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**Coleman O. Parsons. Witchcraft and demonology in Scott's fiction, with chapters on the supernatural in Scottish literature. Edinburgh and London. Oliver & Boyd. 1964. x + 363 pp. 63 shillings.**

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STUDIES IN SCOTTISH LITERATURE

Coleman O. Parsons. *Witchcraft and demonology in Scott's fiction, with chapters on the supernatural in Scottish literature*. Edinburgh and London. Oliver & Boyd. 1964. x + 363 pp. 63 shillings.

The title of this book is somewhat misleading, for better and for worse. For better, because the text discusses not only witches and demons but also many other manifestations of the supernatural in Scott's own fiction; for worse, because Scott's achievements as a craftsman of the novel tend to get lost in the shuffle. Professor Parsons has proceeded on the following plan: first, a section on the philosophical, historical, and biographical background of Scott's dealings with the wonder-world; next, a critical catalogue of examples found in the Wizard's prose fictions; then, a summing-up of the functions performed by these materials in the Waverley novels; and finally, a rapid survey of samples of supernaturalism and their uses in the works of Scott's contemporaries and of his successors (Scottish writers of prose fiction), and the usual scholarly apparatus.

This bill of fare promises God's plenty, with a threat of repletion implicit in the opening and closing courses. The reader interested in exploring Scott's practice of the art of fiction will find that the first three chapters serve up an assortment of history of ideas, of literary history, and of biography; only in connection with the third of them do critical considerations begin to emerge. The *pièce de résistance* is brought on in the chapters on "The Waverley Novels" and "Scott's Methods and Achievements." The former surveys Scott's variety of supernatural materials "in a topical arrangement of Waverley lore. As far as possible, the sequence in which the topics are discussed will be that of Scott's arriving at his fullest or most significant use of each superstition." These topics are displayed in sixteen main categories, from "The Warning Spirit" to "Assorted Spirits and Superstitions," and some are subdivided, to isolate sixteen sub-species. Particularly for the earlier topics, the emphasis is on origins and sources; eight or more sources are suggested for the "German *Diablerie*" in *The Antiquary*, and this in the face of an assurance that "the concentration of this study [is] on the novelist's use, rather than on the provenience, of supernatural materials." But concurrently some conclusions are suggested as to Scott's own developing attitudes and opinions on such materials, and the effective employment of them for the purposes of his novels.

It appears that Scott's early addiction, random and uncritical, to the lurid supernaturalism of inferior German models was relieved by a more

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wholesome diet of Scottish legend; his taste was matured, in part, by the native influence of the folk ballads he collected for the *Minstrelsy*. As he grew older, his own credulous acceptance of the supernatural was chastened into imaginative sympathy; this in turn gave way to common-sense skepticism. His typical response to the marvelous was "an enthusiastic curiosity followed by an urge to discover the natural cause," until in his decline he relapsed into uncritical use of the supernatural to gain artificial effects—"an artistic second childhood."

The novelist perceived a certain relationship between degrees of religious fervor and acceptance of the supernatural: the more devout, the more credulous. But serious religion was in its supernatural aspects "too solemn" for use in novels; only when it merged "into the superstition of a later day," did it become "more properly matter of fiction." Unheroic commoners accept the superstitions of their age; highborn heroes are forced into a more critical attitude by the conflicting loyalties imposed upon them. Recognition of the interplay of human and supernatural circumstances was incumbent upon Scott as "national and cultural historian, the greatest of his fictional capacities." In the final analysis he is "much more interested in [a character's] response to the ghostly than in the ghostly *per se*."

Thus Professor Parsons suggests certain strictly novelistic functions of the supernatural: to control the personality or, temporarily, the mood of a character, or to explore it psychologically; Scott's "object is not to excite fear of supernatural things in [his] reader, but to show the effect of such fear upon the agents in the story." The supernatural can heighten the impact of the action by foreshadowing events; it can establish a link between past, present, and future. On a more superficial level, with the help of seemingly miraculous agents, "the hurried plot-maker slips out of many a tight place." A fictitious character's belief in supernatural phenomena is a part of the manners of his period, and enriches the frame of reference and the setting; the phenomena themselves objectify the environment of natural forces disposing of man's proposals, and they intensify moods conditioning characters' (and readers') responses to fictitious circumstances. A supernatural event may in itself generate an isolated (and inorganic) interest in the reader, or it may deepen his involvement in the central issue of a novel. Implicit moral values are made explicit by their objectification on a non-human level; supernatural intrusions expose with a frightening clarity the human predicament. Contrariwise, they may evoke the saving sense of humor. And, as Professor Parsons points out in two brilliant passages analyzing "Wandering Willie's Tale," the "demonry, . . . fusing details from a large

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body of tradition," may help to integrate the multiple elements that compose *Redgaunlet* as a whole.

The chapter of Professor Parsons' study to which the student of literature will most eagerly turn is probably that entitled "Scott's Methods and Achievements." He will find in it an organized summary, with valuable additions, of Scott's various uses of the supernatural for novelistic purposes, which in the body of the book have been worked out through analysis of the novels. As a bonus, there is an interesting exploration of the basic plot-patterns employed by the novelist, though these are not always strictly related to elements derived from "witchcraft and demonology."

An honest recognition of the virtues of the central chapters of this book must take account of certain incidental lapses. There appears to be a slackness not only in the definition of the terms employed but also in the observance of their limitations. Too many of the passages cited as illustrative of "demonology and witchcraft" are mere hollow phrases with no more supernatural significance than the "God" in "goodby." Nor does Professor Parsons sufficiently discriminate against mere counterfeit appearances of supernaturalism; pages are devoted to the poltergeist of *Woodstock* before the whole subject is dismissed as a matter of "hobgoblin impersonators." It sometimes seems that any recollection associated with a supernatural phenomenon or with a Scott novel, but not necessarily with both, is fair game for the critic. In further discussion of *Woodstock*, the story of Fair Rosamund (which is not a matter of witchcraft or demonology) is adduced to motivate an attempted seduction by Charles II. This incidental item accompanies an accumulation of evidence supporting a psychoanalytic hypothesis, of the novelist's own sexual confusion.

More questionable is the treatment of figurative uses of the supernatural. To begin with, they are virtually renounced: "figurative ghosts contribute little." Immediately thereupon, ten figurative examples are cited within the compass of two pages. A distinction might properly have been made between different classes of figures of speech—the simile puts the reader on warning that the supernatural allusion is mere rhetoric; the metaphor invites him to accept the supernatural as real (at least in the speaker's mind). This minor stricture is really only one phase of a major one: the insufficiency of inquiry into the relative degrees of belief among the parties concerned in the novel. In the course of such inquiry questions might be raised as to how far Scott's narrators (as in *Tales of My Landlord* and *Chronicles of the Canongate*) adopt a fictitious position more or less credulous than his own, and how

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far the narrator (or Scott) offers, and presumably for the moment accepts, his supernatural material at face value (for instance, the *White Lady of Avenel*), without volunteering any realistic escape from acceptance (as with the *Bodach Glas*). And how far reader (and Professor Parsons) are committed to going along with him in acceptance. Furthermore, since the impact of the novels on the reader depends heavily on the extent to which disbelief is suspended for the moment, a critic may properly examine the devices by which the suspension is achieved.

An extension of the considerable attention already directed toward these problems by Professor Parsons might be welcomed by some readers in place of the examination of Hogg and Galt, and of the final chapter, on fiction after Scott. This last is really an appendix to the central subject and comes as somewhat of an anticlimax to the thorough analysis of Scott's choice of supernatural materials, and to the conclusions derived therefrom. In contrast, the materials for this appendix seem to be treated rather casually (in, at the most, three pages per author); no continuity of tradition is established.

To return to Scott: it would be picayune to dispute with Professor Parsons a few of his readings of passages in the novels, or a few of his conclusions. In sum, his work is an impressive achievement in focusing attention on the nature of the supernatural elements in Scott's novels. That this was his real intent appears to be obvious, in the light of the implications of his text, and of the evidence of his extensive bibliography (at least 30% of its general items deal primarily with folklore and related topics) and of the index of subjects discussed in the text, re-arranging and expanding the list of categories presented in Chapter iv (only one-tenth of the index has to do with literary topics, five-sixths with supernatural). The impression arises that Professor Parsons is primarily interested in what the novelist has done with the supernatural, rather than in what the supernatural does to the novels. His book probably provides the last word on Scott as folklorist; its contributions to our understanding of Scott as artist are in some respects disappointing.

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