

CRITICS OF "THE BRIDE OF LAMMERMOOR"

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I.

THE more one reads of literary criticism, the harder it gets to know what to make of it. Impressionistic apothegms, tendentious discussions of highly individual contemporaries, and such like expressions of personal reaction must always, it is clear, be more or less fallible. But when it comes to estimating and interpreting a very widely read writer who has been dead for generations, and whose work is conspicuously lacking in obscure passages or controversial content or in any strangeness of mood or manner, there surely, if anywhere, should criticism have arrived at something approaching objectivity. *A priori*, one would expect a book like *The Bride of Lammermoor* to be exactly the sort of work that, having been exposed to the investigation of students and to the discriminating taste of cultivated readers for well over a century, would now have come to occupy a fairly definite place among well-known works of fiction. At the very least, literary historians should no longer allow themselves to make elementary mis-statements concerning its contents, or disagree utterly and hopelessly as to its merits. But the actual state of things tends seriously to disturb one's simple faith in the pronouncements of the learned and in the intuitive reactions of cultivated souls.

As *The Bride of Lammermoor* is a historical novel, before the reader can find his bearings it would seem indispensable for him to have a clear idea of the time at which the events are supposed to have happened; and it is not for a moment to be supposed that Scott, in a tale that impinges throughout upon the political intrigues and vicissitudes of his own country, would have failed to indicate explicitly the exact nature of the *milieu*.

What the precise setting is, cannot remain uncertain to any careful reader of the text. Historical allusions are no doubt less common than in most of the Waverley novels, but they are enough. William III is spoken of as already dead, and Sarah Churchill has become Duchess of Marlborough: William died and the duchy was created in 1702. The Treaty of Union is already in effect; the Union was achieved in 1707. Finally,

the crisis of the story, the ejection of the Master of Ravenswood from his ancestral home by the relentless Lady Ashton, coincides with the change of government in England in 1710, and the tragic conclusion occurs a year or so later. All this is made perfectly plain to a reader of ordinary education, and yet when we look up the authorities we find a strange lack of unanimity. Though Seccombe, Rait, Professor Edgar, and others who have contributed to the discussion of this novel assign the correct date to the imaginary events, several eminent critics wander curiously astray. No less a scholar than Professor Elton, when he states in his survey that six of the first nine Waverley novels have their setting in the eighteenth century, implicitly assigns *The Bride of Lammermoor* to the seventeenth century, for all the other eighteenth century stories have settings that are still more recent. The end of the seventeenth century is also the period given in Nield's *Historical Novels*, and in Bock and Weitzel, *Der historische Roman als Begleiter der Weltgeschichte*, *Die Braut von Lammermoor* is referred to as "Dieser in der 2. Hälfte des 17. Jahrhunderts spielende Roman Scotts." Dr. Baker, in his chapter on the novel in the *History of English Literature* edited by John Buchan, and in his *Guide to Historical Fiction*, gives the exact year 1695. In his monumental *History of the English Novel*, a more recent publication, it is fair to mention that Baker says nothing about the imaginary date. It is this year, 1695, however, that is also given in Buckley and Williams's *Guide to English Historical Fiction* and in Bernbaum's *Guide to Romanticism*, a recent and very scholarly handbook. It is noteworthy that some of the indexes of historical fiction (Bowen, Kaye, Lagusa) omit *The Bride of Lammermoor* altogether. Nor is there anything about it in Canning's comprehensive study, *History in Scott's Novels*.

One feels a strong impulse to discover what may be behind this mysterious date of 1695. Though there may well be some more esoteric explanation, two possibilities suggest themselves. The year 1695 is actually mentioned in the text, is in fact one of the few dates to be found in the letterpress expressly set forth in four numerals. "Now, when I was at Rouen in the year 1695", said Craigengelt, "there was a Chevalier de Chapon and I went to the Opera, where we found three bits of English birkies. . . ." But Craigengelt is here of course speaking of long ago, just as the old sexton a little later describes his escape from death as a young trumpeter at the battle of Bothwell Brigg in 1679. No specific year later than 1695 is expressly mentioned

in the text, and a very stupid reader completely ignorant of history might conceivably for that reason regard 1695 not merely as a *terminus post quem* for the story, but as the actual date of the events narrated. This though possible is unlikely; the confusion is best explained in another way. Though Scott associates his narrative with the events of Queen Anne's reign, the actual circumstances that suggested the tragic plot do belong to an earlier period. Janet Dalrymple, the historical prototype of Lucy Ashton, was betrothed to Lord Rutherford, but having been obliged by her father Lord Stair at the instigation of his wife to break her troth and marry David Dunbar of Baldoon on 29th May, 1669, died soon after of a broken heart. The Earl of Stair himself died in 1695. Admittedly it remains hard to understand why scholars should have chosen to assign the events of Scott's novel to the year when the father of the heroine's prototype died.

It is right to add at this point that in Scott's own mind there can be traced a certain element of confusion. Already in 1825 Robert Chambers had pointed out in his *Illustrations of the Author of Waverley* that the Marquis of A. in the novel must be identified with the Marquis of Atholl, who however had been a duke since 1703, and that the change in administration by which Sir William Ashton lost his influence is probably to be equated with Lord Stair's removal from office in 1682. It is well known that Scott wrote this novel during a severe illness, while suffering great bodily pain. When he recovered he had completely forgotten his own narrative, and read it as though it were an unknown writer's work. This fact, however, though it may partly explain the confusion of the critics, is scarcely enough to excuse it.

II

A more desperate matter than this chronological muddle is the failure of Scott's critics to arrive at any general agreement as to the merits of the work. Serious differences arise concerning the characterization, the emotional appeal, the supernatural element, and the comic relief. And what is worse, these divergent pronouncements seem quite unpredictable. It is not that some readers like Scott and some don't, not that one school of critics is romantic, another realistic or what not. All that appears on the surface is that one man chooses to say this, another man that, and unless we are made in an adventurous

mould, we are likely after giving the critics a patient hearing to fall back upon that counsel of despair:

L'homme éclairé suspend l'éloge et la censure.

Professor Hillhouse's convenient assemblage of nineteenth century critical material shows how violently controversial this curious novel has been since its first appearance. Sydney Smith and other contemporary reviewers expressed opinions in varying degrees unfavourable, Scott himself called it "monstrous, gross and grotesque", and Coleridge went to the length of referring to it as a wretched abortion. Byron, however, thought highly of it, and so did Jeffrey, and to Lockhart it seemed "the most pure and powerful of all the tragedies that Scott ever penned." Among Victorian critics Fitzgerald admired it, and Bulwer considered it "the grandest tragic romance our language possesses"; yet to Ruskin the author's broken health was clearly betrayed by its prevailing melancholy and fantastic improbability.

But it is the more recent critics whose disagreements are most significant. Saintsbury, Andrew Lang, and Stephen Gwynn on the whole withhold their admiration. W. H. Hudson, John Buchan and E. A. Baker give expression to unrestrained eulogies. And it is the conflicting opinions of these eminent scholars that throw such a disturbing light on the arbitrariness of literary judgment. The humorous element, at least, one would expect, should provide no serious difficulty, and yet whereas Lang enjoys *Craigengelt* but does not think *Balderwood* (*sic*) successfully humorous, Saintsbury finds *Balderston* amusing but dismisses *Craigengelt* as "a mere super". As for the leading personages, we find John Buchan for instance asserting that on the whole the characters do not fall below the true tragic stature, whereas to Saintsbury *Ravenswood* is a mere operatic figure, and in Lang's opinion Lucy ceases to be feeble only when she ceases to be sane. T. F. Henderson in the *Cambridge History of English Literature*, while admitting the tragic painfulness of portions of the novel, has little else to say in its favour. The characterization of the Ashton family and of *Ravenswood* himself seems to him inadequate, and in general the novel's faults make it decidedly inferior to Scott's best. As for the wit expended on *Balderston's* ingenious devices, Henderson thinks it of the very cheapest kind.

Perhaps a real clue to the problem is presented in Stephen Gwynn's *Life of Sir Walter Scott*. To account for what seems to him the violence and lack of balance of this particular novel,

Gwynn contends that nowhere else is the hidden self of the maker so openly revealed, and suggests that an unhappy early love affair of the author's own was the ultimate inspiration of *The Bride of Lammermoor*. This suggestion is also present in Lord Sands's *Sir Walter Scott's Congé*, which contains a careful investigation of Scott's early infatuation for Miss Williamina Belsches, who after refusing the future novelist, then a youth of uncertain prospects, was married at the age of twenty, becoming Lady Forbes of Pitsligo, and having borne her husband six children, died in 1810 at the age of thirty-three. Scott had never become formally engaged to this lady, but between 1792 and 1796 was deeply in love with her, though there is little to show what encouragement, if any, Miss Belsches supplied. Lord Sands comes to the conclusion that though Williamina's parents did not coerce their daughter to abandon the man she loved and marry another against her will, Scott nevertheless may well have cherished some such notion throughout his life as a result of his rejection. Traces of the affair may be found in *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* and in *Redgauntlet*, and more definite reminiscences in *Rokeby*, while scattered passages in Scott's other works receive added significance when related to this episode. But nowhere else is this dead romance as poignantly recalled as it is in *The Bride of Lammermoor*. In his illness during the spring of 1819, when death seemed near and the pain could scarcely be borne, Scott for once abandoned his constitutional reticence and his usual rule that the hero should be colourless, that the heroine should never be reduced to desperate action, and that the ending should be pleasant. Instead, he let himself go. No longer is he the serene, self-possessed gentleman taking a mildly paternal interest in the fortunes of his characters; no longer does he spin a yarn that is delightful but slightly superficial. Here there is no lack of that passion whose absence in *The Antiquary* and elsewhere has been so much deplored by Mr. E. M. Forster. The great writer in an abnormal condition for once lays bare the recesses of his soul. Elsewhere, as Carlyle has put it, Scott fashioned his characters from the skin inwards, but here in a very real sense it was from the heart outwards.

But granting the importance of *The Bride of Lammermoor* as a personal document, what are we to make of it as literature? Must we utterly abandon the attempt to assess its artistic worth, and admit that one man's opinion is just about as good as anyone else's? The simplest and most summary method of escaping from this impasse is to decide that a book that has provoked

such divergent estimates must for that reason be a poor one. This is the position assumed by Fowler Wright in his *Life of Sir Walter Scott*. "*The Bride of Lammermoor* has always", he says, "been a disputed book. To some it is dull and unreal; others have placed it high or even highest on the list of Scott's romances. Probably preference for the species of tale it tells has deranged their judgment. But the doubt is the condemnation. Had it been written with the intellectual vigour and imagination of *The Heart of Midlothian*, the tragedy would have left no doubt in our minds." The naive implication that any book that provokes much controversy must be condemned simply shows to what shifts a critic can be reduced who feels he must make up his mind and yet does not quite know how. We are on safer ground if we pause to consider the judgment of two great literary artists, neither of whom had any special affinity with Scott. Emerson admired *The Bride of Lammermoor* because of the Aeschylean character of the plot, and Thomas Hardy described it as being, unlike some of Scott's other work, an almost perfect specimen of form.

The fact is that among all the adverse criticisms of the novel there is none that really succeeds in showing that the plot as a whole is anything other than admirable. It is fair to say that the most famous English novels, with some well-known exceptions like *Clarissa* or *The Egoist*, are not noteworthy for well-knit structure. Least of all are the general run of the Waverley novels marked by compactness and symmetry of form; it is notorious, for instance, that *The Heart of Midlothian*, at present the most widely applauded of them all, is intolerably amorphous. Now, though theoretically we are brought up to attach importance to plot, to be quite candid we do not look for plot in the strict sense in most English novels, certainly not in Scott. And when we do find it, we are disconcerted unless we have been educated to recognize it when we meet it. It is accordingly of singular interest that among the nineteenth century critics mentioned by Hillhouse as admiring *The Bride of Lammermoor* there are three who express their enthusiasm in quite unmeasured terms; they are W. E. Gladstone, Jowett, and A. W. Verrall, and it is unnecessary to mention that the three were highly accomplished classical scholars, intimately familiar with Greek literature and the practice of the ancient Attic dramatists. Modern students sometimes wonder why Aristotle asserted that the plot was more important than character in tragedy, but that is because they are so much more familiar

with modern novels than they are with the Athenian tragedians. Scott himself was no Hellenist; he would have been surprised to learn that in *The Bride of Lammermoor* he had by some accident produced something structurally more akin to a Greek tragedy than in any of his previous works. Yet that is so, and that at least in part is what has reduced his critics to a helplessness truly pathetic. That Scott should have produced this masterpiece of form under circumstances when he was, one would suppose, least capable of deliberate planning or sustained creative effort adds, at least superficially, to the miracle, though a competent psychologist might offer some interesting suggestions. It is not permissible to hope that the creative process in Scott will ever be analysed with the insight that Professor Lowes has brought to bear in his great work on Coleridge, but in Scott too the shaping spirit of imagination could become strangely active, though perhaps in a widely different way. In *The Bride of Lammermoor* certainly we have a unique masterpiece resulting from the operation of an unusual stimulus. There can be little doubt that the autobiographical reconstruction that is here so conspicuous was made possible by the temporary withdrawal of the rigid censorship to which at ordinary times Scott subjected his creative powers. The resulting paradox that still remains to be adequately explained is that, whereas Scott's novels in general reflect their author's boisterous health, but are formless and often seem superficial, *The Bride of Lammermoor* reflects a morbid physical condition, but has perfect form and is profoundly revealing. In the presence of this triumphant product of the imagination the dry light of criticism seems reduced to an *ignis fatuus*, so that not only do the critical pronouncements of experienced judges become arbitrary and mutually destructive, but their statements concerning so impersonal an element as the historical setting itself no longer deserve any serious attention.