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Introduction: the Alabama Conference on Medieval & Renaissance Scottish Literature: Reframing and Mediation

Tricia A. McElroy
University of Alabama

David Parkinson
University of Saskatchewan

INTRODUCTION: THE ALABAMA CONFERENCE ON MEDIEVAL & RENAISSANCE SCOTTISH LITERATURE: REFRAMING AND MEDIATION

Tricia A. McElroy & David J. Parkinson

The four essays in this symposium derive from papers given in July 2021, for the 16th International Conference on Medieval and Renaissance Scottish Literature and Language, hosted by the University of Alabama.[1] The conference was organized around a general theme of "Crossing Boundaries, Making Connections." As the original call for papers in 2019 observed, we live in a time when boundaries literal and conceptual continue to be sites of contention and negotiation. What was evident then had become prevalent by 2021. The Covid pandemic certainly altered the format in which scholars connect with each other at academic conferences, but it also threw these broader issues into stark relief. Making meaningful connections is challenging but more important than ever.

   The triennial International Conference on Medieval and Renaissance Scottish Literature and Language, which first met in Edinburgh in 1975, continues to thrive by forging new connections and honoring longstanding ones. Its relationship with *Studies in Scottish Literature*, for example, dates to 1990, when the sixth ICMRSLL met at the University of South Carolina, with its papers published as *SSL*, vol. 26 (1992). Our thanks go to Patrick Scott, who had worked with Ross Roy on the South Carolina conference and volume, and Tony Jarrells, joint editor, for this opportunity to reaffirm the productive relationship between the ICMRSLL and *SSL,* on the occasion of the conference returning to the United States for the first time since 1990.

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The four papers from Alabama presented here share an interest in what has long been regarded as the heartland of Older Scots studies, from the mid 15th to early 16th centuries. By focusing on some relatively neglected texts and contexts, these papers expand our understanding of the vitality of this

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[1] The conference at Alabama, planned for 2020 but postponed due to Covid, took place in hyrbrid format the following year. On the history of the conference, and future plans, see: https://icmrsll.org/dir/.

culturally rich phase. They draw attention to the suppleness with which Older Scots and neighboring literary texts could be employed as instruments of persuasion, affiliation, and perspective.

This set of papers opens with Katherine Terrell's paper on mapping in the 15th-century *Buik of King Alexander the Conquerour*. Alexander returns from an aerial survey of the known world and creates a medieval *mappaemundi*, a visualization and inscription of his empire, present and potential. Terrell shows how the poem plays with spatial perspectives, tantalizingly extending territorial possibilities and, at the same time, hinting at limits on the human capacity to claim and retain power. Thus, Alexander's map not only asserts prerogative and ambition, but also betrays anxiety about the success of further conquests. At the end of the poem, Britain appears at the edge of the world, beyond the reach of Alexander, widening the geographical and historical scope of the poem and provocatively shifting its center to the west of Alexander's empire.

In the second paper, Janet Hadley Williams offers a close analysis of an early 16th-century political poem, a shrewdly constructed petition sent into France that foregrounds the political needs of Scotland. In "We lordis hes chosin a chiftane mervellus," the writer, speaking on behalf of the Scottish lords of council, urges the duke of Albany to leave France and return to Scotland, where he must resume his duties as governor during James V's minority. Opinion about Albany's leadership varied, but his lengthy absence allowed political instability to flourish. At first glance, the poem reads as an obscure if earnest petition, but Hadley Williams's detective work transforms the poem into an urgent and highly specific instance of effective political discourse in Scots. She demonstrates the linguistic and rhetorical skill with which the writer negotiates international borders, beseeching Albany to return but warning that he cannot presume to have unqualified support at home—that is, at the political center where he is needed.

Where Hadley Williams finds both encouragement and caution in the poem to Albany, the third paper looks south to identify a way in which literary writing partakes in the devising of claims of sovereignty. The mid 15th-century English chronicler John Harding attempts to control Scottish history by rewriting it. In her comparative source study, Ryoko Harikae investigates how Hardyng's *Chronicle* mines Scottish history to buttress the argument for English overlordship of Scotland. Specifically, Hardyng appropriates Scottish dynastic genealogy through strategic sampling and suppression of matrilineal connections. Matrilineality, it would appear, needs to be controlled and contained lest it result in the discovery of a rival kingdom's greater right. Through selective use of source material and outright forgery of documentary evidence, Hardyng relies on a female narrative of descent and succession and, at the same time, the male

prerogative to modify that lineage, all to prove England's right to rule Scotland.

The final paper in this symposium returns to Scotland, when Roderick Lyall unravels an elusive network of connections between the Celtic and Continental past in the 15th-century Aberdeen Candlemas play. Considering the shared strands thus far identified here, Lyall's document-driven study of the Candlemas play may seem rather an outlier. From the perspective of Alexander's *mappaemundi*, that would seem to be a very Scottish place to occupy! Yet, in the wonderful way that juxtaposition can be serendipitously illuminating, other connections begin to materialize. In the absence of surviving texts, Lyall asks what two character lists and meager guild records can tell us about the dramatic nature of the play and the cultural work it might have performed. With the prominence of the Three Kings—strongly associated with Cologne, a destination for Scottish students and merchants—Lyall identifies possible lineages of the play both scholarly and commercial. When he extends his sleuthing to the presence in the play of St. Helen and St. Brigid, he introduces a different kind of matrilineality than we saw previously, with these female saints enabling a celebration of Scotland's royal and saintly Celtic roots.

These papers, in their interests and methods, may at first seem divergent, apart from their evident gestures to the conference theme of "crossing boundaries." Yet, those gestures begin to coalesce more powerfully in what appears to be a political and cultural centering of Scotland among its neighbors, geographical and conceptual. We encounter a play of perspective, much like Alexander's experience, surveying and articulating a complicated, interrelated world, zooming out to the vast but invariably landing back in the local.

From the global perspective of the *Buik of Alexander the Conqueror to* to a poetic reminder that Albany's proper place is in Scotland, from the irony of using Scottish genealogy to promote English superiority to the continental connections of an Aberdeen guild play, all four papers present a world of shifting, malleable boundaries, with Scotland repeatedly inserted into international narratives as a political and literary entity worthy of note. It is fitting that the symposium concludes with the Aberdeen Candlemas play, where we can imagine multiple sources across time and space animating this Scottish ritual performance and making Aberdeen a site where biblical, Continental, and Celtic traditions converge.

University of Alabama
University of Saskatchewan