

James Hogg, 'Basil Lee' and the Pragmatics of Highland Masculinity

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Abstract

The present paper will develop a literary-pragmatic analysis of 'Basil Lee', a short novella published in 1820 by Scottish writer James Hogg (1770-1835). The analysis will view literature as an interactive phenomenon between author and readers. The writing and reading processes will be assumed to be a conversation about the text, which may be influenced by the author's and reader's historical positions, although not totally determined by it since they both can resist or comply with the cultural values of their time. The aim is to show that the negative response to Hogg's text at its time of publication may have been motivated by the subversiveness of its subject. Hogg presenting a prostitute as a lady at heart who 'redeems' through marriage a supposedly Highland soldier, and prevents him from deserting the imperial war in Quebec, may have defied bourgeois principles of literary politeness; while their subsequent happy marriage may also have been perceived as Hogg's manifest intention to critique the apparent assumptions of respectability of contemporary bourgeois marriage.

1. Introduction

By considering the picaresque figure of Basil Lee in *Winter Evening Tales* (1820) this paper will illustrate how Scottish writer James Hogg (1770-1835) deconstructs the mystique of Highland masculinity which, in early-nineteenth century Britain, so greatly contributed to both the shaping of Scottish national identity and to the virilisation of the more feminized commercial England, the centre of the British Empire. Integrating Bakhtin's (1981) carnivalesque dialogics with a more socially dynamic literary pragmatics (Sell 1991, 2000; Mey 2000), the paper will view the processes of writing and reading as phenomena ruled by communicative principles. The focus will be on the interface between author, text, and readers, hence recognizing that literary texts are 'inherently dialogic' (Sell 2000: 20). The relation between Hogg's strategic use of linguistic features, cultural tropes, and literary motifs, and the historical influence on Hogg's writing and reception of 'Basil Lee', will show *why* and *how* Hogg's parody of Highland masculinity challenged the stability of early-nineteenth-century British discourse.

Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832), a committed supporter of the union between Scotland and England, played an important role in developing the romantic idea of Highland Scotland. In his Waverley novels, he recreated the 1745 Jacobite Rebellion — a moment of turbulence in Scottish history — as heroic romance in a mythical past, highlighting only those militaristic Highland qualities such as courage and unconditional loyalty to the clan chief which could be channelled into the service of the British army for imperial expansion. James Hogg, Scott's contemporary, who represented an alternative, non-elite cultural perspective, parodied the masculine stereotype of the Highland soldier in his writing, revealing the exploitation of working-class young, who died in the name of the British Empire. Drawing on literary pragmatics, this paper will show how Hogg conveys this critique.

Some modern critics are concerned about using literary pragmatics because writing and reading are non-simultaneous processes. Since the author cannot enjoy immediate feed-back from the reader, as in a real conversation, it is hard to provide empirical evidence of how a reader may perceive the linguistic features of a text. Ernest W.B. Hess-Lüttich (1991), however, argues that although literary dialogics is different from everyday communication, writer and readers follow the same basic rules of a real interaction, and literary texts risk the same ruptures and breakdowns involved in a conversation.¹ Also, according to the pragmatics of communication both hearers' and readers' interpretation is always inferential, that is, a

matter of hypothesis which can never be taken as certain. Christine Christie (2000), for instance, argues that only when interlocutors share a great amount of knowledge are ‘the meanings the hearers infer [...] likely to approximate those the speaker was attempting to convey’ (Christie, 2000: 69). On this point, Nils Erik Enkvist (1991) observes that inference may indeed become an endless process which needs to be restrained by Sperber and Wilson’s (1986) principle of relevance, in order to avoid unnecessary information congesting the text; namely, readers infer what is relevant to textual interpretation, stopping the process of semiosis when unnecessary to its comprehension.²

The present analysis will show that Hogg’s novella ‘Basil Lee’ is an excellent example of how author and readers establish an interactive relation for the duration of the text, as argued by Jacob L. Mey (2000). It will go beyond Bakhtin’s *heteroglossia* by recognizing not only the existence of subversive voices within Hogg’s novella, but also considering the active management of those voices by the author and their active recreation through a pragmatic act of reading. The analysis will also draw on politeness and relevance principles in order to show theoretically the reasons why ‘Basil Lee’ was received negatively at its time of production. The aim is to illustrate that literary pragmatics has the potential to open very productive lines for investigating the interface and overlapping between language, literature, and communication.

2. The Ideology behind the Mystique of Highland Masculinity

Maureen Martin in her book *The Mighty Scot* (2009) discusses the significance of Highland masculinity for the British Empire. The mystique of Highland masculinity as representative of Scotland as a whole was incorporated in early-nineteenth-century British discourse. Martin argues that both in literature and the visual arts, the story of nineteenth-century Scotland was articulated through the marriage plot with England, a metaphor for the 1707 Union between the two countries. This metaphorical union was a politically-powerful tool as it was meant to contain the military threat to England embodied by the two Jacobite rebellions in 1715 and 1745, when the Highland clans had mounted a military campaign to restore the Catholic Stuarts to the British throne. Identifying the Highland soldier with Scotland and the wife with a patriotic icon of England, the marriage plot came to represent a defining moment of Scottish history as it performed simultaneously the Jacobite defeat in 1746 and the

assimilation of Scotland into an England-dominated Britain. Martin claims that ‘a heart of Highland masculinity animates Scotland’s [...] history and culture [...] an undying heart that, because Scotland is part of Britain, can beat for Britain as a whole’ (2009: 38). And indeed, the reputation of the kilted Highland regiments, depicted as the direct descendants of the clans, conferred great prestige to the British army, especially during the Napoleonic wars in early-nineteenth-century Britain. The charm of Highland masculinity, however, obscured the historico-cultural achievements of the Lowlands, where Scottish political and economic life was traditionally centred. T. M. Devine (2006) argues that ‘Highlandism’ answered a Scottish national need to keep a distinctive identity without compromising the union with England; while Peter Womack (1989) observes that as Lowland Scotland became economically similar to England, it turned to the Highlands to mark its difference.

In ‘Basil Lee’, James Hogg deconstructs the supposed Highland traits of courage and unconditional loyalty of the British regiments by featuring the eponymous picaresque character who, by wishing to desert the war in Quebec, exposes both the ideology behind Highlandism as well as the inhumanity of the imperial wars.

3. The Pragmatics of Literary Communication

In order to clarify how the meaning of utterances is generated in spoken communication, pragmatics takes into account the language system, the particular situational context where the conversation occurs, and the personal knowledge that language users bring with them which, supposedly, influences both their production and interpretation of language (Christie 2000). Christine Christie observes that scholars dealing with language use in sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, conversation analysis, and ethnography have often viewed pragmatics as rather abstract, because it appears to investigate merely ‘the behaviour of hypothetical individuals within an isolated interaction’ (2000: 26) without any consideration about their historical context. Since its focus is on the strategies exploited in communication, pragmatics has also been accused of conceiving the individual as the ‘originator and controller of meaning’, independently from his or her socio-cultural constraints (Christie, 2000: 26). Christie, however, points out that the fact that speakers use language strategically does not entail their total control of meaning with no regard of their socio-cultural background.

Even so, pragmatics has been applied to diverse disciplines across the humanities. In literary, cultural, and gender studies, for instance, speech-act theory has thrived. John

Austin's (1975) notion that the act of saying something also implies the performance of what is said,³ has been particularly prolific among anti-essentialist gender studies such as Judith Butler's (1993) and Eve K. Sedgwick's (2003), which share the assumption that gender is culturally constructed through language use.⁴

Dividing the development of pragmatics into two waves, Joseph A. Porter (1986), however, observes that although modern critics are very knowledgeable of both Austin's notion of language performativity and Searle's theory of speech acts,⁵ they seem to be rather unaware of further developments in the field of pragmatics. Neither Butler nor Sedgwick, for instance, draw on phenomena investigated by second-wave pragmatics such as Paul Grice's (1989) cooperative principle,⁶ Stephen and Levinson's politeness principles (1987), and Sperber and Wilson's (1995 [1986]) relevance theory which, according to Porter, may provide greater precision to criticism in the humanities.⁷ In relation to gender studies, Christie (2000) argues that a relevance theory accounting for variables such as gender, class, and ethnicity may clarify theoretically the reasons why a hearer considers a speaker's discussion to be relevant or not.

Concerning literary pragmatics, Roger D. Sell (2000) observes that preliminary studies have been rather formalist in their scope as they have limited their analysis to the dialogues among characters within the text, overlooking the fact that literature itself is a dialogic phenomenon which implies a communicative relation between author and readers. According to Sell, the only moment when literary communication ceases to exist is when a reader does not think about the text. In an attempt to overcome the historical determinism of postmodern criticism such as Foucault's, where human agency seems to be forgotten in the interpretative process, Sell (2000) views literary activity as a triangular interaction, where the writer and the reader are 'social individuals' who communicate about a third entity, the literary text, and who, although affected by their historical positions, are not totally determined by them.

Literary pragmatics will hence show how the early-nineteenth-century British context contributed to shaping the writing of 'Basil Lee', and how Hogg himself tried to adapt to and/or resist contemporary bourgeois literary conventions. This framework will provide a detailed analysis of Hogg's deconstruction of Highland masculinity by considering the stylistic features of 'Basil Lee', pragmatic phenomena such as politeness and relevance applied to the writing and reading processes, the socio-historical position of James Hogg, and Hogg's negotiation of his own individuality with the readers' cultural beliefs of his time.

3.1 Literary Politeness

Observing the phenomenon of deference, so powerfully radicated in the culture of Far-Eastern societies, Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson (1987) have developed a set of politeness principles by arguing that all languages, to a more or lesser extent, recognise a need for saving face in social interaction. They claim that any dialogic exchange between individuals entails a potential threat to their face and, for this reason, people exploit a set of strategies meant to express solidarity and minimise potential threats both to themselves and their interlocutors. Brown and Levinson distinguish between ‘negative’ and ‘positive’ face, claiming that the former represents individuals’ necessity not to feel impeded in whatever they want to do, and the latter represents the need of human beings to feel approved by their social peers. Specifically, face-threatening acts against positive face may ridicule or show irreverence towards the hearer; while requests and orders represent potential threats to the hearer’s negative face, since not replying to a demand may appear irreverent to someone asking for it.

Some linguists have critiqued Brown and Levinson as they seem to assume that all languages share the same notion of saving face, without considering that other factors such as class, gender, or age may contribute to people’s assumptions of what is polite or not (Christie 2000). Sara Mills (2003), for instance, observes that gender stereotypes within particular social groups may influence both the production and interpretation of politeness. Notwithstanding linguists’ negative reactions to the supposed universality of politeness principles, Sell (1991) claims that Brown and Levinson’s notion of face-threatening acts and their distinction between positive and negative face may open very productive lines of investigation into literary criticism. Regarding the politeness of literary communication, Sell distinguishes between *selectional* politeness and *presentational* politeness, arguing that while the former deals with the author’s choice of topics, which a potential community of readers may perceive as breaking social taboos, presentational politeness evaluates whether the author is observing Paul Grice’s (1989) maxims of communication and hence failing to cooperate with the reader. Similarly to Christie (2000) and Mills (2003), Sell (2000) argues that literary criticism discussing selectional politeness must be ‘culture specific and historical’ because the perception of what is considered to break social taboos changes not only across time and space, but also within the same community of people (Sell, 2000: 225-26).

The present paper argues that Hogg presenting a prostitute endowed with higher moral values than the picaresque Basil Lee may have been perceived as a face-threatening act against the positive face of early-nineteenth-century Edinburgh bourgeoisie. The literati of that period had already established specific principles of selectional politeness, and Hogg's failure to observing them by addressing the issue of prostitution so openly may have contributed to the negative reception of his novella.

3.2 Relevance Theory

Reducing Grice's four maxims of communication to the principle of relevance, Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson (1995) argue that hearers interpret speakers' new information only when relevant to improving their personal representation of the world — defined as *cognitive environment* — and only when such interpretation requires the minimum processing effort. Sperber and Wilson describe their theory as *ostensive-inferential communication* in that the hearer's inferential process is triggered by the speaker's manifest intention to communicate. Most importantly, Sperber and Wilson conceive of context as psychologically activated by the hearer at the very moment of utterance interpretation, rather than as already existing. In this way, they counteract the 'unitary context assumption', that is, the notion that all the people involved in an interaction share the same context. Two interlocutors can have a similar system of beliefs, yet their respective representation of the world is never identical, which fact may cause different reactions to the same utterance.

Drawing on relevance theory, Sell (2000) claims that in the specific case of literary communication, the 'unitary context assumption' is 'unhistorical and dehumanizing' as it implies that 'any given text can only be taken in just some single way: either according to the putative intention of its author, or according to the understanding of the current commentator' (Sell, 2000: 133). According to Sell, any act of reading is characterized by an inferential process which goes beyond the author's control and which can never be predicted, as it is determined by the tension between the cultural background and personal beliefs of the reader. As we shall see, when reading 'Basil Lee' the bourgeois readership of Hogg's time experienced different cognitive environments 'jostl[ing] against each other' which they may have found difficult to negotiate, hence resulting in a negative response to Hogg's text.

4. The Analysis

‘Basil Lee’ is a novella narrated in the first-person, which was included in Hogg’s collection *Winter Evening Tales*, published in 1820. The protagonist is a Lowlander who, in the Border countryside of 1770s Scotland, works as a ploughman, shepherd, grocer, and farmer, but with such ‘instability of mind’ that he cannot keep any of these jobs. The life of a shepherd turns out to be harsh, not idyllic as depicted in contemporary pastoral poetry. While a farmer, Basil neglects his crops and indulges in a profligate life, getting his housekeeper pregnant. Hence, in Basil’s words,

As the war was then raging in America, I determined on going there in person, to assist some of the people in killing *their neighbours*. I did not care much which of the parties, provided I got to a place where I should never see nor hear more of *my drunken neighbours*, profligate servants, lame horses, blighted crops, and unfathomable servant. (‘Basil Lee’: 17, emphasis mine)

As a last opportunity after so many failures, in 1777 this Lowlander enters the Highland regiments to defend the British colonies from the revolutionary war in America. Through the ironic ‘parallelism’ between the noun phrases ‘their neighbours’ and ‘my drunken neighbours’, Hogg highlights that Basil is willing to struggle against any neighbours — it does not matter of which party — as long as he gets rid of his own.

As argued by T. M. Devine (2006), the British army was not composed solely of Highlanders, though this was the general perception. Basil’s picaresque-anti-heroic nature represents Hogg’s first deconstruction of the mystique of Highland masculinity, since it exposes the erroneous belief that the Highland troops of the British army were mostly people not only from geographical areas other than the Highlands, but also lacking those qualities of courage, loyalty, and sense of honour which so characterised the myth of the Highland soldier.

The second deconstruction operates through the carnivalesque depiction of Basil’s combat in Quebec, where he becomes a hero of the American Wars for saving, very much unwittingly, the British flag, as depicted in the following passage:

[...] at that time *I did not know in the least what I was doing* [...] As we went up the hill I heard an *old grim sergeant*, who was near to me, saying, “*It is utter madness! We are all sold to a man.*” The murmur ran along, “*We are sold—we are sold;—to a certainty we are sold.*”[...] [But] they went the faster, and *the old burly ill-natured sergeant, though assured that he was sold to destruction* [...] *hurried on fastest of any* [...] *I did not see what was going on*, till the Yankee horse in a moment came and attacked us [...] *I did not know in the least what I was doing*; and chancing to have a hold of my flagstaff with both my hands, I struck at him with my colours, which, flapping round the horse’s head, blindfolded *him*, and at the same moment the cavalier struck at me, but by good luck hit the flag-staff, which he cut in two not a foot from my hand. I ran

for it, and left my colours about his horse's head or feet, I did not stay to examine which; but, owing to the pikes and bayonets of our men, I could only fly a very short way. When the old crusty sergeant saw the colours down and abandoned, he dashed forward with a terrible oath, and seized them, but was himself cut down that moment. *The dragoon's horse* that left the ranks, and came upon me, had been shot. I deemed that *he* had come in *desperate valour* to seize my standard, whereas *his horse* was running with him in the agonies of death and *knew not where he was going*. ('Basil Lee': 31-32, emphasis mine)

The foregrounded linguistic feature in this passage is the sentence 'I did not know in the least what I was doing', which is repeated twice in Basil's voice; later, Hogg reiterates a similar sentence when depicting the horse which, similarly, 'knew not where he was going'. The horse is then personified through the masculine pronoun 'he', possibly to suggest the negative consequences of arbitrary power shared with the dragoon, Basil Lee, and 'the ill-natured sergeant', who are all described as pawns in others' hands. It is not clear whether the pronoun 'he' in the second-last line refers to the dragoon or the horse, hence blurring the boundaries of their identities as they are a unique body sharing the same destiny of death. Paradoxically, while the sergeant's blind courage leads him to his death, Basil's cowardice or, we may say, his human drive to survive, saves his life.

Although the war depicted in the novella is the British campaign to expel the Americans from Canada in 1777, at Hogg's time of writing the Napoleonic wars were affecting the destiny of Europe. Hogg's text reflects the critical scrutiny to which the wars were being subjected at this time, and the above passage is in intertextual relation with Hogg's essay 'Soldiers', where he comments on the arbitrary power behind the Napoleonic wars. As argued by Enkvist (1991) as well as by Mey (2000), intertextuality is a pragmatic phenomenon since it requires an active reader who has to infer and hence recreate the intertextual relations between the texts. In 'Soldiers' Hogg argues that

Princes and great men [...] generally live in luxury in their palaces, far from the battle's alarm, and are but little sensible of the miseries that accompany the wars that they themselves have raised [...] [which] lead to no aim or end besides the taking of life [...] The thirst of military fame is never quenched. Every victory is a new starting place from which *to unleash the dogs of havoc and war*. (*Lay Sermon*: 40-47, emphasis mine)

And indeed, in Hogg's novella the thirst for destruction, which is nourished by the ideology of Highland masculinity, is what motivates the old sergeant to risk his life. Although aware of the fact that 'it is utter madness' and they 'are all sold to a man', the sergeant hurries on faster than anyone, only to find his death.

Soon after, Basil Lee is infected by the same contagious thirst for destruction when, having stabbed the Yankee, and unwittingly saved the flag without ‘the most distant idea of valour or heroism’, he is incited by an old English officer who claims:

“Well done, young Scot [...] you have behaved like a hero!” [...] but *I was quite delirious, and knew not what I was about* [...] The old man’s words raised my madness to the highest pitch. I swore dreadfully at the Yankees – threw down my colours, and began to strip off my coat, the first thing that a country-man of Scotland always does when he is going to fight with any of his neighbours. “No, no,” said the old lieutenant, “you must not quit your colours after fighting so hardly for them; you must not throw them away because they have lost the pole. Here,” continued he, and giving them a hasty roll up, he fixed them in my shoulder behind, between my coat and shirt, where they stuck like a large furled umbrella; and having then both my hands at liberty, I seized the long bloody halbert once more, and with my eyes gleaming madness and rage, and, as I was told, with my teeth clenched, and grinning *like a mad dog*, I rushed on in the front of the line to the combat. (‘Basil Lee’: 33, emphasis mine)

The first two lines of this passage foreground through ‘parallelism’ the sentence claiming that Basil is not aware of what he is doing, with the variant that now he is even ‘quite delirious’. The irony lies in the old lieutenant’s voice; he argues that Basil must not quit the flag after having fought for it so hard. At this point of the story, in fact, the reader knows that the old sergeant is the one who died to save the flag, while Basil has run away. Anne McClintock argues that nationalism is constructed through the visible use of national fetishes such as ‘flags, uniforms and military displays’ (1995: 374). Hence, when the unworthy Basil Lee, with the flag flapping on his shoulders, takes hold of the dead sergeant’s halabard, he becomes a living, carnivalesque image of the flag itself, inverting the mystique of the Highland soldier. A good-for-nothing Lowlander becomes the very symbol of the British nation, ‘grinning like a mad dog’, that is, one of those ‘dogs of havoc and war’ unleashed by ‘princes and great men’ whose ‘thirst of military fame is never quenched’, as Hogg himself argues in his essay.

The honour of the British army is also critiqued by Clifford Mackay, a prostitute from the Highlands, who will marry and ‘redeem’ Basil Lee. She claims, “I never yet knew an officer in the British army [...] who would not seduce his friend’s mistress, or even his wife or sister, if he found it convenient” (‘Basil Lee’: 26). And indeed, Clifford, although a prostitute, is presented by Hogg as the most honourable character as she prevents Basil from deserting the British army. Douglas Gifford observes that in contemporary fiction such as John Wilson’s *The Trial of Margaret Lindsay* (1823), the prostitute was characterised as ‘a symbol of irretrievable social and moral ruin’ (1976: 98). Hogg, on the contrary, presents Clifford as a symbol of redemption and the story of Basil Lee as an emblem of ‘anti-

hypocrisy and honesty’, what was needed ‘to correct the worldly conventionality of the nineteenth-century novel’ (Gifford, 1976: 98). Basil Lee defies the false assumptions about morality and delicacy of contemporary British discourse by addressing directly the reader at the end of the story:

Never yet was there a *young* female seduced from the paths of virtue, who did not grievously repent, and who would not gladly have returned, had an opportunity offered [...] I have known many who were timeously snatched from error; before their *minds* were corrupted, which is not the work of a day; and who turned out characters more exemplary for virtue, and every good quality, than in all likelihood they would have been, had not such misfortune befallen them (‘Basil Lee’: 73-74, emphasis in the original).

Interestingly for a literary-pragmatic analysis concerned with the empathetic movement between Hogg, his cultural circumstances, and the readers of his time, Ian Duncan (2004) notices that although Hogg removed Clifford’s considerations about the British army in the 1821 edition of *Winter Evening Tales*, he kept ‘the Clifford Mackay plot’, even though it had provoked a negative response from contemporary critics. Although Hogg’s collection of *Winter Evening Tales* (1820) had been received very well, three anonymous reviewers judged ‘Basil Lee’ the worst story because its grappling with prostitution and pregnancy out of wedlock offended ‘the best regulated modesty’ (*The Monthly Review*, 1820: 264); while *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* (1820) argued that ‘not a few passages [...] would require an intrepid person to read aloud to boys and virgins’ (p. 154). Duncan argues that ‘it seems that Hogg took care to present the story as a challenge to middle-class morality, not a lapse from it; and to the very end he refused to alter it’ (2004: 534). As Duncan observes, Edinburgh was not ready. Hogg’s failure to observe the principle of selectional politeness by addressing prostitution so openly may have been perceived as a face-threatening act against the positive face of Edinburgh bourgeoisie, whose male members, although prone to see prostitutes outside marriage, preferred to keep their daughters, wives, and sisters in the dark. Regarding ‘Basil Lee’, *The British Critic* claimed that ‘prostitutes and blackguard gentlemen belong to a department of human nature, which is not at all necessary that our wives and daughters should study [...] There are cases in which it is better to be ignorant of vice, than even to detest it’ (1820: 623). Apparently, Hogg failed to strike the balance between bourgeois values and their subversion as, instead of placing Clifford in the background, he presented her as a lady at heart. According to relevance theory, Hogg’s bestowing of dignity upon a prostitute from the Highlands who rehabilitated a Lowlander through marriage

implied a strong 'implicature'. 'The Clifford Mackay plot' may have been perceived as a communicative act intentionally conveyed by Hogg to critique the hypocrisy of the bourgeoisie of his time. The union between Basil and Clifford, in fact, seemingly worked to subvert both the culturally-constructed valour of the Highland soldier and the trope of marriage in bourgeois literature.

5. Conclusion

A stylistic analysis of some passages from James Hogg's novella 'Basil Lee' has shown the complexity of its linguistic features, as the foregrounding of some sentences, their parallelism, and reiteration certainly strike the readers as significant. A literary-pragmatic analysis, however, exposes Hogg's conscious and purposeful use of those linguistic features in an attempt to convey a critique of specific bourgeois values to the readership of his time. Revealingly, an investigation focused on the pragmatics of literary communication, where the text is viewed as a dialogue between author and readers, shows how the 1820s British historical context contributed to shaping Hogg's novella, and how Hogg's text, being replete with subversive meanings, apparently failed to strike the balance between bourgeois values and their subversion. Literary pragmatics also enriches Bakhtin's theories with a more dynamic analysis. Bakhtin's carnival, in fact, may explain *why* Basil Lee's temporary masquerade as a flag subverts the contemporary mystique of Highland masculinity; it does not explain, however, *how* the contrast between Basil Lee's lack of moral values and a prostitute who is, at heart, a lady subverts the hypocrisy of the contemporary national tale, where the marriage between its upper-middle-class protagonists was meant to unite England and Scotland in the imperial project, from which people from the margins were excluded.

ENDNOTES

¹ In *Literature as Communication* (2000) Roger D. Sell quotes Richard Watts (1989) as being ‘perhaps the first scholar to point out that readers, despite the superficial asymmetry of the situation, can refuse to grant the writer a turn. They can leave a book unread’ (Sell 2000:80). Interestingly, James Hogg (1997 [1834]) in one of his essays dedicated to ‘Reviewers’ claimed ‘Sit down to your book as you would to conversation [...] and read to be pleased [...] if he [the author] should fail in those particular points which are suited to your fancy, it is an easy matter to take leave of him (*Lay Sermons*: 104).

² Since space precludes further discussion of relevance theory, for its application to the analysis of literary texts see Pilkington, A. (1991) ‘Poetic effects: A relevance theory perspective’ in R. D. Sell (ed.) *Literary Pragmatics*, pp. 44-61; Pilkington A. (2000) *Poetic Effects: A Relevance Theory Perspective*. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company; see also the special issue on relevance theory, rhetoric and style in *Language and Literature* 5(3) (1996).

³ The performative quality of language was initially formulated by philosopher of language J. L. Austin in the early 1950s, and subsequently developed by J. R. Searle into the well-known speech act theory. Although in the first stage of his research Austin distinguished between constative (descriptive of the world) and performative utterances, in his later years he arrived at the conclusion that all utterances are performative since, as well as describing reality, utterances perform acts. Austin distinguishes between locution (the act of saying something), illocution (the act carried out in the act of saying), and perlocution (the effects of these acts). That is, in performing the locutionary act of ‘Could you open the window?’ the speaker also performs the illocutionary act of making a request which has a perlocutionary effect on the hearer. Austin claims that a performative act fails when its felicity conditions are not met. The locution ‘I now pronounce you husband and wife’ will perform the illocutionary act of ‘marrying’ only when it respects the felicitous conditions of being pronounced by somebody who can legally marry people, between people who are not already married, and in a place where marriage can legally be performed.

⁴ Extreme exponents of anti-essentialist theory, such as Judith Butler, argue that gender identity does not exist outside the acts we perform through language; see Butler (1993). Sedgwick (2003), alternatively, poses a new class of performatives, which she calls ‘periperformatives’, by analysing those utterances placed in the vicinity of the explicit performative, hence adding the notion of spatiality to the speech act, usually thought of in terms of temporality. Deridda and Butler, Sedgwick argues, have investigated the temporal complexities of performativity through the reiteration entailed in ritualised utterances (gender is performed and made appear as natural through its ritualised performance). Sedgwick claims that while an explicit performative such as ‘I dare you’ invokes a tacit consensus between speaker and addressee, the periperformative is a reaction to it on the part of the hearer (2003: 70).

⁵ In developing Austin’s theory on the performative nature of language, Searle clarified the process through which utterances perform speech acts, which Austin had left unexplained. While Austin differentiates the force of an utterance from its meaning, Searle claims that force is just one aspect of meaning. Searle, however, treats speech acts as isolated events whose meaning is not influenced by the surrounding discourse. His speech act theory is too focused on the speaker, as the hearer is seen as a passive interactant who either gets the illocutionary force of an utterance or fails it. For a detailed discussion of both insights and limits of Searle’s speech-act theory see Christie (2000: 105-110).

⁶ Paul Grice argues that in order to understand meaning, a hearer needs to ask what a speaker intends by his or her specific linguistic choices rather than what a chain of words literally means, because communication is a complex process and the sender usually communicates more than what is actually said. Starting from this assumption, Grice formulated the Cooperative Principle of communication which he bases upon four maxims, hence arguing that conversational behaviour is constrained by expectations of Quantity (make your contribution as informative as is required – nor more nor less); of Quality (your contribution must be true); of Relation (be relevant to the topic); of Manner (avoid ambiguity). Grice’s maxims are not so much important for the set of regulative principles he proposes as for how maxims can be flouted in order to generate conversational implicatures, that is, indirect meanings to manipulate communication. For further discussion see Grice, P. (1989) *Studies in the Ways of Words*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

⁷ The principles of politeness and relevance theory will be explained later in this paper.

Primary Text

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