

The French Presence in Medieval Scotland: Le roi René and *King Hart*

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Although less pervasive in Scotland than in England, and with major Scottish writing coming under a strong English influence, French remained a powerful focus for all literature in the vernacular, in both the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.¹ In 1934 Janet Smith published a meticulous analysis of the French sources for the medieval period.² However, since Smith's time a spate of hitherto neglected French texts have received scholarly editions; since her time we have found new ways of looking at literature. One argument I make in what will be an extended study on the French presence in the literature of medieval and Renaissance Scotland is that the French *dit amoureux* had a significant impact on high courtly narrative (what C. S. Lewis called the "allegory of love") in Middle Scots.

On occasion the French courtly tradition had an impact on Scottish books that partake of a different current and follow different conventions. One example would be the 960-line allegory entitled *King Hart* (late fifteenth or very early sixteenth century).³ Hart leaves his castle for a good fight. He is taken prisoner by Bewtie and Fayr Calling and imprisoned in the castle of Dame Plesance. Danger and Piete debate. However, New Desyr and Grene Luif conquer Plesance on Hart's behalf, so that she makes him the master of her domain. Manifestations of joy, followed by a banquet! But, then, Age

1 Amongst a number of works which treat the French presence in medieval England, see Calin, *The French Tradition and the Literature of Medieval England*.

2 Smith, *The French Background of Middle Scots Literature*.

3 In Bawcutt, *The Shorter Poems of Gavin Douglas*, 139-70. Quotations from *King Hart* are taken from this text.

arrives with a retinue of old men. Conscience, Resson, and Wisdome now counsel Hart. Although he resists, Youthheid and Plesance herself leave. Hart returns to his own castle, kept for him all these years by Hevines, upon which Decrepitus arrives with an army and wounds Hart to the quick.

This text has been relatively neglected by the critics. C. S. Lewis, who did so much to rehabilitate the literature in Middle Scots, stated that “*King Hart* [. . .] is an admirably ordered little work [. . .]. Its content represents the fusion of erotic and homiletic allegory to perfection.”⁴ Priscilla Bawcutt published an impeccable edition of the book with a first-rate literary and historical introduction.⁵ Nevertheless, only one-half of one sentence is devoted to *King Hart* in the monumental four-volume *History of Scottish Literature*,⁶ in which Bawcutt observes that “[Gavin Douglas’s] authorship of *King Hart*, an excellent moral allegory once attributed to him, is now thought unlikely.”⁷ That *King Hart* is not discussed in the *History* is the fault of no-one; it testifies only to the fact that in multi-authored literary histories, important texts will occasionally slip through the cracks, as we say. Inevitably, too, a book authored by a major writer will have greater visibility than if it is the work of Mr. Anonymous. Here is an important text which has, to a small extent, escaped notice in the scholarly community.

I would like to suggest that we find in *King Hart* the intertextual presence of works by René d’Anjou, Count of Provence and King of Naples, and especially *Le Livre du Cuer d’amours espris* (1457).⁸ This text is a *prosimetrum*, an experiment in quest allegory whereby René fuses the allegory of love (*Le Roman de la Rose* in verse) with the romance of chivalry (*The Lancelot-Grail Prose Cycle* and, more particularly, *La Queste del saint Graal* in prose). The plot is rich and convoluted. In brief, in the Narrator’s dream, Cuer, along with his companion and mentor Desir, seeks to rescue Douce Mercy, held prisoner by Reffus and Dangier. Although they fall into all kinds of trouble on the road, Cuer reaches the God of Love’s castle and becomes Amours’s vassal. He succeeds in freeing Douce

4 Lewis, *The Allegory of Love*, 287-90, esp. 287.

5 Bawcutt, *The Shorter Poems*, 1v-1xxix. The 2003 edition contains, in a supplement, a review of scholarship since 1967 and a bibliography to the supplement. See also Sheila Delany, “*King Hart*: Rhetoric and Meaning.”

6 *History of Scottish Literature*, ed. C. Craig.

7 See Bawcutt’s article, “William Dunbar and Gavin Douglas,” 73-89 (esp. 74). On the authorship, see the studies by Bawcutt, “Did Gavin Douglas Write *King Hart*?” and Ridley, “Did Gawin Douglas Write *King Hart*?”

8 Ed. Wharton, *Le Livre du Cuer d’amours espris*. Quotations from René d’Anjou’s *Livre du Cuer* are taken from this edition. See also Viereck Gibbs and Karczewska, trans., *The Book of the Love-Smitten Heart by René d’Anjou*, and Bouchet, ed. and trans., *Le Livre du Cœur d’amour épris*.

Mercy and wins a kiss. However, on the road back they are ambushed by Reffus, Dangier, and a contingent of men sent by Mallebouche. Doulce Mercy is recaptured and Cuer gravely wounded, upon which the Narrator wakes up.

What does Janet Smith have to say? That René's book "may have given [the Scottish poet] some hints for his own work . . . not much certainly, but worth considering." Why so little? Because, she says, "René's *Livre du Cuer* is a love romance, not a moral allegory. It ends not with a death-bed scene, but with the hero left upon the island of love, where the air is clean and pure, without wind or clouds. Love, to René, is the spirit's goal, not the body's temptation."⁹

In other words, because the two works are so different, because *King Hart* diverges so much from René's *Livre du Cuer*, the French text ought not to be considered a source or analogue for the one in Scots. Because the resemblance is slight, the French had little impact on the Scots. But is that the way we should go about things? Guillaume de Digulleville's *Pèlerinage de la Vie humaine* differs enormously from *Le Roman de la Rose* in much the same way: a moral and religious allegory of the life of man wherein carnal love proves wanting is opposed to an allegorical romance of carnal love. However, Guillaume de Digulleville states that he is writing specifically against *Le Roman de la Rose* in order to counter the errors to be found in the *Rose*. Could the Scottish poet not be doing roughly the same thing? Writing an anti-René and a super-René?

Are the differences that great? *Le Livre du Cuer* takes the form of a quest romance whereas *King Hart* assumes in part the form of a *psychomachia*. Yet the dominant imagery is the same: the imagery of war. In the Scots book Hart's people and Plesance's people fight a battle, Hart is taken prisoner, and then he is rescued. Later, back in his own castle, Hart is mortally wounded by Decrepitus, who had broken in with his army. In René's book, Cuer is a warrior, brave and impetuous, accepted by Desir because of his military attributes. He wanders through the countryside in the guise of a knight-errant. Among the traditional Arthurian motifs we find a perilous bridge as in Chrétien's *Lancelot*, a fountain of storms defended by a giant as in *Yvain*, and travel by boat to a sacred island as in *La Queste del saint Graal* and *La Mort le roi Artu*. Battles are fought. At different points in the narration, Cuer, Bel Accueil, and Doulce Mercy are taken prisoner and then rescued. The gatekeeper (Dangier) in *Cuer*, who fails to keep the pro-love figures out, corresponds to the gatekeeper (Wantonnes) in *Hart*, who fails to keep the anti-love figures out. Furthermore, the endings of the two texts are actually quite similar. In *King Hart*, Hart is mortally wounded by Decrepitus:

9 Smith, *The French Background of Middle Scots Literature*, 120-21.

He socht king Hart, for he full weill him kend,
 And with ane swerde he can him smertlie smyte
 His bak in twa, richt pertlie, for dispyte,
 And with the brand brak he both his schinnis.

(883-86)

In the *Livre du Cuer*, Cuer, ambushed by Dangier and Reffus, is deeply wounded:

Dangier . . . lui ramena ung coup sur la
 teste tellement que la coiffe de fer ne le
 garentist qu'il ne lui abatist une des
 machoueres, et si cruellement l'ataindit que
 la cervelle de la teste lui paroissoit.

(p. 200)

His retinue sets off to Amours's castle whereas he is ready to repair to the Hospital d'Amours, to spend the rest of his days in prayer and to be buried there.

Admittedly, the *Hart* poet could hardly approve of *fin' amor* as it is portrayed by René; after all, in *King Hart* any number of the sins — Falset, Invy, Crude Desyr, Glutony, and Vainegloir — are associated with Plesance and the life that Hart leads with her. Upon the arrival of Conscience and Ressoun, they leave. In *Le Livre du Cuer*, Desir is a delightful, witty young man, and Honneur aids Cuer in his function as a vassal to Amours. Jalouzie is a hideous dwarf, Melencolie a disgusting hag, and Dangier a peasant-like brute. At the cemetery next to the hospital/hospice of love we find the blasons and devices of any number of the great heroes of love who voyaged to Amours's realm. They include Achilles and Hercules, Caesar and Augustus, Lancelot and Tristan, and also David and Solomon, plus a sample of the contemporary French aristocracy. Especially honoured are the six great poets of love buried there: Ovid, Jean de Meun, Petrarch, Boccaccio, Guillaume de Machaut, and Alain Chartier. The blasons and any number of other works of art reveal, as Daniel Poirion argues, a courtly ideology enriched by artistic culture and ancient myth.¹⁰ Indeed, one aspect of René's book is the exaltation of art — on the great portals of the castle of Plaisance we find the 'images' of Fantaisie and Ymagination — as a natural companion to *fin' amor* if not its final flowering. Finally, the

10 Poirion, "L'allégorie dans le *Livre du Cuer d'Amours espris* de René d'Anjou" and "Les tombeaux allégoriques et la poétique de l'inscription dans le *Livre du Cuer d'Amours espris* de René d'Anjou (1457)." See also Scheidegger, "Couleurs, amour et fantaisie dans le *Livre du cuer d'amours espris* de René d'Anjou," and Polizzi, "'Sens plastique': le spectacle des merveilles dans le *Livre du Cuer d'Amours espris*."

Scottish poet would have recoiled from the religion of love as René depicts it. Amours is a god as well as a feudal lord. Next to his chapel we find his hospice, directed by a prioress, where the relics of love are honoured. These include a ewer containing water from the sea where Leander perished swimming to meet Hero, the swords wielded in the slaying of Corebus and Turnus, and the goblet from which Tancred's daughter Sigismunda drank poison. Bad lovers, the excommunicated, are condemned to rot in a ditch outside the cemetery. No need to pray for the six great poets, explains Courtoisie, for their souls dwell already in Love's Paradise:

. . . lors commença le Cueur a prier pour eulx, et
 dame Courtoisie lui dist qu'elle avoit ferme
 creance qu'il n'estoit ja besoign, car leurs
 esperilz estoient en grant joye et
 repos pardurable ou paradis d'Amours.
 (p. 146)

The hospice and the castle, where mass is said every morning, evoke a Mediterranean-like syncretism, according to which *amor* and *caritas* are harmoniously juxtaposed if not fused, and the various allegories partake of the rule of the God of Love without tarnishing in the slightest their faith in the one true God.

On the other hand, René undercuts the very courtly ideology that appears to pervade his book. The Arthurian motifs can be read as parody, for example, when Cueur jousts on the perilous bridge, loses, and is cast into the river, or when Cueur and his companions set out in the boat, get seasick, and prove to be less courageous and more inept than the female allegorical figures who row them. At their destination Amictié explains that the fish, dear to Amours, on which they are dining is called mackerel:

Or saichez, noble Cueur, et vueillés escouter
 Que ce poisson ycy, duquel vous voy gouster,
 Est appellé en France maquereau vrayement,
 Lequel est savoureux et tressain pour l'amant
 Qui a le mal d'amer.

(p. 106)

Humour is generated from the second meaning for *maquereau*, in the fifteenth-century *sermo humilis* and still today: procurer or pimp. Largesse and Promesse are sent to help Cueur in his quest for Douce Mercy. Not only is it assumed that having money and bribing people (Dangier) with it is central to a successful amorous career, but Cueur is advised

to promise more and spend less. In addition, think of how much Cuer has endured in the course of his travels: suffering from Fortune and Amours; forced to eat the bread of Dure Paine and drink the water of Larmes; knocked off his horse into a river by Soulsy and almost drowned; imprisoned by Tristesse; and finally wounded to the quick by Dangier, Reffus, and their band of thugs. The critics stand in agreement that, whatever the ideology, Cuer fails in the end. He fails in love, and love fails him. In other words, love poses as many problems, is as problematic, for René as it does and is for the *Hart* poet. Neither text nor, for that matter, Guillaume de Lorris's *Rose* offers the prospect of continuous love and a happy, bourgeois ending.

Why relate *King Hart* to *Le Livre du Cuer* instead of to a dozen other French allegories? Because of the title of the French book, which is more than a title. René, Count of Anjou and Provence, claimed to be King of Naples, Sicily, and Jerusalem. Although his political career was one of failure, any number of people accepted his claims. Le roi René, as he was called, was recognized to be one of the great French writers of the century, alongside Christine de Pizan, Alain Chartier, Charles d'Orléans, and, later on, the Burgundians and Jean Lemaire de Belges. Like Charles d'Orléans, he was also extolled as a munificent patron of the arts, a bibliophile, inveterate builder, an organizer of festivities who attracted to his court writers and artists from all over. Among the writers are to be found Jean le Prieur, Antoine de La Sale, Arnoul Greban, and Louis de Beauvau. He was known and celebrated throughout Europe.¹¹ Given that the medieval public committed the biographical fallacy as much as our twentieth-century public does, it was readily assumed that Cuer, the protagonist of *Le Livre du Cuer d'amours espris*, was his author's heart, Cuer du roy, and that the text had genuine autobiographical roots. Any reasonably cultured reader of a poem — or listener — in which the protagonist is named King Hart, and the author of the poem, would recognize at once the intertext — the allegory about Cuer du roy. They could not help doing so. And they would inevitably make comparisons.

Then there is Plesance. In *King Hart*, she is the second most important figure, Hart's *opposant* and *objet*, she who wages battle with him, wounds him, makes him her prisoner in her castle (it glitters with gold and is difficult of entry), and grants him overlordship; then, when those wretched killjoys — Resson, Conscience, and Wisdome — take control, she abandons both Hart and her castle. In the book about Cuer du roy, Cuer, Desir, and Largesse travel to a castle on an island, difficult of entry, all in gold and precious stones, dazzling in the light — the castle named Plaisance, where Amours dwells

11 On René's life and reputation, see Françoise Robin, *La Cour d'Anjou-Provence*. See also the synthesis by Noël Coulet, Alice Planche, and Françoise Robin, *Le Roi René: Le prince, le mécène, l'écrivain, le mythe*; Planche's contribution, "L'oeuvre littéraire," 143-216, is excellent literary criticism.

René d'Anjou and the *Hart* poet both portray something like a debate or conflict (although Cuer does not speak) between body and soul or between the physical, erotic, and worldly versus the rational and spiritual. *Le Mortifiement de Vaine Plaisance*, like *King Hart*, exposes the vanity of human wishes in all its forms and, more particularly, in the form of the sensual in Vaine Plaisance. Both underscore the fragility and evanescence of life, its inherent instability and inconstancy due to the sway of Fortune. They both harp on the inevitability of death. In both *Mortifiement* and *King Hart* the conflict occurs within the self, the thinking and conscious subject allegorized as the heart (Cuer and Hart), although René allots subjectivity above all to Ame. In both works, the heart — the fallen human self — grows and evolves. The outcome is the same, with Plaisance/Plesance defeated and, consequently, forced out of the self.¹³

I suggest that the author of *King Hart* was, to some extent, acquainted with both works by René. His is, in part, a work of appropriation, adaptation, and demystification. His stance would go something like this. Yes, Eros is passion and madness, the most powerful of earthly drives. Yes, it drives us into anguish and melancholy, it tears us apart. Still, let us avoid French extravagance. I will give Douce Mercy to Cuer so that he can enjoy her at his leisure. Just wait. In time, Age will arrive, and all that was Plesance will be for naught. Drive out Plaisance from Cuer in blood on the cross? Admirable. Yet still more French extravagance. Just wait. With Sadnes, Hevines, Langour, and the physical ills, she will leave of her own accord. In time, all that will remain is Decrepitus, and his army is invincible. What does a king do? Wander about trying to conquer people or to rescue people? Nonsense. What should he do? Rule wisely over his own castle, which is his self.

In a sense, for French space, the Scottish poet substitutes time. For the static beauty of love and art, mutability and the evanescence of all that we hold dear. For personal freedom and the anguish of an enhanced consciousness, the law of nature in our fallen human condition. For a rich, luxurious, mannerist structure of narrative, a more austere, reduced, linear pattern. *King Hart* manifests its own, highly successful impersonality of tone, clarity and unity of structure, and simplicity of diction. The *King Hart* poet incorporates the French pre-texts, perhaps misprisions them (he is a Bloomian strong son), adapts them to his own purposes, and creates his own narrative grounded in his own vision of life and art. That is what writers do.

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13 Poirion argues, in “Le coeur de René d’Anjou,” for a similar vision in the *Livre du Cuer* and in the *Mortifiement*. In “The Crucified Heart of René d’Anjou in Text and Image,” Schwam-Baird relates the book cogently to late medieval devotion in its sermon tradition, mysticism, and iconography.

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