

Women as Readers, Writers, and Book Owners in Late Sixteenth-Century Scotland: The Maitland Quarto Manuscript

By Joanna M Martin

The Maitland Quarto manuscript, a collection of ninety-five Older Scots poems, is housed in the Pepys Library at Magdalene College Cambridge, a long way from its likely place of origin in the highly cultured circle of a family of lairds and its associates from Lethington (now Lennoxlove) East Lothian.¹ Inscribed twice on the fly leaf of the manuscript in elegant and fashionable scripts — italic and roman — is the name of Marie Maitland and the date 1586. Marie Maitland (d. 1596) was one of the four daughters of Sir Richard Maitland of Lethington, and thus part of a family of influential administrators and statesmen. Her father was a judge and privy counsellor and her brothers rose to positions of distinction in the mid to late sixteenth century: William was secretary to Mary Queen of Scots and John to James VI. Marie's family also fostered literary interests and talents. The Maitland Quarto contains the earliest complete collection of the poems of Richard Maitland, and some poems attributed to John Maitland, as well as a handful of poems ascribed to important intellectual and literary figures to whom the family had connections: the protestant scholar and reformer Alexander Arbuthnot, and the court-poets Alexander Montgomerie and Thomas and Robert Hudson, and the king, James VI. Apart from writing poetry, much of which is of a moral and topical nature, Richard Maitland also composed two prose family histories — one of his mother's family, the Setons, and the other of the Douglasses. Another of Marie's brothers, Thomas, was the author of poetry in Latin, which made print circulation in the *Delitiae Poetarum Scotorum* (1637). Marie's sister Helen wrote her name into a second manuscript collection of poetry associated with the family, the Maitland Folio.² The Folio indicates that at least one member of the family had an interest in collecting the poetry of late fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century Scotland: the manuscript contains an important collection of poems by William

Dunbar, and some late medieval poems which would otherwise be lost to us including the lively love allegory, *King Hart*.

The Maitland Folio is a truly miscellaneous collection of Scottish and a few English texts and its many misogynist poems indicate that Helen Maitland must have been thick-skinned if she enjoyed reading all of its contents. The Maitland Quarto, with which Marie is associated, is a different book altogether and more reflective of a mixed family audience of readers, and indeed of writers too. As well as the poems in the Quarto attributed to Richard and John Maitland, and to noteworthy associates, the manuscript also contains thirty-eight anonymous poems, which are likely to have been composed by family members and close friends. Amongst these are poems which relate to family affairs (including one poem in praise of the Maitland home, Lethington) and several poems on the theme of friendship. Some of the anonymous texts, as Evelyn Newlyn has pointed out, may well have been composed by women.³ Indeed, a number of these speak to aspects of women's experience in love, and their creative and intellectual lives. There are sympathetic poems on lesbian love (poems 49), marital cruelty (poem 66), equality and reciprocity in love (poem 72), lost love (MQ 65 and 79), and female virtue and constancy (poem 74), and while some of these have sources or analogues amongst contemporary French writing by men, their presence in the Quarto may nevertheless suggest the literary interests of educated women.⁴ Some too, are addressed to or name Marie Maitland, and make reference to her poetic talents. The care with which Marie's name is inscribed at the front of the manuscript, plausibly in her own hand, suggests her desire to be closely associated with the collection of poetry: she may also have participated in its copying and compilation.⁵

The Quarto poems which concern Marie Maitland have begun to receive the critical attention they deserve by scholars such as Evelyn Newlyn and Sarah Dunnigan.⁶ One short but fascinating poem in the collection, however, has received less comment. This is number 77 in the Quarto which the scribe entitles, 'In Prais of ane Gilt Bybill'. The poem, printed here, is composed in a simple hymnal stanza (ab³c⁴ b³), although it is set out in long lines in the manuscript, presumably to allow the scribe to fit it onto folio 120v between the end of one poem and the ornately-written title of the next. It thus has something of the character of a 'page-filler' in the manuscript, although its significance for our

understanding of the Quarto and the culture which created it is hardly done justice by such a description. The poem's manuscript title is also slightly misleading as the lyric is concerned more widely than this suggests with reading and writing and with the materiality and ownership of the book. The poem begins by cautioning anyone who chooses to praise such a famous work as the Bible in writing ('by pen'), and modestly protests the author's own inability to give proper account of its value. This is of course belied by the elegant succinctness of the lyric's style. The poem then goes on to describe the elaborate binding on the 'gilt' or gilded bible as a way of figuring its spiritual treasures. This description brings to mind real examples of decorative covers which were made for copies of devotional texts including the Bible and Psalters: some of these were embroidered, and others were tooled leather laid on oak boards, the most prestigious of which were inlaid or onlaid with gold. The National Library of Scotland contains many examples of early Scottish book bindings of high quality and artistry.⁷ In the poem, the book's 'cot' (coat or cover) is described as decorated with gold and silver 'streamis' (line 10): once opened it will reward the reader with the 'glistening gemmis, and pearlis of pryce' (line 15) to be found amongst the pages of the book. Indeed, the poem carefully positions the reader as attentive and focused in his or her approach to the text — s/he must examine the text with 'with single ei' (line 14), a phrase which suggests looking with extreme concentration, in order to perceive its value.

There is no clue as to the sex of the 'gentle reader' (line 7) who is addressed in the lyric, but the Bible is clearly shown to be the possession of a woman: women's book owning tendencies in the late Middle Ages and early modern period frequently centred on devotional works.⁸ In a topos which recalls the lady's giving of love tokens to her knight in the courtly romance tradition, the fine binding of the Bible is said to be a gift to the book from its owner, who is described as its devoted 'maistres' (line 11). Her piety is exemplary, and the emphasis in the poem on careful reading and writing, suggests that the poet or compiler perhaps intended the lyric to refer to Marie Maitland who is presented as pious, virtuous, and creative elsewhere in the manuscript. Poem 85 exhorts 'Maistress Marie' to put to use her many virtues to become 'A plesant poet perfyte' (line 14). Poem 69 is a dedicatory poem to Marie Maitland and contains a pun on her name. It takes the form of a vision in which the narrator falls asleep in a May landscape and dreams of being taken by two harts, carrying between them a wounded lion, to an

idyllic woodland grove where 'Marie' and her female attendants are found, Diana-like. The significance of the poem's heraldic beasts, the lion and the harts, is difficult to determine, but the intimate audience for which the Quarto was compiled surely made connections now lost to us: the eighteenth-century editor of poems from the Maitland Manuscripts, John Pinkerton, suggested that the lion represented William Maitland, who died ignominiously in 1573 after the fall of Edinburgh Castle, but the lion could equally represent Marie's ailing father.⁹ The poem's pun on Marie's name is perfectly clear, however: 'Mait, land, and gold scho gave abundantlie' (l. 42, 'Mait' here means 'food'). It invests Marie with authority and financial autonomy, indicating her importance within her family. It is possible that the presentation of Marie in these terms, if to be understood literally rather than figuratively, is related to the fact of her forthcoming marriage in on 9 August 1586 to Alexander Lauder. Her landed and monetary wealth, an ability to provide a tocher, would have been especially significant under such circumstances. However, the poem also stresses Marie's continued commitment to virginity, which is less easy to relate to this context, even though her purity would of course be highly valued by her suitor. Her chastity seems to go hand in hand with her creativity in the poem. Marie carries a branch, 'ane flourishit trie', which bears a written pledge to 'sustein' virginity, presumably her own, and perhaps also that of others through the influence of her example or writing:

Quhairin wes writtin, with letteris properlie,
 'This is in sing of trew virginitie,
 Quhilk I haue socht and luiffit best of all;
 Heirfoir I sall, with cair most diligentlie,
Sustein the same that it ressaue no fall.' (lines 44-48)

The women in her company, who include Diana, Minerva and Cleo signify chastity, wisdom, creativity and virtue.

The female book owner of 'In Prais of ane Gilt Bybill' is therefore much in the image of the pious, faithful and educated 'Marie' of poems 85 and 69. It provides additional evidence amongst the Maitland Quarto texts that women in the Maitland circle were engaged in literary activities, and fostered creativity and wisdom as well as values such as modesty and chastity which were more traditionally expected of their sex. The poem also reminds us that by the 1580s such activities were often conducted in a protestant ethos which valued the reading of the Bible and other 'godly' texts within the family. We know from

poems copied into the Maitland Folio that members of the Maitland family had access to the popular collection of Lutheran hymns and catechetical material, known as *The Gude and Godlie Ballatis*, which was printed in 1565, 1568 and 1578. Other poems in the Maitland Quarto look to such a literary and devotional context. Poem 24, for example, a *contrafactum* attributed to Richard Maitland and based on a secular poem associated with Henry VIII,¹⁰ explores the comfort and knowledge to be gained from looking ‘in Goddis buik’, and from shared reading of the Bible when individual meditation on the text is impossible:

All plesour vaine I will refuse,
For my pastyme the byble vse;
Thocht I be auld and may not sie,
I sall it gar be red to me (*have it read to me*)
(lines 9-12)

A number of poems in the manuscript, including some attributed to the protestant principal of King’s College Aberdeen, Alexander Arbuthnot, explore finer points of reformed theology, and position their readers as the ‘elect’, amongst God’s chosen people. Several of the unattributed poems in the Maitland Quarto are penitential works, often ecstatic in tone, which draw heavily on the psalms, thus adopting forms and concerns which reflected a renewed interest in personal spirituality in the years following the Reformation. This extract from poem 73 provides an example of the tenor of the Quarto’s moderately-protestant devotional verse:

Cum sinneris now, the Lord doeth on ws call.
Cum all with me, cum pray with one consent,
Cum, cum in tyme, and doe our sinnis repent;
Cum now with humble hairtis, 3e wretchis all,
Befoir our God for mercie lat ws fall (lines 23-27)

Thus ‘In Prais of ane Gilt Bybill’, despite its brevity and simplicity, offers a fascinating way into exploring the culture of the lairdly classes in the third quarter of the sixteenth-century, and alongside other lyrics in the Maitland Quarto reminds us of the creative and intellectual activities of women in such contexts. In particular, it alludes to women as book owners and readers, and suggests their importance as exemplars of wisdom, fidelity and piety in the family.

Poem 77. In Prais of ane Gilt Bybill

Who takis in hand by pen		
To prais a wark with fame,		
Advysedlie sould luik, then loup,		<i>leap</i>
For hazard of his name.		
This buik all prais deseruis,		5
My prais it wer but vain;		
3it, gentle reader, mark, I say,		
And thyne salbe the gain.		
A cot bedect with gold	<i>cover</i>	
and syluer streamis it weiris,		10
As iust rewaird the maistres gave,		
For love to it scho beiris.		
But opin vp the same,		
And luik with single ei,	<i>eye</i>	
Bayth glistering gemmis, and pearlis of pryce		15
Thair schyning sall thou sie.		

Finis

Commentary

3. *luik, then loup*. Proverbial, 'Luke or 3e loup'. Pause before you take the risk of endangering your reputation (by not being able to adequately describe the book). See *DOST*, Lowp, v, sense 2b.

10. *syluer streamis*. Lines or fine streaks of silver. For a silver tooled bible binding see NLS Bdg.s.60.

14. *with single ei*. Perhaps with a 'sincere eye', or 'with concentration' (with one eye, as if taking aim on a target). See *DOST*, Singil, adj.

15. *pearlis of pryce*. An echo of Matthew 13:46 'a perle of great price' (Geneva Bible, 1560).

References & Further Information

¹ For an edition of the manuscript, see W.A. Craigie, ed., *The Maitland Quarto Manuscript*, Scottish Text Society new ser., 9 (Edinburgh and London, 1920). A new edition, edited by Joanna Martin, is under preparation for the Scottish Text Society for publication in 2014.

² For an edition see W. A. Craigie, ed., *The Maitland Folio Manuscript*, STS, new ser., 7, 20 (Edinburgh and London, 1919-27). For a discussion of the Folio and its family context see Julia Boffey, 'The Maitland Folio Manuscript as a Verse Anthology', in *William Dunbar the Nobill Poyet: Essays in Honour of Priscilla Bawcutt*, ed. Sally Mapstone (East Linton, 2001), pp. 40-50.

³ Evelyn S Newlyn, 'A Methodology for Reading Against the Culture: Anonymous Women Poets, and the Maitland Quarto Manuscript (c. 1586)', in *Women and the Feminine in Medieval and Early Modern Scottish Writing*, eds Sarah M. Dunnigan, C. Marie Harker, and Evelyn S. Newlyn (Basingstoke, 2004), pp.89-103.

⁴ Priscilla Bawcutt, 'French Connections? From the *Grand Rhétoriques* to Clément Marot', in *The European Sun: Proceedings of the Seventh International Conference on Medieval and Renaissance Scottish Language and Literature*, ed. Graham Caie, R.J. Lyall, Sally Mapstone, and K. Simpson (East Linton, 2001), pp.119-28.

⁵ Sarah Dunnigan, 'Scottish Women Writers, c. 1560-1650', in *A History of Scottish Women's Writing*, ed. Douglas Gifford and Dorothy McMillan (Edinburgh, 1997), pp. 15-43.

⁶ For example, see Evelyn S Newlyn, 'A Methodology for Reading Against the Culture'; Sarah Dunnigan, 'Undoing the Double Tress: Scotland, Early Modern Women's Writing, and the Location of Critical Desires', in *Feminist Studies*, 29.2 (2003), pp.298-319; Sarah Dunnigan, 'Feminising the Early-Modern Erotic: Female Voiced Lyrics and Mary Queen of Scots', in *Older Scots Literature*, ed. Sally Mapstone (Edinburgh, 2005), pp.441-66.

⁷ See the [National Library of Scotland's Decorative Bookbindings page](#) for more information and examples from the collection. Also see William Smith Mitchell, *History of Scottish Bookbinding, 1432 to 1650* (Edinburgh, 1955).

⁸ Priscilla Bawcutt, "'My bright buke": Women and their books in Medieval and

Renaissance Scotland', in *Medieval Women: Texts and Contexts in Late Medieval Britain: Essays for Felicity Riddy*, eds J Wogan-Browne, R. Voaden, A. Diamond, L. Hutchinson, C. Meale, and L. Johnson (Turnhout, 2000), pp. 17-34 (23).

⁹ John Pinkerton, ed., *Ancient Scottish Poems Never Before in Print*, 2 vols (London, 1786), pp. 428-29.

¹⁰ A. A. MacDonald, 'Sir Richard Maitland and William Dunbar: Textual Symbiosis and Poetic Individuality', in *William Dunbar, 'The Nobill Poyet': Essays in Honour of Priscilla Bawcutt*, ed Sally Mapstone (East Linton, 2001), pp. 134-49 (145).

(c) *The Bottle Imp*