

Reading Scotland before 1707
The Folger Shakespeare Library
The University of St Andrews

Session Six: Scotland, Literature and Reformation

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Does Protestantism come to dominate Scottish literary production,
or do secular modes of verse and prose writing continue to flourish?

Yes and yes?

1. Does Protestantism come to dominate Scottish literary production, or do secular modes of verse and prose writing continue to flourish?

I've been interested in the evidence for a literary shaping of public identity in the moment of the National Covenant, 1638–41. An opportunity for cultural experimentation slips in between the collapse of the royalist, episcopalian regime and the resumption of political stability under a parliamentary committee of estates. I've been asking whether the public appeal to swear to the Covenant specifically causes changes to literary form and authorship. Might literature have an actively individuating or distinguishing role in the landscape of social change? This seems to me a special opportunity for literary production in Scotland, in which established styles are repurposed to engage with new ideas.

A familiar generic coupling between panegyric and satire is reshaped in the Covenant moment. Its prominence makes sense in the heightened demand for propaganda, but it also corresponds to a perennial need in Scottish literary culture for tactics of affiliation and resistance. These tactics have very much a stylistic aspect. Alasdair MacDonald describes the diction of Scottish *Jacobean* verse as standard English augmented by Scots where metrically or rhetorically advantageous. His description provides a good starting point for the consideration of the language and style of the verse and also prose pieces of the 1630s and '40s. The verse is largely in heroic couplets; while metrical smoothness is sometimes a goal, ruggedness can become prominent, not coincidentally perhaps with a higher proportion of Scots. In prose as in verse, role-playing becomes a principle of design. Elaborate self-portrayal of ironic personae is a key gambit for prose satire in particular. In the prose pieces, sharp contrasts between periodic and aphoristic structures are prominent, as are complex, revealing intersections of allusion. Variegation assumes a political colouration. The reader is invited or goaded to break up the surface import and discover a damning counter-meaning.

In the temporary widening of public discourse in the wake of the Covenant, contestiveness, grounded in traditional forms such as flyting, burlesque and satiric dialogue, provides an opening for innovation. In vernacular literary writing in Scotland, this process involves some fairly independent-minded sampling and re-mixing of the iconic texts of previous generations, often with a critical edge.

A study sample of mainly printed material in prose as well as verse supports this last possibility. To what extent do these texts inventively shape the characters and sentiments they portray? In other words, what might be the lasting literary heritage of the Covenant? I emphasise printed material because I'm interested in the transition from fugitive, ephemeral pasquinade to more ambitious, complex forms of satire. Though this printed material is almost as anonymous as that in manuscript, it enters public record more freely – not least in *sammelbände* – the single-volume anthologies in which citizens collected the printed record of the great events they were participating in and experiencing.

Here are a few samples to test some of these notions.

Henry Adamson, *The Muses Threnodie* (1638)

But in these banks where flowes Saint Conils well,¹
 The which Thessalian Tempe doth excel,
 Whose name and matchless fame for to declare,
 In this most doleful dittey must I spare.

...

These be the banks where all the Muses dwell
 And haunt about that cristall brook and well.
 Into these banks chiefly did we repair
 From sunshine shadowed and from blasting air,
 Where with the Muses we did sing our songs,
 Sometimes for pleasure, sometimes for our wrongs,
 For in those dayes none durst approach their table
 But we to taste their dainties – this no fable.

(Adamson 1638. 'The eight Muse', lines 9–12, 21–8)

Huntingtower, of old called Luthven



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<https://canmore.org.uk/collection/1501766>

¹ St Conval is associated with Strathclyde, not Perth.

² Records of the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland, [Site of Lady Well at] Tibbermure Parish Kirk, Glebe Cottage House' photographer unknown, photograph taken 23 June 1998, Canmore (National Record of the Historic Environment), <http://canmore.org.uk/collection/1501766>, accessed 7 May 2022

2. Henry Adamson's *The Muses Threnodie* is a verse memoir, in nine sections, about 2500 lines in all. It's true comic verse, in which infelicities contribute to mood and characterisation. The narrator is George Ruthven, called Monsier George; his Ruthven surname had been proscribed in the aftermath of the Gowrie Conspiracy. Monsier George is recalling some excursions he and a friend, known as Master Gall, undertook a decade or so previously, in the vicinity of their home town, Perth. In the passage quoted, from the penultimate section, George is declaring that he must not pause to discuss their visit to a spot he calls Saint Conils Well. The rubric refers to a local castle, Huntingtower, formerly Ruthven Castle; but here its name 'of old' is misrepresented as *Luthven*. Monsier George is reminiscing about the visits to wells at Huntingtower but also Tibbermore (the remains of which are shown in the photograph here). In that district these were persistently known as Lady Wells. Perth's parishioners were banned from visiting such wells, especially on the Sabbath; ritual activities there could result in the charge of witchcraft. The classicising, the allusion to the obscure Strathclyde saint Conval and the ingenuous misprint *Luthven* throw transparent figleaves over taboo topics. Monsier George's anxiety may be ridiculous in itself, but it also reflects ironically upon the parish and parliament that impose such bans. There's quite a lot to say about this extraordinary poem, but for now I'll just mention that the vivid depiction of Perth's environs seems overall to have something consoling about it – ruined vistas for the cultivation of private sensibility.

T. H., *The Beautie of the Remarkable Yeare* (1638)

Tune my theorbe, sweet sisters, stretch the string³
 Yet higher, that she may more sweetly sing.⁴
 Hence all you soul-dividing cares, go hence
 You heart afflicting griefs and but dispense
 A little with your captive. Let mee play
 Within a paradise but one poor day.
 Remove your anger, your sad wrath forbear,
 Till I do sing the beautie of a year
 In which luxurious, amarous Heaven doth woe
 His mistres Earth with smiles upon his brow
 And would invite each gentle sprite to be⁵
 A poet of this epithalamie.⁶ (T. H. 1638, lines 5-17)

³ The theorbo, a member of the lute family with much longer neck and strings; with its deep voice it is an emblem of spiritual song (Bath 2018, 265), as in Francis Quarles, *Emblemes*—‘Skruie up the heightened pegs | Of thy Sublime Theorboe foure notes higher’ (Invocation, lines 2-3).

⁴ This encouragement to a higher tuning involves tension and risk. Later, God stretches the sky around the globe (line 23), Heaven stretches its wings over the earth (42-43), the valleys stretch out carpets of flowers (238), and nobler poets are invited to stretch their prosodic skills (388).

⁵ Each gentle sprite: thus named for upholding civility (FQ III.vi.i.13), those who have yet to sign the National Covenant are invited to take part; further, those higher-born wits who should rise to the occasion with songs of their own are urged to do so.

⁶ epithalamie: under the National Covenant, a reprise of the bond between the Sun and the Earth in Creation (Genesis 1:16-18); in Du Bartas, trans. Sylvester, *The Fourth Day of the First Week*, the ‘youthfull throng’ sing ‘aloud his Epithalamie’ (lines 603, 606).

3. The Beautie of the Remarkable Yeare celebrates the National Covenant as a declaration of resistance to episcopal domination of religious government and ritual. The poet known only as T. H. contrasts the exaltation of the moment against the cares, grief and anger that surround it. T. H. goes far to depict spiritual access in terms of sensual delight. The transformation of Scotland from a 'cold hungrie melancholick clime' into a 'sweet Arabie' (lines 288–9) involves repeated *stretching*, of concept as of materiality. I've been interested in the way T. H.'s allusions create stylistic and conceptual bonds (as here with Quarles and Du Bartas) but also set up oppositions (as later with Drummond) that seem designed to provoke further discourse.

Samuel Rutherford, letter 'To the persecuted church in Ireland' (1639)

... the Lord is rejoycing over us in this land as the bridegroom rejoyceth over the bride, and the Lord hath changed the name of Scotland, they call us now no more Forsaken nor Desolate, but our land is called Hephzibah and Beulah.⁷ (Rutherford 1664, 481)

⁷ Geneva Bible (Edinburgh: Andro Hart, 1610), Isaiah 62.4:

It shall no more be saide unto thee, Forsaken [Thou shalt no more be contemned as a woman forsaken of her husband.], neither shall it be said any more to thy land, Desolate, but thou shalt be called Hephzi-bah [Or, my delight is in her], and thy land Beulah [Or, married]: for the Lord delighteth in thee, and thy land shall have an husband [That it might be replenished with children].

4. The eroticism with which T. H. depicts the Covenant contrasts with presbyterian depictions of the Scottish church as a chaste, beautiful bride, transformed after her backsliding and corruption during the misrule of the bishops. By this route, the Covenant added a gendered, allegorical level of signification to the reading of rebellion in secular narrative. With the transformed bride as a leading topic, the interchange accelerated between sacred and secular. The stakes but also the opportunities arose for opposed, competing readings, and for satire and even flyting based on such readings.

The senate-house of planets hath at no time beene more unfriendly set for the acting of some strange trage-comedie in Europe. (Popes Conclave, sig. F1r)

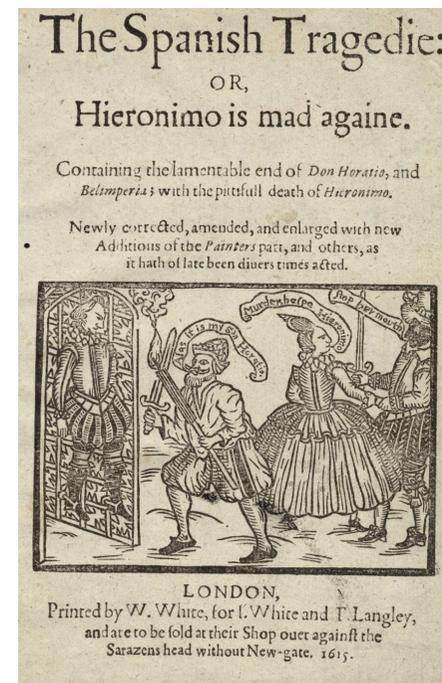
Heavens great substitute, absolute Father of the Church, if ever power did shew a masterie in you, let it now appeare and make the redacted world stand amazed.

O nimium dilecte Deo cui militat æther,
Et conjuratæ curvato poplite gentes

Succumbunt –

Tu ne cede malis, sed contra audentior ito.⁸

(Popes Conclave, sig. F3r)



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⁸ Claudian, De Tertio Consolatu Honorii line 96; Kyd, Spanish Tragedie 1.2.13; Æn. 6.95: O one too much loved by God, for whom heaven fights, and the conspiring populace fall on bended knee – thou shouldst not submit to evils but attack more boldly.

⁹ The Folger Shakespeare Library copy of the 1615 edition of The Spanish Tragedie, digitised at luna.folger.edu, accessed 15.04.2022.

5. Theo van Heijnsbergen has commented on the pervasiveness in Scottish literary writing of 'fictional impersonation' that 'intruded upon the factual' (2002, 73). The ventriloquising that he identifies provides a space for literary invention in the heat of political controversy. In the anonymous prose satire *The Popes Conclave*, Catholic personae are used ironically to defend the Covenant. The speakers are Pope Urban VIII and a fictitious cardinal. Their world of intrigue and deceit is a play. In this light, the display quotation is especially intriguing. It begins with a line from Claudian, one that had been used freely in a brief encomium in *The Spanish Tragedy*, act 1, scene 2. As displayed here, the passage begins (in pale blue) by following Claudian exactly, before shifting (in mid blue) into the wording in the play. The last line is a Virgilian tag with a similar sentiment. This little patchwork plays up the speaker's insincerity and grandiosity: praise to the emperor Honorius, in whose reign Rome was captured by Alaric in 410; a bit of flowery praise from a villainous character in a much-parodied warhorse of Elizabethan theatre; and only then the Sibyl's encouragement to Aeneas en route to Hades. The remixing conveys a wicked sense of allusive discourse – but also of manoeuvring in the political arena – as self-destructive role-playing.

Anna Hume, trans., Petrarch, Triumph of Death (1644)

‘My place of birth did to my thoughts appeare
 Too meane, and I stil grieve ’twas not more neare
 Thy flowry seat,¹⁰ yet doe I wel approve
 Of any countrey where I had thy love.
 Besides, the heart in which I place most trust,
 If me thou hadst not known, ’tis like it must
 Have elsewhere lov’d, so had I got lesse fame.’

(Hume 1644. Triumph of Death, chapter 2, lines 143-9)¹¹

for though I well approve
 Of that faire countrey where I had thy love,
 Yet might that heart in which I trusted stray
 To other beauties and be turned away
 By this defect ...

¹⁰ Annotations: Flowrie seat, 145.line] Florence.

¹¹ Annotations: Of any countrey, &c. 146.line] The sense here seemed cleare to mee, that Lauretta being well descended, but borne in Cabriers, an obscure village, shee was onely displeas’d with that particular; yet the honour of his love was recompense enough for that misfortune, and any place good enough where shee had that honour: and if shee had bene borne neare Florence, where hee had his birth, shee might have bene unknowne to him who had left it, his parents being chased from thence by a contrary faction; and if hee had not seen her, it is like hee might have loved another, so should shee have missed that honour, to which Petrarch answers, that where ever she had been borne, hee must needs have loved her, by the influence of his starres. But when I looke on the Italian commentary, I finde hee takes the meaning quite other wayes, which I have expressed as neare his sence as I can [as above, r.h.] As if shee had said her greatest misfortune was feare or jealousie, that hee disliking the place in which shee lived (though she thought it sweet enough) might change his affection, and bee drawne to love some other. Let him that reads or compares, take the sence hee approveth most.

6. Anna Hume's translation of the first three of Petrarch's Triumphs is significant in various ways, but not least for the dialogue she sets up between the translated text and her acerbic Annotations, a dialogue that reveals blind spots in previous commentary but also in Petrarch's own writing. Though Hume promises that the rest of the Triumphs will follow as a sequel if this offering attracts readers, her decision to end her volume with the Triumph of Death emphasises that 'Lauretta' is the true hero of the work. In Hume's handling, Petrarch resembles the male narrators of Older Scots dream visions, enraptured but alarmed by the female personages they encounter and misread. In her Annotations, Anna Hume makes a play of earnest scholarly sifting of textual alternatives in order to call Petrarch's loyalty into question. Either Lauretta is saying that Petrarch might never have met her if she had lived in another place (as in the main text); or (as in the annotation) she is pointing out that Petrarch might well have been small-minded enough to use contempt for her birthplace as an excuse to chase after other women. Her book coming shortly after the reassertion of parliamentary authority, Anna Hume applies the techniques of ventriloquism and dialogue that had been refined in the Covenant moment.

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7. Was the Covenant responsible for literary innovation, or did Scottish writers persist in doing what their predecessors had been doing for generations? My research is beginning to suggest that the second quarter of the seventeenth-century saw a transformation of some long-established techniques of literary style, and this transformation might be characterised in part by the capturing of vivid spoken idioms, not least where those were exhibited by political and other opponents. If so, we need to redirect our focus into the later seventeenth century with its wealth of barely considered literary production and reception.