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## **SIR WALTER SCOTT'S *THE MONASTERY* AND THE REPRESENTATION OF RELIGIOUS BELIEF**

*Chad May*

*The Monastery* stands at a unique point in Sir Walter Scott's career. Written while he was working on *Ivanhoe*, it was part of a transition as he moved from the relatively recent past to the more distant periods of English and Scottish history. In addition, the novel's reliance on the supernatural White Lady represents a clear departure from previous novels. While supernatural elements are incorporated throughout Scott's novels, they are always presented within a rational framework that allows readers to see them as simply the product of a prior belief system. The extensive use of the supernatural in *The Monastery* makes it unlike any other novel Scott wrote. As a result, critics from the moment of its publication labeled the novel and its central supernatural figure, the White Lady of Avenel, a failure. However, Scott's decision to rely upon the supernatural in this particular novel does not represent a failure. Instead it demonstrates his awareness that certain elements of the human condition are not necessarily capable of representation. *The Monastery* seeks to dramatize the historical transition of Scotland from a Catholic to Protestant country. Scott's prioritizing of the romantic and supernatural elements of the story, not present in his other fictions, indicates that he saw religious belief as standing outside the neutral ground of human emotion that he defined as essential to his project of providing an accurate vision of the past. It is only in the romantic qualities of the supernatural that he can hope to transmit some understanding of the mystery of religious belief.

To understand fully the unique position that *The Monastery* holds in his canon, it is helpful to consider the way in which Scott imagines the project of historical recreation in the prefaces to his novels. In the opening of *Waverley*, Scott works to establish the boundaries of historical

fiction through a discussion of the confining qualities of literary genre. He presents and rejects a series of possible titles for his work, each of which would limit it to a particular genre:

Again, had my title borne ‘Waverley, a Romance from German,’ what head so obtuse as not to image forth a profligate abbot, an oppressive duke, a secret and mysterious association of Rosycrucians and Illuminati, with all their properties of black cowls, caverns, daggers, electrical machines, trap-doors, and dark lanterns? . . . I could proceed . . . displaying . . . my own intimate knowledge of the particular ingredients necessary to the composition of romances and novels of various descriptions.<sup>1</sup>

The goal of this exercise is to establish a distinction between the elusive ideal of historical representation and the fictitious nature of literary creation. Unlike a German romance or other types of fiction, Scott is not interested in fulfilling the requirements of a particular genre (involving certain expectations for setting, character and plot), but rather in “throwing the force of . . . [his] narrative upon the characters and passions of the actors; -- those passions common to men in all stages of society, which have alike agitated the human heart” (5, Ch. 1). This emphasis on human nature and the common passions of humankind becomes the defining quality of the historical romance in Scott’s account. In addition, this “neutral ground,” as Scott will later describe it in the ‘Dedicatory Epistle’ to *Ivanhoe*, becomes the point at which a fictional creation can make a claim to historical veracity.<sup>2</sup> Put simply, this neutral ground

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<sup>1</sup> Sir Walter Scott, *Waverley; Or ‘tis Sixty Years Since* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2007), 4, Chapter 1; subsequent references in the text.

<sup>2</sup> George Dekker argues that Scott’s model of historical transformation was heavily indebted to the central thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment. Essentially, Enlightenment philosophical abstractions regarding the various levels of social development allowed Scott and those who followed him “to interpret . . . historical data . . . coherently, meaningfully, and even objectively”: Dekker, *The American Historical Romance* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1987), 45. In Dekker’s thought then, the nineteenth-century historical novel obtains its historicity when it dramatizes the concept of historical transition provided by the Enlightenment stadialist model of progress. “According to these philosophical historians, there were four main stages of society resulting from four basic modes of subsistence: (1) a ‘savage’ stage based on hunting and fishing; (2) a ‘barbarian’ stage based on herding; (3) a stage considered ‘civilized’ and based mainly on agriculture; (4) a stage based on commerce and manufacturing which was sometimes considered over-civilized. Each stage had its characteristic social institutions and cultural forms, and in theory each followed the next in orderly

becomes the point of difference between the genres he is rejecting and his own creation. The trappings and manners of the historical period will be present, but the truth of the representation will depend on an adherence to the constants of human nature instead of generic convention.

Even as Scott lays claim to a form of historical truth through his formulation of the neutral ground, the prefaces to his novels indicate a continual awareness of the complex and interdependent relationship between romance and history. In other words, despite his belief in the constant of human nature, Scott is aware of the way in which history and fiction must constantly blend in any attempt at recreating the past. Staging a debate between two of his narratorial masks, the Author of *Waverley* and the antiquarian Dryasdust, over the validity of straying from the historical record, Scott, in the prefatory letter to *Peveiril of the Peak*, suggests an explanation for the presence of romance within his narratives. Conducting the argument through the metaphor of a Turkish kiosk raised on the ruins of a Greek temple, the Author of *Waverley* insists that

since we cannot rebuild the temple, a kiosk may be a pretty thing, may it not? Not quite correct in architecture, strictly and classically criticized; but presenting something uncommon to the eye, and something fantastic to the imagination, on which the spectator gazes with pleasure of the same description which arises from the perusal of an Eastern tale.<sup>3</sup>

The completeness and strangeness of the romance form symbolized by the kiosk generates a reading pleasure that a strict historical account cannot. Additionally, romance exists because the project of history is ultimately impossible; the temple cannot be rebuilt. In the Magnum Opus edition of the novels, historical footnotes and newly written prefaces abandon such narratorial masks, offering in their place direct access to the documentary sources behind the historical tales. As a result of these changes, the Magnum Opus edition of the *Waverley Novels* seems to lay claim to a form of historical truth that earlier prefaces evaded.<sup>4</sup> However,

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progression from savagery to civilization irrespective of factors like race, place, or time" (Dekker, 75).

<sup>3</sup> Sir Walter Scott, *Peveiril of the Peak* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2007), 8-9, Prefatory Letter.

<sup>4</sup> Fiona Robertson offers a reading of the similarities between the original prefaces and the rewriting of the Magnum Opus. Fiona Robertson, *Legitimate Histories: Scott, Gothic and the Authorities of Fiction* (New York: Oxford UP, 1994).

what this shift indicates is not so much a transition in Scott's conception of his work (the original prefaces also at times suggest that the most romantic moments of the narrative are actual historical events), but an acknowledgement that the division between history and romance is not easily located in the novels. Romance reveals historical truth, as the later prefaces inform us, just as the earlier ones suggest that in its telling history, because of its obscurity, cannot help but co-opt romance forms.<sup>5</sup>

In the original preface to *Ivanhoe*, the 'Dedicatory Epistle', we again see Scott grappling with this question. As I noted previously, *Ivanhoe* signaled a definitive shift in Scott's work, as he moved from the confines of Scottish history, a history he could access through the oral traditions of those who lived it, to the medieval history of England. In the preface, the narratorial masks of Laurence Templeton and Dr. Dryasdust debate the possibility of even addressing such a history. Taking their cue from Scott's fabricated argument, critics have often positioned the novel as the boundary point between the densely historical novels of Scotland and the more romantic texts that followed.<sup>6</sup>

To match an English and a Scottish author in the rival task of embodying and reviving the traditions of their respective countries, would be, you alleged, in the highest degree unequal

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<sup>5</sup>As Ina Ferris has shown, this combination of history and romance was central to the nineteenth-century perception of Scott having reclaimed the novel as a masculine discourse. Popular fiction could be justified through the authority that was beginning to accrue around the discipline of history. What the readings of Ferris suggest is that the blending of history and romance was not only central to Scott's conception of historical recreation, but to the reading public's acceptance of his narratives. Ina Ferris, *The Achievement of Literary Authority: Gender, History, and the Waverley Novels* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1991), 91.

<sup>6</sup>Bruce Beiderwell nicely summarizes this common evaluation of the later novels: "In these works, Scott generally replaces history with nostalgia, moral complexity with chivalric codes; and unsatisfying scenes of punishment with perfectly unqualified, swift and certain acts of righteousness. The moral compromises offered by Argyle in defense of Effie Deans [in the *Heart of Mid-Lothian*] are made unnecessary by the conditions of romance, which make guilt and innocence easy matters to ascertain – punishment and pardon easy solutions to enact." Bruce Beiderwell, *Power and Punishment in Scott's Novels* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992), 82. As part of his argument that we should read Scott's novels in relation to contemporary events, Graham McMaster suggest that the later novels "move away from [historical] realism toward fantasy, allegory, and symbolism." Graham McMaster, *Scott and Society* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1981), 149.

and unjust. The Scottish magician, you say, was, like Lucan's witch, at liberty to walk over the recent field of battle, and to select for the subject of resuscitation by his sorceries, a body whose limbs had recently quivered with existence, and whose throat had but just uttered the last note of agony. . . . The English author, on the other hand, without supposing him less of a conjurer than the Northern Warlock, can, you observed, only have the liberty of selecting his subject amidst the dust of antiquity, where nothing was found but dry, sapless, mouldering, and disjointed bones, such as those which filled the valley of Jehoshaphat.<sup>7</sup>

Where the Scottish author must invoke those whose existence was recent and still remains within the space of memory, the English author must recreate from whatever little is left. In other words, the further one moves into the past the more likely it is that romance must supplement a historically accurate account. The validity of such a project, however, remains because of an unchanging human nature: "that extensive neutral ground, the proportion, that is, of manners and sentiments which are common to us and to our ancestors, having been handed down unaltered from them to us, or which, arising out of the principles of our common nature, must have existed alike in either state of society" (9, Dedicatory Epistle). It is again the "neutral ground" of human nature that allows for historical veracity to exist in the midst of a romantic resurrection of the past.

The original opening to *The Monastery* surprisingly abandons the historical justification offered by Scott's account of the neutral ground, and instead highlights the fictitious nature of Scott's narrators and the project of historical recreation. This opening, like many of Scott's novels, is constructed around the autobiographical account of its authorial mask: in this case, Captain Clutterbuck, a local antiquarian in possession of an ancient manuscript, who exchanges letters with a second mask, the Author of Waverley. Interestingly enough their correspondence is dominated by the Author of Waverley's insistence on the fictitious nature

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<sup>7</sup> Sir Walter Scott, *Ivanhoe* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2007), 7, Dedicatory Epistle; subsequent references in the text. As I have discussed previously the image of resurrection is central to Scott's understanding of the historical romance. Chad May, "'The Horrors of My Tale': Trauma, the Historical Imagination, and Sir Walter Scott," *Pacific Coast Philology*. 40 (2005): 98-116.

of Clutterbuck's very person and the historical manuscript he claims to hold.<sup>8</sup> The opening of his letter begins with this challenge:

You derive your respectable parentage . . . from a land which has afforded much pleasure, as well as profit to those who have traded to it successfully. I mean that part of the *terra incognita* which is called the province of Utopia. . . . What I have remarked as peculiar to Editors of the class in which I venture to enroll you, is the happy combination of fortuitous circumstances which usually put you in possession of the works which you have the goodness to bring into the public notice. One walks on the seashore, and a wave casts on land a small cylindrical trunk or casket, containing a manuscript much damaged with sea-water, which is with difficulty deciphered, and so forth.<sup>9</sup>

The central point here is that a series of elements previously central to Scott's compositions, the authorial mask and the idea of an original manuscript, are labeled as fictional or generic tropes.<sup>10</sup> In short, unlike other prefaces which argue for a balance, or at least a complex intertwining of historical accuracy and romantic fiction, the preface to *The Monastery* emphasizes the way in which historical fiction has become yet another literary genre, not unlike the ones Scott dismisses in the opening chapter of *Waverley*.

This change in the preface is reflected in the content of the novel as well. As I have suggested, *The Monastery* relies on the romantic or the supernatural to an extent not present in any other novel. Supernatural elements are present throughout the *Waverley* Novels. Yet as most critics have noted, there is distinct separation between the narratorial response to such occurrences and the responses of the individual characters who populate Scott's historical fiction. Whereas the characters often fully accept the possibility of supernatural influences, the rational frame offered by the narrator allows the reader to both enjoy and reject such possibilities while retaining confidence in the historical veracity of the tale. As Michael Gamer suggests "Scott's readers . . . are free . . . to

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<sup>8</sup> As Penny Fielding argues, Scott "deconstructs that authority, which in other eyes, he was in the process of conferring upon the status of the novel." Penny Fielding, *Writing and Orality* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 89.

<sup>9</sup> Sir Walter Scott, *The Monastery* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2000) 24, 27, Answer to the Introductory Epistle; subsequent references in the text.

<sup>10</sup> It should be noted that the defensive nature of the preface is partly the result of a series of advertisements in the London *Morning Chronicle*, for a fourth series of *Tales of My Landlord* which Scott had not written.

indulge in a host of supernatural effects . . . [which] are safely framed within a scholarly apparatus of enlightened antiquarianism."<sup>11</sup> As a result, these effects becomes a means through which to register the historical otherness of a time period or cultural belief system. Similarly, as David Brown has argued in relation to the presence of a supernatural curse in *The Bride of Lammermoor*, "Scott's feat of imagination. . . [is] combining with his realistic description of the demise of the feudal order a dramatisation of its destruction as the traditional feudal consciousness would see it."<sup>12</sup> In essence, the inclusion of the supernatural grants readers insight into the beliefs of past ages and cultures, while at the same time assuring the reader of his or her distance from this past.<sup>13</sup> Standing in opposition to Scott's typical presentation of the supernatural, the White Lady's presence and actions within *The Monastery* exceed the skeptical frame of the narrator. The spirit's centrality to the narrative and the absence of any possible rational explanation for the events she brings about represent a very distinct departure from Scott's usual practice of historical recreation.

In her initial appearances within the novel, the White Lady, the legendary protector of the house of Avenel, seems to follow the general

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<sup>11</sup> Michael Gamer, "Gothic Fictions and Romantic Writing in Britain," in *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, ed. Jarrold E. Hogle (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002), 94.

<sup>12</sup> David Brown, *Walter Scott and the Historical Imagination* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979), 136.

<sup>13</sup> *A Legend of the Wars of Montrose*, which was included with *The Bride of Lammermoor* in the third series of the *Tales of My Landlord*, provides the reader with another example of the typical narratorial response to the presence of the supernatural. Discussing the abilities of a highland seer, who incorrectly predicted the death of Lord Menteith, the narrator says: "The Highlanders were somewhat puzzled to reconcile Menteith's recovery with the visions of the second sight, and the more experienced Seers were displeased with him for not having died. But others thought the credit of the vision sufficiently fulfilled, by the wound inflicted by the hand, and with the weapon foretold . . . . The incredulous held that all this was idle dreaming, and that Allan's supposed vision was but a consequence of the private suggestion of his own passion, which, having long seen in Menteith a rival more beloved than himself, struggled with his better nature, impressed upon him, as it were involuntarily, the idea of killing his competitor" (Scott, *A Legend of the Wars of Montrose* [Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1995], 181, Ch. 23). The possibility of second sight is not completely foreclosed by the narrator's explanation, but Menteith's recovery and the somewhat humorous response of the seers discredit the possibility for the reader.



pattern of Scott's previous works. Early in the narrative, the reader is informed that a superstitious belief in the activity of spirits was common to the period. Noting that his characters simply cannot appreciate the natural world from the perspective of contemporary ideas such as "the picturesque, the beautiful, [and] the sublime," the narrator argues that instead the people imagined "a race of supernatural beings" who inhabited the yet wild places of Scotland (37, Ch. 2). This focus on the supernatural is explicitly connected to Catholicism as we are informed that the great families of Scotland not only depend on the saints of the Catholic Church, but instead have their own lesser spirits who protect them (56, Ch. 4). Initially the spirit appears as a guide to the Lady of Avenel and her daughter as they flee to the safety of the Tower of Glendearg. It then intervenes years later when a monk attempts to remove a vernacular translation of the bible from the Lady of Avenel. When Father Philip conveys the story of his encounter with the White Lady to the monastery, the events are discounted by both narrator and character alike. The sub-prior, Father Eustace, assumes Philip has been drinking while the rest of the monastery imagines "the black-eyed miller's daughter was at the bottom of the affair" (76, Ch. 7). The narrator, in typical Scott fashion, simply states "we have recorded the adventure as we find it written down" (75-76, Ch. 7).

Yet when Father Eustace initiates his own search for the book, the reader is presented with a series of events which ultimately overwhelm the guarded rationality of the narrator. Eustace learns that not only was the bible taken from Father Philip, but it was returned to Mary Avenel. Eustace retakes the volume, but his actions are also interrupted by the White Lady who both steals the book and preserves Eustace from an attempt on his life. The spirit is next summoned by Halbert Glendinning, a feudal vassal of the monastery, who calls upon her to both grant him the book and provide him with the knowledge to understand it. The spirit continues to intervene, facilitating a duel between Halbert and the English Piercie Shafton by providing Halbert with a token that symbolizes the less than noble origins of Shafton's mother, a secret that had been completely hidden from the other characters in the novel. In the ensuing duel, Shafton is mortally wounded and Halbert flees. Yet when Shafton is later found, his wound has nearly disappeared, "the spot through which Halbert's sword had passed . . . [was] already cicatrized, and bearing the appearance of a wound lately healed" (243, Ch. 26). The spirit's centrality to the plot and the inability of the narrator to provide other explanations is, as I have said, a strange departure for Scott. Sub-Prior

Eustace who stands as a figure of rationality along with the narrator eventually can no longer locate a valid explanation for the growing series of interventions on the part of the White Lady:

He greatly doubted the English knight's account of the duel, and of what had followed it. Yet the extraordinary and supernatural circumstances which had befallen the Sacristan and himself in that very glen, prevented him from being absolutely incredulous on the score of the wonderful wound and recovery of Sir Piercie Shafton, and prevented him from at once condemning as impossible that which was altogether improbable. (252, Ch.. 27)

The most extensive account of the White Lady's interventions is directed toward the eventual religious conversion of both Mary Avenel and Halbert Glendinning. It is this focus on religious transformation that explains her unique presence in the novel. Before discussing these events however, I want to turn back to *Ivanhoe*. Begun shortly before *The Monastery*, *Ivanhoe* also addresses the concept of conversion, but unlike *The Monastery* which seeks to dramatize a period of religious transition, *Ivanhoe* presents conversion as an impossibility. The central example of conversion occurs after King Richard's raid on Torquilstone castle to free his loyal follower Ivanhoe. During the destruction of the castle, the wealthy Jew Isaac is rescued from the dungeons by Friar Tuck, who proclaims to all that "the Jew is converted" (280, Ch.. 32). Upon further questioning, Isaac rejects this claim. Even so, events prior to his rejection demonstrate how incomplete such a transformation of religious identity would be. As he makes his statement of successful conversion, Tuck holds "a halter, one end of which was fastened to the neck of the unfortunate Isaac of York, who, bent down by sorrow and terror, was dragged on by the victorious priest" (279, Ch.. 32). The restraints make it clear that in the eyes of the Christian monk the converted Jew remains no different from the unconverted. Bound and persecuted, his only social value is attached to his wealth: "thou didst promise to give all thy substance to our holy order" (280, Ch.. 32). Isaac's possible new role is not a subversion or even a slight disturbance of his old.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Discussing this scene of mock conversion in "Writing Nationalist History: England, The Conversion of Jews, and Ivanhoe," Michael Ragussis argues "that the trope of conversion becomes the central figure by which writers of English history attempt to construct, regulate, maintain, and erase different racial and national identities . . . . Scott demystifies the trope of conversion by historicizing it – that is by redefining it in the context of the history of the Jews. By rewriting English history, as Anglo-Jewish history in *Ivanhoe*, Scott exposes the ways in

Although this moment employs humor to emphasize the impossibility of altering religious identity, the idea is reinforced throughout the novel. When the Templar Bois-Guilbert offers Rebecca his protection at the cost of her faith, she heroically rejects him even though it may cost her life. Later she repeats her determination to the sympathetic Rowena: "I may not change the faith of my fathers like a garment unsuited to the climate in which I seek to dwell" (400, Ch.. 44). The metaphor of clothes is important because the narrative consistently explores the possibility of changing cultural identity through disguise. Two central conflicts divide the novel: the cultural divide between Norman and Saxon and the religious separation between Christianity and Judaism. Through the figure of Ivanhoe, the novel dramatizes the disappearance of the former, looking forward to the merging of the two cultures symbolized in the "present English language, in which the speech of the victors and the vanquished have been so happily blended together" (17, Ch.. 1).

Unlike Isaac and Rebecca, Ivanhoe, through the use of disguise, can move nearly effortlessly back and forth within the cultural divide of Norman and Saxon. Initially, he is represented as an individual disinherited from both cultures. His father has exiled him for his devotion to King Richard and Norman customs, as well as his love of Rowena. Similarly, Prince John has stripped him of the Barony of Ivanhoe, his feudal connection to the conquerors. Opening the novel in the guise of a palmer, wearing "a cloak or mantle of coarse black serge [which] enveloped his whole body," Ivanhoe seemingly duplicates this dual disinheritance by abandoning the visual markers of both cultures (40, Ch.. 4). Yet, in granting its wearer the cultural identity of Christianity, one applicable to both Saxon and Norman, the cloak works to transcend this cultural and political divide. Suspended between identities, Ivanhoe is allowed unlimited freedom to move across the landscape of England. He can guide the Normans, who wake him from his sleep at the crossroads, through the forest and swamp, landscapes the novel associates with Saxons. Later, he will excel in the tournament, a distinctly Norman sphere. As Judith Wilt perceptively notes, through the medium of horsemanship Ivanhoe can assert his claim to Norman

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which racial and cultural differences are regularly erased in the project of writing English nationalist history." See Michael Ragussis, "Writing Nationalist History: England, The Conversion of Jews, and *Ivanhoe*," *ELH*, 60: 1 (1993):185.

culture.<sup>15</sup> Yet as the tournament and *Ivanhoe's* continued conflict with Bois-Guilbert makes clear, it is also a forum in which he can stake a claim to his Saxon origins. The crowd perceives him as such, and his unveiling at the end sets in motion the events that will lead to reconciliation with his father. Ultimately, *Ivanhoe's* cross-cultural movement through disguise sets up a model of Englishness as a combination of both Saxon and Norman that King Richard will later take up.

Yet along side of this tale of the formation of English national identity, the novel illustrates the unbridgeable gap between Jew and Christian which ultimately cannot be overcome. Instead the Jewish characters must be expelled from the narrative. Isaac "hath a brother in high favour with Mohammed Boabdil, King of Granada -- thither we go, secure of peace and protection, for the payment of such ransom as the Moslem exact from our people" (399, Ch.. 44).

In *The Monastery*, Scott returns to a moment of a religious conflict as he attempts to account for the radical historical transformation which will replace one dominant religious belief with another. As a result, the trope of conversion becomes no longer an object of humor, but rather a real possibility. In this setting the vernacular translation of the bible, which is the principal site of the White Lady's actions, represents the Protestant belief and the future. Again and again, the narrator describes the Catholic priests as "confounding the vital interests of Christianity with the extravagant and usurped claims of the Church of Rome, defending . . . [their] cause with ardour worthy of a better" (79, Ch.. 8). Conversely, the traveling preachers who convey Protestant belief to Scotland are described as "bold in spirit, and strong in faith" (231, Ch.. 25). Ultimately, the denizens of the monastery are characterized as the "living dead" (300, Ch.. 33). The Gothic metaphor conveying what the text has already established; Catholicism is a religion of the past, Protestantism of the future.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Judith Wilt, *Secret Leaves: The Novels of Walter Scott* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 40.

<sup>16</sup> Numerous critics have commented on the strange connection between Protestantism and the spirit: see, e.g., Donald Cameron, "History, Religion, and the Supernatural: The Failure of *The Monastery*," *Studies in Scottish Literature* 6:3 (1969):76-90: <http://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol6/iss2/3/>; and James Anderson, "Sir Walter Scott as Historical Novelist: part VI," *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 5:3 (1967): 143-166: <http://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol5/iss3/2/>.

As I noted above, it is through of the characters of Mary Avenel and Halbert Glendinning that Scott hopes to signal this shift in religious belief. Jealous of his brother Edward's growing relationship with Mary based in their shared love of knowledge, Halbert seeks the aid of the White Lady, calling her with a spell she taught him the day she first returned the vernacular translation of the Bible to the Avenel family. Believing that in knowledge lies the key to the heart of Mary, Halbert asks for the White Lady to grant it:

I have lived in this day the space of years – I came hither a boy – I will return a man – a

man, such as may converse not only with his own kind, but with whatever God permits to be visible to him. I will learn the content of that mysterious volume – I will learn why the Lady of Avenel loved it – why the priests feared, and would have stolen it – why thou didst twice recover it from their hands. (115, Ch. 12)

The White Lady agrees to Halbert's request, taking him to a place deep within the earth, where a supernatural flame guards the volume. After plunging his hand into this fire "that no human imagination can conceive, or words suffice to describe," Halbert is transformed by the experience (117, Ch. 12). As the narrator indicates "it was evident to all, that, from this day, young Halbert was an altered man; that he acted with the steadiness, promptitude, and determination which belonged to riper years, and bore himself with the manners which appertained to a higher rank" (138, Ch. 14). This transformation is later confirmed as the commoner Halbert is granted the Barony of Avenel by Lord Moray. This change of social status is dependent not only on the service that Halbert provides Moray, but also on his acceptance of his Lord's faith:

The ministers who attended upon Moray, and formed his chief support amongst the

people, found an easy convert in Halbert Glendinning, who, from the beginning of his life, had never felt much devotion towards the Catholic faith, and who listened eagerly to more reasonable views of religion. By thus adopting the faith of his master, he became still nearer to him, and was constantly about his person during his prolonged stay in the west of Scotland. (325, Ch. 36)

Scott provides two rational explanations for the conversion of Glendinning. On the one hand, there is obvious political and economic gain that comes with his conversion. On the other, it is partly a result of Glendinning's interactions with Henry Warden, a traveling preacher, who represents the historical forces that spread the Protestant faith. Addressing this point, Lionel Lackey argues that

in Halbert's case the changeover has been only *initiated* by the White Lady's presenting him with the Bible: his refusal of a church office as chief forester to the Monastery of St. Mary's, his acquaintance with and admiring observation of the wise and courageous Protestant preacher Henry Warden, and his service under the able and fair-minded Protestant partisan Lord Murray are all necessary steps in the gradual process of his confirmation.<sup>17</sup>

In other words, Lackey sees the conversion of Glendinning as a validation of Scott's philosophy of a neutral ground. The political and economic gain that comes with the conversion as well as Glendinning's own reverence for the character of Henry Warden are reasons that resonate with any reader.

Yet the radical and elaborate account of Glendinning's interactions with the White Lady suggests that the act of conversion simply cannot be explained with the rational framework Lackey identifies. The various events that lead Glendinning to the service of Moray such as the duel with Shafton and his encounter with Warden, would not have required the intervention of the White Lady from the perspective of plotting. Scott invests too much narrative energy in this supernatural intervention for us to simply dismiss it as non-essential. Instead what we must understand is that Scott uses the White Lady as a figure to represent the mysteries of religious faith. When Halbert is magically transported below ground by the Spirit, he beholds:

A grotto . . . composed of the most splendid spars and crystals, which returned in a thousand prismatic hues the light of a brilliant flame that glowed on an altar of alabaster . . . . The fire itself did not remain steady and unmoved, but rose and fell, sometimes ascending in a brilliant pyramid of condensed flame half way up the lofty expanse, and again fading into a softer and more rosy hue, and hovering as it were on the surface of the altar . . . . There was no visible fuel by which it was fed, nor did it emit either smoke or vapour of any kind. What was of all the most remarkable, the black volume so often mentioned lay not only unconsumed, but untouched in the slightest degree amid this intensity of fire. (116-17, Ch. 12)

For any contemporary reader, the flame that is fed by "no visible fuel" and does not burn could not help but call to mind a number of key moments in both the Old and New Testament. The first would be Moses'

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<sup>17</sup> Lionel Lackey, "*The Monastery and The Abbot: Scott's Religious Dialectics*," *Studies in the Novel*, 19:1 (1987): 49-50; subsequent references in the text.

conversation with God through the burning bush, which precipitates his transformation into the leader who will rescue the Hebrews from their captivity in Egypt. The Exodus story also contains the pillar of fire that guides the Israelites at night. The prophet Elijah is taken to heaven in a chariot of fire and Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego do not burn when they are thrown into the fiery furnace of King Nebuchadnezzar. In the New Testament, tongues of flames are granted to the disciples of Christ after his death, allowing them to convert three thousand individuals in a single day. In all their various biblical iterations the flames signal moments of profound religious transformation or conversion.

From a historical perspective, the protestant preacher John Knox (1514-1572) is widely scene as the central figure of Scottish Reformation. For Knox and other reformers the Protestant challenge to Catholic theology could be summed up in three phrases: *Sola Fide* (by faith alone); *Sola Scriptura* ( by Scripture alone); *Sola Gratia* (by grace alone). All three can be found in *The Scottish Confession of Faith*, the principal document of the Scottish Reformation, authored in 1560 by Knox and six other preachers. *The Confession*, read before and approved by the Scottish parliament, affirms the idea of scripture alone by rejecting the traditions of the Catholic church and asserting that in questions of religious belief “we ought not so much to look what men before us have said or done, as unto that which the Holy Ghost uniformly speaks within the body of the scriptures, and unto that which Christ Jesus himself did, and commanded to be done.”<sup>18</sup> It insists on the primacy of faith over moral actions by insisting that “the cause of good works we confess to be, not our free will, but the Spirit of the Lord Jesus who, dwelling in our hearts by true faith, brings forth such good works as God has prepared for us to walk into” (Knox). Finally and perhaps most importantly it points to the idea of God’s grace alone as necessary for salvation, rejecting the role of church as mediator: “have with our Head and only Mediator Christ Jesus: whom we confess and avow to be the Messiah promised, the only Head of his kirk, our just Lawgiver, our only High Priest, Advocate, and Mediator” (Knox).

Halbert’s encounter with the mystical flames of the White Lady is constructed in terms of a trial of faith. Commanded by the White Lady to

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<sup>18</sup> John Knox, and others, *The Scottish Confession of Faith* (Dallas, TX: Presbyterian Heritage Publications, 1993): open-access online version available at: <http://www.swrb.com/newslett/actualNLS/ScotConf.htm>; subsequent references in the text.

remove the volume from the flames, Halbert first hopes "by the rapidity of his motion to snatch out the volume before the fire could greatly affect him" (117, Ch. 12). The attempt fails and leaves Halbert burned and in agony. Condemning him for relying "on his own weak worth," the spirit directs him to "prove thy luck again" (117, Ch. 12). What we are given at this moment is an act of faith, tied to the scripture, which depends on a kind grace. Halbert's own "weak worth," or works, are insufficient. He has no real reason to believe that his hand can pass unharmed through the fire and yet he reaches for the holy text once again after the spirit insists that it is "truth alone" (118, Ch. 12). Without pushing this moment in the text too far, it is clear that Scott offers us this event in place of a multitude of other possible narratives of Halbert's conversion. He deliberately shifts into a romantic and supernatural account that he does not employ in any other novel. In other words, instead of offering an account of the psychological or emotional conflicts that must surely precede any type of religious conversion, the text offers a symbolic account that alludes to instances of religious transformation throughout the Christian tradition as well as the central theological disputes that animated the Protestant reformers.

As we saw with Halbert, the explanation of Mary Avenel's conversion invokes the neutral ground, through the presentation of emotions that readers could surely identify with. She carefully reads the written notes her mother has placed in her Bible explaining the errors of the Catholic church as well as

Other papers . . . which had no reference whatsoever to polemics, but were . . . those affecting texts to which the heart has recourse in affliction, and which assures us at once of the sympathy and protection afforded to the children of the promise. In Mary Avenel's state of mind, these attracted her above all the other lessons, which, coming from a hand so dear, had reached her at a time so critical, and in a manner so touching. . . . There are those whom a sense of religion has come in a storm and tempest; there are those whom it has summoned amid scenes of revelry and idle vanity; there are those, too, who have heard its "still small voice" amid rural leisure and placid contentment. But perhaps the knowledge which causeth not to err, is most frequently impressed upon the mind during seasons of affliction; and tears are the softened showers which cause the seed of heaving to spring and take root in the human breast. At least it was thus with Mary Avenel. (280-281, Ch. 30)



In the passage, Scott focuses heavily on the type of emotional situations that could generate a moment of religious insight. Dealing with the death of her beloved mother, and the supposed death of Halbert, Mary encounters the religious writings of her mother specifically directed to her situation. In other words, Scott offers a highly rational and reasonable explanation for Mary's conversion, not unlike the less admirable but equally reasonable account offered for Halbert alongside the supernatural explanation discussed above. Yet the very existence of this bible that contains the notes of her mother, depends completely on the supernatural actions of the White Lady. As we have seen on two separate occasions, the volume is removed by Catholic priests only to be returned in miraculous fashion by the White Lady. Although Mary's reading of her beloved Mother's bible so shortly after her death is sufficient explanation for her conversion, the structure of the plot confuses the issue. Simply put, without the supernatural interference of the White Lady neither Halbert or Mary could have been converted. Even Henry Warden, the protestant preacher, charged with bringing converts to the Protestant cause cannot explain the situation except by reference to the supernatural: "They are both . . . by means which may be almost termed miraculous, rescued from delusions of Rome, and brought within the pale of the true church" (345, Ch. 37).

Literary critics have been very skeptical of the White lady describing her as a "stylistic anomaly, incongruous with the rationalism Scott advocates" (Lackey, 47). Scott's contemporaries provided a similarly negative response and in *The Abbot*, the sequel to *The Monastery*, all supernatural influence is removed. In fact, the White Lady is relegated to a narratorial reference in the final paragraph. In the 'Introductory Epistle' included in *The Fortunes of Nigel* from the first edition onwards, Scott, in the voice of the Author of Waverley, admits to the failing of the White Lady (from the perspective of his audience) and comes to the conclusion that he "must invest . . . [his] elementary spirits with a little human flesh and blood."<sup>19</sup> In practice, this meant that never again would the plot of the novel depend so heavily on a figure which stood outside rational explanation.

In writing a novel which focuses on the Scottish and English reformation, Scott had to illustrate how individuals exchange one system of beliefs for another. The White Lady may have been a failure from the

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<sup>19</sup> Scott, *Fortunes of Nigel* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2004), 6, Introductory Epistle.

perspective of Scott's critics, but she stands as a marker for that which lies outside historical explanation, in this case faith. Without the dominant rational or skeptical framework present in his other novels, Scott makes it clear that what is at stake is not simply representing a belief system of the past, but giving voice to those qualities of human existence which remain, even in the present day, beyond the purview of reason. Scott's inability to produce characters who are defined by their faith is well noted. As A.N. Wilson comments, "Scott was not a religious novelist . . . He would not have considered the private conversation of the human soul with its Maker an appropriate subject of romance."<sup>20</sup> In fact, Scott's religious figures seem to vary between two extremes: religious fanatics like Habakkuk Mucklewrath in *Old Mortality*, or those like Friar Tuck in *Ivanhoe* for whom religion is one disguise among many: "I will but confess the sins of my green cloak to my grey friar's frock, and all shall be well again" (168-69, Ch. 20). Most critics have considered the White Lady "an insufficient and unrealistic motivator of Halbert Glendinning's and Mary Avenel's conversions to Protestantism" (Lackey, 48). However, what I am suggesting is that the supernatural actions of the White Lady become one means of representing a deeply personal transformation which cannot otherwise find representation. Although Scott, never again employs the supernatural in such a manner, it continues to play an important function in his work. For the first and only time in *The Monastery*, Scott associates the supernatural with historical progress. This change suggests that the progressive movement of history is never fully explainable.<sup>21</sup> In the case of the reformation, it is

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<sup>20</sup> A.N. Wilson, *The Laird of Abbotsford: A View of Sir Walter Scott* (New York: Oxford UP, 1980), 94-95. Similarly, in his analysis of Scott's novels dealing with Protestant Reformation, George Marshall notes that like many of his contemporaries Scott "disapproved of a clergyman who was 'enthusiastic' in his religious beliefs: the term 'moderate' expressed approval . . . in his expressions of his personal religious views Scott consistently placed a high value on common sense and civic, as well as individual, virtue. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, in contrast, varieties of Christian beliefs and modes of worship were sufficiently important for a substantial number of people to be prepared to die for them. It seems unlikely that Scott or his associates would have emulated them" (George Marshall, "Scott and the Reformation of Religion," in *The Edinburgh Companion to Sir Walter Scott*, ed. Fiona Robertson [Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2012], 83).

<sup>21</sup> Daniel Cottom argues the "White Lady . . . does illustrate the complicity of reason with its supposed antagonists. In so doing, it shows that the exposure of

composed of a multitude of personal acts of faith that can never be fully expressed or contained within a narrative of cause and effect.<sup>22</sup>

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language as rhetoric – as discourse representing heterogenous subjects, sources, interests, and ends – is the greatest danger faced by the conception of reason advanced by Scott and the other heirs of the Enlightenment with which he may be compared”: Daniel Cottom, “Sir Walter Scott and the Spirit of the Novel,” in *Spirits of Fire: English Romantic Writers and Contemporary Historical Methods*, ed. G.A. Russo and Daniel P. Watkins (Toronto: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1990), 146. In other words, the White Lady is a rhetorical tool, like all novelistic conventions, and her failure is the way in which she exposes universal reason to be simply another product of rhetoric and therefore not universal.

<sup>22</sup> Another example of this lies in the conflict between Henry Warden, the protestant preacher, and Sub-Prior, Eustace. Former friends, these two individuals stand as the representatives of their respective faiths. However, although the narrative is based around an explicit and implied belief in the superiority of the protestant religion, the narrator can identify very little difference between the two individuals: “These two men, both excellent from natural disposition and acquired knowledge, had more points of similarity than they themselves would have admitted. In truth, the chief distinction betwixt them was, that the Catholic, defending a religion which afforded little interest to the feelings, had, in his devotion to the cause he espoused, more of the head than of the heart, and was politic, cautious, and artful; while the Protestant, acting under the strong impulse of more lately adopted conviction, and feeling, as he justly might, a more animated confidence in his cause, was more enthusiastic, eager, and precipitate in his desire to advance it. . . . They could not part from each other without a second pressure of hands, while each looked in the face of his old companion, as he bade him adieu, with a countenance strongly expressive of sorrow, affection, and pity” (303, Ch. 33).