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OLDBUCK AND OCHILTREE: SCOTT, HISTORY, AND THE ANTIQUARY'S DOPPELGÄNGER

John Williams

Although Jonathan Oldbuck's first appearance in Sir Walter Scott's novels is in *The Antiquary* (1816), he had in fact always been there, the author's doppelgänger patiently waiting to step out of the shadows. Oldbuck is a principal figure within the private repertory company of authors and antiquaries with whom Scott shared his entire literary career, and it was through the interventions of such fictional voices as Oldbuck, Cleishbotham, Pattieson, Osbaldistone, Dryasdust, Croftangry and Clutterbuck that Scott expressed what Kenneth McNeil describes as the author's awareness of the "ironic relationship" between the past and the present.¹ To this end, Scott's novels are grounded from the outset in a creative exploration of the Gothic tropes of double identity, hero/anti-hero, tainted familial relationships (notably between father and son), and shape-shifting; and for all its relative lightness of mood when compared to its close contemporaries, *Old Mortality* (1816) and *Rob Roy* (1817), nowhere is this more apparent than in *The Antiquary*. In this essay, therefore, I discuss the way Scott himself set about reworking existing literary forms, specifically those associated with the Gothic, contributing significantly as he did so to the evolution of subsequent European literary culture, even while his own work began to be reimagined and reworked by others long before his death.

In chapter four of *The Antiquary* Jonathan Oldbuck delivers a verbose antiquarian lecture to his young companion, Mr. Lovel, designed to prove that the earthworks on the Kaim of Kinprunes date from the final conflict between Agricola and the Caledonians. In full flow, Oldbuck is unceremoniously interrupted by the mendicant, Edie Ochiltree: "Praetorian here, Praetorian there, I mind the biggin' o't." Ochiltree goes on to describe how, with a few others, he created the banks still visible as part of

¹ Kenneth McNeil, "Ballads and Borders," in *The Edinburgh Companion to Sir Walter Scott*, ed. Fiona Roberston (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 22-34 (24).

a shelter for the celebration of a wedding a mere twenty years ago, and he does so in a Scots dialect which differs markedly from the scholarly English in which Oldbuck has lectured Lovel: “is not here the Decuman gate? And there, but for the ravage of the horrid plough, as a learned friend calls it, would be the Praetorian gate.”² The linguistic disparity between Oldbuck and Ochiltree identifies key issues for the novel, which are equally important for a reading of the rest of Scott’s output. Foremost among these is his intention to explore the ambivalence and insecurity of the human condition, any resolution of which must inevitably be of an ad-hoc nature.

Angela Wright has described Scott as “blending classic Gothic motifs with a national oral tradition”, in order to reveal “a nuanced, multi-layered version of Scotland’s history”, one that challenges “a national, romanticised myth of ancestry.”³ Applying this critique to *The Antiquary*, Wright refers only to Oldbuck by way of illustration. I suggest that it is through Scott’s use of Oldbuck and Ochiltree, a subtle adaptation of the trope of double identity, that Scott achieves his aim. Ochiltree is as much Oldbuck’s doppelgänger as the Fool is Lear’s (“Sirrah,” says the Fool to Lear on his first appearance in Act I scene four, “you were best take my coxcomb”), as Falstaff is Prince Hal’s in *Henry IV* (a source for Scott’s recreation of “Alsatia” in *The Fortunes of Nigel* [1822]), as the creature is Frankenstein’s, Magwitch is Pip’s, and Hyde is Jekyll’s. Scott adapted Romantic Period Gothic to explore and redefine a sense of uncertainty and instability that begins to surface in European culture as the eighteenth century drew to a close. Oldbuck’s cry of frustration as he marches down the main street of Fairport, “Lord, deliver me from this Gothic generation!” (*The Antiquary*, 121) is the cry of a man who is inextricably trapped in it along with his alter-ego, Edie Ochiltree, and condemned to make the best of it.

Despite the initial impression that Scott is providing us with predictable character-types, the self-opinionated old know-all, the servile but subversive beggar, and Lovel as the young enigmatic stranger and hero of the story, they soon become as problematic as the landscape in which they are placed. Scott offers us a “hero” who is rudderless to the point where he disappears completely from the action before we are half way through the novel. Like Francis Osbaldistone in *Rob Roy*, Lovel’s retreat from his responsibilities is accompanied by an enthusiasm for poetry, but this Byronic image only renders him the more indecisive. His reappearance as

² Walter Scott, *The Antiquary*, ed. David Hewitt (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), 29-30.

³ Angela Wright, “Scottish Gothic,” in *The Routledge Companion to Gothic*, ed. Catherine Spooner and Emma McEvoy (London: Routledge, 2007), 73-82 (80).

his true self at the end of the novel leaves no time for further character development, his function is the mechanical one of resolving the entanglements of the plot. Although Osbaldistone is present throughout *Rob Roy*, Scott having made him its narrator, like Lovel, he earns our admiration for little more than his ability to survive.

The problematic nature of Lovel as the “hero” of *The Antiquary* suggests that Scott means to challenge current trends in Romantic Period Byronic fiction through recourse to models supplied by eighteenth-century picaresque fiction, where Lovel and Osbaldistone might resemble Tom Jones, and Oldbuck Matthew Bramble, and where characters assume names that seem comically descriptive of their behaviour. Predictable eighteenth-century stereotypes were no more appropriate for Scott’s intentions, however, than were Byron’s Childe Harold or their seventeenth-century equivalents noted in *Old Mortality* as “the laborious and long-winded romances of Calpranede and Scuderi.”⁴ Scott’s writing registers a subtle and profoundly original response to both his forbears and contemporaries, who sought, as he put it in 1815 (writing in defence of Jane Austen) to alarm our credulity and amuse our imagination “by a wild variety of incident” in a way that bears little or no relation to the lives of those “who actually live and die.”⁵

From the confrontation on the Kaim of Kinprunes, we learn that Ochiltree’s knowledge of both local history and current events far surpasses that of Oldbuck. He is embarrassingly well-informed on the details of Oldbuck’s ill-advised purchase of the Kaim, and he also appears to be well on the way to discovering more about the identity of Lovel than Oldbuck has managed, despite the latter’s opportunities to cross-question him. Angry and embarrassed as Oldbuck understandably is by Ochiltree’s baiting, we swiftly deduce that this is an oft recurring scenario that informs a long-standing, volatile relationship between the two men, regardless of their superficial differences of appearance, background, and speech.

The description of Ochiltree that Oldbuck gives to his young companion is preceded by Lovel misquoting Hamlet’s observation in Act I Scene 1 that “Brevity is the soul of wit”. Lovel suggests that “Freedom is the soul of wit” (*The Antiquary*, 33). *Hamlet* is a play of suspended action, and in Lovel’s failure to master *Hamlet*, we find the essence of the Waverley hero’s recurring fate; he will be a man, as Caroline McCracken-Fletcher has described it, faced with “the necessity and impossibility of

⁴ Walter Scott, *The Tale of Old Mortality*, ed. Douglas Mack (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993), 19.

⁵ [Walter Scott], “Emma; A Novel. By the author of Sense and Sensibility, Pride and Prejudice etc.,” *Quarterly Review*, XIV (October 1815), 192-95.

relating [himself] to a world of easy oppositions, fatal results, and no real choices.”⁶ Lovel turns out to be a Prufrock:

No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;
Am an attendant lord, one that will do
To swell a progress, start a scene or two,
Advise the prince; no doubt, an easy tool,
Deferential, glad to be of use,
Politick, cautious, and meticulous;
Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse;
At times, indeed, almost ridiculous –
Almost, at times, the fool.⁷

Lovel’s identity crisis (shared with all Scott’s putative heroes, not least Waverley, Mannering, Osbaldistone, and Henry Morton) links him, along with the crisis of confidence that underwrites so much romantic-period literature, to the Modernist angst of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century literature articulated here by Eliot. Eliot’s reference to “the Fool” at the end of the passage takes us appropriately from *Hamlet* to *King Lear*. *Lear* is a text unmistakably invoked in *The Antiquary*, and Oldbuck’s relationship to Ochiltree frequently mirrors Lear’s relationship to his Fool, representing a version of the Gothic trope of double identity that pervades much nineteenth-century writing.

In their study of Daphne DuMaurier and the “Gothic Imagination”, Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnick discuss the way that Gothic double identity frequently functions within a “triangulated relationship”, involving a shadowy third party.⁸ In the case of Oldbuck and Ochiltree in *The Antiquary*, the ineffectual Lovel, “Deferential, glad to be of use,” fulfils that role precisely. The same trope is repeated in a far darker vein in *Old Mortality* when Morton (as the third party) is struck by the similarity between Claverhouse and Burley: “so deeply did the idea impress him, that he dropped a hint of it [to Claverhouse] as they rode together.” Claverhouse readily admits to it “with a smile”, implying that he is already familiar with the thought; but he goes on to insist that there is a distinction between his “fanaticism of honour” and Burley’s fanaticism of “dark and sullen superstition.” “Your distinction is too nice for my comprehension,” Morton replies (*Old Mortality*, 270-1).

⁶ Caroline McCracken-Flesher, “Scott’s Jacobitical Plots,” in *The Edinburgh Companion to Sir Walter Scott*, 47-58 (50).

⁷ T. S. Eliot, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” in *T. S. Eliot Collected Poems 1909-1962* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), 17.

⁸ Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik, *Daphne du Maurier: Writing, Identity and the Gothic Imagination* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998), 128.

After Ochiltree has left his doppelgänger and Lovel on the Kaim, Oldbuck's explanation of the mendicant's status is influenced initially by his resentment of Ochiltree's mockery:

"I'll have the hangman's lash and his back acquainted for this.... He is spoiled by our foolish gentry, who laugh at his jokes, and rehearse Edie Ochiltree's good things as regularly as Joe Miller's.... he generally invents some damned improbable lie or another to provoke you, like that nonsense he talked just now...."
 "In England," said Lovel, "such a mendicant would get a speedy check."

Lovel's response prompts a significant change of tone from Oldbuck, whose inconsistency personifies the sense of uncertainty and instability that informs the Waverley novels from the outset:

"Yes, your churchwardens and their dog-whips would make slender allowances for his vein of humour. But here, curse him, he is a sort of privileged nuisance—one of the last specimens of the old-fashioned Scottish mendicant, who kept his rounds within a particular space, and was the news-carrier, the minstrel, and sometimes the historian of the district. That rascal, now, knows more old ballads and traditions than any other man in this and the next four parishes. And after all," continued he, softening as he went on describing Edie's good gifts, "the dog has some humour. He has born his hard fate with unbroken spirits, and it's cruel to deny him the comfort of a laugh at his betters" (*The Antiquary*, 32-4).

Unlucky in love as a young man, Oldbuck's determination to give his bachelor life purpose and meaning has led him into an obsessive urge to collect books, manuscripts, and historical bric-a-brac. His study at Monkbarns, "the floor, as well as the tables and chairs, was over-flowed by the same *mare magnum* of miscellaneous trumpery," is a visible representation of his mental state, a bizarre, chaotic agglomeration of random objects (*The Antiquary*, 220). Compared to this, Ochiltree lacks the formal education that gives Oldbuck access to his scholarly sources, and to the controversies that inform his eccentrically opinionated research. Ochiltree, however, has lived a hard and varied life, in the course of which he has become a fully informed and perceptive historian, familiar with material and information of which Oldbuck remains largely ignorant. The "history" that underpins the action of *The Antiquary* is mediated primarily through the combined initiatives of these two men. Oldbuck is at his most effective in this respect when he ceases to pursue his Antiquarian obsessions, while Ochiltree's most valuable contributions reside in local knowledge and oral history; when he decides to act in the case of exposing

Dousterswivel's duplicity, he gets himself into serious difficulties. The part he plays in aiding Lovel's escape appears to have put the young man into mortal danger. Though portrayed as very different men, the relationship between Oldbuck and Ochiltree reflects Scott's conviction that progress is at best a deceptive concept predicated on ambiguity and contradiction, rather than on conformity and resolution.

For all his pretensions to scholarly research, we discover eventually that Oldbuck's achievements in the written word are, to say the least, meagre. Two essays in the *Antiquarian Repository*, two further sets of "Remarks," and an anonymous piece in the *Gentleman's Magazine*, all published a considerable time ago, suggest that he is not, as he claims, "an author of experience" (*The Antiquary*, 106). Ochiltree's timely intervention on the Kaim of Kinprunes means that Oldbuck's tract on the subject will be indefinitely postponed, should it ever be written. It is entirely in keeping, therefore, that the Antiquary's important mission to record Elspeth Meiklebackit's testimony towards the end of the novel is derailed by his wish to note down the words of the ballad he hears the old woman singing. His insistence on its rarity is flatly contradicted by Ochiltree: "I'se engage to get ye the sang onytime" (*The Antiquary*, 312). His cavalier attitude towards historical veracity is startlingly exposed when he attempts to persuade Lovel to publicise his pet theory regarding the battle between the Caledonians and the Romans by writing an epic poem on the subject. Lovel points out that the invasion was not repelled, to which Oldbuck responds:

"No; but you are a poet—free of the corporation, and as little bound down to truth or probability as Virgil himself—You may defeat the Romans in spite of Tacitus" (*The Antiquary*, 107).

Against this, as Oldbuck himself has already grudgingly implied, Ochiltree emerges as by far the more trustworthy chronicler and historian of the two. He is evidently literate, but as he makes clear when discussing Elspeth's pending testimony with Oldbuck, he distrusts anything that originates in printed book English:

"It's fearsome baith to see and hear her when she wampishes about her arms, and gets to her English, and speaks as if she were a prent book let be an auld fisher's wife.... Howsomever, she's a weel-educate woman, and an' she win to her English, as I hae heard her do at an orra time, she may come to fickle us a'" (*The Antiquary*, 309-10).

The tortuous relationship between Oldbuck and Ochiltree is further marked by the way both men act as a father figure to Lovel, the one able to provide the appropriate companionship and support when the other cannot. The Antiquary and the mendicant complete each other's identity without fundamentally altering their individuality, and in this respect their

interdependence reflects the nature of Scott's engagement with social, political, and religious difference throughout the Waverley novels. Henry Morton's commitment to religious tolerance in *Old Mortality* may be taken as representing Scott's position. Morton, we are told, has "an undaunted courage ... and a firm and uncompromising detestation of oppression, whether in politics or religion.... goodness or worth were not limited to those of any single form of religious observance" (*Old Mortality*, 109).

This refusal to endorse "any single form of religious observance" complements Scott's reworking of Gothic double identity in *The Antiquary*, which in turn is a natural progression from what he had already achieved in *Waverley* (1814) and *Guy Mannering* (1815). The young Mannering (designated "our hero") disappears from the novel in Chapter Five, and finds his doppelgänger in his older self who reappears as a middle-aged man in Chapter Eleven, a hero well past his Byronic sell-by date. Mannering encounters his Edie Ochiltree (as had his younger self) in the person of Meg Merrilies. Merrilies completes a reworking of the double identity triangle, and like Ochiltree, she is a repository of local knowledge who fully appreciates the value of theatrical presentation when it is called for. Mannering's relationship to his younger self suggests both the doppelgänger and the implied father-son relationship between Oldbuck and Lovel, Francis Osbaldistone and Rob Roy, and at its darkest, between Morton and Balfour in *Old Mortality*.

The titular hero of *Rob Roy* illustrates Scott's use of another familiar Gothic trope, that of the shape-shifter. Rob Roy fails to appear and be known for who he is until past half way through the story. Osbaldistone has failed to recognise him because (we suspect like Scott's target reader) he expects that the Highland brigand would cut a more Byronic figure. MacGregor moves between the contrasting locations of the novel, appearing in a variety of guises, and playing whatever role the circumstances dictate using whatever name best serves his cause. Where Scott's different characters identify themselves to a significant degree by their mode of speech, MacGregor can, like Robert Burns, cannily adapt his language to the needs of the moment, and in case we miss the significance of that fact, Scott—through Osbaldistone—comments that he could lay "the Scottish brogue, with its correspondent dialect and imagery" to one side if he chose, although it "recurred at every moment of emotion, and gave pith to his sarcasm, or vehemence to his upbraiding."⁹

In common with many of his contemporaries, Scott was profoundly influenced in his work by Shakespeare, but characteristically, his response was very much his own, and contained a powerful sense of its

⁹ Walter Scott, *Rob Roy*, ed. David Hewitt (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 186-87.

contemporary relevance when it came to registering the social and political ambiguities endemic to the human condition; comedy rubs shoulders with tragedy, pomposity with wisdom, and events of great national significance meld into the details of domestic life. The high drama of blank verse shifts into plebeian prose, dialect, and bawdy. In *Old Mortality* the antics of Jenny Dennison and Cuddie Headrigg contrast with the grim drama of Claverhouse, Bothwell, and Morton, recalling the way high and low life share the field of battle in *Henry V* at Harfleur, when the King's heroic oratory is undercut by the antics of Nym, Bardolph, and Pistol: "the humour of it is too hot, that is the very plainsong of it" (Act 3 Scene 2). Declamatory pomposity is undercut by the vernacular of the mob. Scott's characters inhabit his novels as actors who, if not quoting Shakespearian lines, frequently adopt a Shakespearian style. When Lovel reminds Oldbuck of Ochiltree's explanation for the earthworks on the Kaim, Oldbuck responds (no doubt with an appropriately theatrical gesture), "No more of that, an thou lovest me ... " (*The Antiquary*, 107).

As we have already seen, among the many Shakespearian sources that inform the writing of *The Antiquary*, *King Lear* was clearly uppermost in Scott's mind. In the first storm scene, while the characters are out where "The howling of the storm mingled with the shrieks of the sea-fowl" (*The Antiquary*, 57), we might well be reminded of Edgar, son of Gloucester in Act 4 Scene 1, passing himself off as "poor Tom", when we encounter the Honourable William Geraldin passing himself off as Lovel. Ochiltree, Oldbuck, and Lovel work as a team to save Sir Arthur Wardour and his daughter. Ochiltree has made his way down to the beach, while on the cliff-top the fishermen efficiently set about organising ropes to pull the victims to safety, working around the hyperactive but essentially redundant Oldbuck, who does little more than supply a characteristically verbose, inconsequential, Falstaffian commentary on events. When eventually he is reunited with Ochiltree there can be no doubt that Scott has the ambivalent relationship between Lear and his Fool running through his mind:

"What have we here?" said Oldbuck ... "what patched and weather-beaten matter is this?"—then, as the torches illumed the rough face and grey hairs of old Ochiltree,—"What! is it thou?—come, old mocker, I must needs be friends with thee..." (*The Antiquary*, 64)

The second great storm that occurs in the novel is instrumental in bringing about the revelations that steer the novel towards its conclusion. In the early stages of these events the Earl of Glenallen identifies himself with King Lear (Act 3 Scene 2) when he pleads with Oldbuck, "I can show you that I am more sinned against than sinning" (*The Antiquary*, 269). The tragic consequences of this storm have the effect of unlocking the tongue of the drowned Steenie Meiklebackit's grandmother, Elspeth. She holds

the secret of Lovel/Geraldin's true identity, a story that carries with it the prospect, but not the promise, of laying to rest the outmoded practices of the past in the modern world. This includes the superstitious rites attending the Roman Catholicism of the Wardour and Glenallan families; it also ridicules the regressive irrational Gothic supernaturalism represented by Dousterswivel's ghost story; for all his calculated attempts to exploit Wardour's gullibility, Dousterswivel himself is revealed to be pathetically superstitious.

In his essay on "The Uncanny" in *The Routledge Companion to Gothic*, David Punter provides a comprehensive list of definitions for the term. All are indicative of what Scott believed to be the natural order of society; they include "unreliable", "mysterious", "malicious", and "uncomfortably strange."¹⁰ In *The Antiquary* Scott fashions his Gothic tropes to suggest that while change and evolution is inevitable, and indeed desirable, the natural order of things tends to difference and divergence. Any attempt to enforce uniformity is therefore destined to breed failure and tragedy. Recalling, perhaps, Feste's lament at the end of *Twelfth Night* that "the whirligig of time brings his revenges" (Act 5 Scene 1), Scott has Oldbuck admit that there can be no resolution to "the changes of this trumpery whirligig world", a fact that goes against the grain both for the author and for the Antiquary. Both men have their doppelgänger by them to correct any unjustified optimism on that score. Oldbuck has Ochiltree, and Scott the antiquary (Oldbuck by any other name) has Scott the historian by his side only too ready to inject a note of sober realism into the self-indulgence encouraged by Romantic fiction:

We harden ourselves in vain to treat with the indifference they deserve the changes of this trumpery whirligig world – We strive ineffectually to be the self-sufficing, invulnerable being, the *teres atque rotundas* of the poet – the stoical exemption which philosophy affects to give us over the pains and vexations of human life, is as imaginary as the state of mystical quietism and perfection aimed at by some crazy enthusiasts (*The Antiquary*, 100).

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¹⁰ David Punter, "The Uncanny," in *The Routledge Companion to Gothic*, as in n. 3 above, 129.