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# A "Quarrell sett out in metre": Towards a New Edition of Scottish Reformation Satirical Literature

## **Cover Page Footnote**

This essay is part of the SSL Symposium, 2013: Divergent Authenticities: Editing Scottish Literary Texts.

## **A “QUARRELL SETT OUT IN METRE”: EDITING SCOTTISH REFORMATION SATIRICAL LITERATURE**

*Tricia A. McElroy*

In *Satirical Poems of the Time of the Reformation* (Scottish Text Society, 1891), James Cranstoun brought together 48 poems from the period of civil unrest and religious debate that followed the overthrow of Mary Queen of Scots, roughly 1565 to 1584. Dominated by the broadsides of poet Robert Sempill and printer Robert Lekpreuk and by the fierce perspective of the Protestant faction, Cranstoun’s two-volume *Satirical Poems* remains the only critical edition of this corpus.<sup>1</sup> My assignment, both daunting and exciting, is to produce a new edition for the STS, entitled *Scottish Satirical Literature, 1567-1584*. More than 100 years since the *Satirical Poems*, the need for a new edition might appear axiomatic. Although well transcribed, Cranstoun’s collection is dated, with turgid explanatory notes and cumbersome biographical notices. More important, other relevant manuscript pieces in verse and prose have come to light and should take their rightful place among Cranstoun’s selections. Yet distinguishing *Scottish Satirical Literature* from its predecessor has presented surprising challenges – a few of them practical, others more conceptual. As the new editor, I am caught between a desire to revise and modernize, and an obligation to preserve as much of Cranstoun’s original collection as possible, thereby obviating the need for readers to consult both editions. For a set of satirical pieces that are unrelentingly topical and cantankerously partisan, the key challenge

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<sup>1</sup> J. G. Dalyell (1801) and James Sibbald (1802) had published some of the poems, and T. G. Stevenson presented a fuller collection in *The Sempill Ballates* (1872); but Cranstoun’s was the first critical edition. Hereafter, poems are cited parenthetically using Cranstoun’s Roman numeral and line number (e.g., IV.23-4).

seems to be one of balance: a readable text that preserves the distinctive character of sixteenth-century Scots and a thorough apparatus that elucidates but does not overwhelm with historical detail. Ideally, I would like the new edition to draw attention to the literary merits and political energies of this material – a tricky, if not dubious, goal for an editor – and so encourage fresh scholarly activity.<sup>2</sup>

The poems in Cranstoun's collection are peculiar and, for readers unfamiliar with the political and religious wrangling of sixteenth-century Scotland, opaque and, quite possibly, distasteful: Cranstoun judged them as notable for "perfect sincerity" but sorely lacking in "poetic feeling" (xi). Various occupied with slandering Mary Queen of Scots and her supporters, rebuking assorted murderers (often Hamiltons), execrating Papist "louns," recounting military battles, and extolling the Reformed kirk, the poems might at first seem irrelevant to any notion of a "literary" tradition in Scotland, a point to which I shall return. As a literary editor, I have struggled to determine what should bind these pieces together. Cranstoun would appear to have been guided by something like the quote in the title of this essay. It derives from an endorsement on the verso of the broadside poem, "Ane Declaratioun of the Lordis iust quarrel": one of Lord Burghley's diligent clerks in London filed the item under the heading "The Lordis of Scotlands quarrell sett out in metre."<sup>3</sup> The "Declaratioun," dating from August 1567, is a rhyme-royal verse in which an eavesdropper overhears two men having a debate about the lawfulness of Mary Stewart's deposition and, even more crucially, about the source of monarchical power: divine and mystical, or derived from the "ruid pepill" who once chose their kings by majority vote (VII.136).

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<sup>2</sup> For recent and admirable reappraisals of this corpus, see Roderick Lyall, "Complaint, Satire, and Invective in Middle Scots Literature," in *Church, Politics and Society: Scotland 1408-1929*, ed. Norman Macdougall (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1983) 44-64; Priscilla Bawcutt, "Crossing the Border: Scottish Poetry and English Readers in the Sixteenth Century," in *The Rose and the Thistle*, ed. Sally Mapstone and Juliette Wood (East Linton: Tuckwell, 1998) 59-76; Gregory Kratzmann, "Political Satire and the Scottish Reformation," *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 26 (1991): 423-37: <http://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol26/iss1/36/>; Kratzmann, "Sixteenth-Century Secular Poetry," in *The History of Scottish Literature*, vol. 1, ed. R.D.S. Jack (Aberdeen: Aberdeen Univ. Press, 1988), 105-23; and David Parkinson, "'The Legend of the Bishop of St. Androis Lyfe' and the Survival of Scottish Poetry," *Early Modern Literary Studies* 9.1 (May 2003): 5.1-24.

<sup>3</sup> National Archives, State Papers 42/14/73.

Cecil's clerk pithily captures the form and substance of the matter: the nobility's political disagreement put into verse. Granted, this endorsement describes only a single item, but it has a precision and directness that Cranstoun's "satirical poems of the time of the Reformation" or my "Scottish satirical literature" would seem to lack. As editors and critics, we may find it difficult to characterize and collect, much less to epitomize and evaluate, such a disparate set of literary-historical-political-religious texts.

With *quarrell* and *metre*, Cecil's clerk gets to the heart of the matter, and his phrase – along with the familiar *Reformation* and *satirical* – point to the conceptual challenges of distinguishing the new edition from Cranstoun's. What might be the unifying logic or logics of the collection? To begin with, controversy seems obvious. But which *quarrell*, and between whom? The second half of the sixteenth century witnessed more than one political debate shot through with religious questions, and vice-versa, with the participants and their shifting allegiances difficult to pin down. Cranstoun described his selections as "almost all of a political or party nature," though only three represent a Catholic point of view. His selections first treat Mary's overthrow and then reach toward political and religious concerns far beyond that momentous event, yet the focus can dilate and contract dramatically, from relevant international politics to philosophizing closer to home: Cranstoun included a poem on the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre, for example, three poems on the betrayal of the Earl of Northumberland to Elizabeth's government, and Sir Richard Maitland's "Aganis Sklanderous Tungis," in which Maitland suggests one should not pay mind to backbiting poets who will criticize everything and, like petulant children, finally abandon their craft if ignored.

Cranstoun also characterized the poems as "of the time of the Reformation," which, however broadly intended, suggests that they emerged principally from the "fierce struggle between Catholicism and Protestantism" (ix). Certainly many of them participate in debates about the establishment and funding of the new Kirk, but their concerns reach much further afield. How exactly should we understand their relationship and interaction with a specific historical period? If these poems are *of* the Reformation, they are so not simply by reference to religious debate. Rather, changing ideas about spiritual and secular authority impinged on and drove cultural and literary production of a particularly inventive kind, leading to pointed adaptations or re-formations of literary and rhetorical styles. It may also be possible to reverse the direction of the influence.

That is, more controversially, could these poems actually have helped to manufacture aspects of their own historical moment? *Could* readers be persuaded to a course of action? We know that in April 1567, for example, Mary's government legislated against the broadside ballads, fearful they might destabilize the realm. We know that Sempill and Lekpreuik were patronized by the Earl of Moray's faction.<sup>4</sup> These facts ask us to consider the likelihood that the broadsides circulating in Scottish burghs were designed to and could in fact generate real political consequences. As I have argued elsewhere, the strategic deployment of material forms and the inventive use of literary conventions give force to the political aims of these pieces, providing frameworks through which social change can be explained and models for what an involved populace might look like.<sup>5</sup> It seems too easy and inaccurate to claim, as Cranstoun does, that these poems are "representative of the popular literature of the latter half of the sixteenth century" (xi). No doubt the poems aspire to represent a popular viewpoint: homely proverbs, demotic wisdom, ballad rhythms, not to mention being printed on broadside, in black letter, and posted anonymously, as if they emerge from a "simple" (or Sempill) man. Yet this, I would argue, is precisely the point and the strategy: propaganda meant to look like the popular expression of a widely accepted point of view. It is, of course, difficult to assess the effect of such literature, but we must take seriously the possibility of its impact on contemporary affairs.

For his title, Cranstoun chose "satirical poems," and of course he included only poetry. The title of the new edition retains "satirical," as it best captures the tone of the collection – which is not to suggest that *satire* lacks its own definitional problems. As a mode (not a genre) of writing, its form is flexible and its tone can modulate: from gently exposing human failings, tauntingly aimed at reform, acerbically hell-bent on scolding, or, more complexly, part of a game, like Scottish

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<sup>4</sup> See *The Acts of the Parliaments of Scotland, 1424-1707*, 2:552. Treasury records show a payment to Sempill in 1568 for more than £66 (*Accounts of the Lord High Treasurer of Scotland*, 12:98), and Lekpreuik was rewarded in January 1568 for his service to the anti-Marian party with the distinction of "King's Printer for the space of twenty years" (Robert Dickson and John P. Edmond, *Annals of Scottish Printing* [Cambridge: Macmillan & Bowes, 1890], 201).

<sup>5</sup> Tricia A. McElroy, "Imagining the 'Scottis Natioun': Populism and Propaganda in Scottish Satirical Broadside," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 49.4 (2007): 319-39.

flying, where the purpose of ridicule is complicated by performance and one-upmanship. Nevertheless, Cranstoun's selections and mine share a satirical tone, of varying intensity and purpose. "Poems," however, must be revised, hence, my change to the more generically inclusive "literature." Although meter remains central to the new edition, I am including two prose pieces, "An Account of a Pretended Conference held by the Regent, Earl of Murray" and "The Dialogue of the Twa Wyfeis." Not only do these witty satires participate in same debates, with the "Pretended Conference" providing a welcome satire on Mary's opponents, but they also use many of the same rhetorical ploys and literary forms. And the "Dialogue" shares a series of images with Sempill/Lekpreuik broadsides like "The Cruikit Leads the Blind" and "The Bird in the Cage" (XVI and XXII): sailing and weathercock metaphors, allusions to children's games, the presence of Maddie the kale wife (Sempill's *nom de plume*), and an acerbic portrait of the Scottish Machiavel, Maitland of Lethington. Indeed, the single manuscript copy of the "Dialogue" can be dated confidently to April 1570, near the exact date for the two broadsides, this time thanks to an endorsement by William Cecil himself: "30 April 1570. a Scottish dyalog betwixt 2 Scottish women of the state of Scotland."<sup>6</sup> These immensely clever productions provide a greater sense of the one-upmanship between the men likely responsible for contributing to this body of satire, as well as a fuller picture of the range of tools at the satirist's disposal.<sup>7</sup>

Inevitably, this conceptual thinking must evolve into pragmatic decisions, a process that has led to the following modest goals for the new edition: to re-present the poems, making important new additions to the corpus; to produce more useful, streamlined notes; to update the glossary using the *Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue*; and to provide a more helpful introduction. In selecting the texts, I have tried to reinforce and clarify some of the parameters discussed above, deviating from Cranstoun's by including only items of Scottish origin and incorporating prose. My title *Scottish Satirical Literature, 1567-1584* therefore makes more explicit the governing dates; retains the focus on

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<sup>6</sup> National Archives, State Papers 52/17/70.

<sup>7</sup> A point made by Mark Loughlin, "'The Dialogue of the Twa Wyfeis': Maitland, Machiavelli and the Propaganda of the Scottish Civil War', in *The Renaissance in Scotland: Studies in Literature, Religion, History, and Culture Offered to John Durkan*, eds. A. A. MacDonald, Michael Lynch, and Ian B. Cowan (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994) 226-45 (p. 237).

religious and political conflict; insists on the Scottishness of the selections; and, most importantly, opens generic boundaries. Based on these parameters, the new edition will drop five of Cranstoun's poems (those less specifically engaged with civil conflict and one of English origin) and incorporate three new manuscript poems and the two prose pieces. For those 43 poems retained from Cranstoun, I will be using his print and manuscript witnesses, which are limited in number. The 26 Lekpreuik broadsides, for example, have 37 witnesses altogether: 17 broadsides with one witness, seven in duplicate, two in triplicate. Without exception, all of these are located in the British Library, National Archives (London), or Society of Antiquaries.<sup>8</sup> Textual variants in the broadsides, as well as in the surviving copies of Lekpreuik's octavo and quarto productions, are rare or of little note. Similar to Cranstoun's approach, and closely following STS guidelines, editorial intervention in the texts will be minimal, with the same principles applied to print and manuscript: full and silent expansion of brevigraphs, suspensions, and contractions; semi-modernized capitalization and punctuation; regularization of the <i/j> and <u/v/w> distinction; and retention of yogh and thorn. The aim, a crucial one for this period, is that these texts should be accessible to a wide scholarly readership but should retain the character of their lively Scots vernacular.

The state of the manuscript witnesses is not terribly complicated. Like the Sempill/Lekpreuik broadsides, several manuscript items survive in single copies, often in the British Library or the National Archives. The poems on the betrayal of the Earl of Northumberland are found only in the Maitland Quarto, preserved in Madgalene College, Cambridge; and several items were copied into Richard Bannatyne's journal, which survives in the National Library of Scotland and in Edinburgh University Library. The five new items have come to light since Cranstoun's edition or have emerged as literary pieces with overlapping concerns. Of three new manuscript poems, one was copied by Sir James Melville of Halhill into the holograph manuscript of his *Memoirs* (ca. 1603), in order to demonstrate to his readers how contemporary versifiers wrote about the

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<sup>8</sup> This is no accident. The Sempill/Lekpreuik broadsides, as well as numerous other print and manuscript items, survive because of an Elizabethan bureaucracy intensely interested in these Scottish poems and prose pieces: all were posted south to London and filed away by Cecil, Lord Burghley, and his clerks.



civil strife in Scotland.<sup>9</sup> The second, a ballad on the death of Darnley, is located in the Lennox papers at Cambridge University Library.<sup>10</sup> Finally, the edition will incorporate “A Warning to the Lordis,” the new Sempill poem uncovered and edited by Priscilla Bawcutt from the archives of the Earl of Moray at Darnaway Castle.<sup>11</sup> As for the two new prose pieces, “The Pretended Conference” survives in three manuscript copies in London and Edinburgh, and the “Dialogue” in only a single copy in the National Archives.<sup>12</sup>

The challenge of this edition lies in preparing the apparatus: fuller introduction, streamlined notes, and updated glossary. Cranstoun organized his introduction by topic: 1) Period and Character of the Poems, 2) Subjects, 3) Style and Language, 4) Authorship, 5) Nationality, 6) Bibliography, and 7) Conclusion (his acknowledgments). The entire discussion of these seven topics covers only seven pages, with the next 43 pages devoted to biographical descriptions of the principal characters associated with the poems. My introductory essay will address in far greater detail the historical and cultural circumstances of production as well as the literary character of the poems and prose pieces, weaving in biographical information on the major figures and leaving notices on lesser figures to appear in explanatory notes. Specifically, I plan to address matters of authorship, genre, textual presentation, printing history, and means of preservation; consider possible analogues or precursors (the 1534 anti-Catholic “Affair of the Placards” in France, for example, or German Reformation propaganda); and describe both native and foreign literary influences. The goal is to illuminate both the literary and distinctively Scottish engagements of this material and to situate it carefully in its moment of production.

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<sup>9</sup> Sir James Melville of Halhill, *Memoirs of His Own Life*, ed. T. Thomson (Edinburgh: Bannatyne Club, 1827), 268-74. His manuscript is British Library, Add. 37977.

<sup>10</sup> Cambridge University Library, Oo.7.47. Never printed.

<sup>11</sup> See Priscilla Bawcutt, “A New Poem by Robert Sempill: ‘A Warning to the Lordis,’” *Scottish Literary Review* 1.1 (2009): 17-49. Mrs. Bawcutt has kindly granted me permission to include the poem in the new edition.

<sup>12</sup> The “Pretended Conference” is most easily accessible in *The Bannatyne Miscellany*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh, 1827), 33-50; and in Richard Bannatyne’s *Memorials of Transactions in Scotland, 1569-1573* (Edinburgh: Bannatyne Club, 1836), 5-13. “The Dialogue of the Twa Wyfeis” survives in one manuscript copy, see above. It has never been printed.

Cranstoun's notes are broadly helpful but very old fashioned. He offers many cross-references to earlier works of Scottish literature; these references are enjoyable and demonstrate his learning (or memory), but they are not always pertinent or necessarily illuminating. The new edition will attempt to preserve, enhance, and bibliographically update those references that have specific historical, religious, and political relevance or that identify an important literary influence. For example, in "Ane Ballat Declaring the Nobill and Gude Inclination of our King," the poet quotes almost directly from Sir David Lyndsay's *Papyngo*: "Ane King at euin, with Sceptur, Sword, & Crown, / At morne bot ane deformit lumpe of clay" (III.6-7). The poet thus describes a contemporary event, the murder of Darnley, by alluding to a crucial episode of Scottish history through Lyndsay's *Papyngo*: the defeat of James III, overthrown in 1488 in a *coup* led by his son and heir, the future James IV. Importantly, all cross-references in the new edition would be made to more recent critical editions of authors like Lyndsay. Cranstoun's notes also occasionally duplicate the function of his glossary, and, except where meaning or etymology has a notable impact on a reading of the text, I would prefer to let the glossary serve its intended purpose, updating it, of course, with *DOST*. Absolutely crucial to making this material useful to scholars, however, is the historical and political information provided in the notes, and the new edition will rely heavily on Cranstoun's substantial foundation, incorporating new discoveries wherever possible. The result of all of these decisions will be, I hope, a more coherent set of poetic and prose satires, written by Scottish authors about a specific set of religious and political disputes, between James VI's coronation and the end of his minority.

I conclude by considering the word *literature* in the title of the new edition. A few critics have observed how literary tradition informs these satirical pieces: learned references to native and continental authors, adoption of literary forms. But does this make them *literature*, does this give them aesthetic value? My attempted, if evasive answer, is this: I am convinced that the authors of these satirical pieces are using meter, fictions, and familiar literary genres for a reason, and their calculated transformations of these forms are crucial to the quarrels of this historical moment. To the extent possible, these shared characteristics and strategies have informed my editorial decisions. David Parkinson makes an astute observation:

the Scottish readers of satire have learned to scan stylistic oppositions for their political import. The durable repertoire of

sixteenth-century Scottish literature – dream, flyting, petition and complaint, the eldritch tale – is liable to be read most attentively at the overlay between contrasting categories—high and low, courtly and homely, fear and laughter, polemic and testimony.<sup>13</sup>

An example from the “Dialogue of the Twa Wyfeis” illustrates this point. The “Dialogue” operates under the fiction that a concealed listener overhears and reports an ale-house conversation between two wives who have just “sat down to the drink.” At the beginning, we find ourselves in an urban *chanson d’aventure*, and then, more specifically, at a gossips’ meeting. Just as William Dunbar’s *Twa Mariit Wemen and the Wedo* plays on our generic expectations, transforming a courtly garden scene into one of bawdy license, the author of the “Dialogue” – very likely thinking of Dunbar’s poem – trips us up: expecting to hear two Edinburgh wives talk about men and sex, we instead get clever political analysis and a scathing portrait of the Marian party. The source of the persuasive power is the abrasion between “stylistic opposition[s],” the unexpectedness of literary collisions, and, in fact, Parkinson’s “overlay between contrasting categories” may be too coincidental. Why choose the broadside ballad to justify the establishment of a new political and religious order in Scotland? Indeed, why choose a dream vision, a *chanson d’aventure*, or any meter at all? Because literary forms give persuasive and memorable force to political argument, teaching an interested audience, a nation of readers, how to read and understand events.<sup>14</sup> Entitle this body of literature what we will, these works of satire are inventive and smart and worth our attention still.

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<sup>13</sup> Parkinson, as in n. 2 above, p. 13.

<sup>14</sup> Parkinson has provocatively called this “a breed of poetry...that demands and creates an unusually interested audience” (24).