PART THREE

‘Women in mischief are wyser than men’
CHAPTER SEVEN

‘Dragonis baith and dowis ay in double forme’: Women at the Court of James V, 1513–1542

Andrea Thomas

A faire huire is a suete poyson.
Women in mischief ar wyser than men.
Women is moir pietefull than men, moir invyous than a serpent, moir malycious than a tyraunt, moir deceytfull than the devill.
Woman’s counsale is waike and a chyldis unperfyte.
Woe be to that citie quhair a woman beirith rule.
It is better to be in companye with a serpent than with a wikit woman.

IN DECEMBER 1542 Master George Cook, scribe of the Privy Seal, scribbled these slogans onto the fly-leaf of the last volume of The Register of the Privy Seal for James V’s reign.\(^1\) James V had just died and the new monarch was a girl in the arms of a young, vigorous and foreign dowager. Cook’s preoccupation with the nature of women therefore had a certain urgency about it, yet the conclusions he reached were not original. The same feminine vices were listed by the court poet, William Dunbar, in his Ballate against evil Women as sensuality, envy, deceit, inconstancy and an inability to bear authority.\(^2\) Dunbar was too humane and tolerant an observer of human foibles to sustain this vilification. Many of his poems suggest that he liked the company of women. The title quotation is from The Tua Mariit Wemen and the Wedo. Here he presents his subjects as bawdy, vain, scheming and deceitful, but implies that this is no worse than their menfolk deserve because they are possessive, jealous, lecherous, bumbling, gullible and impotent.\(^3\) Dunbar was well placed to observe the ladies of the court of James IV and he indulged in the little games of ‘courtly love’ there. In To a Ladye, he melodramatically declares that he will die if she is so heartless as to reject his offers of love, whilst elsewhere he maintains that chastity is the paramount feminine virtue.\(^4\) He is sharp with ladies who distribute their sexual favours at court to further their material interests.\(^5\) When he praises women he sets them upon exalted pedestals from which any mortal woman would inevitably fall. For Dunbar, Queen Margaret Tudor was an icon of national and chivalric significance. She was beautiful, good, bounteous, of imperial birth and
dignity, young, vigorous and likely to have healthy children. With such expectations, disappointment was almost inevitable.

At the court of James IV, especially after his marriage in 1503, ladies held a prominent place. However, if the poetry of Sir David Lindsay of the Mount is a reliable indicator, the role of women at the court of James V was much less significant. An index of historical persons mentioned in Lindsay’s works lists 110 people, of whom only ten are women and four of them are queens and one a saint. Lindsay rarely generalised about the nature of women in the manner of Dunbar, but in his Contemtioun of Syde Taillis he makes a conventional, if rather tongue-in-cheek, attack on the excesses of female fashions and feminine vanity. Elsewhere he is more serious for in The Testament of the Papyngo he discusses Queen Margaret’s position during James V’s minority, acknowledging her authority, but stressing how transient political power can be. In The Monarche he denies that women are fit to bear rule, but this poem dates from the chaotic minority of Mary, Queen of Scots. Lindsay’s only poem specifically dedicated to a woman is The Deploratioun of the Deith of Quene Magdalene, in which he mourns the passing of one so young, noble, beautiful and sadly childless. However, he seems to regret most of all the cancellation of grand pageants that were to have been staged for her reception, which he had helped to organise. Other poets of the court such as William Stewart, George Steill and Sir George Clapperton also repeat the prejudices and wry comments of Dunbar and Lindsay about female subjects. It is therefore difficult to excavate satisfactory information about the lives of individual women from literary sources.

If male poets give a conventional and stereotypical view of women at court without indicating who most of the women were, other sources can be equally unhelpful. For example, the financial accounts where the woman of Falkland employed to wash sheets in 1540 and some of the nurses engaged for the king’s children remain anonymous. Yet some women are named and designated members of the royal household. An index of James V’s household between 1528 and 1542 contains over a thousand names, yet only thirty of them are female. The king’s household was dominated by men who even did tasks regarded as ‘women’s work’ in the kitchens, brewhouse and wardrobe. Of the thirty household women, there were seventeen children’s nurses, five laundresses, three seamstresses, one brewer and four general servants. Most of them seem to have been of fairly obscure social origins, perhaps from the burgess families of royal burghs and several of them served continuously for many years. Some even transferred from the service of Margaret Tudor to that of her son. Only three of them were demonstrably of some social standing, and may therefore be considered to have had some influence at court. Firstly the king’s senior laundress, Mavis Atkinson, who
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appeared in the records continuously from 1516 to 1542 and married John Tennant of Listounschiels. He was an influential and favoured chamber servant, simultaneously in charge of the king’s purse and his wardrobe. Secondly, there was Janet Douglas, the king’s seamstress between 1522 and 1540 and wife of the poet and senior herald Lindsay. Thirdly, there was Katherine Bellenden, who held a position in the wardrobe between 1537 and 1542. She was the sister of John Bellenden, translator of Boece, and wife of Oliver Sinclair of Pitcairn. As one of the Sinclairs of Roslin, he was related to the Sinclair Earls of Caithness and was another favoured chamber servant of James V, as cupbearer and captain of Tantallon Castle. English reports of 1542 credit her with housing one of the king’s mistresses at Tantallon. These three women came from respectable families and filled what would be described today as middle-management positions, yet none of them feature in narrative sources for the reign. If they exercised any influence at court beyond their household functions it would probably have been through their prominent husbands.

In Mary of Guise’s household, between 1538 and 1542, one might expect to find a much higher proportion of women, but there was only a modest increase. Eighteen out of 106 recorded members of her household were women and of these, six were the wives or daughters of men in her service. They served as ladies in waiting, maids of honour and women of the bedchamber, with one laundress, one jester and a dwarf. All the servants of the queen’s kitchens, pantry, cellar, stable and wardrobe (and even some in her chamber) were men. All of the women and three-quarters of the men were French, although some later married into Scottish families such as Marie Pierris, who married George, fourth Lord Seton, and Jehanne Gresmor, who married Robert Beaton of Creich.

In a court that regularly numbered around 500 people in the late-1530s, only ten per cent are known to have been women. However, there may well have been more women whose presence went unrecorded in the accounts. For instance, many of the men in the king’s service were married and, if they held positions in the kitchens, stables, wardrobe or any of the other departments whose service was required continuously, it would be reasonable to infer that their wives and children lived with them nearby. There are occasional glimpses of these arrangements in the accounts when wives are recorded receiving payments on behalf of absent or ill husbands. The wife of James Aikenhead, master of the cuphouse, received several such sums in 1529 as did the wife of David Bonar, a groom in the stable, in 1540 and there are other scattered examples. It would be reasonable to speculate that wives of nobles, lairds and knights who came to court to conduct business or circulate socially would have sometimes accompanied their husbands. Occasions when the presence of
noble ladies was specifically demanded at court are few, but at the coronation of Mary of Guise in February 1540, it was regarded as appropriate to the dignity of the Queen to be attended by as many ladies of good birth as possible.21

One of the most frustrating gaps in the record is the lack of reference to the king’s many mistresses. Their presence at court has to be deduced from the recorded provision made for their children. It is speculation to suggest that they would have been housed with their mothers, at least when they were very young. However, both Maurice Lee and Peter Anderson agree that James and Robert Stewart retained strong links with their mothers and maternal kin throughout their lives.22 James V’s amorous career began at fourteen or fifteen years old when he was deliberately encouraged into promiscuity by the Angus regime in order to distract him from exercising political power.23 James’s list of conquests included Elizabeth Shaw, the daughter of Alexander Shaw of Sauchie, Master of the King’s Wine Cellar. She bore him a son, James, in 1529 when the king himself was only seventeen.24 We know nothing more of her except that she received a payment of £20 and the nurse’s fee in 1532 and died sometime before 31 August 1536. The boy was made commendator of the abbeys of Kelso and Melrose and granted some of the forfeited Douglas lands.25 There was also Margaret Erskine, the daughter of John, fourth Lord Erskine, captain of Stirling Castle. She was already married to Sir Robert Douglas of Lochleven before James became interested in her. She bore the king another son named James in 1531 and seems to have been his favourite mistress.26 In 1536, whilst he was theoretically engaged to Marie de Bourbon, daughter of the Duke of Vendôme, James attempted to divorce Margaret Erskine from her husband so that he could marry her. The petition was refused and she was then granted 500 merks a year from the Edinburgh customs, perhaps as compensation.27 Their son was granted the lands of Tantallon and made commendator of the Priory of St Andrews.28 These sons were clearly accorded some dignity and status, given lands, preferment and a good education. One might speculate that their mothers would have shared their glory.29

Other mistresses included Christina Barclay, perhaps from the family of the captains of Falkland. She produced another James probably in 1532, who seems to have died young.30 Then there was Euphemia Elphinstone, daughter of the first Lord Elphinstone, who produced a son, Robert, in 1533, later appointed commendator of the Abbey of Holyrood.31 Elizabeth Carmichael, daughter of Sir John Carmichael, captain of Crawford, and wife of Sir John Somerville, gave birth to a son, John, in 1531 who became commendator of Coldingham Priory.32 Eleanor Stewart, daughter of John, third earl of Lennox, produced yet
another son, Adam, who was given a pension from the Charterhouse of Perth. Finally, there was Elizabeth Beaton, the daughter of Sir John Beaton of Creich and a cousin of Cardinal David Beaton, James’s keeper of the Privy Seal and one of his Ambassadors to France. She produced the king’s only illegitimate daughter, Lady Jane or Jean Stewart, who as a child was placed in the household of Mary of Guise and then in that of her legitimate half-brother, the short-lived Prince James. As an adult she married the fifth earl of Argyll, a match that was possibly arranged within her father’s lifetime. There may have been a second Robert, who became commendator of the Priory of Whithorn, but his mother is not recorded.

Apart from this catalogue of names, kinship connections and births virtually nothing is known about James V’s mistresses. They were almost all the daughters of nobles or lairds in the king’s service and so, presumably, were present at least on the periphery of the court before they became mothers of royal bastards. The children were suitably provided for but very little is recorded about the financial support of the mothers. Some of them subsequently made respectable marriages for Elizabeth Beaton married Lord Innermeith, Eleanor Stewart married the sixth earl of Errol and Euphemia Elphinstone married John Bruce of Cultmalindie. If they subsequently had any significant role within the court circle, sources do not mention it. There is certainly no suggestion that James ever imitated the French practice of having an official mistress with luxurious apartments in the royal palaces, a rich endowment of lands and titles and considerable influence in politics and diplomacy.

The only remaining category of women at court are the queens. Only a few remarks about their role at court are appropriate as the lives of Margaret Tudor, Madeleine of France and Mary of Guise are well documented. The king’s mother, Margaret Tudor, was a force to be reckoned with until her death in October 1541. His first wife, Madeleine of France, was married in Paris in January 1537 and survived only a few weeks in residence at Holyrood before she died of consumption. His second wife, Mary of Guise (or Mary of Lorraine as she is styled in contemporary sources), arrived near St Andrews in June 1538 and produced two princes who died in infancy before she bore Mary, Queen of Scots, in December 1542 days before the king died. All three were foreign princesses brought to Scotland as young women as the human manifestations of alliances between Scotland and the lands of their birth. Margaret was only thirteen when she married the thirty-year old James IV in August 1503 after the so-called Treaty of Perpetual Peace, and still only twenty-three when she was widowed by the Battle of Flodden. Madeleine was sixteen when she married the twenty-four year old James V and had not reached her seventeenth birthday when she died.
Mary of Guise was more mature, for she was already a twenty-two year old widow, with a young son left behind in France, when she married the twenty-six year old James V.

The letters, diplomatic despatches and narrative sources of the period make it clear that there were certain expectations of the role a queen would play in her new realm. First and foremost she was responsible for the production of a male heir and barren queens or queens who only had daughters might be put away, the most famous example being Katherine of Aragon, Henry VIII's first wife. Of course, daughters were not totally unwelcome since they could be bartered on the international marriage market. The daughters of James I of Scotland were used particularly effectively here, yet sons were essential to carry on the dynasty. Although James V's reputed comment on his deathbed, 'it come witht ane lase, it will pase witht ane lase' may well be apocryphal, it sums up very well the contemporary view that an heiress, through her marriage into another family, signalled the end of a dynasty. It is significant that Mary of Guise was not given a coronation until she had been in Scotland for twenty months and was visibly pregnant.

As well as bearing children, a queen was expected to supervise the disciplined order of her household and to provide for the education and training not just of her own children, but those of noble or landed families entrusted to her care as pages, maids of honour or wards. The French poet, Pierre Ronsard, came to Scotland as a page to Queen Madeleine and later wrote a glowing account of James V as a vigorous, gracious and regal monarch. Mary of Guise took her household responsibilities seriously since many of her accounts are checked and signed in her own hand and she had the reputation of taking a keen interest in the marriages of her ladies, two of whom are noted above. She is also credited with treating her husband's illegitimate offspring with some consideration and even affection. If this was so, it underlines the fact that however robust, capable and overwhelmingly masculine these children may have been, they were no threat to the rights of her daughter.

The public role of a queen consort was largely decorative. She was expected to preside as a gracious figurehead at banquets, tournaments, pageants and ceremonies. Contemporary narratives often describe in detail how queens were dressed and how they appeared to be gratified by the attentions they received, but they do not usually show them doing anything more strenuous than nodding and smiling. Speeches were sometimes made to them and about them, but never by them. Elaborate preparations made for the official reception of Queen Madeleine in 1537 were never carried out and the only Scottish state ceremony in which she took part was her own lavish funeral at the Abbey of Holyrood. According to George Buchanan this was the first time that mourning dress
was worn in Scotland. Mary of Guise made ceremonial entries into the burghs of St Andrews, Edinburgh, Dundee, Perth and Aberdeen, attended several tournaments and was given a coronation for which new regalia was produced by the royal goldsmiths. The household accounts also make it clear that the king and queen would preside together at court for the major feasts of Yule and Pasche (Christmas and Easter), even if their itineraries might separate at other times of the year.

Queens were also expected to specialise in acts of piety, charity and mercy. For example, Margaret Tudor, when a refugee at her brother's court in 1517, joined with her sister, Mary, the Queen Dowager of France, and her sister-in-law, Queen Katherine of Aragon, in a carefully stage-managed plea for clemency for the London apprentice boys held responsible for the riots of 'Evil May Day'. With their hair loose upon their shoulders, the three queens knelt weeping before Henry VIII until he was moved to pardon the miscreants. Margaret was also a regular patron of Scottish shrines as was Mary of Guise who visited St Adrian's on the Isle of May and the shrine of the Virgin of Loretto at Musselburgh. In 1540-1541, when she was approaching the birth of one of her three children by James V, Mary made arrangements for offerings to be made at several Scottish and French shrines in the event of her death.

Queens were also expected to be leaders of fashion and patrons of the arts. As the courts of both England and France were wealthier and more sophisticated than that of Scotland, they played some part in introducing cultural novelties. English portraits and painters were sent to the Scottish court when the Princess Margaret was first betrothed to James IV and English musicians may well have come north in her train, bringing with them pieces of English music that found their way into the Carver Choirbook. It is also possible to detect English influence in the architecture of the palaces of Linlithgow and Holyrood as developed by James IV and James V. Even more pervasive was the French influence on the architecture, art, etiquette, clothing and jewellery of the Scottish court after James V's marriage to Madeleine. James had gone in person to the court of Francis I to secure the hand of his daughter and stayed there for nine months as an honoured guest of the French king and at his expense. He returned to Scotland in a fleet of ships laden with French wines, tapestries, fabrics, jewels, objets d'arts and artillery pieces, some of which were his but many were his wife's possessions. After Madeleine's death her jewels and other movable goods were bequeathed by Francis I to Mary of Guise on her marriage to James. Mary's parents were later commissioned to find the best French masons, goldminers, armourers and falconers and send them to Scotland. Mary took an interest in all these transactions.

Despite all the sixteenth-century controversy about female rulers,
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queens consort did have a clearly defined, if rather tricky, political role to play.\textsuperscript{55} The splendour of a queen’s attire, the size and social status of her entourage and the manner in which she was escorted and housed within her new realm were all regarded as a reflection not only of the dignity of her husband but also of the honour in which her father or brother was held. In political and diplomatic exchange, a queen was not supposed to have an agenda of her own but act as a channel of communication between the king she had married and the king she had left behind. These expectations did not take into account the fact that a queen might have a mind of her own. Whatever Francis I and James V expected from Mary of Guise, she seems to have regarded her marriage as an opportunity to further the cause of true religion in a land that was wavering.\textsuperscript{56}

When the terms of the peace treaty or alliance that accompanied the marriage were upheld and there was goodwill on both sides, a queen’s duty might be fairly straightforward. When diplomacy failed and warfare became a threat or a reality, her position was a very difficult one. Margaret Tudor spent thirty-seven of her fifty-two years in Scotland. For twenty-seven of them Anglo-Scottish relations could be described at best as tense and at worst as hostile.\textsuperscript{57} It is quite clear that Margaret was neither a paragon of virtue nor a skilled politician. She had weaknesses in her character and made many errors of judgement that are familiar to historians.\textsuperscript{58} Yet some of her grievances and complaints may have been too lightly dismissed as hysterical or self-indulgent, without any serious consideration being given to them. During the adult rule of her son, when the anarchy of his minority had been quelled, Margaret’s complaints to her brother were largely concerned with her inability to appear in public as a personification of the English realm. When James’s two French queens arrived she was especially worried about being embarrassed in front of them.\textsuperscript{59} These complaints are usually considered to be indicative of her greed, vanity and insatiable desire for new finery, but considering the political symbolism of such matters, there was probably more to it than that.\textsuperscript{60} Henry VIII, impatient though he often was with his sister’s demands, sent her a gift of £200 (sterling) and interceded with James V on her behalf on the occasion of Madeleine’s arrival. Margaret’s career as Queen Dowager was not a success. Even if she had been one of the most skilful of Scottish queens, she would still have faced many difficulties.\textsuperscript{61} Mary of Guise, on the other hand, was a talented politician, though the example of her years as dowager is not an encouraging one. With French money, troops and diplomacy behind her, she struggled to maintain the interests of her daughter, her faith and her two realms through eighteen years of widowhood (the last six of which she was Regent of Scotland). Even before her death in June 1560, many Scots were rejecting the French alliance and Roman church. Seven years on they would reject her daughter as well.\textsuperscript{62}
In surveying the role and status of women at the court of James V it is often necessary to read between the lines to draw inferences and speculations from sources produced by contemporaries who clearly did not consider the subject to be of any great interest. It would appear that the position of women at the court reflected many of the experiences of women in the wider society of the sixteenth century. In this they were expected to operate within the limited spheres of family, household and traditional occupations such as nursing and sewing. Court poetry suggests that the models they were exhorted to emulate were idealised icons of saints and queens. The untidy complications of real life do sometimes emerge from the sources in references to illegitimate unions and the political struggles of the dowager queens. These snippets of information occasionally illuminate a dim corner of the history of sixteenth-century Scotland.

NOTES


17. Scottish Record Office [SRO], Despence de la Maison Royale, E.33/1, fos 8r.-15v. TA, vii & viii and ER, xvii; Thomas, ‘Renaissance Culture’, app. A.

18. *Foreign Correspondence with Marie de Lorraine, from the Balcarres Papers* (SHS, 1923–5), i, 245; TA, vii, 166, 328.


28. RMS, iii, 1620; James V Letters, 343.


34. TA, vii, 478; SP, i, 25, 342, iv, 155, ix, 21.

35. SP, i, 25.
36. RSS, ii, 2206, 4016, 4525; Pitscottie, Historie, i, 381; W. Fraser, The Elphinstone Family Book (Edinburgh, 1897), i, 83.
41. The Works of John Knox, ed. D. Laing (Edinburgh, 1846-64), i, 91; Pitscottie, Historie, i, 407.
42. M. Simonin, Pierre de Ronsard (Mesnil-sur-l’Estrée, 1990), 52-77.
43. SRO, Despence de la Maison Royale, E.33/i, fos 3v.-8r., E.34/8/1, E.34/8/3; Marshall, Mary of Guise, 73; Anderson, Robert Stewart, 8.
44. Teulet, Papiers, i, 292-303; D. Stevenson, Scotland’s Last Royal Wedding (Edinburgh, 1997), 63.
49. SRO, Royal Household Book, E.31/8, fo 99v; Balcarres Papers, i, 78-9; J. Lesley, Historie of Scotland (2 vols, STS, 1888-95), ii, 253.
52. J. Lesley, The History of Scotland 1436-1561 (Edinburgh, Bannatyne Club, 1830), 154.
53. C. d’Espence, Oraison Funebre es obseques de ... Marie ... Royne douairiere d’Escoce (Paris, 1561), 39.
54. TA, vii, 48, 182, 184, 193-4; Balcarres Papers, i, 16-33, 71-3.


