PART TWO

‘In her great anguish she composed the song . . . and sung it as a lullaby to her babe’
CHAPTER FOUR

Scots Abroad in the Fifteenth Century: The Princesses Margaret, Isabella and Eleanor

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MANY YEARS AGO Annie I. Dunlop devoted a pioneering article to the medieval Scotsmen who travelled widely in Europe as diplomats, soldiers, students, priests and merchants.¹ Nothing is said there of Scottish women, however, apart from a passing reference to the ‘matrimonial adventures’ of the six daughters of James I: Margaret, Isabella, Joan, Eleanor, Mary and Annabella. For most historians this is indeed the chief importance of these women: they figure as pawns in the intricate diplomatic manoeuvres first of their father, and then of their ambitious brother James II, whose treatment of them was governed largely by ‘political cynicism and the prospect of financial advantage’.² Only a little is known of Mary, who in 1444 married Wolfaert van Borselen, son of the Lord of Veere in Zeeland, or of Joan and Annabella, who were sent abroad, in the hope of prestigious foreign alliances, but eventually, in the late 1450s, were married to Scottish noblemen, Joan to James Douglas, newly created earl of Morton, and Annabella to George, master of Huntly. The lives of Margaret, Isabella, and Eleanor, however, are much better documented, largely in Continental rather than Scottish records, because of their marriages, respectively, to the dauphin of France, the duke of Brittany, and the archduke of Austria-Tyrol. Such marriages – like that of James II himself to Mary of Guelders – were designed to enhance Scotland’s standing in European politics. Yet these princesses have interest and importance in their own right, not simply because of their dynastic alliances. What is more, all three were involved in literary activity, whether as readers, book-collectors, patrons, and possibly, indeed, as authors; although differing greatly from each other in character, they illustrate the varied cultural opportunities available to privileged women in the fifteenth century.

MARGARET (1424–1445)

The eldest child of James I and Joan Beaufort, Margaret was betrothed at an early age to the dauphin, who later reigned as Louis XI. The match was a piece of power politics: Charles VII, the father of Louis, wished to
ensure Scottish assistance in his war with England, and James hoped for financial aid from the French king and to acquire territory in France, in particular the county of Saintonge. Margaret sailed for France in March 1436: little is known of her parents’ feelings towards her, although they are said to have shed tears and shown some anxiety concerning her dangerous voyage at such a ‘tender age’.

Margaret’s escort included some of the greatest Scottish nobles, and she was welcomed in France with much pomp and pageantry: as she entered Poitiers, for instance, a child dressed as an angel crowned her with a wreath of flowers. A miniature in the Chroniques de Charles VII (Bibliotheque Nationale, MS fr. 2691) depicts her entry on horseback into Tours, where she was married on 25 June 1436. In this image the princess looks small and frail, but there are contemporary testimonies to her beauty, including that of the poet Martin le Franc: ‘C’est une estoile clere et fine / Mise en ce monde à parement’.

Margaret spent the rest of her short life at the French court, chiefly in the household of the queen. She seems to have seen little of the dauphin, whose aversion to her was notorious and remarked on by several contemporaries. Malicious rumours are said to have circulated about her conduct, spread by a Breton, Jamet de Tillay. She is reported to have regretted ever coming to France, and to have exclaimed on her death bed: ‘Fy de la vie de ce monde, et ne m’en parlez plus’. Her life may sound brief, pathetic and loveless, yet in fact Charles VII and his queen treated her kindly, and at her death there was a great outpouring of grief. She was far from being a nonentity, and made a remarkable impression on contemporaries, exciting far more interest than Louis’ second wife, Charlotte of Savoy, of whom little is reported except for Philippe Commynes’ double-edged remark that she ‘was not one of those women in whom a man would take great pleasure but in all a very good lady’.

Walter Bower praised the literary and musical skills of James I, who is the reputed author of The Kingis Quair, the first and finest of Scottish medieval love poems. Margaret perhaps inherited an aptitude for poetry from her father. She is said to have devoted much time to writing rondeaux and ballades, sometimes producing as many as twelve in one day. Her doctors later criticised this indulgence in verse-making as excessive, and suggested that ‘poetical overwork’ might have contributed to her death. Unfortunately nothing survives of her poetry; after her death Louis is said to have ordered that all her papers – ‘toutes les lettres et tous les vers’ – should be destroyed. According to W. M. Bryce, a copy of Pierre de Nesson’s Paraphrase sur Job has as frontispiece a miniature of Margaret, ‘wearing the Franciscan cord’ (see the discussion of Isabella below). Bryce suggests that Margaret was erroneously believed to be the work’s author, but this seems unlikely. Her possession of this
sombre meditation on death by a then famous fifteenth-century French poet testifies chiefly to her piety. It is unfortunate that the whereabouts of the manuscript are now unknown.11

There is no doubt, however, that Margaret was at the centre of a small circle at the French court which took delight in verse-making, along with music and dancing, as a social pastime. One of her ladies-in-waiting, Jeanne de Filleul, wrote verse that has been preserved.12 Another and more considerable poet in her circle was Hugh, vicomte de Blosseville, a close friend of Charles d’Orléans, whose imprisonment he shared in England. Several of Blosseville’s poems survive, including allegorical debates and rondeaux, one of which addresses Margaret in its opening line as ‘Celle pour qui je porte l’M’.13 Long after her death the sixteenth-century chronicler Jean Bouchet told a famous but apocryphal story that Margaret so admired the poet Alain Chartier that she placed a kiss upon his lips as he lay sleeping. Chartier died before Margaret journeyed to France, and on the one occasion that he visited Scotland, in 1428, she was only four years old. Yet the anecdote is significant, and testifies to Margaret’s contemporary image: she was a young woman who ‘fort aymoit les orateurs de la langue vulgaire’, but was characterised by daring, slightly unorthodox behaviour.14

Several French poets mourned Margaret’s untimely death. Blosseville celebrated her in a ballade, full of courtly hyperbole, that proclaims her superior to the fairest and most virtuous women of antiquity, and employs the refrain as a prayer: ‘Je requier Dieu qu’il en veuille avoir l’ame’.15 Another poem is inscribed in a book of hours belonging to her sister Isabella, and represents the dying dauphine as bidding farewell to all her kindred, including the dauphin, ‘son loial mari’, and also ‘mon pere, roy d’Escosse’.16 This poem has sometimes been attributed to Isabella herself, but is more likely to have been copied by (or for) her, since the reference to James I as if he were still alive in 1445 could hardly have been made by anyone in close touch with Scottish affairs, let alone by Isabella. The poem belongs to a well-established literary tradition, in which such ‘conges’, or ‘farewells’, are placed in the mouth of the person whose death is being mourned.

The longest and most ornate of the elegies for Margaret has been discovered comparatively recently: an anonymous Complainte pour la mort de Madame Marguerite d’Escosse, dauphine de Viennoys (Bibliothèque de l’Arsenal, MS 3523).17 Its most interesting feature is the highly symmetrical structure: the complaint, or lament, consists of eighteen stanzas, and is matched by a second section, of the same number of stanzas. This contains the reply of Reason, who voices orthodox sentiments about death’s inevitability and the consolation of religion. A very free translation of this poem was made into Scots, and is preserved in the
Liber Pluscardensis. The chronicler says that the original was written by the dauphin himself, which seems unlikely in view of his coldness towards Margaret, and that it was placed as an epitaph upon her tomb, which was indeed a common practice. The chronicler says also that the translation was made at the command of James II.18

All these poems are accomplished but impersonal expressions of public mourning. A more intimate and poignant sense of grief is communicated by the chronicler himself, an as yet unidentified Scotsman who had spent several years at the French court and knew Margaret well:

Alas that I should have to write what I sadly relate about her death ... I who write this saw her every day, for the space of nine years, alive and enjoying herself in the company of the king and queen of France. But then ... I saw her, within the space of eight days, first in good health and then dead and disembowelled and laid in a tomb at the corner of the high altar, in the cathedral church of Châlons.19

Margaret, however, wished to be buried in the abbey church at Thouars (near Poitiers), where she had founded a chapel, and her body was removed there in 1479.

ISABELLA (?1427–c.1495)

Not much has survived to shed light on the personality of Isabella, who married Francis, duke of Brittany in 1442. From a diplomatic report to her prospective father-in-law, it may be inferred that she was a well brought-up young lady, schooled to silence and submission, when she set sail for Brittany.20 But she was more fortunate than Margaret, and was granted blessings not often accorded to medieval princesses: a long life, and a combination of character and circumstances that enabled her to resist all the pressure, from her brother James II, to return to Scotland after her husband died in 1450, and exchange the independence of widowhood for the dubious pleasures of a second marriage.21 As a result she enjoyed the luxury of time to develop her own tastes, and the freedom to indulge them.

Like other great ladies of her period, Isabella was devout, and from the evidence of the books she collected it is possible to trace the pattern of her piety. Four books of hours associated with her name still survive. One magnificent example (Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, MS 62), may have been inherited by Isabella from her husband’s first wife, Yolande of Anjou, who died in 1440.22 Another (Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, MS lat. N. A. 588) was probably commissioned by Isabella, while a third
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(Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, MS lat. 1369) was certainly made for her.23 These three have long been linked with the duchess, but the presence of a fourth book in the Gulbenkian Museum in Lisbon (simply identified on a postcard reproduction as ‘Hours of Isabel Duchess of Brittany’) suggests that others from her library may still await discovery.

Having been lucky enough to inherit a splendid book, Isabella in turn presented treasures to her daughters, Marguerite (d.1469) and Marie (d.1506). The book of hours made for Isabella (Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, MS lat. 1369) probably passed to Marie, while Marguerite received two ‘armoyées aux armes de la duchesse ysabeau’, of which one may have been Fitzwilliam MS 62.

Besides commissioning at least one book of hours, Isabella directed another book to be made for her. A note in the manuscript (BN. MS fr. 958) gives the date, 1464, the scribe, Jehan Hubert, and the information that ‘Ysabeau... fist faire ce livre’.24 The book was a copy of the Somme le Roi, that thirteenth-century manual on the articles of faith, the seven sins and the seven virtues, which was one of the building blocks of lay devotion in the later Middle Ages. The book of hours definitely made for Isabella (Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, MS lat. 1369) also contains much educational material organised in the same simple, schematic way.25 This manuscript and two of Isabella’s books of hours can be dated from internal evidence to some time after her husband’s death, and it seems likely that they were purchased or commissioned by her authority alone.

The Fitzwilliam book of hours may have helped to draw another kind of spiritual guide to Isabella’s notice, because its borders are decorated with hundreds of tiny scenes from a devotional entertainment cast in the form of an allegorical romance, Deguileville’s Pèlerinage de la vie humaine, c.1350. This book was immensely popular among aristocratic readers, and it is not implausible that Isabella was one of these.26

Four formal portraits of the duchess appear in the pages of her books. In each she wears a dress patterned with her heraldic arms, the ermine of Brittany and lion of Scotland, and in each she is protected by her spiritual supporters. In Fitzwilliam MS 62 she is presented to the Virgin and Child by St Katherine of Alexandria, but in the others it is St Francis who stands behind her. He is also the figure who guards her in a fifth portrait, where she kneels in a family group on a page of the Missal of the Carmelites of Nantes (Princeton University Library, Garrett MS 40). The Carmelite community in Nantes enjoyed the patronage of the dukes of Brittany, and the Missal contains a long series of their portraits. Francis I appears with his children and two wives, Yolande and Isabella.27

Isabella was linked to the Carmelites by her marriage, but her personal sympathies seem to have lain with the Franciscans. St Francis was the patron saint of the duke, so it is possible that he was adopted by Isabella
in turn as a mark of affection for her husband, but there is one extra clue that she had her own special devotion to the saint. The portrait which is in her copy of Somme le roi shows her in magnificent heraldic dress, but round her waist appears a plain, knotted cord. This was the badge worn by members of the laity who wished to follow a spiritual regime, even while they continued to live in the secular world. Although Isabella is always pictured as a great lady, and although her will reveals that she had many rich possessions to bequeath, the girdle is a sign that she consciously tried to obey the Order's rules, even while carrying out the duties of her high estate. Nevertheless, with that endearing medieval fondness for display as well as devotion, one daughter, Marguerite, thought it appropriate in 1469 to leave Isabella a special legacy, a fine gold chain, knotted in imitation of the Franciscan cord.

The choice of St Katherine of Alexandria as guardian of the duchess in Fitzwilliam MS 62 may indicate an interest in education, because Katherine was famous for her learning, but whether Isabella could actually write as well as read is open to question. The fact that her name ‘Ysabeau’ is written, perhaps in her own hand, on the margin of six pages in another book of hours (Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris, MS lat. 1369) is no proof of real fluency. (On the poem in this MS, see above, p.47)

As a book collector, Isabella is linked through a tissure of family ties, to her sisters and to other women patrons in France and England. The Fitzwilliam hours may have been made originally for Yolanda of Aragon, and passed first to her daughter and then to Isabella. Through her mother, Joan Beaufort, Isabella was related to the Beaufort family in England, which included during Isabella’s lifetime two women remarkable for their piety and their libraries: Cecily Neville, duchess of York and mother of Edward IV, and lady Margaret Beaufort, mother of Henry VII.

Isabella was not a strikingly original figure. In both piety and patronage she could be matched by others in her world. Her life is of interest, nevertheless, because it provides precious evidence of the tastes of one particular woman, shaped by current fashions in devotion. Beneath the splendid trappings and ceremonial routine appropriate for her rank, Isabella attempted an internal pilgrimage as a private soul, a day by day progress on a path to spiritual enlightenment.

ELEANOR (?1433–1480)

Eleanor passed her childhood in Scotland, chiefly in Linlithgow; but in 1445, shortly after their mother’s death, she and her sister Joan were invited to France by Isabella, and arrived there in August only a few days after the death of their sister Margaret. Eleanor spent the next three
years at the French court, under the charge of Jeanne de Tucé. James II had wished her to marry the dauphin, but this and other marriage proposals were abortive. In 1447 Sigmund, archduke of Tyrol, sent an embassy to Charles VII to ask for her hand, and on 8 September 1448 she married him by proxy.

Little is known of Eleanor in the early years of the marriage, but in the mid-1450s she was appointed regent while Sigmund was out of the country. She was involved in the notorious and long-running dispute between Sigmund and Nicholas of Cusa, who had been appointed bishop of Brixen, and attempted to reform discipline at the Benedictine convent there. Eleanor was given her own seals, and was actively involved in raising money, guns, and mercenary soldiers. Throughout her marriage she was an intrepid traveller, and in 1465 made visits to several warm springs, such as those at Wildbad Gastein. She enjoyed hunting and chivalric sports, and in 1467 witnessed Sigmund tourneying at Basel.

No contemporary portrait of Eleanor survives, and the sixteenth-century heraldic representations of her are vivid but unflattering, showing a plump, sturdy woman. Such an image tallies with what is known of her life. She emerges as a strong and extremely independent woman, ‘well able to run a separate household and to look after the administration of scattered properties in difficult terrain and difficult political circumstances’. Nothing certain is known of Eleanor’s education, but she was clearly a cultivated woman, who was literate in several languages. She conducted correspondence in German, Latin, French and Scots; many letters to her are extant in the State Archive at Innsbruck, and a few of her own autograph letters survive, written in German and French.

Sigmund’s court has a reputation for learning, and Eleanor seems to have shared with him a love of books. The household accounts contain entries for the purchase, copying and binding of books; there is a reference to a ‘vocabulari’ and another to a spectacel, or entertainment, which one of the trumpeters had written for Eleanor. It was a custom at that time for nobles to exchange books as gifts: in 1454 Eleanor presented to duke John of Bavaria a hefftel, a small volume which unfortunately is untitled. Perhaps even more significant, in view of Eleanor’s own literary tastes, was the gift to her in 1478 by duke Albrecht of Bavaria of a buch des lancilot. The story of Lancelot was then immensely popular, particularly among women: the Scottish Lancelot of the Laik seems to have been composed about this time.

After Sigmund’s death in 1496 his library passed to Maximilian or was dispersed, and only a few books can now definitely be traced to the ownership of Eleanor and Sigmund. One interesting example is a psalter (Austrian National Library, MS 1852), which bears both the Austrian and the Scottish coats of arms.
incunable, an edition of St Jerome’s *Epistolae* printed in Rome c.1467, which she presented to the collegiate church of Augustinian canons at Neustift, near Brixen. Each volume of this work has the contemporary inscription: ‘Iste liber est Monasterii S. Marie virginis ad grans (grams?) alias ad Novam cellam dicti, donatus eidem ab illustissima domina Elienor de Scocia domina ac princi pe huius terre’. Alasdair Cherry considers this ‘possibly the earliest recorded Scottish provenance in a printed book’. It has been suggested also that the fine manuscript of Virgil, now in Edinburgh University Library (MS 195), may have belonged to Eleanor: ‘the initials ‘P’ and ‘L’ beside the Scottish royal arms in the volume are thought to stand for “Principissa Leonora”’. In 1473 a translation of Boccaccio’s *De claris mulieribus* was dedicated to Eleanor. The author, the humanist Heinrich Steinhöwel (1412–78), followed the precedent of Boccaccio himself, who had dedicated his work ‘not to a prince but to some illustrious lady’. Steinhöwel also imitated Boccaccio in an apology for including evil women as well as virtuous ones, but he included a fulsome tribute to Eleanor herself as the ‘crowning representative of all women’. Steinhöwel followed this work with other translations — of Aesop and the *Speculum vitae humanae* — both of which he dedicated to Sigmund.

Eleanor’s great claim to literary fame rests upon *Pontus und Sidonia*, a landmark in the history of German prose literature. It was first printed in 1483, three years after her death, and the title states that Eleanor translated (*getransferiert*) and made (*gemacht*) the work out of French into German, for the pleasure of her prince and lord Sigmund, and as a testimony of her love. Eleanor’s authorship of this work has been traditionally accepted for centuries, but in recent years some doubt has been expressed as to whether she was personally responsible for the translation. Women translators were indeed rare in the Middle Ages, but Eleanor has an interesting precedent in Elizabeth von Nassau-Saarbrucken (1397–1456), who translated French *chansons de geste* into German prose. Late medieval English women, such as Eleanor Hull (born c.1394) and Lady Margaret Beaufort (1443–1509), were more obviously pious in their choice of texts, translating prayers and devotional works, such as part of *The Imitation of Christ*. Only experts in German medieval language and literature can discuss this question authoritatively. But perhaps, as A. M. Stewart suggests, we should regard Eleanor as ‘a supervising patron rather than as a translator in the modern sense’. The appeal of the French *Ponthus et Sidoine* to Eleanor, whatever her degree of involvement in its translation, is not difficult to explain. A chivalric romance, full of marvellous exploits, jousts and tournaments, it has much in common with the Scottish *Clariodius* (also a translation from
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a French prose romance) and with Malory's Morte d'Arthur. What is more, the work combined an exciting story with excellent morality; it celebrates the virtues of faithfulness and loyalty in love. During the fifteenth century the romance had an enormous vogue, particularly among aristocrats; one finely illustrated copy of the French work was owned by Margaret of Anjou, whose wedding to Henry VI had been attended by Eleanor’s sister Margaret. Eleanor’s translation was reprinted several times, and long retained its popularity in Germany; it was still being read in the eighteenth century, long after the story was forgotten elsewhere.47

This brief article does not claim to be definitive, although it is firmly based on different types of evidence – pictorial, bibliographical, literary and historical. What it offers is an introduction to a fascinating subject, which deserves further and much fuller investigation. In recent years there has been an ‘explosion’ of interest in the varied cultural activities of medieval women.48 Little has been written as yet, however, about this aspect of the lives of medieval Scotswomen, perhaps because the evidence is considered scanty or non-existent. If so, the cultural interests and activities of these three princesses, who travelled ‘furth of the realm’, should surely receive much greater recognition.

NOTES

4. Barbe, Margaret of Scotland, 83–113. For reproductions, see Barbe, frontispiece; Alastair Cherry, Princes, Poets and Patrons: the Stuarts and Scotland (Edinburgh, 1987), plate facing p. 28.
5. Quoted in Barbe, Margaret of Scotland, 95.
7. Quoted by Kendall, Louis XI, 123.


13. Raynaud, *Rondeaux*, no. lxxxii; also pp. viii-x.


24. Unsigned note in *Scottish Historical Review*, 4 (1907), 488; Toynbee, 'Portraiture', 305.


29. Barbé, 'A Stuart Duchess', 44.


1. On Eleanor’s life, see Beaucourt, *Histoire de Charles VII*, iv, 365-70; Margarete Köfler and Silvia Caramelle, *Die Beiden Frauen des Erzherzogs*


33. See the portrait of her in this volume.

34. Stewart, ‘Austrian Connection’, 139.

35. The correspondence is preserved in the Innsbruck Landesregierungsarchiv für Tirol. See Köfler, Beiden Frauen, 89-92 who prints a letter from Eleanor to Sigmund; Stewart, ‘Austrian Connection’, 135-6 prints a letter to her in Scots from James, lord Hamilton.


38. Köfler, Beiden Frauen, 98.

39. This book is in private possession, and we are grateful to Alasdair Cherry for sending a transcript of the inscription; see also his Princes and Patrons, 18.


41. Köfler, Beiden Frauen, 94-5.

42. Stewart, ‘Austrian Connection’ (see note 31), 138-42. On the origins and great popularity of this romance, see F. J. Mather’s edition of the English version: ‘King Ponthus and the Fair Sidone: A Prose Romance Translated from the French about the Year 1450’, Proceedings of the Modern Languages Association, 12 (1897), iv-lxvii [Introduction]; i-150 [Text].

43. Reinhard Hahn, ‘Von französischer zungen in teiitsch’: das literarische Leben am Innsbrucker Hof des späteren 15. Jahrhunderts und der Prosaroman ‘Pontus und Sidonia (A)’ (Frankfurt, 1990). We are indebted to Klaus Bitterling for bringing this work to our attention.


