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RICHARD HOLLAND AND *THE BUKE OF THE HOWLAT*:
REMEMBRANCE OF THINGS PAST

Since the history of literature is concerned with the relation between literary works and the historical, personal, and cultural circumstances of authors, it tends to be preoccupied with determining dates of first composition. However, determining the true importance of a work of literature is a different matter. The author may have had second (or third) thoughts, impelling him to reformulate his work (cf. *Piers Plowman*), with each version demanding an appropriate response. Other considerations have their own effects: textual witnesses, perhaps later than the work itself, can contribute to notions of what was the author's purpose; copyists have been known to intervene in a text, and where no earlier manuscript is available for comparison, such intervention is not easily detectable; anthologization may place the work in a new and unintended context.¹ Such factors certainly apply in the case of Older Scots literature, and especially where literary manuscripts containing medieval, courtly, and Catholic material have been compiled in early modern and non-courtly (legal-professional or bourgeois) milieux, and in some cases by Protestant scribes.² As a result, many works of medieval Scottish verse are now glimpsed through a glass darkly.

One problem case (though not necessarily for all the reasons just mentioned) is Richard Holland's mid-fifteenth-century poem *The Buke of the Howlat*, pronounced by the most recent editor 'more narrowly datable, on internal grounds, than most medieval poems'.³ Despite the latter claim, much of the attention paid to the poem has been devoted to determining the date of composition, and over the years a perhaps surprising number of suggestions have been advanced.⁴ The present essay revisits this vexed issue from a new perspective – one which allows for the possibility that the textual witnesses (all of which are of the sixteenth century) may actually preserve the poem in a form that allows the poet to respond to circumstances different from those which formed the original background of the work. In other words, the problem of dating the *Howlat* may be reducible to the impossibility of offering a single date for two chronologically separate states of the poem. The current consensus on dating, it will be argued, overlooks signs of authorial revision, and it has neglected some evidence with a bearing on the moment of revision.

The Buke of the Howlat has many points of interest. It is the earliest Scottish

poem featuring thirteen-line stanzas combining alliteration and rhyme.⁵ The *Howlat* had an influence on more than one later work, most notably Hary's *Wallace* (c.1470).⁶ The *Howlat* was one of the first works of Scottish literature to reach the medium of print (STC 13594: Chepman and Myllar, c.1508), and Holland's poem remained appreciated well into the sixteenth century, being transcribed in both the Asloan (Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, MS 16500; c.1515–25) and Bannatyne (Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, Adv. MS 1.1.6; 1568) manuscripts.⁷ A notable feature of the language of the poem is vocabulary and idiom particular to Orkney, the home background of the author, Richard Holland (c.1415–c.1482).⁸ Also of interest is the bird-fable which provides the title. This fable, traceable ultimately to Odo of Cheriton (d. 1246/7), tells of an owl (for Odo, a crow) which, dismayed at its ugliness, complains to the Pope. The Pope promptly summons a council of all the birds, and, through a decree of the goddess Nature, the owl is awarded a feather from each of those assembled. The new plumage makes the owl insufferably proud, and the birds petition Nature to rescind her grant, thereby stripping the owl of its finery and returning it to dowdiness.

The following is a selection of the known information concerning the life and career of Richard Holland.⁹ The link with Orkney is seen in his surname, since 'Holland', as a toponymic, is connectible with several places there, among them the island of North Ronaldsay, on which the only hamlet is Hollandstoun, where the poet had a vicarage. In the early 1440s Holland is described as a *clericus cathaniensis* – a priest of the diocese of Caithness. In 1444 he was active as a notary and as prebendary of Kirkmichael, in the diocese of Ross, and in the first half of the 1440s he seems to have sought appointment as Archdeacon of Caithness. Between 1453 and January 1456 he was involved in litigation concerning the precentorship of the diocese of Moray, wherein he seems to have been successful.

By 1450, and described as Rector of Halkirk (in Caithness), Holland was acting as secretary and notary for Archibald Douglas, who had become Earl of Moray by virtue of his marriage to Elizabeth Dunbar (c.1410–c.1486), Countess of Moray in her own right. It is unclear precisely when Holland became an associate and supporter of Archibald Douglas, but his allegiance, once given, was firm. He accompanied Douglas to Leith in 1451, and there witnessed two documents. The years of Holland's association with Archibald were marked by tensions between the 'Black' Douglas family and James II. This conflict led to the king's murder, in Stirling Castle, of William, eighth Earl of Douglas (22 February 1452), and, after tension had flared into open revolt, to the death (1 May 1455) of Earl William's younger brother Archibald (Holland's patron) at the Battle of Arkinholm (Dumfriesshire), and of other members of the Douglas kin. The latter event, which betokened the collective downfall of the Black Douglas

family, has been seen 'as a European phenomenon, part of an age of tensions and conflicts between sovereigns and their greatest subjects, traditionally regarded in western Europe as a major stage in the formation of nation states'.¹⁰

After these dramatic events, Holland is recorded in 1457 back in Orkney, as priest and canon of Kirkwall. He may have held this position for a decade, and in 1467 his vicarage on North Ronaldsay was granted to a new incumbent. Before the latter date Holland would have departed to follow James Douglas, the (twin) brother of Archibald (Holland's patron), and now ninth Earl of Douglas, into exile in England, where the poet eventually died. Richard Holland's pre-exile career thus took him through a series of dioceses: Orkney, Caithness, Ross, Moray, and back again to Orkney.¹¹

All the editors and critics agree that the *Howlat* is in some way connected with the marriage of Elizabeth Dunbar to Archibald Douglas – an event of which the precise date is not known, but which had occurred before 26 April 1442. From at least 3 July 1445 Archibald, on the basis of his wife's title, was styling himself Earl of Moray, and by 1447 he had taken up residence at Elizabeth's castle of Darnaway (some 4 miles south-west of Forres, and still today the residence of the Earl of Moray). The final stanza of the *Howlat* contains two mentions of Darnaway, together with a discreet allusion to Elizabeth and Archibald as a pair of doves. The relevant – and punning – lines are: 'Thus for ane dow of Dunbar drewe I this dyte, / Dowit with ane Dowglas, and boith war þai dowis' (lines 989f.) ('Thus, for a dove of Dunbar I ended this poem, / Endowed with a Douglas, and both of them were doves.') Paired doves are a traditional symbol of romantic attachment,¹² and the lines just quoted have doubtless led to the idea that the *Howlat* is a work celebrating the union of these two members of the Scottish nobility. Holland's poem, in combining the theme of love with the motif of the bird-debate, is clearly indebted to Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls*; however, as will be argued below, the discernment of this influence has prompted an over-estimation of the importance of the theme of love in the *Howlat*. As a Chaucerian, Holland was selective, and had his own agenda.¹³

Holland's main purpose is to trumpet the glory of the Douglasses, and in the central part of the poem he provides lengthy descriptions of the shields of several members of that family, which had long been regarded as the 'werwall' ('defensive wall') of Scotland (382).¹⁴ The shields are those of 'Good Sir James' Douglas (d. 1330; 391–546), Archibald 'the Grim', third Earl of Douglas (d. 1400; 547–85), Archibald Douglas, Earl of Moray, Holland's patron (d. 1455; 586–98), followed (599–603) by those of two younger brothers of Archibald: Hugh Douglas, Earl of Ormond (d. 1455; executed after Arkinholm) and John Douglas, Lord Balvenie (d. 1463). The Douglas family therefore constitutes the central matter and message of the poem. There are accounts of the valour of Good Sir James

(who carried the heart of King Robert the Bruce to sanctification at Jerusalem, and into battle against the Saracens) and of Archibald the Grim (who performed doughty deeds along the Borders). All this is followed by a passage (604–31) on the symbolism of the Douglas arms, with a note on the heart-symbol which is so prominent therein. The poem also mentions the arms of the emperor and the Pope, with the latter (339–50) now securely identified as Antipope Felix V (Amadeus of Savoy).

The rich heraldic detail has been the starting point of attempts to date the *Howlat*. Not surprisingly, it has been assumed that the poem must have been composed prior to the end of Felix's reign (1439–49).¹⁵ Negative evidence has also been pressed into service: since the poem makes no mention of the defeat (23 October 1448) of an English army at the Battle of Sark (Dumfriesshire) at the hands of a Scottish force led by Hugh Douglas, Earl of Ormond, a date before the Battle of Sark has been inferred. Such details led Felicity Riddy to place the composition of the poem in the summer of 1448, a conclusion accepted by Nicola Royan and Ralph Hanna; the latter, however, observed that such a date anticipates the earliest certainly known association between Richard Holland and Archibald Douglas.¹⁶ In the past, other dates had been put forward: Laing assigned the poem to 1453, Amours to 1451–2, and Diebler to 1451.¹⁷ Matthew McDiarmid argued for a date before the autumn of 1446, on the grounds of what he took to be the significant absence of any mention of a shield for James Douglas, the twin brother of Archibald (Holland's patron).¹⁸ For her part, Marion Stewart introduced a new factor into the debate – arguing for a connection between the *Howlat* and the fall from political influence of the Livingstone family, in 1450.¹⁹ These various suggestions are discussed by Riddy, and most recently again by Hanna, both of whom uphold summer 1448 as the most probable date.

Unfortunately, this *communis opinio* does not settle all the problems presented by the *Howlat*. If the poem arose from the marriage of Archibald Douglas and Elizabeth Dunbar (before October 1442), it is strange that six or more years elapsed before the union was commemorated in verse. It is not known just when Holland entered the household of Elizabeth, Countess of Dunbar, but the inception of the poet's involvement with Archibald Douglas seems likely to belong to the late 1440s. Moreover, if the purpose of the *Howlat* were to celebrate the married couple, it is strange that the final stanza should declare that the poem was composed for Elizabeth Dunbar alone; after the beginning of Holland's close association with Archibald Douglas, this elision of the Earl of Moray must have seemed stranger still.

Although Holland says that the *Howlat* was written for Elizabeth Dunbar, it cannot be claimed that the poem is *about* either Elizabeth or her husband Archibald. The focus of the *Howlat* is not upon contemporary individuals, but

upon the general subject of honour, as manifested over centuries by generations of Douglasses. In the poem, true honour is presented in contrastive juxtaposition with its opposite, symbolized by the meretricious adornment briefly granted to the owl. Honour, however, belongs of right to the Douglas family. If any message were intended to Elizabeth Dunbar in particular, it can only have been that, though she may have brought the earldom of Moray to her husband by way of dowry, much greater honour has accrued to her from the renown of her husband's family. The *Howlat* is a poem which sets out to comment on the large topics of nobility, chivalry, history, and religion, and has scarcely anything to say about the nuptial union of Archibald and Elizabeth.

Yet these are not the only intriguing details. Very striking in lines 989f. (quoted above) is the poet's use of the preterite in the verbs 'drew' and 'war', since this has the effect of situating both Archibald and Elizabeth in a (relatively) distant past: had the intended time-reference been contemporary or near-contemporary, the perfect tense might have been more appropriate. One therefore surmises that some time must have passed since the Earl and Countess of Moray behaved, or might be figured as behaving, as doves. Yet the really interesting element in the final stanza of the poem remains the poet's temporal distancing of himself at the present moment of writing, from an earlier time, at which he would have first composed the poem – a time belonging to a past, at Darnaway, which he is now recollecting. This temporal distancing may also explain why in this final stanza the poet's words have an assertive ring to them. Though Holland is not the only poet to incorporate his name as a 'signature' in a final line,²⁰ it is difficult to think of a parallel in any earlier work of Older Scots literature in which a poet comments in such an apparently objective way on a work of his own creation.²¹ In this final stanza, and despite what has more than once been said, Holland is neither dedicating his poem to Elizabeth Dunbar-Moray,²² nor making her a formal presentation of his work: rather, he is informing the reader that the poem had once upon a time been created for one particular female dove. One is forced to the conclusion that, although Elizabeth may have been among the intended audience when the poem was first conceived, neither she nor her husband is the envisaged audience *now*.

What, therefore, is required is an interpretation, taking the fullest account of the implications of the final stanza, that can satisfactorily respond to the following questions: (a) Why is the *Howlat* said by Holland to have been composed only for Elizabeth and not also for Archibald? (b) What length of time may be thought to have intervened between the composition of the poem and Holland's comment on his poem in the final stanza? (c) Is there any plausible scenario wherewith to elucidate the disjunction between the initial purpose of the poem, and the poet's later perspective on his own work?

The first of these questions is the most straightforward. Given that Holland must have composed the *Howlat* after the marriage of Archibald and Elizabeth – in theory at any point after 1442, but probably at a time when the two doves were living at Darnaway, and possibly in the summer of 1448 – his principal intention was not to celebrate the marriage but to honour the Douglas lineage. In the process, an incidental secondary purpose may have been to impress the Countess of Moray with the achievements of her new family; for any Douglas, such information, however ingratiating, would have been otiose. The poet may also have had a third purpose – to wit, to impress an audience beyond the immediate Douglas–Dunbar–Moray circle with a reiteration of the fame of the Douglases and especially their long service to the Scottish Crown. Such a reminder may have been tactful, for, as Sally Mapstone has noted in connection with the *Howlat*, ‘Douglas patronage has a solipsistic focus’, and there may be ‘an undercurrent of [Douglas] aggression’ towards the Stewarts.²³

The second question cannot be answered with confidence. While Holland’s manner of referring to the two doves implies something in the past, the degree of temporal remoteness remains unclear. The year 1448 is certainly one possibility, if not the only one. However, given what has been seen as the implication of the final stanza, there are grounds to extend the range of possibilities to include the period of the Douglas revolt against King James II (1452, or 1455). Consequently, two dates must be considered for the *Howlat* – that of the first composition (1448?), and that of Holland’s retrospective comment on his poem.

In the 1450s, the poem would have lost none of its ability to resonate beyond merely the Douglas–Dunbar–Moray household: on the contrary, it would continue to function as a powerful, if not exactly welcome, piece of advice to James II, reminding him of the bravery, chivalry, loyalty, and piety of the Douglas family. In this way, the *Howlat* would qualify as a ‘courtly’ work, not from having been composed at court but in the sense of having been written with the court in mind.²⁴ Furthermore, such a message, intended no longer only for the small circle of Archibald and Elizabeth, but for a wider audience and one which not improbably included the king, would have been fully compatible with recent developments in contemporary court culture. The marriage (3 July 1449) of James II to Mary of Gueldres, great-niece of Philip the Good, had greatly stimulated Scottish interest in the cultural and moral nexus characteristic of late medieval chivalry.²⁵ This topic was especially associated with the court of the dukes of Burgundy, then the cultural trend-setters in Western Europe, and the *Howlat* may in fact be one of the first pieces of Scottish literature to reflect the new ethos.²⁶

As a preliminary to answering the third question, it may be noted that there is actually no reason why the final stanza of the *Howlat* should not be seen in relation to a moment subsequent to the death (1455) of Archibald Douglas. In

such a light, the poet would have moved on from simple praise (befitting the Douglasses) and delight in chivalric display (corresponding to the new Burgundian influences), and would now be sounding a solemn note, in the painful awareness of forlorn glory. After the Battle of Arkinholm, the topic of Douglas honour would still be relevant, even though the memory would be suffused with rueful melancholy.²⁷ A post-Arkinholm date, though never before proposed for the *Howlat*, would clarify, and is not incompatible with, certain other aspects of the poem. For one, it would explain Holland's declaration that the poem was for only Elizabeth Dunbar, now widowed. For another, the arms of Felix V and the non-mention of the Battle of Sark would lose much of the perhaps exaggerated significance with which they have been invested by critics searching for the putative one year in which the poem would have been composed. In addition, the fate of the owl in the fable would now be able to evoke the memory of the fall of the upstart Livingstones – something not possible with any pre-1450 date.

Holland may have wished to console Elizabeth Dunbar in her predicament. As a result of her husband's death and the ruin of the family to which she had become bound, she had been abruptly deprived of much prestige and honour: after Arkinholm, the earldom of Moray was forfeited to the Crown, Elizabeth lost the title which she had once held in her own right, and her son James was excluded from succession. Such a fall from fortune is a tragedy in the medieval sense.

Omnia subjacent vicissitudini. On 20 May 1455, less than three weeks after the death of Archibald Douglas, Elizabeth Dunbar signed a contract of marriage with her cousin George Gordon, son of the Earl of Huntly. Huntly had been an ally of the king in the latter's conflict with the Douglasses, and the Gordon lands, which neighboured those of Moray, had been raided by Archibald. It must have seemed, with the death of the latter, that the tables were turned, and that the lands of Moray were now wide open for annexation by Gordon. Part of the reason for the haste of this marital *démarche* – which is the very antithesis of the characteristic behaviour ascribed to doves – would have been the vulnerable Elizabeth's need of protection. By the terms of the contract, George Gordon undertook to provide just that. He also promised not to force his lady into carnal intercourse before the Church's approval of the marriage, and he declared his willingness to protect Elizabeth's son.²⁸ George Gordon was probably motivated by the assumption that via such a marriage he would gain for himself the title and territory of the Earl of Moray, just as Archibald Douglas had acquired them through *his* marriage to Elizabeth. Unfortunately, the royal confiscation of the title changed everything, and Gordon was never to attain the anticipated honour. It is not clear how long the marriage of Elizabeth and George actually did last: grounds of consanguinity were apparently invoked in

order to annul it, but it is unclear at what point that happened.²⁹ But by 1459 the Gordon–Moray marriage was a thing of the past, since in that year Gordon married Annabella Stewart, a sister of James II.³⁰

The first person listed as witness to the Gordon–Moray marriage-contract was none other than Richard Holland, and the poet may therefore be presumed to have been one of those who advised Elizabeth to the union. Such evident closeness to the countess is not surprising, in view of the fact that, both as secretary to the lady's late husband Archibald and as a priest, Holland had for several years occupied an important and trusted position in the Douglas–Dunbar–Moray establishment. By the same token, such functions may not have endeared Holland to George Gordon, and it is interesting that the marriage-contract is explicit in giving the latter *carte blanche* to dismiss at will any member of the Darnaway household. The threat of such a possibility might be sufficient to explain Holland's appearance in 1457 back in his home territory, as a canon of the cathedral of St Magnus at Kirkwall.

If the fundamental theme of honour in the *Howlat* is extended to include the related sub-theme of the deprivation of honour, the framing fable of the owl may be satisfactorily integrated with the poem's central emphasis on the Douglas family. The owl's case is a negative example, while that of the Douglases is the very opposite, and is entirely positive: the contrast between the frame (the owl) and the framed (the Douglases) speaks for itself. This antithesis would have worked at virtually any point in the 1440s, during which period the topic of honour, both in the abstract and in its concrete exemplification via the achievements of the family of Douglas, would have been the main affair. However, in a post-1455 perspective the central concern with honour would have been no less strong, though it would now inevitably have been seen in a very different light. Several instances of the deprivation of honour had occurred. First, there is the treatment meted out to the owl in the fable, possibly evoking the memory of the downfall of the Livingstones. Second, there is the fate of the Black Douglas family, which, despite former signal service to the Crown, had been crushed by the regnant king. Third, there is Elizabeth Dunbar, who, through the death of Archibald, had lost husband, title, inheritance, and the enhanced prestige accruing from her Douglas marriage. Fourth, there is Richard Holland, whose career would have suffered a disruption, very possibly leaving him no option but to retreat to Orkney.

One small detail, when correctly understood, may be relevant here. When the owl receives its new plumage from the other birds, he rejoices 'That no bird was him lyke / Fro Burone to Berwike / Wnder þe bewes' (lines 895–7) ('That no bird was his equal, from B. to B., under the boughs'). Amours identified 'Burone' with Burrion, the most northerly point of North Ronaldsay, the most northerly of the Orkney Islands, and editors have also followed Amours in identifying 'Berwike'

with Berwick-upon-Tweed, conceived as the most southerly town in Scotland. The general understanding of this collocation has therefore been that the owl sees itself as the finest creature in the entire land – with the phrase ‘Fra Burone to Berwike’ indicating the extremities of the country. Yet this interpretation of the rhetorical effect of the alliterating place names may have been adopted too readily. A reference to the entire kingdom of Scotland sits uncomfortably in a poem which otherwise has such a northern focus. The town of Berwick, in the Borders, has no known relevance to Richard Holland, and in any case it was actually in English hands at the time when the poem was written.³¹ Moreover, if the paired place names were designed to evoke the whole of Scotland, it is bizarre that the very obscure Burrion should be selected as one terminus, since the enormously better-known Shetlands lie still further to the north. Fortunately, a more plausible solution can be offered, whereby ‘Berwike’ would indicate the hamlet of Burwick, situated at the most southerly point of South Ronaldsay, the most southerly of the Orkney Islands. From the viewpoint of Kirkwall, at the geographical and ecclesiastical centre of the archipelago, Burrion and Burwick, at the extremes respectively of North and South Ronaldsay, are genuine, natural, and equivalent territorial markers, signifying not the whole of Scotland but the whole of Orkney.

It might be thought strange that the owl should be thinking of Orkney when exulting in his moment of triumph: does he not belong, like the two doves, in the forest of Darnaway? For several reasons, it seems unlikely that the owl and the doves were ever neighbours under the boughs.

Holland, it may be conceded, handles the imagined geographical localities in his poem rather untidily. The frame-fable begins with a *Natureingang*, with birds singing and flowers blooming in the month of May, and the narrator wandering beside a beautiful river and lake. Such elements are conventional and generic, and clearly do not correspond with the reality of the windy climate and stunted vegetation characteristic of Orkney. On the other hand, a pleasant opening scene is purposeful as a preparation for the poem’s moral contrast between the harmonious governance of the goddess Nature and the disruptive ambition of creatures who rebel against their supposed disadvantage. The fact that Darnaway is mentioned in the final stanza of the poem does not mean that the opening must be understood as located there. When first encountered, the owl is not in any forest (like that at Darnaway) but is merely skulking under a holly-bush (line 48) – one detail within the *locus amoenus*. Moreover, were the geographical details in the *Howlat* intended to be taken as indicators of genuine places, then logic would dictate that the assembly of all the birds, from emperor and Pope down to the most lowly, would be being held somewhere on the mainland of Europe,³² and at any rate not in Scotland: simplistic and mechanical equations are inappropriate.

Yet there remains the question: why the appearance of Orkney in lines 895-7? The reason may well have to do with the personal circumstances of the poet who, after all, was himself an Orkney man. After the 1455 downfall of the Douglasses, the poet retreated to his native habitat, exchanging his comfortable existence in the castle of a prominent nobleman for the perhaps frugal consolations of a Kirkwall canonry and a remote island vicarage. Before Holland's return home, there would be no reason at all for this Orkney reference. On the other hand, the local allusion is fully in harmony with the positing of a post-1455 date, and it is natural that the outcast poet should self-identify with the outcast bird of his poem. Unfortunately, this identification results in moral and artistic clumsiness. When one hears that the owl, though supposedly attending the papal and imperial assembly somewhere in continental Europe, is at the same time cutting a *bella figura* in Orkney, something is not quite right. Moreover, though the owl is deservedly punished for being vainglorious, Holland, the historical poet, has been undeservedly punished for his allegiance to a noble family brought down by a resentful king. The collapsing of a symbol within the fable with the fortunes of the narrator outside the fable is awkward and confusing, even though comprehensible.³³

That the completion of the poem *as it now stands* may have occurred after the author's return to Orkney is a hypothesis neither impossible nor improbable. As Marion Stewart wrote: 'Perhaps it is not too fanciful to think that Holland, after the fall of the Douglasses and the blighting of his hopes of advancement, took refuge in Orkney with his own people.'³⁴ That indeed proved to be the case, and the final stanza may imply that Holland's poem in its final state may eventually have reached the widowed Elizabeth Dunbar: as the relict of Archibald Douglas, she was still a dove, albeit lacking her mate and in need of consolation.

Such a theory leaves intact the idea that Holland's poem may initially have been composed c.1448, though the surviving textual witnesses, given their late date, testify only to what appears to be the post-1455 version of the poem.³⁵ Holland's main purpose was primarily to emphasize the glory of the Douglas family, and this is true of either state of the poem: in the early version, the owl functioned merely as a negative symbol of overweening pride in general; in the revised version, it may in addition have evoked the memory of the upstart Livingstones. Notably, both versions would have communicated the same message to the king, reminding him of the virtues of the Douglasses: in the early version, the message would have been a discreet admonition; in the revised version, the message would be tinged with bitter recollection. The *Howlat* does not celebrate the marriage of Elizabeth and Archibald: by the time of either version, it was too late for that. The *Howlat* is not written for the Douglasses: they were already fully aware of their own excellence. The *Howlat* cannot be said to be dedicated to Elizabeth Dunbar-Moray: rather, it was made for Elizabeth, once the wife,

but now the widow, of Archibald Douglas. In terms of genre, the *Howlat* belongs among the literature of advice to princes, since it was a prince, James II, who brought down not only the Black Douglases but also Holland, their confessor, notary, and house-poet. By returning to Orkney, Richard Holland, the committed and unrepentant Douglas apologist, had put himself beyond the dangerous clutches of James II, for until 1468–9 Orkney and Shetland still belonged to Denmark–Norway.³⁶ Holland did not risk returning to Scotland, and from his northern refuge he departed to exile in England, where he associated with James, ninth Earl of Douglas, in the latter's continuing opposition to the Scottish Crown.³⁷ The more interesting challenge presented by the *Howlat*, therefore, may not be the determination of the date of first composition, but rather the discovery of the functioning of the poem within the profoundly changed political circumstances following the Battle of Arkinholm.

The discussion offered here attempts to reconcile the various difficulties presented by the poem. The *Howlat* impinges upon more than one point of time – having not improbably an origin in the late 1440s, but with a reorientation geared to the mid-1450s, when the poem would have acquired a wholly new resonance. The framing fable set in the conventional 'mirthfull moneth of May' (line 998) and the passages where the tone is humorous (for example, the behaviour of certain birds at the Pope's banquet: lines 794–845) may have fitted the mood of the late 1440s; on the other hand, the melancholy tone detected in the final stanza corresponds with the violent events of the ensuing decade. The structure-technical unity of the poem, visible in the numerological significance of its 1,001 lines and 77 stanzas and also in its overall symmetrical pattern of episodes,³⁸ was a creation of the early version, and would have been left undisturbed in the revised version: there is no reason to think that any lines were added, though some would have been lightly adjusted. On the other hand, the poet's later tinkering did have an impact on the artistic unity and moral purpose, and resulted in the poem as we now know it. Such a double approach has the advantage of subsuming, and so recuperating, the alleged contradiction found to inhere in the puzzling 'double moral' of the poem, whereby a warning against the dangers of pride (the owl) co-occurs with unrestrained dynastic glorification (the Douglases).³⁹

McDiarmid observed that the *Howlat* is more than 'a merely occasional poem',⁴⁰ but, even if it were only the latter, the poem would connect with more than one occasion. The historical references lurking in the poem need not be treated as uniquely one-dimensional factors, as if susceptible of yielding one single solution – the latter being the year of first composition. If the long controversy about dating shows anything, it is that the *Howlat* demands to be interpreted with great care. In its overall ethos, the poem is much more than either a comical or a celebratory work, and, while it does contain a small measure of comedy and a

very large measure of celebration, the final state of the poem matches the sombre circumstances after 1455. So many of the rhetorical high-points are religious in theme: the account of the Jerusalem pilgrimage and crusade of Good Sir James Douglas with the heart of King Robert the Bruce (lines 391–546), the anaphor-rich stanzas in praise of Mary (lines 716–41), and the owl's (perhaps also voicing the priest-poet's) lament (lines 950–88), heavy with observations on mortality and mutability.⁴¹ Despite its few lighter flashes, the poem is essentially a work of spiritual and moral edification.⁴² It is perfectly attuned to the attitudes of an age imbued with the ideals of chivalry, and is likely to have been intended to reach the ears of the youthful James II (b. 1430). However, in the last hoot of the howlat there may well be an echo of the poet himself, disaffected with the Scottish Crown, moping like the owl in his Orkney fastness, and wryly reflecting on what has been.

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NOTES

¹ Kylie Murray, 'Passing the book: the Scottish shaping of Chaucer's dream states in Bodleian Library, MS Arch. Selden. B. 24', in *The Anglo-Scottish Border and the Shaping of Identity, 1300–1600*, ed. Mark P. Bruce and Katherine H. Terrell (New York, 2012), pp. 121–39 (pp. 127–34). The Selden MS (post-1488) contains a version of Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls* with, at the end, several new stanzas, also involving an owl, and perhaps influenced by the *Buke of the Howlat*.

² Alasdair A. MacDonald, 'The cultural repertory of Middle Scots lyric verse', in *Cultural Repertoires: Structure, Functions and Dynamics*, ed. G. J. Dorleijn and H. L. J. Vanstiphout (Leuven, 2003), pp. 59–86; Priscilla Bawcutt, 'Scottish manuscript miscellanies from the fifteenth to the seventeenth century', *English Manuscript Studies*, 12 (2005), 46–73.

³ Richard Holland, *The Buke of the Howlat*, ed. Ralph Hanna, STS (Woodbridge, 2014), p. 12. Quotations in this article are from this edition.

⁴ Editions prior to that of Hanna are those of: Laing (*The Buke of the Howlat*, ed. David Laing, Bannatyne Club (Edinburgh, 1867)); Diebler (*Holland's Buke of the Houlate* (etc.), ed. Arthur Diebler (Chemnitz, 1893)); Amours (*Scottish Alliterative Poems in Riming Stanzas*, ed. F. J. Amours, STS (Edinburgh and London, 1892–7), pp. 47–81), and Riddy (*Longer Scottish Poems*, I: 1375–1650, ed. Priscilla Bawcutt and Felicity Riddy (Edinburgh, 1987), pp. 43–84).

⁵ Felicity Riddy, 'The alliterative revival', in *The History of Scottish Literature*, I: *Origins to 1660 (Medieval and Renaissance)*, ed. R. D. S. Jack (Aberdeen, 1988), pp. 39–54. *Howlat*, ed. Hanna, p. 10. See also Margaret A. Mackay, 'The alliterative tradition in Middle Scots verse' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1975).

⁶ Cf. *Howlat*, ed. Hanna, pp. 14f.

⁷ The textual and literary afterlife of the *Howlat* is recapitulated in *Howlat*, ed. Hanna, pp. 1–10, 14f.

⁸ See Amours's note to lines 698 and 896, and Riddy's to line 825 – recapitulated in *Howlat*, ed. Hanna, p. 10.

⁹ The details in this and in the following two paragraphs are culled from the several editors and, in particular, Marion M. Stewart in her article 'Holland of *The Howlat*', *Innes Review*, 23 (1972), 3–15. For a recapitulation see *Howlat*, ed. Hanna, pp. 10–15.

¹⁰ Michael Brown, *The Black Douglases: War and Lordship in Late-Medieval Scotland 1300–1455* (East Linton, 1998), p. 321.

¹¹ Although it is conventional to think of Orkney as a Scottish diocese, it initially received bishops from York, then Hamburg-Bremen, and, after 1151, from Trondheim-Nidaros. Only in 1472 was it placed under the metropolitan authority of St Andrews: *Fasti Ecclesiae Scoticanæ mediæ ævi ad annum 1638*, rev. edn, ed. D. E. R. Watt and A. L. Murray, Scottish Record Society (Edinburgh, 2003), p. 322.

¹² There is another reference to the 'trewie turtour' (dove) at line 287. Cf. Chaucer, *Parliament of Fowls*, lines 576–88.

¹³ On Chaucerian influence in Scotland see Sally Mapstone, 'Introduction: Older Scots and the fifteenth century', in *Older Scots Literature*, ed. Sally Mapstone (Edinburgh, 2005), pp. 3–13.

¹⁴ Brown, *The Black Douglases*, pp. 132–56; cf. *Howlat*, ed. Hanna, p. 115.

¹⁵ Amours (pp. xxvif.) believed that the papal arms described in the poem were those of Nicholas V (Tommaso Parentucelli), elected in 1447, and he saw in the latter date a *terminus a quo* for the composition of the poem. This idea, however, has been convincingly refuted in the critical literature.

¹⁶ Felicity Riddy, 'Dating *The Buke of the Howlat*', *Review of English Studies*, NS 37 (1986), 1–10; Nicola Royan, "'Mark your meroure be me": Richard Holland's *Buke of the Howlat*', in *A Companion to Medieval Scottish Poetry*, ed. Priscilla Bawcutt and Janet Hadley Williams (Cambridge, 2006), pp. 49–62 (p. 59); *Howlat*, ed. Hanna, pp. 13, 31.

¹⁷ *Howlat*, ed. Laing, p. vi; *Howlat*, ed. Amours, pp. xxvii–xxix; *Houlate*, ed. Diebler, p. 8.

¹⁸ M. P. McDiarmid, 'Richard Holland's *Buke of the Howlat*: an interpretation', *MÆ*, 38 (1969), 277–90. McDiarmid's argument re a 'missing' Douglas shield has been convincingly countered: see Riddy, 'Dating *The Buke of the Howlat*', pp. 2f. Much earlier arguments for dating, proposed by John Pinkerton and David Laing, are summarized in *Howlat*, ed. Amours, pp. xxvi–xxix, and also in McDiarmid's article, and need not detain us here.

¹⁹ Marion Stewart, 'Holland's *Howlat* and the fall of the Livingstones', *Innes Review*, 26 (1975), 67–79.

²⁰ For a (slightly later) Scottish parallel, see Kennedy's Marian lyric: *The Poems of Walter Kennedy*, ed. Nicole Meier, STS (Woodbridge, 2008), pp. 13–15 (line 71).

²¹ That soon changed, however: see Gavin Douglas's self-advertising at the end of his *Eneados* translation.

²² Pace Sally Mapstone, 'Older Scots literature and the court', in *The Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature*, I: *From Columba to the Union (until 1707)*, ed. Thomas Clancy and Murray Pittock (Edinburgh, 2007), pp. 273–85 (p. 276), and Kate Ash, 'Friend or foe? Negotiating the Anglo-Scottish border in Sir Thomas Gray's *Scalacronica* and Richard Holland's *Buke of the Howlat*', in *The Anglo-Scottish Border*, ed. Bruce and Terrell, pp. 51–67 (p. 58).

²³ Mapstone, 'Older Scots literature and the court', p. 276.

- ²⁴ Sally Mapstone, 'Was there a court literature in fifteenth-century Scotland?', in *The Language and Literature of Early Scotland*, ed. G. Ross Roy and Patrick G. Scott (Columbia, SC, 1991), pp. 410–22 (especially pp. 417f.); this volume was simultaneously *Studies in Scottish Literature*, vol. 26.
- ²⁵ Christine McGladdery, *James II* (Edinburgh, 1990), pp. 44–6; Katie Stevenson, 'Contesting chivalry: James II and the control of chivalric culture in the 1450s', *Journal of Medieval History*, 33 (2007), 197–214.
- ²⁶ Alasdair A. MacDonald, 'Chivalry as a catalyst of cultural change in late-medieval Scotland', in *Medieval to Early Modern Culture/Kultureller Wandel vom Mittelalter zur Frühen Neuzeit*, ed. Rudolf Suntrup and Jan R. Veenstra (Frankfurt a.M., 2001), pp. 151–74; Katie Stevenson, *Power and Propaganda: Scotland 1306–1488* (Edinburgh, 2014), pp. 182–214 (ch. 7: 'Elite culture, iconography and propaganda').
- ²⁷ That the *Howlat* might contain no significant ulterior message *at all* seems most unlikely. Cf. Sir Walter Scott, who saw the poem as mere entertainment: 'Holland amused his leisure at Ternoway by composing a poetical apologue, upon a plan used not only by Chaucer, but by many of the French minstrels, without any view whatever to local or national politics' – quoted in *Howlat*, ed. Laing, p. xxii.
- ²⁸ For the text of the marriage-contract see the *Miscellany of the Spalding Club*, ed. John Stuart, Volume IV (Aberdeen, 1849), pp. 128–31. On 13 July 1470, George Gordon would succeed his father as second Earl of Huntly.
- ²⁹ McGladdery, *James II*, p. 44. I am obliged to Dr McGladdery for advice in this matter.
- ³⁰ In 1471, however, consanguinity was likewise invoked to dissolve this latter marriage: *Tracts, Legal and Historical* (etc.), ed. John Riddell (Edinburgh, 1835) pp. 83f. It may be noted that in c.1462, Elizabeth Dunbar married for a third time, her new husband being John, ninth Lord of Colquhoun and eleventh of Luss (d. 1478). In her later years, she is associated with a particular Book of Hours (Auckland Libraries, Med. MS G. 146): see Anne McKim, 'The Rossdhu Book of Hours: tracing connections', in *Migrations: Medieval Manuscripts in New Zealand*, ed. Stephanie Harris and Alexandra Barratt (Newcastle, 2007), pp. 202–15 (pp. 205–9); *The Biographical Dictionary of Scottish Women*, ed. Elizabeth L. Ewan, Sue Innes, and Siân Reynolds (Edinburgh, 2006), pp. 105f.
- ³¹ Berwick was under English control from 1333 to 1461, and again from 1482.
- ³² Some critics have seen in the poem reflections of the Council of Basel (1431–49): McDiarmid, 'Richard Holland's *Buke of the Howlat*', pp. 278f.; *Howlat*, ed. Riddy, p. 324. On the Council see J. H. Burns, *Scottish Churchmen and the Council of Basle* (Glasgow, 1962), where Holland, however, is not mentioned.
- ³³ The *Howlat* has earlier been criticized for clumsiness of construction: Thorlac Turville-Petre, *The Alliterative Revival* (Cambridge, 1977), p. 115 – although this criticism is not entirely deserved, since it does not sufficiently distinguish between the poet and the narrator.
- ³⁴ Stewart, 'Holland of *The Howlat*', p. 11.
- ³⁵ The Chepman and Myllar print is fragmentary, and one cannot know whether it contained the identical final lines.
- ³⁶ The islands came to Scotland in connection with the dowry of Margaret of Denmark, on her marriage (1469) to James III. Whether Holland's departure from Orkney was in anticipation of the transfer of sovereignty is not known.
- ³⁷ On which see Norman Macdougall, *James III* (Edinburgh, 2009), pp. 174f., *et passim*.

³⁸ Margaret A. Mackay, 'Structure and style in Richard Holland's *Buke of the Howlat*', in *Proceedings of the Third International Conference on Scottish Language and Literature (Medieval and Renaissance)*, ed. Roderick J. Lyall and Felicity Riddy (Stirling and Glasgow, 1981), pp. 191-205.

³⁹ The critical problems raised by such a double moral are discussed by Royan, "Mark your meroure be me", pp. 50, 62.

⁴⁰ 'Richard Holland's *Buke of the Howlat*', p. 277.

⁴¹ McDiarmid (*ibid.*, p. 289), who insisted on the organic relation between the framing fable and the main content of the poem, saw in the *Howlat* a 'treatment of [the] theme of natural harmony'. For his part, Hanna would refer the poet's sense of order specifically to the domain of rhetoric: *Howlat*, ed. Hanna, p. 10.

⁴² See Flora Alexander, 'Richard Holland's *Buke of the Howlat*', in *Literature of the North*, ed. David Hewitt and Michael Spiller (Aberdeen, 1983), pp. 14-25.