

Dunbar, Rossllyn, and the Ordering of the Seven Deadly Sins

Graeme Davis
[University of Northumbria](#), UK

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Abstract

Dunbar's poem *The Dance of The Sevin Deidly Synnis* and the sculpture, *The Procession of The Seven Deadly Sins*, in Rossllyn Chapel, Midlothianshire, have been recognised as both part of the same artistic milieu, and therefore each able to illuminate the other. It has not previously been noted that both present the deadly sins in an order which differs from the order then set out by the Catholic church. Both are outrageous; both are at odds with the teaching of the church of the day.



Biographical information about Dunbar is scant. His birth date is generally set at 1465, and cannot be far removed from this year. He seems to regard his home as the Lothians, for in the *Flyting of Dunbar and Kennedie*, in a passage where he contrasts himself with Kennedy, he boasts that *ane pair of Lowthiane hippis* can make better English than Kennedy's *Carrik lippis*. As a member of the Scottish court, Dunbar must have spent most of his life in Edinburgh, and may reasonably be expected to be familiar with the surrounding counties of the Lothians. His date of death is disputed. The frequently quoted 1530 appears unsound as there are no records of Dunbar after 1513; the tradition that he died at the Battle of Flodden in 1513 while unprovable is certainly credible. *The Dance of the Sevin Deidly Synnis* can be tentatively dated following Mackay Mackenzie at 1496: the reference to the eve of Shrove Tuesday being 15th February indicates either 1496 or 1507, and the style of the poem is unlike Dunbar's other work from 1507. It seems reasonable to regard *The Dance of the Sevin Deidly Synnis* as written around 1496 by a man connected with the Lothians.

Rossllyn Chapel in the village of Roslin, Midlothian, was founded in 1446 by William St Clair, Prince of Orkney. Following St Clair's death in 1486 a decision appears to have been taken to do little more than roof the part already built, a task completed in 1488. Save for the construction of a Victorian baptistry this ended the building work. The precise dating of individual carvings in the

church is rarely possible. On the basis of its position within the church - as an architrave - the *Procession of the Seven Deadly Sins* would appear to come from towards the end of the period. A date in the early 1480s seems about right for the placing of the architrave.

We therefore have two presentations of the seven deadly sins separated by little more than a dozen years by artists based in the same location. That Dunbar knew of the Rosslyn carving and was influenced by it can be no more than conjecture. Notwithstanding it would seem reasonable to assert that both the Rosslyn sculptor and Dunbar were working within an understanding of the seven deadly sins particular to Lothian in the late fifteenth century. Possible links between the Rosslyn carving and Dunbar have occasionally been suggested.

What has not been pointed out is that both the Rosslyn carving and Dunbar are outrageous in their presentation.

In mediaeval Christian thought the deadly sins are those which must be confessed in order to save the soul from damnation - in contrast to venial sins which may be forgiven without confession. Pope Gregory the Great in his *Moralia in Job* enumerates them as seven, and places them in an order which became standard, based on the extent to which they differ from love. Pride is considered to be at the greatest distance from love and therefore the most serious, while lust as a form of perverted love is the closest to love and therefore the least serious. Pope Gregory's order is as follows:

Superbia	Pride
Invidia	Envy
Ira	Anger
Avaritia	Avarice
Tristia	Sadness
Gula	Gluttony
Luxuria	Lust

Frequently the sin *Tristia* was replaced by *Accidia*, or *Sloth*. *Avaritia* is frequently translated into English as *Covertousness*.

The order was not to be regarded as a hierarchy of seriousness; indeed the thinking of Thomas of Aquinas points out that any one of the sins will damn the soul. Some branches of Catholic thought have seen any one of the deadly sins when unconfessed as being accompanied by the most deadly, that of Pride.

Given a world picture which sees the deadly sins as leading to damnation unless confessed, teaching the laity what they are becomes imperative so that people may know which sins must be confessed in order to save their souls. In this context the familiar order set by Pope Gregory had an important role as a memory aid. Even if the Aquinas position of equal seriousness is accepted they still have to be presented in an order, and Pope Gregory's order was in the middle ages the one used.

Against this convention it is striking that neither Dunbar nor Rosslyn conform to Pope Gregory's order.

Dunbar's order is explicit in *The Sevin Deidly Synnis*:

- 1 And first of all in dance wes Pryd, With hair wyld bak and bonet on syd
- 2 Then Yre come in with sturt and stryfe, His hand wes ay upoun his knyfe
- 3 Nixt in the dance followit Invy
- 4 Nixt him in dans come Cuvatyce
- 5 Syne Sweirnes (Ydi lnes)
- 6 Than Lichery

Dunbar introduces numerous additional characters. There is the narrator - the dreamer - who may be regarded either as Dunbar, or as Everyman. There is Mahoun, the devil, who gart cry ane dance setting the action of the poem in train, though not actually himself a part of the dance, and there is Makfadyane and the Erschemen chattering in Ersche in hell. Additionally there are unshriven sinners, harlots, priests, and various fiends and monsters. The whole is presented on an immense, cosmological tapestry embodied in the line And then I saw baith hevin and hell.

The traditional order of the deadly sins is similarly infringed by the Rossllyn procession. The architrave shows nine figures, which at first appear to be as follows:

- A bishop
- 1 Pride
- 2 Gluttony
- 3 (Charity)
- 4 Anger
- 5 Envy
- 6 Sloth
- 7 Lust
- A devil

However the assembly of the Rossllyn architrave is wrong. The nine blocks were carved prior to positioning within the church, and have been placed in the wrong order. As the architrave is structural it has to be assumed that this mistake was made at the time of building. It has long been noted that the third block from the left in the deadly sins procession has been turned through 180 degrees and shows the figure of Charity from a procession of the seven virtues sculpted on the other side of the architrave. In fact there seems to be a double error. The third and fifth blocks of the architrave appear to have been put in the reverse order - they are of the same size, and should have been on the other side of the central block (number four) to that on which they appear. Careful examination of the tracery of the vine of life which runs through the sculpture leaves no room to doubt the intended order. Having reversed two blocks, the turning of one of them - the Charity-Avarice block - through 180 is understandable in that the builders were presumably having difficulty in fitting misordered blocks in place.

Correcting for the builders' error, the Rossllyn Seven Deadly Sins may be reordered:

- A bishop
- 1 Pride
- 2 Gluttony
- 3 Envy
- 4 Anger
- 5 Avarice
- 6 Sloth
- 7 Lust
- A devil

Comparing the established order of Pope Gregory, and the orders of Dunbar and Rossllyn, gives the following table:

Pope Gregory	Dunbar	Rossllyn
Superbia	Pryd	Pride
Invidia	Yre	Gluttony

Ira	Invy	Envy
Avaritia	Cuvatyce	Anger
Tristia (Accida)	Sweirnes (Ydilnes)	Avarice
Gula	Lichery	Sloth
Luxuria	Glutteny	Lust

Both Dunbar and Rossllyn depart from the conventional order. Only Pride is presented by both in its correct position according to Pope Gregory's order. Dunbar has three of the sins in their Gregorian order - and those perhaps more by chance than design; Rossllyn has only two, the first and the last, correctly positioned.

Both Dunbar and the Rossllyn sculptor therefore present an unexpected ordering. In as much as the two works of art are within the same cultural milieu, the one by a Lothian poet and the other by a Lothian sculptor, and separated from one another by no more than at most a generation, they can productively be examined together.

- * The non-standard ordering of Dunbar and Rossllyn would have surprised a contemporary. Both Dunbar and Rossllyn use a remarkable order which deserves comment.
- * Dunbar is one of the most educated men of his day. Rossllyn used the leading scholars and artists of the day. It is inconceivable that either have used the non-standard ordering by mistake; rather the ordering Dunbar and Rossllyn present is a deliberate choice.
- * Dunbar and Rossllyn must be aware of the confusion that their departure from the order of Pope Gregory could cause. Given the importance of the conventional order as an aide memoire for the laity to remember what the seven deadly sins are, the departure could not have been for a trivial reason. Poetic licence or visual impact would not be adequate reasons to imperil souls. As confirmation of this view neither the poem nor the sculpture seems to gain any artistic benefit from the re-ordering.
- * The deduction may be advanced that both Dunbar and Rossllyn have made a deliberate decision to depart from the established order, and that the motivation for this departure is not artistic.
- * Dunbar and Rossllyn use different orderings. Only two of the seven deadly sins are in the same position. Both agree that Pride is in the first place. Both place Envy in position three, though this may be no more than coincidence. The implication of Dunbar and Rossllyn is that Pride is in first place, and that the other sins may follow in any order. Arguably in both cases the artists begin with Pride as if using the conventional order, and their departure is artistically the more striking than had they started the sequence with a misplaced sin.

It seems that both Dunbar and Rossllyn are setting themselves against Church teaching on the seven deadly sins. Supporting evidence from Dunbar includes the following:

- * The dance that the unshriven sinners of stanza one are about is described as *kast up gamountis in the skyis*, That last came out of France. By this we seem invited to imagine a high-kicking dance at that time fashionable in France. While not wishing to doubt the Church's ability to teach that this mediaeval precursor of the can-can was sinful, it has to be noted that this reference is more likely to have enticed Dunbar's reader than to have created revulsion at its sinfulness. France was the ally of Scotland, much visited by the nobility of Scotland, and France and all things French very positive images to Dunbar's audience. This is not the sin to use if the intention is to cause horror and revulsion at sin.

Dunbar is inviting us to enjoy the dance.

- * Dunbar mocks priests. Priests who are in hell enter the dance after the harlots and before *Yre*, and are laughed at by Mahoun and all the fiends. They face mocking gestures and are verbally mocked as *Blak Belly and Bawsy Brown*, terms obscure today but apparently offensive. The priests make no response.
- * The climax of the poem is Mahoun's request for a *Hel and padyane*, and the order to a fiend to fetch a Highlander by the name of Makfadyane. The pageant is in the form of a *correnoch* - a Gaelic death lament - led by Makfadyane and the Erschemen. Dunbar presents Gaels as represented by Makfadyane as condemned to hell. Indeed they are specifically sent to the *depest pot of hell*, which in the context of the poem suggests they are the very greatest of sinners. This appeals to the prejudices of his Lowland audience.

What we have in Dunbar is a dance which is more likely to entertain than to shock. Christianity as represented by priests is mocked, while Church teaching on the order of the deadly sins is ignored. The devil is represented not as Satan but as Mahoun - the prophet Mohammed - and the greatest sinners are the Ereshemen represented by Makfadyane.

A motivation for the irregular ordering may be offered: both Dunbar in *The Dance of the Sevin Deidly Synnis* and the Rossllyn sculptor are presenting through their art a criticism of Roman Catholic doctrine.

About the Author

Email: g.davis@northumbria.ac.uk

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