

Antony Hasler. *Court Poetry in Late Medieval England and Scotland: Allegories of Authority*.

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This work is a challenging examination of eight poets associated with royal courts, English and Scottish, between 1485 and 1528. Its concern is the way in which these writers engage with authority — royal, political and patronal, cultural, literary, and generic — and how those engagements shape the poetic *I*. The Scots poets considered are William Dunbar, Gavin Douglas, and David Lyndsay (discussed in the conclusion); the English poets are Bernard André, John Skelton, Alexander Barclay, and Stephen Hawes. The discussion is not concerned with attributing particular features to one court practice or another, nor directly to illuminate nationalist concerns. As a result, the discussion is not arranged by language, or by aesthetic quality, or even, particularly, by place and time, but rather by rhetorical strategies and the positioning of the poetic voice.

Straight historicist interpretation might raise questions about this arrangement, for there are as many differences as similarities between the English and Scots courts at this time. There is, for example, a difference in the stability of the royal line: although both Henry VII and James IV acceded to their thrones after battles in which their predecessors were killed, the claims of the Stewart dynasty were more secure than those of the Tudors. Similarly, in terms of rank alone, Gavin Douglas is a stronger match for Henry Howard than for the other poets discussed here. While such concerns are not unimportant, the strategies and theoretical models adopted here allow nuanced and new interpretations. In chapter 1, Hasler brings together two poems obviously addressing and asserting royal power. Firstly, he considers Bernard André's *Vita Henrici Septimi*. The appeal of humanist Latin to the new regime is outlined, and André's refusal to comment directly on events before his arrival in England, that is, events before Henry's assumption of power. André's self-proclaimed blindness, therefore, might be as much literary and willful as physical, especially in its effects on the text. This discussion is paired with an examination of Dunbar's *Thrissil and the Rois*, a poem associated with James IV's marriage to Margaret Tudor. Here Hasler stresses the reluctance of the dreamer to explore his dream, and his inability to participate in events, suggesting his distance from the vision. Through a common theme of not-seeing, the juxtaposition enables a reconsideration of the place of the poet in relation to the sources of power.

The ambiguities and dangers of representing and participating in court life are further explored in chapter 2's examination of Skelton's *Bowge of Courte*. In particular, Hasler considers the various significance of Drede, the self-revealed identity of the poem's narrator. He suggests that the anxieties of conspiracy that are explored in the poem reflect at some level the rise of the Privy Chamber; as a printed text, however, such concerns might potentially reach far beyond a court audience.

After such sinister imaginings, Dunbar's petitionary poems, discussed in chapter 3, are more straightforward. In this discussion, Hasler argues that these

poems “represent with remarkable consistency certain relations of power between subject and sovereign” (64), focusing especially on the self-mocking common voice in these poems. Such a view makes these often quite alien poems more comprehensible in their larger political work, and a better fit with Dunbar’s other poetry. Gavin Douglas, the other great poet of James IV’s court, is considered in chapter 4, in the company of Alexander Barclay. This juxtaposition contrasts the poets’ engagements with poetic models, specifically Barclay’s use of sources for his *Eclogues*, and Douglas’s gesture toward his still-to-be translation of the *Aeneid*.

Stephen Hawes’s *The Pastime of Pleasure* and *The Comfort of Lovers* are the subject of chapter 5. One particular feature is drawn out in *The Pastime*, namely the protagonist’s description of his own death. Hasler discusses critical views of this section, and concludes that Hawes’s poem reaches to an ultimate authority, exposing the “fictionality of all things” and is thus a “form of poetic self-annihilation” (124). The last extended consideration is given to Skelton’s *Speke Parott* and *The Garland of Laurell* in chapter 6. Here Hasler discusses the application of “Ovidian” as a description of these texts, with their multiple authorities and audiences, and considers how that in turn might affect our understanding of their range.

Hasler concludes his volume with a discussion of David Lyndsay’s poetic relationship with James V, in which Lyndsay both advises the king and yet cedes to him all authority, including poetic. This conclusion outlines the ways in which the whole volume’s themes and discussions have ramifications for critical surveys of the later sixteenth century, specifically offering several alternatives to the domination of particular kinds of lyric poetry. Such alternatives are to be welcomed, particularly when offered in such a challenging and open manner as this.

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