The Heart of Mid-Lothian: Madge Wildfire's Rational Irrationality

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NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

The Heart of Mid-Lothian:
Madge Wildfire's Rational Irrationality

Since the date of the four-volume publication of Sir Walter Scott's The Heart of Mid-Lothian in 1818, critics have tended universally to view Madge Wildfire as a somewhat credulous characterization. Taking their cue from the reviewer for Blackwood's who felt that Madge's madness was "pushed rather far. . . Insanity, as a disease is always disgusting," the scholars have seen her either as a "conventional madwoman" whose pertinence structurally and thematically was only tenuous or, at best, as a morally isolated, non-rational figure whose pathetic situation parallels that of Effie Deans. Possibly overlooked by these commentators, however, are aspects of Madge's characterization which suggest that Scott uses her wild ravings to reveal at times an intuitive perception of reality. Through such a role, Scott renders her madness with deliberate artistic intent to establish character contrasts, to anticipate plot developments, and to reinforce thematic patterns.

In Volumes I and II, character comments, Madge's own actions, and the narrator-voice of Peter Pattieson each suggest that Madge is con-

2. Leslie Stephen, "Hours in a Library," The Cornhill Magazine, XXIV (September, 1871), 286; Thomas Crawford, Scott (London, 1965), p. 89, sees Madge as a "mad harlot" (even though he later praises the creation as a symbol of the Scots language and the Scots-English folk culture).
4. P. F. Fisher, "Providence, Fate and the Historical Imagination in Scott's The Heart of Midlothian," Nineteenth Century Fiction, X (1955), 112. Mr. Fisher hints that, like the witches in Macbeth, Madge is "the presiding prophetess of Fate"; but he concludes that she exists "after the collapse of reason in the aimless world of Nature and Fate." Coleman O. Parsons, Witchcraft and Demonology in Scott's Fiction (London, 1964), p. 139, sees momentary "flickers of sanity" in Madge, but he argues that with her mother she represents only the "extreme of lawlessness in the godless natural dispensation."
5. Scott, of course, published the 1818 edition of The Heart of Mid-Lothian under the pseudonym "Jedediah Cleishbotham" who supposedly tells the tale from the manuscript which Peter Pattieson had prepared as a result of his evening's conversation with the lawyers Halkit and Hardie (Vol. I, Chapter I). Pattieson's "voice" then, is the controlling and judging presence of the novel; and, as I will indicate, he comments sometimes subtly, sometimes directly (but with increasing frequency) upon Madge Wildfire's rational irrationality.

[ 184 ]
ventionally "insane." Robertson-Staunton dupes her of her clothes to lead the attack on Mid-Lothian; the minister Reuben Butler deems her a "poor demented creature"; and Jim Ratcliffe uses his underworld rhetoric and cunning to manipulate the simple girl to reveal all that she knows of "Gentle Geordie"—an action which prompts the narrator-voice to comment that Madge's "unretentive memory let out, in the eagerness of contradiction, all that she would have most wished to keep concealed, had her judgment been equal to her inclination" (p. 171). When blundering Sharptilaw exposes this ploy, Madge slips defensively into a snatch of song; and this wild and random musical flail is used moments later by Ratcliffe to warn Robertson: as the arresting party creeps forward to surprise the criminal, Ratcliffe hums a favorite ballad of Wildfire's, thus causing the girl to burst unawares into a song of warning. Even though each of these early appearances suggests that Madge is merely an irrational, two-dimensional creation, the narrator's comment that she was "not so absolutely void of common sense" (p. 181) gives hint of a hitherto untreated dimension of her personality; and Scott's anticipatory plotting prefigures the later, more significant usage.

Volume III, which deals primarily with Jeanie Deans' journey for justice to London, provides interesting interaction between the staunchly religious pilgrim and the supposed "conventional madwoman." Here Madge's comments and actions reflect a curious pattern of rationality, albeit an unconscious one, beneath the obvious veneer of insanity. Meeting and passing Jeanie on the road, Madge offers a cryptic greeting which warns implicitly of her mother's forthcoming ambush on Gunnerby Hill:

"A braw guide might to ye, Jeanie Deans," said the foremost female, as the horse passed our heroine; "What think ye o' yer bonny hill yonder, lifting its brow to the moon? Trow ye yer's the gate to heaven, that ye are sae fain o't?—maybe we may win there the night yet, God sae us, though our minny here's rather drieth in the upgang." (p. 284)

And when Jeanie (captured by the outlaws on Gunnerby Hill and taken to Meg Murdockson's barn) is threatened physically by the old hag, Madge herself drags the heroine into a small partitioned recess. There she protects Jeanie from harm by deliberately bracing her back against the door (p. 290).

6. Sir Walter Scott, The Heart of Mid-Lothian, ed. John Henry Raleigh (Boston, 1966), p. 170. (Subsequent citations from this work will be indicated by page number after the quotation.)

7. In Chapter VI of Volume II the reader learns of the disappearance of Madge and her Mother Meg Murdockson from Edinburgh even before Effie's trial.
In this same scene Madge rambles on in apparent irrationality about moonlight walks with the dead; yet Scott chooses the exclamations with artistic subtlety, since the girl's reference to her lost child ("I think my puir bairn's dead") anticipates her development as a foil to Effie Deans and her later action at the child's grave. Even the narrator shifts his ground at this point: he speaks at first of Madge's morning greeting to Jeanie as one "with her usual air of insane glee" (p. 297); but, when Madge offers to "take a walk" with her captive, the narrator interjects an observation about Madge's "possessing a doubtful, uncertain, and twilight sort of rationality" (p. 297).

Scott plays upon this "twilight sort of rationality" with conscious thematic intent; for, when Madge leads Jeanie to her child's grave in the wilderness (Vol. III, Chapter V), the author not only provides a structural linking of Madge's situation with the moral plight of Effie Deans but also re-demonstrates his thematic point of Jeanie's efficacious charity. Indeed, it was the heroine's earlier spontaneous sense of justice (she gave Madge a glass of milk when that girl was "on Arthur's seat for four-and-twenty hours") which, in turn, has moved this "fool" to natural kindness. The gesture has made such "a favourable and permanent impression" (p. 299) upon Madge that she somehow senses that Jeanie will be the very instrument of her spiritual salvation:

"...and maybe ye'll can teach me to find out the narrow way, and the strait path; for I have been burning bricks in Egypt, and walking through the weary wilderness of Sinai, for lang and mony a day. But whenever I think about mine errors, I am like to cover my lips for shame." (p. 299)

In terms of plot structure, moreover, it is Madge who shows Jeanie the "way" out of the deep woods and who delivers her safely to the town.

Here Madge's comments are particularly illustrative of her somewhat distorted, yet surprisingly accurate, "insight." By her repeated

8. Nathaniel H. Henry, "Wordsworth's "Thorn": An Analogue in Scott's Heart of Midlothian," English Language Notes, III (1965), 118-120, demonstrates how Scott acknowledges his indebtedness for a literary borrowing which likens Madge Wildfire to Wordsworth's Martha Ray. Mr. Henry argues further that Scott uses this parallel as a kernel of the whole plot involving Effie Deans in order to plead his case for Effie: "She, like Martha and Madge, was seduced, had a child, was apparently deserted by her lover, and like Martha was accused of child murder."

9. Jeanie here resists the temptation to flee and chooses to stay in order to comfort the collapsed, sobbing girl: "Jeanie's first idea was to take the opportunity to flight; but her desire to escape yielded for a moment to apprehension for the poor insane being, who, she thought, might perish for want of relief. With an effort, which, in her circumstances, might be termed heroic, she stooped down, spoke in a soothing tone, and endeavored to raise up the forlorn creature" (p. 299).
references to Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress and by the explicit identification of Jeanie and herself in Bunyan-like allegorical roles ("You shall be the woman Christiana, and I will be the maiden Mercy"), Madge re-phrases unknowingly the religious implications of Jeanie's quest for human and divine Justice, since in Volume II the narrator himself had referred to Jeanie in exactly the same allegorical terminology: "So, like Christiana in the Pilgrim's Progress, when traversing with a timid yet resolved step the terrors of the Valley of the Shadow of Death, she glided on by rock and stone..." (p. 155). Madge's unconscious recognition of Jeanie's essentially spiritual mission here provides definite thematic relevance.

These same references, repeated moments later, form a striking commentary upon the present reality:

"I am sure," she continued, "I may well say I am come out of the city of Destruction, for my mother is Mrs Bat's-eyes, that dwells at Deadman's Corner; and Frank Levitt, and Tyburn Tam, they may be likened to Mistrust and Guilt, that came galloping up, and struck the poor pilgrim to the ground with a great club... But now we will gang to the Interpreter's house, for I ken a man that will play the Interpreter right well... O if I had minded what he had said to me, I had never been the castaway creature that I am!" (p. 305)

That Scott intended these randomly associated ideas to convey a certain insight is made explicit again by the narrator's comment concerning Jeanie's recognition of that "wisdom": "In the midst of the confused assemblage of ideas indicated in this speech, Jeanie thought she saw a serious purpose on the part of Madge, to endeavour to obtain the pardon and countenance of some one whom she had offended; an attempt the most likely of all others to bring them once more into contact with law and legal protection" (p. 305).

Thus guided by her merciful benefactor, Jeanie is led out of Meg Murdockson's primitive wilderness and into the civilization of the community. Freed from the forces of evil, Jeanie acknowledges fully "the service Madge had conferred upon her" (p. 312). This "service" has additional structural and thematic implications: Jeanie's deliverance to the church\textsuperscript{10} removes all physical obstructions from her path to London and provides her with another encounter with Robertson-Staunton to test further her belief in the Providential Power.

Madge Wildfire's final appearance occurs in Volume IV, when Scott arranges a parallel confrontation of Jeanie and Meg Murdockson.

10. Madge's dressing herself in gaudy "beggarly finery" and her "floating" entrance into the church provide a daring parody of the social aspects of church worship.
Here, however, Meg is powerless to harm Jeanie; and the scene provides a further ironic view of mob "justice," as well as indicates again Jeanie's instinctive response to Madge’s need: "Oh Jeanie Deans—Jeannie Deans! . . . save my mother, and I will take ye to the Interpreter’s house again . . . " (p. 389). But the pilgrim is unable to rescue her friend. Madge is mistreated by the crowd in the ducking pond and is dying when Jeanie gets to her side.

Madge's death-bed comments and snatchs of songs deserve particular consideration, for the lyrics reflect again associationally connected thoughts about her own spiritual destiny, the connection of which is hardly clear to her. The girl sings first of the "jolly harvest-home"—a natural place of earthly rest after a hard day or season of work. But sensing her impending death, she renounces the physical comforts of life by turning her face to the wall, exclaiming that she will "never see mair of a wicked world" (p. 391). In this posture, she assumes what the narrator terms a "state of abstraction" (p. 391), uttering a Methodist hymn whose moving theme is that of salvation and of heavenly reward:

"When the fight of grace is fought,—
When the marriage vest is wrought,—
When Faith hath chased cold Doubt away,
And Hope but sickness at delay,—
When Charity, imprisoned here,
Longs for a more expanded sphere,
Doff thy robes of sin and clay;
Christian, rise, and come away." (p. 391)

Then, in ironic juxtaposition to the hymn of heavenly promise, Madge follows with two ballads which offer unconscious summary of her unfulfilled earthly relationship with George Robertson. The first song, in fact, actually forecasts his later death in Chapter XV:

"Cauld is my bed, Lord Archibald,
And sad my sleep of sorrow;
But thine sall be as sad and cauld,
My fause true-love! to-morrow.

"And weep ye not, my maidens free,
Though death your mistress borrow;
For he for whom I die to-day,
Shall die for me to-morrow." (p. 392)

And Madge's final comment, the second ballad—"one wilder, less monotonous, and less regular" (p. 392) than the previous one —

11. The narrator is apparently aware of these intuitive perceptions, noting that "it was remarkable, that here could always be traced in her songs something appropriate, though perhaps only obliquely or collaterally so, to her present situation" (pp. 391-92).
re-echoes the theme of marital sterility and at once suggests impellingly the girl's forthcoming death through its heightened tone of fatal inevitability:

"Proud Maisie is in the wood,
Walking so early;
Sweet Robin sits on the bush,
Singing so rarely.

"Tell me, thou bonny bird,
When shall I marry me?"—
When six braw gentlemen
Kirkward shall carry ye.'

"Who makes the bridal bed,
Birdie, say truly?"—
The grey-headed sexton,
That delves the grave duly.'

* * *
"The glow-worm o'er grave and stone
Shall light thee steady;
The owl from the steeple sing,
'Welcome, proud lady.'" (p. 392)

Madge's four songs, then, furnish a symbolic re-capitulation of her life of suffering and suggest her final spiritual reward. Unlike her parallel, Effie Deans, who ends her life in spiritual and physical barrenness, the young Murdockson demonstrates her capacity for charitable action and sings out her own epitaph of salvation. Here, as in other moments of a guilt-ridden, tormented existence, Madge Wildfire momentarily breaks through the outward veneer of insanity to what the narrator terms a "twi-light sort of rationality" in order to provide an artistic structural and thematic contribution to the novel.

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