The Devonshire Manuscript: A Women’s Book of Courtly Poetry

LADY MARGARET DOUGLAS AND OTHERS

Edited and introduced by

ELIZABETH HEALE

Iter Inc.
Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies
Toronto
2012
Lennox, Margaret Douglas, Countess of, 1515–1578
The Devonshire Manuscript: a women’s book of courtly poetry / Lady Margaret Douglas and others; edited and introduced by Elizabeth Heale.

(The other voice in early modern Europe. The Toronto series ; 19)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
Issued also in electronic format.
Co-published by: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies.
ISBN 978-0-7727-2128-0

PR522.L46 2012
821’.208 C2012-904577-2

Cover illustration:
Portait of a Lady, ca. 1540, by Hans Holbein the Younger, The Royal Collection © 2011 Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II / The Bridgeman Art Library ROC 397748.

Cover design:
Maureen Morin, Information Technology Services, University of Toronto Libraries.

Typesetting and production:
Iter Inc.
Introduction

The Other Voice

In the Devonshire Manuscript of early Tudor verse (British Library, MS Additional 17492), the experiences of a group of elite women associated with the court of Henry VIII speak to us with astonishing freshness and distinctiveness despite the distance of centuries and the unfamiliarity of the literary and social conventions within which they wrote and lived. Although most of the poetry it contains was written and no doubt copied by men, the manuscript was a women’s book. It was owned by Mary (Howard) Fitzroy (ca.1519–1555?) and subsequently by her friend Lady Margaret Douglas (1515–1578). Douglas’s hand and that of another friend and fellow courtier, Mary Shelton (ca.1513–1571), are frequently evident in the manuscript, copying, annotating, commenting, and, most remarkably, entering their own compositions. The Devonshire Manuscript has long been celebrated for preserving many early Tudor courtly poems, particularly those of Sir Thomas Wyatt, an important Henrician poet. But it is just as remarkable for the precious insights it yields into women’s active participation in the production and circulation of verse in the period, not merely as the idealized addressees of courtly verse but also as active readers and responders, collectors, copyists, and contributors.

For students interested in understanding women’s participation in the cultural and literary life of the Tudor elite, the value of the manuscript is greatly increased by its singularity. Few manuscripts of verse from the period survive, and among those that do, the Devonshire Manuscript is unique for the richness and variety of the evidence it provides of women’s active involvement.1 For the women associated

1. John Stevens, in Music and Poetry in the Early Tudor Court (London: Methuen and Co., 1961), provides a dated but nevertheless valuable account of early Tudor manuscripts of verse and their social context. His book includes editions of three manuscripts, and Appendix C provides a useful list of others. The most comprehensive list of early Tudor manuscripts of verse appears in William A. Ringler Jr., Bibliography and Index of English Verse in Manuscript, 1501–1558 (London: Mansell, 1992). The “Findern Manuscript,” which belongs to the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries and seems to have been produced in a provincial household, also contains fascinating evidence of women’s participation in the circu-
Introduction

with the manuscript, poetry clearly played a central role in honing their courtly skills, articulating their aspirations, and providing pleasure and, at times, solace. That the part of the female courtier was a difficult one, requiring considerable wit and tact, is suggested in Baldassare Castiglione’s account of the arts of courting in *The Courtier*, first published in Italian in 1528.² He describes how female courtiers were expected to stimulate and manage the evening pastimes at the Renaissance court of Urbino. Castiglione’s account is an idealized one, but it is at least suggestive of women’s role in the aristocratic and courtly milieu in which the Devonshire Manuscript was produced. Glamorous as it might be, this role was clearly fraught with personal and social dangers. Castiglione’s character Count Giuliano warns the female courtier that “she must observe a certain difficult mean, composed as it were of contrasting qualities, and take care not to stray beyond certain fixed limits.”³

² An English translation by Sir Thomas Hoby, *The Book of the Courtier*, was published in 1561, but Castiglione’s book was known in England before that date.

The Devonshire Manuscript has long been known to scholars of Tudor literature, but its significance as a testimony of the central role women played in the practice of courtly verse has only recently been recognized. Since the nineteenth century, the manuscript has been valued mainly as a source for the work of Sir Thomas Wyatt and for the insights it provides into the social context in which he and Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, produced their poetry.⁴ In this schol-
Introduction

Women’s active participation in the development of the courtly lyric, as writers and adapters, as well as copyists and collectors, significantly alters our perception of the gendered nature of the writing and circulation of such verse. The poetry of the 1530s and 40s would exert a formative influence on the later Elizabethan lyric, primarily through Richard Tottel’s printed miscellany of verse of the period, *The Songes and Sonettes, Written by the Ryght Honorable Lorde Henry Howard late Earle of Surrey, and Other*, first printed in 1557 and reprinted at least nine times by the 1580s (*Tottel’s Miscellany*). George Puttenham, writing in 1589, hailed the Henrician generation of poets as a “new company of courtly makers [poets]” who reformed “our English meeter [versification] and stile.” But that tradition, as mediated

---

*Collected Poems of Sir Thomas Wyatt* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1969), include most of the Devonshire poems but in a form that ignores their context in the manuscript. Even Helen Baron’s ground-breaking analysis in “Mary (Howard) Fitzroy’s Hand in the Devonshire Manuscript,” *Review of English Studies* 179 (1994): 318–35, focuses on identifying a reliable version of Surrey’s “O happy dames.” For a fuller discussion of the history of scholarship on the manuscript, see pages 30–33 below.

5. See particularly Raymond Southall’s use of the manuscript in *The Courtly Maker: An Essay on the Poetry of Wyatt and his Contemporaries* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1964), chap. 2, and W. A. Sessions’ account of the genesis of the manuscript in the circle surrounding the poet Earl of Surrey in *Henry Howard: The Poet Earl of Surrey; A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 176–77. While Southall’s analysis is based on some erroneous interpretations of entries and tends to read all the poetry as biographical to some degree, it is an important discussion of the manuscript as a source for understanding the social and political context of the verse of the period.


7. George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie*, 1569, facsimile edition (Menstone, Yorks.: The Scolar Press, 1968), 48. When quoting from early sources other than the Devonshire Manuscript, I have not modernized the spelling. However, obscure words are glossed, in square brackets, within the quotation.
through printed collections of verse throughout the sixteenth century, is almost exclusively male. With very rare exceptions, it was the work of male poets that was printed, and the printed volumes were, explicitly or implicitly, most often addressed to male readers. The centrality of women to the genre, as participants, recipients, and contributors, was almost entirely erased. This erasure continued into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries with the predominant modern emphasis on creating definitive editions of the authorial texts of male poets. Thus the verse was removed yet farther from the social milieu in which it was produced and in which, as the Devonshire Manuscript shows us, women were in fact central and active participants.

Pastime in the Queen’s Chamber: The Background of the Manuscript

From a twenty-first-century perspective, women’s central role in courtly pastime and the verse that was its major currency may seem to confirm the kind of domestic and decorative roles for women that the Other Voice Series seeks to challenge. But such a view is anachronistic. As Castiglione made clear in his depiction of the court of Urbino, women had an important role in European courts and noble houses, where talented and ambitious men and women spent long hours waiting on the whims of their powerful masters and mistresses. The court of Henry VIII’s second wife, Queen Anne Boleyn, who had herself been educated at two of the most sophisticated courts of Europe—namely, that of Margaret of Austria in the Netherlands and that of Queen Claude in France—must have borne some resemblance to Castiglione’s idealized court. In such an environment, success, for both women and men, might depend on the judicious display of wit and


Introduction

courtly accomplishments. Just as crucially, the management of entertain-ment and maintenance of decorum often devolved on the skills and tact of courtly women.¹⁰

One of the stock themes of sophisticated courtly pastime in mixed company was courtly love and its expression through courtly verse and “balets,” song-like verses often sung to existing song or dance tunes.¹¹ The young women of the court must expect to be addressed and courted, often in verse, as the adored mistresses of male courtiers who in return might ask for signs of favor. Such courting belonged to a game designed to refine and codify the social interaction of leisured men and women, “a specialized aspect of the principle of acquiring credit by ‘exposing merit to view’ which dominated the social life of the court.”¹² The women who collected and used the verse in the Devonshire Manuscript first met and spent time together as very young ladies-in-waiting at the court of Anne Boleyn. In 1533, Margaret Fitzroy was fourteen; Margaret Douglas, nineteen; and Mary Shelton, in her early twenties. Anne Boleyn’s court gave the women plenty of experience of high-spirited courting. The vice-chamberlain, Sir Edward Baynton, reported to the queen’s brother soon after Anne Boleyn’s coronation: “as for pastime in the queen’s chamber, [there] was never more. If any of you that be now departed have any ladies that ye thought favored you and somewhat would mourn at parting of their servants, I can no whit perceive the same by their dancing and pastime they do use here.”¹³ At this court, the pastime consisted


¹³. Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, of the Reign of Henry VIII, 1509–1547 (London: HMSO, 1882), vol. 6, item 613. See also State Papers Online, Gale, Cengage Learning, 2011,
not only of dancing, but also of joking, singing, and composing verse. Nevertheless it was a court that also demonstrated in extreme form the dangers the arts of courting might pose. While much of the poetry in the Devonshire Manuscript was probably copied into it after the disastrous collapse of Anne Boleyn’s court, the events that led to that crisis provide the most vivid context possible for the women’s use of the album.

In May 1536, Anne Boleyn was accused of committing adultery with five courtiers, among them her brother, the Earl of Rochford. The poet Sir Thomas Wyatt was also under suspicion and imprisoned in the Tower of London, although he was never charged with adultery. The trial of Anne Boleyn and her supposed lovers was constructed entirely out of inferences and innuendo derived from the charged discourse of courtly love and the games that served as pastime in the queen’s chamber; “all the evidence was of bawdry and lechery,” according to one unsympathetic judge at the trial. Separate incidents in which the queen rebuked two courtiers, Sir Henry Norris and Sir Francis Weston, for flirting with Mistress Shelton (perhaps Mary Shelton or, possibly, a sister) as a cover for their supposed preference for herself, provides glimpses of the pastime, and perhaps of the increasing hysteria with which it was played as Anne Boleyn lost her power with the king in the early months of 1536. Another of the accused in the queen’s court was a musician, Mark Smeton, who used to play instruments and sing in her chamber. Even the apparently innocent activity of dancing with male courtiers seems to have acquired a sinister innuendo. In the eyes of those unsympathetic or even hostile to the queen, the language of gallant courting could easily be interpreted as bawdry or even as treason. Anne Boleyn’s chaplain, William Latymer, was at pains to present Anne’s attitude to such pastimes rather differently when he assured her daughter Elizabeth that she

---


14. For accounts of Anne Boleyn’s fall and trial, see Ives, Life and Death, esp. chaps. 22 and 23, and Retha M. Warnicke, The Rise and Fall of Anne Boleyn, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 211–29. I take the details in my account below from these studies.

15. Quoted by Ives, Life and Death, 345.
admonished her ladies that “they shoulde not consume the [time] in vayne toyes [frivolities] and poetical fanses” and gave commands that “all tryfels and wanton poeses should be eschued upon her pleasure.”

Mary Shelton figures in Latymer’s report as the lady in waiting who received a particular rebuke for having written “ydill [idle] poeses” in her prayer book. That Anne Boleyn did in fact enjoy the lively wit and verse of her courtiers is suggested by a brave punning joke she made when told that her supposed “lovers,” had been brought into the Tower of London without servants to see to their needs. Playing on the similarity of the words “balets” (verses) and “pallets” (beds), she commented that they “might make balettes well now, bot ther is non bot [Rochefor]de can do it.” Here she is referring to her brother’s reputation as a poet. The wife of her warder replied, “Master Wyett [can],” and Anne Boleyn agreed.

The Devonshire Manuscript contains clear evidence of the pleasure some of Boleyn’s ladies took in “poeticall fanses” and of the ways in which they used and contributed to the courtly verse they collected. Some of the poems reveal their taste for witty, sardonic verse, not all of it in praise of women: misogynist poems appear alongside those in women’s defense. Other poems reflect the women’s passionate identification with some of the ideals of courtly love and the difficulty of maintaining that “certain difficult mean” described by Castiglione’s Count Giuliano. One remarkable series of poems bears witness to the fact that it was not only in the queen’s chamber that pastime threatened to get out of hand. In the aftermath of the execution of Anne Boleyn, a secret betrothal was discovered between Lady Margaret Douglas and Lord Thomas Howard, uncle of Mary Fitzroy, Duchess of Richmond. On this occasion the pastime had dangerously strayed “beyond [the] certain fixed limits” that Count Giuliano prescribed for the female courtier, and as a result both lovers were thrown into the Tower of London (this liaison and its aftermath are discussed below). The disastrous events of 1536 provide the necessary perspective for

modern readers to understand the anguish to which a number of poems in the manuscript refer and to appreciate the vulnerability and danger that could follow from the spirited pleasantries and wit expected of female courtiers.

The Devonshire Manuscript and Its Female Users

The Devonshire Manuscript consisted originally of a quarto-size album of blank pages. Poems, sometimes singly, sometimes in groups, were copied into the album by various hands over a period of at least ten years between the mid-1530s and the mid-1540s. The poems were not always (and perhaps not even often) entered sequentially; indeed, some poems on later pages were almost certainly entered before poems on earlier pages. The chronologically latest poem (i.e., poem 82) entered in the manuscript appears near the middle and probably dates from the early 1560s. Written by Margaret Douglas’s eldest son, Henry Stewart, Lord Darnley, the poem may have been addressed to his future wife, Mary, Queen of Scots. As I have noted above, most of the copyists were men, and some were no doubt friends of the women who owned and used the manuscript. One or two others may have been professional secretaries. The handwriting of all three women associated with the manuscript shows that they were relatively untrained both in letter formation and spelling. However much the women enjoyed reading, memorizing, and perhaps singing the poems, it seems probable that they found copying them out a more arduous task.

19. A quarto-sized book was produced by folding the papermaker’s large sheet in four to make eight pages. It is half the size of a folio. The term “album” is used to describe a book of originally blank pages in which poems or other matter could be entered.

20. Identification of the handwriting of Margaret Douglas and Mary Fitzroy is based on extant letters in their hands. Baron, “Mary (Howard) Fitzroy’s Hand,” 318, lists specimens of Mary Fitzroy’s handwriting. Margaret Douglas’s entries may be compared to a letter in her hand in British Library, MS Cotton Vespasian F xiii, fol.134b, probably written in 1536; see State Papers Online, Gale, Cengage Learning, 2011, s.v. “Margaret Dowglas to [Cromwell]” (Gale manuscript document no. MC4301980305), accessed June 17, 2011. Identification of Mary Shelton’s handwriting is based on entries she signed in the manuscript.

Some evidence about the ownership and date of the manuscript can be deduced from its binding, which is stamped on the front with the initials M F. These are probably the initials of Mary Fitzroy, who married the illegitimate son of Henry VIII, Henry Fitzroy, Duke of Richmond, in November 1533 (both bride and groom were about fourteen years old at the time). W. A. Sessions speculates that the album was a gift to the new Duchess of Richmond from her brother, the poet Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, who was being educated with the Duke, and goes so far as to suggest that Surrey directed which poems should be entered into it: “the Devonshire Manuscript may be a record of the earl’s own taste.”22 The suggestion that Henry Howard may have given the blank album as a gift is an attractive one, but there is no evidence that it was he who chose the poems entered into it. As we shall see, the manuscript contains only one poem composed by the Earl of Surrey (i.e., poem 81), and that was certainly copied into the manuscript by Mary Fitzroy in the 1540s.23 However the album came into Mary Fitzroy’s possession, it is clear that it was used primarily as a private album for herself and her friends, in particular the other women whose names and handwriting appear in the manuscript: Lady Margaret Douglas and Mary Shelton, both fellow members of Anne Boleyn’s court. The Duke of Richmond died in 1536, but Mary Fitzroy continued to be known by her married name and title.

I discuss Mary Fitzroy’s contribution to the album in more detail below. The manuscript makes clear that Margaret Douglas became a key figure in its use and development very early on. If, as seems likely, the manuscript originally belonged to Mary Fitzroy, she may have passed it to her friend during the 1530s. Margaret Douglas was a person of considerable significance at the Henrician court. She was the daughter of Henry VIII’s sister, Margaret Tudor, and the Scottish magnate Archibald Douglas, Earl of Angus, making her Henry VIII’s

91–102. Baron, “Mary (Howard) Fitzroy’s Hand,” 319, quotes Mary Fitzroy’s apology for her “euell hande.”

22. Sessions, Henry Howard, 177. Southall, Courtly Maker, 171, notes that the binding was made in London and can be dated to between 1525 and 1559. G. F. Nott first suggested, on the basis of the appearance of her name on page 164 below, that the album may have belonged to Mary Fitzroy; see The Works, vol. 2, ix.

23. For one piece of evidence for Surrey’s use of the manuscript, see page 14 below.
niece. She was also half-sister to James V, King of Scots, son of Margaret Tudor by her first husband, King James IV of Scotland. Like Mary Fitzroy, Margaret Douglas was one of Queen Anne Boleyn's ladies, and she and Fitzroy remained friends into the 1540s. The two women were often at court together, and Margaret Douglas was on occasion a guest of the Howard family at Kenninghall in Norfolk. The manuscript had certainly passed to Margaret Douglas by the time of her marriage to Matthew Stewart, Earl of Lennox, in July 1544, for it found its way into the Devonshire Library at Chatsworth House, the home of Margaret's daughter-in-law, Elizabeth Cavendish, and the childhood home of her granddaughter Arabella Stuart. Raymond Southall suggested that the initials S E stamped on the back of the manuscript binding were those of [Charles] S[tewart] (Margaret Douglas's second son) and his wife E[lizabeth]. If so, the album may have been a wedding gift from Margaret Douglas, for Charles died just two years after his marriage.

The manuscript bears lively witness to Margaret Douglas's enjoyment of and engagement with the verse that was popular and fashionable in her time. She intervened in what were probably the earliest poems copied into the manuscript, correcting poem 2 and taking over the copying of poem 3 at line 8, although she either misremembered the poem or had an imperfect copy text, for she leaves out two lines. Later in the manuscript, she copied several poems (i.e., poems 59–66), and in an even later section, verses copied by Douglas alternate with those of several copyists, including Mary Shelton (i.e., poems 95–106). Throughout the manuscript she has marked poems with the words “and this” in the margin, perhaps for copying into another manuscript, perhaps for memorizing or recommending to others. On at least one occasion (poem 162) she has marked a poem for singing (“learn but to sing it”). Margaret Douglas clearly shared the sophisti-


cated taste of her contemporaries for courtly “balets” that often took a wry or sardonic view of love and lovers’ deceipts.

A rather different attitude to love is evident in a striking group of poems that closely concern Margaret Douglas, although she did not copy them into the manuscript. Poems 41–48 were written in the aftermath of a betrothal contracted, probably in the early months of 1536, between Margaret Douglas and Lord Thomas Howard, uncle of Mary Fitzroy. Neither of the lovers sought the approval of King Henry VIII. The two lovers exchanged the poems copied into the manuscript probably in the Tower of London after the affair was discovered following the disastrous events of May 1536. Both were incarcerated in the Tower in July, perhaps occupying some of the cells from which Anne Boleyn and the courtiers accused with her had gone to execution. The relationship between Margaret Douglas and Thomas Howard undoubtedly began and flourished at the queen's court during 1535 and the early part of 1536. In evidence brought before the official enquiry, it was said that Howard “did resort unto her when my lady of Richmond was present” and that he “would watch till my lady Boleyn was gone, and then steal into her chamber.” Margaret Douglas was close in line to the throne, particularly after the bastardization of both the king’s daughters, and was therefore much too valuable a mar
