The inlegebill scribling of my imprompt pen: the production and circulation of literary miscellany manuscripts in Jacobean Scotland, c. 1580-c.1630


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Abstract

This thesis investigates the textual culture of early modern Scotland, as evident from three literary miscellany manuscripts produced and circulated in the late-sixteenth and early-seventeenth centuries. Each of the main three chapters will consider one miscellany manuscript in its complex totality, dealing with questions of provenance, ownership, editorial history, literary analysis, and an assessment of the manuscript in its wider cultural context. Manuscript transcriptions are appended, particularly since the contents of two out of three of the miscellanies discussed here have never been printed.

Chapter One, by way of introduction, considers the current state of manuscript research in Scotland, and the implications for Scottish studies of book-historical methodologies. ‘Histories of the Book’ are currently being written across Europe (and further afield), and Scotland forms no exception. Against this backdrop, Chapter One evaluates recent critical work on early modern Scottish textual culture, and the extent to which book-historical narratives, developed in relation to medieval and renaissance English literature, can be applied to Scottish writing. More specifically, this chapter locates the miscellany manuscript as a prime site of investigation for scribal culture.

The first miscellany under investigation, in Chapter Two, is Edinburgh University Library MS Laing III.447. For the largest part, the content of this manuscript has been printed, as a supplementary volume to the works of Alexander Montgomerie. This print is problematic in many respects, however, since it reorganised the entire content, and removed from its immediate context the longest poem of the manuscript, Montgomerie’s The Cherrie and the Slae. The appended transcription restores the original order. Chapter Two will investigate the contributions of the many scribes that were responsible for the manuscript, and examine whether any thematic coherence may be detected.

Chapter Three deals with Cambridge University Library MS Kk.5.30, a hybrid manuscript that contains two sections. Section one (dating to the late-fifteenth, early-sixteenth century) features a transcription of John Lydgate’s Middle English Troy Book; section two consists of a later supply (c. 1612) by James Murray of Tibbermuir, containing additions to the Troy Book and twenty-seven miscellaneous poems. Though this latter section will be the main focus of the chapter, the manuscript’s other section, and its hybridity, will not be ignored.

The third and final miscellany to be discussed is National Library of Scotland MS 15937. Containing approximately 175 items (many of which from English sources), it the most expansive of the three manuscripts considered here. MS 15937 is textually a problematic source, since it is a nineteenth-century transcript of a lost original, latter compiled by Margaret Robertson of Lude around 1630. This miscellany is an important witness also in musical terms, since it collects the words to a significant amount of Scottish and English songs, many of them unique to the manuscript.

All chapters will stress the highly idiosyncratic nature of the miscellanies, but also, where possible, establish common ground between them, and connect them to other Scottish and English manuscripts and printed books. In all their complexity, the miscellanies reveal a literary culture whose nature undermines the monolithic and court-centred history that has been so prevalent in literary criticism (though the court, and courtly writing, are important backgrounds to a great deal of the poetry contained manuscripts). Finally, as underlined in the concluding Chapter Five, EUL Laing III.447, CUL MS Kk.5.30, and NLS MS 15937 are important collections both for the preservation, and for evidence about the dissemination, of Scottish and English verse.
The Voynich Manuscript is a mysterious document that is kept in Yale University's Beinecke Rare Book Library. It is made up of 246 vellum pages of the original 262. The document is an unassuming 7 inches by 10 inches. At first glance, one may assume that it is simply an old document, written in a language that they cannot understand, and they would be right, in a way. The Voynich Manuscript is named for the American rare book collector and dealer who found the document. His name was Wilfred M. Voynich. Wilfred found the document in a Jesuit College just outside of Rome in 1912. The Voynich Manuscript had been documented and attempts made at discovering its origin before then. However, it had slipped out of history. Voynich brought it into the modern public eye.