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Rick A. Davies

The Demon Lover Motif in
The Heart of Midlothian



They had not sail'd a league, a league,
A league but barely three,
Until she espied his cloven foot,
And she wept right bitterlie.
"The Daemon Lover"¹

George Robertson/Staunton stands apart from the other menacing figures in Sir Walter Scott's *The Heart of Midlothian*; a few, such as the revenge-obsessed Meg Murdockson, may be his equal in abandon, but none provides such a clear example of deliberate villainy. Robertson, after all, purposely forsakes a life of moneyed respectability for one of petty crime and loose associations. The evidence of Robertson's deliberately evil nature is so overwhelming, in fact, that as Coleman Parsons states in his comprehensive work on the supernatural in Scott's fiction, it is apparent that Scott purposefully connected Robertson with the demonic in a general way. It is clear, however, that Scott had in mind no such general supernatural representation but intended Robertson to be seen as the physical incarnation of a specific demon type--the demon lover.

As Parsons notes in his book, *Witchcraft and Demonology in Scott's Fiction*, it is Robertson's melodramatic character which provides his primary connection with the demonic. His intemperate nature, so basic to him and so destructive of those

around him, finally forces even him to say of himself that he seems "predestined to evil here and hereafter."² This sense of evil surrounding Robertson is so strong that it takes on a nearly physical form; during their first meeting with Robertson, both Jeanie Deans and Reuben Butler are struck by this almost tangible sensation. Jeanie believes that she may be speaking with an "apostate spirit incarnate" (Ch. 15), and Reuben wonders whether or not he has indeed come face to face with "the Roaring Lion" (Ch. 11). Beyond the suggestiveness of his character, Robertson is allied with the supernatural in his long relation with Meg and Madge Murdockson, whose lives and deaths are equally tainted by rumors of witchcraft and demonology. It is easy to see why David Deans feels that his daughter has truly run away with a "son of Belial" (Ch. 42). As Parsons points out, these and other suggestions provide a clear connection between Robertson and the demonic. However, Scott obviously had more in mind than this general representation of demonology.

Interrupted in her journey to London, Jeanie Deans is confronted by Robertson in his father's home. Attempting to allay her fears, he remonstrates with her, "My head is not horned, my foot is not cloven, my hands are not garnished with talons..." (Ch. 33). His assurances are less than soothing, and it is no wonder: at that same moment his head is completely covered with bandages (Ch. 33). The juxtaposition of his statement and actual condition would provide only momentary comic relief if it did not correspond to a number of similar instances in the book where Robertson's head is likewise hidden from view. Indeed, nowhere in *The Heart of Midlothian* is a single reference made to Robertson's uncovered head. At various times he is mentioned as wearing a sailor's cap (Ch. 3), a woman's bonnet (Ch. 16), and his own hat which he plucks "deep over his brows" (Ch. 11). Yet, it is unlikely that this is a mere oversight attributable to the author's lack of descriptive care. Scott's descriptions of such characters as Radcliffe (Ch. 13) and Madge Wildfire (Ch. 16) provide ample proof that he was neither stingy nor slovenly in presenting physical appearances. Rather, it appears that the cause of this apparent oversight must be looked for in Robertson's statement to Jeanie Deans. Scott suggests that Robertson may be attempting to hide something that is on his head--possibly a pair of horns. Certainly, Scott did not mean to imply that Robertson actually possessed a pair of devil's horns. However, this apparent act of concealment offers a physical suggestion of Robertson's demonic nature (the horns connoting physicality even in their implied concealment). This physical suggestion in turn provides specificity to Robertson's demonic identity: to suggest physical characteristics is to suggest a

specific physical entity. Robertson is presented as a specific demon figure much in the same way that Meg Murdockson is thought of specifically as a witch and not merely as being connected with witchcraft in general. What kind of demon he is associated with is evident from his actions.

Robertson's demonic identity is easily recognizable in his relations with two characters in *The Heart of Midlothian*: Madge Wildfire and Effie Deans. It is in his seduction of both of these young women that his demon lover nature is discovered. Madge's liaison with Robertson costs her the life of her child and her reason; Effie is nearly put to death and her child is lost to her forever because of a similar thoughtless relationship. The ordeals of both of these women are indications in themselves of the evil quality of their connection with Robertson. But, it is the seduction of these two and the important role that their seduction plays in the story which clearly points up Robertson in his demon lover role. Confirmation of this role is provided by one of the victims of Robertson's indiscriminate desire.

Early in *The Heart of Midlothian* Effie Deans is seen returning home from a rendezvous with an unknown suitor, who is later identified by his own admission as George Robertson. Under the circumstances the song that Effie sings to herself is important:

"The elfin knight sate on the brae,
The broom grows bonny, the broom grows fair;
And by there came liltin' a lady so gay,
And we daurna gang down to the broom nae mair"
(Ch. 10)

The lines are basically derived from the popular ballad "Sheath and Knife"--the story of a king's daughter who is stabbed by her brother after giving birth to the child of their union. What makes the lines that Effie sings so significant is that they do not belong to any of the four known versions of the ballad; in fact, F. J. Child states that the lines were probably of Scott's own making.³ Scott introduces into this ballad (normally devoid of the supernatural) the figure of the elfin knight, an extremely licentious supernatural character, and places these altered lines in Effie's mouth. Thus, Effie is unconsciously providing Robertson's demon lover nature by connecting herself with the "lady so gay" and Robertson with "the elfin knight." Certainly, Scott meant for Robertson to be perceived in terms of this specific demon lover figure. His reasons for using this motif are readily apparent within the novel.

In his use of the supernatural in his fiction, Scott achieved more than mere Gothic window dressing. At its best Scott's demonology helps to unify his work to a significant degree. Among the aspects of Scott's work that a proper use of the supernatural aided, Parsons notes the defining of setting as being of major importance.⁴ In *The Heart of Midlothian* the susceptibility of the characters to the supernatural is as crucial to the setting of the story as are the references to contemporary events and people. For Scott superstition was the attribute of an earlier, less educated age, and evidence of a belief in the supernatural constituted a setting within that age.⁵ As he says of his characters in *The Heart of Midlothian*, "Witchcraft and demonology...were at this period believed in by almost all ranks..." (Ch. 15). Jeanie and Reuben in the credence they give to their supernatural fears regarding Robertson, and especially those who kill Meg and Madge Murdockson as witches, firmly place themselves in the story's setting, Scotland of the mid-eighteenth century. In his general use of the supernatural, Scott especially contributed to his story by accurately defining his setting; his use of the specific demon lover motif is more understandable in terms of the moral outlook of the novel.

Another aspect of the novel that a use of the supernatural could aid is character development. George Robertson is no demon; in fact, he is not a supernatural agent of any sort. He is a man of frenetic energy and inconsistent morality. However, the suggestions of the supernatural that surround Robertson provide an instantly recognizable framework for his chaotic character and actions; the reader's apprehension of Robertson is brought into focus through his perceived demon nature. The demonic, thus, is important to an early and continuous appreciation of Robertson's character. Still, even within his role as the lurking menace, Robertson would achieve little more than passing melodrama if it were not for the relation that he and his demon nature bear to the major incident in the book--the seduction of Effie Deans.

Of the various moral questions entered into within *The Heart of Midlothian*, none receives more attention than the one posed by the seduction of Effie Deans. There is no question for Scott, however; his viewpoint is stated throughout the novel unequivocally--extra-marital relations are evil actions, whose only reward can be misery. His position is made clear in the special fate that he reserves for those involved in such relations: despair, madness and death. The importance of this moral message is made equally clear in the primary nature of Effie's seduction to the plot. It would appear that virtually nothing of consequence happens in the book that is not attributable to her downfall; among those consequences are Robert-

son's initial imprisonment which eventually brings about the Porteous riots, Jeanie Deans's journey to London which leads to her final domestic reward, etc. Effie's seduction is essential to *The Heart of Midlothian* as an initiator of action and a central connection; it is in a perception of the primary significance of this seduction to the story that the importance of the demon lover motif is to be found.

As stated above the demon lover motif in *The Heart of Midlothian* provides a focus for Robertson's turbulent character; at the same time that focus directs the reader once more to Scott's seemingly obsessive concern with Effie Deans's seduction. By the very nature of Robertson's specific demon identity, attention is returned to this continuing theme; the demon lover motif is both an expression of and a contribution to that theme. Nowhere is that bond between the demon lover motif and Scott's moral consideration more evidenced than in the ending to the book.

Objections have been raised more than once to the ending of *The Heart of Midlothian*, that seemingly endless vision of domestic tranquility shattered by Robertson's melodramatic death. Yet, with an understanding of Scott's moral concern, it is easy to see how this ending is essential (at least for Scott). Robertson, once so menacing and apparently so powerful that he was allied with the demonic, is reduced to a typically fevered remorse in his search for his son. The end of that search is all that can be expected under the circumstances; Robertson has doomed himself in his open contempt for conventional morality. His death at the hands of his own son (that "imp of Satan," whose very mania is another expression of his father's demon nature) becomes more than mere poetic justice, or melodramatic finale. His end is the culmination of his previous choices; the same actions and character which placed upon him the stigma of the demon lover at the same time guaranteed his horrible end. Thus, the Butlers' domestic happiness is less a reward meted out to the novel's good characters than it is the certain consequence of their correct action. Similarly, Robertson comes to his only possible end (within Scott's moral universe, at least): an end which demonstrates the crucial bond between the demon lover motif and Scott's view of illicit relations in this work.

The demon lover motif in *The Heart of Midlothian* is an essential facet of that work. Chiefly, the demon lover motif aided Scott's fiction in binding together various demonic suggestions associated with George Robertson and directing those focussed suggestions toward his most pervasive moral consideration--the consequences of extra-marital relations. Whatever the reader's opinion of Scott's moral viewpoint, it must be admitted that his use of the demon lover motif is a skillful

use of suggestion and connection which effectively strengthens aspects of his work, including characterization and setting definition, while at the same time stressing a moral consideration he was compelled to express.

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NOTES

¹ Sir Walter Scott, *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, ed. T. F. Henderson (1902; rpt. Detroit, 1968), III, 250.

² Sir Walter Scott, *The Heart of Midlothian* (Atlanta, 1969), Ch. 15. All further references to this work appear in the text.

³ Francis James Child, ed. *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (New York, 1956), I, 187.

⁴ Coleman O. Parsons, *Witchcraft and Demonology in Scott's Fiction* (London, 1964), p. 285.

⁵ Sir Walter Scott, *Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft* (London, 1887), p. 35.