

BOOK REVIEW

William Hepburn. *The Household and Court of James IV of Scotland, 1488–1513*

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James IV (1473–1513) met a bad end. The event a massive catastrophe for Scotland, to call it Scotland's Agincourt understates. And yet James' rule of the diverse, decentralized, multilingual Scottish realm proved a success, both for contemporaries and to modern historians. He rarely summoned the Scottish Parliament; the organs of central government were not highly formalized or particularly effective institutions. His success owed much to the highly affecting, chivalric court culture he propagated, and the key to that culture and that court, William Hepburn tells us, lay in the household that provided its spine.

Although Hepburn turns to Scottish literature to help explicate the functioning of the household and the court with which it was so centrally associated, Scotland's intellectual life does not concern him. John Mair never surfaces, and John Ireland appears only in passing (and not at all in the index). Nor does he have any interest in the court or household as a focal point of late medieval Scottish culture or the "aureate age" as it was formerly termed. Nor, finally, does he seek to explicate the dynamics of government and its interaction with the elites. Instead, his concern is the intimate, informal connections with the king's person and the ways in which the household serviced and sustained court and crown, while providing access. Those processes, Hepburn claims, did not serve as background to domestic politics, but provided the route for creating "such a state of politics" (2). Further, Hepburn also seeks, promisingly, to illuminate aspects of household and court through the anthropology of Clifford Geertz, specifically his *Negara: The Theater State in Nineteenth-Century Bali* (1980). More as an aside, Hepburn also references Norbert Elias' sociology of civilization.

The early chapters are far removed from Geertz (and Elias). Drawing largely on the Comptroller Accounts and the 1508 bill of household, Hepburn instead offers a fine-grained discussion of how elite and nonelite individuals functioned as the king's servants. Although relatively amorphous, with figures continually leaving and returning, the household emerged with parallel, interconnected hierarchies as well as hierarchies within hierarchies, reflecting the values of the realm's aristocratic society. Elite servants were more often titular than actually assuming a particular responsibility, and even then performed symbolically rather than engaging in ongoing service. Hepburn struggles to narrate the experience of lesser individuals who did provide the services that kept the court operating and gave it coherence. Often enough, titles can turn out to involve widely generalized areas of concern rather than the formulated or defined responsibilities we would expect.

Hepburn makes considerable effort to show that the Scottish household was broadly similar to that of England, Portugal, France, and, notably, the one at the famously grand court of

Burgundy. The most striking difference frequently lay not in structure or conception but in size. The Duke of Burgundy had an esquire cupbearer with some fifty esquire cupbearers under him at any one time. James never had more than one senior cupbearer accompanied with no more than three subordinates at any juncture. Visibly, James' success owed much to his personal skill at combining magnificence with accessibility. The Dukes at Dijon confronted a very different political terrain, and acted out authority against an urban civic culture at Ghent and elsewhere that was much more highly articulated than what James experienced at Edinburgh, Falkirk, and Linlithgow.

Geertz resurfaces in chapter 4 ("The Household and Performance"). The point of power, as Geertz proposes it, is to create meaning: Balinese theater represents the supernatural order into which both ruler and ruled can situate themselves. This idea, Hepburn tells us, has been adopted and inverted by scholars in their study of the late medieval court. Power becomes articulated through ritual, and thereby cogent and compelling. Hepburn concedes that some studies align more closely to the Geertz formula, noting Jamie Reid Baxter's work on devotional music during James IV's reign. In the end Hepburn argues that James' household and court need to be understood within the analogy of immersive theater. Members of the household at all levels were at once both participants in the theater of its ritual and at the same moment its audience, as any proscenium arch dissolved before court functions and routines. In this regard Hepburn references the immersive productions of the Punchdrunk theater company in today's London. This is entirely plausible and may well provide an intuitive sense of James' courtly world, but few readers are likely to have experienced a Punchdrunk performance. The discussion continues on to notice the presentation of inverted performance, the world turned upside down, that served to validate the traditional order.

Hepburn extends this line of thought to the king's gambling, primarily at cards, gift exchanges, and the hospitality of royal visits. All of these activities need to be regarded not as simple diversions, but as stabilizing activities, connecting the crown to the elites of the realm. In a society so suffused with the nonverbal, with emblem, symbol, and gesture, these activities carried layered meanings and generated sociability. Still, if they provided visibility, smoothed relations, and served to stabilize the realm, the last could prove highly expensive, and ultimately problematic. Imagine if Charles the Bold stopped by.

The final chapter finds the household an engine of stability not only at the court, but also well beyond. Hepburn describes how members of the household became tenants on the royal demesne or with properties in Edinburgh and other burghs. Departing the household need not be permanent and could actually continue to serve the crown's ongoing triangular travels from the capital to Falkirk and Linlithgow. Tenancies also occurred still further afield. Well-placed members of the household provided filaments connecting the court to key regions, providing the face of the center.

Hepburn has provided an insightful discussion of the intimate dimensions of rulership, and the crucial role of the household in providing such rule with coherence. Inevitably Hepburn is hampered by the limitations of the surviving sources. Thus he finds it difficult to develop a significant comparison of the Scottish court with Elias' study of the complex role of etiquette at the court of Louis XIV. Mistakes are few: Thomas Craig of Riccarton (d. 1608) was not a "seventeenth century lawyer" (124n5). The most jarring aspect of this study is the disjunction between the granular teasing out of the doings of household figures and grand anthropological theory. Even so, this remains a book of substance and significance.