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Canonicity and National Identity: Let's put Scotland on the Map

Where is Scotland on the map of literary studies? This is a timely question for scholars to address. Recently, for example, some Scottish literature scholars have written a petition to the Modern Language Association to expand its current Scottish Literature Discussion Group into a Division on Scottish Literature at the MLA. The petition states that recent Scottish literary scholarship has “(a) recognised the wealth and distinctiveness of the Scottish literary tradition, and (b) sought to redress the anglo-centric bias of earlier treatments of Scottish writing...” (Corbett et al 1). The Discussion Group raises questions of literary scholarship that indirectly affect the entire canon; specifically, these scholars question the content of the canon and who builds that content.

The literature of Early Modern England and Scotland is a fervent battleground for those who build the canon (textbook editors, classroom professors, and research professors), because the practical decisions they face are also political. As John Guillory notes in *Cultural Capital*:

Literary culture in general, and the university in particular, are by no means structurally organized to express the consensus of a community; these social and institutional sites are complex hierarchies in which the position and privilege of judgment are objects of competitive struggles. (27)

If a university must face internal socio-political decisions about including Scottish Renaissance literature in its curriculum, then that university is subject to considering the socio-political

background of Renaissance Scotland. Such a background remains largely under-established; Scotland does not seem to enter the picture of Renaissance history or literature until the ascension of James VI of Scotland to become James I of England in 1603.

Early Modern Scotland yields a bountiful selection of dramatic, poetic, and prose works that were never given the opportunity to appear alongside their English relatives. Scottish authors accomplished many of the same literary feats, and they worked toward many of the same political ends, especially in creating through poetry a national identity. The sonneteers in particular appropriated traditional tropes and vocabulary from continental influences, mainly Petrarchan. If the Elizabethans are recognized within the academy for innovating the sonnet as part of developing English nationhood, then why should the academy not recognize Alexander Montgomerie, William Fowler, and King James for innovating the sonnet as part of creating Scottish nationhood? Scottish sonneteers belong on the map of literary studies, because they participated as strongly as canonized sonneteers in appropriating and innovating their verse form.

In the 1580s, King James took on the challenge of solidifying a Scottish national identity. For decades Scotland had been ruled by regency, and so the Scottish people saw James' ascension to the throne in Edinburgh as a defining moment for their nationhood. When the newly crowned James VI began writing legislation in 1584, his first notable laws involved literary production. He established the Castalian band of poets, a group of hand-selected courtiers from different backgrounds. The Castalians were to use Scots language alongside European languages in their verse. For instance, many of them composed original poetry while they translated longer works from French sources.

Scottish literature scholars are fortunate in that James VI clearly codified his expectations for the Castalians as national writers, as R. D. S. Jack articulates in his DNB article on the Castalians:

First, he wished to forge a distinctive role for Scottish verse in Europe... his *Reulis and Cautelis*... addresses that aim. Secondly, he hoped that Edinburgh might become a cultural home for English and European writers. A third consideration... he might lead a British court. Could he ease the way for the major cultural and political changes this would imply for his Castalians? (“Castalian band”)

The original poetry of the Castalians incorporated many of the images and tropes from the continental sources, but the verses were distinctly Scottish. In this way James hoped to build a Scottish literary Renaissance that would be recognized by all of the nations in Europe.

How could James VI forge a new plan for the literature of his people if he absorbed the foreign rhetorical model of the French? The answer is in his application of the Pléiade model; the Pléiade model was meant to elevate French vernacular, and so the Castalians could elevate Scots vernacular. The *Reulis and Cautelis* “is clearly meant to be a trumpet call for a Scottish literary Renaissance” (“Poetry” 126). Jenny Wormald suggests that Scotland’s sixteenth century morale was so low (likely due to long regency and internal strife) that the kingdom needed to draw upon continental models of civilization in order to maintain a stable national identity (xvii). This certainly seems to be the case for James VI during the first years of his personal reign in the 1580s.

It was not enough for Scotland to be a nation with a proper king: Scotland had to be a viable empire alongside other European empires. Continental nationhood, that link to stronger nations like France, was a powerful component in James’ reign over Scotland. Reciprocally, Scotland made France look strong by accomplishing viable nationhood based on a French model. Mason observes that “in the course of the sixteenth century, Europe impacted on Scotland, and

Scotland on Europe, in ways quite unprecedented in the kingdom's history" (107). Scottish sonneteers wrote in a continental style, because James wanted a continental identity for the nation.

Incorporating an influence does not, as Morna Fleming has pointed out, necessitate subordinating one's literature to the appropriated influence (79). The Castalian poets did not write French literature; they followed a French literary model in order to create Scottish literature. The *Reulis and Cautelis* demonstrate how James, according to R. D. S. Jack, "wants to produce critical guidelines which will be relevant to Scotland's verse specifically" ("Poetry" 126). The King James of 1584 is both pupil and pioneer. He does not merely carry continental models to Scotland. He is an appropriator, a status far more creative than a translator. It makes perfect sense that his first literary activity as king involved verse forms such as the sonnet, because the history of the sonnet involves appropriation from one literary era to another.

The sonnet originates from the French lyric tradition of the Troubadours in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries; Dante and Petrarch adopted the verse form into Italian literature during the latter part of the middle ages (Wolosky 55). The typical sonnet involves intense feelings or thoughts condensed into a relatively short poem. Although there was not a strictly codified form for the sonnet during the Renaissance, conventions maintained a pattern of most sonnets being fourteen lines, having a tight rhyme scheme, and using a conceit, or elaborate metaphor. The challenge for a sonneteer is to create and fully develop a metaphor while restricted by a small structure and the expectations of his patron.

As a language appropriator, James often used proper nouns (including names of classical gods, his own name, and names of his courtiers) to grant power to ideas. His use of names is adopted from the French Pléiade tradition, and Fleming cites such an adaptation as

indicative of the Auld Alliance between Scotland and France (93). An outstanding example of the Castalian sonnet is in the *Essayes of a Prentise*, a collection of verse and prose works by James containing the “Reulis and Cautelis”. In a sequence of twelve sonnets, James appeals to different gods and goddesses to make his poetry powerful enough to affect change. Each sonnet focuses on a particular season of the year or on a particular setting, like the ocean or death and war.

The first sonnet in this sequence is particularly interesting, because it models James’ expectations for his sonneteers. [Should I read the sonnet here?] He begins by appealing to Jove rather than to a muse, which perhaps indicates his sense of authority as king. He does incorporate the modesty trope by referring to his “veine Poetique” (line 5), but then he quickly returns to discussing the powerful effect his verse should have on his readers. He incorporates many mythological figures, including Semele and Phaethon. Semele and Phaethon might seem like strange choices, but they were probably familiar characters to James. Semele, who was impregnated by Zeus, was destroyed before her son Dionysus was born; however, Zeus saved the unborn child who would later restore his mother. Semele bears striking resemblance to Mary, Queen of Scots. James dresses these characters with repeated powerful words like “thunder”, and he incorporates distinctly Scottish vernacular phrases or pronunciations of words. The most noticeable single word is “syne”, which is the adverb “then” (line 10). The most noticeable rhyme of Scottish words is in the final couplet (eard “the earth” and monstrous reard “a monstrous cry”), which is a prominent place to display vernacular.

James stands out as a particularly unpredictable sonneteer. He wrote several sets of sonnets which were consistent within each set, but he did not compose a unified sonnet cycle. Fleming suggests that this is due to James’ discomfort with the sonnet form: “The attempt to

cram in more comparisons that the sonnet will really bear is a sign of James' discomfort with the straitjacket of the short lyric form generally, and in most of his poems it is a measure of his insight that he knows his own limitations as a poet" (90). Because James was more comfortable translating longer lyrics, his sonnets include many strong images, often classical, with many proper nouns that could be found in those longer lyrics.

What of the other Castalians? How did they create verse with their fellow poet who was also their king? James' lead Castalian poet was Alexander Montgomerie, a poet who worked his way up the social ladder until he found a place in James' court. After engaging in a Scottish poetry contest called flyting, Montgomerie out-versed Sir Patrick Hume of Polwarth, gaining acknowledgement as the best court poet in 1584. R. D. S. Jack suggests that Montgomerie combined a vision of the people with the form of court in order to establish a unique poetic voice, creating a perfect harmony of vernacular and classical tradition well-suited to James' goals for the Castalians (132). Montgomerie is an excellent example of an appropriator, because he dressed classical tropes and mythic figures in distinctly Scottish words and settings.

As an appropriator, Montgomerie worked with a wealth of influences. In seeking a model for his sonnets, he preferred Wyatt to Petrarch, because he felt that Petrarch had been picked over as a source ("The Lyrics of Alexander Montgomerie" 179). His larger body of work was influenced by French rhetoric ("Lyrics" 169), medieval allegorical Romance ("Poetry under King James VI" 135-136), and Scots as a literary language (Fleming 85). Fleming's reading of Montgomerie's "Sonnet XLV" indicates the intricate weaving of different influences to generate a unique effect:

In addition to the caesura rhyme, there is a careful use of alliteration which links Montgomerie's technique to that of older Scottish poetry, but with the subtle

change in that while medieval alliterative verse used the figure structurally, on the strong stresses of the line, Montgomerie employs it more subtly, linking semantically related words. (91)

Montgomerie is creating a pattern of alliteration which does not work to reinforce the stresses of the spoken sonnet. Instead, his subtle connection of semantically related words suits a more visual style, one suited to a printed rather than a spoken text. Montgomerie recognizes the visual appeal of the sonnet and the need for visually appealing verse to survive in print.

William Fowler was appointed to the Castalians in 1584, and immediately he began work on translations. Dunnigan observes in the Dictionary of National Biography that Fowler's *The Tarantula of Love* and his translation of the *Trionfi* by Petrarch "demonstrate the markedly Italian influence on the literature associated with James' Scottish court in the 1580s." Fowler stands out as a unique member of the Castalians due to the number of Italian translations, original compositions in Italian, and distinctly Petrarchan sonnets. While it might seem odd for Fowler to embrace the Italian influence, it is worth noting that there were many Italian conventions to arrive in Scottish literature, only they did so by way of French literature. Fowler was unique among the Castalians in that he was able to tour Italy in his youth (Dunnigan). His travels in Italy contributed to a mostly Roman vocabulary.

All of the Castalians can be seen as language appropriators in their thorough use of strong sources to establish a Scottish Renaissance. Like the Elizabethan sonneteers, the Castalians experimented with and innovated diction, rhyme scheme, and other vital components of courtly verse. On one hand, it seems perfectly appropriate to treat Scottish literature as independent of the rules that bind English literature. On the other hand, it is tempting to let the English Renaissance completely overshadow its Scottish counterpart. Some critics combat the notion that there was not a Scottish Renaissance at all, that "late sixteenth century poets provide an

inferior postscript to the powerful movement begun a century earlier by Henryson and Dunbar...” (“Poetry under James VI” 137). Such a notion is preposterous considering the level of communication and intertextuality among Scottish and continental literatures during the late sixteenth century; the label “postscript” completely ignores the importance of court verse under James in 1584.

If creating a lower-class or marginalized literary tradition only reinforces the cultural stereotype labeling the minority who composed it (Guillory 3), then it makes less political sense to emphasize noncanonical works than to claim canonical status for works for the literature of a marginalized nation. In the case of the Castalians, the sonnets and the sonneteers share in every literary quality of the Elizabethan sonneteers, and they should be incorporated into the university literary curriculum.

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