

# Studies in Scottish Literature

---

Volume 10 | Issue 3

Article 7

---

1-1-1973

**R.D.S. Jack. The Italian Influence on Scottish Literature. Edinburgh University Press. Aldine-Atherton Inc., Chicago. £3.50.**

Islay M. Donaldson

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Donaldson, Islay M. (2014) "R.D.S. Jack. The Italian Influence on Scottish Literature. Edinburgh University Press. Aldine-Atherton Inc., Chicago. £3.50.," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 10: Iss. 3, 190–193. Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol10/iss3/7>

This Book Reviews is brought to you by the Scottish Literature Collections at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Studies in Scottish Literature by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact [digres@mailbox.sc.edu](mailto:digres@mailbox.sc.edu).

## BOOK REVIEWS

R. D. S. Jack: *The Italian Influence on Scottish Literature*  
Edinburgh University Press. Aldine-Atherton  
Inc., Chicago. £3.50

To the general reader, and even to some students and scholars, Scottish literature appears rather like a few well-known peaks rising from a sea of confusion without any clearly-defined trade-routes linking them together. In 1934, Janet Adam Smith, in *The French Background of Middle Scots Literature*, mapped out one such route for part of the journey, but although the Auld Alliance between Scotland and France has long been acknowledged to apply to literature as well as politics, it apparently ceased to operate with the fragmentation of Scottish writing in 1603 when James VI and I moved with his court to London. Dr Jack's study of *The Italian Influence on Scottish Literature* now reveals a multiplicity of such routes; by examining the work of certain Scottish writers from mediaeval times to those of Sir Walter Scott, he shows that — to vary the metaphor slightly — only slightly submerged under the sea of superficially disconnected writing there lies a solid unknown bed of familiarity not merely with Italian but with European literary ideas and practices. Moreover, he demonstrates by references and quotations as well as by helpful reminders of Scottish history that Scotland and its writers were cognisant of their Italian contemporaries and were sufficiently confident to be able to borrow and adapt from individual works, both in Latin and in Italian, which appealed to certain qualities in their native temperament.

Dr Jack stresses the complexity of this relationship, and rightly so. He points out instances in which a Scottish writer in composing his own work is clearly aware both of the classical originals and of Latin and Italian reworkings of these originals, notably Henryson, whose *Orpheus and Eurydice* owes much to Poliziano's *Orfeo* as well as to Ovid, Virgil and Trever's Latin commentary on Boethius's *De Consolatione* — so much so that Henryson "may have read or even seen Poliziano's piece, which was performed as a play" in 1480. As with Henryson, so with others, the author of the *Three Prestes*, and Gavin Douglas; and when these writers "show debts to Italian literature in one form or another one ought to confess the power of the Italian humanist line, rather than allow it to be wholly overshadowed by that of French Romance and

Chronicle". Dr Jack argues his case well and convincingly, leading us in and out of parallels, echoes and direct imitation with the deftness and enthusiasm of a Scottish country dancer executing a complicated measure. Lindsay's *The Dreme*, containing, for instance, a journey to Hell very similar to that in Dante, and the play *Philotus* of which the Italian novelle plot borrowed from Barnaby Rich is sharpened by constructional details from the *commedia erudita*, bring us via Italianate modes to the court of James VI, and with that learned monarch the European influence becomes codified in his *Reulis and Cautelis*, "a late Scottish addition to the European treatises urging vernacular poets to break finally the bonds of classicism".

From this point onwards the situation becomes even more sophisticated. Stewart of Baldynneis's *Roland Furious*, the finest long narrative poem of the Scottish Renaissance, while freely adapted from Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, clearly has affinities with French sources, the poet, taking what was to his taste from Desportes's *Roland Furieux* and *Angélique*, from the French prose rendering of Martin and to a lesser extent from that of Chappuys, but, as Dr Jack's argument meticulously suggests, "the primary source may very well be Ariosto himself." Petrarch, Boccaccio, and Machiavelli are all shown to exert strong influences as sources of form and image for members of James VI's "Castalian band", especially since their patron and leader expressly encouraged translation and imitation, provided always that "ye inuent your awain subiect yourself." In particular the sonnet emerges as a form of unique significance to Scottish poets and one most sensitive to European influences, Italian and French; James VI, Montgomerie and Stewart of Baldynneis had written sonnets with French models in mind, but William Fowler's sonnet sequence *Tarantula of Love* shows Italian originals, echoing Petrarch in phrase and theme and deriving its title from a remark in the opening of Castiglione's *Il Cortegiano* about the pains suffered by victims of the tarantula spider. Dr Jack, perhaps because of the wide scope of the present study, mentions the sonnet form only in passing as part of a general trend. This is tantalising, and one would wish it to have been developed further. He has pointed out, also, that William Fowler merits greater prominence than critics have given him so far, but he does not allow himself space to rectify the omission himself and just gives us enough to make us want more.

After 1603, Scottish poets found themselves involved in an established opposition between two groups of English poets, the Petrarchans headed by Drayton and their more metaphysical contemporaries by Donne. The sixteenth century golden age of poetry in Scotland had dissipated, "temporarily merged with the English one", but Dr Jack

makes a distinction between Scottish and English practitioners in whichever camp they settled; the Scots, dogged by a sense of having passed their literary peak, concentrated on perfecting the awareness of form which they found in Italian poets, polishing, sharpening, wittily varying their conceits and stylistic devices in sonnet and pastoral, lyric and tragedy. "It was to the Italian poets of the later sixteenth century, Tasso, Guarini and their followers, that the Scottish poets turned, when tired of Petrarchanism. But they turned to them, as it were, in their own spirit, while their English counterparts added to these sources an energy and an inventiveness which had not been there originally." Drummond of Hawthornden, on the other hand, did not move south with the rest, and was more truly a metaphysical poet; when he deals with love, he does so as a pretext for philosophical speculation, and treats themes of mutability, transience, human frailty and death, fully aware of how Petrarch, Marino and other Italians had already treated them but retaining his individual viewpoint in choice of image and intensification of meaning.

In these first four chapters, Dr Jack, for all his infectious enthusiasm, demands close and particular attention from his reader. In the last two, which deal with the eighteenth century, Scott and the novel, one can happily relax and enjoy oneself. This does not mean that there is any lessening of acuteness or comprehensiveness. The Grand Tour, the concert-going Edinburgh public in the eighteenth century, Henry Mackenzie, the artificial Italianate music and settings with which Burns and Ferguson had to contend, Tenducci, the group of Scottish artists (Ramsay the Younger, Cunningham, Aikman, More, Raeburn) who studied in Italy under Italian masters — they are all there and dealt with as is fitting; and contrariwise we are shown the influence which translations of Thomson's *Seasons* and *Castle of Indolence*, of Ossian, and of Blair's lectures on rhetoric had on Italian writers. "Thomson's *Seasons* was the prime mover behind the cult of 'seasons' poetry that then sprang up in Italy and counted among its major disciples Metastasio, Frugoni and Rolli. Indeed, the way would not have been so clear for Ossian's Italian welcome had the path not already been prepared by another Scot, Thomson." This is indeed fascinating.

But perhaps the great joy of the last two chapters is the sense one has of meeting old friends in unfamiliar and totally fresh situations — Boswell reading Ariosto in Siena and using snatches from him "to illustrate particular moments in his amorous adventures" or warbling Italian airs to his Italian friends and following them with Scots songs; Hume spending two years in Italy and growing familiar enough with Italian poetic romances to lament that Italian prose should be so much less

satisfactory; Adam Smith able to join issue with Italian critics on their own ground, express clear and authoritative views on the theory of comedy and the techniques of romance, and analyse Italian verse forms so copiously and with such appropriate illustrations that he is obviously very much at home in that language. Finally, in the chapter about the novel and Scott, Dr Jack gathers up with relish a multitude of details some of which one had noticed in a lazy way without thinking much about them. Beginning with Urquhart's neglected *Jewel of 1652*, "one of the first Scottish 'novels'" (which I must confess to have neglected as much as anyone), he traces through Smollett and Scott the familiarity with Italian literature, customs and landscape which shows that Italy formed a vivid part of their everyday imaginative life. Once more, old friends in a fresh light, for which one is grateful. For good measure, he again produces references to show that Scott in turn influenced Italian novelists, like Manzoni and Grossi, concluding gracefully that "it is pleasant to remember that there is a Scottish background to Italian literature as well, although, as the present book has striven to indicate, our debt is immeasurably greater."

Dr Jack provides English translations of his passages in Italian, but such is the stimulating quality of his book that it may well increase the number of Scottish literature students who turn towards the learning of Italian. He is to be congratulated on so compellingly charting the sea of Scottish literature through his Italian scholarship that others are bound to feel the urge to follow. His book is pleasing to read and in, format, continues the high standard which one has come to expect from Edinburgh University Press.

ISLAY M. DONALDSON  
*Edinburgh*