The Tragedy of Lucy Ashton, the Bride of Lammermoor

Brian Hollingworth

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The Bride of Lammermoor stands out among the Waverley novels in the tightness of its construction and the controlled force of its narration. Dictated while Scott was in severe pain, and almost unaware of what he was doing, it nevertheless impresses the reader by its coherence and its melancholy impact. In a mere thirty-five chapters, most concisely told by Scott's ample standards, he charts with unusual sureness of tone and intention the tragic tale of the death of Lucy Ashton and the Fall of the House of Ravenswood.

It might be thought, therefore, that this book might have escaped that general neglect of Scott's work which often seems based on the erroneous assumption that Scott is a long-winded bore with very little of serious importance to say. Yet, despite some favorable notice by modern critics, it has scarcely received the attention it deserves as a genuinely tragic novel—an outstanding example of Scott's response to historical change, and his ability to transmute this response into literary art.

The Bride of Lammermoor is compelling reading because the story is inexorable—because the fate of the protagonists is inevitable, yet undesirable; deserved, yet pitiable. It is a tragic novel in the fullest sense of the word. It is a tragedy of character, a tragedy of politics, a tragedy of history, a tragedy of destiny, and a tragedy of chance. It is a trage—
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dy, moreover, where all these elements are so skillfully blended together that the story becomes an archetypal expression of a legitimately pessimistic response to the inevitable changes afflicting humanity at both the personal and the social level.

Parallels with Shakespearean tragedy are almost inevitable in discussing The Bride of Lammermoor, and they do not work to the detriment of Scott. The plot is reminiscent of Romeo and Juliet. Two young people fall in love, yet, because they belong to antagonistic and warring families, their love is doomed and causes their mutual destruction. There are echoes, too, of Macbeth, since one of the main causes of the tragedy is the implacable ambition of the heroine's mother, Lady Ashton, which overcomes the scruples of her weak and vacillating husband and condemns Lucy to the marriage which kills her. The melancholy Master of Ravenswood, dressed in black, is a potent reminder of Hamlet, and in the graveyard scenes one recaptures something of the macabre atmosphere of that play—the jesting among the skulls which links the melancholy fate of the individual to the inevitable fate of all mankind.

It is possible, therefore, to discuss the tragedy in old-fashioned terms of Shakespearean criticism as primarily a tragedy of character. The major characters are all afflicted by a fatal flaw of personality which makes the final madness and death of Lucy deserved and inevitable. Lucy, herself, for instance, suffers because, perhaps through heredity, perhaps through historical circumstance, she is unable to assert herself against a domineering mother. When she has fallen in love with the Master of Ravenswood, whose ancient lands her family have usurped, her "passiveness of disposition" (p. 40, chapter 3) makes her unable to withstand the pressures that her family put upon her to marry the worthless Bucklaw. Here, it is interesting to note, one of the most commonly instanced weaknesses of Scott's comic characterization becomes a tragic strength. In the stories which end happily, his heroines are often condemned for their insipidity and inability to act for their own good. With Lucy Ashton, however, such beautiful ineffectualness and passive suffering is tellingly depicted as a major cause of the horrible death which awaits her.

Similarly the political indecision and timidity of her father is seen as an inevitable part of the tragedy. At first, largely for political reasons, but partly through genuine gratefulness that the Master of Ravenswood has saved Lucy's life, he encourages their relationship. But he has not the strength of character to withstand his wife's decision that Lucy should marry Bucklaw, nor to protect his daughter from the evil effects of his wife's all-conquering will.

One of the triumphs of the book, indeed, is in depicting
the relationships within the Ashton family--the canny but timid father whose redeeming feature, and his curse, is his love for Lucy; the haughty mother whose pride does not recognize the psychological limits of her daughter's pliability; the unfortunate daughter who has inherited to tragic effect, her mother's commitment to a cause, alongside her father's timidity of purpose.

The tragedy is far more than a tragedy of character, however, and the sureness of Scott's art is shown in the way that he links Lucy's personal tragedy to the social and political situation of her time. At another level the story could be simply described as a tragic consequence of political antagonisms. It is set in the early years of the eighteenth century, in those few years between the Act of Union between England and Scotland (1707), and, presumably, (since there is much talk of Jacobitism but no mention of civil war) the Earl of Mars rebellion (1715). The Ashton family have prospered under the changes which came with the ousting of the Stuart Kings in 1688. Sir William is a lawyer whose civilized skill in the prosecution of law suits has gained him wealth and possessions which he would never have gained by force of arms. Conversely the feudal Master of Ravenswood has seen his political star wane, and has been deprived of all his inheritance by Ashton, except for his ruined castle at Wolf's Crag.

But the times are not stable. As Ashton, the timeserver, knows, it is not too late for a resurgence of Jacobitism and Toryism. So his encouragement of the affection between Lucy and the Master of Ravenswood is in the nature of an insurance policy for the estate.

It had...been Sir William Ashton's policy, on all occasions to watch the changes in the political horizon, and, ere yet the conflict was decided, to negotiate some interest for himself with the party most likely to prove victorious. His time-serving disposition was well known... (p. 155, chapter 5)

Moreover, the recent Union with England is another source of unease. It is now possible for the Master of Ravenswood to approach the House of Lords as a final court of appeal in his legal wrangle with Ashton--and what has seemed soundly sanctioned under Scots Law may be overturned by a "court of last resort" (p. 165, chapter 16), a body which, from Sir William's point of view, seems composed indeed of men of the highest rank, but...not trained to the study of any municipal law, and [one that] might be supposed specially to
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The rising political fortunes of Ravenswood, though they rise only temporarily, do in fact hasten Lucy's personal tragedy. Under the powerful guardianship of the tory Marquis of A---, his appeal to the House of Lords shows every sign of being successful, and it is difficult for Lucy to withstand the arguments that her lover is a vindictive persecutor of her family who shows scant regard for her welfare.

Lady Ashton's behavior, on the other hand, is also largely motivated by political ambitions. A member of the ancient Douglas family, she has plainly married beneath her rank, and, at whatever cost to humanity and the heart's affections, she sees her duty in impelling her husband socially and politically upward. As a member of an aristocratic family, and a friend of the Duchess of Marlborough, she is far less concerned than her family to find herself on the winning side, but she is also far more ruthless in winning the political game. She wishes Lucy to marry Hayston of Bucklaw because he is rich, because he has inherited an estate adjoining the Ashtons, and because he owns a pocket borough which can launch her eldest son on his career in politics. For these reasons, she is willing to overlook Bucklaw's profligacy, to give favors to Bucklaw's disreputable friends and, with ruthless determination, to drive her daughter to despair, madness and death.

Politics, however, in The Bride of Lammermoor, are seen primarily and limitingly as present active evidences of divisions and antagonisms created by the past in the historical development of a society. Lady Ashton's ambition, for instance, has its roots in the unhappy condition of a superceded aristocracy which has either to succumb to historical inevitability and disappear or to ally itself with parvenus like Ashton--the lawyers, the politicians, the businessmen who throng Scott's eighteenth century novels. So, at a deeper level we must see Lucy's tragedy as a tragedy with a firm historical dimension. For all the major characters in this novel are victims of their inheritance, victims of Scottish history, and quite incapable of changing their destiny by individual action or exertion.

This is clearly to be seen in the situation of the hero and the heroine themselves. Lucy's personal tragedy, we have seen, is to be a singularly passive and ineffectual character, but her tragedy in terms of history is to be a believer in romance. "Her secret delight was in the old legendary tales of ardent devotion and unalterable affection, chequered as they so often are with strange adventures and supernatural
horrors" (p. 40, chapter 3).

Her devotion to Ravenswood grows from this dangerously romantic view of history.

The noble form and fire features of Ravenswood, fired with the pride of birth and sense of internal dignity—the mellow and expressive tones of his voice, the desolate state of his fortunes, and the indifference with which he seemed to endure and dare the worst that might befall, rendered him a dangerous object of contemplation for a maiden already too much disposed to dwell upon recollections connected with him. (p. 166, chapter 16)

As Scott illustrates in many of his novels, this romantic view of life is potentially tragic because, in all its fascination with the past, it is tempted to simplify and idealize the present. So Lucy, in all innocence, allows herself to become infatuated with her father's sworn enemy, counting the historically based social, political and religious barriers between them (c.f. p. 206, chapter 31) as nothing when weighed in the balance of romantic love. Her tragic death is a sign of her misreading of history.

In the same way Edgar, Master of Ravenswood, is fatally misled by allowing romantic love to gain the ascendancy over native prudence. However, Edgar's tragedy in its historical context is also much more than this and reveals at its subtlest and best Scott's ability to translate "history" into credible human conflict and behavior.

At one level Edgar is a representative historical figure. As his name implies, he personifies the feudal past. His claims to the Ravenswood estate are hereditary, his relationship to his people is based on the ancient customs of feudal duty and obligation. As such, Scott emphasizes that the Master of Ravenswood is an anachronism. His temporal state is reduced to the romantic but ruined castle of Wolf's Crag. Fittingly named, and fittingly placed at the very extremity of the land, a "solitary and naked tower, situated on a projecting cliff that beetled on the German Ocean" (p. 81, chapter 7). His faithful followers are a dwindling band of geriatric retainers whose loyalty the Master no longer has means to repay.

The feudal way of life itself is seen as an anachronism. Some of the most amusing "peasant" scenes in the whole of the Waverley novels take place at Wolf's Hope, the village near Wolf's Crag, as Caleb Balderstone, that caricature of the faithful seneschal, makes his desperate attempts to reassert over the villagers their obligations to their feudal lord. The amusement has its serious purpose, however, since it is obvi-
ous that idealistic notions of obligation and service between Lord and tenant have disappeared at Wolf's Hope. There remains only a form of selfish calculation concerning potential personal benefit from services rendered which is little short of bribery and corruption, and certainly more akin to the Ashton desire for personal aggrandizement than the Ravenswood call for feudal loyalty.

The death of Ravenswood, swallowed up by a quicksand as he rides to a duel with Lucy's brother, is therefore in one sense the symbolical representation of the tragic passing into history of a significant and once dominant way of life.

But the subtlety of Scott's presentation of Ravenswood lies in the paradox that his hero also represents the modern man—a figure of the Enlightenment. As with many Waverley heroes, he is a man ahead of his time, mirroring in his character the changing spirit of the age, and consequently alienated from the enthusiasms of his less sensitive contemporaries.

'...when I recollect the times of the first and second Charles and of the last James, truly I see little reason, that as a man or a patriot, I should draw my sword for their descendants...I hope to see the day when justice shall be open to Whig and Tory and when these nick-names shall only be used among coffee-house politicians, as slut and jade are among apple-women, as cant terms of idle spite and rancour.'

'That will not be in our days, Master--the iron has entered too deeply into our sides and our souls.'

'It will be, however one day,' replied the Master; 'men will not always start at these nick-names as at a trumpet sound. As social life is better protected, its comforts will become too dear to be hazarded without some better reason than speculative politics.'

(p. 98, chapter 8)

Such olympian detachment may fit him to become Scott's mouthpiece in the novel, but it scarcely fits him for the role assigned to him by history. He betrays equal skepticism towards the supernatural, which is such an important element in the lives of his contemporaries and supporters, and towards Caleb Balderstone's honest dishonest attempts to conceal Ravenswood's poverty and destitution. As F.R. Hart puts it, "what the master stands for is tragically at war with his hereditary identity." Consequently, he is too easily disarmed by Sir William's politic offers of friendship, and too readily acquiescent in Lucy's naive belief that love conquers
all old quarrels.

In this respect there is no more significant moment in the novel than Chapter Five where he meets Lucy for the first time. He has gone out for a feudal purpose— to avenge, according to his oath, the death of his father, and the disruption of his father's funeral, for which he blames Sir William. In the event he uses his gun to save Sir William and his daughter from the attack of a wild bull, and is so overcome by Lucy's beauty that his feudal commitments speedily and fatally evaporate.

So it is possible to see Ravenswood's tragedy quite clearly in terms both of character and history. His "flaw," not unlike Hamlet's, is his lack of emotional commitment to the role assigned to him by birth and destiny. His tragedy historically is to be born out of his time.

It is significant indeed that he should kill a bull. For the bull is one of several animal symbols for the Ravenswood family, and it is plain to see that Ravenswood can only "save" Sir William and his daughter by figuratively killing himself— by betraying all he stands for in terms of history. And it is in this context we begin to appreciate the power of this remarkable novel as tragedy not only of history but of fate and destiny. Broadly speaking, within the tragic vision of The Bride of Lammermoor, fate is the inevitable consummation of the forces of history working upon the individual. A man may ignore or actively oppose his fate; he may appear to defy it, but he cannot escape it.

The role of fate in the novel is represented basically by the metaphor of the supernatural. No other Waverley novel, with the possible exception of The Pirate, gives so much of the plot to the supernatural. Yet it is important to realize that the supernatural is not there to provide the romantic "horrors" of the Gothic tale, but to emphasize the role of destiny in the tragedy of Lucy Ashton. In particular the supernatural—in the form of omen, prophecy or legend—intervenes like a Greek chorus at those moments when Lucy and Ravenswood seem most likely to escape their tragic destiny as a means to remind the reader of the inevitability of their destruction.

So, for instance, omen most tellingly intervenes when Lucy's young brother shoots a raven at the very moment of the lovers' betrothal.

As they arose to leave the Fountain which had been the witness of their mutual engagement, an arrow whistled through the air, and struck a raven perched on the sere branch of an old oak near to where they had been seated. The bird fluttered a few yards
and dropped at the feet of Lucy, whose dress was stained with some of its blood.  

(p. 201, chapter 20)

The "supernatural" element here is plain enough. The raven itself is a bird of ill omen, and its mere presence near the lovers presages death (p. 202, chapter 20). Like the bull, moreover, it is yet another animal associated with the Ravenswood family, and its killing presages their destruction and the destruction of all they represent. Further, the spots of blood on Lucy's dress look forward to her wedding night when "all around was flooded with blood" (p. 323, chapter 34). But it is perhaps more important to realize how closely Scott has woven even this supernatural happening into the tragic historical vision of the novel. The fatal arrow is shot by Henry, the inheritor not only of Ravenswood's estate, but his feudal delight in hunting (it is stressed throughout the novel that both Sir William and Lucy are repelled by blood sports). And Henry is attended by a servant with the significant name of "Norman," who has reluctantly transferred his allegiance from the Ravenswoods to the Ashtons, and is now teaching the young Ashtons the old forest crafts. The scene is intricately emblematic of inevitable and "natural" social and historical change leading to personal tragedy for those who are the destined victims of the hatreds and rivalries thus engendered.

Scott uses prophecy within the novel just as skillfully to suggest the close correlation between destiny and historical inevitability. As in all his novels, Scott makes the point that superstition in a superstitious age cannot be ignored, and indeed becomes, in prophecy, and interpretation of omen, a historical force of considerable significance which the "enlightened" often wrongly neglect because of their own prejudices. But in the speeches of Alice Gray and her evil doppelganger Ailsie Gourlay, we begin to realize that superstitious "prophecy" is capable of a less occult interpretation. It is a poetic form of historical prediction, which can be perfectly "reasonable" and in many cases conforms to plainly observable phenomena in the individual, social and political condition of the day.

Thus, immediately before this fateful betrothal scene, Alice Gray addresses Ravenswood in words where it is hard to distinguish the "prophecy" from the intelligent analysis of a potentially tragic situation.

'Are you prepared to sit lowest at the board which was once your father's own, unwillingly, as a connexion and ally of his proud successor?...Can you say as Sir William Ashton says--think as he thinks--
vote as he votes, and call your fathers' murderer your worshipful father-in-law and reverend patron?
Master of Ravenswood, I am the eldest servant of your house, and I would rather see you shrouded and coffined!

'If you remain an hour under Sir William Ashton's roof without the resolution to marry his daughter, you are a villain—if with the purpose of allying yourself with him, you are an infatuated and pre-destined fool.' (pp. 193, 195, chapter 19)

The greatest evidence of Scott's artistic skill in reinforcing the fatefulness of this tragedy lies, however, in his use of legend, and in particular the legend of the mermaiden's fountain. This fountain by superstitious tradition is fatal to the Ravenswood family, and yet Ravenswood and Lucy are inevitably drawn there at the significant moments of their romantic relationship. It is to the fountain that he is bound to take her when she has fainted after being attacked by the bull. It is by the fountain that Lucy waits for him as he makes his visit to Alice Gray, and where the fatal betrothal takes place.

To a superstitious eye, Lucy Ashton, folded in her plaited mantle, with her long hair, escaping partly from the snood and falling upon her silver neck, might have suggested the idea of the murdered Nymph of the Fountain. But Ravenswood only saw a female exquisitely beautiful, and rendered yet more so in his eyes—how could it be otherwise—by the consciousness that she had placed her affections on him.

(p. 197, chapter 20)

So Scott at this fateful moment reminds us not only of a Ravenswood whose lack of superstitious feeling dangerously divides him from his age, but also a Ravenswood whose fate is to re-enact the tragedy of his ancestors as depicted by legend. In Chapter 5—the same chapter which tells of the incident with the bull—we have already learned how, by this well, Raymond of Ravenswood fell in love with a beautiful young maiden. They met only on a Friday, and "they were under the necessity of separating as soon as the bell of a chapel, belonging to a hermitage in the adjoining wood, now long ruinous, should toll the hour of vespers" (p. 57, chapter 5).

Raymond's confessor believed that such a girl must be an emissary of the devil, and, by delaying the curfew bell, tricked her into delaying her departure. When she realized
what had happened

she tore herself from her lover's arms with a shriek of despair, bid him adieu for ever, and, plunging into the fountain, disappeared from his eyes. The bubbles occasioned by her descent were crimsoned with blood as they arose, leading the distracted Baron to infer that his ill-judged curiosity had occasioned the death of this interesting and mysterious being...From this period the house of Ravenswood was supposed to have dated its decay.

(pp. 57-8, chapter 5)

As his custom is, Scott gives two rational explanations of this legend--perhaps it is a remnant of heathen mythology, or perhaps it refers to "the fate of a beautiful maiden of plebeian rank, the mistress of this Raymond, whom he slew in a fit of jealousy" (p. 58, chapter 5). However, as the emphasis upon ruin and decay indicates, the legend's force within the novel is contained as a metaphor of the re-enactment of a tragic history. Like his legendary ancestor, Edgar is involving himself, through romantic love, with forces which will surely destroy him. Now the forces are seen in historical, or political, rather than theological or superstitious terms, but they are just as certainly represented in the seductive form of Sir William Ashton's daughter, as they were by beautiful agents of the evil one, or by the legendary Naiads of folk tradition.

The tragic story of The Bride of Lammermoor could therefore be regarded as a modern interpretation of this old legend whose sad story provides the basic theme for the novel. So the frequent comparisons of Lucy with the fabulous Naiad gain their tragic force, and so the apparent similarities between the well water "crimsoned with blood" in the legend, and Lucy's blood-stained bridal chamber became more than the familiar omens of Gothic horror. They truly and metaphorically represent the lovers' inevitable fate.

One is observing here, indeed, a most complex, intricate and subtly-conceived tragedy--at a far remove from the common view of the Scott novel as a piece of artless and prolix storytelling. And the tragic vision is completed by the convincing way in which Scott allows chance to play a significant, yet not an overwhelming, role in completing the tragedy. It is chance, for instance, that Ravenswood unwittingly offends Bucklaw by locking him out of Wolf's Crag, when Sir William and Lucy came to shelter there. So a disreputable but good-natured friend becomes an enemy and a potential rival (p. 117,
chapter 10). It is chance which delays the Marquis of A---'s visit to Ravenswood Castle and so causes the direct confrontation with Lady Ashton so finely symbolized in the race of their respective carriages to be the first to reach Ravenswood Castle (pp. 221-5, chapter 22). It is chance—the chance of Ravenswood's illness—which causes the fatal delay in responding to Lucy's letter and so helps Lucy to believe that he has abandoned her (p. 307, chapter 33).

Chance is a present factor, but it is never dominant. It fills out the tragic picture, but it does not paint it. In this way *The Bride of Lammermoor* is artistically more satisfying than the tragedies of Hardy, which in some ways seem to have been strongly influenced by it. For it is the completeness of the tragic vision in the novel which is most impressive—its totality and its unity.

In part, this success is due to a common feature of Scott's writing which few novelists can match, and which few critics acknowledge—his magnanimity of viewpoint. He presents people and situations with sympathy and yet with detachment—a considerable artistic triumph. So R.C. Gordon is surely wrong when he argues that the novel displays a "bias" against Sir William, and that it betrays "a deep hatred of historical change."\(^5\)

This is precisely what the novel avoids doing. Ultimately it does not take sides. Sir William is certainly seen clinically as a man who deserves the unhappiness which he suffers, and a man who exploits others, even his own daughter, for his political ends. On his contrived visit to Ravenswood at Wolf's Crag, where he deliberately and cynically encourages the relationship between Lucy and Edgar, Ashton is ruthlessly exposed as a timid and time-serving machiavellian. At the same time, however, we also grow aware of the inner insecurities of the parvenu, the real affection he has for his daughter, and his reluctant admiration for Ravenswood which gives a more humane face to his actions. The reader is likely to find himself with more sympathy for Ashton than objectively he might deserve, which is hardly a sign of bias.\(^6\)

Similarly, by its tragic form, the novel may seem to be speaking strongly against historical change, and may well justify Gordon's claim that it is "a novel of Tory pessimism." Ravenswood, the feudal Lord, is a finer man physically, morally and temperamentally than the usurper of Ravenswood castle. Yet, as we have seen, a major part of the tragic theme is the inevitability of such change, however painful it may be. The novel does not for a moment indulge in escapist nostalgia, or a forlorn wish to return to feudal values and feudal living. The race will be to the lawyer and the politician, it will not
be to the soldier and the romantic idealist. Such is the un­
sentimental message of The Bride of Lammermoor and such is the unblinking clarity of Scott's tragic vision in this "ower true
tale."

Derbyshire College of Higher Education

NOTES


3 All page references are to the Everyman edition; chapter numbers are included for the convenience of readers using another edition.

4 Hart, p. 314.

5 Gordon, p. 141.

6 Though the ruthlessness of the new is caricatured as com­
pletely evil in the behavior of Lady Ashton, the caricature is balanced by the ridiculousness of the old in the behavior of Caleb Balderstone.