

1991

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### Recommended Citation

Scheps, Walter (1991) "Middle Scots Bibliography: Problems and Perspectives," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 26: Iss. 1.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol26/iss1/20>

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*Walter Scheps*

## Middle Scots Bibliography: Problems and Perspectives

It is axiomatic that criticism changes literature; it should be equally axiomatic that bibliography changes criticism. Questions of scope, evaluation vs. description, and the like must be addressed by every bibliographer regardless of subject. Middle Scots bibliography presents all of the problems common to bibliography generally, but, in addition, it contains several which are uniquely its own, the result of cultural and historical factors of long duration. Finally, innovations in technology, word processing in particular, have changed the ways in which bibliographies are compiled and produced, and may ultimately change the ways in which they are conceived as well. It is with these issues that this paper is concerned.

The first question confronting any bibliographer is the scope of his study. The second is whether his bibliography is to be descriptive or evaluative. These issues seem to be straight-forward enough, but, here as elsewhere, appearances are deceptive. Since most recent bibliographical work in Middle Scots has dealt with the makars, it might seem reasonable to hope that subsequent study would move to a consideration of less popular authors and works, Holland and Barbour say. However, with regard to the makars, their recent surge in popularity makes any bibliography of contemporary studies a desideratum. Historically—and present scholarship has by no means put the matter to rest—the canon for each of the makars has been and continues to be in dispute; of course, this problem exists for innumerable early writers besides the Middle Scots. But even when modern scholarship agrees on the canon, the bibliographer's problem is by no means solved. No one seems to believe any longer, for example, that Gavin Douglas wrote

*King Hart*. But until recently his authorship of this poem was universally accepted.<sup>1</sup> If the bibliographer excludes *King Hart*, he must also exclude all references to this poem in earlier criticism. When the references are explicit, that task is simple if tedious, but often general comments on Douglas's worth or practice as a poet will not mention specific works. Since virtually all critics before 1959 believed Douglas to have written *King Hart*, their comments will always, at least to some extent, be based on this belief. Several choices confront the bibliographer: should he ignore the problem and simply report critical comments, should he report only those comments which are indisputably based on the currently accepted canon, or should he edit the comments so as to exclude putative, if indirect, comments on *King Hart*? The attribution to James I of *Christis Kirk on the Green* and *Peblis to the Play* was discredited much earlier,<sup>2</sup> but the same problems exist even though they are limited to a smaller body of critics. As for Henryson and Dunbar, each new edition and book-length critical study seems to redefine their respective canons.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps the best that any bibliographer can do in this situation is to err on the side of being overly inclusive; unfortunately, his publisher is not apt to look charitably upon such a decision.

If determination of the canon is difficult for many medieval writers, the question of which critical works to include is a problem for all bibliographers regardless of subject. Any work which is not included tends to become, by that very fact, not only unimportant but virtually nonexistent. No bibliography can include everything, but bibliographies of criticism, especially those that cover a larger chronological period, must confront their own peculiar

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<sup>1</sup>Priscilla Preston [Bawcutt], "Did Gavin Douglas Write *King Hart*?" *M AE* 28 (1959), 31-47; Florence H. Ridley, "Did Gawin Douglas Write *King Hart*?" *Speculum* 34 (July, 1959), 402-12.

<sup>2</sup>Although as late as 1908, G. Gregory Smith says, "the assumption of inappropriateness in style is invalid as an argument against authorship by James I," and concludes "[t]hat James I may have been the author is an allowance of some importance in studying the entwined relationship of the Chaucerian and the 'popular' verse during the period." "Anonymous and Popular Scottish Verse," *The End of the Middle Ages*, ed. A. W. Ward and A. R. Waller, *CHEL*, 2 (Cambridge, 1908), 270. And in 1952, W. L. Renwick and Harold Orton discuss the two poems among the works of James I because "it is convenient to put them there, and the tradition [of James's authorship] is noteworthy evidence of the Scottish view of royalty," *The Beginnings of English Literature to Skelton, 1509*, 2nd rev. ed. (London, 1952), p. 413. However, by 1977 when Derek Pearsall writes the first volume of *The Routledge History of English Poetry*, James's authorship is no longer considered worth mentioning (*Old English and Middle English Poetry* [London, 1977], p. 280).

<sup>3</sup>See Denton Fox's discussion of "The Want of Wyse Men" in his edition *The Poems of Robert Henryson* (Oxford, 1981), p. cxvi.

problems. Early criticism, to take up one of these problems, often strikes the modern reader as naive; but to weight entries towards the contemporary distorts, even obscures, the historical development of the critical tradition for a given author or work. Ironically, this tradition is most clearly seen in precisely those studies, especially literary histories and other criticism intended for a general, non-specialist audience, which the overwhelming majority of bibliographies exclude because of their lack of originality. Conversely, the most brilliantly original practical, as opposed to theoretical, criticism is frequently *sui generis* and often exerts little influence on subsequent critics.

In addition to literary histories, another category of works which is ordinarily excluded from bibliographies is literature itself, poems, plays, and novels. These are not criticism in the strictest sense of that term, but individually and collectively they are probably more important in establishing, or even creating, the reputation of any author they refer to. This phenomenon is forcefully demonstrated in criticism, or simply brief appreciations or passing comments, written by individuals better known as poets or novelists than as critics. If, for example, Sir Walter Scott had not called Dunbar "The Scottish Chaucer" and "the darling of the Scottish Muses"<sup>4</sup> the term "Scottish Chaucerian," over which there has been much gnashing of teeth, might never have been coined. And if Scott had been a critic writing in a learned journal, instead of a world renowned poet and novelist, his opinions would probably have been interred with his bones. Similarly, the influence exerted by Washington Irving's extravagant praise of *The Kingis Quair*<sup>5</sup> is largely attributable to his stature as a man of letters rather than to the incisiveness of his remarks. And, speaking of extravagance, would anyone have paid attention to the statement that Douglas's *Eneados* is better than the original if it had been made by someone less famous than the poet Ezra Pound?<sup>6</sup> On a less exalted level perhaps, but equally revealing, is the praise of one or another of the makars by such poets as Barnabe Googe, Henrie Charteris, who is better known as an editor, John Rolland, John Norden, John Langhorne, Alexander Geddes, and George Dyer; in each instance the praise

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<sup>4</sup>In, respectively, "Memoir of George Bannatyne," *Memorials of George Bannatyne 1545-1608*, ed. David Laing (Edinburgh, 1829; rpt New York, 1973, p. 14; and *The History of Scotland*, 1 (London, 1830), 333.

<sup>5</sup>"A Royal Poet," *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.* (New York, 1864), pp. 122-40.

<sup>6</sup>*How to Read* (London, 1931), p. 45; see also, *ABC of Reading* (London, 1934; rpt New York, 1960), pp. 115-23.

appears in poetry written by these individuals.<sup>7</sup> For the most part, these encomia fail to rise above the limitations peculiar to the genre. Here, for example, is George Dyer using, *inter alia*, the pathetic fallacy to praise Gavin Douglas:

Dunkeld, no more the heaven-directed chaunt  
 Within thy sainted wall may sound again.  
 But thou, as once the muse's favourite haunt—  
 Shalt live in Douglas' pure Virgilian strain:  
 While time devours the castle's crumbling wall;  
 And roofless abbies pine, low-tottering to their fall.

The references to the makars in the poetry of David Lyndsay and Allan Ramsay are almost as well known as those by Scott, as are those made by Hugh MacDiarmid in *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*.<sup>8</sup> And, of course, the makars sometimes refer to one another, Dunbar and Douglas to Henryson in *Lament for the Makaris* (82) and a gloss in the Cambridge manuscript of *Eneados* respectively, and Douglas to Dunbar in the *Palice of Honour* (923). But Richmond Lattimore's poetic praise of Dunbar is known to few, and even fewer are likely to have heard of an early seventeenth-century play in Welsh which is based in part on Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid*.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Barnabe Googe, "An Epytaph of Maister Thomas Phayre," *Eglogs, Epytaphes and Sonettes 1563*, ed. Edward Arber, *English Reprints*, 8 (London, 1871; rpt New York, 1966), p. 72; Henrie Charteris, "Ane Adhortatioun of all estatis to the reiding of thir present warkis," in his edition of *The warkis of the famous and vorthie knicht Schir David Lyndsay of the Mont...* (Edinburgh, 1568), st. 3; John Rolland (1570), *Court of Venus*, ed. Walter Gregor, STS 3 (1884), Bk 3, ll. 109-17; John Norden, "The Authors farewell to his Book," *The Labyrinth of Mans Life, or Vertves Delight and Enuiues opposite* (London, 1614); John Langhorne, *Genius and Valor* (1763) and *A Pastoral Poem* (1766), in *The Poetical Works*, ed. J. T. Langhorne (London, 1804); rpt Westmead, 1971), p. 56; Alexander Geddes, "Epistle to the . . . Scottish Society of Antiquaries," in "Three Scottish Poems, with a previous Dissertation on the Scoto-Saxon Dialect," *Trans. of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* 1 (1792), 448, 454; George Dyer, "Ode XVI. Addressed to Dr. Robert Anderson," *Poems* (London, 1801), pp. 89-90.

<sup>8</sup>Lyndsay (1559), *Testament of the Papyngo, The Works of David Lyndesay*, ed. John Small, EETS, 11 (London, 1883), 223-62, ll. 16-36, 430-36; Ramsay (1724), "Familiar Epistles Between Lieutenant William Hamilton and Allan Ramsay," *Poems by Allan Ramsay and Robert Fergusson*, ed. A. M. Kinghorn and Alexander Law (Totowa, NJ, 1974), p. 22, l. 55; MacDiarmid (1926), ed. John Weston (Amherst, 1971), ll. 727-30.

<sup>9</sup>Lattimore, "Witness to Death," *Poems From Three Decades* (New York, 1972), ll. 9-10, 29-32; John Jones (1613), *Troelus a Chresyd*, ed. W. B. Davies (Caerdydd, 1976), pp. 127-39, 158-61.

Finally, what are we to make of the fact that references to Dunbar appear in at least three detective novels, Michael Innes's *Lament For A Makar* and Edmund Crispin's *Holy Disorders* and *The Case of the Gilded Fly*?<sup>10</sup> Given the mystery surrounding Dunbar's life, these references are perhaps peculiarly apt. In any case, the makars, especially Dunbar, seem to exert a hold on the popular, as well as the literary, imagination.

The second question, evaluative vs. descriptive, is no less complex than the question of scope. In fact, it can be fairly stated that all bibliographies are evaluative; the only question is whether evaluation is to be implicit or explicit. If the bibliographer finds a work to be worthless, he can leave it out, or he can include it with his evaluation, or include it with a description but no evaluation. Each of these possible courses of action requires an evaluation by the bibliographer, and any pretense on his part of objectivity should be viewed with profound suspicion. It seems to me that even for a bibliography which is primarily descriptive the second course, inclusion with an evaluation, is probably best. Exclusion may convince the reader that it is the bibliographer who is inept rather than the critic, and inclusion without evaluation does a disservice to both the other entries and the reader. A particular aspect of the question of exclusion affects Gavin Douglas and James I, both of whom were extremely prominent public men and about both of whom much has been written which completely ignores their literary careers. Material of this kind can sometimes shed light on the poetry, even if only indirectly, but literary bibliographies rarely include it. Another kind of evaluation which the bibliographer faces is the problem of length for each entry. Ideally, the length of an entry should be commensurate with the item's importance, itself a determination involving evaluation, but this is not always possible. The complexity of an argument may require a longer entry than its wroth warrants, whereas some far more important studies can often be summarized more succinctly.

What evaluation of any kind, whether silent or overt, leads to is the rewriting of literary-critical history. Since, as we can see, excluded works often become, for all intents and purposes, nonexistent, all bibliography is to some extent, whether deliberately or inadvertently, canonical. A thoroughly objective bibliography is chimerical, and it is up to the bibliographer therefore to discover and make allowances for whatever biases lurk in his material or in himself and to the reader to determine precisely which biases affect a given bibliography before he can use it effectively.

Biases notwithstanding, one of the most significant things a bibliographer learns in the course of compiling his study is the critical history of a given

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<sup>10</sup>Innes (1938; rpt New York, 1961), pp. 61-2, *et passim*; *Holy Disorders* (1945; rpt New York, 1974), p. 146; *Case of the Gilded Fly* (1954; rpt New York, 1980), pp. 12, 159.

author or work; if his bibliography is annotated and organized chronologically, this information becomes available to the reader as well. In the case of Dunbar, for example, his early reputation was based almost exclusively on but three poems, *The Thrissil and the Rois*, *The Goldyn Targe*, and *The Dance of the Sevin Deidly Sinnis*.<sup>11</sup> Most of the other poems had been printed in the eighteenth century, but the nineteenth century was well along before they began to receive anything more than passing attention. Similarly, the only works of Henryson to receive much notice from critics prior to the latter half of the nineteenth century were *The Testament of Cresseid* and *Robyn and Makyne*, and, to a lesser extent, the *Morall Fabillis*.<sup>12</sup> Again, the other poems were known, but critics largely ignored them. The bibliographer also often discovers the origin of critical commonplaces, although these rarely occur where one might reasonably expect to find them. For example, David Laing, in his 1834 edition of Dunbar, is the first to note the absence of James I from Dunbar's list of poets in *Lament for the Makaris*,<sup>13</sup> and much modern criticism of both Henryson and Dunbar has essentially reinvented the wheel by inadvertently repeating what had already been pointed out, though rarely noted, by John Merry Ross more than one hundred years ago.<sup>14</sup>

One of the most curious aspects of bibliography and critical history involves James I and *The Kingis Quair*. Prior to 1896 no one seems to have questioned his authorship, and much of the criticism of the poem to this date is similar to the remarks of the deservedly anonymous observer who, in 1823, praises the *Quair* as "that transcript of <the king's> true feelings, the real story of his loves and fortune, where we get at the history of a monarch's heart, and find the simple affections of human nature throbbing under the ermine."<sup>15</sup> All this changed forever with the publication of J. T. Brown's monograph on the authorship of *The Kingis Quair*. On the basis of both internal and external evidence Brown argued that James was not the

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<sup>11</sup>In W. Scheps and J. A. Looney, *Middle Scots Poets: A Reference Guide to James I of Scotland, Robert Henryson, William Dunbar, and Gavin Douglas* (Boston, 1986), see, e.g., Dunbar 1778.1, 1793.1, 1799.1.

<sup>12</sup>In Scheps and Looney, see e.g., 1640.1, 1763.1, 1873.1.

<sup>13</sup>*The Poems of William Dunbar*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh, 1834), I, 41.

<sup>14</sup>See e.g., *The Book of Scottish Poems: Ancient and Modern* (Paisley, 1882), pp. 129-70; "King James, Henryson and Dunbar," *Scottish History and Literature to the Period of the Reformation*, ed. James Brown (Glasgow, 1884), pp. 132-218.

<sup>15</sup>*The Beauties of Scottish Poets Ancient and Modern* (Glasgow, 1823), pp. 2-3.

author of the *Quair*. He was met with virtually unanimous scorn; the public was not about to give up its royal poet without a fight.<sup>16</sup> But, in spite of the fact that Brown's "evidence" was almost immediately shown to be invalid by his opponents, his study of authorship had the ironic effect of largely removing autobiographical considerations from critical studies of the *Quair*; in fact, it is fair to say that modern criticism of the poem begins with Brown and his opponents, all of whom were for virtually the first time regarding the text as a literary document rather than as a royal curiosity. Before leaving Brown, to whom we all owe a debt of gratitude, we should note that four years after revolutionizing criticism of *The Kingis Quair*, he attempted the same sort of things for the *Wallace* and the *Bruce* but must have been profoundly disappointed when his monograph, *The "Wallace" and the "Bruce" Restudied*,<sup>17</sup> fell into the great void, probably because commoner patriots and warrior kings are of less general interest than kings who fall in love at first sight from a prison window and lament their unfortunate fate in terms which are both Boethian and courtly.

One of the goals of every bibliographer is the correction of errors in previous studies; in making corrections, of course, he invariably adds errors of his own. Word processing should alleviate this problem and, with the proper degree of cooperation from the scholarly community, could virtually eliminate it. The bibliography, in manuscript form, could be sent to scholars in the field for the correction of errors prior to publication. It seems to me that for a bibliography, such pre-publication vetting should be a matter of course, since everyone benefits from an error-free reference work. This practice, were it to be widely adopted, would change the nature, and perhaps the function, of scholarly book reviews as well. Philosophical differences would, of course, still exist, but the reviewer would be spared the tedium of compiling lists of errata, the author the embarrassment of seeing them for the first time publicly, and the reader the angst of wondering how many more exist which the reviewer failed to notice.

As far as Middle Scots bibliography is concerned, a great deal remains to be done. In many ways, the pioneering work of William Geddie in 1912 is still unsurpassed; it includes all Middle Scots writers and its accuracy and good sense are admirable. More recently, the bibliographical work on the makars done by Florence Ridley, in both *Studies in Scottish Literature* and especially in the revision of Wells's *Manual of the Writings in Middle*

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<sup>16</sup>Brown, *The Authorship of "The Kingis Quair": A New Criticism* (Glasgow, 1896). For the authorship controversy, see Scheps and Looney, pp. 27-31 *passim*.

<sup>17</sup>Bonn, 1900.



*English*, has made valuable contributions,<sup>18</sup> as have the annual bibliographies in the *Bibliothek* and the *Scottish Literary Journal*. The reference guide which I compiled with the assistance of Mrs. Looney contains only about twenty percent of the entries we gathered and, of course, terminates in 1978. As I write I can visualize a particularly dingy corner of my basement, the final resting place of a large cardboard box filled to overflowing with thousands of bibliographical slips, the product of a misspent middle age. In the past twelve years a great deal of important scholarship has appeared, not only on the makars but on lesser known Middle Scots writers and works as well, and an annotated bibliographical listing of this material would be of considerable use to all of us, as would a chronologically organized annotated bibliography for writers other than the makars. One can only hope that somewhere out there are the admirable and intrepid individuals who will undertake these projects whose necessity becomes increasingly clearer with each passing year.

*SUNY Stony Brook*

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<sup>18</sup>Geddie, *A Bibliography of Middle Scots Poets*, STS, 61 (Edinburgh and London, 1912); Ridley, "A Check-List, 1956-68, for Study of *The Kingis Quair*, the Poetry of Robert Henryson, Gawin Douglas, and William Dunbar," *SSL*, 8 (July 1970), 30-51; Ridley, "Middle Scots Writers," *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English, 1051-1500*, ed. A. E. Hartung (Hamden, CT, 1973), IV, 961-1060, 1123-1284.