By Poetic Authority is one of the first, most comprehensive, and detailed studies on panegyric codes in Scottish Gaelic poetry. In this book, author M. Pia Coira systematically examines an impressive range of poetry by both highly trained filidh and the more amateur vernacular poets across the medieval and early modern era. Initially Coira's objective in this work seems to be to compile and dissect instances of panegyric language that supports the authority of its subjects in Scotland, however her conclusion takes a turn to reveal a symbiotic relation between the poets and their subjects. Coira's work sets a new standard for research on the topic and provides a basis for further studies.

In the first two chapters, Coira provides a brief historical and literary discussion on court poetry. She later builds on this context through both compiling and analysing instances of panegyric motifs in poems whose subjects are from several of the long standing noble Scottish kin groups, Normanised Gaelic patrons, and finally the kings of Scotland. Each chapter is methodically laid out, beginning with background and genealogical information on the kin group and then splitting into cadet branches of the main kin groups. The chapters on Normanised patrons and kings follow suit. Within each subject group, Coira discusses early classical verse, mostly written by filidh and following the Irish panegyric code to some degree, then focuses on subsequent vernacular poetry, which fits within what Coira defines as a 'later model' of the panegyric code.
Coira admits to potential pitfalls in some sources; some manuscripts remain anonymous or sections were lost over time while others were re-written several centuries after their original creation. All of these factors could potentially alter the language and meaning of the source. However, Coira's experience with the subject allows her to acknowledge these obstacles and move past them by dismissing the exceptional cases as oddities or else artfully finding a place for them within her argument where they can best support her conclusions.

Coira's discussion reveals that the motifs found in Scottish Gaelic poetry reflect the Irish panegyric code from which it originated, but at the same time the motifs are silenced or re-worked in both early and later models so that the poems suited the contemporary social and political climate in which the authors and subjects lived. Coira argues that the use and adaptation of motifs also pointed to successful and non-confrontational Normanisation of Gaelic Scotland (pp. 344). Coira's conclusions logically flow from her prolific volume of supporting evidence but overall, this reader would like to see more discourse and argument, perhaps even a discussion on contemporary alternative views or addressing a void in research on the topic.

Coira's closing remark raises an interesting point that is explored throughout the book but is not as clearly defined as the majority of her main points and conclusions. Asserting “so we have it from poetic authority” (pp. 344) challenges the reader to consider whether the purpose of the book was to demonstrate the authority held by the poets to validate their subjects or to demonstrate the authority held by the subjects which is validated by the poets. It appears that, to some extent, the authority and validation works both ways. This is the backbone of Coira's argument and fleshes out a symbiotic relationship between poet and subject: a relationship which degraded with Normanisation and the decline of Gaelic.
One of the most valuable aspects of this book are the accompanying appendices. Coira provides several excerpts of poetry throughout the body of her work, but her first appendix provides one of the sampled poems in full, along with translation and notes on authorship, the language used and the style and metre of the poem. This is particularly useful to readers with knowledge of the Scottish Gaelic language as the entire length of the poem allows the reader to see and hear the lyrical quality of a poem written by a file. The second and third appendices are glossaries of the panegyric code motifs and a list of poems sorted by the subject for whom they were written. These appendices are effective reference tools to quickly locate concise descriptions of motifs and locate poems by subject.

In all, this book is an excellent resource for scholars of Gaelic poetry. Although it is a study that assumes prior knowledge of Scottish history and literature, it can also serve as an anthology of medieval and early modern Scottish poetry, which can be of great use to students who are new to the topic. The flow of the book does feel marred by repetition at times but it is this very systematic and repetitive approach, in combination with highly useful appendices, that makes this book accessible and authoritative.

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