JAMES V OF SCOTS AS LITERARY PATRON

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At the command of the richt hie, richt excellent, and noble prince James ... : thus, in confident conventional terms, does the cleric and court servant, John Bellenden, allude to the royal sponsorship of his vernacular translation of Hector Boece's Scotorum Historia (see fig. 1). The words selected for the patron are perforce linked also to the context in which the commission was fulfilled. His Hystory and Croniklis of Scotland (see fig. 2), Bellenden implies, was written in a stable and conservative era, when patronage of contemporary writers was a well-established expression of the king's power. The content of the commissioned work itself (of which more detail later) further supports these inferences. Yet Bellenden was writing during the reign of James V, more specifically its middle years of the 1530s. His brief image – of a mature monarch to whom literary patronage is important – encourages further investigation: it is strikingly at odds with the opening indicators for James and his reign. Unlike his own father, James IV, who was fifteen years old at his accession, or his future father-in-law, Francis I, who was twenty-one when he succeeded to the French throne in 1515, James V had not yet reached two when he was crowned King of Scots in

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1 This is on fol. 6v of the printed version of Bellenden's work; see the facsimile of STC 3203, confusingly titled (by the modern publisher), Chambers, R.W., Batho, R.C. and Husbands, H.W., eds, Hector Boethius, Chronicle of Scotland, Edinburgh, (1540?). Bellenden's earlier manuscript version (New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, M 527) differs only slightly: at the desyre of the richt hye, richt excellent, nobill and michty Prince ...; see Bellenden, Chronicles, 1, p. 13.

2 Literary patronage is understood to refer to that relationship between a patron (here, specifically, a princely patron) and a writer to whom he offers favour, protection, or support (by commissions or influence), and from whom he accepts dedications, presentation copies, and, in some cases, also commentary (of support, apology, flattery, explanation, propaganda, advice) concerning his [the patron's] own position in contemporary affairs; see further Lucas, 'The Growth', pp. 219-248; Asch, 'Court and Household', pp. 1-38; Carlson, English Humanist Books, pp. 1-19. Green, Poets and Princepleasers, although not specifically about princes and literary patronage, covers many aspects of the topic throughout; see also Mason, 'Regnum et Imperium', pp. 104-138.
1513, soon after the unexpected death of his father at the battle of Flodden. It was to take the following fifteen troubled years before he was truly in a position (and that for only fourteen years) to offer personal patronage of any kind.

It could be argued, all the same, that even such a lengthy minority as this one would not have obliterated all the remains of literary patronage at the previous court: although James IV had favoured diverse live entertainments rather than written artefacts, what had existed of the latter would not have perished, since, at least initially, the widowed Queen Margaret was Regent. Nor, it could be suggested, need the minority leaders have prevented the king from receiving an education that would equip him with the intellectual and moral discipline necessary for enlightened rule. It might even be added that the long period of regents, lieutenants, protectors and guardians would have enabled the young king to observe and learn from a variety of examples about the operation of patronage, and to begin to understand the roles that literary patronage, in particular, might play in the wise governing of his kingdom and in the nurturing of his own interests. There is some surviving evidence to support these propositions. Working against them, however, are the facts that those who held power in the king’s name did not retain it for long (as one political faction overcame another); that the king’s education (though it began well when James was five years old, with the appointment of a learned maister and a co-ordinated recreational programme) was brought prematurely to an end; and that faction leaders, as far as can be known, infrequently resorted to literary patronage, whether in James V’s name or not.

Those part-time writers (otherwise clerks, chaplains, ushers, or grooms) at court during the minority provided confirmation of the latter point. Altogether, they found Better hap to court nor gude serviss [Luck is more important at court than good service]. One poet, surely without hope of obtaining the patronage of the addressees, sharply admonished those Lords

3 James V was born on 10 April 1512 and was crowned at Stirling on 21 September 1513.
4 The decisive battle in the intermittent border war between England and Scotland occurred on 9 September 1513; see Phillips, The Anglo-Scots Wars, pp. 117-133.
5 Bawcutt, Dunbar the Makar, pp. 47-62, 79; Ross, Music Fyne, pp. 6-7, 25-39.
7 Rolling in my remembrance, Bann. MS, II, pp. 249-251. In this and following quotations, letter conventions of Middle Scots have been normalised, and words written in abbreviated forms have been expanded and romanised.