



Scots Language Centre

## Crack Aboot Politics



### Document 3

Sir Richard Maitland  
On Regime Change  
1586

## **Sir Richard Maitland**

Sir Richard Maitland of Lethington (1496-1586) had a long and successful career in the Scottish government under James V, Queen Mary and James VI. He was a senator of the College of Justice, ordinary Lord of Session, Privy Councillor and Lord Privy Seal. But he is best remembered for his work as a poet, making astute comment about his life and times, and particularly about the political and religious strife that gripped Scotland. It was an established tradition at the Scottish royal court for poets to discuss politics either in the form of a conversation or simply as a commentary. In his poem *Aganis the Weiris* Maitland dwelt at length on the predicament Scotland found herself in during much of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, as both England and France (and latterly also Spain) interfered in Scottish internal politics and attempted to engineer what we today would call 'regime change'.

### **Political Background**

England attempted to occupy Scotland during the 1540's, but was driven out with French help, but then the French attempted to dominate Scotland too. In 1560 the new English government, which had finally settled on being Protestant, supported a military coup in Scotland which placed a similar Protestant regime in power in Edinburgh and drove the French out. However, the queen – Mary Queen of Scots – was a Catholic and returned home in 1561. This led to distrust, intrigue, and eventually an armed uprising in 1567 and the forced abdication of Queen Mary. In 1568 Mary fled to England, her rebellious subjects having placed her baby son on the throne as James VI. They raised King James as a Protestant, expecting they could control him, and relied on support from an English government which was afraid of the Catholic powers of Europe. Between 1567 and 1584 (when James VI took control in his own right) Scotland endured battles, coups, sieges, religious persecution, and ongoing instability as the pro-Mary and pro-James parties sought to dominate the court. Two regents were killed in office and a third was later executed. Even when it seemed the pro-James faction had gained control, they remained paranoid about French and Spanish intrigue in Scotland, a paranoia which England exploited to keep Scotland divided and neutralised as a potential threat to English foreign policy.

### **Content, Language and Style**

The poem, of which an extract of four stanzas is given below, is written in what scholars call Late Middle Scots, the language literate Scots speakers wrote between 1550 and 1700. The poem is also literary and intended to appeal to an audience with similar tastes, each stanza being nine lines and with the final word of each line rhyming. Sir Richard Maitland alluded to the policy of England ("England is glad when it is told the Scots are divided") and expressed the wish that Scotland could be rid of both England and France if the Scots could just agree amongst themselves ("free not to be mixed up with France or England"). He also makes reference to the civil strife between the great lords of Scotland which, he says, only leads to feuds in the future ('but raise a deadly feud which we can do without') and the destruction of the young king's inheritance unless they can put aside their differences now ('hold up your hands...and quickly agree').

Sir Richard Maitland had become blind in later life and so it was his daughter Mary Maitland who caused her father's work to be set down in a manuscript in 1586. The original spelling conventions/letters of Middle Scots have been retained to show the form the written language took in that period. Forms and spellings to note are as follows:

## Ei

In the Maitland manuscript we find the established custom of spelling an ‘ee’ sound in Scots with the letters *ei*. This appears in the words *greit* (great), *heir* (hear), *meintyme* (meantime) and *weill* (well). Note that the same sound coming at the end of a word was usually spelled *-ie*, as in *grie* (agree). Some words in Scots today continue to be spelled this way, while some writers choose to apply these older rules consistently throughout their texts.

## Ou

Generally pronounced as ‘oo’ in Scots. We find *commoun*, *co(u)ntrie*, *hound*, *our(e)*, *tounis* and *without* pronounced with an ‘oo’. Today in Scots both spellings ‘oo’ and ‘ou’ can be found, as in *oot* (out) and *toun* (town), all pronounced as ‘oo’.

## Quh-

The spelling *quh*, which had once also been used in Northern English, was by this period considered peculiar to Scots and would remain common in writing until the 18<sup>th</sup> century. *Quh-* was pronounced as either a ‘k’ or ‘wh’ depending on the word. In the Maitland manuscript we find *quhen* (when), *quhat* (what), *quhilk* (which) and *quhair* (where). We still see this spelling today in some Scots words and place-names, such as *quaich*, originally *quhaich* (a drinking cup), or the village of Kilconquhar (pronounced Kinuchar) in Fife.



## U/V/W

These three letters could be used interchangeably in Scots which is why Maitland’s daughter Mary wrote *ws* for the word *us*, *haue* for have (pronounced hay-v, which later became *hae*), *diuisioun* (division) and *vp* (up). This explains why in other Scots texts from this period we can find spellings such as *uar* (were), *wse* (use) or *uith* (with) and why words such as *cou* and *toun* might also be spelled as *cov/cow* and *tovn/town*.

## The Thorn ‘Y’

This letter can cause some confusion for those of us who are not familiar with Older Scots texts. Inherited from Anglo-Saxon was the letter þ - which looked like a ‘p’ but was pronounced as ‘th’, and called the **thorn**. In the Middle Ages the Scots often used the letter ‘y’ in place of þ and alongside ‘th’. This is why we find in Maitland’s poem forms such as *yis* (this) and *yair* (their), and why we find in other Scots writings of the period spellings such as *yai* (thay), *yame* (thame), and *yat* (that), all pronounced with a ‘th’.

## The Yogh ‘Z’

In the old writings of the Anglo-Saxons a letter ȝ which had a curling tail – known as a **yogh** – was used to show the sounds ‘g’ and ‘y’. When people came to print books, the nearest typeface letter to this was a ‘z’ and so ‘z’ was often used as the stand in for ȝ. In Maitland’s poem we find the forms *ze* for ye (you), *zit* for yit (yet) and *zour* for your, all pronounced with a ‘y’. Scots continued to use this letter as late as the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

## Various

In Older Scots people wrote a letter which looked like a long line slightly curling at each end and known by scholars as a ‘vowel length marker’. This basically means that when people saw this letter they knew to make a long or drawn out sound. In Maitland’s poem we find *tauld*, *hauld* and *all* which are pronounced as *taw-ld*, *haw-ld* and *aw*. In other versions of Maitland’s work these words take the forms *tald*, *hald* and *al*. When people wanted to show this letter in printed books they used the letter ‘l’. This explains why we find spellings in books such as *al* – read as ‘aw’. Also in Maitland is *not*, which is short for *nocht*, and we find ‘y’ in place of ‘i’ as in *bayth* (*baith* – both). The forms *do* and *to* (with *ta*) were standard in this period but would give way to the modern *dae* and *tae* in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.



### Aganis the Weiris

England is glaid quhen It is tauld  
Of Scottis ye diuisioun  
And for oure folichnes thay hauld  
Our doingis In derisioun  
    Bot wald we weill considdir  
    Thai hound ws ay togiddir.  
Makand yair awin prouisioun  
for our greit scayth and lesioun  
    The grip of thame is slidder.

Zit the ane part in thame dependis  
The other on france for thair supplie  
Ilkane fra other thame defendis  
as fra ane commoun eneme  
    I pray god I heir tell  
    We grie amang our sell  
And syne that all yis haill countrie  
of france an England bayth wer frie  
    With thame na mair to mell.

Quhen that ye ane the other wraikis  
The quhilk will not be done lichtlie  
Without travel an mony straikis  
    Bot quhat sall yis worke finallie  
    Bot rais ane deidlie feid  
    of quhilk we haue na neid.  
In the meintyme greit policie  
And gud tounis destroyit be  
    And monye man lye deid.

Thairfor my lordis hauld vp zour handis  
Thocht of zour will ze want sum thing  
Or be distroyit men and landis  
Quhilk wilbe hurtfull to the king  
    for his weill It is maist  
    That ze aggrie In haist  
For quhen he is of aage to ring  
quhair on to leif sall find na thing  
    Bot all the contrie waist.