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Scottish Presbyterian Eloquence and Old Mortality

The kind of eloquence I am writing about in this paper is a rather specialised variety. My title refers specifically to the ways in which language is used both by English Puritans and Scottish Presbyterians—and particularly by the 17th Century Covenanters—in their prayers and sermons. This use of language was so distinctive that it was given its own name: 'the language of the saints'. There are four main elements discernible in this kind of preaching and praying. These are, firstly, a continuous context of reference to the Scriptures, particularly the Old Testament; secondly, close imitation of the cadences of the prose of the Authorised Version; thirdly, the constant use of images and metaphors of a very earthy and non-spiritual kind, and finally, an inspirational and rhapsodic tone. This kind of preaching and praying did not disappear in 1688 at the end of the Covenanting period; it continued to characterise the public performance of many an evangelical preacher from the 18th to the 20th century. The praying of a religious hypocrite in this style was beautifully hit off by Robert Burns in his satirical poem 'Holy Willie's Prayer' and when that poem was first published in 1789 in chapbook form, the chapbook was called 'The prayer of Holy Willie ... with quotations from the Presbyterian Eloquence'.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, 'the language of the saints' became strongly associated in people's minds with Episcopalian satire of, and moderate Presbyterian disapproval of, the extreme Presbyterians who were pictured by the Episcopalians and moderates as using pulpit eloquence in a very coarse and unedifying way. It is at this point that Scott, Hogg and Galt enter the picture. Between 1810 and 1830 Scottish novelists began to turn to the turbulent and exciting history of their own nation for raw material with which to create their fictions. At one point the fictions of the three novelists came very close together, for they each wrote a novel about the Covenanters in the period before 1688, i.e. in the period when the Stuart kings of Britain tried to reintroduce Episcopacy into Scotland. All three novelists use literary versions of the 'language of the saints' in their efforts to recreate fictionally the religious strife of these times. Old Mortality was published in December, 1816 and Scott was immediately accused of
writing Episcopalian satire; Hogg regarded his novel, *The Brownie of Bodsheck* (1818) as a Presbyterian response, and Galt who named his novel after its hero *Ringan Gilhaize* (1823), thereby limiting its potential audience by giving the work a title that only Scotsmen could pronounce, also had Scott's version of the Covenanters in his critical sights. In writing their individual versions of the Covenanting story, Galt and Hogg were doing a good deal more than trying to cash in on Scott's enormous success. They both sincerely believed that Scott's account of the Covenanters was one-sided and unfair. Both men were moderate Presbyterians and they had been brought up, like most good Presbyterians, to venerate the memory of the Covenanting martyrs. Their Covenanting novels do just this and there is never any doubt as to either Galt's or Hogg's basic sympathies. Scott, despite his later Episcopalianism, had also been brought up in a strict Presbyterian household and knew in his youthful days many chapbooks about the Covenanting martyrs. He had been given as a tutor (1782) a Presbyterian divinity student called James Mitchell, who was even more Calvinistically inclined than Scott's own father. Scott tells us that despite, or perhaps because of, his father's and tutor's devotion to the cause of Calvinism and Whiggism, he himself became a Tory and an Episcopal. In his reading of history, Scott consistently preferred the Cavaliers to the Roundheads, the Duke of Montrose to the Duke of Argyll, and bishops and archbishops to ministers and presbyters. Those critics who see in Scott a snob with a prodigious devotion for titled rank, think that he is only half-joking when he says he preferred the Cavaliers because they were on the 'gentlemanly' side of the question. When Hogg's *Brownie of Bodsheck* appeared, Scott told his shepherd friend that he did not like the novel at all and that it was a false and unfaithful picture of the times and the existing characters. Hogg retorted: 'It is a devilish deal truer than yours, though, and on that ground I make an appeal to the country.' John Galt tells us in his *Literary Life* that Scott treated the Covenanters with levity, and he clearly regarded *Ringan Gilhaize* as a corrective. He was proud of the fact that *Ringan Gilhaize* was the only novel written to that date which had ever been recommended from the pulpit—presumably a Presbyterian pulpit.

A lively critical debate has been going on ever since about the merits and demerits of Scott's view of the Covenanters as compared with that of Galt and Hogg. The question that interests me in this debate is not a philosophical or theological one. All three writers show their ideological and religious preferences. It is not of central critical importance that any one historical fiction can be said to be more historically true than another. They are all imaginative restructurings of selected historical data. What does interest me is an aesthetic and critical question. From 1817 down to the present day there has been a strong suggestion in the criticism of *Old Mortality* that Scott, because of the strength of his anti-covenanting prejudices, created a caricature of the Covenanters and their times instead of the balanced portrait he so obviously intended. This accusation of bad art seems to me to arise from an insensitive reading of the novel, and particularly from a misunderstanding of Scott's relationship to the tradition of Episcopalian satire in pamphlets like *Scottish Presbyterian Eloquence displayed*. It is my purpose in this paper to try and show what that satirical tradition was like, and the ways in which Scott transcended it.

*Scottish Presbyterian Eloquence displayed, or, the foolishness of their teaching discovered from their books, sermons and prayers* is the somewhat heavyweight title of a book first published in 1691, which, according to the BM catalogue, went into at least fifteen editions in the 18th century alone, and was still being reprinted as late as the middle of the 19th century. It is an anonymous, amusing and scurrilous attack on the ministers of the Presbyterian Church. Although divided into chapters and sections, it is a formless work, which might well have been written by a committee, and at least one ecclesiastical historian thinks it probably was added to at various times. A Scottish Episcopal minister called Robert Calder is sometimes credited with its authorship; at other times it is said to be written by Gilbert Crockatt and John Monro, but there is no proof. Shapeless in form though it is, it is nevertheless consistent in tone—a tone of mocking and malicious raillery at the intellectual and moral imperfections of the now triumphant Scottish Presbyterians, for the 1688 Settlement had settled the arguments in their favour and the Scottish Episcopalians had been thrown out. A large number of well known Presbyterian heroes come in for special attention in this satire e.g. the Reverend Samuel Rutherford of St Andrews, famous for his spiritual letters to his flock; the Rev. David Williamson, who was satirised in the ballad 'Dainty Davie' (he was the character who was hidden from the Royalist troops in the bed of the daughter of one of his supporters, and she produced a 'dainty Davie' for him nine months later); and a whole group of worthies, James Kirkton, Alexander Peden, and James Fraser, all of whom are venerated in Scottish ecclesiastical history. In *Scottish Presbyterian Eloquence displayed*... the Calvinists are celebrated for their unclerical dress, their monetary greed, their fleshly lusts and general immorality, and, what is most important for my purpose, their impromptu and inspirational prayers and rabble-rousing sermons. The Covenanting
ministers are accused of filling their flocks with superstitions such as the idea that bishops had cloven hooves, or that Claverhouse could only be killed by a silver bullet. In addition, they are accused of teaching false values and bigotry, that it was a worse sin to listen to an Episcopalian than to be accused of bestiality; and they are also charged with leading their flocks into such doctrinal traps as antinomianism, i.e. the Calvinist heresy to the effect that, provided you are one of the elect or 'saved' it does not matter what sin you commit. Selkirk of Musselburgh and Rutherford of St. Andrews are quoted as saying:

'Now sirs, be you guilty of murder, adultery or any other gross sin, if you be of the election of his grace, there is no fear of you, for God sees no sin in his chosen covenanted people . . . Hellfulps of sin cannot separate us from Christ'.

A reading of *Scottish Presbyterian Eloquence displayed* . . . soon shows that the method of attack is a familiar propaganda one: hearsay, innuendo, and highly selective quotation out of context. The satire particularly accuses the Covenanting ministers of misleading their flock as to what was made possible through enthusiastic prayer: a dying Covenanter at the Battle of Bothwell Brig is reputed to have said:

'Our preachers, our preachers, they made us believe that as sure as the Bible was the word of God, we should gain the day, for that the Windle-straws should fight for us'.

The author or authors of *Scottish Presbyterian Eloquence displayed* . . . also use extensive quotation to try and enforce their view that Presbyterian sermons were a 'gallimaufry of enthusiastic zeal, farce and nonsense'. By paying no attention to the circumstances of the prayer or sermon being criticised, or even to the very obvious need in preaching to simple rustic people to choose images and examples they could easily understand, the compilers of the propaganda pamphlet succeed in their aim in giving the impression that the Covenanting preachers were nearly always irrational, coarse and undignified in their sermons and prayers. Dean Swift would have found illustrated in this work many of the flaws in preaching styles that he wrote so powerfully against in *A letter to a young clergyman, lately entered in Holy orders*. Satiric examples are also given of the use of Scots dialect words and idioms from the pulpit. The compilers are vastly amused at Thomas Ramsay's sermon 'on the foolishness of preaching' where he says:

There are two sorts of preaching, Sirs; there is gentlemanly preaching and commonmanny preaching. Sirs, I will give you commonmanny preaching Sirs; I will give you milk-pottage and this will make you bonny, fat and lusty in your journey to heaven . . . there are three sorts of men that despise commonmanny preaching. 1.—the Politician, 2.—the Gallant and 3.—the Ignorant man. First for the Politician, what cares he for commonmanny preaching? He will go twenty miles to hear a gentlemen preaching. Secondly, for the Gallant, give him a glass of wine to drink and give him a lady to kiss what care he for preaching? Thirdly, for the Ignorant man, give him a cogful of brose for his belly, a pair of breeks to his arse what cares he for preaching.'

If you were to believe the compilers of *Scottish Presbyterian Eloquence displayed* . . . the Covenanters were capable only of 'commonmanny' preaching. Sir Walter Scott, as *Old Mortality* abundantly proves, knew better. The 17th century satire does illustrate, however, that, in an effort to communicate with everybody, the Presbyterian preachers could and did use images that seemed strangely inappropriate to the message.

e.g. Rutherford:

Christ shuffleth up and down in his hands the great body of Heaven and Earth; and Kirk and Commonwealth are in his hands like a stack of cards, and he dealeth the play to the Mourners in Zion.

or Alexander Shields:

The only way to hold a fast grip of Christ was to entertain him with three liquors of three sundry bickers; you must have a pint of hope, three pints of faith and nine pints of hot, hot burning zeal.

Anybody brought up in the countryside will recognise the powerful and homely appeal of Rymer of St. Andrews who told his flock,

That he was not reputed a good husbandman who did not muck his land well. Now, Sirs, said he, except you get your hearts mucked wi'the sharn o' grace you'll never thrive.'

My examples have stressed the 'homely' nature of much Presbyterian eloquence but the other elements mentioned at the beginning of this paper, such as Old Testament reference and rhapsodic tone, are clearly illustrated within it as well. *Scottish Presbyterian Eloquence displayed* . . . sums it all up thus:
The most of their sermons are nonsensick raptures, the abuse of mystick divinity in canting and compounding vocables, oft-times stuffed with impertinent and base similes, and always with homely, coarse and ridiculous expressions, very unsuitable to the gravity and solemnity that becomes Divinity.\footnote{16}

The reader may well ask now for some evidence that this tradition of Episcopal satire affected Scott’s choice of material in his presentation of the Covenanting preachers, and for some evidence that his readers saw Old Mortality as belonging to this tradition. The contemporary reviews are instructive here: Thomas McCrie,\footnote{17} the biographer of John Knox, and a prominent Scottish clergyman of the day, reviewed Old Mortality at great length in the Christian Instructor and said:

We were not startled by the picture of our persecuted ancestors presented to us in the Tales. It was not new to us. We had often seen it before. We could recognise every feature. There is only an alteration in the costume and border work, and a slight softening of the colours to adapt it to the taste of the age. In all other respects the author has faithfully copied his great originals . . . When they were restrained from torturing and murdering the Presbyterians, the Episcopalians, abusing the lenity of a new and tolerant government, took up the pen, and with hands yet besmeared with the blood of their countrymen, employed it in writing against them calumnious invectives and scurrilous lampoons, which they industriously circulated.\footnote{18}

The two works he names as Scott’s sources for what he believed to be lamooning are Scottish Presbyterian Eloquence displayed . . . and Archibald Pitcairn’s play The Assembly.\footnote{19}

Similarly the British Critic, a journal with Episcopal leanings, said this of Old Mortality:

To many of our readers the sermons and speeches which these volumes contain may appear a caricature rather than a portrait. We have before us now a book published in 1718 entitled Scotch Presbyterian Eloquence Etc and another of nearly the same date called A century of Presbyterian Preaching—in which will be found many discourses of the same nature . . .

The reviewer then gives some examples from these works and concludes:

from these few specimens of real covenanting eloquence our readers will not imagine the picture before them (\textit{i.e.} in \textit{Old Mortality}) to be a distortion or caricature: the picture is executed by too faithful and too well instructed a pen.\footnote{20}

Or take the Eclectic Review, a journal favoured by the Nonconformists who preferred the Presbyterian view of Covenanting history:

It is not necessary to adduce historical proof that the characters of the Cameronian Preachers in these Tales are excessively distorted as individual portraits, and still more scandalously unfair as specimens of the persecuted Presbyterians.\footnote{21}

It is clear that, in 1817, friend and foe alike saw Scott’s novel as lying very much within the tradition of Episcopal satire of Covenanting history. McCrie further asserts that Scott ridicules the Covenanters by overstressing the extent to which their ordinary conversation was interlarded with Scripture phrases ludicrously misapplied; by insisting they were constantly harping upon certain cant phrases relating to theological disputes, and by suggesting that the style in which the preachers usually preached was coarse, incoherent and rhapsoidal.

The first-hand nature of Scott’s knowledge of Presbyterian eloquence is not in doubt. The catalogue of the library at Abbotsford\footnote{22} shows that Scott, at least by the end of his life, had copies of \textit{Scottish Presbyterian Eloquence displayed} . . . and all the other Episcopal tracts, and the researches of Corson, Anderson and others\footnote{23} prove conclusively that he had known the writings of the Scots covenanting worthies at first hand from early boyhood. There is all the difference in the world, however, between showing that Scott was aware of this satiric tradition and asserting that he mechanically followed it; the fact surely is, on the evidence of the novel itself, that he used pulpit eloquence as one of his chief ways of differentiating between the degrees of fanatical commitment in his Covenanting portraits—between what he called ‘Presbyterianism’ and ‘extra-Presbyterianism’. One further review should be mentioned. Scott was somewhat taken aback by the nature of the response to his novel, particularly in Scotland itself, and he took the unusual step of writing an anonymous review of his own anonymous novel in the \textit{Quarterly Review} for January, 1817.\footnote{24} (It actually appeared in April.) We know it is Scott’s because the MS in Scott’s autograph still survives at John Murray’s in London. One of his friends, Erskine, and the editor of the \textit{Quarterly}, Gifford, also had a hand in the final version. It is usually, and charitably, supposed that these parts of the review which attempt
to answer McCrie’s criticisms are by Scott, and the praise of Scott, especially the comparison of Scott and Shakespeare, is by either Gifford or Erskine.

Returning again to McCrie, one can dispute the main debating points in his extremely lengthy review. He suggests that, though a novel, Old Mortality should be treated as if it was academic history. Scott strongly disagrees; he wrote both history and historical novels and knew the difference between them. McCrie also claims that the novel is one-sided because it fails to give a full representation of the Covenanters’ sufferings before 1679. Anybody who has read the novel knows that this is simply not true. What Scott has done, partly to keep his novel a reasonable length, is to outline this part of Covenanting history through the different voices of Balfour of Burley and Henry Morton of Milnwood, the one fanatical, the other moderate, and to attempt to give a balanced portrait of that suffering.

Thirdly, McCrie asserts that Scott mis-represents the character of ‘bludy Clavers’ and many readers of the novel, including Hogg and Galt, have agreed with McCrie. But Scott made it quite clear, that in his view, however personally attractive Claverhouse might be, he is as much a fanatic as Balfour of Burley: ‘fierce and ardent in pursuing success, careless of death himself, and ruthless in inflicting it upon others’. Claverhouse is fanatical about honour, Burley is fanatical about the Covenant and they are both portrayed as destructive of the liberties and civilisation of the Scottish people. McCrie’s final charge is that Scott dehumanises the Covenanters and robs them of their heroic dignity in life and death by satirising their pulpit eloquence and their extempore prayers. It was against this last charge that Scott made a spirited and thoughtful defence of himself in the Quarterly Review. His main point is that one must make distinctions between ‘enthusiastic’ nonsense, masquerading under the veil of religion and religious truth; between extremists who use religion as a disguise for fanatical and unchristian acts and those whose Christianity is, in Scott’s words: ‘wise, sober, enlightened and truly pious’. Scott says in his key passage:

We believe, therefore, the best service we can do our author in the present case is to show that the odious part of his satire refers only to that fierce and unreasonable set of extra-presbyterians, whose zeal, equality absurd and cruel, afforded pretexts for the severities inflicted on nonconformists without exception, and give the greatest scandal and offence to the wise, sober, enlightened and truly pious among the Presbyterians.25

As well as preaching in this way the virtues of the kind of religious moderatism that was to characterise the Scottish Presbyterians in the 18th century. Scott also differs greatly from the Episcopal tradition of undifferentiated satire of all Covenanters by stressing in his fiction a wide array of preachers and other characters who all use the language of the saints, but who use it in very individual ways. Balfour of Burley, the murderer of Sharp, is fanatical, dignified and stern in his linguistic usage at the beginning of the novel. He is also in control of his religious eloquence and can and does reject it entirely when the political occasion demands it. Burley is capable both of weary rational argument and elaborate emotionalism of the same kind as Habakuk Mucklewharth. Scott also introduces a wide range of preachers from Peter Froud, a very unattractive moderate, sensual and self-seeking; to the mad enthusiast, Habakuk Mucklewharth, who invites others to act in violence, and who is ready to murder in the name of the Solemn League and Covenant. Scott also deliberately opposes the wordy and unconvincing sermonising of Gabriel Keptleburne, ‘an absolute Boanerges and son of thunder in the pulpit’, who is grossly inadequate when it comes to action, with the real eloquence of the dignified martyr Ephraim Macdriar, whose acceptance of torture and death for his religious ideals is sympathetically and beautifully done.26 The dramatic range of these preachers and the skill with which Scott differentiates their characters by the use they make of pulpit eloquence, is far removed from the consistent tone of contempt of Scottish Presbyterian Eloquence displayed . . .

McCrie and some modern scholars have accused Scott of historical misrepresentation in putting pulpit eloquence in the mouth of Mause Headrigg, the mother of the wily Cuddie. I think they are just wrong about this; there are many historical examples of real life female religious enthusiasts of this sort.27 Scott’s point in making Mause speak the way she does is not only to amuse, although she would fit in well to the satirical pages of Scottish Presbyterian Eloquence displayed . . . He wants also to show the ‘language of the saints’ often went along with ignorance of the real issues involved in a covenanting stance, and could lead people into acts that were dangerous to themselves and those around them. Mause is a dangerous, arrogant and ignorant old woman, and Scott deliberately opposes her to Bessie M’Clure, who also uses ‘Presbyterian eloquence’ but who is a covenanter of the best type. Despite the fact that she has lost her husband and two sons in her fight for the covenant, she never forgets that even Cavaliers and English soldiers were fellow human beings who deserved compassion and help when in danger and distress.
The extensive range of these Covenanting characters and their widely varying use of Presbyterian eloquence dramatically illustrate that Scott shared with his hero, Henry Morton, a strong belief that there are viable distinctions between Presbyterian rights and Presbyterian madness. He successfully uses Scottish presbyterian eloquence in Old Mortality to underline this distinction along with the more obvious devices of character and plot.

NOTES

1. A first version of this paper was given at a seminar in the Institute of Advanced Studies in the Humanities, University of Edinburgh, 1973.


5. The literary life and miscellanies of John Galt. 3 vols. (Edinburgh, 1834), 1, 250, 254.

6. D. Wing, The shor·t·itle catalogue ... 1641-1700 (New York, 1972), Items C991-3. Wing lists the work under Crockat. My page references are to be the 19th century reprint of the 1738 edition.

7. Robert Calder (1666-1723). According to the DNB, Calder was the reputed author of Scottish Presbyterian eloquence displayed ... The British Museum Catalogue lists the work under Gilbert Crockat and Alexander Monro.

8. Samuel Rutherford (1600-1661), Professor of Divinity, St. Mary’s College, University of St. Andrews.


10. James Kirkton (1620-1699); Alexander Peden (1626-1686) and James Fraser of Brea (1639-1699) are all heroes of the Covenanting movement. See DNB.


14. Ibid., p. 86.

15. Ibid., pp. 75, 89, 105. Alexander Shields (1660?-1700) was the author of A Hind led loose, and many other tracts. For Shields and Rymer, see Fasti, V, 239-40 and 188-9.

16. Scottish Presbyterian Eloquence displayed ... p. 23.

17. Thomas McCrie the elder (1772-1835). An account of this seceding divine and ecclesiastical historian can be found in the DNB.