle English form of the verb *perishen*, to perish.
[98] For more on this MS see Sharon L. Jansen Jaech, 'British Library MS Sloane 2578 and Popular Unrest in England, 1554–1556', *Manuscripta: a Journal for Manuscript Research* 29/1 (1985): 30–41.

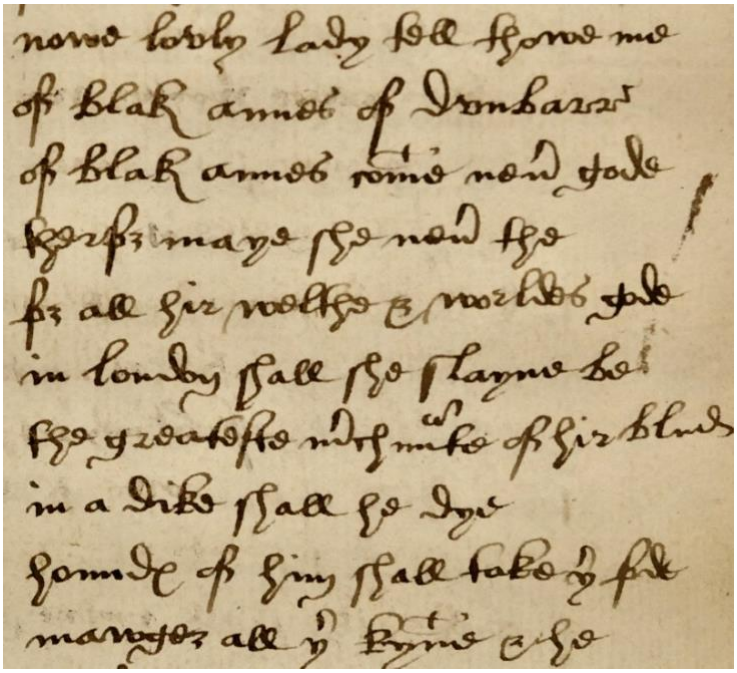

Figure 3b. **British Library: MS Sloane 2578, p. 11b** [203 x 152 mm]. Detail of lines 660–672. (Photo: Author)

‘nowe, lovly lady, tell thowe me	‘Now, lovely lady, tell thou me
of blak annes of Dvnbarr.’	Of Black Agnes of Dunbar.’
‘of blak annes co*m*me neu*er* gode,	‘Of Black Agnes comes never good,
therfor, maye she neu*er* the :	therefore may she never thrive
for all hir welthe, & worldes gode,	despite all her wealth and worldly goods
in london shall she slayne be.	in London shall she be slain.
the greateste merch*a*unte of her blud.	The greatest merchant of her blood
in a dike shall he dye ;	in a ditch shall he die.
hound*es* of him shall take þ*er* fode,	Hounds will take him for their food,
mawger all þer kyn*ne* & he.’	Despite of him and all their kin.’

There is much to unpick here, especially because the three manuscripts do not entirely agree and there are different ways of interpreting what is written. This article, however, will focus only on her nickname, and will suggest that this text is key to a better understanding of it. It is important first to note that Thomas asks pointedly about Black Agnes of Dunbar by name, and it is not contested among scholars that he is referring to Agnes Randolph.[99] She is ‘blak annes of Dvnbarr’ / ‘blake aunes of Dunbar*e*’ / ‘blake Agnes of Don[bar]’ as written by an English author during her lifetime, perhaps very soon after the Siege of Dunbar. These examples thus predate Bower’s use by nearly a century.

It seems likely that ‘black’ is not a positive nickname here: ‘of blak annes co*m*me neu*er* gode’ / ‘Off blak Agnes cu*m* neu*er* gode’. In fact, it rings with vitriol. The term ‘prophecy’ is perhaps inaccurate here; ‘curse’ is closer to the truth. The language in the text is vicious: ‘in london shall she slayne be…In

[99] The Cotton and Cambridge manuscripts are likely conflating Black Agnes with the Countess mentioned in the Harley MS, which itself is an alteration from a lost source, as mentioned earlier, which accounts for the phrases about imprisonment, sheep, etc.

a dyke þen shall she dye ; / Houndis of hir shall haue þer fode.' This is not Wyntoun's heroic 'gud Dame Agnes of Dunbar', or Bower's 'countess…commonly called "Black Agnes", [who] defended this castle courageously.' Thomas of Erceldoune's Black Agnes will lose whatever worldly goods she gained and she will be taken to the English capital and slain. Even worse, her body will be hideously dishonoured in a 'foule dyke' where hounds will feast upon her.[100] A 'dyke' in Middle English refers to a ditch or trench beyond a wall, or even something like a moat; disposal of her remains in such fashion would thus exclude her from any basic dignity after death.[101]

If Thomas's account is evidence for the infamy of Agnes's reputation amongst the English, it in turn reflects the true achievement of Agnes's defeat of William Montague's forces. A curse such as this serves a social function by defining the enemy and directing anger toward a single individual.[102] The successful defence of Dunbar castle was a humiliating defeat and indeed the last of Edward III's efforts in that campaign to conquer Scotland; afterward he turned his martial energies toward France. Considering the scope of her victory, R. J. M. Pugh wrote that if Agnes had lost, 'England would have won a victory of immeasurable propaganda value and allowed their continued occupation of the south-east'.[103] Edward III was aware of this twenty five year-old Scottish Agnes and her defiance at Dunbar, and even monitored her letters to her brother John. During the siege, John Randolph was imprisoned in the Tower of London and Edward had his communications with his sister observed for anything 'sinister'.[104] Some chronicles show that Edward III travelled to Whitekirk for a meeting with the Earls of Salisbury and Arundel specifically to determine what was going awry with their straightforward siege attack of Dunbar.[105] After the Siege was called off on 16 June 1338, efforts were made to save face for the pride of the English, and Thomas of Erceldoune's prophecies about Agnes were likely part of this effort.

In a sense, then, this curse was an effort to 'blacken' Agnes's reputation, although how far Thomas's prophecies circulated is uncertain. Agnes unsettled conventional ideas of femininity and

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[100] The phrase in the Sloane MS 'the greateste m*er*ch*a*unte of her blud' may refer to her sister's children, her husband, or possibly another male descendant. Murray writes, p. lxxxi: '[Agnes's] husband's [Patrick, Earl of March] career was marked by much oscillation between Scotland and England, and his son finally took the English side, which may account for the hostility to the family here displayed. Thomas of Erceldowne lived a whole generation earlier than Black Agnes, and it is probable that traditions of his relation with an earlier Countess of March, who was "sothely lady at arsyldone"…were transferred to her more famous successor.'

[101] See entry for 'dǐch(e' in Robert E. Lewis, et al., *Middle English Dictionary* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1952–2001); online edition: Frances McSparran, et al., *Middle English Compendium* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Library, 2000–2018). https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/.

[102] Flood, *Prophecy*, *Politics and Place*, 154.

[103] Pugh, *A History of Dunbar*, 107.

[104] J. Bain, G. G. Simpson and J. D. Galbraith, eds., *Calendar of Documents Relating to Scotland*, vol. 3, no. 1233, dated 3 June 1337 (Edinburgh: H. M. General Register House, 1887), 225: 'The K[ing] commands Nicholas de la Beche constable of the Tower of London, to allow Adam de Cailly, lately released from Dunbar castle by the Countess of March, to deliver a letter from her to her brother John Randolf earl of Murrey, examining it in his presence; and to send it to the K[ing] or Council if it contains anything sinister or noteable.'

[105] Ranald Nicholson, *Scotland: The Later Middle Ages* (Edinburgh: Mercat Press, 1974), 136.

subverted prevailing gender norms.[106] The curse was used to vilify her and reinforce power structures. For instance, when the Earl of Salisbury grew frustrated with his failed attempts to break the siege, he turned to blackmail, as recorded in an episode of the *Chronicon de Lanercost* for 12 April 1338.[107] When he threatened to take the life of her captured brother, John, she refused to surrender, even to secure her brother's rescue, reportedly stating, 'If you do this, then I will be the sole heir of Moray'.[108] In other words, if were John to die, then she stood to inherit his lands – a response that flouts expectations of sisterly devotion. She successfully exposed the hollowness of Salisbury's threat; her brother was spared and she never surrendered. Her actions were strikingly unconventional, effectively placing her outside the bounds of normative feminine behaviour. Her byname thus marks her as separate, and in Thomas's prophecy Agnes is not celebrated for her courage but damned for her defiance.

This interpretation comes to the fore particularly when we consider this prophecy within the whole text. For example, fytt 2 is written from a demonstrably Scottish point of view, but the third is demonstrably pro-English.[109] Flood situates the prophecy concerning Black Agnes among other contemporary English, jingoist, anti-Scottish writings, such as the song sung by English soldiers concerning Agnes recorded by Wyntoun.[110] Regarding the incorporation of anti-Scottish prophecies with the rest of the Thomas of Erceldoune material, Flood writes, 'Transplanted to Dunbar in the 1330s, Thomas became a contemporary prophet of Agnes's downfall, and with her, the Bruce faction. And yet in this new historical framework, Thomas is a prophet not of the 1280s but the 1330s, opening up a vision of continued suffering that was English as much as it was Scottish'.[111] This prophecy is thus the work of a politically informed author engaged in Anglo-Scottish affairs, and Black Agnes represents a dangerous threat to the English, and perhaps even existentially to social order.[112] Capturing the castle at Dunbar was supposed to be a straightforward siege, but Agnes made sure it was not so.

Conclusion

It seems probable, therefore, that the 'Black' of 'Black Agnes' did not relate to her appearance. In the Erceldoune prophecies Agnes's 'Black' is derisive, a malediction as much as a nickname. In Bower's

[106] Possibly not among her Scottish peers and relatives, for whom there was the precedent of Christina Bruce, sister to Robert the Bruce and her great aunt, who successfully withstood an English siege at Kildrummy Castle in 1335. See Elizabeth Ewan's excellent 'The Dangers of Manly Women: Late Medieval Perceptions of Female Heroism in Scotland's Second War of Independence', in *Woman and the Feminine in Medieval and Early Modern Scottish Writing,* ed. Sarah M. Dunnigan, C. Marie Harker, and Evelyn S. Newlyn (London & New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 3–18.

[107] Stevenson, ed., *Chronicon de Lanercost*, 296–298.

[108] Stevenson, ed., *Chronicon de Lanercost*, 297: 'si hoc feceritis tunc ego ero heres comitatus Moraviæ'.

[109] Flood, *Prophecy*, *Politics and Place*, 114: 'Although the genesis of the legends associated with Thomas were almost certainly Scottish, the earliest recorded prophecies are not.'

[110] *The Cronykil of Scotland*, Book 33, lines 4995–5000: 'Of this assege in thare hethyng / The Inglis oysid to mak karpyng / "I wowe to God, scho [mais gret stere] / The Scottis wenche ploddere. / Come I are, [or] come I late, / I fand Annot at the yhate."

[111] Flood, *Prophecy*, *Politics and Place*, 129.

[112] Flood, *Prophecy*, *Politics and Place*, 139.

text 'Black' is noted as her common nickname, but we cannot know when or why it became common. Where James Douglas's 'Black' was related to his hair colour, the same cannot be said about its application to Agnes. There is, however, a similarity between them, in that the adjective 'black' was used derogatively by their enemies but proudly adopted by later kin. Gender seems to play a significant role in the generational dissemination as, for example, in the case of Agnes Randolph's goddaughter, Margaret of Dunbar, whose nickname 'White Annays' likely derived from that of her famous godmother.[113] This could be an inversion of black with white as an informal act of heraldic cadency, as if a black field was swapped for a white with the next generation of 'Agnes'. Whiteness, however, is more often explained as relating to physical attractiveness. For example, Dorothy Owen comments about Margaret of Dunbar, 'Her nickname White Annays suggests that she had some personal attractions, and, perhaps, some force of character: it seems unlikely that she waited for things to happen to her'.[114]

Owen's comment may reflect the influence of medieval romance literature, where fairness and whiteness are usually aspects of a heroine's beauty, as when Florippe from *Sir Ferumbras* (1380s) is described as 'fair': 'Sche was a mayde fair & swet' (She was a maid fair and sweet), 'þat maide fair & gent' (that maid fair and gentle), 'þat mayde fair and hende' (that maid fair and refined).[115] Similarly, the wife of Sir Lord Bredbeddle in a version of *The Greene Knight* is portrayed as 'both blyth and blee', glossed as cheerful and of white complexion.[116] We should also mention Iseult of the White Hand from *Tristan*, and Eric's golden-haired Enide with skin 'clearer and more delicate than the lily'.[117] It seems there is an inexhaustible supply of white, fair, virginal maidens gracing the folia of romances, providing ample material for scholarship.[118]

Whereas Douglas's nickname came to represent an entire clan of 'Black' Douglases, prominent until 1455, only two generations of women were named for Black Agnes, and thereafter the nickname seems to have been dropped. It is even possible that there was a conflation of two 'Blacks' in later generations.[119] In 1372 Sir James Douglas of Dalkeith, an indirect descendant of James 'the Black' Douglas, married a second-generation Agnes of Dunbar (niece and ward of Black Agnes, and daughter of Isobel Randolph).[120] Because James Douglas was described as 'black' partly for his

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[113] Dorothy M. Owen, 'White Annays and Others', in *Medieval Women*, ed. Derek Baker (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978), 332.
[114] Owens, 'White Annays', 334.
[115] Sidney J. Herrtage, *The English Charlemagne Romances, part I. Sir Ferumbras* (The Early English Text Society, London: Trubner & Co., 1879), ll. 1201, 1204, 1260, 3319, 5035.
[116] Thomas Hahn, *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales* (Middle English Texts Series. Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995), l. 45.
[117] Chrétien de Troyes, *Eric and Enide*, ed. & trans. W. W. Comfort (Ontario: In parentheses Publications, Old French series, 1999), 7.
[118] Naomi Wolfe, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1990), 300.
[119] On the connections between the Dunbars and Douglases in later generations, see Michael Brown, *The Black Douglases: War and Lordship in Late Medieval Scotland, 1300–1355* (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 1998), 99–105.
[120] Brown, *The Black Douglases*, 66.

appearance and partly for his reputation, it is possible that later writers such as Pitscottie assumed the same was true for Agnes. But, as noted previously, 'black' is a dynamic byname, and in this case gender must be considered. For the Douglases, the appellation 'Black' played an active role in the construction of their social power and delineated dynastic membership; but for Agnes Randolph, 'Black' set her apart as unique, distinguished her from other women, and marked her as a fierce opponent. In conclusion, it seems clear that the idea that Agnes Randolph was 'black' because of her physical appearance should be dropped. There is simply not enough evidence to support this interpretation, and furthermore it distracts from the significance of her role in British history. Put simply, her 'black' is more than skin-deep.

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