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BOOK REVIEWS


This second edition of James Hogg's most ambitious prose fiction, published one hundred and fifty years after its predecessor of 1822, is certain to be of great interest to everyone interested in Sir Walter Scott, J. G. Lockhart, John Wilson, and their contemporaries in the literary world of Edinburgh. It is, of course, an event of the first magnitude for all concerned with Hogg himself. Douglas Gifford has given a helpful account of the circumstances of its composition and publication; his textual and explanatory notes include an account of Hogg's subsequent rehandling of the story, and a sketch of the historical background of the narrative; and a sketch map of the scene of action clarifies the complicated journeyings and campaigns described.

This extraordinary work has been represented after a fashion in Hogg's collected *Tales and Sketches* (1837) under the title "The Siege of Roxburgh"—some fourteen of the original thirty-two chapters put together with a minimum of rewriting. This version, as its title implies, presents the long and fiercely contested siege of Roxburgh Castle (a fictitious event placed about 1375 in the reign of Robert II). It deals with the "peril" of war with effectively grim and realistic detail, demonstrates with a less consistent hand the "peril" of women's influence—or more properly that of the chivalric devotion to women—and virtually omits the "peril" of witchcraft. The "witchcraft" material is actually of prime interest, and by itself would make this edition eminently worthwhile. In a word, it is Hogg's amazingly vivid and grotesque vision of the medieval and Catholic supernatural world—a counterpart to the justly admired Calvinistic vision of his *Justified Sinner*, an external and physically manifested array of supernatural horrors in contrast to the private, largely psychological, horrors of the later work. If, as Hogg's own
words seem to suggest, his sources were mainly "traditionary" Border lore, medieval traditions of witchcraft and diabolism must have continued late and strongly in the Ettrick Forest.

The relationship between Hogg and Scott is illuminated by the work itself and by Mr. Gifford's account of the revisions suggested by Scott while Hogg was preparing it for publication. The reciprocal influences go farther than this, for Hogg was surely making use of both The Lay of the Last Minstrel and The Monastery. The Three Perils of Man, like the Lay, claims to be an ancient narrative dealing with the past of the Scott family. It presents a representative (though factually unhistorical) episode of Border warfare, and includes a substantial supernatural element centered on the figure of the "wizard" Michael Scott—transported from another century for the purposes of the story. Like The Monastery it has a learned priest as a major character; it presents supernatural forces in conflict with the Catholic Church and clergy—at times in ludicrous actions—and attempts to make supernatural occurrences credible by vivid circumstantial description. Scott, it will be remembered, was severely criticized for his use of the supernatural in both the Lay and The Monastery. Hogg's work was hardly noticed, and mentioned only slightly by those who read it. Finally, Scott in his very last completed novel, Castle Dangerous, drew on the chivalric elements of Hogg's narrative. In Castle Dangerous, as in The Three Perils, an Earl of Douglas besieges a castle held by a noble English knight in fulfilment of a vow to his lady; the lady comes to the scene of action disguised as a boy; there is destructive dissension among the defenders of the castle; and the castle is won by a clever stratagem.

Important and interesting reading as it is, The Three Perils of Man deserves inclusion in any respectable collection of Scottish literature. This is not to say that it deserves the extravagant praise with which Mr. Gifford concludes his introduction. "... Hogg's imagination" he claims "... creates a living world which needs no other justification than its own unique blend of irony, racy humour, fantasy, and romance. The achievement has no parallel." Imaginative power indeed is present in many parts. There is irony, racy humour, fantasy, and romance. But the effect is that of a mixture, not a blend. As the editor himself concedes, Hogg is "frequently unsure of his artistic intention and his own sympathies." The middle section, comprising the supernatural adventures at Michael Scott's
castle, is broken up and confused by a long series of stories tenuously connected with each other and irrelevant to the main narrative; and the characters range from delightfully realistic living people to the flimsiest of patchwork figures. Of great interest as a sketchbook, or perhaps a sampler, it need not be called a finished work of art.

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