

1999

Freedom and Responsibility in The Bride of Lammermoor

Gerry H. Brookes

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



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

Recommended Citation

Brookes, Gerry H. (1999) "Freedom and Responsibility in The Bride of Lammermoor," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 31: Iss. 1.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol31/iss1/11>

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.

Gerry H. Brookes

Freedom and Responsibility in *The Bride of Lammermoor*

Sir Walter Scott's *Bride of Lammermoor* (1819) ends in a bizarre disaster. Lady Ashton has driven her daughter to the brink of insanity in an effort to force her to give up her engagement to Lord Ravenswood and to take Frank Hayston of Bucklaw instead. Despite her loyalty to Ravenswood, Lucy Ashton is intimidated and cannot proclaim her feelings. After Ravenswood denounces her for her disloyalty, the wedding to Bucklaw proceeds, but when the bride and groom retreat, she stabs him. They find her hiding in a corner, "her eyes glazed, and her features convulsed into a wild paroxysm of insanity."¹ The groom survives and will say nothing, but Lucy dies shortly thereafter. Ravenswood appears at her funeral and then, on his way to face her brother's challenge, drowns in quicksand.

Scott acknowledges that these events may seem to some readers, "overstrained, romantic, and composed by the wild imagination of an author, desirous of gratifying the popular appetite for the horrible." But, he assures us, those who read private Scottish history of the period will see that "through the disguise of borrowed names and added incidents, the leading particulars of AN OWER TRUE TALE" (*Bride*, ch. 34, p. 340). In his 1830 Introduction Scott tells the original story, which lets us see that in the narrative he does remain

¹Walter Scott, *The Bride of Lammermoor*, ed. Fiona Robertson (Oxford, 1991), ch. 34, p. 337. This edition is based on the Magnum Opus Edition of 1830. Henceforth *Bride*. References to other Scott novels are to the Dryburgh Edition (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1892-4). Henceforth Scott.

true to the leading facts of the climactic incident, including the confrontation between the lovers in the presence of the mother and the stabbing of the groom on the wedding night by a now insane bride. But Scott reconstructs on his own the events that lead to this predicament. He clearly wondered, as anyone might, how such a catastrophe might have come to pass. The tale Scott creates works in numerous ways toward an increasingly specific ending, which naturally creates a sense, so prevalent in the criticism, that the ending is predetermined and inevitable. Yet he also works in a contrary direction both by asserting the freedom of his characters to choose alternative courses of action and by making them thereby share responsibility for the consequences of their choices. These two tendencies correspond to a further double purpose in the narrative.

As he constructs events leading to this catastrophe, Scott seeks to create a realistic, "true" tale, in which human emotions and human choices figure as important causes. He makes what Alexander Welsh calls a "strong representation."² At the same time, he seeks to make this narrative "over true," like a wild, romantic tale governed by a fiend, that is, by an intelligence beyond human control. Very early Scott tells us that now "the peasant, who shows the ruins of the tower," affirms that on the night after his father's funeral, "the master of Ravenswood, by the bitter exclamations of his despair, evoked some evil fiend, under whose malignant influence the future tissue of incidents was woven." But Scott adds, "Alas! what fiend can suggest more desperate counsels, than those adopted under the guidance of our own violent and unresisted passions?" (*Bride*, ch. 2, pp. 34-5). Scott wants us to feel as if these bizarre events actually did occur and to show us how, through ordinary causes, they transpired. (Of course, we understand that the work is fictional and that the actual is only the possible and probable.)³ For Scott, human causes lie at the root of events, even extraordinary ones, and, if unresisted, they may cooperate powerfully with other causes to make it seem as if one has aroused an evil fiend. The difficulty for Scott, however, is to internalize the demon, to make ordinary life like something governed, not by the ponderous movement of history so often discovered in Scott, but by something mischievous and perverse.

Scott's double purpose, of making the tale on the one hand plausible and on the other as if governed by a fiendish intention, leads him to use a number

²Welsh argues that in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, "narrative consisting of carefully managed circumstantial evidence, highly conclusive in itself and often scornful of direct testimony, flourished nearly everywhere," in *Strong Representations: Narrative and Circumstantial Evidence in England* (Baltimore, 1992), p. ix.

³Scott constantly works in the region that Michael Riffaterre says narratology seems to have neglected, that is, in "the constant coincidence between textual features declaring the fictionality of a story and a reassertion of the truth of that story," in *Fictional Truth* (Baltimore, 1990), p. 30.

of strategies that risk overpowering our perception of human agency, which indeed many of these strategies mean to enforce. To begin with, the narrator of the tale looks back from the perspective of the nineteenth-century, and he knows how the tale ends. His perspective seems reinforced by many means of prediction within the tale, including the use of devices associated with the supernatural, such as omens, inherited stories, and prophecies, which may seem to claim for themselves the power of determining events. The apparent nature of causes is further complicated by the form of the work itself, which readers perceive tacitly as moving toward closure. Moreover, the protagonist himself comes to half believe in fate, despite his resistance to everything that smacks of superstition.

The retrospective view of the narrator is an important strategy for making the tale coherent and believable. It is one of several kinds of knowledge shared with the reader, creating a perspective different from that of the characters, and is made even more explicit by placing the 1830 Introduction before the tale. At times this strategy seems to insist that the tale is true because it actually happened, which indirectly acknowledges its apparent implausibility but also indicates both its fragility and the extraordinary concatenation of circumstances, human and otherwise, that produced it. The tale is made to seem unlikely but true. Scott uses the narrator's knowledge both to emphasize certain human causes of events and to make the ending seem to evolve through their choices. Scott may refer to Providence, as, for example, preparing "a dreadful requital" for Ashton, "this keen observer of human passions, who had spent his life in securing advantages to himself by artfully working upon the passions of others" (*Bride*, ch. 16, p. 173). But Scott's Providence is a first cause that operates through secondary causes and not an active, overt agent. It is a Providence that arranges "dreadful requitals" rather than just or merciful ones, and its workings are known retrospectively.

Although some of them do believe in fate, the characters themselves view the future as open. At the very end of this over true tale, Scott blames everyone's "misfortunes" on Lady Ashton's "implacability" and refers to them as "her victims" (*Bride*, ch. 35, pp. 348-9). A great deal turns on her cruel implacability, yet Ravenswood himself accepts the label of "murderer" given him by Lucy's brother at her funeral (*Bride*, ch. 35, p. 343).⁴ Lady Ashton has pressed her daughter cruelly without expecting her to resist so strongly that she will go mad and stab Bucklaw. Ravenswood turns on Lucy, without understanding that she is so thoroughly coerced and so near madness. Yet he, as we shall see

⁴Fiona Robertson notes that Scott originally wrote that the misfortunes were "in a great degree" owing to Lady Ashton's implacability and deleted the phrase in response to Ballantyne's objection that she was altogether responsible (*Bride*, p. xxxiii). Both men were, incidentally, allowing ample room for human agency.

more clearly, is complicit in her predicament. At the same time he himself seems a complicit victim.

The reader further experiences the tale as fated, in the sense that it moves toward an increasingly probable but not inevitable ending, because of inferences the reader makes about its fictional shape, its closed form. In *Narrative and Freedom* Gary Saul Morson notes the difference between the way characters may experience events as open to choice and the way a reader experiences them as closed by the structure of the narrative.⁵ The ending is explicit in the narrator's comments, but it evolves powerfully yet more tacitly in the pattern of events, which the characters do not perceive. Ravenswood does glimpse that events seem to be closing in on him, but he does not, of course, understand that he is part of a shaped fiction. The pattern depends on characters' repeating certain choices among the available ones and on more circumstantial causes, which readers understand intuitively to be manipulated by the implied author, most obviously when accidents or coincidences occur. In this tacitly compelling pattern the tale is most strongly felt to be governed by an ethical intelligence (severe but not fiendish), which creates what Wolfgang Iser calls "the special illusion of historical reality."⁶ The pattern, however, does not constrain characters tightly or fatefully. Alternatives are open to them, yet they cooperate with the pattern by repeating wrong or mistaken or ambiguous choices. The pattern implies a potential disaster different in degree if not in kind from what is most commonly predicted within the story. All of the predictions in the story, as opposed to those made by the narrator, point to disaster springing from Ravenswood's vengefulness in a mix with the Ashtons, but all of them get details of the outcome wrong. Based both on what characters say and on the interaction between their actions and their circumstances, the reader is helped to understand, with increasing specificity, where this pattern is likely (but not necessarily) to lead. None of the characters, however, is able to foresee just what will happen, and hence no one can warn Ravenswood very precisely.

This pattern that establishes the increasingly probable (but not necessarily inevitable) ending creates a quality of perversity, which has about it an intriguing ethical ambiguity. In his "Essay on Chivalry" (1818), Scott discusses the way in which the religious faith that permeated chivalry tended "to degenerate into a ferocious propensity to bigotry, persecution, and intolerance." He sees human passions as the cause: "Such, however, is the fate of all human

⁵*Narrative and Freedom: The Shadows of Time* (New Haven, 1994), pp. 43-5. Henceforth *Narrative*.

⁶Iser argues that fictional probability and consistency in *Waverley* makes the narrative credible as history, in "Fiction—The Filter of History: A Study of Sir Walter Scott's *Waverley*," *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore, 1974), pp. 86-8. Henceforth Iser.

institutions, which, however fairly framed in theory, are in practice too often corrupted by our evil passions, until the results which flow from them become the very reverse of what was to have been expected and desired."⁷ A dynamic like this manifests itself in the novel in several ways. The characters, especially Ravenswood, keep getting into situations in which either they do the opposite of what they intend, or their actions have consequences contrary to their expectations. Ravenswood declares revenge on Sir William Ashton but instead rescues him and his daughter from a charging bull. Since he is fascinated by the daughter, he is drawn to the Ashton family, against his initial and recurring repulsion. As Nassau Senior recognized in an early review, Ravenswood's pride and vengefulness seem perversely to gain him social advantages, turning an enemy into a friend, attracting Lucy, and gaining a valuable patron.⁸ In being drawn to Lucy while still attracted to revenge, Ravenswood becomes passive. Rather than seizing hold of events, as he is expected to do, rather than taking blood revenge, proving himself on the Continent, or actively seeking to regain his property, he cooperates with a perverse tangle of circumstances. He renounces his pledge of revenge, but his vengefulness is transformed, without his being aware of it, into an arrogant cruelty focused on Lucy Ashton, so that in coming to claim her, he succeeds only in making her desperate situation worse.

This pattern, at least until it is understood, makes Ravenswood's actions difficult to evaluate. He becomes passive, which has obvious risks, but he also appears to become a better man, renouncing revenge for forgiveness, becoming host to and guest of his former enemy, extending generous terms when he can reclaim some of his father's property, and conducting himself as a model young man. In the terms commonly used in discussing the Waverley novels, he seems to move from becoming a pre-revolutionary baron to becoming a post-revolutionary gentleman. The perverse underside of this progress is in his vengeful spirit, which reveals itself in his hardness toward Lucy, which may be more advanced socially than blood revenge but has no tinge of honor to it, only shame. Overtly he seems to change into a civil and honorable young gentleman, while covertly he remains liable to do harm—of a kind he does not anticipate—to others and to himself.

The causes of Ravenswood's predicament and its perverse pattern are realistic, which does not mean that we do not perceive them as manipulated, only that extraordinary or supernatural causes are not active, in spite of all the refer-

⁷"An Essay on Chivalry," *Miscellaneous Works of Sir Walter Scott* (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1881), VI, 21. Henceforth Chivalry for the essay and *Miscellaneous Works* for the edition.

⁸"Novels, by the Author of Waverley," *Quarterly Review*, 26 (1822), 121.

ences to that wild and romantic possibility.⁹ The causes that operate are of four kinds: individual human causes (what people do by—and sometimes to—themselves), relational causes (what specific people do to each other), social causes (those stemming ultimately from past and present actions of groups of people), and natural causes (consistent with the laws of nature, including high tides and lightning, which figure prominently in *Bride*). There is also the suggestion of supernatural causes, to which we will return. Relational causes are obviously important in the novel. Ashton, Lady Ashton, and the Marquis of A--- seek to use the young people to their advantage, with crucial consequences. Scott establishes a social or historical context that proves important as well. He sets the tale in a period when royal attention is distracted and power falls to aristocratic factions. In revising the novel for the 1830 edition, Scott appears to have moved the setting from before the Union to after.¹⁰ Though there is some doubt about whether he succeeded in placing the novel at a period when the conditions he posits were in fact in place, those conditions make the events of the novel internally plausible, especially the attempts to turn young lives to political advantage. Such people might do such things under circumstances like these.

This view of social and other causes—that is, reading its central character as free and responsible, though fated in retrospect to a disaster that was, in prospect, probable but not necessary—runs counter to the common impulse to read the novel as a slice of history and often as historically determined.¹¹ Tra-

⁹George Levine makes the point that Scott undercuts supernatural explanations and that he uses “realistic technique,” in *The Realistic Imagination: English Fiction from Frankenstein to Lady Chatterley* (Chicago, 1981), pp. 108-09.

¹⁰The debate about just which historical period Scott had in mind is in part an argument about the extent to which Scott views historical moments as unique and determinative. Fiona Robertson argues that Scott was not precise or consistent about dates in either edition (*Bride*, pp. xxxiv-xxxv). In *Walter Scott: The Making of the Novelist* (Toronto, 1984), Jane Millgate argues for preferring the earlier text and hence the earlier dating of events, based on a reading that seeks to make Ravenswood the victim of a particular historical moment (pp. 172-85). As Robertson notes, this does not seem a sufficient reason for discarding a revised text. Millgate’s argument suggests indirectly that, whatever the case in the original version, in the *Magnum Opus* narrative the outcome is not determined narrowly by the political and legal context, and the causes have some independence of a particular historical moment.

¹¹Georg Lukács’s view that Scott presented historical necessity operating in “concrete historical circumstances” has cast a long shadow, so that even critics inclined to see Ravenswood as responsible, hesitate to do so; see *The Historical Novel*, trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (London, 1962), p. 58. George Levine wavers between acknowledging *The Bride*’s emphasis on the psychology of the characters and submerging characters in “historic fatality” (Levine, pp. 118, 121). Iser sees an emphasis in Scott on “human motives underlying and

ditionally the Waverley novels have been seen as a struggle between the old and the new, sometimes expressed as binaries, such as progressive/retrograde or Tory/bourgeois, a view that emphasizes what the characters represent, rather than what they do. Ina Ferris characterizes the “official, inscribed plot of history” attributed to Scott as “the story of the progress of civil society and of the British state (virtual synonyms) that culminate in the ‘Glorious Revolution’ of 1688.”¹² In *Romantic Narrative Art*, Karl Kroeber says what is often implicit, arguing that in Scott’s view “history rolls relentlessly on.... If we resist the new it will destroy us.”¹³ He echoes a Carlylean view of history as a punitive God, which reappears in other descriptions of Scott’s work. In *Darwin’s Plots*, however, Gillian Beer points out that nineteenth-century metaphors of evolution, which infiltrated the metaphor of progress, influenced the ways in which we think about experience because while they permitted no place for stasis, their indications did not all point one way.¹⁴ There was room for rise and fall, evolution and devolution, generation and degeneration, growth and decay. Scott seems quite capable of imagining change that is not only ambiguous but that also does not proceed constantly, or in every case, in one direction. Further, he seems capable of imagining change negotiated between parties representing not simply the new and the old. Struggle may occur between the good and the evil or the partly good and the partly evil, no matter whether new or old, and it may occur within one person, rather than among opposing parties. In this novel, at least, categorizing is not easy, because both political parties show common traits and because the tensions invade the central character, who shows characteristics of the old, the new, and even, as George Levine remarks, of the future (Levine, p. 116). Scott places complex characters in a very specific situation, which resists easy generalizations about the broad movement of history.

As mentioned above, the suggestion of possible supernatural causes may increase the reader’s inclination to think of Ravenswood as fated or his history

formulating historical reality,” but even he seems to feel that “the character must never take precedence over the events” (Iser, pp. 86-8).

¹²*The Achievement of Literary Authority: Gender, History, and the Waverley Novels* (Ithaca, NY, 1991), p. 205. Her model of the Waverley novels would suggest looking for romance-like variation from the progressive historical paradigm in the singular and out-of-the-way stories Scott creates, where he can negotiate a route out of the official history and “into the unofficial areas where fiction can move more freely” (p. 207). It seems possible to view *The Bride* more particularly and in a more integrated way, to see complexity, rather than the stolid march of history, at the center.

¹³(Madison, 1960), p. 175.

¹⁴*Darwin’s Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot, and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (London, 1983), pp. 8-9,11.

as determined, although no modern reader who thought supernatural causes actually operated would see the work as representing history. In this respect, noting and then disparaging supernatural explanations reinforces the realism of the narrative, while of course also suggesting an alternative and not quite proximate reality. Yet this other reality has a bearing on Ravenswood that the reader understands but Ravenswood does not. In *Revenge Tragedy: Aeschylus to Armageddon*, John Kerrigan argues that revenge stories are especially theatrical because, while the character murdered is excluded from further violence, “in the transference of revenge from the dead to those who survive, questions of duty, justice, and loyalty are amplified, while a vibrant and eminently theatrical territory of ghosts, dream-visions, and graveyards opens up.”¹⁵ In this novel, the supernatural repertory is opened up, as if by the protagonist’s declaring revenge. It remains present though he subsequently denounces revenge, and it contributes to other warnings of what his submerged vengefulness may do. Kerrigan imagines Hamlet asking, “Why is he in *this* play?” (*Revenge*, p. 15). Ravenswood on the other hand could well ask, what play am I in? He slips in and out of different roles, apparently seeking to accommodate to his situation, denying most of the time that some fiend is loose and unable to see that it might be in him, which is where the supernatural apparatus points the reader. His rational prejudice against the supernatural, against elements of the revenge drama into which he could throw himself, seems progressive, especially because he shares it with the narrator, and it inclines some to admire his rationality.¹⁶ But he also shows himself immune to a kind of folk wisdom inherent in omens and prophecies, especially to the obvious suggestion that he might look inward, which the narrator credits and supports with plentiful additional testimony. Discussing “eluctable destiny,” Morson reminds us that omens may be warnings of what will happen if preventive action is not taken, rather than signs of what will necessarily happen (*Narrative*, p. 69). By careful interpretation, Ravenswood might learn about himself from the supernatural apparatus, but he tends toward a mistaken and prideful self-reliance, which is exacerbated by the fact that no trustworthy kinsman or friend of his father steps forward to offer him the counsel he so badly needs. In his isolation he does not think he can control the weather, but he does mistake his ability to understand and control himself and the world around him.

Thus the omens and inherited tales, rather than simply hinting at supernatural intervention, gloss the human and, in doing so, offer warnings, point to human responsibility, and support the realism of the novel. For example, the story resident at the fountain to which Ravenswood first takes Lucy Ashton

¹⁵(Oxford, 1996), p. 17.

¹⁶Edgar Johnson, focusing on Ravenswood’s efforts to resist revenge, sees him as a “hero of rationalism,” in *Sir Walter Scott: The Great Unknown* (New York, 1970), I, 662.

functions, first, to provide a vague caution to Ravenswood about the harm that may be done and the regret that may follow from acting on suspicions about a loved one; second, to open the possibility that Ravenswood may learn from Baron Raymond's mistake; and, third, to signal the reader that something similar is likely to happen to Ravenswood if he does not take heed. The last effect is cumulative. The more signals like this one we are given, and the more often Ravenswood chooses not to pursue a course that diminishes the signals, the more likely we are to anticipate the worst. But doing so does not mean that the worst is inevitable.

In sum, Scott portrays these characters as free and responsible, living in a world in which, despite widespread superstition, ordinary natural causes operate, and the future cannot be known.¹⁷ Yet they are, we infer, assisted to a prospectively probable and retrospectively certain ending by the invisible hand of the author, working through secondary causes, including the coincidences and happenstances that might be said to constitute luck. In this sense the characters are, as Morson notes, "compelled by a structure beyond their ken" (*Narrative*, p. 43). At times Scott will blur the distinction between realistic causes and supernatural ones, in ways that reveal to the reader the underlying, structuring, perverse pattern-making hand of the author, while the characters, especially Ravenswood, remain necessarily oblivious. When, for example, after Lucy and Ravenswood plight their troth, a dead raven falls at their feet, we read it as a bad sign, even if the natural cause, Henry Ashton, is lurking in the bushes with his crossbow. Ravenswood ought to know his engagement is a dangerous decision, but not because a plausible if unusual accident brings Henry Ashton and a raven together in close proximity to the couple at a crucial moment. Again, we do not credit it as a supernatural event, rather as one of those arranged accidents common in fiction, like the lightning bolts that strike at opportune moments in the plot. Scott's hand, however, seems more visible than usual, and he seems to be taking a bit of pleasure in making reality more demonic than it ought to be, just to suggest to a stubborn young man that there is a lot he does not know.

A risk is that the concurrence of luck with other causes may seem contrivance, although a degree of contrivance is necessary to make the tale seem strange but true. Scott's tendency to explain implausibility also calls attention to it. Things threaten to come apart even at the last moment. Bucklaw must not understand Lucy's state of mind, lest he stand up (like Mareshcal in *The*

¹⁷In the introduction to *Guy Mannering* Scott remarks: "Were everything to happen in the ordinary train of events, the future would be subject to the rules of arithmetic, like the chances of gaming. But extraordinary events and wonderful runs of luck defy the calculations of mankind, and throw impenetrable darkness on future contingencies" (1, 14). In *The Bride* the reader's sense of a known future runs against the sense within the tale that the future is not predictable, especially in details. The future is contingent on a present in which alternatives remain relatively open, while, of course, the past will seem closed.

Black Dwarf) and seek to call off the wedding. Scott anticipates the improbability of Bucklaw's obliviousness by calling attention repeatedly to his inexperience with women of Lucy's class. In effect, Scott "sideshadows" by holding open the alternative possibility that Bucklaw might understand Lucy.¹⁸ While Ravenswood's circumstances may seem unlikely, if still truthful and motivated, Ravenswood himself seems ready enough to contribute to them.

Ravenswood's vulnerability to other people and to his situation springs from problems of identity or personality and values, exacerbated by his inexperience. He is not secure in who he is, and he has difficulty reconciling the different ethical roles that he might play. His actions reveal qualities in him like those of a narcissistic personality, of which Scott seems to have an intuitive understanding. This model of Ravenswood is not meant to simplify him or his predicament, which Scott wants to represent in a dense ethical and social context, yet it helps us understand both some of the unusual aspects of his conduct and also how Scott locates responsibility within Ravenswood himself. Ravenswood is narcissistic in his exaggerated sense of his own intrinsic worth, in the accompanying fear of worthlessness, in susceptibility to slight, in difficulty in understanding the feelings of others, which is related to difficulties in self-understanding, in a tendency to blame specific others, and in susceptibility to self-righteous, vengeful rage. This last is likely to be triggered in individuals by particular situations, like the one that Ravenswood finds himself in at the end of this tale.

As is often pointed out, Ravenswood has many admirable qualities of a man of rank: a sense of honor, skill with weapons and in the hunt, awareness of traditions, and concern about feudal obligations. From the start, however, his identity has been undermined by the loss of property that would give it substance. In *The Fortunes of Nigel*, Nigel Olifaunt remarks: "My patrimony alienated—my title become a reproach—for what can be so absurd as titled beggary?" (Scott, 2, 275). Ravenswood, however, has trouble seeing any absurdity in his situation, and he seems to feel that he deserves deference as his birthright, although at times he voices the more progressive notion that he will prove his worth on his own. Though he has some knightly virtues, Ravenswood must not be identified too closely with chivalry in its ideal and, as Scott saw it, fragile state, since what he is alleged to have inherited from his family is vengefulness, one of those vices into which Chivalry kept degenerating. Ravenswood's family is also connected with assassination, which especially in Scotland became "the most general vice of the sixteenth century" ("Chivalry," p. 125). His whole conception of his heritage is idealized, and he keeps coming up against the near irrelevancy of what he wants to see as a heroic older or-

¹⁸Morson defines "sideshadowing" in *Narrative*, p. 6.

der. He also seems to think of his place as fixed and unchanging, which makes him more fearful and defensive than he might otherwise be.¹⁹

Though the narrator identifies vengefulness as “a prevalent vice in the Scottish disposition” (*Bride*, ch. 2, p. 31), the young man gives it a heroic, self-aggrandizing cast, identifying it with honor and loyalty, especially to his father. He hears his father’s curses against Sir William Ashton, “as if they had conveyed to him a legacy of vengeance” (*Bride*, ch. 2, p. 31). The young man invents his obligation, without being asked by his father, or being troubled by his father’s ghost. Yet when he first swears revenge against Sir William Ashton for condoning interference at his father’s funeral, it is not clear whether in fact he intends to play the role of blood revenger. Early in the tale much emphasis is put on the threat that he will commit physical violence, but the threat resides primarily in what omens, tales, and warnings say, which, as we learn, are reliable only in oblique ways. Alice warns the Lord Keeper that the blood of a recent revengeful murderer runs through the young man, “and one drop of it were enough to fire him in the circumstances in which he is placed—I say, beware of him” (*Bride*, ch. 4, p. 52). Scott sideshadows the possibility that Ravenswood may be violent, without having him reiterate his threats publicly, thereby emphasizing that he can choose not to be violent. At the same time, Scott is able to use the threat to make Ashton cautious. Ashton, it appears, can learn prudence from traditional tales, except that once he sees Ravenswood is no physical threat, he discounts him as any threat at all. The reader is thereby encouraged to expect what the characters tend to disregard, that is, to anticipate that Ravenswood may be a threat in some unexpected way. The clearest evidence that Ravenswood originally intended violence is seen in his description to Lucy of the oaths that he swore after his father’s death (*Bride*, ch. 20, p. 208). Lucy gets him to admit readily that his action was sinful, and he appears a lot less dangerous than family tales and warnings indicate. He certainly proves less dangerous than his father, whom one of the old women—one of Scott’s three witches—tells another “sticked young Blackhall with his whinger for a wrang word said ower their wine, or brandy, or what not” (*Bride*, ch. 23, p. 250).

Ravenswood has inherited blood revenge as an idea and an impulse, rather than as an active motivating force. From the start his actions, as opposed to his initial angry words, suggest more civilized impulses toward restraint. Again,

¹⁹Bruce Beiderwell notes that Ravenswood lacks a secure sense of self and explains his shifts from “the stance of a seemingly moderate hero to that of a feudal lord” on the grounds that “neither of these roles is grounded sufficiently in a widely shared system of value or in a secure political and social order.” To be sure, the fit between Ravenswood and the world is not easy, but his exaggerated sense of what he is due and his vengefulness cannot be thrown back on the failings of society to provide him the place he requires. See “Death and Disappearance in *The Bride of Lammermoor*,” in *Scott in Carnival*, Selected Papers for the 4th International Scott Conference, ed. J. H. Alexander and David Hewitt (Aberdeen, 1993), p. 251.

the perversity of the plot constantly places him in situations in which his conduct takes surprising, unanticipated turns. When he sees the bull about to crush his sworn enemy, he shoots it. Although he later minimizes his action as one “of mere brutal instinct” (*Bride*, ch. 17, p. 180), his instinct seems humane and noble. It seems even more so when one considers that, as Lucy recognizes, he was faced with an opportunity to take revenge by omission—though one wonders what sort of satisfaction might reside in it (*Bride*, ch. 5, p. 65).²⁰ Ravenswood’s impulses do not take the overt form that the family legends predict, and his own action has consequences that are both ambiguous and the opposite of what he intended beforehand.

In conversation with Bucklaw, Ravenswood insists that in seeking out Ashton initially, he intended simply to harangue him (*Bride*, ch. 7, p. 81). His claim seems credible, given what we have learned about his restraint, though it hardly promises much by way of revenge or justice, whatever that might be. He seems, as Bucklaw says, “not the lad to shoot an old and unarmed man” (*Bride*, ch. 6, p. 73). Bucklaw chides Ravenswood for thinking of revenge and puts the risk in a different way. He sees that words might have failed and he might have killed Ashton. Ravenswood asks Bucklaw to consider the provocation, “the ruin and death procured and caused by his hard-hearted cruelty—an ancient house destroyed, an affectionate father murdered! Why in our old Scottish days, he that sat quiet under such wrongs would have been held neither fit to back a friend nor face a foe.” Bucklaw replies that he is glad to discover that the devil is as cunning with others as with himself, “for whenever I am about to commit any folly, he persuades me it is the most necessary, gallant, gentlemanlike thing on earth, and I am up to saddlegirths in the bog before I see that the ground is soft.” Bucklaw adds that Ravenswood might have turned out “a murd—a homicide, just out of pure respect for our father’s memory.” Bucklaw sees the troubled son in Ravenswood and recognizes the potential self-deception in mistaking violence toward a personal enemy for a virtue. He also sees the potential for folly in fronting Ashton. Ravenswood responds, “It is too true, our vices steal upon us in forms outwardly as fair as those of the demons whom the superstitious represent as intriguing with the human race, and are not discovered in their native hideousness until we have clasped them in our arms” (*Bride*, ch. 7, p. 82). Like Bucklaw, he is aware of

²⁰His killing the bull, incidentally, lends itself to various interpretations, especially since the bull is associated with the spirit of Malise Ravenswood, an ancestor who bided his time. Kerr, for example, sees the “bull’s attack as an expression of the hostility of the feudal state...towards the interloper, a hostility which is then suppressed by the central feudal figure,” in *Fiction against History: Scott as Storyteller* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 92. This particular bull, like Ravenswood, may be stirred “by one of those fits of capricious ferocity to which their dispositions are liable” (ch. 5, p. 55). Or, as Scott tells us, thereby sideshadowing causes, maybe the bull was just drawn to Lucy’s red cape. In either case, the consequence in the narrative is the same.

the power of self-deception, and, as Scott himself does habitually, Ravenswood this time also sees the psychological relevance of the demonic. The metaphor, however, supports his vengeful tendency to personify and personalize his difficulties. Ravenswood's fear of forms "outwardly fair" marks an inclination to distrust someone like Lucy Ashton, to make a demon of the actual woman, rather than to recognize the demon in himself, in his own imagination. As usual he dramatizes his own temptations in a language that contrasts with Bucklaw's more military and commonplace terms. Bucklaw gets stuck in bogs. Ravenswood, of course, is the one who gets stuck in a bog ultimately, and he gets there partly because of the language—or one of the languages—in which he dramatizes his predicament.

Presumably when one finally recognizes the hideous vice in one's arms, one feels foolish. Throughout the tale Scott focuses on Ravenswood's extreme narcissistic sensitivity to slight and shame, which is related to his sense of honor. In *Humiliation* William Miller, in the process of comparing heroic Norse culture with modern, remarks, "Honor is above all the keen sensitivity to the experience of humiliation and shame, a sensitivity manifested by the desire to be envied by others and the propensity to envy the success of others."²¹ Miller argues that an aggressive culture of heroic honor and shame gave way (about 1700, near the time the novel is set) to a relatively universal culture of humiliation and embarrassment. Thus Ravenswood seems to be emerging from a culture of honor—which is more in his head than in the actual life of his father's generation—into a more modern predicament. Miller argues that, unlike those who inhabit heroic culture, "most of our disposition with regard to honor is defensive rather than offensive, preserving rather than acquisitive" (*Humiliation*, p. 204).²² In Miller's terms, Ravenswood's defensiveness is modern, but he uses language that masks his aggressive vengefulness in the guise of honor. He is, surely to his credit, no assassin, but he does not recognize that vengefulness may become partly socialized and dwindle down to cruelty. This troubled young man becomes entangled with the family on whom he has sworn revenge, which appears to move him into a preferable realm of conduct but one which covertly exacerbates his sensitivity and the risk of humiliation.

Scott describes Ravenswood's attraction to Lucy Ashton as the second major passion driving him, but it and his vengefulness are not so easily separated, springing as they do from the young man's confused identity and tenta-

²¹*Humiliation and Other Essays on Honor, Social Discomfort, and Violence* (Ithaca, NY, 1993), p. 84. Henceforth *Humiliation*.

²²Bruce Beiderwell's discussion of revenge in *Power and Punishment in Scott's Novels* (Athens, GA, 1992) is useful, though he does not seem to take into account the function of revenge in preserving honor in the sort of prior culture that appeals to Ravenswood's imagination.

tive place in the world. Scott's essential design is to transform the energy of Ravenswood's desire for revenge onto a narrow demand for loyalty on Lucy's part. Thereby Ravenswood puts his sense of honor and obversely of potential humiliation at risk on her. Because he has doubts about her loyalty from the start, he contributes to creating a situation in which he may well both feel betrayed and have his blood up, the sort of predicament Bucklaw warns him about. This design makes the ending especially painful, since Ravenswood is cruel to the most vulnerable person, to the woman whom his idealized and confused chivalric impulses ought to lead him to protect and who, though she cannot speak, is in fact loyal to him. Ravenswood's focusing his honor, which is also fear of humiliation, on Lucy also diverts him from more rational targets, from Ashton, the subject of his original hostility, and from Lady Ashton, who has done all she can to provoke him.

Scott makes Ravenswood's very attraction to Lucy seem perverse, explicitly benign but covertly threatening. He is attracted to her because she has qualities that are opposite to his, and she seems to have the effect of making him more gentlemanly and a better Christian in his renunciation of revenge. Yet his fascination with her has the corollary effect of making him passive and defensive, so that he gives himself up to circumstances, increasing the prospect that his fear of humiliation will be realized. Their courtship and engagement, up to the point where Lady Ashton turns on Ravenswood, is full of unsettling elements that predict a disruption, even while Ravenswood's behavior is overtly increasingly calm and civilized. The narrator allows, as we might think, that Ravenswood would prefer a more spirited mate (*Bride*, ch. 21, p. 215). Yet he is drawn to her beauty, and her blushes transfix him. In *Fictions of Modesty*, Ruth Bernard Yeazell has helped us see how seductive blushing could be.²³ Lucy evokes in Ravenswood's imagination "a picture of the most seducing sweetness" (*Bride*, ch. 8, p. 96). Scott emphasizes the extent to which Ravenswood is drawn to her passivity, softness, need for protection, and, when he learns of it from Alice, her love for him. Their language does not tend in this direction, but she seems his only vassal. Certainly she is the one person who cares for him and needs him, once he has lost his father, "his nearest, and almost his only friend" (*Bride*, ch. 2, p. 33). In the Darwinian terms Yeazell uses, Lucy chooses him, and she does so with such passive discretion that she seems wholly innocent (*Modesty*, p. xi). Still, their relationship seems threatened by the serious differences they discover when, after their engagement, they begin to talk with each other.

Engaging in hospitality and courtship provides Ravenswood opportunities for more progressive forms of humiliation, and symptoms of the toll they take on him keep bursting out, which predicts some larger disruption. The couple's

²³*Fictions of Modesty: Women and Courtship in the English Novel* (Chicago, 1991), p. 96. Henceforth *Modesty*.

engagement, where even the apparently romantic act of exchanging love tokens takes on a sinister cast, embodies the pattern of this section of the narrative. Lucy's father has used his superior eloquence to convince Ravenswood that he had wanted to be reconciled with the young man's father. Ravenswood's new role of forgiving suitor has been put to the test by a return to Ravenswood Castle, as the Lord Keeper's guest. In this setting, the young man cannot help measuring himself and his family against those he again finds himself thinking of as usurpers. His family pride actually leads him in the right direction when he reads the Ashton family portraits quite accurately, seeing exactly how such people conduct themselves and how, if he could recognize it, they are conducting themselves toward him. But Lucy descends like an angel, and her beauty quiets thoughts that revive vengefulness (*Bride*, ch. 18, p. 195).

While at Ravenswood Castle, he visits old Alice, who tries to discourage the marriage with a wide range of appeals, from the chidings of a feudal vassal, to the accusation that he might be a devious revenger, making his way to the heart of the family "under the mask of hospitality," to more common-sense advice. She even demonstrates Ravenswood's ability to mix the language of blood revenge with that of more gentlemanly activities, that is, to mix the pagan with the political and civil. She asks if he is ready to accept Ashton's patronage, to "gnaw the bones of his prey when he has devoured the substance... vote as he votes, and call your father's murderer your worshipful father-in-law and revered patron?" (*Bride*, ch. 19, p. 201). He shows his usual contempt for her prophecies but asks for more rational advice. She tells him Lucy loves him and moves to explaining the rules of courtship, telling him to leave the Ashtons because he cannot remain and not propose to Lucy, presumably because such action would be ungentlemanly, and because, she adds, if he does intend to ally himself with Ashton, then "you are an infatuated and predestined fool" (*Bride*, ch. 19, p. 203). She clearly believes that he can choose to be predestined, as well as to be a fool. Like everyone else, she misreads Lucy, thinking her attachment for him will fade readily if he leaves. In her mode of sensible advisor, however, she sees the general case rather clearly, that "your love, as well as your hatred, threatens sure mischief, or at least disgrace" (*Bride*, ch. 19, p. 201). The slip into the last register of disgrace suggests where Ravenswood begins to dwell. While he is susceptible to warnings involving potential disgrace, he remains remarkably impervious to those involving his own character and passions, despite their frequency and their manifold sources.

In spite of the generous attitude he has taken toward the Lord Keeper, Alice's advice confirms his reluctance to marry Lucy, which is a defensive symptom of his transformed vengefulness. He fears a new form of disgrace. He sees that not only will he ask to marry the daughter of his father's enemy, but he will also risk being rejected by her "wealthy and powerful father" (*Bride*, ch. 20, p. 204). The thought of this insult he cannot bear, and he resolves again to leave the country. But, characteristically, he pauses. Scott

remarks, "Between two scales equally loaded, a feather's weight will turn the scale" (*Bride*, ch. 20, p. 205). Ravenswood resigns his will to circumstances and to a passion he does not seem to understand. Though he is capable of restraint and tends to avoid violence in ordinary circumstances, his hate and aggression can still be triggered by his sensitivity to slight, which he risks in a more ordinary social sphere, where real personal enemies are harder to spot and then almost impossible to cut down. Lucy and Ravenswood give in to the "immediate impulse of the moment" and plight their troth (*Bride*, ch. 20, p. 206). Having again acted rashly and not as he intended, Ravenswood finds himself exposed immediately to his worst fear, humiliation as a suitor rejected by the family.

Of course, Ravenswood exaggerates the potential dishonor, just as he has over-dramatized the revenge, if not the vengefulness, he has given up for Lucy. When Henry Ashton mentions the possibility of his sister's having had other sweethearts, Ravenswood imagines "that his present engagement might only end in his being exposed like a conquered enemy in a Roman triumph, a captive attendant on the car of a victor, who mediated only the satiating his pride at the expense of the vanquished" (*Bride*, ch. 20, p. 211). He imagines himself in some other drama and certainly overestimates his enemies. There also remains an element of cruelty in his attitude toward Lucy. Scott tells us he finds "her softness of mind, amounting almost to feebleness, rendered her even dearer to him" (*Bride*, ch. 21, p. 216), and says that if they had acted out of better knowledge of each other and not in such haste, she might have feared him too much and he might have "construed her softness and docile temper as imbecility, rendering her unworthy of his regard" (*Bride*, ch. 21, p. 216). Scott sideshadows here, showing us that Ravenswood might have acted differently, although the hint of arrogant cruelty toward the weak would have remained constant in either case. Incidentally, it is hard to see how this courtship at any stage promises much happiness, much less how it represents the prospect of a happy union of old and new.

When Lady Ashton returns and spurns him, Ravenswood's worst fears seem realized, though in a more mundane form than his imagination anticipates. Overtly he appears calm, reasonable, and free from vengefulness, just when he has both fresh provocation and sufficient power to get his property back from Sir William. He can certainly, with the willing assistance of the Marquis of A---, repay Ashton in kind for what he did to his father. (Curiously, Ravenswood does not seem ever to confirm Ashton's version of his dealings with his father.) Yet he speaks "like a gallant young nobleman" to the Marquis, insisting that if Lucy will prefer him in his poverty, then he will put up with the slight degradation of marrying her (*Bride*, ch. 25, p. 264). He asks that the Marquis be liberal with the Ashtons if they will only agree to his engagement. He seems interested in his inheritance only as it may make a union

possible and is grateful to get out from under indigence and inactivity.²⁴ Ravenswood even seeks to isolate his relationship with Lucy from her family, so he appears to take a modern view of marriage as contracted between couples not families. But covertly he is simply focusing the grounds of potential dishonor on Lucy, testing her where he suspects weakness, which makes his gamble seem desperate, and inviting himself into the kind of situation where his indignant blood will be up and where he is most likely to do something rash, possibly violent, and foolish.

That occasion arises when he returns from abroad. He left with Lucy's assurance that she will be true to her word, "while the exercise of my reason is vouchsafed to me," which gives the reader a quite specific foreshadowing of the coming disaster (*Bride*, ch. 27, p. 290). Once he is out of the country, he has surrendered his predicament to the Marquis and Lady Ashton, who have no doubts about what they want and how to get it. As a result, Ravenswood's honorable gentlemanliness now seems naïve. The Marquis does all he can to bully and antagonize the Ashtons, and Lady Ashton tries every device of her cruelty to get her daughter to change her mind, driving her to the edge of insanity.

Ravenswood finally reappears just as Lucy's unsteady hand marks the marriage contract with Bucklaw. His appearance is wild, he seems to have been ill, and his eyes show grief and "deliberate indignation" (*Bride*, ch. 33, p. 321). Colonel Ashton and Bucklaw are kept at bay, in part by Ravenswood's weapons and in part by "the ecstasy of real desperation" (*Bride*, ch. 33, p. 324). Ravenswood insists on his right to hear Lucy reject him with her own words. He assumes, of course, that she is free to speak, while Scott indicates quite clearly that her will is seriously impaired. Rev. Bide-the-Bent, who has been sympathetic with Lucy, supports his claim, but Lady Ashton insists on being present at any interview. Bide-the-Bent also volunteers to be present.

Ravenswood reminds Lucy who he is, with what might be gentleness. But immediately he reverts to his theme of renounced vengeance, forgetting perhaps that he has just dismissed the original object of his revenge, Ashton, in order to treat with his daughter. "I am that Ravenswood," he says, "who, for your sake, forgave, nay, clasped hands in friendship with the oppressor and pillager of his house—the traducer and murderer of his father" (*Bride*, ch. 33, p. 325). Any apparent progress he has made falls away, and he brings the threat of his anger to bear on poor Lucy. Lady Ashton interrupts, but Ravenswood speaks again to Lucy of their "solemn engagement." Lucy can only say, "It was my mother" (*Bride*, ch. 33, p. 326). Ravenswood cannot understand what she says, which is the truth. It was her mother after all, but Ravenswood

²⁴Scott represents Ravenswood as showing the trust in the law to dispose of property that a Waverley hero should have, according to Alexander Welsh in *The Hero of the Waverley Novels* (New Haven, 1963), p. 120.

is too preoccupied with his own position to pay attention to Lucy's desperate state.

The conflict takes unexpected turns, mimicking in part the original anecdote on which the story is based. Capable of any argument, Lady Ashton quotes scripture at him, a text from Numbers requiring parental approval for marriage. Ravenswood will have none of it, asking Lucy if she is "willing to barter sworn faith, the exercise of free will, and the feelings of mutual affection, to this wretched hypocritical sophistry" (*Bride*, ch. 33, p. 326). She does not reply, and he reiterates his claim of fidelity, against honor, against advice, against reason, against portents. What finally quiets Ravenswood is the signed contract, and his tone shifts again to that of a reasonable gentleman. "This is indeed, madam," he says, "an undeniable piece of evidence" (*Bride*, ch. 33, p. 327). When she takes off her half of their gold token, he seems to recognize that despite her renouncing him, she still cares for him. He then casts some of the blame on her mother and says his final words to Lucy: "I have nothing farther to say, except to pray to God that you may not become a world's wonder for this act of wilful and deliberate perjury" (*Bride*, ch. 33, p. 328). He sets appointments with those who have challenged him and leaves "with the speed of a demon dismissed by the exorcist" (*Bride*, ch. 33, p. 329). He is a bit demonic.

Despite the evidence to the contrary and despite his own treatment by her parents, Ravenswood sees Lucy as intentionally, deliberately acting against him, just as his own indignation is "deliberate."²⁵ In the aftermath, when Lucy has stabbed Bucklaw, been found mad, and dies shortly thereafter, Ravenswood must recognize his mistake, coming to knowledge the reader shares. Scott emphasizes, although there seems little need, that her body comes to the churchyard with "as little free will" as she had been brought as a bride (*Bride*, ch. 35, p. 341). His doing so emphasizes the element of choice available to the other participants, even those whom modern readers might think of as not free but subject instead to internal compulsion. In his 1830 "Introduction" Scott suggests that the original groom's comment, which becomes Ravenswood's remark that he hopes Lucy "may not become a world's wonder," usually implies "some remarkable degree of calamity" (*Bride*, p. 3), giving it some of the power of a curse. Under the circumstances, his memory of those words must increase his sense that he has helped to bring Lucy's death upon her by his

²⁵Carl P. Malmquist remarks that their vulnerability inclines narcissistic persons to attack some other person in self-righteous rage: "Feeling humiliated, weak, and put on by others, their interpretation falls back on needing to attribute blame for someone having deliberately done things to them. They are left vulnerable to react with miscarried attempts to remedy a chronically devalued sense of self," in *Homicide: A Psychiatric Perspective* (Washington, DC, 1996), p. 175. Henceforth Malmquist.

indignant suspicions. His vice has truly turned to something shameful in his arms.

Ravenswood fulfills the prophecy that he will lodge his horse in Kelpie's flow. He takes the shortest most dangerous course to his appointment with Colonel Ashton, and his "precipitated haste" does him in (*Bride*, ch. 38, p. 348). He could have been more careful, yet it is consistent with his character that he would choose to ride on the sand the night after especially high tides. It is also consistent with the repeated pattern of the novel that his rashness will have disastrous consequences, different from what he would predict, since he has set himself up to die at Lucy's brother's hand. The reader is aware, however, of the invisible hand of the implied author completing a story that has nowhere else to go. Ravenswood could not now appropriately be killed by Lucy's brother, and it is more fitting that his rash haste contribute to his own drowning.²⁶ Those who seek to see Ravenswood as undone by history, by the failure of Union or compromise, or by circumstances beyond his control, strip Scott of his overt implication that the fiendish resides partly in us, in our unrestrained passions and especially in our vengeful spirit, which may betray itself as suspiciousness and cruelty. This quality may flourish more readily under some circumstances, historical or otherwise. Yet clearly it seems to Scott especially a quality of a certain class.²⁷ In *The Bride* Scott shows acute awareness of how vengefulness can infect decisions, especially in a displaced young man, and transform itself into a form of haughty cruelty, which is without honor.

Though history is not represented here as determined, the novel certainly represents complex understanding of forces, political, interpersonal, and personal, which might plausibly be at work in some particular historical moment. The novel works toward a very specific climax, setting forth the realistic elements, including human choice, that combine to bring it about. The ideals of Christianity and paganism war in Ravenswood, and vices lurk behind what tempt him as honorable ideals. In "Chivalry" Scott notes that we must remember that "we are ourselves variable and inconsistent animals, and that, perhaps, the surest mode of introducing and encouraging any particular vice, is to rank the corresponding virtue at a pitch unnatural in itself, and beyond the ordinary attainment of humanity" (VI, 48). Such moderate observations stand aside

²⁶Malmquist remarks, "It is not an exaggeration to say that to eliminate a sense of hopeless mortification, the person is sometimes willing to pay the price of destroying themselves [*sic*]" (p. 184).

²⁷In his "Character" of the Duke of Buccleugh (1819), whose health was so much a concern to him as he was writing *The Bride*, Scott notes that his dear friend differed from his father, "in that his temper was more quick, and, for the moment, more easily susceptible of resentment, when undeserved injury was offered to him or an ungrateful return made to his favours," in *Miscellaneous Works*, IV, 299-300.

from any particular historical moment, though they may seem more relevant at some moments than others. Certainly it is an unusual set of circumstances that encourage a young man to try to set for himself a standard of forgiveness and implicitly of humility so high that he thinks he can marry the daughter of the man who has wronged his father, who has taken over the family estates, and whom he thinks of as his father's murderer. The degeneration or perversion of his conduct is implicit from the start, which some of us might be ready to take as determining its failure and as freeing him from responsibility. Scott, however, seems to dramatize a more complicated understanding of the young man's predicament and to hold him to account.

University of Nebraska—Lincoln