

Dr Alex Thompson

Walter Scott, *The Bride of Lammermoor*.

[All page references to Penguin Classics Edition]

Synopsis

The lecture explored what Scott called an ‘Ower True Tale’, drawing attention to three features of the novel which are typical of Scott’s novels.

Firstly, Scott very self-consciously draws attention to the mixed mode of the novel: that although broadly ‘realistic’ (in his own terms, ‘accommodated to the ordinary train of human events, and to the modern state of society’) it is shot through with ‘marvellous and uncommon incidents’. Scott offers a rationalist psychological interpretation of the tragedy in which the telling of supernatural stories becomes self-fulfilling, working on Lucy’s impressionable mind. But this must threaten the ‘modern’ interpretation, since the fate that has been predicted for Lucy and Ravenswood comes true anyway!

Secondly, Scott dramatises a specific moment of historical transition in the novel in terms of the decline of the feudal aristocracy (raising the question of Scott’s nostalgia), the rise of new Whig landowners such as Ashton seen as out of touch with the values and needs of the people on their land (characteristically demonstrated in the failure of comprehension between Ashton and his woodsman), and the emancipated merchants of Wolf’s Hope, pointing to the importance of the North Sea trade with the Dutch. As an interpretation of the aftermath of the Glorious Revolution (1688) this might be seen as an example of Scott looking backwards, with his taste for Romance supplying further evidence: but the indication that all legal right is founded on violent usurpation, and the allusions to the judicial murder of suspected witches in the previous century suggest Scott’s position is more complex.

Thirdly, Scott’s self-consciousness about the consequences of narrative form leads to a novel in which words acquire an almost magical power (“‘a description of a dinner,” as [Caleb] said afterwards to Mysie, “that wad hae made a fu’ man hungry”), stories tend to come true, and imagined plots turn out to be real ones. It is for this reason that we should beware the power of the pictorial image without narrative sequence (dramatised in the argument between Pattieson and Tinto which prefaces the novel): our only hope of heeding the Machiavellian lesson of Ashton’s attempt to escape shipwreck, is to recognise that we navigate the world by stories.

Quotations

By many readers this may be deemed overstrained, romantic, and composed by the wild imagination of an author, desirous of gratifying the popular appetite for the horrible; but those who are read in the private family history of Scotland during the period in which the scene is laid, will readily discover, through the disguise of borrowed names and added incidents, the leading particulars of AN OWER TRUE TALE. [262]

Dr Johnson has defined Romance, in its primary sense, to be “a military fable of the middle ages, a tale of wild adventures in love and chivalry.” But although this definition answers correctly the ordinary idea of the word, it is not sufficiently comprehensive to answer our present purpose. A composition may be a legitimate romance, yet neither refer to love nor chivalry—to war nor to the middle ages. The “wild adventures” are almost the only absolutely essential ingredient in Johnson’s definition. We would be rather inclined to describe a *Romance* as “a fictitious narrative in prose or verse; the interest of which turns upon marvellous and uncommon incidents;” being thus opposed to the kindred term *Novel*, which Johnson has described as a “smooth tale, generally of love;” but which we would rather define as “a fictitious narrative, differing from the Romance, because the events are accommodated to the ordinary train of human events, and the modern state of society.” Assuming these definitions, it is evident, from the nature of the distinction adopted, that there may exist compositions which it is difficult to assign to the one class or the other and which, in fact, partake of the nature of both.

Walter Scott, ‘Romance’. from *Miscellaneous Prose Works*.

Lucy might have despised these tales, if they had been related concerning another family, or if her own situation had been less despondent. But circumstanced as she was, the idea that an evil fate hung over her attachment, became predominant over her other feelings, and the gloom of superstition darkened a mind, already sufficiently weakened by sorrow, distress, uncertainty, and an oppressive sense of desertion and desolation. [240]

Such was the generally received legend, which some, who would seem wiser than the vulgar, explained, as obscurely intimating the fate of a beautiful maiden of plebeian rank, the mistress of this Raymond, whom he slew in a fit of jealousy, and whose blood was mingled with the waters of the locked fountain, as it was commonly called. Others imagined that the tale had a more remote origin in the ancient heathen mythology. All however agreed, that the spot was fatal to the Ravenswood family; and that to drink the waters of the well, or even approach its brink, was as ominous to the descendant of that house, as for a Grahame to wear green, a Bruce to kill a spider, or a St Clair to cross the Ord on a Monday. [40]

Ravenswood was now out of hearing. He despised most of the ordinary prejudices about witchcraft, omens and vaticination, to which his age and country still gave such implicit credit, that to express a doubt of them, was accounted a crime equal to the unbelief of Jews or Saracens; he knew also that the prevailing belief concerning witches, operating upon the hypochondriac habits of those whom age, infirmity, and poverty rendered liable to suspicion, and enforced by the fear of death, and the pangs of the most cruel tortures, often extorted those confessions which encumber and disgrace the criminal records of Scotland during the seventeenth century. [193]

We are bound to tell the tale as we have received it; and considering the distance of the time, and propensity of those through whose mouths it has passed to the marvellous, this could not be called a Scottish story, unless it manifested a tinge of Scottish superstition. [187]

Those from whom we won our ancient possessions fell under the sword of my ancestors, and left lands and livings to the conquerors; we sink under the force of the law, now too powerful for the Scottish chivalry. Let us parley with the victors of the day. [120]

‘Your honour is the bad paymaster,’ he said, ‘who pays before it is due. What would you do were I to miss the buck after you have paid me my wood-fee?’

‘I suppose,’ said the Keeper, smiling, ‘you would hardly guess what I mean were I to tell you of a *condictio indebiti*.’

‘Not I, on my saul—I guess it is some law phrase—but sue a beggar, and your honour knows what follows. [...]’ [28]

The Marquis occupied the chamber of dais, which, in every house above the rank of a mere cottage, was kept sacred for such occasions as the present. [...] The cooper [...] had imitated the fashion observed by the inferior landholders and clergy, who usually garnished their state apartments with hangings of a sort of stamped leather, manufactured in the Netherlands, garnished with trees and animals executed in copper foil, and with many a pithy sentence of morality, which, although couched in Low Dutch, were perhaps as much attended to in practice as if written in broad Scotch. [216, continues to 217]

He had sailed long enough amid the contending tides and currents of the time to be sensible of their peril, and of the necessity of trimming his vessel to the prevailing wind, if he would have her escape shipwreck in the storm. [121]

[N]o cavalier appeared to rival or to obscure the ideal picture of chivalrous excellence which Lucy had pictured to herself in the Master of Ravenswood. [45]