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*Sally Mapstone*

## Was there a Court Literature in Fifteenth-Century Scotland?

With so little space, the best way to answer my question would be to say yes, and to give a lively account of the court of James IV as portrayed through the poetry of William Dunbar. But it would be quite wrong to suggest that court life and courtly literature, even the court poet, had the same character before the 1490s as they were to have after them. Though the literature of the reigns of James I - James III offers us much, it gives us nothing like the exaggerated clarity of the vignettes of court life that we find in Dunbar. The court is the dominant social sphere of his writing, and the king is at its center. Dunbar, moreover, was a regular paid presence (though not as a poet) in the king's household from at least 1500.<sup>1</sup> Of none of those makars we can place from his own catalogue in *Timor Mortis Conturbat me* could all these things so unequivocally be said.

This is a question, then, that needs to be asked of the reigns of the other James who dominate the century up to 1488, but it has rarely been directly confronted. On the contrary, confident assertions about the existence of a fifteenth-century court culture of some significance continue to be made. A number of preconceptions lie behind them. One may be illustrated from Hughes and Ramson's informative *Poetry of the Stewart Court*, a volume primarily concerned with the sixteenth century, but not exclusively so. Holland's *Howlat* (c. 1448) is said to belong to "a provincial culture, that is, to a

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<sup>1</sup>See e.g. J. W. Baxter, *William Dunbar: A Biographical Study* (Edinburgh, 1952), pp. 47, 61.

culture which is modelled on, but removed from the court."<sup>2</sup> The notion here is that the court provided the locus for cultural stimuli, literary composition and imitation. Related preconceptions appear in three other recent discussions of the fifteenth century: John MacQueen's chapter in Jennifer Brown's *Scottish Society in the Fifteenth Century*, the late Denton Fox's contribution to *English (sic) Court Culture in the Later Middle Ages*, and R. J. Lyall's article on "The Court as a Cultural Centre."<sup>3</sup> A recurrent idea is that royal patronage played an important part in fifteenth-century cultural life, following a pattern begun in 1375-6 with the composition of Barbour's *Bruce* in supportive relation to Robert II and the new Stewart dynasty.<sup>4</sup> Thus it is that for MacQueen *Lancelot of the Laik* was "apparently composed during the reign of James III . . . in all probability for the queen, or another lady of the court."<sup>5</sup> And the various Scottish translations of European best-sellers produced during the fifteenth century, to which I will come back anon, are by "translators, no doubt for the most part under royal patronage."<sup>6</sup> For Lyall, too, the role of kings is an important one. *The Buke of Gud Counsall* or, as it will be known here, *De Regimine Principum*, is a "royal commission" and "the court over which James III presided was probably the most cultured that Scotland had seen."<sup>7</sup> All regard the real flowering of what Fox calls a "definite tradition" of court writing in Dunbar and Douglas as having long roots in the previous ninety years.<sup>8</sup> All also accept, of course, that there was patronage outside the court, and that there was a

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<sup>2</sup>Joan Hughes and W. I. Ramson, ed., *Poetry of the Stewart Court* (Canberra, 1982), p. 18.

<sup>3</sup>John MacQueen, "The Literature of Fifteenth-Century Scotland" in Jennifer M. Brown, ed., *Scottish Society in the Fifteenth Century* (London, 1977), pp. 184-208; Denton Fox, "Middle Scottish Poets and Patrons" in V. J. Scattergood and J. W. Sherborne, ed., *English Court Culture in the Later Middle Ages* (London, 1983), pp. 109-27; R. J. Lyall, "The Court as a Cultural Centre," *History Today*, 34 (1984), 27-33.

<sup>4</sup>See Fox, p. 110; Lyall, p. 28.

<sup>5</sup>MacQueen, p. 193: see his *Ballatis of Luve* (Edinburgh, 1970), where the poem is also conceived as written for Margaret of Denmark, James' wife, and "the convention of the dream-vision poem . . . used to signify what in fact is an appeal on the part of the poet for some kind of patronage" (p. xxv).

<sup>6</sup>MacQueen, "Literature of Fifteenth-Century Scotland," p. 193.

<sup>7</sup>Lyall, pp. 29, 30.

<sup>8</sup>Fox, p. 118.

growing literate audience, lay and clerical, throughout the century. But for all of them the "court" is primarily the country's cultural center and the monarchs and their "courtiers" the most significant collective audience.

On the face of it such judgments appear perfectly fair because Scotland seems to slip so easily into the broader European picture. There are those fifteenth-century Scottish versions of the European best-sellers delivered to monarchs and their courtiers. Scotland has its translations of the *Secretum Secretorum*, the *Ludus Scaccorum* and *De Re Militari*. It has its *Troy Book*, its Alexander romances, its chronicles in Latin and the vernacular. It has indeed its advice to princes tradition—one of the most common motifs in the surviving fifteenth-century corpus.

But before one proceeds along such reassuring lines a few more hard questions should be asked about this material and these assumptions. To return to the examples cited above: What was the "court" of 1448 that was supposed to be providing literary models for the provincial *Howlat*? James II had hardly emerged from his minority and the Crichtons and Douglases were jockeying for power. This sort of royal power vacuum was in fact one which was repeated throughout the century. All the James' reigns opened with periods of kingly absence. In the first instance through James I's eighteen-year imprisonment in England. In the case of the next three kings, though significantly less with James IV, through the early deaths of their fathers and subsequent periods of minority rule. It is not only that the Scottish court was a peripatetic one;<sup>9</sup> it also regularly lacked for long periods a firm center in the presence of a mature king. It is surely unwise to refer to the "court" in this period as if its constitution and character were largely unchanging. This was far from the case.

Continuing with our examples, *Lancelot of the Laik* is notoriously hard to date, but there is nothing to link it definitely with the reign or court of James III. And there is much in its moralistic and political material to suggest that it was aimed at a broader audience than courtly ladies. It is a good example of a text that it would be dangerous to assume had an entirely courtly audience just because it contains "courtly" material. Denton Fox's simple but important point that "the very existence of *The Thre Prestis of Peblis* and *The Talis of the Fyve Bestes* presupposes a reading public"<sup>10</sup> of a kind not necessarily confined to the court could certainly be extended to

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<sup>9</sup>See Jennifer M. Brown, "The Exercise of Power" in *Scottish Society in the Fifteenth Century*, p. 43; Jenny Wormald, *Court, Kirk and Community, Scotland 1470-1625*, The New History of Scotland, 4 (London, 1981), 14. On the "highly developed" peripatetic court life of James IV, see Baxter, pp. 49-50.

<sup>10</sup>Fox, p. 117.

*Lancelot of the Laik*. We know too from the composition of Wyntoun's chronicle in the 1420s for Sir John Wemyss, the laird of Kincaldrum and Reres, and from Bower's Latin *Scotichronicon* in the 1440s for Sir David Stewart of Rosyth, a minor member of a cadet branch of the country's ruling family, emphatically "not in the magnate class,"<sup>11</sup> that the lower, uncourtly nobility had literary interests. This is further confirmed by R. J. Lyall's work on book ownership in the fifteenth century.<sup>12</sup> Without venturing far into the debate on the extent of lay literacy at this time,<sup>13</sup> I would merely say that this sort of material leads me to conclude that it has regularly been underestimated.

I am not seeking here to deny the importance of an aristocratic audience, but to take the emphasis away from the royal court as the main center for literary stimulus and composition and to challenge the importance of royal patronage.<sup>14</sup> For this is indeed what a longer examination of those translations and best-sellers should tell us. In fifteenth-century England such works are continually dedicated to (amongst others) monarchs: Lydgate's *Troy Book* for Henry V, his version of the *Secretum* for Henry VI; Hoccleve's *Regement* for Henry V; Hardyng's *Chronicle* for Henry VI then Edward IV. French rulers have an even greater and more munificent tradition of patronage throughout the century. In stark contrast, only two fifteenth-century Scottish works can be shown to have any direct connection with a monarch. If a tradition of commissioning vernacular literature got started with Robert II, the evidence we now have suggests that it largely fizzled out until well over a century later, when John Ireland dedicated *The Meroure of Wyssdome* to James IV. The one vernacular exception is the French lament on the dauphiness Margaret, translated into Scots "ad praeceptum inclitae memoriae regis Jacobi secundi, fratris eiusdem dominae" [by command of that lady's brother, King James II of famous memory]. A case has also been made for

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<sup>11</sup>Alexander Grant, "The Higher Nobility in Scotland and their Estates, c. 1371-1424" (D. Phil. thesis, University of Oxford, 1975), p. 302.

<sup>12</sup>R. J. Lyall, "Books and Book Owners in Fifteenth-century Scotland" in Jeremy Griffiths and Derek Pearsall, ed., *Book Production and Publishing in Britain, 1375-1475* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 239-56.

<sup>13</sup>For recent discussion: Fox, pp. 123-4; Alexander Grant, *Independence and Nationhood, Scotland 1306-1469*, *The New History of Scotland*, 3 (London, 1983), 101-6; Lyall, "Books and Book Owners," pp. 243-4, 250-53; Roger Mason, "Kingship, Tyranny and the Right to Resist in Fifteenth-Century Scotland," *Scottish Historical Review*, 66 (1987), 137; Wormald, *Court, Kirk, and Community*, pp. 68-71.

<sup>14</sup>See the comments in this volume by Priscilla Bawcutt, pp. 254-70.

James II's patronage of *De Regimine Principum*, but I remain unconvinced that the lines "My soverane Lord, sen thou hes gevin me leif/To fynd faltis that forfaltis to thy croun" refer to a royal commission.<sup>15</sup> In the learned language we have Ireland's Latin theological compositions for James II in the 1470s and 1480s. This does not amount to very much in the form of royal patronage. This distinctive difference in the character of Scottish patronage is one that has been neglected. Perhaps one explanation has been the too ready assimilation of Scotland to ideas of "court culture" inherited from other European nations, from which it in fact differed. This is certainly the way, for example, Scottish material is handled in R. F. Green's *Poets and Princepleasers*, where it is liberally mixed in with English, French and Burgundian sources, and David Lindsay, a sixteenth-century poet, is discussed in relation to fourteenth and fifteenth-century "court" writers.<sup>16</sup>

What the revisionist researches of the past two decades of Scottish historians should have taught us is the necessity of judging Scottish political, and hence cultural, life on its own terms.<sup>17</sup> All the fifteenth-century Scottish kings were highly interested in wielding power and had, especially in the case of James III, a well developed sense of their own importance. But the periods of minority created for each of them the requirement that substantial parts of their reigns be devoted to re-establishing royal authority. And it was an authority that found its expression more in the acquisition of land than in the commissioning of literature.<sup>18</sup> The dispensation of literary patronage, particularly in the vernacular, was not high on their list of priorities. Had they really been active patrons and their households centers of composition we might expect more examples of poets showing and sharing associations with each other than we possess. Much has been made of the fact that James III commissioned a few MSS, but this is as nothing compared with Charles V's campaign of literary patronage throughout the second half of the fourteenth century, or, closer to home, the long-term interest in vernacular liter-

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<sup>15</sup>For the elegy see F. J. H. Skene, ed., *Liber Pluscardensis*, 2 vols (Edinburgh, 1877-80), I, 382. On *De Regimine Principum*, see Lyall, "Court as a Cultural Centre," p. 29.

<sup>16</sup>Richard Firth Green, *Poets and Princepleasers: Literature and the English Court in the Late Middle Ages* (Toronto, 1980), esp. pp. 135-67.

<sup>17</sup>In addition to the publications by Jennifer Brown (now Wormald) and Alexander Grant cited at nn. 9 and 13 above., see also Jenny Wormald, "Taming the Magnates?" in K. J. Stringer, ed., *Essays on the Nobility of Medieval Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1985), pp. 370-80, and Norman Macdougall, *James III: A Political Study* (Edinburgh, 1982).

<sup>18</sup>Brown, "The Exercise of Power," pp. 36-8; Wormald, *Court, Kirk and Community*, pp. 11-13.

ature of the Sinclairs, or Whitelaw and Scheves' concentrated acquisitions of a personal library.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, there is a further set of distinctions to be made here. The largest exercises of an interest in book collection that we can see in this century are by the clerics, Whitelaw, Scheves, Elphinstone. Scheves had a certain interest in Scottish history (we know that he commissioned a local scribe Magnus Makculloch to copy Bower's *Scotichronicon*), but for the most part their interests are primarily in non-Scottish works in the learned language: from Whitelaw's Lucan and Sallust to Elphinstone's annotated copy of Tudeschis' commentary on the *Decretals*.<sup>20</sup> Literature of this varied sort, along with lighter works in English and French would undoubtedly have formed a major part of the cultural lives of such men. In this sense James III did certainly preside over a court with a rich cultural life and literature. But how significant this king's role in such a circle was is a debatable point to which I will return. And when we turn back to the question of the composition of literature in the Scottish vernacular it remains the case that it is to the political peripheries, the households of upper and lower nobility, and religious institutions, that we must look.

Such a judgment fits in well with another aspect of Scottish political life. It was far less socially centralized and administratively streamlined than many of its European counterparts. Parliaments and general councils were still sporadic assemblies, which by no means all of the entitled nobility and clergy made concerted efforts to attend. The administration of justice remained a highly localized affair and none of the four James found a satisfactory answer to the problem of dealing with the profusion of appeals that made their way up from the various local courts to the shifting series of central bodies set up to deal with them.<sup>21</sup> During the second half of the

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<sup>19</sup>On James' MSS, MacQueen, "Literature of Fifteenth-Century Scotland," pp. 193-4; Lyall, "Court as a Cultural Centre," 31. On Charles V, Diana B. Tyson, "French Vernacular History Writers and their Patrons in the Fourteenth Century," *Medievalia et Humanistica*, 14 (1986), 103-24; C. Meale, "Patrons, Buyers and Owners: Book Production and Social Status," in Griffiths and Pearsall, ed., *Book Production and Publishing*, pp. 202-6; on the Sinclairs, MacQueen, "Literature of Fifteenth-Century Scotland," pp. 197-8; Lyall, "Books and Book Owners," pp. 250-53. On Whitelaw and Scheves, MacQueen, "Literature of Fifteenth-Century Scotland," p. 194; Lyall, "Court as a Cultural Centre," 30-31, "Books and Book Owners," pp. 245-50.

<sup>20</sup>On Elphinstone's books, Leslie J. Macfarlane, "William Elphinstone's Library," *Aberdeen University Review*, 37 (1958), 253-71, and *William Elphinstone and the Kingdom of Scotland, 1431-1514* (Aberdeen, 1985), pp. 32-5.

<sup>21</sup>Brown, "The Exercise of Power," pp. 43-6. For more detail, see James S. Robertson, "The Development of the Law," in Brown, ed., *Scottish Society in the Fifteenth Century*, pp. 136-52.

century, however, we do see the emergence of important career statesmen: the professional clerics, Whitelaw, Scheves, Elphinstone, and nobles such as Argyll and Avandale, who were to be the closest counsellors of successive monarchs on a daily basis.<sup>22</sup> Yet we should remember that while these people were nearest to the king "at court," in his household, they also had their own estates, and, for the clerics, ambits of influence. To Argyll's wife for example are attributed a number of Gaelic lyrics sung in the Highland "courts."<sup>23</sup> For such people the king's household was but one sphere of their cultural lives.

That said, it is now important to distinguish between reigns. We are on shaky ground here, because of difficulties in dating, but revealing differences can still be noted.

The reign of James I is dominated by the *Kingis Quair*. Whether he wrote it or not, it is also suggested in Bower's *Scotichronicon* that James I had the sort of interest in the literary arts that seems to have skipped a couple of generations before coming through again in James IV.<sup>24</sup> Works that bear relation to the *Kingis Quair* in subject matter and literary language, such as the *Quare of Jelusy*, *Lancelot of the Laik* and *Buik of King Alexander*, provide a slim trend for a taste for fine amour and things chivalric that continues in the fifteenth century into the copying of MS Arch. into Selden B 24 (containing the *Kingis Quair* along with Chaucerian and Lydgatian pieces) at the end of the 1480s. But what does it really mean to call such varied pieces "courtly"? The Selden MS is associated with the Sinclair household, not with the royal court.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, it has been claimed, perhaps plausibly, that the 1438 *Buik of King Alexander* was begun during the reign of James I under that monarch's literary influence, and that "James' courtiers formed the audience for which it was intended" after his death.<sup>26</sup> But that after 1437 there was much promotion at "court," whatever that then was, of literary ac-

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<sup>22</sup>The concept of the "daily counsellor" is that of Trevor M. Chalmers in his invaluable thesis, "The King's Council, Patronage, and the Governance of Scotland, 1460-1513" (Ph.D. thesis, Aberdeen University, 1982).

<sup>23</sup>MacQueen, ed., *Ballattis of Luve*, pp. lxix, 142-5.

<sup>24</sup>On James "tanquam alterum Orpheum," see D. R. Watt, ed., *Scotichronicon* by Walter Bower, vol. 8, Books XV and XVI (Aberdeen, 1987), p. 304. For opposing views on the status of the *Kingis Quair* as a poem of the "Scottish Court," MacQueen, p. 198; Fox, p. 111.

<sup>25</sup>See especially Llyall, "Books and Book Owners," pp. 250-53.

<sup>26</sup>MacQueen, ed., *Ballattis of Luve*, p. xxii.



tivity looks less likely. On reflection it seems more probable that in the tortuous politics following the murder of James I by some of his "courtiers" in 1437 those remaining may have found their literary entertainment just as much in their own homes. The court would reappear as an important place for literary transmission and exchange as James II came out of his minority, but it was not essentially a forum for composition or an enclave for courtly writers. This would continue to be the case for much of the next two reigns.

In the reign of James II there is far more direct evidence for the production of Scottish literature outwith the court than inside it. Bower's *Scotichronicon* was written at Inchcolm, Holland's *Howlat* at Darnaway castle, Hay's translations for Sinclair at Roslyn. Of their authors, Bower is the exception: "Himself a magnate," after his translation to Inchcolm and one who is judged by the editors of the *Scotichronicon* to have "presumably frequented the court . . . of James I and II."<sup>27</sup> The rapid dissemination of his chronicle may be explained more in terms of the status of its author than of its initial patron, Stewart of Rosyth. Nevertheless, the title of court writer hardly suits Bower. In no sense was he an official historiographer of the kind appointed by French rulers.<sup>28</sup> Bower looks hopefully to the new young king at the beginning and ending of his work, but he does not write directly on his behalf. Holland and Hay have even more to link them to their noble patron's households than to the king's. It was their patrons who would have had reason to be in the king's entourage. Archibald Douglas, Earl of Moray, as one of those attending parliaments and supporting his brother's edgy dealings with James; and William Sinclair, Earl of Orkney and Caithness, as a man up and coming in the 1450s and for a brief time (coinciding with Hay's composition of the prose works) the king's chancellor and one of his advisors.<sup>29</sup> Yet if Hay and Holland were not yet "court" writers as Dunbar was to be, the court of James II was still a significant forum for the reception of their material. It is in this light, as R. J. Lyall has also suggested, that we should view Holland's *Howlat*.<sup>30</sup> The poem may have been designed initially for Moray and his wife, but, like the *Scotichronicon*, it looks for a

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<sup>27</sup>Watt, ed., *Scotichronicon*, 8, xvii.

<sup>28</sup>See the discussion of Kathleen Daly, "'The Vraie Cronique d'Escoce' and Franco-Scottish Diplomacy: an Historical Work by John Ireland?" *Nottingham Medieval Studies*, 35 (1991), 106-33.

<sup>29</sup>On Sinclair's career from the 1450s onwards, Barbara E. Crawford, "William Sinclair, Earl of Orkney, and his Family: a Study in the Politics of Survival," in Stringer, ed., *Nobility of Scotland*, pp. 232-53.

<sup>30</sup>Lyall, "Court as a Cultural Centre," pp. 29-30.

wider audience. In its assertive and faintly aggressive demonstration of the long-standing loyalty and might of the Douglasses; and in, strikingly, its deliberate recasting of a version of events in Barbour's *Bruce*, a poem composed firmly from a Stewart perspective, the *Howlat* makes a claim for the importance of the Douglasses precisely when James II was seeking to curtail it. The *Howlat*, then, has a two-stage audience, with an eye ultimately to the king and those about him.

It is also in this light that we should see two other texts which give us a sense of the nature of "courtly" currency. The most courtly work of James II's reign in the sense of the one most concerned with the workings of the king's government, is *De Regimine Principum*. It is found earliest in the *Liber Pluscardensis*, a Latin chronicle concluded around 1461 but commenced in the reign of James II, and I would date the poem itself around 1455.<sup>31</sup> *De Regimine Principum* is a programmatic and detailed poem, full of legal allusion and quotation in a manner that anticipates an informed audience, undoubtedly clerical as well as noble. It is in fact the outstanding fifteenth-century example of a poem that comes from the heart of "court" politics. Like the *Howlat* it was a popular piece that continued to be copied and printed for over another hundred years. But not previously remarked is its relationship to other contemporary works. First, the "Regiment" section of Gilbert Hay's *Buik of King Alexander the Conquerour*, commonly if insecurely dated around 1460, has incontrovertible links in phrasing and content with *De Regimine Principum*.<sup>32</sup> The *Alexander* was written for Lord Erskine, a man not in the favored ranks of James II's counsellors, but one who had occasion to make his presence felt about that king in the 1450s in pursuit of his family's long and unsuccessful claim to the earldom of Mar.<sup>33</sup> *De Regimine* has further links too in tenor and content to the *Liber Pluscardensis* chronicle in which it was inserted.<sup>34</sup> Relationships like these (unless all these works are by Hay alone) illuminate a currency of ideas and arguments between milieux as apparently unconnected as the households of Sinclair and Erskine and the Abbey of Pluscarden. The logical conclusion to be

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<sup>31</sup>A conclusion formed on the basis of its links to contemporary parliamentary legislation; discussed at more length in my forthcoming study of the advice to princes tradition in Scotland.

<sup>32</sup>Discussed in *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup>Macdougall, *James III*, pp. 39-41; Annie I. Dunlop, *The Life and Times of James Kennedy, Bishop of St. Andrews*, St. Andrews University Publications, 46 (Edinburgh, 1950), pp. 183-6. This is the second Lord Erskine, the first having died in 1452.

<sup>34</sup>Discussed at length in my forthcoming study.

drawn from such material is that this is a literature not dependent upon the royal court or king for its production, but one which reflects the views of individuals who had in common a presence at parliaments, court sittings and councils, and who shared their literary interests together.

What, by contrast, is curious about the reign of James III is the absence both of works with the precise critical engagement of *De Regimine* and, for what was after all, a longer reign, a comparable amount of royal, aristocratic or clerical patronage of vernacular literature by those with close attachments to the royal court. This is a view antithetical to that still often given. The reign of James III has often been a dumping-ground for literature argued to be informed criticism of the many failings of that unpopular king, literature composed, in other words, with strong reference to the king's household.<sup>35</sup> *Lancelot of the Laik*, Henryson's *Fables*, *The Thre Prestis of Peblis* and others have been seen as alluding to the inadequacies of his rule. In an important article R. J. Lyall demonstrated the conventionality of much of this so-called criticism, and the recent work of Norman Macdougall has shown how far the image of James III on which such judgments were based was the confection of prejudiced sixteenth-century historians.<sup>36</sup> It remains that James III was an unappealing man; but he was pushy rather than vacillating, strong-willed rather than weak. I think we can take these conclusions even further, building here on the point made earlier about a fifteenth-century reading public. The dates of the fifteenth-century works I am about to mention are more or less insecure, but along with *Lancelot* (possibly earlier than the reign of James III) and the *Thre Prestis* (possibly later) should be considered *The Talis of the Fyve Bestes* and *The Buke of the Chess*.<sup>37</sup> All of them, and oth-

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<sup>35</sup>For example, Robin Fulton, "Social Criticism in Scottish Literature, 1450-1560" (Ph.D. thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1972); Robert L. Kindrick, *Robert Henryson* (Boston, 1979), *passim*; Macdougall, *James III*, pp. 270-72; T. D. Robb, ed., *The Thre Prestis of Peblis*, STS, 2nd Series, 8 (1920), ix-xiv; Bertram Vogel, "Secular Politics and the Date of *Lancelot of the Laik*," in *Studies in Philology*, 40 (1943), 1-13.

<sup>36</sup>R. J. Lyall, "Politics and Poetry in Fifteenth and Sixteenth Century Scotland," *Scottish Literary Journal*, 3 (1976), 5-29; Macdougall, *James III*, esp. pp. 269-98, and "The Sources: A Reappraisal of the Legend," in Brown, ed., *Scottish Society in the Fifteenth Century*, pp. 17-32.

<sup>37</sup>The most significant recent discussion of the dating of *Lancelot of the Laik* is in an unpublished paper by R. J. Lyall which argues that the poem's prologue is a late fifteenth-century addition to a work composed before 1460 and possibly as early as the second quarter of the century. During discussion of my paper here, Walter Scheps suggested that stylistic influence of *Lancelot of the Laik* on Hary's *Wallace* gave the former at least a *terminus ad quem* of 1478. On the dating of the *Thre Prestis of Peblis* see Craig McDonald, "The Thre

ers, may well be taking a more broadly based moral line in their use of political material precisely because they are written for an audience quite removed from the court—that literate audience which we all accept was growing throughout the century. Indeed, from the evidence we now have, it is arguable that there was a falling off of patronage of vernacular Scottish literature on the part of the king and higher aristocracy during the reign of James III and of the court as a significant place for its transmission. But this not to argue that the king and his noble courtiers were interested in more high-flown literary things. Whitelaw, Scheves and Elphinstone had their learned collections, but the degree to which James and his unclerical courtiers were really intellectually influenced by their cultured counterparts may not have been as great as some would like to think. Did James read his copy of Vergil, or did he prefer his more low-brow *Mandeville's Travels*? John Ramsay's commissioning of a copy of Magninus' *Regimen Sanitatis* has been instanced as showing the influence of how the "vital intellectual life" of Scheves and the others rubbed off on James' close servants.<sup>38</sup> But anyone who has actually read this turgid account of diet, menstruation and hygiene would find it hard to regard as a good indicator of a vital and healthy intellectual life. There was probably a considerable gap between the tastes of king, noble, courtiers and clerics, but neither group seems to have done much, for most of the reign, to promote the Scottish vernacular. Perhaps Patrick Johnson was making vernacular entertainments in the *ludi* he prepared for James III,<sup>39</sup> but there is little reason to think that many other of those distant "makars" named by Dunbar were figures dependent on patronage from the king or those closely about him.<sup>40</sup>

It is surely revealing that the two most important writers of the 1470s and 1480s, Hary and Robert Henryson are both definitely composing outside the king's court. The *Wallace*, rather like the *Howlat* earlier, is a poem designed for a double audience. Commissioned by the southern lairds Craigie and Liddale, it had, as M. P. McDiarmid has shown, a propagandistic purpose that reached towards the king's household in opposing James III's rap-

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*Prestis of Peblis* and *The Meroure of Wyssdome*: A Possible Relationship" in *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 17 (1982), 153-64.

<sup>38</sup>Lyall, "Court as a Cultural Centre," p. 31.

<sup>39</sup>Anna Jean Mill, *Medieval Plays in Scotland*, St. Andrews University Publications, 24 (Edinburgh and London, 1927), pp. 57-8, 75.

<sup>40</sup>See here the argument of R. J. Lyall, "Two of Dunbar's Makars: James Afflak and Sir John the Ross," *Innes Review*, 22 (1976), 99-109.

prochements with England.<sup>41</sup> There are still many people who would like to see Henryson's *Fables* as having a similar function.<sup>42</sup> This is to mistake their character and the general context of the times. The *Fables* are certainly accurate in their legalistic criticism, but the problems they denounce were recurrent ones, and the same is true of their treatment of kingship. The *Fables* hit targets precisely but are not aimed at individuals. And while Dunfermline may not entirely deserve to be called a "cultural center," a phrase that makes it sound uninvitingly like a modern "theme park," its abbey did supply Henryson with a ready and educated audience.<sup>43</sup> Nor does he seem actively concerned with patronage. The ironic cadence of the way in which the *Fables* are described as being written "be requeist and precept of ane lord/Of quhome the name it neidis not record" (ll. 34-5) may be compared with the deliberate way in which the names of Hay's patrons are recorded in his works or how Hary pays tribute to Wallace and Liddale. The impact of his poetry at the court was probably of less importance to Henryson than some have like to make—not least perhaps because that "court" had no strong interest in Scottish literature.

There are some signs however that the decline of James III's court as a center for exchange and vernacular composition did not persist up to the end of the reign, but that there may have been an even slightly sinister sea-change in the last few years. Towards the end of his reign, James III was becoming an ever more capricious king, whose self-esteem appears to have inflated as his public withdrawal increased. His commissioning of new coinage featuring himself in the imperial crown was a belated example of a self-importance that was soon to display itself more worryingly for his noble subjects in sudden interventions in local justice and in the sacking of his long-serving chancellor Argyll.<sup>44</sup> We should not forget, therefore, that it was in the last part of James III's reign that John Ireland began his *Meroure of Wyssdome*. Did

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<sup>41</sup>M. P. McDiarmid, ed., *Hary's Wallace*, 2 vols, STS, 4th Series, 4-5 (1968-9), I, xiv-xxvi.

<sup>42</sup>E. g. Kindrick, *Henryson, passim*; R. L. Nicholson, *Scotland, The Later Middle Ages*, (Edinburgh, 1974), pp. 500-20; Nicolai von Kreisler, "Henryson's Visionary Fable: Tradition and Craftsmanship in 'The Lion and the Mouse,'" *Texas Studies in Language and Literature*, 15 (1973), 405-22. See now Steven R. McKenna, "Legends of James III and the Problem of Henryson's Topicality," *Scottish Literary Journal*, 17 (1990), 5-20.

<sup>43</sup>MacQueen, "Literature of Fifteenth-Century Scotland," p. 184.

<sup>44</sup>Macdougall, *James III*, pp. 98, 244-5. A less critical view of James III is found in Macfarlane's *Elphinstone*.

James III, aggravated by the popularity of the *Wallace* begin at last to see that his court too might generate propagandistic literature of its own?

Some explanation, too, needs to be found for the plethora of literary recopying around the late 1480s. MSS recopied include not only the controversial *Wallace*, but also the *Bruce* (twice), Hay's prose works, three *Liber Pluscardenses*, Arch. Selden, B 24, part of the MS containing *Lancelot of the Laik* and many others.<sup>45</sup> All this in a period before the renaissance of the arts associated with James IV. Were men in a time of political anxiety looking back into their national literary traditions to find reassurance or explanations? Or had, rather late in the day, the king's initiative stimulated an interest in vernacular literature that had been dormant for a couple of decades? A stimulus that would continue with the emergence of Kennedy and Dunbar, or of a writer such as Stobo from the ranks of those who may have been involved in some of the recopying. The renaissance of the reign of James IV may have its origin in the late flowering of the reign of the de-spised James III.

Was there a court literature in fifteenth-century Scotland, then? Yes, up to a point; but in so far as it took the form of literature written by Scots it was an erratic and changing one, a literature that more often came to the court than from it, and in which the role of the monarch as patron or dedicatee was a noticeably low-key one. And despite the important presences of Dunbar and Lindsay it was to continue to be slow to grow. Not really until the reign of James IV's great grandson James VI, can we speak of a thriving body of writers about a Scottish monarch. But it was to the fifteenth and not the sixteenth century that my comments were supposed to be confined.

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<sup>45</sup>Information from R. J. Lyall's "Fifteenth-Century Scottish Manuscripts: a Further Revised Checklist," presented at the Fourth International Conference for Medieval and Renaissance Scottish Literature, University of Mainz—Germersheim, July 1984.