

JOURNAL *of the* NORTHERN RENAISSANCE

<http://northernrenaissance.org> | ISSN: 1759-3085



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Issue 4 (2012) - Natio Scota

Editorial: *Natio Scota*

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[1] *Natio Scota* was the name chosen for the Thirteenth International Conference on Medieval and Renaissance Scottish Language and Literature, which took place in Padua in July 2011. It was the first time that the ‘Scottish Conference’ had migrated to Italy; by an interesting coincidence it was hosted by the first university to admit, in 1534, the existence of a *Natio Scota*, a group of students sharing the same Scottish national identity – even if this birth was only the result of chance, or political calculation, as a recent study has made clear (Piovan, forthcoming). This coincidence suggested the opportunity to study the meeting of two strands in medieval and early modern Scottish literature: the definition of a literary canon, and the definition of the Scottish nation. Attempting an assessment of Scottish literature means above all dealing with a definition of this literature within a strongly defined national context: literature and nation grow together, and each contributes to the other’s definition. This was what we asked conference participants to consider in the papers that were presented, and in the lively discussions that took place over those five days.

[2] With sixty papers being presented, the themes and discussions ranged widely, and the conference offered an opportunity to assess the state of critical enquiry into Medieval and Renaissance cultural production in Scotland; the theme of the existence, formation and vindication of a Scottish nation remained present throughout, and was translated into literary terms through discussions of the Scottish canon, an issue that has been the object of critical discussion since Roderick J. Lyall’s seminal study in 1991. Here Lyall contended that the Scottish literary canon had erred on the side of nationalism, ‘privileging works which foreground their Scottishness at the expense of texts which are more universal in their style and/or content’ (Lyall 1991: 2). The issue involved not simply style and theme, but also language, as poetry and prose in Older Scots tended to occupy a dominant position in critical studies, incidentally giving priority to the debate on Anglo-Scottish literary relations over a possibly more propitious setting of Scottish literature (in one of its many languages) in a wider European context. The risk, clearly envisaged by Lyall, was that of a ‘coalescence, not to say complicity, in the canon-forming processes of English and Scottish literature’ (Lyall 1991: 15), while it was certainly time to envisage medieval Scottish literature as one more vernacular contribution to the European Middle Ages.

[3] In the twenty years between Lyall’s exhortation and the Padua conference, there has been a radical change in attitude on the part of scholars and critics dealing with late medieval and early modern Scottish works, a change reflected in the papers presented here. The present issue of *JNR* includes a small selection of the conference papers, but even within this range it will be seen that many of the issues under discussion in Padua are being re-presented here, allowing us to gauge the progress of Scottish studies since, and partly thanks to, Lyall’s own work. The early modern period in particular has benefited from attentive study and from an increase in scholarly editions, starting with the impressive work undertaken by the Scottish Text Society and drawing on earlier, epoch-making studies such as Helena Mennie Shire’s work on the relation between politics, poetry and music at the court of James VI (Shire 1969): the conference constituted also an opportunity to present much work in progress on editions of the works of John Stewart of Baldynneis, the Maitland Quarto, the satirical literature of the Reformation, and a corpus of comic and parodic

poems; at the same time scholarly research has brought about the re-discovery of late sixteenth-century poets such as Elizabeth Melville, while electronic publication offers dazzling new opportunities in the editing and analysis of texts. The relation between literature and religion has been reconsidered in a recent collection of essays studying Scottish works across the divide between Middle Ages and Renaissance (Houwen 2012); literature composed at the court of James VI has been newly assessed in the articles collected and edited by David Parkinson (Parkinson 2012), while the study of Scottish literature in Latin has received new impulse thanks to forthcoming volumes and projects (Johnson and Petrina, forthcoming; see also the 'New Vistas' project directed by Alasdair A. MacDonald and John Flood). More comprehensive works such as the 2012 *Cambridge Companion to Scottish Literature* include an evaluation of the appearance and progress of Scottish studies (Carruthers and McIlvanney 2013: 248-60), while the forthcoming *International Companion to Scottish Poetry* promises equal attention to works in Gaelic, Norse and Latin, as well as in English and Scots (Sassi, forthcoming). Above all, we are asked to reconsider the positioning of Scottish literature within its European context, by reflecting not only on the cultural exchanges between Scotland and its close or less close neighbours, but also on the role played by politics and religion in the creation and implementation of a new literary language, thanks to its influence on collective imagery and modes of thought.

[4] Aptly enough, the present collection opens with Michael Bath's study of the celebrations accompanying the baptism of Prince Henry in Stirling in 1594. Bath's study draws on the description of the event written by William Fowler, who supervised the celebration and organized the entertainments in his role as Secretary to the Queen (interestingly, his description was printed, shortly after the baptism, in slightly different versions in Edinburgh and London), as well as on a tradition of studies on festivities and *trionfi* that has hitherto privileged English celebrations over Scottish ones (Anglo 1969; Orgel and Strong 1973). The Stirling entertainment, however, is set even more firmly in an international context by focusing on its analogies with contemporary French celebrations, especially as concerns the use of emblems and the marine pageantry. All this shows the strength of 'the cultural commerce between Scotland and France in the sixteenth century', and suggests a sharing of mythological symbols and of humanist iconography that offers a new setting for Scotland's display of power in a propagandistic context in the late sixteenth century.

[5] If Bath uses a long-forgotten text by William Fowler to study the role of symbolism at the court of James VI, the contributions that follow show equal attention to works that a few decades ago would have been considered minor, but that offer a unique and novel approach to literary culture, revealing unexplored facets of Scottish early modern imagination. We go back to more traditional literary texts in Janet Hadley Williams's contribution, dedicated to comic verse in Older Scots, and especially to the 'Quha doutis?' poem appearing in the Bannatyne miscellany. Through her analysis, Hadley Williams also offers an exemplary instance of the modern editor at work on a medieval Scottish text. Her close reading and use of analogies ranging from Aristides and Columella to Sacrobosco and Gavin Douglas offer useful clues for an identification of the time and cultural setting in which the poem was composed. The contribution thus welcomes back a long-forgotten poem within the canonical folds of early modern literature, highlighting at the same time the universality of some of its themes (the dream vision, the *moralitas*) and the peculiar Scottishness of some of its modes. Curious sounds, strange smells, fantastic shapes connote the dream atmosphere of this poem; dream-like classifications and eldritch sounds appear in another little-studied text, the 'Monologue recreative' set at the centre of the fifteenth-century

Complaynt of Scotland and studied here by Luuk Houwen, who examines the animal catalogues contained in the monologue in the light of his knowledge of medieval bestiaries and the Scottish heraldic tradition. Houwen brings this text back into a wider European tradition by showing the influence of *ars grammatica* on this text through a close analysis of its rhetorical and stylistic traits, and identifying in Alain Chartier's *Quadrilogue invective* a possible source. Houwen's conclusions ('here we have an author who is not only heavily indebted to medieval traditions but also one who is innovative enough to develop these traditions into something new and special') appear to insist once again on the theme of the relation between tradition and innovation, which in the case of Scottish literature is profoundly embedded in the relation between local and international culture.

[6] The observation of nature and the use of literature to investigate the natural world is also the object of Karen Jillings's study, dedicated to late-sixteenth- and early-seventeenth-century literature on healing waters. As in the case of the previous contributions, the choice of generally overlooked texts allows Jillings to explore areas often considered only tangential to literary criticism, such as the use of vernacular in scientific writing; the impact of medicine on Renaissance humanism in Scotland; the development of medical education in Scottish universities, and the international models these universities followed. In her study we also see the progress that is made in early modern Scottish culture between a medieval, 'gnostic', authority-based approach to scientific issues and more modern, empirical attitudes, reflecting an international trend but at the same time forcing the scientist to concentrate on national, even local features through observation and experimentation. In this case, too, the scholar's conclusion is that, by focussing on topical traits, these writers entered the 'dynamic picture' of European medical writing.

[7] The contribution that follows, on the other hand, concentrates on a poem that proclaims its European outlook in its very subject. Robert Henryson's *Orpheus and Eurydice* represents a fascinating mixture of classical tradition and medieval interpretation of the myth, and Beatrice Mameli reads the poem proposing first an outline of the impact of the Orpheus myth in the British Isles, both in literary and in iconographic terms. In following the Boethius-Trivet reading of the myth, Henryson never forgets concomitant literary interpretations of the story, and Mameli posits the analysis of Henryson's mediation between various sources (both classical and medieval) as a key to understanding the relation between author and intended audience. Through her analysis of the various characters of the poems, Mameli highlights the contradictions inherent in their representations – contradictions that morph into an ironic commentary on the mutable nature of the myth, an attitude that could evidently be appreciated by an erudite and sophisticated audience.

[8] Another romance, set in comparison with the tradition it is supposed to derive from, is discussed in the contribution that follows. Rhiannon Purdie reads *Roswall and Lillian* in relation with the early modern ballad 'The Lord of Learne', re-positioning such a relation through the proposal of a new chronology for the two texts, and highlighting the structural and thematic differences between the two texts. In this way what is challenged is the very 'medieval nature' of *Roswall and Lillian*, and, by extension, of chivalric romance, or indeed, the separateness in time of romance and ballad. It is a welcome reminder that the often re-proposed divide between medieval and early modern, already successfully challenged in the English context (as briefly but persuasively shown in Cooper 2006), is even less meaningful in Scottish literary history.

[9] This issue of *JNR* offers one last exploration of obscure, un-canonical corners in its last contribution, in which Jamie Reid Baxter discusses Francis Hamilton's religious verse. The

essay offers also an exploration of the nature of the sonnet in seventeenth-century religious poetry in Scotland: Reid Baxter carefully disentangles Biblical echoes, Calvinist overtones, and personal and political allusions, uncovering a complex autobiographical background that constantly informs Hamilton's poetry. At the same time as this early modern versifier is reclaimed into the literary canon, the critic asks us to reconsider our own attitudes as modern readers when approaching a medieval or early modern text. What we discover at the end of this variegated, polyphonic journey into *Natio Scota* is that the construction of a canon may indeed tell us more about modern reading attitudes than about the formation of a cultural tradition.

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