

1986

Dialectic, Rhetoric, and Anthropology in Scott's Waverley

Louise Z. Smith

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Smith, Louise Z. (1986) "Dialectic, Rhetoric, and Anthropology in Scott's Waverley," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 21: Iss. 1.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol21/iss1/6>

This Article is brought to you by the Scottish Literature Collections at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studies in Scottish Literature* by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact digres@mailbox.sc.edu.

Louise Z. Smith

Dialectic, Rhetoric, and Anthropology in Scott's *Waverley*



'Tis forty-eight years since Georg Lukács invented in *The Historical Novel* (1937) the definition of historical fiction for modern readers. Scott invented the "entirely new"¹ historical novel, *Waverley, or 'Tis Sixty Years Since* (1814) for Lukács. But who invented it for Scott? And what is the nature of his invention? I think Scott's invention combined the elements familiar in eighteenth-century fiction with two closely related, newer elements: dialectical rhetoric and anthropological historicism. Dialectical rhetoric presents the narrator's shifting vision—sometimes sympathetic, sometimes objective—of the past. This dual vision presents anthropological details—of language, genealogy, ceremony, legend, and local association—both as facts of life in the on-going past and as artifacts revealing the past in the present. These anthropological details link the hero's personal development with historical change.

Dialectical rhetoric shows us two simultaneous views of the past. Avrom Fleishman explains that as if living our own lives, we little-by-little share the characters' experiences then. And stepping back across a median of more recent time in *Waverley*, we see their past as a completed whole now.² Scott's dialectical rhetoric expresses this double view. Appropriately for the

fictional mode, the narrator sometimes sympathetically unfolds events as the changing hero experiences them in the on-going past. But the distance of sixty years empowers him to reveal their historical significance in the present; his interpretive comments acknowledge the historian's tug toward objectivity. And Scott's editor (a term I will use for Scott's persona, distinct from the narrator) with his documentary apparatus of annotations and prefaces, urges us to compare "real history" with the fictions of the novel. This editor also reminds us to see Waverley's experiences objectively, not to become too enchanted with the romance of the past—the lesson that Waverley himself must learn. In 1821 Coleridge characterized the "essential wisdom and happiness" of the Waverley Novels as a contest between "two great moving principles of social humanity . . . the desire and admiration of permanence . . . and the mighty instincts of *progression* and *free agency*."³ Though the narrator sympathizes with Waverley's romantic aspirations to adventure, glory, and love (seen in terms of traditional literary romance), he also interprets the experiences in the perspective of sixty years and emphasizes the values of stability and mundane common sense (the last in the comic intervention of Baillie MacWheeble). When he synthesizes subjective sharing with more objective interpretation, the narrator can become an historian: he imaginatively seeks, recreates and assesses the permanence of the past.

Scott's narrative strategy is not, of course, wholly new. Earlier English novelists provided precedents for synthesizing intrusive with detached narration and combining immediate with remote perspective on events. The intrusive narrator of *The History of Tom Jones* never pretends his "comic epic in prose" is really history, whatever its title. But other novelists invented fictitious editors, collectors, and publishers to make epistolary novels and travel "journals" seem real. In Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, Crusoe himself has two points of view. While the ink supply lasts, the marooned voyager records his dramatic spiritual crises and keeps a double-entry ledger of "Blessings" and "Afflictions." This journal allows the reader to share Crusoe's immediate experience without commentary or historical distance. Later Crusoe intersperses his autobiographical reflections, which sometimes contradict the journal's accounts. And still later, the anonymous editor presents Crusoe's story, "a just history of fact" without "any appearance of fiction in it," but improves it for the

instruction and diversion of the reader.⁴ While Defoe's three parts are linear, Scott's three—the sharing narrator, the interpreting narrator, and the editor—tell the story simultaneously through dialectical rhetoric.

The second important aspect of Scott's invention is his anthropological historicism. The historian depends upon history's "auxiliary sciences," such as archaeology, linguistics, or numismatics, to derive historical facts by studying artifacts. On this analysis the historian bases an imaginative reconstruction of the past.⁵ So does Scott. Dialectical rhetoric simultaneously presents anthropological details both as shared facts of the on-going past and, from a distance of sixty years, as interpreted artifacts of the completed past. This accomplishes a "delineation of manners." He distinguishes "manners" from the horrific, sentimental, or fashionable manners of earlier English novels,⁶ but because his "tale is more a description of men than manners," Scott selects only the "manners and laws which cast a necessary colouring" upon "those passions common to men in all stages of society" (I, 64-5). The facts of the historian's present enable him to breathe new life into the artifacts of the past, reinvigorating the modern reader's sense of the on-going "*vie privée* of our forefathers." These artifacts are "manners," which Scott categorizes as language, the traditions associated with particular localities, and the folklore and laws which shape the "sentiments" or "habits of thinking from generation to generation."⁷ Scott's invention, historically connecting the past with modern understanding of the past, is to present anthropological details simultaneously—through dialectical rhetoric—as facts and artifacts. Verisimilitude thus widens to include not only economic but also anthropological elements.

Bearing in mind the dialectical meaning of "invention," we still ask "Who invented historical fiction for Scott?" Although he acknowledges historical sources in the prefaces and notes of most of the novels, he says very little about literary sources and models. One of these is Scott's life-long favorite: *The Old Manor House* (1793) by Mrs. Charlotte Turner Smith. In this work, Scott found in relatively simple and incidental form the elements of his invention: both the kinds of anthropological details that would enliven history for a modern reader and the narrative rhetoric that would most clearly illumine their historical significance. The breadth and complexity with which he then

employed these elements more than justifies locating in *Waverley* the "invention" of the historical novel.

In his appreciative essay "Charlotte Smith" (written in 1821 for the Ballantyne's Series but published in 1827 in *Miscellaneous Prose Works*), Scott calls *The Old Manor House* her *chef d'oeuvre*. He admires the truth and precision of her landscapes whether actually observed or "only become acquainted with by report," the accuracy of "language fitted to [a character's] station in life," and in general her regard for the same kinds of anthropological details with which Scott imparts anthropological historicism to *Waverley*. He approves of her augmenting direct observation with unpedantic use of scholarly reading.⁸ It is not surprising, then, to discover that the narrative mode of *The Old Manor House*—a storyteller who both shares experiences in the past and interprets them in the present, together with an editor who supplies a documentary framework—is woven naturally into *Waverley*.

Both novels use dialectical rhetoric. The narrators' sympathetic sharing of the heroes' experiences in both novels is so pervasive as to require no demonstration. Appropriately to the fictional mode, the narrators interpret frequently. For instance, Mrs. Smith's narrator emphasizes the protagonist Orlando's naive self-identification with classical heroes by commenting that even the Furies would smile upon him in the "abode of the Sybil."⁹ Similarly, Scott's narrator calls Fergus MacIvor's ancestor a "second Aeneas" (XIX, 172). Narrative intrusions forecast inevitable disillusionment for Orlando, who enters the military "romantic in the extreme . . . his mind expatiating on visionary prospects" (p. 138) and for Waverley (LX, 406). Scott's narrator exposes Waverley's romantic distortion of the correspondence with Colonel Gardiner (XXV, 213-4); the narrator's emphatic reservations—"apparently," "as it seemed," "appeared"—explicitly question Waverley's perception of deliberate unfairness. However sympathetically the narrators may share the heroes' feelings, they also know that Orlando and Waverley must correct romantic assumptions and curb hasty judgments. The narrators' comments—Scott's much more pervasively and systematically than Mrs. Smith's—point toward and interpret their learning process.

Strong authorial presence, modeled after Fielding's, augments these narrative intrusions. Mrs. Smith's epigraphs from

Shakespeare, Cowper, and Rousseau announce the subjects of volumes. More elaborately, Scott's titles announce, often weigh, and sometimes satirize the subjects of chapters. Mrs. Smith addresses to the reader her indignant comparison of British troop ships with slave ships (p. 345). Scott too discusses his authorial concerns. Besides parodying the titles of popular novels (I), he defends "speedily" changing his style (XXX, 172) and teasingly leaving events unexplained (LXV, 438). In contrast to the editors' objectivity, these strong authorial presences remind the reader that these novels are imaginative, fictive, non-historical discourse.

On the other side of the dialectic, both novels have editors who provide a documentary framework, urging the reader to accept the narratives' historicity. The apparatus includes scholarly-seeming, often historical, notes (pp. 326, 348, 385, 510). In one referring to David Ramsay's *The History of the American Revolution* (1789) and to the *Annual Register for 1779*, the editor opposes British exploitation of Indian warriors and compares the American War with the French Revolution (p. 360). In another, the editor compares the King's rationalization for killing American colonists with the Medicis' for killing Protestants in 1572 (p. 450). Thus, lacking the sixty years' perspective given *Waverley*, Mrs. Smith reaches into the far distant past to create historical perspective. The editor of *Waverley* also provides notes, prefaces, and appendices, all inviting comparison of historical record and fictional creation. This editorial apparatus establishes a sense of the historical context within which each hero's learning process takes place: a distant, completed past whose artifacts can have historical significance in the present. Like Froissart's accounts of war, these novels are "memoirs, scarcely more faithful than romances, and romances so well written as hardly to be distinguished from memoirs," (III, 77). Their dialectical rhetoric synthesizes the two modes. The anthropological details of language, genealogy, ceremony, legend and local association are an important means of linking the hero's individual growth with historical change. Through dialectical rhetoric, the narrator shares the facts of the hero's experience of historical events, interprets them as artifacts in the present, and with the editor's help connects modern "manners" with those of the past.

In both novels language dramatizes the dangerous isolation of

an individual caught in the historical interpenetration of social classes. Scott's favorite character in *The Old Manor House* is Mrs. Rayland, the Tory Jacobite matriarch of the Rayland family. In "Charlotte Smith," he calls her "a Queen Elizabeth in private life" and her letter projecting Orlando's future as a gentleman "a masterpiece of diplomacy." The Jacobean orthography and formality, elegant and proper in Mrs. Rayland's generation, seem humorously quaint to Orlando's middle-class family. The narrator interprets the historical significance of the linguistic artifact: Mrs. Rayland's language expresses her hope of insulating herself from the inevitable middle-class encroachment upon Tory traditions. In contrast to her linguistic isolation, Orlando's ease with the languages of many social classes enables him to reconcile social and political groups at the end of the novel. By interpreting language, the narrator shows its importance in an individual's adaptation to historical change.

The language of the Baron Bradwardine reflects his views much as Mrs. Rayland's does hers. That of Fergus (modern and cultivated) appeals to Waverley, but conceals atavistic pride and violent ambition. Waverley suffers physical injury because of his ignorance of Gaelic in the hunting scene, but his misinterpretation of the language of his Jacobite friends is more serious.

Genealogy also presents "history as . . . the concrete precondition of the present."¹⁰ In both novels dates and ancestral portraits or arms represent genealogy. Mrs. Rayland and Sir Everard Waverley recall generations of Jacobite loyalty, cling to memories of the days before the defeat of Tory Jacobites, and cherish relics. *The Old Manor House* is set mainly in 1779, when the narrator voices both Tory and Whig sympathies in turn (pp. 7, 10). Like Rayland hall, Waverley-Honour sheltered Jacobites in the Great Civil War. Sir Everard cherishes the genealogical tree of Sir Hildebrand Waverley's descendents. On the verge of disinheriting young Waverley's father, who read his recantation and befriended the Hanover succession, Sir Everard is dissuaded by the sun's momentary illumination of the ancestral arms. In both novels, reverence for family artifacts entails excessively romantic education.¹¹ However, Waverley's genealogical education makes him a stronger Tory than Orlando's. Both must overcome excessive romanticism, but Waverley must also learn the personal and political dangers of fanatical partisanship. Thus, personal and historical change are more intimately

connected in *Waverley* than in *The Old Manor House*.

Ancient ceremony dramatizes the historical and personal issues in both novels. The traditional ceremony of the Michaelmas dance figures forth *The Old Manor House*'s central historical question: who will inherit the old Tory estates? *Waverley*'s major ceremony, the grand ball restoring "liveliness and elegance" to the "long deserted halls of the Scottish palace" at Holyrood-House (XLIII, 312-18), functions similarly. The narrator interprets this event "in the illfated and desperate undertaking of 1745" to connect personal with political disappointment. Hopelessly in love with Flora MacIvor, the heartsore young Waverley feels "like one striving to recover the particulars of a forgotten dream." Fergus's chagrin on Waverley's behalf bears historical overtones: "This, then, is the end of my day-dream!" The narrator's observation of Waverley's "expectations which now seemed so delusive" applies equally well to the Prince's expectations of being restored to the throne. To the Prince's ceremonial "Good Night," hoping for "many future meetings of mirth and pleasure in the palace of Holyrood," the narrator appends Baron Bradwardine's melancholy gloss:

"Ae half the prayer wi' Phoebus grace did find,
The t'other half he whistled down the wind."

The narrator's introduction and the Baron's epitaph create an historical frame for the ceremony.

To awaken from such dreams to the real historical issues embodied in these ceremonies, both young heroes must learn to re-evaluate legends. As anthropological artifacts connecting the past with the present, legends can either impede or promote historical change. Ancient legends teach both heroes to respect the irrational force of superstition. In America, Orlando is overcome with melancholy by the cry of the night hawk (pp. 384-5). Scott's use of legend of the Bodach Glas is almost identical (LIX, 396-400). An equally important lesson for an historian or historical novelist is the converse: by establishing ideals, legends can promote historical change. An ideal cherished throughout the eighteenth century, long before Rousseau, was sentimental primitivism. This contemporary legend conceived the New World as a "new Eden," populated by genteel, primitive people. But Scott (XXIV, 202-3; XL-XLI, 297-301) and Mrs. Smith (pp. 379-

83) portray both the ideal and the reality. Orlando and Waverley follow identical steps: rescue by gentle yet willful leaders; imitation; virtual captivity. Sentimental primitivism encourages both to idealize their mentors: Wolf-hunter's "more open countenance—his more gentle manners" (p. 361) distinguish him from the other Iroquois, just as Fergus's French education and courtliness distinguish him from the other Highlanders. Expecting their mentors to live up to the legend of gentility, Orlando and Waverley must nevertheless recognize the foolhardiness of letting the legend obscure real experiences. Each mentor retains a rather savage will: Wolf-hunter is a "savage protector" whose "word was not to be disputed" (pp. 383-4), and Fergus responds fanatically to any opposition to his cause, ambitions, or affections (XXV, 216; LII, 363; LVIII, 389). Frequent interpretations by each narrator emphasize that these noble primitives are not just representatives of an abstract ideal. They are real individuals, who share the love of power Scott observed in Elizabeth I and Mrs. Rayland. While sentimental primitivism can set forth goals of historical change, i.e. respect and humane understanding between different cultures, progress toward these goals of history and anthropology depends on taking realistic account of individual human shortcomings. Fanatic partisanship—like Mrs. Rayland's, Flora MacIvor's, and Fergus's—prevents realization of their ideals. In contrast, Orlando and Waverley succeed precisely because they do learn to see people not just as partisans but as individuals. When balanced with reality, the ideals embodied in legends can promote historical change.

By far the most important artifacts are the estates. Local associations, the values attached to particular landscapes and houses, connect personal with historical change. Reassessment of these local associations, paralleling revaluation of legends, is the learning process by which Orlando and Waverley become worthy inheritors of the estates.

Stewardship, protecting and reinvigorating the decaying monuments of the Jacobite past, becomes their role. The legalities of wills, repurchases, and deeds, the artifacts upon which economic interpretations of historical change are based, are no more significant than the restoration of architectural integrity and vitality. The estates suffer similar damages.¹² The neglect and destruction of ancient houses and trees, artifacts that

have survived generations of personal and historical change, figures forth the neglect and destruction of the old ways of life. Both narrators fully share the heroes' despair. But to maintain historical perspective, dialectical rhetoric furnishes objective interruptions, permitting the reader to witness the estates' destruction and interpret it as an artifact of historical change.

Stewardship does not try to isolate the estates from change in order to preserve their antiquity. By restoring their vigorous integrity, Orlando completes the reconciliation of the two families begun in his childhood. And they represent the changing relations of the aristocracy, Tory Jacobites, and Whigs. Waverley's reconstruction of Tully-Veolan also connects personal with historical change. The estates are important artifacts because they show how Orlando and Waverley redeem themselves from historical fanaticism—Whig opportunism or Jacobite quixotism. They encounter both sides of the conflict without sustained, passionate commitment to either. They neither renounce nor conquer the romantic values of the past; instead they infuse it with present strength and transform it with personal and historical aspiration for a New Eden.

The same might be said for Scott's invention of the historical novel. In creating a form which dramatizes economic historicism and the struggles between social classes, Scott does not renounce a more conservative anthropological historicism. In the Eighteenth Century's scholarly investigation of the languages, ceremonies, and legends of "primitive" peoples, of individual genealogy and cultural heritage, and of the picturesque and the sublime, the antecedents of Scott's anthropological historicism are clear. But Scott's invention, elaborating the much simpler pattern found in *The Old Manor House*, uses dialectical rhetoric to present language, genealogy, ceremony, legends, and local association both as facts shared with the hero and as artifacts interpreted sixty years since. The combination broadens Scott's historicism beyond economics and the struggles of social classes to include much more of the felt life linking the hero's personal development to historical change. Recognizing the Eighteenth Century materials from which Scott invented historical fiction increases our understanding both of the new genre and of the dialectical nature of literary invention.

NOTES

¹Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (1937; rpt. New York, 1956), p. 31.

²Avrom Fleishman, *The Historical Novel: Walter Scott to Virginia Woolf* (Baltimore, 1971), p. 13.

³Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Letters, Conversations, and Recollections of S. T. Coleridge*, ed. T. Allsop (New York, 1836), p. 41; quoted in David Brown, *Walter Scott and the Historical Imagination* (London, 1979), p. 206.

⁴Tobias Smollett, *Humphry Clinker* (London, 1966), p. 1; Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe* (London, 1981), p. 2.

⁵E.H. Carr, *What is History* (New York, 1962), pp. 7-9.

⁶Sir Walter Scott, *Waverley* (London, 1969), Chapter I, pp. 63-4. Subsequent references are given in the text.

⁷Sir Walter Scott, *Ivanhoe* (London, 1959), pp. 16, 19.

⁸Ioan Williams, ed. *Sir Walter Scott on Novelists and Fiction* (London, 1968), pp. 184-190.

⁹Charlotte Turner Smith, *The Old Manor House*, ed. Anne Henry Ehrenpreis (London, 1969), pp. 5, 9. Subsequent references are given in the text.

¹⁰Lukács, p. 20.

¹¹Compare Smith, pp. 9, 23, 28 with Scott III, 76; IV, 79-81; XXII, 189.

¹²Compare Smith, pp. 397-8 and p. 516 with Scott LXXIII, 423. And compare Smith, p. 519 with Scott LXIII, 423.