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Francis D. Doucette

Scott, Sainte-Palaye, and the Institution of Sworn Brotherhood



Familiar to readers of Chaucer's *Pardoner's Tale* and *Knight's Tale*, the sworn brotherhood or brotherhood of arms is an underlying structural and thematic device in some of Scott's best known fiction. In the historical age of chivalry this was most often an arrangement or contract between two knights of the same order, who maintained a common ransom fund, divided spoils, defended one another in both peace and war, etc. But the term also refers to a bond wherein two former enemies or rivals cancel hostilities and pledge mutual friendship and protection; and this, in skeleton form, is what Scott has taken over from the literature of the Middle Ages and refashioned for his own ends. Sir Thomas Malory, whose tales Scott faulted for their alleged historical misrepresentations but commended for their "excellent old English" and for "breathing a high tone of chivalry,"¹ depicts just such a reconciliation after the epic battle between Sir Launcelot and Sir Tristram:

"So God me help," said Sir Dinadan, "that same day met Sir Launcelot and Sir Tristram at the same grave of stone. And there was the most mightiest battle that ever was seen in this land betwixt two knights, for they fought more than two hours. And there they both bled so much that all men marvelled that ever they might endure it. And so at

the last, by both their assents, they were made friends and sworn brethren for ever, and no man can judge the better knight. And now is Sir Tristram made a knight of the Round Table, and he sitteth in the seige of the noble knight, Sir Marhaus."²

The historians of chivalry, from earliest times to the present, have devoted considerable attention to the origins and characteristics of knightly brotherhood; and it might be instructive, before turning to Scott's novels, to review some of their observations. Scott's general reliance on the *Chronicles* of Jean Froissart is well known, and no one has called more attention to this indebtedness than Scott himself. "Voilà mon maître!" Scott is reported to have exclaimed when asked to autograph a folio of Froissart in 1826.³ The great fourteenth-century French historian is "the celebrated Froissart"⁴ in Scott's *Tales of a Grandfather*, "always our best and most amusing authority"⁵ in the *Essay on Chivalry*, and in Scott's review of Thomas Johnes's 1804 translation is acclaimed "the most entertaining, and perhaps the most valuable historian of the middle ages."⁶ It is said of young Edward Waverley, whose reading propensities obviously reflect those of Scott himself, that "the splendid pages of Froissart, with his heart-stirring and eye-dazzling descriptions of war and of tournaments, were among his chief favourites;"⁷ and there is a significant mention of Froissart by name in the narrative of *Old Morality* as well. Understandably, then, when Scott in *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* wanted to document the sudden transitions in "the old Border-day" from peace to war, from friendship to hostility, and the reciprocal courtesy and generosity that often thrived in the midst of such flux, he turned to a passage from Lord Berner's edition:

Froissart says of both nations, that "Englyshmen on the one party, and Scottes on the other party, are good men of warre; for when they meet, there is a harde fight without sparynge. There is no hood [*truce*] between them, as long as spears, swords, axes, or daggers will endure, but lay on eche upon uther; and whan they be well beaten, and that the one party hath obtained the victory, they then gloryfye so in theyre dedes of armies, and are so joyfull, that such as be taken they shall be ransomed, or that they go out of the felde; so that shortly eche of them is so content with other, that, at their departyng, curtyslye they will say, God thank you."

(*Poetical Works*, VI, 163-64)

But there is another history of chivalry written much closer to Scott's own day that has all but been ignored by students of Scott. When, in 1817, Scott was hurrying to fulfill his assignment for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, the piece now known as the *Essay on Chivalry*, he specifically requested this work from his publisher Archibald Constable: "I wish Mr. Napier would be so kind as to send me the *Memoires de la Chevalerie* by Mons. de St. Palaye. I shall want it to help out my promised article which must now be thought upon."⁸ Scott had actually come across this relatively unknown work many years before, and certainly before the composition of any of the *Waverley Novels*. No precise date can be established, but it could have been no later than 1805, the year that Scott's lengthy review of Johnes's new translation of Froissart, containing many laudatory references to Sainte-Palaye, appeared in the *Edinburgh Review*.

First published in two volumes in 1759 (a third volume, devoted mainly to hunting, appeared in 1781, the year of his death), and translated into English in 1784, Sainte-Palaye's treatise, for all its obscurity then and today, seems to have reached a number of influential historians. Gibbon cites him as one of his sources in his digression on chivalry in *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*; Joseph Ritson refers to him briefly in his *Dissertation on Romance and Minstrelsy*; Charles Mills both applauds and attacks him in the Preface to his 1825 *History of Chivalry*; and in the mid-nineteenth century Kenelm Digby makes important use of him in *The Broad Stone of Honour: or the True Sense and Practice of Chivalry*. Given the reverent tone that the author consistently maintains to his subject, and bearing in mind as well the problems of France in 1759, it is tempting to suspect Sainte-Palaye, who became a member of the prestigious Académie française in 1758, of trying to recruit the past chivalric glories of the nation in order to prop up and extol the *ancien régime*. Mills strongly hints of this when he charges that Sainte-Palaye treats "kighthood as if it had been the ornament merely of his own country."⁹ But, the question of original intention aside, no reader of the work could deny that it is permeated with examples of chivalrous generosity and sworn brotherhood, ideals Scott held dear, for a reason to be seen shortly.

The model of the tournament, according to Sainte-Palaye, with its formalized rules, prohibitions, and rewards, was at the heart of the chivalrous way of life. Carried over into other, less regulated activities, this model spawned the idea of the humane treatment of prisoners: "These examples of humanity, and the lessons of generosity, so often repeated in the tournaments, were not forgotten, even in the fury of war, and

amidst the carnage of battle--the knights were as compassionate after, as inflexible before victory."¹⁰ Sainte-Palaye's account of the brotherhood of arms differs little from versions widely accepted today, although in his examples he stresses far more the idealistic rather than the economic aspects. "The brother in arms," he informs us, "was to be the enemy of those who were enemies of his brother, and the friend of all those who were friends to him; both of them were to divide their present and future wealth, and employ both that and their lives for the deliverance of each other, if taken prisoner" (p. 215). And he cites the particular circumstances of how one of these brotherhoods was formed:

Olivier de la Marche, in his Memoirs, gives a pleasing instance of generosity in James de Lalain and Piétois, two knights, in 1450, who, in a combat on foot, having overthrown each other, were raised up again by the assistants, and brought to the judges, who caused them to embrace, in sign of peace; and when Lalain, from modesty, would have sent his bracelet to Piétois, according to the convention agreed on for the peace, Piétois declared, "that having been overthrown as well as Lalain, he considered himself as equally obliged to give him his bracelet." This new combat of politeness ended by saying no more about the bracelet, and by accepting from each other a much richer gift; for a strict bond of friendship was formed between these generous enemies. (pp. 133-34)

Undeniably, such magnanimity was not the practice always, and chivalry assuredly had its darker side. Sainte-Palaye, for example, in celebrating the gracious respect paid by the Black Prince of Wales to his royal prisoner, King John of France, says nothing about the Prince's responsibility for the infamous and grisly sack of Limoges, in which, in Froissart's account, "Upwards of three thousand men, women and children were put to death that day."¹¹ But even Richard Barber, whose *Knight & Chivalry* (1970) is one of the most thoroughly researched works on the subject and who maintains throughout a careful distinction between romance and fact, admits to the exceptional character of chivalrous brotherhood:

Yet, despite the financial basis of such agreements, brotherhood-in-arms acquired a veneer of idealism. Its deepest roots may go back to the primitive oath of blood-brotherhood, in which blood was mingled in a cup. At its highest, it was a bond of alliance second only to those of family and liege homage, and acquired a special mystique

of its own. Brothers-in-arms were supposedly "bound to one another in such a way, that each will stand by the other to the death if need be, saving his honour," in both counsel and action, and such a bond could sometimes be forged without a formal oath. The curious custom of fighting in mines--dug at a siege to bring down the wall of a fortress--was one such occasion. If a mine and countermine met, a skirmish would often ensue; and this often became a form of tournament. Knights who fought in such a combat became brothers-in-arms by the mere fact of having taken part, even though on opposing sides.¹²

"In Scottish, one might say in British, history," remarked H. J. C. Grierson, "Scott has been the great reconciler."¹³ To reflect to what extent this is true, one has only to glance at Grierson's list of alien or opposing cultures and traditions--Highlands and Lowlands, Celt and Angle, Scotland and England, Britain and the Continent, Presbyterian and Episcopalian, rich and poor--and like a torrent the novels and poems of Scott begin to crowd one's brain. Reconciliation, indeed, is the theme in Scott that dwarfs all others and the primary reason that the sworn brotherhood looms so large. To be sure, the characters so related do not refer to themselves in this manner; nor, seemingly, do they have any awareness that they extend and symbolize a medieval institution. But in their motivations and actions there is no mistaking the similarity they bear to the sworn brotherhood enshrined by Sainte-Palaye, Malory, and others.

Two of Scott's most compelling and enduring novels, *Waverley* and *Old Mortality*, despite their background of social upheaval can be read as little more than sustained dramatizations of reciprocal generosity between individuals divided by war but united by the recognition of each other's gallantry, compassion, and high-principled motivation. In *Waverley*, which Scott himself tells us in the Introduction is really the story of the "mutual protection afforded by Waverley and Talbot to each other," the reciprocal generosity of Colonel Talbot and Edward Waverley bridges the political divisions of Jacobite and Hanoverian, England and Scotland, and affirms the value of human life against the claims of "imaginary loyalty" and military expediency. In *Old Mortality* the even deeper divisions of Covenanter and Cavalier, church and crown, provoke both sides to fanaticism and atrocity, and the only language of appeasement is the self-denying generosity practiced by Henry Morton and Lord Evandale, who, though opponents in both love and war, save each other's life so often that the reader is almost forced to keep count.

What generally triggers and cements these unspoken brotherhoods in Scott's novels is a battlefield rescue or other act of disinterested valor or magnanimous intercession. So high, in fact, did Scott prize this virtue that he even commended it in Napoleon, calling attention to the youthful emperor's "generosity towards a gallant but unfortunate enemy"¹⁴ for the way he accepted the surrender of Mantua in 1797 from Austrian field marshal Wurmser after a long siege. Courageous Colonel Talbot, "standing alone and unsupported" at the battle of Prestonpans, disdaining flight, and about to be cut down by the Highlanders en masse, arouses the same sentiment in Waverley. No less important in these heroic acts, of course, is the chivalrous principle of fair play, the refusal to take a man at a disadvantage. Roland Graeme defines this virtue better than any other character in Scott: "'So please you, my lord,' said Roland, 'I think my master himself would not have stood by, and seen an honourable man borne to earth by odds, if his single arm could help him. Such, at least, is the lesson we were taught in chivalry, at the Castle of Avenal'" (*The Abbot*, pp. 239-40). In a similar vein Count Robert distinguishes himself in the pivotal battle with Hereward, "generously relinquishing victory when he might have achieved it by an additional blow" (*Count Roberts of Paris*, p. 562). More familiar, perhaps, is Ivanhoe's conduct toward De Grantmesnil at the tournament of Ashby-de-le-Zouche, riding by with lance upraised, without striking a blow, rather than capitalize on his adversary's violent and untractable horse. Ivanhoe even offers De Grantmesnil a second chance. But "this De Grantmesnil declined, avowing himself vanquished as much by the courtesy as by the address of his opponent" (*Ivanhoe*, p. 119). The incomparable Knight of La Mancha, finding himself in the identical situation, *seizes* the opportunity:

At this fortunate juncture Don Quixote found his adversary embarrassed by his horse and concerned with his lance, which he either could not, or had not time to, put into its rest. Taking no heed of his embarrassments, however, Don Quixote attacked the Knight of the Mirrors, in complete safety and without the slightest risk, and with such force that, almost unintentionally, he threw him over his horse's crupper to the ground, giving him such a fall that he moved neither hand nor foot, but gave every appearance of being dead.¹⁵

Even General Campbell and Charles Edward strike up a kind of brotherhood in the poignant closing moments of *Redgauntlet*.

Restrained, sympathetic General Campbell adds to his offer of unconditional pardon to the Jacobites by graciously assisting the Pretender into the boat. The words of gratitude wrested from the disillusioned but not despairing Charles Edward, about to leave the shores of Britain forever, epitomize the power of magnanimity to conciliate and appease:

"You are not sorry, General, to do me this last act of courtesy," said the Chevalier; "and, on my part, I thank you for it. You have taught me the principle on which men on the scaffold feel forgiveness and kindness even for their executioner. Farewell!"

(*Redgauntlet*, p. 634)

Waverley and Talbot in *Waverley*, Morton and Lord Evandale in *Old Mortality*, Saladin and King Richard in *The Talisman*, Hereward and Count Robert in *Count Robert of Paris*, Mordaunt and Cleveland in *The Pirate*--these are some of the most prominent unspoken brotherhoods in Scott, but the list is by no means exhausted. At least two distinguishing features can readily be discerned. Almost invariably each partner saves the life of the other, frequently more than once and always in disregard of his own life; and the pair usually bring together the two cultures or traditions that are at odds in the novel. Scott, however, should not be taken as any "formula" novelist simply because he resorts to this pattern so often. For example, "It was chiefly owing to Major Bridgenorth's mediation, that Sir Geoffrey's life was saved after the battle of Worcester" (*Peveril of the Peak*, p. 6). But these two neighbors and antagonists who, like Morton and Lord Evandale, represent the same opposition of Roundhead and Cavalier, drift further apart rather than closer together as the novel progresses, although there is a kind of surrogate reconciliation in the tender affection of their offspring. Far more tragic is what happens between the Scotsman Robin Oig and the Englishman Harry Wakefield in "The Two Drovers." Despite the close friendship of the pair, and despite the fact too that Robin had once saved Harry from drowning, a dispute over want of courage leads first to angry words, then to blows, and finally to violent murder.

In this regard, we might recall what Scott enunciated in the Introduction to *Ivanhoe* about poetic justice and its relation to reality:

But a glance on the great picture of life will shew, that the duties of self-denial, and the sacrifice of passion to principle, are seldom thus remunerated; and that the

internal consciousness of their high-minded discharge of duty, produces on their own reflections a more adequate recompense, in the form of that peace which the world cannot give or take away. (p. xxxix)

It would be a mistake, thus, to view Scott's trust in Sainte-Palaye and like sources as absolute. He was an accomplished historian himself, "an antiquary many years before I thought of being a poet;"¹⁶ and his novels, for all their grounding in history, should not be confused with history. Moreover, these oft-quoted remarks from the Introduction to *Ivanhoe* must be seen in context. Scott was setting down no key to unlock his writing, he was merely trying to anticipate and nullify the objections that generations of readers have made to the ending of *Ivanhoe*, the marriage of Wilfred and Rowena, which occasioned one of the liveliest of Thackeray's burlesques. Scott's light-hearted, even frivolous attitude toward the craft of writing (of which the Introductory Epistle to *The Fortunes of Nigel* is perhaps the best example) borders on the legendary; but anyone who thereby assumes that self-denial, magnanimity, and the other attributes of the sworn brotherhood do not count for a great deal in the awarding of happiness and prosperity in the *Waverley Novels* is very much misinformed. Indeed, many distinguished critics have elevated Scott's didactic purpose above all other considerations. "Scott may have nothing to teach us about life or its mysteries," observed W. H. Hudson. "But to have lived in his world is to have enjoyed a splendid moral education."¹⁷

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NOTES

¹ *The Poetical Works of Sir Walter Scott, Bart.*, 12 vols. (Edinburgh, 1834), V (*Sir Tristram*), 81. Subsequent references are to this edition and are indicated parenthetically.

² *Le Morte D'Arthur*, ed. Janet Cowen, 2 vols. (London, 1969), II, 33.

³ Una Pope-Hennessy, *Sir Walter Scott* (London, 1948), p. 100.

⁴ *Tales of a Grandfather, Fourth Series; Being Stories Taken from the History of France Inscribed to Master John Hugh Lock-*

hart, 2 vols. (Philadelphia, 1851), II, 93.

⁵ *The Miscellaneous Prose Works of Sir Walter Scott, Bart.*, 6 vols. (Edinburgh, 1827), VI, 114-15.

⁶ *The Edinburgh Review*, 5 (January 1805), 347.

⁷ *The Waverley Novels*, "Border Edition," ed. Andrew Lang, 24 vols. (London, 1898), I (*Waverley*), 23. Subsequent references are to this edition and are indicated parenthetically.

⁸ *The Letters of Sir Walter Scott*, ed. H. J. C. Grierson, 12 vols. (London, 1932-38), IV, 480.

⁹ *The History of Chivalry, or Knighthood and its Times*, 2 vols. (London, 1825), I, v.

¹⁰ Jean-Baptiste de la Curne de Sainte-Palaye, *Memoirs of Ancient Chivalry* (London, 1784), p. 132. This is an anonymous translation of the first edition published in Paris, 1759. I have modernized the older spelling of "f" for script "s." Subsequent references are to this edition and are indicated parenthetically.

¹¹ Quoted in Richard Barber's *The Knight & Chivalry* (London, 1970), p. 202.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 207.

¹³ *Sir Walter Scott 1771-1832: An Edinburgh Keepsake*, ed. Allan Frazer (Edinburgh, 1971), p. 19.

¹⁴ *The Life of Napoleon Buonaparte, Emperor of the French, with a Preliminary View of the French Revolution*, 9 vols. (Edinburgh, 1827), III, 250-52. But Scott could be harsh with Napoleon, too. See *Letters*, X, 254-55, where he labels him "the most selfish man that ever lived. Not *selfish* in the [usual] meaning of the word because he could combine with his personal feelings the weal of nations. But if he did great things for France or Italy it was because they were his OWN...."

¹⁵ Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, *The Adventures of Don Quixote*, trans. J. M. Cohen (London, 1972), p. 557.

¹⁶ *Letters*, II, 56.

¹⁷ *The Life of Sir Walter Scott* (London, 1901), p. 291.