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R. J. Lyall

"A New Maid Channoun"? Redefining the Canonical in Medieval and Renaissance Scottish Literature

Among the frequently-conflicting trends which have affected critical scholarship over the past generation, none has been more characteristic than the realization that criticism, like the texts which it studies, is historically bound. And nowhere is the historical relativism more apparent than in attitudes towards the formation of literary canons, where assumptions long unchallenged have been shown to be serving the specific cultural needs of dominant critical communities and the societies which maintain them. Symposia in several scholarly journals have focussed upon the question of canonicity¹ and the traditional canons of English, American and other literatures have been subjected to radical analysis on gender, racial, generic and other theoretical grounds. The thrust of this work is to show, in the words of a reviewer of one of these collections, that "all apparently monolithic canons are transitory cultural fictions forged by specific and discernible cultural mechanisms as well as historical pressures."²

Understanding this fundamental principle enables us to see how even the best-established canonical judgments serve ideological purposes. The evolution of the English poetic canon was in many respects a nationalist enterprise, disguised by the belief that such processes are ideologically value-free and by

¹Two of the more important are: *Critical Inquiry*, 19 (1983), subsequently re-issued as *Canons*, ed. Robert van Halberg (Chicago, 1984); and *Modern Language Studies*, 18 (1988).

²Louis A. Renza, "Exploding Canons," *Contemporary Criticism*, 29 (1987), 261.

the English conviction that nationalism is a vice exhibited by other people. And, as I propose soon to demonstrate elsewhere, the Scottish literary canon, especially as it has emerged since the publication of Gregory Smith's *Scottish Literature: Character and Influence* (1919), has been no less nationalist, privileging works which foreground their Scottishness at the expense of texts which are more universal in their style and/or content. This tendency has, as one might expect, been more evident with works produced since the union of the crowns in 1603, and especially since the Act of Union in 1707: it is possible to identify a whole succession of Scottish writers—James Thomson, James Boswell, Henry Mackenzie, Margaret Oliphant, Catherine Carswell, Muriel Spark, to name just half a dozen of the more obvious ones—who have either been ceded to the English canon or ignored completely because their work did not deal overtly enough with questions of Scottish identity. A thorough review of these covert processes of canon-formation is evidently overdue.

I should make it clear at the outset that I do not believe that we can aspire to escape completely from the canonical. It's not just that academic institutions will always have finite time and students limited budgets, or that literary histories and anthologies have limited numbers of pages; it is also the experience of the overwhelming majority of readers that certain texts are more enjoyable and rewarding than others. For all its institutionalization by the "academy," the canon is equally underpinned by the reading preferences—however bound these may themselves be by cultural assumptions—of whole communities. No amount of constructive reevaluation of the canonical will convince me, or I suspect any reader, that the Scottish *Saints' Lives* or *Ratis Raving* has an equal claim on our attention to that of Henryson's *Morall Fabillis* or Douglas's *Aeneid*, although I might be able to persuade you that the latter deserves greater prominence than it generally receives. If canons are inevitable, however, we *can* insist that they are subjected to continual scrutiny, and that their underlying assumptions are brought into the open and fully debated.

Let us begin by looking at the established canon of Older Scots literature as it has been defined over the past century. Its main lines are clear enough: it is built around the unquestionably great figures of Henryson and Dunbar, whose works dominate the literary histories, the anthologies and the critical literature. Barbour and James I (if we may now safely take him to be the author of the *Kingis Quair*) precede them, Gavin Douglas is a secondary light at the court of James IV, while the succession to the two greatest makars is generally recognized to have passed to Lindsay—principally by virtue of *The Thrie Estaitis*—and, perhaps, to Alexander Scott. It would, clearly, be absurd to challenge the importance of any of these poets. *The Brus* is an extraordinary blend of chronicle and romance, the *Kingis Quair* an intricate al-

legory, in Major's words "a most elegant little book." We are only now beginning to realize the full extent of Henryson's narrative mastery, while Dunbar ranks among the greatest vernacular rhetoricians of the Middle Ages. The other three I have named have so far received, if anything, rather less than their due: Douglas rivals Dunbar in rhetorical skill and adds a substantial measure of humanist rigor; Lindsay's poetry deserves as much attention as his unquestionably splendid play; while Scott, despite the spirited attempts of Professor MacQueen to rescue his lyrics from oblivion,³ has still not been generally recognized as the subtle and innovative craftsman that he undoubtedly was.

Even so, this received version of the Older Scots canon falls far short of telling the whole story. It excludes, most obviously, a number of fine individual works which suffer from their anonymity: *Rauf Coilyear*, *The Freiris of Berwik*, and *King Hart*, to name just three. Were these three poems the work of a single known poet—Sandy Traill, let us say, or Clerk of Tranent—there can be little doubt that they would figure prominently in the canon. But scholars and critics are nervous in the face of works of uncertain provenance and chronology, and the result has been the marginalization of texts which hover uncertainly in the later fifteenth or earlier sixteenth century. Attempts have been made to associate these works and others like them with the corpus of the greater makars: *The Freiris of Berwik* with Dunbar; *King Hart* with Douglas; *The Thre Prestis of Peblis* with Henryson.⁴ But there is no real evidence to support such ascriptions, and they are based upon the fallacious view that only the accepted members of the canonical club were capable of producing accomplished verse. It is, certainly, inconvenient not to know who wrote (say) *King Hart*, or even whether it was produced before or after *The Goldyn Targe* and *The Palice of Honoure*, but its isolation does not detract from the ingenuity of its allegorical structure or the metaphysical subtlety of its argument. Any view of the Older Scots canon which finds no room for such key anonymous texts is simply too narrow to do justice to the richness of later medieval Scottish poetry.

³See, in particular, "Alexander Scott and Scottish Court Poetry of the Middle Sixteenth Century," *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 54 (1968), 93-116; and *Ballatis of Luve*, ed. John MacQueen (Edinburgh, 1970), pp. xxxv-lxiii.

⁴*The Freiris of Berwik* was first attributed to Dunbar, and *King Hart* to Douglas (on no very good grounds in either case) by James Pinkerton in *Ancient Scottish Poems* (London, 1786); for the ascription of *The Thre Prestis of Peblis* to Henryson, see Ronald MacDonald, "Henryson and the *Thre Prestis of Peblis*," *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, 51 (1967), 168-77. The *King Hart* question is conclusively dealt with by Priscilla Bawcutt, "Did Gavin Douglas write *King Hart*?" in *Medium Aevum*, 28 (1959), 31-47; and by Florence Ridley, "Did Gawin Douglas write *King Hart*?" in *Speculum*, 34 (1959), 402-12.

If criteria of authorship have drawn the canon too narrowly, so too have generic considerations. A preference for moral, satirical and amatory verse, for example, has drawn us away from the notable but much more diffuse tradition of the Scots romance. You may feel that having myself declared recently that "Older Scots prose was slow to develop and sparse in its achievement,"⁵ I am in no position to cast stones. And the truth is that the justified contention that it was in verse that medieval Scotland produced its finest literary achievements has often blinded critics to the significant elements which *did* exist in the prose tradition. Nowhere, perhaps, is this prejudice more evident than in the case of John Ireland, whose *Meroure of Wysdome* is a thoroughly underrated work which demonstrates its author's command of a wide range of discursive styles. It is true that the full extent of the *Meroure's* significance has been obscured by the lack of a complete edition—an omission now rectified by Craig McDonald's edition of Books VI and VII in the Scottish Text Society series—and by the fact that the STS version is, while admirable in its scholarship, surely among the least user-friendly of medieval texts. It is also true that the work of Dr. McDonald, Dr. Mapstone and others has demonstrated that much of Ireland's work is quietly purloined from elsewhere, and that further research is revealing yet more sources for substantial tracts of the *Meroure*.⁶ Yet none of this detracts from the scope and the rhetorical skill of Ireland's prose, or from the sheer ambitiousness of the project of writing a fairly technical theological treatise in vernacular Scots.

Ireland's work goes far beyond that of his fifteenth-century predecessors, but he is succeeded by a number of significant prose writers, including John Bellenden and his anonymous fellow-translator of Hector Boece, the author

⁵"Prose before Knox," *The History of Scottish Literature . . . Origins to 1660*, ed. R. D. S. Jack (Aberdeen, 1988), p. 163.

⁶On Ireland's use of Gerson, see Roger Mason, "Kingship, Tyranny and the Right to Resist in Fifteenth Century Scotland," *Scottish Historical Review*, 66 (1987), 130-41; the evidence will be presented in full in Craig McDonald's forthcoming STS edition of Books VI and VII. Other sources have been noted by McDonald, "John Ireland's *Meroure of Wysdome* and Chaucer's *Tale of Melibee*," *SSL*, 21 (1986), 23-34, and by Sally Mapstone, "The Advice to Princes Tradition in Scottish Literature, 1450-1500," Unpubl. DPhil. thesis, University of Oxford, 1986, pp. 356-442, and "A Mirror for a Divine Prince: John Ireland and the Four Daughters of God," in *Bryght Lanternis: Essays on the Language and Literature of Medieval and Renaissance Scotland*, ed. J. Derrick McClure and Michael R. G. Spiller (Aberdeen, 1989), pp. 308-23. I have recently established that almost the whole of Book I is derived from Aquinas's *Expositio in Orationem Dominicam* and the thirteenth-century French *Somme le Roi* of Laurent d'Orléans; I hope to publish a detailed discussion of this evidence in the near future.

of the *Complaynt of Scotland*, and of course, John Knox. The *Meroure* itself appears to have remained largely unknown; it survives in a single manuscript and there is no evidence that it was ever read outside the king's immediate entourage, despite Ireland's desire to address a wider audience. So it is by a different route, through humanist Latin, that Bellenden and the author of the *Complaynt* developed the rhetorical skills which made them as effective as they are as exponents of Older Scots prose. Beside this tradition of learned prose there was another, longer-lived line of vernacular writing, represented by Knox's works in Scots (and above all in his *Historie of the Reformatioun*), by Robert Lindsay of Pitscottie, and by such controversialists as George Buchanan and William Fowler; the last Scots prose writers to practice their craft before English acquired its dominant cultural position at the beginning of the seventeenth century. It may not compare in either quantity or quality with the tradition, even the later tradition, of Older Scots verse, but the achievements of Scots prose demand proper recognition.

As Older Scots verse has been privileged at the expense of prose, so vernacular Scots has tended to dominate work in other languages in Gaelic and above all in Latin (there has, regarding the latter part of the period, been considerable ambivalence about the position of English, but that is a point I'll return to a little later). Pedagogically, of course, there are problems about the inclusion of Gaelic and Latin texts within the Scottish canon, and these difficulties are exacerbated by the absence, particularly in the case of Latin, of accessible bilingual editions. But think about what is thereby excluded: Ireland's remarkable *De immaculata conceptione*, the contrasting histories of Boece and Major, Florence Wilson's *De animi tranquillitate*, the works of George Buchanan, and the riches of the *Delitiae poetarum Scotorum*, to name only the most obvious. Even the medieval Latin chronicles have scarcely made an impact on the canon, although it may be hoped that the appearance of Walter Bower's *Scotichronicon* in the impressive edition of Professor Watt and his team⁷ will modify this gap in perception. The exclusion of these riches from our normal awareness of the range of medieval and Renaissance Scottish literature undoubtedly limits our sense of its shared Europeanness; by the same token, the omission of the Gaelic tradition, and in particular the failure of Scottish scholarship to develop adequate comparative approaches for dealing with the very distinct poetic cultures of Scots-speaking and Gaelic-speaking Scotland (and not only for the period before the Act of Union—where is there a satisfactory modern discussion of the connections

⁷Walter Bower, *Scotichronicon*, ed. D. E. R. Watt *et al.*, 9 vols (Aberdeen 1987-). Vol. 2, ed. John and Winifred MacQueen, Vol. 5, ed. Simon Taylor, D. E. R. Watt and Brian Scott, and Vol. 8, ed. D. E. R. Watt, have so far appeared. Vol. 4 is due to appear shortly.

between the verse of Robert Fergusson and that of Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair or Donnchadh Ban Mac an t-Saoir?), prevent us from properly understanding the polarities within Scottish culture.

As one who must still depend upon the fearfully banal prose translations in William J. Watson's *Scottish Verse from the Book of the Dean of Lismore* and the rather more poetic interpretations of Deorsa Caimbeul Hay, Ruairidh MacThomais and others, I hesitate to make any substantive critical observations on this Gaelic tradition; but I cannot be the only non-Gaelophone reader to be struck by its profound otherness. Only in the case of the love poetry, the *danta gradha*, and a few religious pieces such as Donnchadh Og's "Seacht saighde ata" ("There are seven shafts")⁸ do I at once feel that I know where I am: the traditions of panegyric verse and of incitement to battle are so very different from those of Scots poetry and its nearest European cognates that the problems of reception and of making appropriate cultural connections are formidable. Yet, as Donald Meek demonstrated so convincingly at the previous conference,⁹ the manuscript evidence argues that the linguistic divide in medieval Scotland was not as absolute as we might suppose, and the presence of Scots texts in such collections as the *Book of the Dean of Lismore* and the various Breadalbane volumes¹⁰ proves at least the *possibility* of significant bilateral cultural influence—or trilateral, if we take the Latin tradition into account as well. Until all three traditions can be seen together, certainly, our understanding of medieval and Renaissance Scottish literature will never be whole. And in the meantime, it is clear that poets such as Cathal and Niall MacMhuirich and Sir Duncan Campbell of Glenorchy deserve to be numbered among major Scottish poets, while the Gaelic tradition provides in the persons of Aithbhreac Inghean Corcadail and Iseabail Ni Mhic Cailein valuable augmentation to the very short list of early Scottish women poets I am about to offer.

For vitally important as it is in the general debate about canon-formation and central to a re-evaluation of the later Scottish canon, gender appears to be only marginally relevant to the Older Scots period. There is no sign of a Juliana of Norwich waiting to be rediscovered: mystical writings, like ser-

⁸*Scottish Verse for the Book of the Dean of Lismore*, ed. W. J. Watson, Scottish Gaelic Texts Society, 1 (Edinburgh, 1937), 252-5.

⁹Donald E. Meek, "The Scots-Gaelic Scribes of Late Medieval Perthshire: An Overview of the Orthography and Contents of the *Book of the Dean of Lismore*," in *Bryght Lanternis*, pp. 387-404.

¹⁰See *The Black Book of Taymouth*, ed. Cosmo Innes, Bannatyne Club (Edinburgh 1855); and Sally Mapstone, "The Testament of Cresseid, lines 561-7: a new Manuscript," *N&Q*, NS, 32 (1985-6), 307-10.

mons, are completely missing from the medieval Scottish corpus, although whether this is because they have been lost or because they were never written is necessarily a matter for conjecture. Apart from a few letters, there are, indeed, only three extant works certainly by women in Older Scots: Christian Lindsay's sonnet to Robert Hudson; Elizabeth Melvill's *Ane Godlie Dreame*, printed by Robert Charteris in 1603; and a sonnet addressed by Melvill to John Welsh.¹¹ None of these is a masterpiece, but it is nevertheless extraordinary that neither Lindsay nor Melvill receives so much as a mention in volume I of the *History of Scottish Literature*. *Ane Godlie Dreame* certainly deserves more attention that it has had since it was included by Alexander Lawson as an appendix to the STS edition of Alexander Hume; it is a striking example of the late survival of the allegorical genre in Scotland, falling between Montgomerie's *The Cherrie and the Slae* and the dream-vision which concludes Drummond's *Poems* (1616). It is competent enough to lend credence to Hume's observation in a dedicatory letter of 1598 to Elizabeth Melvill, that "ye delite in poesie yourselfe, and as I vnfaignedly confes, excelle any of your sexe in that art, that euer I hard within this nation."¹² There is every reason to suppose, therefore, that other works of Melvill's have been lost, or are lurking among the anonymous texts we find in some late sixteenth-century manuscripts. Her career, and that of Christian Lindsay, are certainly subjects that demand further investigation.

The neglect of Lindsay and Melvill, however, is part of a larger pattern, whereby the second half of the sixteenth century and virtually the whole of the seventeenth have been written out of the Scottish literary tradition. It is, of course, true that there is little or nothing in Scottish writing of this period to compare with the great achievements of Henryson, Dunbar and Douglas, or with the quite extraordinary achievements of contemporary English litera-

¹¹For Lindsay's sonnet, see Alexander Montgomerie, *Poems*, ed. James Cranstoun, STS, 10 (1887), 103-4. *Ane Godlie Dreame* is printed in Alexander Hume, *Poems*, ed. Alexander Lawson, STS, 48 (1902), 185-97; the sonnet to Welsh has recently been printed by Germaine Greer in *Kissing the Rod: An Anthology of Seventeenth-Century Women's Verse* (London, 1988), pp. 32-3. "Away vaine world," a lyric appended to Charteris' edition of *Ane Godlie Dreame*, is firmly attributed to Melvill by Helena Shire, *Song, Dance and Poetry of the Court of Scotland under King James VI* (Cambridge, 1969), p. 147n, but its presence in the Ker MS. means that the case for Montgomerie's authorship is at least as strong as for Melvill's. The somewhat later "One yeir begins," preserved in Andrew Melvill's commonplace book and elsewhere, and known as "Lady Lothian's Lilt," may well be by Ann Ker, Lady Lothian, but again the ascription is uncertain; see *Music of Scotland 1500-1700*, ed. Kenneth Elliott and Helena Mennie Shire, *Musica Britannica XV*, 3rd edn. (London 1975), pp. 200, 220.

¹²Hume, *Poems*, ed. Lawson, p. 4.

ture. But the virtual invisibility of Scott, Montgomerie, Ayton and others goes much further than such a gap strictly justifies: we only have to look at their representation in anthologies and literary histories to realize how far the poets of the Jacobean period—which in Scotland, of course, extends from 1567 (or 1579) to 1625 and breaks naturally into two halves around the critical date of 1603—have been excluded from the canon. This process has, I think, been made to serve a view of literary history which is essentially political in nature, and which is reflected in the overall pattern of canon-formation in Scotland: since the "Vernacular Revival" of the eighteenth century has been seen—quite justifiably, in many respects—as a recovery from more than a century of linguistic and cultural decline. Since the earliest histories of Scottish literature there has been a tendency to ascribe the origins of this process to the period before 1603, and in particular to the effects of the Reformation. It has followed that the later sixteenth century has been defined as the first phase of the decline.

Of the writers whose reputations have succumbed to this view of the latter part of the Older Scots period, the most unfortunate is probably Alexander Montgomerie. Although he has received some serious attention from Helena Shire, and more recently from Professor Jack,¹³ his poetry remains largely unknown, the extent of its stylistic and rhetorical range largely unappreciated, and the distinctiveness of his poetic voice largely unheard—even Professor Jack is able to afford him a total of only three pages or so of substantive discussion in his chapter of the recent *History of Scottish Literature*. There is, moreover, no adequate modern edition of his verse. *The Cherrie and the Slae*, it is true, is too long, its allegorical action is forced and its stanza-pattern too rigid for a work of nearly 1600 lines. Yet its argument is ingeniously worked out, and some of its descriptive passages bear comparison with anything in the Older Scots tradition:

The cherreis hang abone my heid,
 Lyk twinkling rubeis round and reid,
 So hie vp in the heuch,
 Quhais schadow in the rever schew,
 Als graithlie glansing, as thai grew
 On trimbling [twistis] teuch,
 Quhilk bowit throw burding of thair byrth,
 Inclyning doune thair toppis:
 Reflex of Phoebus in the firth
 Now cullorit all thair knoppis
 With dansing, and glansing,

¹³Shire, *Song, Dance and Poetry*, pp. 80-180; R. D. S. Jack, *Alexander Montgomerie* (Edinburgh, 1985).

In tirlis lik dornik champ,
 With streming and leming,
 Throw lychtnes of that lamp.¹⁴

The comparison quickly reveals, of course, that Montgomerie is not Dunbar's heir only in a general sense: the echoes of the *Goldyn Targe* are very strong whenever he moves into a high style, but here they include the borrowing of one of the most distinctive phrases in that archetypically aureate poem, "throu the reflex of Phebus visage brycht." But Montgomerie is not solely, or even primarily, an exponent of the high style: his range extends as far as flying, and in many ways he seems most at his ease in a markedly Scots form of the plain style, whether he is buttering up the young James VI and describing an (imaginary) landfall on the south coast of England:

Fra they persaivd the hillis high of calk,
 One to another they begouth to talk:
 'Thir ar the hillis, surely we suppone,
 Quharthrou this land is callit Albion.'
 They askand farther, What if the Quene war deid?
 Quha suld be nixt, or to the croun succeid?
 They follouit furth this argument so far:
 Syndrie wes sibbe, bot ay your Grace wes nar.¹⁵

or giving a spirited if pathetic account of his own privations away from the court:

This is no lyfe that I live vpaland,
 On rau rid herring reistit in the reik,
 Syn I am subject somtyme to be seik,
 And daylie deing of my auld diseis.
 Eit breid, ill aill and all things are ane eik:
 This barme and blaidry buists up all my bees.¹⁶

The undervaluation of this vigorously vernacular plain style is, I think, both a cause and an effect of our failure to come to terms with later sixteenth-century Scots poetry: we tend to place a premium on verse which is, like its Petrarchan analogues elsewhere, more obviously courtly, more elaborate in its rhetoric; and we are apt to miss the more direct and homely skills of the

¹⁴ll. 305-18 (MS. Laing 447 version), *Poems . . . and Other Pieces from Laing MS. No. 447*, ed. George Stevenson, STS, 59 (1910), 24.

¹⁵"The Navigatioun," ll. 223-30, *Poems*, ed. Cranstoun, p. 211.

¹⁶"To Robert Hudson" (Sonnet 25), ll. 3-8, *ibid.*, p. 101.

plain style. Nor is Montgomerie the only Castalian poet to suffer from this process: Stewart of Baldynneis, who can be among the most mannerist of courtly poets, also writes moral sonnets of the severest sparseness, while Alexander Hume's autobiographical *Epistle to Maister Gilbert Montcreif* is surely one of the neglected masterpieces of the Scottish Jacobean period:

Ane house ov'rlaid with proces sa misguided
 That sum to late, sum neuer was decided;
 The pure abused ane hundreth diuers wayes,
 Postpond, differd with shifts and meere delayes,
 Consumde in guds, ov'rset with greife and paine,
 Your aduocate man be refresht with gaine,
 Or else he faints to speake or to invent
 A gud defence, or weightie argument;
 Ye spill your cause, ye truble him to sair,
 Unles his hand annointed be with mair.¹⁷

Here is the plain voice of Renaissance satire at its most effective; yet the poets of the Castalian movement are too often categorized as practitioners of a rather effete high style and little more.

In other respects as well Montgomerie's achievement has been undervalued: his religious poetry, for example, is remarkable for its exploitation of musical rhythms and its stylistic radicalism. This is apparent in his choice of the "Solsequium" stanza for his psalm translations, producing subtle harmonies such as the following:

The Lord most hie,
 I know, will be
 An heyrde to me:
 I can not long haue stresse, nor stand in neede.
 He makes my leare
 In feelds so fare
 That without care
 I doe repose, and at my pleasure feede.
 He sweetlie me conuoyes
 To pleasant springes,
 Where nothing me annoyes,
 But pleasure bringes.
 He giues my minde
 Peace in such kinde,
 That feare of foes nor force can not me reauē.

¹⁷"Epistle to Maister Gilbert Mont-crief," ll. 151-60, *Poems*, ed. Lawson, p. 73.

By Him I am leade
In perfite tread;
And, for His name, He will me neuer leaue,¹⁸

But it is even more true of such original devotional pieces as "Come, my childrene dere," where the language of sexual love is applied to the individual's relationship with Christ in a way which certainly anticipates Herbert:

Vhill I did these words besyd me,
With a secreit sigh, confes,
Lo, my Lord and Love espyd me,
And dreu neir me vhair I wes;
Then a ring
Did He thring
On my finger, that wes fyne:
'Tak,' quod He,
'This to the,
For a pledge that I am thyne.'¹⁹

It may be that the power of Montgomerie's religious devotion is the direct consequence of his position as a Catholic in Reformed Scotland; and the rhetorical display of his psalm translations contrasts emphatically with the sobriety of the Calvinist Psalter which became the staple diet of the Kirk. His excision from the tradition of post-Reformation religious writing is not, therefore, surprising; but we have no real excuse for failing to recognize in Alexander Montgomerie a voice which is individual, innovative, and above all, assured in its mastery of the musical potential of Scots.

Our understanding of the later sixteenth century, then, needs to be purged of the effects of a reductive literary history which equates significance with maintenance of the vernacular and yet which paradoxically is unable to respond to those genres and modes in which Scots is at its most vigorous. A more open and less programmatic approach to the canon will allow poets like Montgomerie, Hume and Stewart of Baldynneis to be valued for their real merits, and will transform our view of the development of Scottish poetry in the two decades before James' accession to the English throne. That, in turn, will enable us to understand better what happened after 1603; but that is an issue which I want to return to in a moment, after I have widened out my argument to consider the way in which Older Scots literature has been treated in the canon of English literature. It is, I think, fair to say

¹⁸Psalm 23, ll. 1-18, *Poems*, ed. Cranstoun, pp. 255-6.

¹⁹ll. 31-40, *ibid.*, pp. 239-40.

at the outset that Older Scots literature has characteristically been dealt with by the English canon in two ways: *appropriation* and *dismissal*.

The most obvious form of the first is in the notion of the "Scottish Chaucerians," by virtue of which James I, Henryson, Dunbar and Douglas were accorded the status of an honorable footnote to the career of Chaucer. By an ironic twist, it was probably Gregory Smith who did most to establish the term, for his chapter so entitled balanced George Saintsbury's on "The English Chaucerians" in volume II of the *Cambridge History of English Literature* (1908); and while the phrase itself does not occur in *Scottish Literature: Character and Influence*, it underlies almost everything Smith says there about Middle Scots poetry:

. . . early in the fifteenth century, Scottish literature yielded wholeheartedly to the genius of Chaucer. There is perhaps no parallel to the suddenness of the change in the national manner, and to the completeness of that change; or anything so remarkable as the immediate and continuing vigour of the transformed verse.²⁰

It is a mistake, he says, to regard Dunbar as "the Scottish Chaucer"; that epithet rightfully belongs to Henryson. The influence of Chaucer on Older Scots poetry had, of course, been noted before, and the term was perhaps implied in Saintsbury's use of "English Chaucerians" in 1898, but it was the *Cambridge History* which defined the basis on which the Makars would find a place in the English canon. It was as "the Scottish Chaucerians" that they persistently occurred in subsequent literary histories; and while the development of Older Scots studies in the past generation—and important essays in redefinition by Denton Fox, Gregory Kratzmann and others²¹—have made the term less current, its vestiges can still often be detected in the ways in which Henryson and Dunbar are taught and written about.

The problem lies less in the assertion of Chaucerian influence than in the failure of that approach to deal adequately with other aspects of the Makars' achievement. The great strength of Older Scots poetry stems from its fusion of indigenous traditions with both Chaucerian generic and stylistic elements and those drawn from a wider European heritage: to reduce the *Morall Fabillis*, or even *The Testament of Cresseid*, to a response to Chaucerian models is to miss the extensiveness of Henryson's range of cultural influence;

²⁰G. Gregory Smith, *Scottish Literature: Character and Influence* (London, 1919), p. 77.

²¹Denton Fox, "The Scottish Chaucerians," in *Chaucer and Chaucerians: Critical Studies in Middle English Literature*, ed. D. S. Brewer (London, 1966), pp. 164-200; Gregory Kratzmann, *Anglo-Scottish Literary Relations 1430-1550* (Cambridge, 1980), esp. pp. 1-32.

while Joanne Norman has impressively demonstrated the degree to which Dunbar is neither a Scottish Chaucer nor a "Scottish Lydgatian," but a corresponding member of that Continental fellowship, the *grands rhétoriciens*.²² If the Makars are henceforward to maintain a place in a medieval British canon (and that is surely the right way to think of it), then they should do so on their own terms, according to the complex dynamics of a Scots literary tradition which draws on the tradition of Chaucer and his English successors only as one of many influences.

The appropriation of the "Scottish Chaucerians" to the English canon is relatively overt, and can fairly easily be dealt with on the available evidence. A more specific, and less obvious, example of the process lies in the strange case of the so-called "Spenserian sonnet," the form (rhymed *ababbcbccd-cdee*) which was of course widely used in both Scotland and England in the last years of the sixteenth century, and for some time thereafter. It owes its name to its occurrence in Spenser's *Amoretti* (1595), but its published debut appears to have been in James VI's *Essayes of a Prentise in the Diuine Arte of Poesie* (1584), where both the king's own sonnets and those dedicated to him are *all* in the "Spenserian" form. Discussing Alexander Montgomerie's use of it, James Stevenson noted this priority of date, but seems to have been unwilling to draw the obvious conclusion: that Spenser derived the pattern from James' book. It is, of course, possible that some of the *Amoretti* were written before their incorporation in the sequence, but there is nothing to suggest that any of them were written as early as the first half of the 1580s, when Spenser was in Ireland. It was in Dublin that he wrote what is probably the earliest of his sonnets in the "Spenserian" form, addressed to Gabriel Hervey and dated 18 July 1586. This poem, in other words, was written more than eighteen months after the appearance of *Essayes of a Prentise*, ample time for Spenser to have seen and adopted the Scottish sonnet. The only other possible basis for believing that Spenser developed the form before the publication of James' *Essayes* lies in the dedicatory sonnet to the Earl of Leicester which precedes *Virgils Gnat*; this is one of the *Complaints* by Spenser published in 1591 but clearly written somewhat earlier. In the case of *Virgils Gnat*, we are told that the translation was "long since" dedicated to Leicester, who died in 1588, and the traditional reading related the poem's allegorical references to Spenser's appointment as deputy to Lord Grey of Wilton, Lord Deputy in Ireland, in 1580.²³ A generation ago, how-

²²Joanne S. Norman, "William Dunbar: Grand Rhétoricien," in *Bryght Lanternis*, pp. 179-93.

²³See, for example, Edwin Greenlaw, "Spenser and the Earl of Leicester," *PMLA*, 25 (1910), 535-61; Harold Stein, *Studies in Spenser's Complaints* (New York, 1934), pp. 54-

ever, Eleanor Rosenberg argued cogently that there were no grounds for supposing that Spenser regarded his posting to Ireland (for all M. C. Bradbrook's description of it as "an Elizabethan Siberia") as a punishment, or that Leicester was displeased with or embarrassed by his protégé at that time;²⁴ and in the absence of any firm basis for dating *Virgils Gnat* or its dedicatory sonnet, it would be rash on the evidence of this one sonnet alone to give Spenser credit for inventing the *ababbcbccdcdee* form.

We will probably never be certain; but the alternative possibilities, that the form was known in Scotland through some example or examples (by Spenser or someone else) circulating in manuscript, or that it was developed independently and almost simultaneously in both countries, scarcely seem credible. There is also the question of the models from which the pattern was derived; there is a striking resemblance between the linked alternations of the "Spenserian" sonnet and the "ballade" stanza, rhymed *ababbcbc*, which was very popular in Scotland throughout the sixteenth century. It was a favorite stanza of Dunbar's, and in the Bannatyne manuscript it occurs more often than any other, including rhyme royal.²⁵ It was, it must be conceded, a familiar Chaucerian stanza (the "Monk's Tale" stanza), and was used by Spenser himself for two of the poems in *The Shepheardes Calender*; but the fact remains that it was much more common in Scotland than in England throughout the sixteenth century, and that it was recommended by James in his *Reulis and Cautelis* for "any heich & graue subiectis, specially drawin out of learnit authouris."²⁶ The sonnet simply extends this pattern for a further quatrain before adding a couplet; and it seems more than likely

5; B. E. C. Davis, *Edmund Spenser: A Critical Study* (Cambridge, 1933), p. 36. Gabriel Harvey himself owned a copy of James' *Essayes*, now in Magdalene College, Cambridge, which he was given by Bartholemew Clerk and which he inscribed 'legi xxiii. februarii 1585' [i.e. 1586]; v. Virginia F. Stern, "The *Bibliotheca* of Gabriel Harvey," *Renaissance Quarterly*, 25 (1972), 36-7.

²⁴Eleanor Rosenberg, *Leicester, Patron of Letters* (New York, 1955), pp. 336-48. For Bradbrook's remark, see "No Room at the Top: Spenser's Pursuit of Fame," in *The Artist and Society in Shakespeare's England: Collected Papers*, 2 vols., (Brighton/Totowa, NH, 1982), I, 26.

²⁵Although the "ballade" stanza was fairly widely used by Lydgate and other fifteenth-century English poets, constituting just over 10% of the poems in *Religious Lyrics of the XVth Century*, ed. Carleton Brown (Oxford, 1939) and *Secular Lyrics of the XIVth and XVth Centuries*, ed. R. H. Robbins (Oxford, 1952), for example, it seems to have become much less common in the sixteenth century; none of the poems in *The Arundel Harington Manuscript*, ed. Ruth Hughes, 2 vols. (Columbus, OH, 1960) uses this form, and it is most unusual elsewhere in English collections.

²⁶James VI, *Poems*, ed. James Craigie, STS, 3rd Series, 22 (1955), 80.

that this was precisely how it was developed. On balance, I think, it can more properly be regarded as the "Scottish" sonnet than as the "Spenserian," though I do not expect this argument to roll back four hundred years of Britain's imperialist heritage, and the Spenserian sonnet it will no doubt remain.

That which could not easily be appropriated by the English canon has simply been dismissed. In this respect, there has often been a certain coalescence, not to say complicity, in the canon-forming processes of English and Scottish literature. If the achievements of Scottish poets of the later sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries were insignificant by comparison with the work of Henryson and Dunbar, by how much more are they overshadowed by Shakespeare, Spenser, Donne, Herbert and Milton? But then, they also appear to be overshadowed by Raleigh, Daniel, Herrick and Crashaw—and perhaps even by Barnaby Googe. The existence of Drummond of Hawthornden is, it is true, often acknowledged: after all, the man was important enough in his own day for Ben Jonson to travel to Scotland to visit him. But his poetry is now little regarded, and his contemporaries merit scarcely a passing reference in histories of English literature or in anthologies of Elizabethan and Jacobean verse. There's an irony here: Drummond was the only significant Scottish Jacobean to hold out against the general exodus to Westminster, and yet it is only Drummond who has managed even a peripheral place in the early seventeenth-century English canon. Those who plunged into the larger pool of the English court have vanished almost without trace.

Most of the group, admittedly, were profoundly minor: William Alexander, Earl of Stirling, Alexander Craig of Rosecraig, Sir David Murray of Gorthy, Patrick Hannay and even Sir William Mure of Rowallan are names whose resonance is much greater than that generally achieved in their verse. As a cultural phenomenon, the absorption of the immigrants into the court is worthy of much greater attention than it has received from either side of the Border (or of the Atlantic); but that is not to be confused with the recovery of long-unsuspected masterpieces. The exception to this general assessment, however, is Sir Robert Ayton, whose poetry is, I think, seriously undervalued, both in the Scottish canon and in the English. From an English perspective, no doubt, Ayton appears as a pallid imitator of Donne, while against the background of the Makars—and even the Castalians—his verse may seem anglicized, mannered and the work of a cultural quisling. He certainly failed to impress Sydney Goodsir Smith, for example:

those who enjoy this elegiac period when the Scottish "Castalian" muse was breathing her last at Whitehall will enjoy possessing it [Helena Shire's selection of Ayton's *Poems and Songs*]. It is thin stuff but it exhales its own perfume, faint

and pursued, a nostalgic, pathetic memento of the death of a culture, uprooted and unable to acclimatize to its new soil.²⁷

I must say that Goodsir Smith seems to have been reading a different poet from the one I find.

In abandoning the sometimes-precious manner of late Castalian verse in favor of the increasingly dominant English, Ayton unquestionably moved further than his fellow Anglo-Scots towards a distinctive voice. It is a less passionate and more musical voice than that of Donne, and it sometimes catches the note of urbane cynicism we find in the later Cavalier poets. As Mary Jane Scott has recently pointed out,²⁸ we can deduce something (though not nearly enough) from the evidence of the surviving texts, of Ayton's development from a Castalian sonneteer in the authentic Petrarchan mould to the ageing courtier who playfully borrows the language of Donne to tease one of the maids of honor in the household of Charles I:

Thus doe your raptures reach to that degree
 In loves phylosophy
 That you can figure to your selfe a fyre
 Void of all heate, a love without desire.

Nor in divinity doe you goe less:
 You thinke and yow profess
 That soules may have a plenitude of joy,
 Although there bodyes never meete t' enjoy.

But I must needes confess I doe not finde
 The motions of my minde
 Soe purifyed as yet, but at there best
 My body claims in them some interest.²⁹

That's the authentic voice of Ayton, but it's a late example; earlier in his career, it would seem, the tensions between Petrarchanism and a more matter-of-fact rhetoric produce quite startling effects, as when he shifts from urging his mistress to "read in my sighes and teares/ The secreete anguish of they dyeing slave" to a completely different concluding register:

²⁷Sydney Goodsir Smith, in *New Saltire*, 1 (Summer 1961), 84.

²⁸M. J. W. Scott, "Robert Ayton: Scottish Metaphysical," *Scottish Literary Journal*, 2 (1975), 5-16.

²⁹Sir Robert Ayton, "Vpon Platonick Love: To Mistress Cicely Crofts," ll. 13-24, *Works*, ed. Charles B. Gullans, STS, 4th Series, 1 (1963), 196.

And thus resolv'd I only begg of the,
Amidds my sadd exile, this poore reliefe:
That if thou cannot think with love on mee,
Thou would with pittie pause vpon my greiffe;
Or if perhapps this little seeme too much,
As, ah, I feare thy rigour shall be such,
That when some freind my name to minde shall call,
Thou'll only sigh and wish mee well, that's all.³⁰

Elsewhere, there is a much more calculated kind of wit, often concentrated (in true Cavalier fashion) on the vanity and inconstancy of women and the futility of the lover's lot:

Oft have I wish'd that there had beene
Some Almanack whereby to have seene
When love with her had beene in season,
But I perceive there is noe art
Can finde the epact of a heart
That loves by chance and not be reason.³¹

Not Donne, exactly; but there's real precision in Ayton's introduction of the notion of the epact, the number of days from 1 January to the first full moon, used in the calculation of Easter and here introducing all the old associations of the Moon as a figure of mutability. Less passionate *and* less intellectual than Donne, Ayton nevertheless draws effectively upon the poetic fashions of Jacobean England, finding his own voice (*pace* Goodsir Smith) in the process. Yet he continues to be largely excluded from Scottish anthologies, and is apt to receive sparser treatment in anthologies of seventeenth-century English verse than, say, Henry King, Francis Quarles or Sidney Godolphin. The whole Jacobean generation, I submit, demands greater attention in relation to both Scotland and post-accession Britain, and the presence of a large Scottish contingent at Whitehall, in particular, is a phenomenon which has been underestimated. Within this necessary reassessment, the work of Ayton will clearly have a pivotal role.

In addition to the two canonical systems I have so far discussed, however, I think it is possible to add a third, that of the most important literary works of the European Middle Ages. While the factors underlying the formation of such a list are inevitably as problematic as those affecting national canons (however those are defined), certain works obviously stand out as

³⁰"An Exhortation," ll. 17-24, *ibid.*, p. 155.

³¹"Vpon his unconstant Mistress," ll. 13-18, *ibid.*, p. 198.

supremely representing the finest achievements of medieval literary culture: the *Chanson de Roland*; the romances of Chrétien de Troyes; the *Roman de la Rose*; Dante's *Divina Commedia*; Petrarch's *Rime*; Boccaccio's *Decamerone*; *Pearl* and *Gawain and the Green Knight*; Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and *Troilus and Criseyde*; the greatest English miracle cycles; the Middle Dutch *Elckerlijck*; the lyrics of Villon. Ranging in scale from the comprehensiveness of Dante and Chaucer to the rhetorical precision of Petrarch and Villon, these works are, like the grandeur of Chartres and Notre-Dame and the intricacy of the finest miniatures, equally representative of medieval art at its most powerfully expressive. And I believe that the greatest works of the Makars deserve to be mentioned in the same breath as these masterpieces. Now that it can at last be seen as a single, comprehensive moral statement, Henryson's *Morall Fabillis* emerges not only as the zenith of the medieval Aesopic tradition, but as a subtly encyclopaedic exploration of human sin and the need for Grace, themes which Henryson develops, more equivocally, in the *Testament of Cresseid*. At his best, Dunbar is capable both of the distilled sparseness of a Villon and the rhetorical pyrotechnics of the *grands rhétoriciens* at their most elaborately wrought. Gavin Douglas, one of the first and certainly one of the greatest of medieval translators whose work is informed by the disciplines of humanist philology, would surely be more widely recognized if he had translated into one of the major modern vernaculars instead of Scots. And perhaps Lindsay's *Thrie Estaitis* deserves, by virtue of its subtle interplay of topical political polemic and universal moral argument, to be seen as one of the finest achievements of late medieval drama and as one of the most substantial literary achievements in sixteenth-century Protestantism. All these works, I would claim, demand greater recognition than as a series of footnotes to Chaucer: they represent Scotland's distinctive, and extraordinarily rich, contribution to the vernacular heritage of the European Middle Ages.

University of Glasgow