

“It may be verifyit that thy wit is thin”: Interpreting Older Scots Flyting through Hip Hop Aesthetics

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Poetic invective traditions have developed across many cultures throughout history.¹ This study examines Older Scots flyting, a little known instance of medieval poetic invective. The *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* defines this tradition as “a kind of contest practised by the Scottish poets of the sixteenth century, in which two persons assailed each other alternately with tirades of abusive verse.” Poetic flyting among the Scottish *makars*, or poets, seems to have been inspired by a broader culture of flyting in Scottish society of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (Todd 2002:236). But very few formal poetic flyting texts have survived, and since the late eighteenth century scholars have been baffled by this tradition (Lord Hailes 1770:274; MacKay 1893:cxiv; Scott 1966:175). The extinct tradition of Scottish flyting bears a striking resemblance to American Hip Hop battle rap, a modern day manifestation of poetic invective that developed in the late 1970s among African-American youths in New York City.² Adam Bradley (2009) describes this poetic phenomenon as “a verbal cutting contest that prizes wit and wordplay above all else” (177). By comparing Older Scots flyting with Hip Hop battle rap we hope to recover something of the tone and purpose of the medieval tradition, namely, that the poets who engaged in these public invectives were actually amicable rivals competing for increased court status and wealth.³

Foley (2002:61-62) observes that the act of textualizing oral poetry is intrinsically antithetical. The scholar of flyting, who depends solely on written text, must come to terms with the permanently distant and disjointed context of the flyting texts (45-50, 63-64). In order to

¹ Bawcutt 1983:5, 1992:136; Bradley 2009:176; Gray 1984:278-86; Hesk 2006, 2007; Rosen and Marks 1999 all discuss invective traditions and their widespread presence in many cultures.

² See Dimitriadis 1996 for a discussion of the early culture of Hip Hop, particularly the way in which performance can be used to trace the development of Hip Hop culture. Throughout this essay, we have capitalized “Hip Hop” to reflect the notion of it as a cultural movement, whereas rap is just one element of this culture, which also includes dance and art.

³ The label “medieval” here is relatively fluid: in each European vernacular the medieval period covers slightly different dates. As one moves from Southern to Northern Europe the beginning of the early modern era begins increasingly late. In Scots literature, whose earliest recorded text dates from around 1375, the medieval period lasts until the latter half of the sixteenth century and the linguistic term “Middle Scots” runs right up to 1600 (Aitken, McDiarmid, and Johnson 1977). Discussions of the specifically *medieval* practice of flyting, medieval Scottish literature, and William Dunbar as a medieval writer can be found in Gray 1984; Lyall 1983, 1989; and Bawcutt 1983, 1992; among others.

recover some of this context, we will demonstrate the thematic and stylistic parallels shared by flyting and battle rap and use this relationship to explore further the lost flyting performances. By examining live recordings and interviews we have found that the emcees discussed here have competed in these battles for reasons at times surprising: all express respect for their opponents and attest to the fact that their battles were meant to determine linguistic and artistic supremacy. We argue that flyting shares this essentially constructive purpose with battle rap.

In a recent historical study Todd (2002) sets kirk session records of public flyting in relation to the wider context of Protestant culture in Early Modern Scotland. Flyting seems to have transcended gender and social bounds: cases are recorded from all levels of society, between those of different social ranks, and between the sexes (232-36). Todd makes the plausible assertion that flyting was not a subversive practice—rather it served as a formalized mode of initiating public involvement in the resolution of conflict (235-37). Much like the flytings composed by the Scottish makars, public flytings at the local level were highly formulaic, and insults tended to be thrown in pairs or triads, to use alliteration, to depend on expanding themes, and respondents generally mirrored insults thrown by the first participant in slightly altered language (237-41). Kirk session records of this kind only appear after the Reformation of 1560, but the existence of early sixteenth-century poetic flyting suggests that public flyting was a common practice in Scotland as early as the late fifteenth century.

Priscilla Bawcutt's 1983 paper, "The Art of Flyting," was the first modern study exclusively focused on the tradition of flyting.⁴ Prior to this, discussion of flyting was largely confined to the notes of critical editions. Flyting has not always been deemed obscure and too rude for print: the tradition remained popular until the eighteenth century. But Lord Hailes voiced deep contempt for this kind of poetry in his *Ancient Scottish Poems* (1770) and this seems to have set the tone thereafter, with flyting poems most often either ignored or incurring further criticism (274).⁵ Although early twentieth-century poets such as W. H. Auden and T. S. Eliot recognized the beauty of flyting (Bawcutt 1992:221-22), their interest was purely aesthetic admiration; and in 1966 Tom Scott observed that flyting produced "the most repellent poem known to me in any language" (175).

Rap has fared better than flyting, although it has only recently become the subject of literary criticism. Like flyting, its "repellent" language seems to have discourage scholarship and Shusterman observes that many critics have dismissed rap lyrics as "crude and simple-minded . . . the rhymes raucous, repetitive, and frequently raunchy" (1991:613). Pate's preface to *In the Heart of the Beat* (2010) calls attention to the defensive stance commonly adopted by Bradley (2009) and Shusterman (1992), among other scholars of Hip Hop poetics: "when the general public turns to discuss rap, it is almost never about the surprising skill and power of these poets. It is usually about a profane idea or action that is described in one of these poems" (Pate

⁴ See also Bawcutt 1992:221-22 and Gray 1984. Critics often use the term "flyting" in reference to other medieval and early Renaissance English invective forms, with varying degrees of accuracy. Cochran reasonably employs the term flyting to describe insult contests in the Mystery Plays, "these comic exchanges are the dramatic equivalents to flytings . . . which ultimately derive from the insult contests of ritual and festivity" (1979:186), but Eric Nebeker inaccurately applies it as a label for "for public, text-based discourse" (2011:5) that ranges from "appropriate public speech to almost childish insult and mockery" (1).

⁵ See also MacKay 1893:cxiv.

2010:xvii). Scholars have recently begun to expand beyond the study of Hip Hop history, development, and socio-political contexts to examine the poetics of this tradition in their own right.⁶ Despite the expanding interest in rap poetics, the phenomena of rap battles and cyphers (a collaborative freestyle circle that, at times, develops into a battle) are often neglected (Alim 2012:552).

Flytings enjoyed popularity in their age and for centuries thereafter, but as with much of Older Scots literature there is not a large corpus of original texts available to scholars. “The Flyting of Dunbar and Kennedie” is the earliest surviving Scottish poetic flyting, probably composed sometime between 1490 and 1505,⁷ and is also the most influential text in the corpus (Bawcutt 1998b:429-431).⁸ Later works, such as Sir David Lyndsay’s “Answer to the Kingis Flyting,” composed in the 1530s, claim to be a flyting between Lyndsay and James V—although if there was a flyting by James V it no longer survives (Hadley Williams 2000:257). Alexander Montgomerie and Patrick Hume of Polwarth kept flyting a prestigious practice in the court of James VI as seen in James’ 1584 treatise on Scottish poetics, “Reulis and Cautelis to be Observit and Eschewit in Scottis Poesie” (“Rules and Warnings to be Observed and Avoided in Scottish Poetry”), which repeatedly uses flyting—and particularly the Montgomerie-Polwarth flyting—to demonstrate various poetic techniques.⁹ The “Invectuius Capitane Allexander Montgomeriee and Pollvart,” dating between 1580 and 1583,¹⁰ relies on the tropes established by the Dunbar-Kennedy flyting while creating its own unique style. For their influence, as well as their high degree of technical skill, this study examines “The Flyting of Dunbar and Kennedie” and “Invectuius Captain Allexander Montgomeriee and Pollvart.”¹¹

Kool Moe Dee’s battle with Busy Bee Starski in 1981 is the first recorded use of invective in a live performance. This battle, marking the inception of modern battle rapping, is integral to this study’s comparison of flyting and battle rap. The 1986 battle between KRS-One of Boogie Down Productions and MC Shan of Juice Crew has been chosen as a result of the high profile of the crews (an artistic collective in Hip Hop culture), wide dissemination of the battle

⁶ Toop 1984 and Rose 1994 are both pioneers in Hip Hop criticism. Banks 2010, Ciccariello Maher 2005, Dimitriadis 1996, Perry 2004, Shusterman 1991, 1992, and ya Salaam 1995 all provide important insights into Hip Hop culture and rap aesthetics.

⁷ Bawcutt 1998b:429 notes that the poem has been given various dates by different critics (all within this range), but her main clues for dating the poem are the mention of two poets (Stobo and Sir John the Ross) who both die by 1505 and Kennedy’s gibes that Dunbar is still seeking a benefice, which he did not receive until 1510.

⁸ This flyting may have drawn upon a lost flyting jointly composed by Quintin and Kennedy. The “Cursing of Sir Iohine the Ros” is also associated with this flyting.

⁹ In Chapter I (463) James VI uses flyting to demonstrate rhyming the last syllable of a line, in Chapter III (466) as an example of choosing words and sentences according to the subject matter, and in Chapter VIII (470) during his instruction on verse forms. He specifically refers to Montgomerie’s line, “I’se fell the lyk any fluk flat on [th]e fluir” (I.43), to demonstrate choosing appropriate diction and the use of contractions.

¹⁰ Bawcutt 1983:6 says that the poem is generally dated c. 1580 and Parkinson 2000b:126 observes that the crest on the title page of the invective belongs to William Murray of Tullibardine who died in 1583.

¹¹ Throughout this essay Bawcutt’s 1998a edition is relied upon for the Dunbar-Kennedy flyting and Parkinson’s 2000a edition is relied upon for the Montgomerie-Polwarth flyting.

recordings, and the technical skill of the emcees.¹² This study does not argue that flyting in some way influenced rap, nor does it argue for direct parallels in social or political context. Rather, we argue that flyting and rap share common thematic and stylistic techniques and that both function as constructive, positive venues for artistic expression and experimentation.

“To red thy rebald rymyng with a rowt:”¹³ Forms and Themes

In flyting simple and familiar language is combined with the inventive exploitation of formal rhetorical devices to prove the superiority of one poet over another. Through their attention to specific stylistic and thematic patterns, flyting poets signaled their participation in an established tradition. Flytings use established Scottish stanza forms, particularly the eight-line alliterative stanza, and variations on the alliterative thirteen-line bob-and-wheel form.¹⁴ Montgomerie and Polwarth test the bounds of these traditional stanza forms, and their opponents duly note any perceived blunders.¹⁵ Dunbar and Kennedy use alliterative stanzas astonishingly dexterously—rhyme and alliteration often weave between lines and across stanzas. This careful manipulation and subversion of a familiar form signals the immense skill of the flyters composing these apparently lewd and repellent invectives.

Like flyters, emcees competing in rap battles also work in and against established form and style tropes. This formal tradition is anchored by the use of sixteen-beat verses and isochronous line structure: each line consists of four beats with any number of unstressed syllables in between (Bradley and DuBois 2010:xlvi). Dimitriadis (1996) describes Run-DMC’s 1983 single, “It’s Like That,” as the first successful transition into “the traditional popular song structure, including the use of a chorus . . . and theme . . . and collective delivery—often used as a loose, non-thematic framing device by early collectives . . . is employed . . . in an organized and thematic manner” (184-85). The battles discussed here date between 1981 and 1986 when this verse structure was still in the early stages of development. These battles, which ultimately influenced the development of the tradition as a whole (*Beef* 2003), are innovative in their development of theme and use of technically difficult verse.

Thematic parallels between these traditions are evident in the nature of the taunts and insults used by the poets. These exchanges use themes of poetic legitimacy and originality,

¹² Bradley and DuBois’s 2010 edition is used for Kool Moe Dee’s battle against Busy Bee, though we have applied our own line numbers. The battle between MC Shan and Boogie Down Productions has been transcribed from a compilation of sources including: Bradley and DuBois 2010, MC Shan, *The Bridge*, from *Down by Law (Deluxe Edition)* 2007, Cold Chillin’ Records, m4a; MC Shan, *Kill That Noise*, from *Down by Law (Deluxe Edition)* 2007, Cold Chillin’ Records, m4a; Boogie Down Productions, *South Bronx*, from *Criminal Minded (Elite Edition)* 2010, Traffic Entertainment, m4a; Boogie Down Productions, *The Bridge is Over*, from *Criminal Minded (Elite Edition)* 2010, Traffic Entertainment, m4a; Rap Genius, <http://www.rapgenius.com>.

¹³ “To strike down your contemptuous rymyng with a shout.”

¹⁴ Eight- and thirteen-line alliterative Scottish stanzas have been proven to be technically difficult forms. See Turville-Petre 1974, MacKay 1975, and McClure 2008.

¹⁵ According to Turville-Petre 1974:3, the Montgomerie-Polwarth flyting is the last medieval work to use the thirteen-line alliterative stanza.

plagiarism, death via rhyme, and opposed poetic identities to differentiate the victor from the lesser poet. Ultimately, the poet seeks to publicly humiliate and disgrace his opponent in such a way that he will be declared superior in skill and talent. The thematic parallels listed above are often addressed through the use of strikingly similar stylistic techniques. Establishing these shared rhetorical techniques and tropes will enable us to develop our argument that battle rap is a useful tool for reconstructing flyting performance.

First and foremost, both of these invective forms are concerned with creativity, originality, and poetic legitimacy. Kool Moe Dee's battle with Busy Bee Starski, from 1981, features Busy Bee's older style of crowd calling, repetitive chants, and non-semantic vocable routines, as well as Kool Moe Dee's new style of personalized insults, complex rhyme scheme, and defined thematic progression.¹⁶ In this battle Kool Moe Dee mystified the audience with an aggressive six-minute invective ruthlessly insulting Busy Bee Starski's poetic legitimacy. He dismisses Busy Bee: "Hold on, Busy Bee, I don't mean to be bold / But put that ba-diddy-ba bullshit on hold" (4-5). The staccato alliteration on "b" emphasizes his insult of Busy Bee's non-semantic vocable routine, "ba-diddy-ba," as "bullshit." He goes on to say, "you're not number one, you're not even the best / and you can't win no real emcee contest," (38-39) and, "but in a battle like this you know you'll lose . . . because they hear your name, you're gonna hear boos" (44, 47). By continually highlighting Busy Bee's inability to create complex invectives and dismissing his status as an emcee, Kool Moe Dee emphasizes the importance of composing creative and original verse.

Flyting is also concerned with demonstrating poetic legitimacy and skill through composing innovative verse. Montgomerie and Polwarth return to this theme several times in their flytings. Polwarth pays particular attention to Montgomerie's supposedly drunken attempts to compose verse (III.9-12):

Thy raggit roundaillis, reifand royt,
Sum schort, sum lang and out of lyne
With skabrous collouris, fowsome floyt
Proceeding from ane pynt of wyne

(Your irregular roundels, thieving fiddler
Some short, some long, and out of line
With harsh, unpolished metres, nauseating flute[-player]
Proceeding from a pint of wine)¹⁷

In similar style to Kool Moe Dee, Polwarth dismisses Montgomerie's identity as a poet by referring to him as a "fiddler" ("royt") and "flute-player" ("floyt")—both lowly court entertainers. Polwarth continues his critique of Montgomerie's style: "with mankit, manschocht, manglit meitter / Trottand and twmbland top over taill" ([“with defective, mutilated, and

¹⁶ Dimitriadis 1996 uses "Di bi di bi, pop the pop pop you don't dare stop" (184) as an example of a non-semantic vocable routine.

¹⁷ Parkinson's translation of lines 9 and 11 2000b:143. All other translations are our own.

mangled meter, trotting and tumbling top over tail”] IV.19-20). In the first line he ingeniously parodies Montgomerie’s alliterative heavy-handedness while disparaging his poetry and in the second line jeers at the way in which Montgomerie’s words tumble over each other ineffectively. This attention to style—although exaggeratedly condemning of Montgomerie—emphasizes the technical skill required in flyting.

These poets often accuse each other of plagiarism in order to establish their own poetic legitimacy. Kool Moe Dee accuses Busy Bee of plagiarism twice (9-23):

You even bit your name from the Lovebug
 And now to bite a nigga’s name is some low-down shit
 If you was money man, you’d be counterfeit

 He [Busy Bee] begged for the rhyme, asked for it twice
 He said, “Spoonie Gee, I’ll buy it at any price”
 Well, Spoonie finally sold it, oh, what a relief
 Busy Bee stole it like a fuckin thief

The practice of selling rhymes is a relatively frequent occurrence in rap, but emcees that steal rhymes are commonly referred to as “biters.”¹⁸ Kool Moe Dee unequivocally rejects Busy Bee’s poetic legitimacy because Busy Bee has supposedly attempted to buy rhymes (albeit unsuccessfully) and has subsequently resorted to stealing. According to Kool Moe Dee, he has even stolen—“bit” (9)—his name from Lovebug Starski, another rapper from the period. By sketching Busy Bee’s unsavory character, Kool Moe Dee establishes himself as the opposite through his distanced (and disgusted) attitude towards these methods. The Montgomerie-Polwarth flytings also refer to plagiarism, specifically Polwarth’s use of Chaucer and Lyndsay. Montgomerie asserts: “Thy scrowis obscur ar borrowit fra sum buik. / Fra lyndsay þow tuik, þow art chawceris cuik” ([“Your obscure scrawlings are borrowed from some book. You took from *Lyndsay*, you are *Chaucer*’s cook”] I.44-45). These lines are woven together using internal and end rhyme with “buik”/“tuik”/“cuik”—each rhyme pointedly emphasizing an element of the insult.

Images of death are pervasive in both invective forms. These images primarily appear in two forms: the first, in flyting, as a depiction of the physical appearance of an opponent, and the second, found in both forms, in relation to killing the opponent for the crime of terrible poetry and/or as a result of the devastatingly clever rhymes of the poet delivering the invective. Dunbar is particularly fond of describing Kennedy’s gruesome appearance (161-65):

Thow Lazarus, thow laithly lene tramort,
 To all the warld thow may example be,
 To luk vpoun thy gryslye peteous port;
 For hiddowis, haw and holkit thyne ee,
 Thy cheikbane bair and blaiknit is thy ble.

¹⁸ See Bradley and DuBois’ discussion of “biting” and “ghostwriting” 2010:41, xlii.

(You leper, you loathly emaciated carcass,
 You may be an example to the world,
 To look upon your grisly piteous countenance;
 For your eyes are hideous, decayed and a wan, green-blue
 Your jawbones are bare and your complexion is pallid)

This gruesome imagery serves two purposes: the one is to humiliate Kennedy by likening him to a decayed and reanimated corpse, and the second is to showcase Dunbar's impressive ability to conjure such a realistic and haunting image through his poetry.¹⁹

While Dunbar seeks to humiliate Kennedy through his horrifying portrait, Kennedy uses imagery of death in the context of Dunbar's execution for his traitorous offenses, one of which being terrible poetic skill. Kennedy begins by commanding Dunbar to "hald Kenydy the king" (326) and then uses this kingly status to convict Dunbar of (poetic) heresy (329-36):

Pas to my commissare and be confest,
 Cour before him on kneis and cum in will,
 And syne ger Stobo for thy lyf protest.
 Renounce thy rymis, bath ban and birn thy bill,
 Heve to the heuyn thy handis, ande hald the still.
 Do thou not thus, bogane, thou salbe brynt,
 With pik, fire, ter, gun puldre and lynt,
 On Arthuris Sete or on ane hyar hyll.

(Go to my deputy and be confessed,
 Come willingly and cower before him on your knees,
 And then go to Stobo to protest for your life.
 Renounce your rhymes, both ban and burn your bill,
 If you don't do this, boil, you will be burned,
 With pike, fire, tar, gun powder and flint,
 On Arthur's Seat or on a higher hill)

This call to "ban and birn thy bill" was the standard "public recantation for heretics" (Bawcutt 1998b:441), and if Dunbar refuses to do this Kennedy claims that he will be burned as a heretic, with every possible accelerant thrown in for good measure (the fire, tar, gun powder, and flint described in line 335). His hyperbolic imagery—naming himself king, demanding homage, declaring Dunbar a heretic, and describing his subsequent execution—builds the apparent seriousness of the invective and heightens the status achieved by the winner (whoever wins will be held the king of flyting).

Emcees employ similarly hyperbolic images of death via rhyme. MC Shan released "Kill That Noise" as a second response during his feud with KRS-One. Much like Kennedy's command to Dunbar, MC Shan admonishes KRS-One (19-22):

¹⁹ Gray 1984:37 also discusses Dunbar's corpse imagery.

We're respected by all, treated just like kings
 How could you have the nerve to say such things?
 If you knew at the time what you were saying
 You wouldn't be on your knees praying

This image distinctly parallels that described by Kennedy in his flyting: MC Shan imagines himself as a king receiving the prostrate, apologetic KRS-One. Following this MC Shan graphically describes KRS-One's death (45-48):

I started with a smash, I'ma leave with a bang
 And to put it to you bluntly—emcees can't hang
 Your boys and your family will be grieving your death
 Weeping while they're sweeping up the pieces I left

The second couplet describes the scene of destruction left by MC Shan's devastating rhymes. Line 48 uses internal rhyme ("weeping"/"sweeping"), while at the same time playing on the assonance between "weeping"/"sweeping"/"pieces," which all land on line stresses. The end rhyme is somewhat of a slant rhyme, though in pronunciation there is nearly a true rhyme between "death"/"left." The colloquial contraction "I'ma" (45) performs important structural work in MC Shan's lyric line. The shortening of the multi-word (and multi-syllabic) sentiment, "I am going to," maintains the four stress line while indicating an informal and personal tone.

James VI notes the importance of using colloquial contractions in flyting, declaring that words ought to be "cuttit short" (James VI 1997 [1584]:466)—in modern terms, contracted. In his flyting against Polwarth, Montgomerie threatens: "I'se fell the lyk any fluik flat on [th]e fluir" (I.43: I shall fell you like a flounder on the floor). "I'se" is a contraction for "I shall" (Parkinson 2000b:129), and although Montgomerie does not have the same rhythmic constraints as are observed in rap battles, the shortening achieves the same informal sense. James VI describes this attention to tone, suggesting that one ought to write, "'I sall never cair,' gif your subject were of love or tragedies because in thame your words man be drawing lang," while in genres such as flyting this phrase should be cut short: "'Iis neir care' . . . quhilkis in flyting man be short" (1997 [1584]:466). Montgomerie's contraction appears in a line dominated by the alliteration of "f," so turning "I shall" into one word minimizes the impact of the "s"/"sh"-sound, allowing the eye (and the ear) to skim over this consonant. The use of colloquial contractions in flytings and battle raps are integral to the poetic structure and highlight the informal language of the two genres of invective.

The reference to named deputies is another prevalent motif. In flyting this deputy is referred to as a "commissar" (Dunbar-Kennedy 34, 44, 131, 329). According to the *Dictionary of the Scots Language (DSL)* a *commissar* is a sheriff who has taken over judiciary duties in the



MC Shan, "Kill That Noise," from *Down by Law (Deluxe Edition)* 2007, Cold Chillin' Records, mp3. We direct your attention especially to 1:11-3:13. [http://journal.oraltradition.org/issues/29i/flynn_mitchell#myGallery-picture\(1\)](http://journal.oraltradition.org/issues/29i/flynn_mitchell#myGallery-picture(1))

absence of the judge. As the *DSL* definition suggests, Dunbar and Kennedy's *commissares* (Sir John the Ross and Quintin, respectively) are often tasked with receiving homage from recalcitrant opponents on behalf of the flyter. Kennedy commands Dunbar: "Se sone thow mak my commissar amendis / And lat him lay sax leichis on thy lendis" ([“So soon you will make amends with my deputy and let him lay six leeches on your loins”] 44-45). In most cases the *commissar* is invoked in his capacity to receive homage on behalf of the flyter, though in one case Dunbar informs Kennedy that, “thy commissar, Quintyne, biddis the cum kis his ers” ([“Your deputy, Quintin, bids you to come kiss his ass”] 131). The reference to and use of a *commissar* is important for the development of poetic identity in flyting. The presence of a *commissar* strengthens the poet's high status in the court by suggesting that he has enough renown to acquire a retinue of followers and further secures this court position by distancing the poet from the class of lone, wandering bards (Dunbar calls Kennedy a “baird” eight times in his flyting).²⁰

MC Shan, KRS-One, and Kool Moe Dee repeatedly laud their own crews, insult opposing crews, and name specific deputies. Scott La Rock performs much the same task as the flyting commissar by stepping in to perform a directive given by KRS-One, the “leader” of the Boogie Down Productions crew. In KRS-One's first invective, “South Bronx,” he claims that Scott La Rock will have to show everyone that MC Shan and Juice Crew are “wack” (42) if they don't confess their ineptitude (41-46). In his second invective, “The Bridge is Over,” he insults both MC Shan and his commissar, Marley Marl: “Because Shan and Marley Marl dem a-rhymin' like they gay / Picking up the mic, man, dem don't know what to say” (5-6). KRS-One demeans MC Shan and Marley Marl's performance as “gay” (5)—insulting both their ability to compose technically challenging rap and their masculinity in general. This parallels Dunbar's emasculating depiction of Quintin bidding Kennedy to “kis his ers” (131). Again, the poet seeks to strengthen his public persona through depicting himself as the leader of a devoted retinue, and, as KRS-One's insult demonstrates, the poet-deputy-retinue relationship is often rudely denigrated.

These poets often use cultural rivalries as a pretense for composing their invectives. The Dunbar-Kennedy flyting particularly provokes Lowland-Highland animosities through their continual references to the negative stereotypes of each region. Dunbar and Kennedy use the languages of the two regions, “Inglis” ([“English”] 111) and “Erschry” ([“Gaelic”] 107)²¹ respectively, as indicators of courtliness and education (or the lack thereof). Kennedy actually hails from Carrick, found in present-day Ayrshire in the Southwest of Scotland, but at the time this was a rural and primarily Gaelic speaking region, which was enough to provoke Dunbar's disdain. He insults Kennedy's accent: “Thy trechour tung hes tane ane Heland strynd / Ane Lowland ers wald mak a bettir noyis” ([“Your traitorous tongue has a taint of the Highland kind, a Lowland ass would make a better noise”] 55-6), and later, “I tak on me, ane pair of Lowthiane hippis / Sall fairer Inglis mak and mair parfyte / Than thow can blabbar with thy Carrik lippis” ([“I undertake that a pair of Lothian hips shall make fairer and more perfect English than

²⁰ Bawcutt 1998b:428 discusses the implications of the bard/baird insult further.

²¹ According to the *DSL*, “Erisch” provides an “an alternate spelling, meaning ‘the Irish or Scottish Gaelic Language.’”

you can blabber with your Carrick lips”] 110-112).²² Kennedy strikes back against these insults (345-48):

Thou lufis nane Irische, elf, I vnderstand,
Bot it suld be all trew Scottis mennis lede.
It was the gud langage of this land,
And Scotia it causit to multiply and sprede

(You do not love Gaelic, elf, I understand,
But it should be the language of all true Scottish men.
It was the good language of this land,
And it caused Scotland to multiply and spread)

He depicts Gaelic as the epitome of Scottish culture—a source of great pride for all *true* Scots. Dunbar’s preference for the English language is used as evidence of greater English sympathies: “In Ingland, oule, suld be thyne habitacione. / Homage to Edward Langschankis maid thy kyn” ([“England should be your home, owl. Your kin made homage to Edward Longshanks”²³] 409-410). This battle between languages and national allegiances is crucial to crafting the poetic identities of both flyters. Each poet aims to win over the audience of the flyting by creating personas that perfectly balance courtier, nationalist, and scholar.

The rap battle between KRS-One and MC Shan specifically debates where Hip Hop culture originated: the South Bronx (Boogie Down Production’s neighborhood) or Queensbridge (Juice Crew’s neighborhood). The first release by MC Shan, “The Bridge,” spends 43 of 72 total lines describing early Queensbridge (a housing project in Queens, New York) Hip Hop culture. This provoked KRS-One into composing his response, “South Bronx,” where he aggressively contests the claims made in “The Bridge.” KRS-One raps in the opening stanza: “So you think that Hip Hop had its start out in Queensbridge? / If you pop that junk up in the Bronx you might not live” (7-8). The next stanza goes on to detail the early development of Hip Hop culture and its epicenter, the South Bronx, and only says of Queensbridge, “as odd as it looked, as wild as it seemed / I didn’t hear a peep from a place called Queens” (35-6). Much like flyting, the two crews use their cultural rivalries as a pretense for their battle.



Boogie Down Productions, “South Bronx,” from *Criminal Minded (Elite Edition)* 2010, Traffic Entertainment, mp3. We direct your attention especially to 1:14-2:56. [http://journal.oraltradition.org/issues/29i/flynn_mitchell#myGallery-picture\(2\)](http://journal.oraltradition.org/issues/29i/flynn_mitchell#myGallery-picture(2))

²² The Lothian area of Scotland is in the Lowlands, see Bawcutt 1992:6 for further discussion of Dunbar’s personal history.

²³ Edward I of England, known as Edward Longshanks and the Hammer of the Scots.

“I’m a crowd motivator, emcee annihilator:” Performance and Purpose

In the section above we demonstrated the analogous rhetorical techniques used in flyting and rap battling. The following section seeks to demystify the lost performance and poetic purpose of flyting by examining the actual performance of rap battles and first-hand accounts from the emcees. We find that both forms are essentially positive in their motivations: each function as a venue for experimentation with mainstream styles for the purpose of gaining status in their respective communities and increasing their wealth. Furthermore, we argue that the rivals do not share hostile feelings towards one another; instead it is often the case that the competitors are friends, or at the least, amicable acquaintances.

The nature of live Hip Hop performance is especially useful for reconstructing lost flyting performance. Alim (2012) describes this live atmosphere with a concentration on interviews with emcees.²⁴ He asserts that the emcee views the cypher as a “linguistic training field . . . Several skillz are developed in the cipa—Rap delivery, reacting under pressure, verbal battling, or ‘jousting from the mouth.’ The cipa is like Hip Hop’s classroom” (553). The pedagogical nature of this Hip Hop classroom is especially highlighted in the texts of the battles. KRS-One refers to himself as a “teacher” (11) in “South Bronx” and develops this image as a frame for explaining the origins of Hip Hop. MC Shan’s response, “Kill That Noise,” uses this motif as well (39-42, 67-68):

School’s in session, I’m about to teach
 Versatile with a style that you just can’t reach
 Lesson number one: first strike aim
 You shouldn’t do things to degrade my name
 . . .
 Shoulda stayed in school, learned comprehension
 Trying to state facts that I did not mention

MC Shan styles himself as a teacher giving instruction and juxtaposes this with a stinging insult of KRS-One’s lack of education. Two feminine rhymes also occur here: “versatile”/“a style” (40) and “comprehension”/“mention” (67-68). MC Shan solidifies his pedantic image by employing this difficult technique while instructing KRS-One.

The Montgomerie-Polwarth flyting employs this teacher-student motif with particular relish: Montgomerie declares in his first invective, “to teach þe to think with they maister mel” ([“To teach you to think twice about meddling with your master”] I. 50), and as already quoted above, “Thy scrowis obscur ar borrowit fra sum buik. / Fra lyndsay þow tuik, þow art chawceris cuik” (I.44-45). Polwarth replies to the latter insult, “also I may be Chawceris man and ȝet thy maister not the les” ([“Also, I am no less your master though I am Chaucer’s man”] IV. 41-42). Polwarth nearly turns the original insult into a compliment by claiming that he is still superior to Montgomerie despite admiring Chaucer. The general tone of the invectives is influenced by this recurring motif. Despite the crude and degrading nature of the insults,

²⁴ See also Lee 2009:307-10.

manuscripts describe flytings as “jocound and mirrie” ([“joyous and merry”] Bawcutt 1992:222). The communal and academic atmosphere of these performances reflects the merry mood of flyting.

Live battle raps culminate in the audience meting out judgment for and against the two emcees. In a battle emcees are judged on clarity and lyrical complexity, flow and delivery, and cleverness and humor.²⁵ Based on these criteria the audience declares a winner through a communal outburst of support for the superior emcee (Lee 2009:313). Flyting performances may have also been judged in a similar fashion. In a manuscript containing the flyting of Dunbar and Kennedy, there is an annotation preceding Dunbar’s second invective that reads: “Iuge in the nixt quha gat the war” (“judge in the next who gets the worst”) and a colophon post-flyting asking the audience to “Iuge 3e now heir quha gat the war” (“judge now who got the worst here”),²⁶ in other words, asking the audience to judge who got the worst of the flyting. In order to judge the flyting, there must have been some means of assessing the relative qualities of each participant’s delivery. By using modern battle rap as a guide, it seems quite likely that the sixteenth-century performance would have culminated in a similar outcry of derision and/or support.

The discussion above highlights some elements important to live rap battles, which seem to reflect similar patterns in flyting. There are also clues to oral performance in the flytings themselves. The frequent recurrence of insults of language, dialect, and voice in the Dunbar-Kennedy flyting clearly highlights the auralty of their compositions. Kennedy creates a vision of his eloquent poetry versus Dunbar’s horrendous verse (337-44):

I perambalit of Pernaso the montayn
 Enspirit wyth Mercury fra his goldyn spere,
 And dulcely drank of eloquence the fontayne,
 Quhen it was purifit wyth frost and flowit clere;
 And thou come, fule, in Marche or Februere,
 Thare till a pule and drank the padok rod,
 That geris the ryme in to thy termes glod,
 And blaberis that noyis mennis eris to here

(I walked Mount Parnassus
 Inspired by Mercury through his golden spear,
 And sweetly drank of eloquence the fountain,
 When it was purified with frost and flowed clear;
 And you came, fool, in March or February,
 To a pool there and drank the frogspawn,

²⁵ This list has been compiled from Lee 2009:313 and Pihel 1996:253.

²⁶ Bawcutt refers to the nature of the poetry as a “ritualized collaborative game” as suggested by the heading, “jocound and mirrie,” but also acknowledges the competitive atmosphere as seen in the colophon reading, “quha gat the war” 1998b:428.

That now makes you rhyme in slimy [?] words,²⁷
 And blabber in a way that annoys men's ears to hear)

Kennedy's description of his own verse is punctuated by graceful, melodic rhymes and multi-syllabic words—"peramblit," "enspirit," "dulcely," "purifit." In contrast, the lines depicting Dunbar's slimy and plodding verse mimic the very sounds they describe: "fule," "pule," "padok rod," "termes glod," and "blaberis." These words are short and rough, and when spoken aloud they starkly contrast the language Kennedy uses when referring to himself. The diction and meter of Kennedy's verse vividly mimics the sounds being described and punctuates the necessity of performing the flyting aloud.

Polwarth makes direct reference to performance in his battle with Montgomerie. Jack and Rozendaal (1997:472, n.25) state that the flyting was performed for the king, possibly for the position of poet laureate, but they do not detail any substantiating evidence. Within the actual flytings there are two moments that indicate the clear possibility of a performance. The first refers to Montgomerie's physical reaction to Polwarth's performance: "As þe last nicht did weill appeir / Quhill þow stuid fidging at the fyre / My flytting forcit þe so to flyre" ([“As you last night did well appear, while you stood fidgiting by the fire, my flyting forced you to flee”] IV. 61-4). Polwarth's insistence that Montgomerie had to flee an earlier flyting constitutes much of the evidence that these invectives were performed for an audience, perhaps including King James VI as a spectator. In another comment Polwarth refers to the possible memorization of the flytings: "I neur haid of that making 3e mene, / Ane vers in wreit, in print or 3it perquere" ([“I never knew what you intended to make, a verse written, printed or memorized”] VIII. 21-2). The essential word here is "perquere," defined in the *DSL* as "by heart; (to learn, teach, know, etc.) thoroughly, perfectly." Polwarth's reference to the flytings being made "perquere" allows for the crucial possibility that they were memorized.

James VI's "Reulis and Cautelis" further supports the possibility of memorized flytings. He instructs, "as in flyting and invectives, your wordis to by cuttit short and hurland over heuch" (James VI 1997 [1584]:466); the flyting should sound as if it has been composed in spontaneity, each word increasingly jumping over the next, as if they have gone hurling over a cliff—"hurland over heuch" (1997 [1584]:472). Achieving this spontaneous affect in performance would be difficult as a result of the complicated alliteration and rhyme found in the flytings, but a memorized performance would embody the fullest realization of James VI's directive.

The 2003 documentary *Beef* details the development of rap battling in American Hip Hop culture from the earliest battles through the early-2000s. According to *Beef* the culture of rap battle from the early 1980s until the early 1990s was nearly exclusively interested in proving lyrical supremacy.²⁸ In this documentary Kool Moe Dee, Busy Bee Starski, KRS-One, and MC

²⁷ The *DSL* defines "glod" as "a. (?)" and only records its use in Kennedy's flyting. The imagery of Dunbar drinking the pond water slimy with tadpoles has influenced our translation of this term as "viscous and slimy glob." Also refer to Bawcutt 1998b:441 for further discussion of Kennedy's imagery here.

²⁸ The 1990s saw rap battles turn violent with the rise of "Gangsta Rap" and West Coast versus East Coast animosity promoted in part through extensive media coverage (*Beef* 2003).

Shan all observe that their battles were not meant to be disrespectful—rather they were lyrical contests to establish the best emcee. Kool Moe Dee describes Busy Bee as a comedian and skilled rapper, and claims that the battle only started when a heckler in the crowd challenged him to battle Busy Bee. Busy Bee states that, “we were friends before that and never stopped being friends.” MC Shan and KRS-One also claim mutual respect for one another. In two interviews the emcees appear to share a distinctly friendly rivalry. MC Shan refers to KRS-One as a “gladiator” and says that he would like to collaborate on a record with KRS-One (<http://youtu.be/umhiog6Z-KE>). KRS-One returns these sentiments and engages in friendly banter—laughingly rapping back lines of MC Shan’s “Kill that Noise.” This lively repartee is indicative of the positivity of early rap battles. These interviews show that battling emcees often held each other in high esteem and that the battle served as a venue for proving superior lyrical skill, not as a means for expressing real hostilities.

Dunbar and Kennedy deliver scalding and extremely defamatory insults, but it is evident that they too held each other in high esteem. In Dunbar’s poem, “I that in heill wes and gladnes” also known as *Lament for the Makars* (Bawcutt 1998a), Dunbar mourns Kennedy’s imminent death: “Gud maister Walter Kennedy / In poynt of dede lyis veraly. / Gret reuth it wer that so suld be” ([“Good master Walter Kennedy truly lays at the point of death. It is tragic that this is so”] 89-91). Dunbar’s poignant lament reveals his deep respect for the other poet and parallels the sense of camaraderie shared by the emcees.

By establishing that these flyters and emcees are actually friendly rivals among themselves, we are led to wonder what poets stand to gain from engaging in this invective competition. According to Pihel (1996), the winner of a battle rap gains respect in his community in the form of “props” (268). In order to earn this respect the emcee must prove his or her ability not only through rhetorical skills, but through his or her engagement with the cultural register. If the poet is unable to connect with the audience, his or her technical ability will not resonate. Cultural fluency in oral performance is the basis for Bauman’s 1977 study (Foley 2002:85-94). Bauman’s six keys to performance create a schematized order for identifying cultural codes and provide a framework for describing the “oral-poetic language” of any given oral performance (2002:85). Pihel’s (1996) discussion of the freestyle, a rap composed spontaneously and under intense rhythmic constraints, succinctly reflects the nature of Hip Hop’s oral-poetic language: “in a freestyle there is no time to fake or front. In order to keep the rap flowing, you must be practiced in freestyle skills and be able to capture spontaneously the spirit of the community at the moment of the performance” (266-67). The emcee’s reward for capturing the spirit of the audience, or “props,” is a means of acknowledging his or her ability to engage with Hip Hop’s oral-poetic language.

The highly stylized language and structure of flyting also functions as an oral-poetic language. In many cases words found in flytings are extremely rare. Dunbar flytes, “Forflittin, countbittin, beschittin, barkit hyd” (239). Two words in this line—“forflittin” and “countbittin”—have little to no contextual resonance for modern readers. “Forflittin” (239) is defined by the *DSL* as “severely scolded,” and is now only found in two texts, one of which is Dunbar’s flyting. “Countbittin” meaning “poxed” (literally “cunt-bitten”) is only recorded in Dunbar’s flyting. The use of unusual words recalls Foley’s (2002:86) description of Slavic *guslari* and their language code: “up-to-date urbanites describe [the language of the *guslar*] as

archaic and filled with curious words and forms from other regions, not to mention highly stylized.” As suggested by the example of the *guslari*, the actual language of flyting may have even seemed strange to the contemporary audience, but it would have resonated as “a key, a way into the experience” (86). Foley goes on to observe, “it’s well to remember that any language, no matter how powerful or subtle it may seem, requires fluent hearers as well as fluent speakers” (86). The ability of the flyter to navigate the oral-poetic language of flyting would have been a key factor determining the level of credibility and acclaim accorded to the poet by his or her audience.

Rap battles—and potentially flyting performance—also carry the potential for monetary gain. As suggested above, Montgomerie and Polwarth may have been competing for the position of poet laureate (Jack and Rozendaal 1997:472). This very real reward adds a deeper dimension to the competitive nature of performance. In regards to the Hip Hop tradition, the Busy Bee Starski and Kool Moe Dee battle took place at Harlem World, a large competition awarding trophies and cash rewards to the winners. KRS-One’s battle became the anthem of the South Bronx and launched his career (*Beef* 2003). The purpose of flyting potentially reflects this sort of achievement of social notoriety and financial gain. Real rewards such as increased status at court (poet laureate position), and/or the acquisition of a benefactor (a subject Dunbar returns to repeatedly in his greater body of work) may have resulted from the flytings.²⁹

Despite the cultural and historical distance between the genres, flyting and battle rap share thematic and stylistic elements: both play on preexisting cultural rivalries, call upon deputies, accuse an opponent of plagiarism, critique an opponent’s poetic style, and gratuitously depict the death of an opponent. These similarities in form provide scholars of Older Scots literature with an opportunity to discover the motivations prompting some of the most eminent poets of the period to work within the flyting tradition. Flytings would have functioned as court entertainment, while simultaneously providing artists an opportunity to define their individuality and reputation as poets. This open venue may have prompted experimentation with form, as observed in the Montgomerie-Polwarth flytings, and created a less restrictive poetic outlet for poets such as Dunbar and Kennedy. Flytings also seem to become a more alluring mode with the additional possibility of financial rewards and fame in the form of benefices and higher positions in the court. Perhaps most importantly, this comparison may help gauge the tone of the Older Scots texts: the battling emcees’ surprisingly friendly relationships suggest the possibility of a similar phenomenon in flyting.

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²⁹ Bawcutt 1998b:429 points out that Dunbar did not receive his benefice from the crown until 1510 and the flyting is estimated to have been composed sometime between 1490 and 1505—opening the question as to whether this flyting was one of Dunbar’s attempts to win a benefactor.

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