

SIR WALTER SCOTT'S *LICENTIA HISTORICA* – THE HISTORICAL  
NOVEL AS A DISPLACED ROMANCE

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ABSTRACT

The novelistic genre from its origin has functioned in between two discourses: fictional and factual. On the one hand it shares numerous characteristics with romance, from which it has striven to distance itself, on the other it emulated historical forms of writing in the attempt to borrow some of the credibility enjoyed by history. Novelists endeavoured to provide a realistic picture of reality, romance writers indulged in the flights of fancy. Novelists were the chroniclers of the mercantile world of the middle classes, romance writers glorified the chivalric deeds of knights. The distinction between the two types of narratives was none too obvious for the readers. The tension between romance and history is perhaps nowhere so conspicuous as in the historical novel, which by definition brings fiction and history together. Sir Walter Scott, considered as the originator of the genre, customarily thematizes the periods, where the pre-modern, feudal reality gives way to the modern, capitalist world. The aim of this paper is thus to demonstrate how the author shows the transformation of the social order in *The Fair Maid of Perth*, which entails the transformation of the romance conventions into the novelistic ones.

The historical novel created by Sir Walter Scott had for decades been regarded as a modern genre. It was modern because it anticipated the approach of the realist novel, that is a prose narrative, which liberated itself from the tyranny of the romance. It was modern also because it depicted the approach of the modern world, the recession of feudalism and the advent of capitalism. As Lukács, one of the most influential theorists of the historical novel, explained in 1937, the aim of the new genre was to create “an artistically faithful image of a concrete historical epoch” and to describe “enormous political and social transformations” (Lukács 1937 [1989]: 19, 32). The novel thus was to break with the flights of fancy of romance writers and to adopt the mode and subject of history writing: the faithful description of the past reality and of historical changes.

Scott, however, is hardly a realist novelist. As a true Romantic he looked back upon the medieval world of chivalry, which was more poetical than the capitalist world of traders, and recreated it with the help of romance conventions. This is not to say that the author was an unrestrained eulogist of the medieval culture. On the contrary, the nostalgia with which he depicted the bygone reality did not preclude him from exposing those aspects of the medieval order that led to its downfall. In this sense Scott's novels are like Malory's romances, which presented the decline of the chivalric world. The aim of this paper is to present Scott's reliance on romance formulas in his representations of historical transformations on the basis of one of Scott's medieval novels entitled *The Fair Maid of Perth*. The novel seems to provide a perfect commentary on social development since it portrays its three stages: the tribal, represented by Highlanders, the chivalric, symbolised by the Royal family and their retainers residing in Perth, and the capitalist, embodied by the burghers of Perth. By the combination of the historical concerns and romance formula the novel subjects to scrutiny the serviceability of the two genres in the portrayal of the past as well as the mutual interdependence of the two modes of writing.

The conflation of history and romance may have aroused controversies in Scott's own times, but it was a more natural state of affairs in the Middle Ages. Medieval histories were heavily indebted to literature and literary strategies. The oft-cited example of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia regum Britanniae* is a good case in point. As Sweeney (2000) explains:

Geoffrey's version of history has many hallmarks of a romance, such as the appearance of marvels and magicians; in addition, love is held to be an adequate motivator for immoral acts. This "Arthurian romance" illustrates how social issues, Christian concerns, and what will become identified as romance concerns, operate concurrently within the historical format which Geoffrey adopts. (Sweeney 2000: 55)

At another point Sweeney emphasises how easy it was for Wace to convert Geoffrey of Monmouth's history into a romance. The fact that this was "achieved", Sweeney argues, "without having to make significant alterations to the text, best illustrates how close Geoffrey's text was, not to fable, but to the origins of a new type of literature: romance" (Sweeney 2000: 63).

The inclusion of the marvellous and the invented material in medieval histories is usually explained in a few ways. Firstly, it was dictated by the scarcity of documents at those times. In the absence of hard evidence "the only memory of the past", as Ruth Morse (1991: 91) put it, "were traditions of hearsay". As a result, "history sometimes appeared to be the record of what people believed had occurred". Secondly, magic and the marvellous fulfilled educational functions. "If the audience learned from the experiences of Arthur, or magically derived

prophesies, for example, whether the facts were true might have been considered of secondary importance", argued Sweeney (2000: 58). Medieval history thus could deviate from strictly defined truth if it was necessitated by the demands of morality. The concept of factual truth in medieval histories was further attenuated by the literary aspirations of historians. Historical narratives were to make the past meaningful and this was achieved by the employment of recognisable literary conventions: invention, embellishments, *topoi*, set pieces borrowed from other texts. "Where the desire to write well, that is to create recognizably stylish narratives according to the canons of previous historians, conflicted with the limitations of pre-existing witness, literary ambition overrode other considerations" (Morse 1991: 88).

However, if it is true to say that history borrowed material and modes of description from romance, it is equally valid to claim that history exerted similar influence on romance. Romances, like histories, describe the past, and frequently derive their subjects from historical sources. Geoffrey of Monmouth's history as a source of material for romances is a classic example. What is more, romances were not infrequently conceptualised as histories, even despite their clearly poetic verse form. The popularity of prose romances in the 15<sup>th</sup> century only reinforced the affiliations with history since, as Benson (1976) explains, the "use of prose itself was a signal that the authors were dealing with "facts"" (Benson 1976: 8). Prose romances thus borrowed from histories not only the material described but also modes of descriptions: "even works that must have seemed obviously fictional to contemporary readers ... were given the air of chronicles by a careful citation of sources, by an attention to exactness in matter of time and place and by the use of realistic details" (Benson 1976: 24).

Spiegel (1997) in her study on French medieval historiography draws attention to the fact that historiography, which functioned first in a poetic form, adopts prose as a result of "transformations occurring within aristocratic society". The emergence of prose historiography is, according to the critic, an illustration of the theory that "social groups most affected by changes in status tend to be the most conscious of alternative modes of discursive behaviour, that they are, in other words, most sensitive to the power of language to register social transformations" (Spiegel 1997: 182). If the relation between the change in language and the undermined status of aristocracy is true of history, it may well hold true of romance. English prose romances come into fashion in the 15<sup>th</sup> century and the most outstanding prose romance registers the decline of the chivalric world. It seems thus that both history and romance change their mode at the time when the poetic world of chivalry is receding to the past.

*The Fair Maid of Perth* is a novel published in 1828 and is dubbed by its author as a historical romance. Yet, if it is a romance it is a prose romance written at the time of social advancement of the middle classes, thus, as Kelly succinctly

put it, it plays out “the relations of the aristocracy and the middle classes ... in a plot of courtship and amorous intrigue” (Kelly 1989: 173). The action of the novel is set in the last decade of the 14<sup>th</sup> century and centres on the “well-authenticated fact of two powerful clans having deputed each thirty champions to fight out a quarrel of long standing, in presence of King Robert III., his brother the Duke of Albany, at Perth, in the year of grace 1396” (Scott 1907: xix). The event, as Scott explains, is mentioned in Wynthoun’s rhymed “Scoti-Chronicon”, quoted in the preface, in Boece, Loesti and Buchanan. Scott thus reveals the historical foundations of his romance but at the same time points to the invented material in his story. “Two features of the story of this barrier-battle on the *Inch of Perth*, the flight of one of the appointed champions, and the reckless heroism of a townsman, who voluntarily offered for a small piece of coin to supply his place in his mortal encounter, suggested the imaginary persons, on whom much of the novel is expended” (Scott 1907: xx). Scott’s romance thus is founded on well-documented events, which are supplemented by imagination.

However, it is not only history that provides sources for *The Fair Maid of Perth*. Mitchell (1987) in his study on Scott’s indebtedness to medieval literature carefully enumerates references to tales of imagination. The scene of bier-trial, in which Sir John Ramorny’s servants suspected of a burgher’s murder were to pass the bier on which the dead body is laid and “in the form prescribed to call upon God and his saints to bear witness that he is innocent of the acting, art or part, of the murder” (Scott 1907: 383) bears relation to a scene in *Nibelungenlied*. There are also echoes of *The Canterbury Tales*. Smith’s mockery directed at Father Clement reminds of the satirical description of Chaucer’s *Friar*. Henbaine Dwining disguised as Lady Marjorie’s nurse called Griselda evokes Griselda from *The Clerk’s Tale*. Scott “utilizes” also Charlemagne’s romances in the episode directly preceding Oliver Proudfe’s death. Rothsay, disguised as an emperor, identified Oliver, by virtue of his name, as one of Charlemagne’s peers, “immortal in romance”, as Scott asserts in a footnote (Mitchell 1987: 192-196). All the references clearly point to literary, as well historical, sources of the novel.

Scott’s indebtedness to imaginative discourse is however greater than the motifs and set pieces borrowed from it for his story. The plot of *The Fair Maid of Perth* is clearly modelled on the conventions of the romance of chivalry: that of love and war, even if they are handled in an unorthodox way. In the centre of the story there is the titular “fair maid”, Catherine Glover, who, as the narrator reveals, “was universally acknowledged to be the most beautiful young woman of the city or its vicinity” (Scott 1907: 22). Beauty was not a negligible quality in the heroine of a chivalric romance, as Scott makes perfectly clear at the outset of his story:

In the feudal times, to which we now call the reader’s attention, female beauty was a quality of much higher importance than it has been since the ideas of chivalry have been in a great measure extinguished. The love of the ancient cavaliers was a licensed species of idolatry, which the love of Heaven alone, was theoretically supposed to approach in intensity, and which in practice it seldom equalled. God and ladies were familiarly appealed to in the same breath; and devotion to the fair sex was as peremptorily enjoined upon the aspirant to the honour of chivalry, as that which was due to Heaven. At such a period in society, the power of beauty was unlimited. It could level the highest rank with that which was immeasurably inferior. (Scott 1907: 21)

The last sentence includes a justification of the first transgression against romance formula. Catherine is a daughter of an artisan, “a princess of white doe-skin and blue silk”, as the Duke of Rothsay addresses her (Scott 1907: 28). Yet, her beauty put her on a par with all the noblewomen glorified in romances.

In accordance with convention, she inspires fervent emotions in male hearts. Catherine has three suitors, each derives from a different social background: Conachar, or rather Eachin MacIain, a Highlander, who was brought up as Catherine’s father’s apprentice; Harry Smith, an armourer, and the Duke of Rothsay, king Robert’s gallant son. They represent different social orders: the warrior society of Highland clans, the chivalric society of royalty and the mercantile society of burghers, which makes it possible to scrutinise the values of the three respective worlds.

Catherine’s favourite suitor is Harry Smith, an armourer, who, though a burgher, is represented after chivalric fashion. He frequently makes use of the weapons he produces, defends his beloved against assaults and stands up for Mr. Proudfe’s widow in the name of justice. The narrator explains that “[p]erhaps a little of the harebrained and ardent feeling which he had picked out of old ballads, or from the metrical romances which were his sole source of information or knowledge, may have been the means of pricking him on to some of his achievements, which had often a rude strain of chivalry in them” (Scott 1907: 84). It was also his love towards Catherine that is clearly depicted in the convention of courtly love. It “had in it a delicacy such as might have become the squire of low degree, who was honoured, if song speaks truth, with the smiles of the King Hungary’s daughter. His sentiments towards her were certainly as exalted as if they had been fixed upon an actual angel, which made old Simon, and others who watched his conduct, think that his passion was too high and devotional to be successful with maiden of mortal mould” (Scott 1907: 84).

Scott, however, does not write a new romance, which is to glorify chivalric culture. His heroine, though beautiful, does not expect from her lover chivalric deeds. Although, as the narrator reveals, “she had as much secret pride in the attachment of the redoubted Henry Gow as a lady of romance may be supposed to

have in the company of a tame lion, who follows to provide for and defend her" (Scott 1907: 84), she condemns what his father refers to as Harry's "exploits" (Scott 1907: 39) in so resolute a way that it makes her father expostulate with her.

What ... do our King and our court, our knights and ladies, our abbots, monks, and priests themselves, so earnestly crowd to see? Is it not to behold the display of chivalry, to witness the gallant actions of brave knights in the tilt and tourney ground, to look upon deeds of honour and glory achieved by arms and bloodshed? What is it these proud knights do that differs from what our good Henry Gow works in this sphere? ... In what do the proudest dames take their loftiest pride, save in the chivalry of their knight; and has the boldest in Scotland done more gallant deeds than my brave son Henry, though but of low degree? (Scott 1907: 44-45)

Catherine, however, proves to be a new type of a heroine. She inspires her lover to noble deeds, but of a peaceful character. When Harry complains that his trade may incite in him the bellicose instincts she suggest that he should "[a]bjure the fabrication of weapons". (Scott 1907: 48)

If you renounce the forging of swords and bucklers, there remains to you the task of forming the harmless spade, and the honourable as well as useful ploughshare – of those implements which contribute to the support of life, or to its comforts. (Scott 1907: 48)

Catherine's speech sounds like a condemnation of chivalric ideology and a eulogy of the approaching world, her father's reaction, however, indicates that the ideology of the middle classes will also have drawbacks. Simon Glover realises that in "these hard and iron days" armoury is the surest source of good income since "men will give ready silver for anything save that which can defend their own life, or enable them to take that of their enemy" (Scott 1907: 50). Catherine's offer to renounce the profitable trade in the name of idealistic values seems to him a sheer nonsense.

Catherine's second suitor is the Duke of Rothsay, king Robert's son, but she is well aware that "hawks, far less eagles, pair not with the humble linnet" (Scott 1907: 27). He spends his life on drinking, merrymaking and amours. Catherine's piety and love of peace makes a stark contrast to his life of dissipation. In most scenes he appears in disguise as if to accentuate the carnival time, which provides background for the first part of the story. He is an epitome of the degenerated state of chivalry, in which reality changes into a weird game, where nothing seems real and yet entails tangible consequences often stained with blood. As a result of Rothsay's assault at Catherine's house on Valentine's Day, burghers declare war on noblemen and the symbol of the challenge is not a gauntlet but a hand of Rothsay's Master of the Horse cut off by Harry Smith and nailed to the

walls of town. Rothsay's idea of tournament, which was to resolve the conflict between Highland clans, turns out to be a slaughter viewed by numerous spectators. And yet it was to be a lesson of civilised chivalry to the savage clans of Highlands:

Suppose we teach these savage mountaineers a strain of chivalry? It were not hard matter to bring these two great commanders, the captain of the Clan Chattan and the Chief of the no less doughty race of the Clan Quhele, to defy each other to mortal combat. They might fight here in Perth – we would lend them horse and armour ... we should have the pleasure of seeing such a combat between two salvage knights, for the first time in their lives wearing breeches, and mounted on horses, as has not been heard of since the days of King Arthur". (Scott 1907: 241)

King Robert's reaction is reproachful since he feels responsible in front of God also "for those who were robbers because they were poor, and rebels because they were ignorant" (Scott 1907: 240) but the councillors see in Rothsay's idea a real solution of the problem. What is interesting is that the military solution is encouraged by a prior present at the council: "you bear the sword as well as the spectre, and this present evil is of a kind which the sword must cure" (Scott 1907: 240), he advises the king. Albany compares their own culture with that of Highlanders and demonstrates their affinity: "True, the mountaineers have not our forms and mode of doing battle in the lists, but they have those which are as effectual to the destruction of human life; and so that the *mortal game* is played, and the *stake won and lost*, what signifies it whether these Gael fight with sword and lance, as becomes belted knights, or with sand-bags, like the crestless churls of England, or butcher each other with knives and skeans, in their own barbarous fashion? Their habits, like our own, refer all disputed rights and claims to the decision of battle..." (Scott 1907: 242, my emphasis).

The confrontation of the two worlds: the clan society and chivalry demonstrates the superiority of the former. Theirs is the warrior world, very much like that depicted in *chansons de geste*, "whose heroes", as Barber (2000: 106) observed, "were moved by simple emotions of love and hate". It is difficult not to marvel at the loyalty of Torquil, who sends all his eight sons to certain death with a piercing cry "Bas air son Eachin" to defend his chief and foster son, especially when this situation is compared with the scene in which a royal uncle imprisons his nephew, Rothsay, in a dungeon and starves him to death, to shorten his own way to the throne. The courtly world of chivalry, in contrast to the barbarous society of clans, is torn by intrigues, in which neither family ties nor loyalty can outweigh the thirst of power.

The conclusion of *The Fair Maid of Perth* anticipates the historical transformations, which future centuries are to bring. The two Highland clans are slaughtered, which augurs the extinction of their world. Harry refuses to change "leath-

ern apron for a knight's girdle, and burgage tenement for an hundred-pound-land" (Scott 1907: 662), marries Catherine and lives happily ever after in his own state. His wife forgives him his bellicose disposition since, as the narrator explains, "she had reflected that men rarely advance iron civilisation or refinement beyond the ideas of their own age" (Scott 1907: 679).

It is not an accident thus that Walter Scott so frequently subtitles his historical novels: a romance. By doing so he reminds of the close affinity between history and romance, which in the Middle Ages was much more natural than at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the process of scientification of history was already in progress. Both genres rely on documentary, traditional and invented material and both register historical changes. Scott's use of romance format in his novels highlights those aspects of the medieval world which anticipate the inevitable approach of the modern world as well as the transformation of romance into the novel. The transformed genre will promulgate the ideology of the middle classes, which will develop as a reaction to the corruption of the chivalric world. Scott's historical novel then represents not only the society but also the genre in their transitional stage: between the medieval and the modern.

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