

Fighting Words: Duelling at the Bounds of Class and Culture in Walter Scott's Scotland*

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ABSTRACT

The Edinburgh of the 1820s saw a change in social order and the cultural modes that policed it. Private adjustment of quarrels through duelling (which had increased at this time of tension) stood against a greater emphasis on the law, and a negotiation of rivalries in a burgeoning and politicized popular press. Walter Scott, with his historical and conservative sensibility, stood at the centre of this change, and often is considered to have been on the side of the past and its mythicized practices. This article focuses on three encounters between 1818 and 1821—one between James Hogg and a Glasgow editor, one between John Gibson Lockhart of *Blackwood's* and John Scott of the *London Magazine*, and the third between James Stuart of Dunearn and Sir Alexander Boswell (writing for the *Glasgow Sentinel*). From these cases, and in the context of *Ivanhoe*, the article contends that Walter Scott understood the duel as a form of discourse, with all the uncertainties, opportunities and difficulties that this might entail.

KEYWORDS: Walter Scott, James Hogg, John Gibson Lockhart, John Scott, James Stuart of Dunearn, Alexander Boswell, duel, Scotland, newspaper, law, discourse, *Ivanhoe*, *Blackwood's*, *Glasgow Sentinel*, *Beacon*, *London Magazine*

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About seven a.m. on 23 May 1818, James Hogg burst in upon Walter Scott to declare: “Odd Scott here’s twae fo’k’s come frae Glasgow to provoke *mey* to fight a duel” (W. Scott, *Letters* 5: 155).¹ Hogg had locked the two belligerent gentlemen in his room, sent the maid for the police, and run to Scott’s house. Scott noted the obvious: Hogg had already decided whether to fight or flee. Now the Ettrick Shepherd’s recourse should be to the law. But the law proved ineffective. Delivering a challenge was at once a gentlemanly and an oblique exchange. Thus Hogg’s report to the police detailed only terms that, as Scott wrote, “might as well imply an invitation to a dinner as to a battle” (5: 156). Unable to enlist the law on his side, Hogg then “took the wings of the morning and fled to his cottage at Altrive” (5: 156). Scott concluded, laughing: “Now although I do not hold valour to be an essential article in the composition of a man like Hogg yet I heartily wish he could have prevaild on himself to swagger a little” (5: 156).

This moment, with its tragic potential and comic effect, shows how Hogg and Scott understood the contemporary duel, which even at this late date purported to arbitrate disputes—if only among a favoured elite. To Ian Duncan, “Scott clearly relishes the episode’s incongruities of social pretension—these brawls annihilate whatever gentlemanly status they are meant to defend”; at the same time, Scott’s account advertises that he himself belongs “to gentlemanly society rather than a mob of scribblers” (151). The argument here goes further. These two dealers in words put a ritual behaviour under pressure as discourse. Hogg recognizes the signs, but fails to conform to their system; Scott wishes he would, but only because Hogg’s predicament is part of a practice that itself is largely performance. As Scott explained, “Mr. Blackwoods Magazine had been very severe upon a certain Mr. Douglas a blackguard Writer² who conducts an equally blackguard Whig paper in Glasgow calld The Chronicle” (*Letters* 5: 154). Douglas had horsewhipped the Tory Blackwood; Blackwood enlisted Hogg as back-up, and attempted to return the compliment; Douglas, declaring Blackwood worsted once again, seized the power of the press to mock Blackwood’s witness as “a man having the appearance of a shop-porter” (*Glasgow Chronicle* 1127: 2). Hogg replied in print—as Scott has it, “*de haut en bas*” (“from high to low”)—comparing Douglas to a waiter, and thus found himself being baited into a challenge by Douglas’s associates (*Glasgow*

¹ Walter Scott to the Duke of Buccleuch, 25 May 1818; *Letters* 5: 153-58.

² A Scottish Writer to the Signet is a lawyer/solicitor.

Chronicle 1128: 2; W. Scott, *Letters* 5: 155). If Hogg had only swaggered, Scott thought, “the Glasgow Chronicler might have fled the first for by all accounts Mr. D. is of that pacific disposition that gives way before a Barbary hen when she turns back her feathers with a show of resistance” (*Letters* 5: 156). Together James Hogg, notoriously of uncertain status, and the astute Author of *Waverley* reveal that the duel is a social strategy.

Of course, insofar as it is a strategy, duelling brings social positioning into question. It involves a posturing that is inevitably parodic, and that undermines any fixed notions of valour, honour or worth. For Scott, awareness of this perversity would increase. Richard Cronin argues that “no writer of the period took a greater interest in the topic [of duelling],” and certainly single combat, in its many modes, pervades Scott’s works (203). Hogg’s *rencontre*, indeed, was followed by *Ivanhoe* (1819 [dated 1820]). This text, perhaps perversely, seems to give straightforward consideration to single combat. Quickly turning to comedy, Hogg’s 1818 debacle had opened space for a contrastive expression of ideals. Thus, the staged tournaments of *Ivanhoe* culminate neither in comedy nor in death at the hand of an adversary. Rather, God intervenes directly. In trial by combat, though *Ivanhoe*’s horse goes down, the villain topples, spontaneously defunct, from his saddle. “Heaven,” declares *Ivanhoe*, “hath taken this proud man for its victim” (W. Scott, *Ivanhoe* 392). Single combat is historicized, but here it is unproblematized. Its numinous assumptions remain unquestioned when the field of battle is so visibly the proving ground for transcendent “truth.” *Ivanhoe*, however, gives way to the gambling and calculating that cheapen the duels of *The Fortunes of Nigel* (1822), set in the reign of James VI and I. These yield to the botched brawls that bedevil the old town and modern spa in *St. Ronan’s Well* (1824). Now, sport turns serious and a comedy of tawdry manners verges toward madness, degradation and death. During the intervening years, the strutting and strategy of contemporary single combat had turned darkly productive. Scott had seen what began as social ritual turn to comedy but produce personal tragedy. Duelling, he realized, did more than undermine notions of valour, honour, worth. It could make those concepts redundant. Still, until death intervened, the contest of Scott’s day seemed one of words and of relative, not absolute, value.

In the past, duelling had been supposed to trump most other forms of valuation—although not solely in the fatal manner we might expect. Like tournament, its antecedent, it was restricted to aristocrats and marked them as

above the debates of the law and the opinions of common folk. A private duel took place between equals, demonstrated their equality, and maintained the elite in a closed system where they enjoyed uninterrogated public status. It did not matter who was right, who won, or that justice was seen to be done. It did not even matter if the duel was actually fought. Donna T. Andrew notes that during the period of our concern, “the willingness to fight a duel, as well as the recognition of being a person who was ‘challenge-able’ defined, in great part, what it meant to be a gentleman” (415). Even the apology that could make a duel unnecessary participated in and thus affirmed a closed system that was more discursive than active. James Boswell, having inadvertently insulted someone and suffered their reply, offered satisfaction but was willing to take it in the form of a mutual apology: “Will you be good enough to apologize to me before the company?” he asked, hastily making clear that “I will apologize to you first” (309). Whether by mutual assault or apology, insult was satisfied by enacting an equation between elite players, out of the general public’s eye.

The early nineteenth-century insistence on equality between aristocrats through the enactment of the duel, however, manifested a new social unease.³ Mark Schoenfield notes that in 1824, “claims and counterclaims about status . . . disclosed instability and anxiety regarding the social and economic construction of the gentleman.” That one had to have status to participate in a duel, and that participation in turn ratified status, points to what such a closed system seeks to ignore: its permeability. Moreover, because duelling was supposed to ratify status, one might duel to gain social capital—no matter how many rule books sought to exclude upstarts from the practice.⁴ Consequently, duelling increased as eighteenth-century European aristocrats felt their positions tremble—and it increased among those climbing socially as well (Kiernan 187-88, 196-98). It grew to the extent that *The Duellist* of 1822 explicitly aimed to rein in a practice “no longer . . . confined to the military and superior classes of society” (vi). Duelling had become not so much an expression of class, and more “an acid test of the self-made gentleman” (Kiernan 54).

By the early nineteenth century, then, astute readers of cultural processes could see that duelling, with its obsessively asserted ritual behaviours, implied

³ Markley sees in late eighteenth-century duelling “the desperate survival strategy of an embattled upper class, a class frantically attempting to stem the tide of social change” (167).

⁴ For instance, *The British Code of Duel: A Reference to the Laws of Honour and the Character of Gentleman* (London: Knight and Lacey, 1824), critiqued in *The Westminster Review* 4 (July 1825): 20-32.

contingent positions. For them, duelling was outed as the power play that is discourse. This encouraged the parodic encounter between Douglas and Hogg. It also provided opportunities for that virtuoso dealer in words, Walter Scott. Thus, even for *Ivanhoe*, campaigns in the Holy Land and tournaments at home stand subject to dubious reporting and debate (W. Scott, *Ivanhoe* 50). Indeed, *Ivanhoe* persistently suffers in the battle even as he wins the war for status. In this context, the belated intervention of “God” in the Templar’s fall only further undermines the idea of victory as “truth.” And in Walter Scott’s Scotland—a society now privileging the words of the law and the press—the fact that discourse was dominant caused problems all around.

Typically, the 1820s are considered the turning point when duelling gave way to the law, with its purported objectivity (Andrew 421). In 1822, *The Duellist* meets the moment in those terms: “The dark ages of ignorance and superstition, the romantic absurdities of chivalry are gone by,” it declaims; “[s]hall the country, upon which the glorious orb of science and improvement now shines . . . continue to practice and to justify a barbarous usage? No” (166). The press, too, played a role, for here duelling’s terms and meanings could be scrutinized by the larger community. Yet if law and the press challenged the duel, showing it to be a ritualized discourse in no way above the jurisdiction of the courts or even popular opinion, to do so they presumed upon their own status as privileged discourses able to identify truth. And the law, of course, had not been able to help James Hogg. That is, the collapse of duelling through its manifestations as appropriate social discourse implicated these new systems of classification as well. As discourses themselves, law and the press were part of the problem, not the solution.

Scott, as both author and lawyer, understood that discourses were linked and none were reliable. In life, you had to play the game—to swagger a little—or slip sideways out of it, if you could. Still with law, literature, and the duel all playing through one another as discourse—with Hogg unable to make his case visible to law, or the law unable to gain purchase on a story superficially comic—the tale might take a problematic turn. A game played across the competing discourses of law and the press by way of politics, through the inescapability of literary mediation (which increasingly appeared in print), and with the ever-present risk of pistols at dawn, was an impossible game to win. It was a lesson Scott would learn more fully through experience.

At stake in the obsessive elitism of duelling, the ponderous progress of the law, and the unpredictable exchanges of the press was the competition between a private determination of public status, and the public denomination of private status. This is evident in the fact that among Scots, with their power shifted to London, and their status uncertain, duels often were fought over “naming.”⁵ Family name held meaning within rarefied discourses where it hardly needed to be spoken, but could be asserted through the exchanges of the duel—as in *Ivanhoe*, where the “disinherited knight” regains name and family through victory in staged combat. Patrick Murphy notes that “the satisfaction of the duel may be seen as the simple substitution of the concrete for the abstract, people’s bodies for their public or interpersonal identity” (625). One’s good name could not, however, be taken for granted when it was circulated as gossip in an increasingly commercial culture (as in *St. Ronan’s Well*) or, worse still, was trafficked in print.

Being named as a private person in any public forum was inherently devaluative. Thus the press, which is supposed to have directed the shaming light of publicity onto the duel and pushed it into decline, actually increased the anxieties of identity that duelling was designed to evade. In the press, moreover, the degradations of publicity were exacerbated by party politics. In Britain, Whigs and Tories each sought to appropriate the power of this new mass medium. They deployed that power by naming their opponents in no flattering terms—as the Tory J. G. Lockhart named John Ramsay McCulloch, editor of *Blackwood’s* whiggish rival, the *Scotsman* newspaper, in July 1820. In relentless doggerel, Lockhart (as “Doctor Scott”) ran on: “The Galovegian Stot (I mean Macculloch) / I knew your nose the monster’s progress track would, / I knew you’d find a blinker for the Bullock, / And for his cloven hoof a clog of black wood” (“Testimonium” iv).

Walter Scott had not worried too much about Hogg and Douglas—the Shepherd and the lowly Glasgow editor lacked the status for more than mutual insult and low comedy. Lockhart, however, holding name and relation—or a name through his relations with Scott—posed more of a problem. Scott duly pointed out to his new son-in-law that “[i]f M’Culloch were to parade you upon the score of stanza xiii [request a duel], I do not see how you could decline his

⁵ See Baldick; Allen and Reed; and Kiernan for the broader principles and their international operation. Cronin speculates that “citizens of nations bound in unequal partnership with England were more likely to prove . . . ‘exceedingly tender’ if their gentlemanly status was called into question” (13).

meeting, as you make the man your equal . . . when you condescend to insult him by name” (*Letters* 6: 241). Lockhart perhaps had put himself into danger. Interestingly, however, in this moment Scott dwells on the fact that Lockhart had endangered his status by trading names with an inferior in politics and in print. Personal insult now ran rife in a discursive system of politicized journalism that promised no sure outcomes and that, indeed, could not even appear to close.

Worse, the actuality of print gave authority to insult. Scott embraced anonymity as the “Author of *Waverley*”; in *The Fortunes of Nigel*, he would impugn the authority of the author—a mere post-man—and the text—declaring that “the public [is not] obliged to read books merely because they are printed” (W. Scott, *Nigel* 9, 16). But all is relative. Cronin notes the “semi-permanence” of magazine publication, as opposed to the newspaper (139), and magazine publication had taken off in an Edinburgh press that, as he points out, was now operating at industrial pace and on a national scale (13-14, 79). A burgeoning magazine trade devolved and circulated “personalities” as it went. Now it was increasingly difficult to ignore the public degradation of one’s private self.

But law provided no recourse, as Scott the lawyer surely knew. Turning to it would confirm that truth—and personal worth—were not self-evident. The courts offered only a longer-drawn-out public embarrassment. Consequently, sensitive Scots turned back to the duel—as if it could close down discussion of their status. But in the age of mass media, one might win the duel, yet have to fight the war of words all over again. Whatever the outcome of a meeting, it no longer held the power to affirm identity. Rights and wrongs, the merits and demerits of the participants would still—and perhaps even more—pass through the court of public opinion. For nineteenth-century Scots obsessed with privacy but bound to publicity, there was no exit into assured identity.

The manoeuvrings between John Scott, Aberdonian editor of the *London Magazine*, and representatives of *Blackwood’s* make clear what was at stake—personal status in public discourse—and the impossibility of achieving it even through a duel, when that duel was necessarily enacted in a press producing in overdrive.⁶ And again, Walter Scott stood close to the parties and issues involved. The *London*, reinstated in January 1820, took as its goal “the Principles of sound Philosophy in Questions of Taste, Morals, and Politics”—

⁶ For a careful rehearsal of issues, events and players, see Grierson’s note in W. Scott, *Letters* 6: 348n1, and O’Leary.

against the example of *Blackwood's* (1: iv). In January 1819, the editor was grouching: "I have seen two Nos of Blackwood's Magazine—and from them can sufficiently judge of the whole. . . . some one had said . . . that *I* had written the scandalous articles on [Leigh] Hunt! Articles which I read with disgust and abhorrence" (qtd. in Jones 605). Whether motivated by Lockhart's attack on McCulloch,⁷ his own investment in "sound Philosophy," or the fact that the *Blackwood's* crew seems not to have embraced him as an equal in Edinburgh (*London* 5: 497),⁸ by November of that year John Scott went on to attack the Tory magazine outright. He particularly critiqued *Blackwood's* habit of levelling praise and blame alike—often at the same people—in personal terms and under the veil of anonymity and multiple authorship.⁹ Unmoved by *Blackwood's* pretensions to comic discourse, the *London* editor saw here a "mystification . . . for dishonest purposes, and under cowardly motives" (*London* 11: 513).¹⁰

John Scott had claimed the moral high ground in the cause of truth and the "honour of the literature of the present day" (*London* 11: 515). But eschewing mystification, and not at all playful, the *London's* own remarks turned increasingly personal. Scott would prefer not "to interfere at all with Mr. Blackwood's notorious publication," but to leave it to its ungentlemanly practices of setting off "a second edition . . . against a caning received"—a direct reference to the Douglas affair (*London* 11: 510). Indeed, behind William Blackwood's "Maga," John Scott impugned its most famous associate, Walter Scott. The editor marks the territory of national and personal honour: "Scotland owes [Scott] much; but surely he does not owe less to Scotland" (11: 518). Sir Walter should be a model. However, as the uncredited and unacknowledged—yet widely suspected—"Author of Waverley," he has modelled anonymity and irresponsibility.

Naming, that is, was now to the fore: *Blackwood's* writers "forge letters, bearing well-known names," John Scott complained (*London Magazine* 11: 520). In response, truth requires identification, responsibility—and brings about the degradation of the perpetrators in the press. If Walter Scott's name

⁷ Jones infers that John Scott met McCulloch in Edinburgh in summer 1820, and took on his fellow Whig editor's anger (606-07).

⁸ *The London Magazine* Volume 1 runs January to June in 1820, Volume 2 July to December in 1820, and Volume 3 January to June in 1821. This citation is quoted from vol. 1. See also Murphy 637.

⁹ See Cronin 39-58 for discussion of "personality" and the private and public.

¹⁰ *London Magazine*, vol. 2, no. 11 (November 1820).

were similarly “employed, and private circumstances be taken advantage of” in *Blackwood’s*, John Scott asks, is he “prepared to see this done . . . without complaining”? (11: 520) And the editor pointed to his magazine’s righteous strategy of outing *Blackwoodians*. The November issue of the *London* leads with words direct from “The Lion’s Head” (11: 476). “Why is THE LION of *the London* proud? . . . For himself, he is neither a prophet, nor the son of a prophet”—a sideswipe at Lockhart as Walter Scott’s son-in-law. But the *London* has breathed in the spirit of prophecy nonetheless, for “a new Number of the *smoked* Publication [*Blackwood’s*] has just come to hand—strong as *kipper* . . . and there we find . . . all that [the Lion] anticipated the *Reekie* folk would certainly do” (476). Lockhart’s insults against London’s publishing community—the “Cockneys”—have only increased: the “Soot-bags” of *Reekie* are at it again, for “[t]he Fortunate Youth seems to improve at Abbotsford” (Walter Scott’s house) (476). Lockhart is coming into the line of fire.

By December, the attack became direct. Now John Scott presumed to defend James Hogg, in whom the roles of shepherd/poet/Tory to Scott seemed perplexingly combined. Scott challenged *Blackwood’s* supposed depredations on Hogg’s name and reputation (*London* 12: 666-85).¹¹ But the “INFAMOUS SCOTCH HOAX” is brought home to “that great master of *design*, John Gibson Lockart [sic], Esq.,” outed by name and by notoriety as “EMPEROR OF THE MOHAWKS!” (666). Scott, moreover, energetically assembled and exposed the range of *Blackwood’s* pseudonyms that he attributed to the Author of Waverley’s son-in-law—from “Peter Morris” to (incorrectly) “Christopher North” (12: 675-76). “Articles have lately issued from under the roof of Abbotsford,” he concluded, “that do no credit to the place; and the scraps that fall from the Baronet’s table, become sadly changed in odour when they have passed, through ‘certain strainers,’ into that common *cloaca* Blackwood’s Magazine” (12: 685). In a climate of anonymity—an anonymity that maintained gentlemanly privacy, whatever other nefarious practices it allowed—a few months of general insult drew a bead on the man John Scott held to be the editor of *Blackwood’s*.

Walter Scott, notably, though frequently named, said nothing. But Lockhart, a lesser figure, refused to be so specified. In the January 1821 number, John Scott fulminated: “We have been told that Mr. JOHN GIBSON LOCKART [sic] . . . has given it under his hand, that *he is not the Editor of the Magazine*”

¹¹ *London Magazine*, vol. 2, no. 12 (December 1820).

(*London* 13: 77).¹² Scott proceeded to give Lockhart the lie direct—that according to the code of duelling stood as a direct invitation to a challenge.¹³ “The people of Edinburgh are not surprised at this denial,” he declared. “it is well known there that *Doctor Morris*, under the assumed name of Christopher North, is the Editor of the work, and the author of its most malignant articles!” (*London* 13: 77). Outraged in turn, Lockhart required Scott to own up to his authorship and attacks on him, John Gibson Lockhart. Scott, who had posted his January thoughts, uncredited, as “Town Conversation,” held out until Lockhart would acknowledge his role at *Blackwood’s*. Lockhart refused, on the grounds that the man who insulted him had no right to know; the issue was who had insulted Lockhart, not whether they had justification for their words. Scott insisted on his right to determine his action according to whether Lockhart was a “gentleman, assailed in his honourable feelings by an indecent use of his name in print; or as a *professional scandal-monger*, who had long profited by a fraudulent and cowardly concealment; and who was only now driven to a measure of tardy hardihood, by being suddenly confronted with entire exposure” (J. Scott 3). And so it went. The two remained embroiled in a war of public words about privacy. Moreover, each presumed the other postured and prevaricated to avoid a duel.

Lockhart finally issued his invitation to a meeting on January 18. The stalemate about who would own up to what nonetheless continued until Lockhart posted Scott on the grounds of his avoidance and seeming cowardice. “Mr. Lockhart, in consequence of Mr. Scott’s having refused to act towards him according to the rules by which gentlemen are accustomed to regulate their conduct, thinks it necessary to inform Mr. Scott that he, Mr. Lockhart, considers *him* as a *liar* and a *scoundrel*” (Lockhart, “Statement” 3). Lockhart further expressed “that supreme contempt with which every gentleman must contemplate the utmost united baseness of falsehood and poltroonery” (3). These were fighting words.

Still, those words should have been the end of the matter. Walter Scott certainly hoped so. He wrote to his son Walter, at that time a cornet in the army, in joking but carefully diminishing terms that “Lockhart has had a foolish scrape with a blackguard who abused him in a London Magazine. . . . This cost

¹² *London Magazine*, vol. 3, no. 13 (January 1821).

¹³ Andrew categorizes “giving the lie” as “[t]he most serious affront” between gentlemen of the early eighteenth century, because it impugned “veracity, honesty or courage” (411). *The Duellist* recounted its practices in 1822 (see 7, 23 and footnotes in 116).

Don Giovanni a flying journey to London” (*Letters* 6: 348). Naming an opponent’s shame on the street corners forced matters into the most public, most degraded forum, and thus beyond recuperation. A “posted” opponent had fallen beneath the status required to fight a duel. To Lockhart, Scott obliquely yet trenchantly advised, “You have now to attend to the *paullo majora* [somewhat bigger things] and keep clear of magazine-mongers and scandal-jobbers in the future” (6: 354). A few days later he specified, “The Duke of Wellington whom I take to be the highest military authority in the world pronounces you can have nothing more to say to S S . . . Scoundrel Scott either by publication or otherwise” (6: 356). But John Scott, who Walter Scott was sure “will live on this affair for half a year which I dare say is all he wanted for for fighting he thought as much of flying,” was not benefiting from his namesake’s advice (6: 354). Caught in the discourse, and deaf to the silliness and perhaps also to the risk of the situation, he refused to concede, answering back that he considered Lockhart’s note to come “from the Editor of *Blackwood’s Magazine*” (Lockhart, “Statement” 3). When Lockhart’s further statement then explained his limited relation to *Blackwood’s* to the public¹⁴—information to which he had denied Scott’s right and which itself remains disingenuous—Scott published it, with comment.¹⁵ That brought on a duel with Lockhart’s second, Jonathan Christie. With Lockhart now silent, at last following his father-in-law’s advice, Christie himself pushed the war of words one utterance too far.

What made this straightforward matter of mutual recuperation of status, whether through apology or by means of pistols at dawn, so problematic for Lockhart and John Scott? Magazine editor though he was, Scott assumed that truth was involved, and should set at defiance all discourse. He imagined that the accuracy of his claim against Lockhart should determine proceedings. Lockhart held to the processes of the duel, as if that would assert the truth of his status. That is, Lockhart and Scott each presumed there was a truth beyond debate, while arguing through the press to assert that truth, and each held the duel in reserve as the ultimate expression of truth and their own personal worth. Duels, however, had nothing to do with truth or worth, which equally had a dubious relation with print. Ultimately, this duel was distanced even from John Gibson Lockhart—despite his obvious misdeeds. As Christie proved by

¹⁴ For the uncertain provenance of the added note, its timing and impact, see Jones 614-15.

¹⁵ For Lockhart’s levels of involvement with *Blackwood’s*, and where he hedged, see Jones 612-13.

fighting in his place, and John Scott proved by falling, neither players nor outcome—whatever the outcome—were the issue. What mattered was conforming to the discourse. And Walter Scott, too, was learning the unpredictability and power of that discourse. It was he who had encouraged Christie to send the objectionable note to John Scott's second. For all his attempts to stand apart, and to direct or close down speech, Scott too found himself ambushed by the discourse of the duel, the random effects of a ritual (W. Scott, *Letters* 7: 359n1).¹⁶

In fact, even the basic reality of this duel proved impossible to pin down, because whether an utterance in prose or as power, it subsisted both within and as language. John Scott and Lockhart invoke the code terms of “message” and “meeting” and dance around the truth value of an apology.¹⁷ Both parties in the press debated the gentlemanliness of the other. And when Scott fought Christie, he fell because he could not read the duel's signals, failing to parse Christie's subtle attempt to delope (to fire wide). His poignant words just before the second, fatal shot indicate the confusions of even an expression like gunfire within the discourses of the time: “What,” he quavered, “did not Mr Christie fire at me?” (*Edinburgh Magazine* 87: 283).¹⁸ So not surprisingly, at the trial following Scott's death, the realities of the exchange proved irrelevant. Christie bemusedly wrote to Lockhart: “It seems that we were not the men that fought the duel at all; they ran away as soon as the man was shot, & we good creatures happening to be walking by moonlight were attracted to the spot where the wretched man lay—humanely placed him on a shutter & carried him to the house” (*Letters to John Gibson Lockhart* 932: 19).¹⁹ In a perverse circumstance that expresses the difficulty of the entire situation, if anyone was held to blame, it was John Scott's second, for not understanding and explaining that Christie had deloped. He had overheard Christie's second advise him to “not throw away your advantage as you did last time,” but had considered it a private utterance, so had allowed the duel to continue.²⁰ Evidently, in the intersections of the law and the press over the duels of party politics, each showed itself to a significant degree as being discursive. Truth, Walter Scott was learning more and more,

¹⁶ Jonathan Christie to Walter Scott, undated.

¹⁷ Scott enlisted “the services of another friend, in case Mr. Lockhart's reply should be of a nature permitting a meeting” (J. Scott 6). Lockhart noted Scott had not authorized his second to receive a “message,” and thus determined Scott had no intention to duel (Lockhart, “Statement” 2).

¹⁸ *Edinburgh Magazine*, vol. 8, no. 87.

¹⁹ Jonathan Christie to J. G. Lockhart, 14 April 1821; National Library of Scotland manuscript.

²⁰ See Champneys 10-15; Lang 1: 275-76.

insofar as it was dependent on its modes of expression—even on pistol shots—could prove disturbingly unstable.

James Stuart of Duncarn found himself embroiled in the same confusion. In less than a year, this minor Whig politico involved himself in three exchanges that verged toward the duel, with the third achieving the event and putting an end to Sir Alexander Boswell. Again, the scene of insult was the popular press. And again, Scott had lessons to learn. The Tory *Beacon* (of which Scott was an invisible backer), appropriated the “language of truth” in its *Prospectus* to attack Stuart for attacking the government.²¹ He was “not fitted . . . for the prominent part which [he] has been desirous to fill” (1: 5), so the paper made him its butt. One throw-away insult particularly riled Stuart: when Queen Caroline, on the outs with her husband George IV, was rumoured to be about to visit Edinburgh, the paper jibed that none “above the rank of . . . Mr. James Stuart” would want to meet her (qtd. in *Trial* [Constable], Appendix 9). There followed two weeks of exchanges between Stuart and the printer of the *Beacon* in which Stuart sought the name of his libeller; Duncan Stevenson, the printer, referred him to the nominal editor,²² “Nimmo” (*Correspondence . . . Beacon* 4); the editor offered the name on condition that “you have no other intention than that of sending [the author] a message” (12). That is, Stevenson and “Nimmo” deployed the discourse of the duel (“a message”) while swerving back toward continued discussion. Stuart considered this a shuffling kind of behaviour and cautioned Stevenson regarding his “*perilous predicament*” (7). Stevenson invited Stuart to turn to law, as did others offended by the *Beacon*,²³ and invoked his right to “[adjust] the affair . . . in a gentleman-like manner”—but then expressed deflating bemusement at Stuart’s words about being “in a situation of *peril*” (19, 22). No duel ensued. Rather, Stuart lay in wait for Stevenson and delivered a blow that was supposed to deny him equal status. But Stuart was trounced by Stevenson who “returned [it] several times” (24).²⁴ Stevenson now turned belligerent on his own behalf, requiring “that [Stuart] will immediately give my friend Captain Campbell the address of any

²¹ See page 2 in “Prospectus,” and *Beacon* 1: 5.

²² Cline argues that behind Nimmo stood Douglas Cheape (13).

²³ *Report of the Trial by Jury of the Action of Damages for a Libel in the Beacon Newspaper; Lord Archibald Hamilton, against Duncan Stevenson, Printer in Edinburgh* (Edinburgh: John Robertson, 1822). Hamilton, another Whig, launched his case on 14 June 1821.

²⁴ *Correspondence . . . Beacon*, favourable to Stuart, claims that Stevenson “only once succeeded in hitting Stuart in the arm” (24); Stevenson’s version, printed in a hastily assembled and untitled response, gave a sympathetic account that declared Stevenson the winner (9).

gentleman you think proper, to arrange time and place for a meeting” (9).²⁵ Stuart, pulling rank, responded that this was “the consummation of your perversity and insolence” (*Correspondence . . . Beacon* 27). But Stevenson was a canny man: the mutual beating had obviated a duel, while the unmet challenge allowed him to post Stuart on Edinburgh’s street corners. In a triumph of discourse, through the processes but not the enactment of a duel, Stuart could now officially be named as a “Ruffian, a COWARD, and a Scoundrel” (10).

Stuart, however, like John Scott before him, was not done. In September he launched into correspondence with the Lord Advocate, Sir William Rae, who he had discovered to be a bondsman for the *Beacon*.²⁶ He began by inviting Rae to disavow the *Beacon*’s personal attacks (*Correspondence . . . Lord Advocate* 1-2). Rae replied that he played no part in running the paper, but stressed that “I disapprove, as much as you can, of all attacks upon private character in such publications” (5). Stuart wanted to go public with this disavowal (11-12). Rae agreed, but reluctantly, for the case might proceed to law (9-10, 13). Still, Stuart quibbled for days over the exact phrasing and meaning of their exchange. Eventually, the exasperated Lord Advocate hinted toward a rencontre in the courts, naming the lawyer: “Mr Colin Mackenzie [as] the friend with whom I have advised on this occasion; and, if any thing more is to be said, I have to request that it may be addressed to him” (21). Stuart then replied with his own status markers, belatedly claiming the potential to duel with Scotland’s top lawyer: “Had the interference of friends been required, the Honourable Admiral Fleming, and . . . my relation, Captain Alexander Gordon . . . agreed to honour me with their assistance” (22). After yet more letters, Stuart sidestepped both the law and the pursuit of arms. He printed the correspondence—and no duel took place.

Stuart might be considered to have won, since the bondsmen withdrew from the *Beacon*, forcing its cessation. The torch, however, was caught up by Glasgow’s Tory press. The *Sentinel* avowed in its first number, on 10 October 1821, “Truth shall be *our Beacon*” (1: 1). Notably, too, it drew a strong distinction between public and private: “The reputation and manners—the faults, the vices, and the misfortunes of the *private* man shall be held as sacred as our consciences; but the conduct and character of the *public* man we shall

²⁵ Quotations from National Library of Scotland Archives are by permission of the Trustees. Mf. (Ry.) available for re-use under Creative Commons (CC-BY) 4.0 International Licence. <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

²⁶ *Correspondence . . . Lord Advocate*.

esteem as much ours, as his own” (1). From that vantage, the paper continued to drub James Stuart, considering him “an active, every-where-busy, bustling Whig . . . a *publicised* character who courted notice” (*Trial* [Constable], Appendix 15). Gleefully, it repeated the *Beacon*’s calumny about the queen (*Sentinel* 1.1: 6).

As a result, Stuart sued. This gave occasion to new squibs and satires from contributors. A letter to the editor dated Dumbarton, December 17, 1821, pilloried Stuart as “a private individual [who has] hustled out of his element” and thus deserves “public ridicule” (*Trial* [Constable] 8).²⁷ It stressed that Stuart summoned the *Sentinel* to “lists where the winner gains no *honour*” (9). A “Whig Song” reviewed Stuart’s history in such encounters: he is “stot feeder Stuart, / Kent for that fat-cow—art” (7). The duel is specified as being irrelevant to someone of Stuart’s status and character. Another verse wrangles together law, the duel and the press, mocking the hardihood of the “knights o’ the pen”:

Your knights o’ the pen, man,
Are a’ *gentlemen*, man,
Ilk *body’s a limb* o’ the law, man; . . .
And *ought* but a *trigger* some draw, man. (7)

For Stuart, this was too much. He pursued printers, publishers, and editors to get at contributors, and determined the satirist to be Alexander Boswell.²⁸ Invited to admit his error, or call it a joke, Boswell refused to be “catechized,” and preferred to give Stuart a meeting (*Trial* [Constable] 36).²⁹ He fell in events reminiscent of Christie’s duel with John Scott: he deloped, but not visibly enough to save his skin. And once more, legal process produced no result.

In this case, too, we see how the rituals of the duel, supposed to affirm relationships between gentlemen, are undone by the instability of discourse. This applies not just to the victim. Uncertain of whether he can legitimately

²⁷ There are two, politically distinct, publications titled *Trial of James Stuart*. Constable represents the Whig interest, and bears the epigraph. “[t]his Account of Mr. STUART’S Trial has been Prepared under the direction of his Friends”; Dick represents the Tories.

²⁸ Stuart took advantage of a legal dispute between the printers to access manuscripts and determine their writers. See *Trial* [Constable] 11-12, 31-34; *Proceedings against Wm. Murray Borthwick* (Edinburgh: John Robertson, 1822); Robert Alexander, *Letter to Sir J. Mackintosh, Knt. M.P. Explanatory of the Whole Circumstances of the Robbery of the Glasgow Sentinel Office* (Glasgow: Sentinel, 1822).

²⁹ Cockburn’s speech for the defense.

fight the professional Stevenson or the law Lord, Stuart embroils himself in lengthy discussion. Stuart's anxieties to establish status as a truth preliminary to a duel invited the press to debate his terms and opened a space for the despised Stevenson to appropriate them. The *Scotsman* declared that its partisan, being offended, had the right to decide whether the printer was a gentleman, but the Tory papers asserted that Stevenson, at least, was a gentleman by nature (*Scotsman* 5.241: 277; *Beacon* 36: 285). Stuart had laid himself open to attack through his own, supposedly irreducible terms. As a result, when he corresponded with Rae and published their letters, the *Sentinel* was able to quip that "Mr Stuart first became acquainted with [the paper] through the introduction of the Hon. the Lord Advocate. . . . as the name of Mr James Stuart . . . happened to be attached to that of his Lordship, we admitted him merely as one of his retinue, a poor relation for instance, or a favourite valet" (3.3: 22). Duelling's words of art, when circulated through the press, made James Stuart no gentleman.

Indeed, though Stuart survived the duel with Boswell, was exonerated by the law, and subjected Rae to parliamentary debate as to his fitness for office, his own status proved irrecoverable.³⁰ Stuart had presumed upon his family name to determine his practices with the pistol or in the press; in so doing, he had caused his own circulation as a term in public discourse. The papers had never been able to resist such bait, jibing at Stuart's obsessions with identity by calling him "the Late-Lieutenant James Stuart"—for Stuart had relinquished his commission after a dispute over authority—or "the Provost of Inverkeithing"—a small-town role which the *Scotsman* had celebrated on 20 February 1822 (*Sentinel* 1.20: 156; 1.2: 1). Still, such mockery proved minor as events evolved. Stuart had brought two retainers to his drubbing of Stevenson, and when Stevenson fought back, they pinioned him (*Sentinel* 1.1: 6).³¹ The *Beacon* pictured their wives gossiping about Stuart. The gamekeeper's wife and "the Ditch-scraper's lady" agree that, though he lost, "to us 'twas a fortunate Row!" for their husbands were (horrors of embarrassment for Stuart) *paid* (*Beacon* 36: 285).³² The poem ended:

Now the strain of these dames' conversation

³⁰ *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, 25 June 1822, cols. 1325-1373.

³¹ *Sentinel* 1.1 (10 October 1821).

³² *Beacon* 36 (8 September 1821).

May afford man and woman a hint,
 How a spark is despised thro' the nation
 For shying the spark of a flint. (36: 285)

Thus in court even Cockburn, for the defense, found himself protesting too much: “*James Stuart*,” he insisted, was “a first cousin, once removed, of the noble family of Reay. . . . Failing the family of the last Earl [of Moray], the father of the gentleman at the bar would have inherited the honours of that illustrious house” (*Trial* [Constable] 26). Stuart won the case. But it only proves that neither law, legislation, nor the firing of a bullet could stop a Stuart from being degraded in popular discourse.

This was what *Blackwood's* understood and addressed for itself. Though a Tory journal and invested in status, it worked to avoid being fixed in discourse. To that end, it deployed a resolutely playful anonymity and multiplicity in authorship. It was what John Scott and James Stuart, with their insistence on rights and wrongs and their own status even to the point of engagement, failed to grasp. As for Walter Scott, he learned from experience. In 1818, he thought one must play the game fully to survive—presuming the game remained one of words. Thus, when talk turned to battle and the pusillanimous/sensible Hogg subverted aristocratic posturing through comedy, Scott viewed the debacle with wry humour.

Later, however, no matter that he was a backer of the *Beacon* and closely aligned with numerous Blackwoodians, no matter whether he fulminated against Stuart, Scott counselled discretion. John Scott, he considered after the fact, had been “a poltroon in the first instance & a fool afterwards,” but he reminded Lockhart “Did I not tell you that a coward pressed to extremity becomes a desperate animal?” (W. Scott, *Letters* 7: 360, 361). Scott lamented the “ill-omened personalities” of the *Beacon's* enthusiastic writers, and the incautious politics that both established the magazine and then reacted randomly as events unfolded (7: 19, 21). “The grand mistake,” he concluded, “was in attempting to play the game at all” (7: 22).

Scott made a practice of this newfound principle when, in 1827, he was threatened by an offended French general over his *Life of Napoleon Buonaparte*. Scott contacted a “friend” and promised the general “shall not dishonour the country through my sides” (*Letters* 10: 271).³³ He seems poised to fight. Yet

³³ To William Clerk, 27 August 1827.

Scott specified: “I shall have occasion for a sensible and resolute friend . . . on whose firmness and sagacity I can with such perfect confidence rely” (10: 271). A second, in fact, was supposed to arbitrate a quarrel if at all possible (Shoemaker 535). Properly run, a duel was a “talking shop” that avoided other, more violent, forms of utterance. Scott, of course, knew how to talk, and his friend William Clerk was, like him, a lawyer of advanced years. Thus Scott instructed Clerk on what to read—which would prepare him for discussion—asserting a willingness to fight even as he offered talking points. “The passages are in the ninth volume of the book. Pray look at them,” he specified, even as he averred “I am aware I could march off upon the privileges of literature . . . but I have no taste for that species of retreat” (*Letters* 10: 271).

The two agreed that Scott should “stand buff” (firm) to Gourgaud (W. Scott, *Journal* 393). This he did—in carefully chosen words. Significantly, Gourgaud, who years before had been told off by Napoleon for his pugnacity, did not issue a challenge in response. Rather, he published his complaints. Scott replied by publishing the authoritative documents on which he had based his comments. No personalities were invoked, and nothing more happened. That is, standing buff called Gourgaud’s bluff. So Scott’s private claim after the fact that “I would not have shunned him nor any frenchman who ever kisserd Buonaparte’s breech” stands less as evidence that the author would have fought, and more as evidence that—the Napoleonic wars notwithstanding—he had known all along that his battle was one of words. Moreover, he meant to keep it that way (397). “Winning” was out of the question within the indeterminacies of discourse. But at least one could take satisfaction in private, speaking boldly to oneself.

He who undertakes a private life in public discourse, Walter Scott learned, had better understand the basic rule: if we publish fighting words, those words will fight back. There is no fighting to a finish. Or more accurately, words may translate into deeds that make that finish final. So keep your words to yourself, if you can.

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