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Jack Truten

Sir Walter Scott: Folklore and Fiction

In his eleven novels set principally in Scotland and in the time period of 1645 to 1800, Sir Walter Scott casts some 150 characters of demonstrable significance.¹ Culturally, most, if not all, are tightly defined by their relative proximity to folk tradition. As will be seen in the following classification realignment, that proximity may take the form basically of relative opposition or relative representation.

Broadly, Scott casts three character types in his Scottish novels. Operating as might 'central casting,' he first selects from a stable of leading players those whose portrayals are most distant from traditional culture; these tend to be aristocrats, professionals, and sundry pedants. Second, as his 'supporting cast,' Scott consistently summons what W. F. H. Nicolaisen, without differentiation, calls a "memorable array of more roundedly developed folk figures."² Characteristically, these are smallholders, tenant farmers, shepherds, fisher folk, petty dignitaries and ordinary citizens and, as such, are closer to tradition. Third, and most specialized, it is the 'scene

¹The primary fictional works considered in this paper, together with their abbreviations and dates of publication are: *Waverley* (*Wav.*, 1814), *Guy Mannering* (*GM*, 1815), *The Black Dwarf* (*BD*, 1816), *The Antiquary* (*Ant.*, 1816), *Old Mortality* (*OM*, 1816), *Rob Roy* (*RR*, 1817), *The Heart of Midlothian* (*HM*, 1818), *The Bride of Lammermoor* (*BL*, 1819), *A Legend of Montrose* (*LM*, 1819), *The Pirate* (*Pir.*, 1821), and *Redgauntlet* (*Red.*, 1824).

²W. F. H. Nicolaisen, "The Folk in Literature: Some Comments on Sir Walter Scott's Scottish Novels," *Kentucky Folklore Record*, 28 (1982), 58.

stealer' group; characters featured somehow as active bearers or representatives of traditional culture. These, notably, tend to be outcasts of one kind or another; gaberlunzies, spaewives, seannachies, gypsies, minstrels, recluses, and the insane.

Within this last group, three further classes of role can be discerned. First, there are the 'bit part' players like Janet Gellatley (*Wav.*), Meg Murdockson (*HM*), Elspeth Mucklebackit (*Ant.*), and Blind Alice and Ailsie Gourlay (*BL*); characters whose obvious closeness to folk tradition plays nevertheless a relatively minor role in their respective novels. Second, are those who, in contrast, play full supporting roles cast by their carefully scripted active tradition-bearer status; principle figures here are Davie Gellatley (*Wav.*), Madge Wildfire (*HM*), and Meg Merrilies (*GM*). Finally, there are the 'star performers,'³ playing suitably starring roles; Norna of the Fitful Head (*Pir.*), Edie Ochiltree (*Ant.*), and Wandering Willie Steenson (*Red.*) are all major players distinguished by the radiance of their folk performances. It will be seen, however, that even this last, most specialized group is not undifferentiated with regard to type and function.

If in *The Pirate* he remonstrates against the imposture of Norna's deluded, distorted performances of folklore, in *The Antiquary* and *Redgauntlet*, Scott provides us with very much the real thing in the two fully fledged star performers on whom the remainder of this paper will focus—Edie Ochiltree and Wandering Willie Steenson. A professional beggar and an itinerant minstrel, respectively, Edie and Willie have the superficial appearance of outcasts but nowhere in Scott is any character more meaningfully engaged with his community and its culture than are these two.

Edie is without question Scott's most fully developed folk character. His unimpeachable folk pedigree lodges first with his fully documented,⁴ royally bestowed title of King's Bedesman, or Blow Gown; Edie is thus a member of

³In his "Notes toward a European-American Folk Aesthetic: Lessons Learned from Singers and Storytellers I Have Known," *Journal of American Folklore*, 104 (1991), 164-78, Kenneth S. Goldstein defines star informant-performers as not only "those designated by their communities as having the largest and most diverse repertoires—but . . . also [as] outstanding tradition bearers and the finest 'keepers' of the tradition . . . they were usually the best informed, the most articulate, and commanded the greatest respect of those who maintain the tradition" (p. 164).

⁴See the "Advertisement to *The Antiquary*" for Scott's description of beggars and Blue Gowns, ("the genus and species to which Edie Ochiltree appertains") and for his portraiture of Andrew Gemmels, Edie's real life proto-type (p. 7). Scott concludes in the "Advertisement" that "we have vindicated Edie Ochiltree's right to the importance assigned him" (p. 9), an importance reflected in the attention paid Edie throughout this introductory statement to the novel.

the gaberlunzie aristocracy. His title, however, is not hereditary—this aristocracy is also a meritocracy and Willie has earned his ascension. In and around Fairport, his range of peripatetic skills, accomplishments and responsibilities is justly renowned and uniformly honored. Newsmonger, genealogist, folk sage, and general repository of tradition, Edie is a time-served master of his begging trade. The veneration of his stature, in fact, allows him—in performance terms—to ply his trade on a semi-retired, consultatory basis whereby he seldom sings, for example, any of his huge stock of ballads, but, as is shown in his dialogue here with the collector-antiquary, Jonathan Oldbuck, his authority on the subject is irreproachable:

"I wish," said Oldbuck, "she would resume that canticle, or legendary fragment—I always suspected there was a skirmish of cavalry before the main battle of the Harlaw."

"If your honor pleases," said Edie, "had ye not better proceed to the business that brought us a' here? I'se engage to get ye the sang ony time." (p. 359; ch. 40)⁵

As suggested by this passage, Edie and Oldbuck are both antiquaries, but of rather differing perspectives, purposes, and levels of expertise. Oldbuck possesses sufficient funds to furnish himself with the advantages of a personal library and sundry antiquarian collections of everything from broadswords to broadsides. Within his own community—and this is definitively a community-focused novel—Edie stores his wealth in the shape of advanced, unassailably accurate knowledge of people, places, and cultural traditions. To the extent that he can, Oldbuck does come to share this community role with Edie; not so much, as Millgate suggests, as an equal partner,⁶ but more as an avid, if mutinous apprentice to Edie's master craft:

"Yes, my dear friend, from this stance it is probable,—nay, it is nearly certain, that Julius Agricola beheld what our Beaumont has so admirably described!—From this very Prætorium——"

A voice from behind interrupted his ecstatic description—"Prætorian here, Prætorian there, I mind the bigging o't."

"What is that you say, Edie?" said Oldbuck, hoping, perhaps that his ears had betrayed their duty. "What were you speaking about?"

"About this bit bourock, your honor," answered the undaunted Edie; "I mind the bigging o't."

"The devil you do! Why, you old fool, it was here before you were born, and will be here after you are hanged, man!"

⁵Quotations from *The Antiquary* in this paper are from the Everyman edition (1977).

⁶Jane Millgate, *Walter Scott: The Making of the Novelist*, (Toronto, 1984), pp. 94-5.

"Hanged or drowned, here or awa, dead or alive, I mind the bigging o't."
(p. 41; ch. 4)

The testimony of Edie's own memory is supplemented, and the issue put beyond question, by his dipping into his store of folklore to retrieve the traditional image of "Aiken Drum's Lang Ladle" (p. 42; ch. 4) and by then pointing out its recently carved imprint on one of the 'Prætorian' stones.

This episode shows the tenacity and efficacy of Edie's deconstructive mission in the service of the community; he will countenance no sham, blinkered interpretation of his peoples' past—not even in the well-intentioned antiquary—and he will wield his star performer status, with the backing of tradition itself, to bolster his crusade. Thus, while Oldbuck's constructive agency in Fairport grows over the course of the narrative, Edie's is consistently in the vanguard and he is prominently featured as the moral, social, and cultural touchstone in the community and in the novel.

Edie's easy but significant deconstruction of the scholarly detachment of Oldbuck's antiquarianism is mirrored, though less genially, in his relationships with *The Antiquary's* other main characters. Grizzel Oldbuck, while less pedantic than her brother, is more credulous and thus just as likely to misinterpret cultural tradition. Edie is able to put his knowledge of traditional narrative to work—in the form of his concocted Wardour family legend of Malcolm Misticot (pp. 231-3; ch. 24)—to trick the trickster, Herman Dousterswivel, into falling into his own "salted goldmine" trap. Grizzel, in contrast, is herself credulously controlled by her Oldbuck family legend of the haunted 'green room,' the integrity of which is allowed quietly to self-deconstruct later in the novel.

Similarly self-deconstructing is Dousterswivel's crass attempt to dupe Oldbuck and Sir Arthur Wardour into financing his corrupt 'get-rich-quick' scheme through the ostensibly allegorical, supposedly traditional German tale of "The Fortunes of Martin Waldeck" (pp. 161-71; ch. 18). Dousterswivel feels compelled to appropriate Isabella Wardour as the actual narrator of his manipulative tale and, thus, is clearly opposed to Edie and his accomplished deployment of his own legend telling skills.

That Isabella accedes to Dousterswivel's delegation of her as narrator and that both she and, particularly, her father are indeed persuaded of the tale's applicability to their own penurious situation, is again in stark contrast to Edie's personal stoicism and tradition-informed skepticism. Sir Arthur, in fact, is seen to be even more disengaged and pedantic an antiquary than Oldbuck, in his preoccupations with ancient family lineage and philological *mumbus jumbus*. This last obsession of Sir Arthur's throws ...o dramatic relief Edie's contrasting, living embodiment of the language and rhythms of the authentic Scottish Ballad tradition during his rescue of the Wardours from a life threatening coastal storm early in the novel:

"Mak haste, mak haste, my bonny leddy," continued the old man, "mak haste and we may do yet!" Take haud o' my arm—an auld and frail arm it's now, but it's been in as sair stress as this is yet. Take haud o' my arm, my winsome leddy! D'ye see yon wee black speck among the wallowing waves yonder? This morning it was as high as the mast o' a brig—it's sma' enough now—but, while I see as muckle black about it as the crown o' my hat, I winna believe but we'll get round the Bally-burgh Ness, for a' that's come and gane yet." (p. 71; ch. 7)⁷

The Antiquary, however, is no proto-Marxist diatribe in that peasant class characters—even folk performer-characters—are similarly held up to the light shed by Edie and found to be cast in his shade. Old Elspeth Mucklebackit, mother of the stoic Saunders, grandmother of the foreordained Steenie, and solitary witness-accomplice to the Wardour family's theft of Lovel's true identity, is herself a performer of tradition. Her ballads, though fragmentary and self-torturing, are again in notable contrast with Edie and his wholesome repertoire, as are the vicious dark dealings of her criminal past that have exiled Elspeth—and her ballad performances—from the community context.

In his ubiquity, his folk culture repertoire, and his intimate, almost mystical knowledge of the inhabitants and topography of his region, Edie is, in fact, highly reminiscent of two of his literary gaberlunzie descendants—Diggory Venn of Hardy's *The Return of the Native* and V. K. Ratliff of Faulkner's *The Hamlet*. Faulkner's deployment of Ratliff-associated traditional narrative forms within his plot, in turn echoes Scott's use of ballad and legend texts associated with Edie in *The Antiquary*. While Ratliff, however, as Daniel Hoffman observes, is ultimately gulled into investing in buried treasure by Flem Snopes having "salted the mine, the oldest trick in the book,"⁸ Edie turns the self-same tables on Dousterswivel, himself to set the trickster tricked trap and thus to endure as the community's champion of tradition.

This regional folk championship assigns to Edie not only the leadership of the community but the embodiment of its folk, their past, and their culture. His role as representative is to act, often subversively, to protect and unify the community by wielding the full powers that come with star performer status. His success in this project points to the underlying power of folk tradition to engage and unify within its natural, small community con-

⁷In style, tone, and imagery this passage is, of course, highly reminiscent of "Sir Patrick Spens" (Child #58).

⁸Daniel G. Hoffman, *Faulkner's Country Matters: Folklore and Fable in Yoknapatawpha*, (Baton Rouge, 1989), p. 105.

text, and ultimately, and again subversively, hints at the troubling scenario of the fate of Fairport when no longer governed by Edie.

Redgauntlet's Wandering Willie Steenson is not an elder folk statesman of the distinction of Edie Ochiltree, but he is a busy, professional, folk-maestro musician and master tale teller. Scott's depiction of him as a blind, strolling musician in fact promotes Willie as a figure of archetypal proportions from within the Scottish folk performer tradition and, thus, lays the foundation for his status in the novel as a folk cultural hero.

Less engaged in the important affairs of his community and playing a comparatively understated role in the narrative of *Redgauntlet*, Willie's character has fewer, more muted oppositional resonances than Edie's. His essential significance rests, in fact, more in the substance and implications of his star performances and the greater context in which they are placed.

Willie's friendship with *Redgauntlet's* missing heir hero, Darsie Latimer, is initially formed, through the latter's plucky accompaniment of Willie's expert fiddle on his own instrument. Darsie's thus demonstrated awareness of authentic folk music traditions and willingness to engage therein is sufficient inducement for Willie to act as his protector in two subsequent important episodes of folk-communication between the two.

The first of these involves the tremendously well-wrought, widely anthologized "Wandering Willie's Tale" (pp. 102-17; Letter 11).⁹ Here, Darsie is the audience for a supernatural tale, grounded in meta-narrative legend dialectics¹⁰ detail, about Willie's gudesire, Steenie Steenson's narrow escape from ruin at the hands of the demonic old Laird of Redgauntlet.

Of the many commentators on this tale, few have avoided de-emphasizing the teller in favor of the tale. One of those few, David Daiches, is close to the mark in his observation that the tale is a "critical piece about master-servant relations" and that it thus "occupies a central position in the story."¹¹ Another, Neal Frank Doubleday, usefully focuses on how "Scott uses the frame of the tale to make Willie indicate how he connects the events of the tale with his own misfortunes."¹² But Willie's obvious delight in this tale of

⁹Quotations from *Redgauntlet* in this paper are from the Oxford UP edition (1985).

¹⁰For an outline of these definitive features of oral legend telling performance, see Linda Dégh and Andrew Vázsonyi, "The Dialectics of the Legend," *Folklore Preprint Series*, 106 (December, 1973), 12-4.

¹¹David Daiches, "Scott's Achievement as a Novelist," in *Walter Scott: Modern Judgements*, ed. D. D. Devlin, (London, 1969), p. 159.

¹²Neal Frank Doubleday, *Variety of Attempt: British and American Fiction in the Early Nineteenth Century*, (Lincoln, NE, 1976), p. 58.

his own lineage proclaims his celebration of his broken family ties of servitude to the Redgauntlet feudal dynasty. To be sure, this is folklore performance in its most glorious, subversive, anti-mainstream role. In contrast to the present Laird's family legend with its narcissistic fixation on the hereditary horseshoe-appearance birthmark that bespeaks the indignity of Redgauntlet dissolution, Willie's tale drills beneath appearances to the substance of his family's rise to freedom and to his own culturally constructive community involvement.

The second episode of folk communication between Willie and Darsie is equally subversive of Redgauntlet power. Delving deeply, again, into tradition, Willie draws on his performers-in-arms relationship with Darsie to initiate a remarkable musical dialogue that provides the latter with intelligence of some moment in the dilemma of his internment. This traditional music two-way communication sequence (pp. 219-24; ch. 9), presaged by the fiddled signature tune of "Wandering Willie,"¹³ constitutes as replete a dialogue as words can tell and, in its totality, demonstrates some of the scope and versatility of folklore in context as a shared cultural system, vying with, and perhaps eclipsing more mainstream systems. Carefully juxtaposed to this sequence, we are presented with the contrasting pious anemia of Lilius Redgauntlet's "beautiful Italian manuscript lines";¹⁴ again, the potency of Willie's traditional performance deposes Redgauntlet dominion.

Willie Steenson and Edie Ochiltree, Scott's two star performer-characters of folklore are set within a generation of his own time. Throughout *The Antiquary*, Edie continually reflects on his past and on the passing ways of his community. In an otherwise trenchant appraisal of the old Blue Gown, Jane Millgate is quite mistaken in her conviction that he is to be one of "the agents of the reconciliation and social restoration traditionally associated with

¹³The cryptic connotations of this traditional music-constituted conversation are clearly implicit in the back and forth exchange—between the whistling, singing, imprisoned Darsie and the nearby, fiddling Willie—of these song and tune lines and titles in *Red.*, chapter 9: "Wandering Willie" (p. 220), "Oh whistle and I'll come t'ye, my lad," "Come back again and loe me," "There's my thumb, I'll ne'er beguile thee" (p. 221), "Good-night and joy be wi' ye a'," "Cock up your beaver," "My heart's in the Highlands, my heart is not here," "For a' that, and a' that" (p. 222), "When will I get a bonny boy / . . . And bid my merry-men come?," "Kind Robin loes me," "leave thee—leave thee, lad / I'll never leave thee" (p. 223).

¹⁴Darsie's ironic displacement of his appreciation away from poetics and onto penmanship bears quiet testimony to the true merit of Lilius's lines: "Quit not the pledge, frail sufferer, then, / Although a distant date be given / Despair is treason towards man / And blasphemy to heaven." (p. 224; ch. 9).

the conclusion of a romance."¹⁵ Edie is elegiacally depicted, in fact, as deeply aware not only of his own age and mortality, but also of the passing significance of his role as omniscient champion of tradition. In this respect, *The Antiquary* would seem to share in the obsequious lament emblematic of Nineteenth and early Twentieth Century folklorist attitudes toward traditional culture.

Willie, in contrast, is just finding his stride as a strolling folk musician and tale-teller. He performs where and when he likes, enjoys the companionship of his wife on the road, and feels under no pressure to suffer fools gladly. In this light, Daiches' assessment of Willie's present appears quite incongruous beside his accurate, previous reading of Willie's past: "In the days when the Redgauntlets were feudal lairds, Willie had his function, his social position, and his economic security. Now, he is a wandering beggar."¹⁶ In fact, Willie is contentedly thriving in a rewarding, unconstrained, tradition-infused lifestyle that bolsters his dignity and complements his recently won liberty. Like the folk traditions he performs, Willie is independent and free—signifying, perhaps, that even if the halcyon days of Edie Ochiltree are numbered, there will always be a context and an audience for the star performer of tradition.

In a full investigation of folklore performance at work in Scott's fiction,¹⁷ the foregoing community ethnography of folk performers and their performance contexts truly constitutes only the first of a larger, three-part project for, in the assorted narrator guises and narrative miens that distinguish his Scottish novels, Scott operates very much himself in star performance mode. The second part of such an investigation might, therefore, direct its analysis away from Scott's depiction of folk performers toward his own, authorial enactment of specific folk genres¹⁸ and the peculiar author-reader context that such folk-literary performance engenders. The final part of the investigation could then proceed to evolve this reader as audience approach to decipher the ultimate riddle in applied folklore-and-literature

¹⁵Millgate, p. 103.

¹⁶Daiches, p. 159.

¹⁷For a comprehensive and ground-breaking view of how literary creation can be viewed as rhetorical performance, see Roger Abrahams, "Folklore and Literature as Performance," *Journal of the Folklore Institute*, 9 (1972), 75-94.

¹⁸Throughout the Scottish novels, Scott delivers an encyclopedia of folk cultural expression; his special enthusiasm, though, is reserved for the enactment of two particular genres—balladry and legendry.

studies;¹⁹ namely, the author's signified apprehension of the nature, significance, and value of folklore itself.

Scott's program in this respect is to dramatize the ideal, small community context of folklore performance by setting each single novel in a particular culture-region of Scotland while collectively, in all eleven, he is able to map out a traditional culture atlas of the nation for his national and indeed international audience. With the inter-textual, antiquarian voices of Jedediah Cleishbotham, Peter Pattieson, Chrystal Croftangry, and 'The Great Unknown' himself marshalled in support, Scott thus demonstrates—at least in the case of Scotland—that a national literary tradition will enjoy enhanced legitimacy if built on that nation's distinctive regional cultural traditions. Scott's success in exactly this kind of operation acquits him, in fact, of the charges levelled against him by Edwin Muir—he is *not* paralyzed by linguistic uncertainty, he *is* directly sustained by an organic tradition, and he *does* actively and imaginatively create an audience out of an impersonal, amorphous reading public.²⁰ F. R. Leavis' dismissal of Scott as "primarily a kind of inspired folklorist . . . [who] made no serious attempt to work out his own form,"²¹ is thus entirely true in the first instance but demonstrably false in the second.

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¹⁹Robert Hemenway, in his "The Functions of Folklore in Charles Chesnut's *The Conjure Woman*," *Journal of the Folklore Institute*, 12 (1976), argues from a convincing folklore-and-literature theoretical viewpoint that the author's "attitude toward folklore itself," discernable in his literary productions, "serves as the major criteria [*sic*] for critical understanding" (p. 291). This is more true, perhaps, of Scott and his fiction than of any other writer in the Anglo-American tradition.

²⁰For elaboration of the first two charges enumerated here, see Edwin Muir, *Scott and Scotland: The Predicament of the Scottish Writer*, 1936, (Edinburgh, 1982), pp. 75-114; for his views on the third charge, and how it applies to modern writers no less than to the early Romantics, see Edwin Muir, *The Estate of Poetry* (Cambridge, MA, 1962), pp. 94-110.

²¹F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition: George Eliot, Henry James, Joseph Conrad*, (London, 1948), p. 6.