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On The Afterlives of Walter Scott
Interview with Ann Rigney

In The Afterlives of Walter Scott: Memory on the Move (2012) Ann Rigney argues that Scott’s oeuvre ‘provided a blueprint for imagining a relationship to the past that was eminently suitable to conditions of life in the nineteenth century’. (Rigney 2012: 4) During a seminar for one of my classes we - that is, Ann Rigney my fellow classmates, and myself - talked about cultural memory and literature in regard to Rigney’s book. Scott’s literary works were highly popular in the nineteenth century; they inspired many theatrical adaptations and there still are many recurrences of the name ‘Scott’ and ‘Waverley’ (the title of one of his best-known novels) in street- and place-names. Scott’s oeuvre formed a key to a collective identity, in particular for the relatively ‘young’ United States, on which Rigney elaborates in the third and fourth chapter of her book when she examines Scott’s famous Ivanhoe and the cultural adaptations of this work. Scott was once a household name, but he is now in the process of being forgotten. How does such considerable cultural activity around a literary work fade away?

In an introduction to a collection of essays about cultural memory, you and Astrid Erll state that you ‘see literature as having three roles to play in the production of cultural memory. These roles comprise 1) literature as a medium of remembrance; 2) literature as an object of remembrance; and 3) literature as a medium for observing the production of cultural memory.’ (Erll & Rigney 2006: 111) How would you say the first two roles are ‘performed’ by Scott’s Ivanhoe?

First of all, there has been a lot of discussion about the invention of the historical novel and Scott as its father. A lot of feminist scholarship has shown that there were many precursors to Scott, even though Scott is generally viewed as the father of the genre

1 Meaning that ‘[w]orks of literature help produce collective memories by recollecting the past in the form of narratives. This raises the question as to how the writing (genre conventions, points of view, metaphors, and so on) shapes our views of the past’. (Erll & Rigney 2006: 112)
2 This is ‘the way in which literature establishes a “memory of its own” in the form of intertextual relations that give new cultural life to old texts’. (Erll & Rigney 2006: 113)
3 This means that ‘[b]y imaginatively representing acts of recollection, literature makes remembrance observable. [...] [s]een in this light, literature might be called a “mimesis” of memory’. (Erll & Rigney 2006: 113)
since he was the most successful. In a sense his work was the Fifty Shades of Grey of 1814; there was less sex in it, but he made the historical novel really prominent. Of all his novels Ivanhoe is the most popular; it is the one that has ‘survived’ for two hundred years. And my question was why Ivanhoe in particular did survive; part of the answer being the fact that there were so much re-mediations. This can be seen in light of the notion of popular history: people began to see themselves as having an existence that was historical in nature. In the case of Ivanhoe, literature as a medium of memory means that history is turned into a story - a story where longings, romance and struggles are present.

A heritage?
Yes, a heritage, but also a heritage that was alive with drama. Instead of just historical books stating facts, the novel was somehow filled with characters that were exciting and attractive, which made history come more to life for many people. Thus the historical novel became a very strong medium of memory. Around 1830, three quarters of the novels that were being published were historical, which is astonishing considering the fact that the ‘first’ historical novel [Scott’s Waverley, red. ] dates from 1814. However, by 1840 people had grown tired of it and decided they were going to do something different. There has been a revival in postmodernism and in the last twenty decades. So the historical novel as a medium of memory has been incredibly important, but in a certain way its role was taken over by Hollywood. I think many of the great blockbusters, like Braveheart, Rob Roy – which was an adaption of Scott – and other historical dramas are all versions of this idea of historical fiction. That is what I mean by ‘medium of memory’: we all have ideas about how people lived in the past, but we got those ideas mostly from novels. Take for example Jane Austen’s oeuvre and the way we think of regency England. Of course Persuasion and Pride and Prejudice are not historical novels, but nowadays we read them historically.

How would you describe the particular cultural and political context of the nineteenth century or, more narrowly, Victorian England, the time in which Scott’s work first became so popular? How is this context important for his novels?
I have just come back from a conference about the year 1814, the year in which Waverley was first published. Georg Lukács, the Marxist literary critic who wrote the first book on the historical novel, has written about this incredibly exciting period. In the 1930’s people were looking down on historical novels as a popular genre. Lukács however, argued that this genre was really very important as a medium, not only for our understanding of history, but for our sense of having a place in history. He argued that people around the period of the French revolution found that their lives were deeply involved with, and entangled in, huge events happening around them: they realized their position as agents of history. Scott’s novels contain this idea – that history is something that we make ourselves – as well. His novels not only depict characters who
are alive and who have longings and romances, but also characters whose lives are caught up in circumstances which were not of their own making – which is also Marx’s definition of history. The characters in his novels often follow their own desires – as do the characters of Jane Austen’s novels – but they are also caught up in wars and battles; caught up in history. Lukács explains the rise of the historical novel against this background, and I think his analysis is still extremely fertile.

Ivanhoe is Scott’s most adapted and remediated work. In your book you examine why this particular work was so very procreative and how it was adapted and not just simply ‘repeated’. You state that: ‘[t]he many media that have carried stories of Ivanhoe [...] worked in a mutually reinforcing way in turning the novel into a collective text in an international arena that people know in its broad outlines without necessarily knowing the original or its place in Scott’s oeuvre.’ (Rigney 2012: 80) You argue that this remembering says something about the people doing the remembering, as well as about the properties of the text itself. Part of your argument on why this particular text was so ‘procreative’, is the fact that it involves a couple of tensions: Saxon-Norman, modernization-tradition, realism-romance and history and romance. Can you explain a little more about how you understand this?

In answer to my question why it was Ivanhoe that became so popular, I started to look closely at what texts mean to people. In her work on Adaptation, Linda Hutcheon,4 explains that people are appropriators, indigenizing certain texts by linking those to their own circumstances. I was very much struck by the fact that, while Scott himself was considered to be politically conservative, defending the status quo in Great Britain, Ivanhoe was taken up all across Europe and was actually turned into a text of emancipation. In Belgium you have Consience’s Leeuw van Vlaanderen (1838), which is a version of Ivanhoe and an attempt to put Flemish history – the glory days of the Middle Ages – on the map. In the beginning of October [2015, red.] I will be talking about Scott’s time in India, on which I worked recently. I will show how he is appropriated in Indian indigenous cultures in the service of an anti-colonial message.

Thus, one way in which you could explain Ivanhoe’s procreativity, its popularity, its longevity, lies in the fact that other people found it useful for their own purposes. In many cases they even completely adapted and distorted his work, which is fascinating in its own way and perhaps indicative of the fact that Scott is part of popular culture rather than elite literary culture, while as a person he belonged to the latter group. However, I did not feel that this was enough of an explanation; I still wondered about what was in the text itself that made people want to rewrite it. I wanted to bring down what seemed to me fundamental, namely the fact Ivanhoe was about tensions. It was a romance and at the same time it was about intercultural conflict, about how the Saxons

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4 Linda Hutcheon wrote A Theory of Adaptation (Routledge, 2006).
relate to the Normans, but also about how Christians relate to Jews. These contradictions present in the novel are a source of its power, because even when you think you have got hold of it, it can never be reduced to something simple.

Interesting in this case is the story of Rebecca and Rowena: readers found the ending of Ivanhoe – when Ivanhoe marries Rowena – so unsatisfactory that it resulted in many adaptions with different endings in theatrical re-enactments and other texts. Do you think that we might react in the same way to a similar text nowadays, that we experience an ending of a story as unsatisfying and thus create new endings for ourselves?

I think this can be seen in some versions of fan-fiction. Endings are so important, but some so unsettling, that you want them to be different. And I think Scott’s work also generated a sort of fan-fiction in this way. People liked it so much and became so involved with it that they changed it, and used it, and re-enacted it. There were Waverley balls in the 1820’s where people dressed as characters from the novel. And it is this appeal to the imagination, to fantasy, that I find very interesting. This is something that we think of as very contemporary, but if you look at the beginnings of other novels that were popular in the nineteenth century, there are early versions of fan-fiction to be found there too. For example, Charles Dickens’ Great Expectations; Dickens ended up writing two different versions of the end of the story because people did not like his first one. Both Dickens and Scott are examples of a sort of interactivity between author, text and reader prior to the age of the Internet.

In the fourth chapter you talk about adaptations of Ivanhoe in particular by the South of the United States. You say that: ‘Scott’s work provided some of the language with which the South identified itself...’ (Rigney 2012: 114). The popularity of Ivanhoe also caused an interest in Scott’s poetry and the creation of neologisms. Scott’s oeuvre was preoccupied with cultural differences and power struggles between progressive groups and traditional ones, in this manner it resonated with many contemporary concerns of the South and functioned as a model for understanding. However, the appropriation of Ivanhoe by the Southern States was highly selective: Scott’s work portrays the Normans as oppressive, and as trying to bring about change. Between the groups, Ivanhoe had a mediating role. How does the emphasis on the character of Rowena (as opposed to the earlier emphasis on Rebecca in the English theatrical adaptations) engage with the opposition between North and South and their supposed different heritages?

I think these are cases of appropriation that serve the agendas of local communities – another example of indigenization. In this case the text is being appropriated from the perspective of the confederate South, and from this point of view Rowena as a blond Saxon fitted the purpose of the adaptation much better than the Jewess Rebecca who was elsewhere the most popular character. Even though I am not sure about the anti-
Semitism in the confederate cause, it was certainly a racist ideology and I think that fits with the reduced emphasis on Rebecca. In a way, some readers are irresponsible readers. As the Confederate appropriations of Scott show, people are quite willing to do violence to the text, thinking that they are showing their appreciation of it while actually being very selective in what they are saying and what they are not.

**So, would you see this as a kind of misreading? Is there such a thing as misreading?**

When I talked about the influence of Scott on the Ku Klux Klan, a lot of people who liked Scott were offended. I said that the fiery cross, which is carried by the Ku Klux Klan, originated in a poem from Scott; I had established that this was actually the case. People were very nervous about this because the idea of Scott as a great writer did not correspond with the notion of him being fed into the ideological practices of the Ku Klux Klan. I think it confronts us with the issue – indeed the problem – that he inspired both emancipatory and reactionary reworkings. This is troubling since as literary scholars we usually presume that good writers are always on the side of equality. I made sure to say that this was a pathological reading, because I did not want to say that Scott caused the Ku Klux Klan.

**Or the Civil War, for that matter.**

Yes, exactly as Mark Twain said that Scott had caused the Civil War. These are very dangerous terms. And yet, there must be some appeal in the book that helped sparked the Ku Klux Klan, one of which must have been the ability to adapt historical or carnivalesque roles and to dress up. Yes, this is a misreading, and not just because I disagree with their racist practices, but because this particular reading does not do justice to what Scott actually says. If you actually read his work carefully, you see that he always has someone mediate between opposed groups. I do think however that you can never stop misreadings. This is the whole role of culture: people pick up what they want to pick up.

The fact that the re-enactments and appropriations of Scott’s work reached much further and apparently served very different intentions than those of the original texts is remarkable. Do you see this as a definitive argument that literary scholars should look past the author’s intentions? And is your research an appeal for studying literature in a broader cultural context?

Yes, I certainly think so. The social life of texts is something I have been interested in for a long time. The idea of the literary outside of literature; that when we read we are actually performing a text and we can perform it in different ways even when we no longer have the book in front of us. That is something I find incredibly fascinating. We have to look at different forms of productive reception, rather than simply observing the literature that is **there**. I believe that there is still room for the study of individual texts, but I think we have moved beyond this approach in some respects. When we are
interested in culture, we are interested in something that is moving, which is changing, which is being appropriated and which involves the interaction between people and stories. There are also ways of living out the scenarios which we get from books. I found that in Scott’s case, there is a whole way from the text, to the adaption in theatre, to adaptation in movies, to paintings, but also various forms of appropriations in domestic interiors, in clothing – the fact that people are wearing Tartan – all the way to the structuring of emotions in terms of what you want and what you desire. To me, these are all variations on the literary text, that is: the cultural context.

You talked about how Scott’s work was received by his contemporaries and how they dressed up as characters from his novels. Can Ivanhoe be seen as a form of escapism for Scott’s contemporaries.
Yes, I think it was a form of escape, especially the reception of Ivanhoe. That novel seems to appeal, like Jane Austen’s novels, to a romantic idea of historical times; the idea that you can somehow find a world which is not the world of reality, but a world which is that of hopes and of high ideals, and of love and where you can be dressed differently.

Can he then also be seen as the father of fantasy?
Yes, I guess he could be seen as the father of many things. I think one of the really interesting questions about this whole idea of fan-fiction and fantasy is that some books and some movies seem to provoke a response which is way beyond just simply that of an aesthetic reaction. You can take Star Wars as an example, which is one of those fictions which provides not just a story, but a whole world, or even a whole universe – it is not just an extension of our world, but a completely different one. There are Star Wars conventions where people pay a huge amount of money, and they go all dressed up and play out their Star Wars. And I guess there must be other films and books which have this same type of all-round quality to it. A friend of mine is a real Tolkien-fan and he started learning Elvish when he was about fifteen. Lord of the Rings is so incredibly detailed; readers have access to the alphabet and the language developed by Tolkien to make new texts. In this way, it is not only the story, or the world that exists in the book, but a world that goes beyond it. And I think these are certain kinds of texts, often fantasy or science fiction, but also in this curious case Ivanhoe, a historical novel, which arouse the very strange form of totally immersive reception.

What were some of the reactions to your book about Scott, what were the responses of your fellow scholars?
The response was very positive. For many people it was a new way of looking at literature, rather than just being aware of how omnipresent it was. I was very interested when people started going beyond my work and started doing their own research on Scott place-names. I think of culture as something that is infectious, as something that is constantly there because it is reproduced. It is never ‘there, there’, it is always only
there when it is reproduced, when people are doing things to it. And I think in a similar way about the reactions to my book; when I see people doing things to it, I think that they have gotten the point. A lot of the reactions to the book came from Scotland, because of course Scott is the big Scottish author. At the same time the Scottish people have been a little bit put out by the fact that I have been concerned with the question of obsolescence. A lot of literary criticism is based on the idea that ‘it is a wonderful book and I want to show how wonderful it is’. Of course, I do think Scott is an amazing writer, but nobody is really concerned with the notion of when things die out – we always presume that literature is immortal. A lot of people haven’t even read Scott, whereas a lot of them have heard of *Ivanhoe*. I was also interested in how we deal with extinction as cultural scholars, because we are so used to reviving things and to emphasizing that they will always be there. People have criticized me for being too harsh on Scott. Of course, his statue is still there and there are still courses where they read *Waverley*, but compared to the nineteenth century when everybody in Europe and the English speaking world knew of Scott and waited for the ship to arrive with his latest work, he is now relatively unpopular. That world is no longer there. How then do we deal with this rise and fall of literatures?

**Literature**


Sir Walter Scott (1771 - 1832) was once a household name, but is now largely forgotten. This book explores how Scott's work became an all-pervasive point of reference for cultural memory and collective identity in the nineteenth century, and why it no longer has this role. Ann Rigney breaks new ground in memory studies and the study of literary reception by examining the d Sir Walter Scott (1771 - 1832) was once a household name, but is now largely forgotten. This book explores how Scott's work became an all-pervasive point of reference for cultural memory and collective identity in ... Â Be the first to ask a question about The Afterlives of Walter Scott. Lists with This Book. This book is not yet featured on Listopia. Acknowledgements The multiple; afterlives of Walter Scott have taken me into the most unexpected of intellectual places and lured me into odd corners of multiple libraries and odd regions of the Internet. In the process I have incurred debts to many individuals and several institutions. Â I cannot mention everyone who contributed generously in this way, often on the most unlikely of occasions, so must be content with expressing my general gratitude to all those willing to engage with what at times did seem like a very quirky pursuit. Nevertheless, some individuals deserve especial mention for what turned out to be particularly valuable leads: Els Andringa, Mary Ellen Brown, Harald Hendrix, Brian Lambkin, Liedeke Plate, Ann Rowland, Marco de Waard, and William Uricchio. Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832) was once a household name, but is now largely forgotten. This book explores how Scott's work became an all-pervasive point of reference for cultural memory and collective identity in the nineteenth century, and why it no longer has this role. Â “a valuable extension of recent scholarship on the role of Scott's fiction in the development of the nation state and modernity” --David Buchanan, Journal of Victorian Culture. “Rigney explores the “cultural importance and excitement generated by [Scott’s] work”...At its heart this book is a study of memory and forgetting.” - -D.A. Henningfeld, Choice. “As its title promises, this book advances the fields of literary reception, cultural memory, and poetic afterlife. Rarely have I so enjoyed a work of scholarship. Sir Walter Scott, 1st Baronet FRSE FSA Scot (15 August 1771 â€“ 21 September 1832) was a Scottish historical novelist, poet, playwright, and historian. Many of his works remain classics of both English-language literature and Scottish literature. Famous titles include The Lady of the Lake (narrative poem) and the novels Waverley, Old Mortality (or The Tale of Old Mortality), Rob Roy, The Heart of Mid-Lothian, The Bride of Lammermoor, and Ivanhoe.