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# SYMBOLIC CHARACTERIZATION IN *THE LADY OF THE LAKE*

In *The Lady of the Lake* Scott overcomes most successfully the problem of the limited possibilities for characterization that confronts him in all the narrative poems. He resists the temptation to rely on the shorthand of established types to which he largely succumbed in *The Lay of the Last Minstrel.* He transcends these limitations by making his characters representative of various aspects of the typical Scott historical situation. Like so many of the Waverley novels, the poem concerns a period of historical transition. In the inevitable conflict between old and new, each side has both its virtues and its shortcomings; and, as usual, Scott's ideal solution to the conflict involves the moderation of the new by the assimilation into it of the best elements of the old. Scott's characteristic ambivalent tendency to admire the values of both the old and the new is nowhere more evident than in *The Lady of the Lake.*

The poem is, among other things, an historical parable of measured progress, and the old and the new are clearly delineated throughout as Highlander and Lowlander, Northener and Southerner, Gael and Saxon. Scott's frequent interchangeable use of these terms emphasizes that the historical dichotomy has both a temporal and a spatial dimension. In their direct confrontation particularly (V, iv-xvii), Scott employs these epithets at least as often as he uses the names of Roderick and James. Allan-Bane, too, in his narrative of the Battle of Beal 'an Duine (VI, xv-xxi), resorts often to the racial or nationalistic labels. As in *Ivanhoe*, Scott uses the peculiarities of language to reflect the cultural differences in national character. Although there is nothing in the poem that approaches the dialogue between Gurth and Wamba on the differences between swine and pork, Scott conveys the same point here in a more serious vein:

By many a bard in Celtic tongue,
Has Coir-nan-Uriskin been sung;
A softer name the Saxons gave,
And call'd the grot the Goblin-cave. (III, xxv)

The identification of the characters with historical forces is most evident in the person of Roderick Dhu. Although the unmitigated fierceness of his passions makes him a clearly destructive figure, he represents the vitality, color, courage, and fidelity of the old order. Scott profoundly admires Roderick's instinctive sense of reciprocal Highland loyalties. He is conscious of being "the father of his clan" (IV, iv) who inspires an absolute and unquestioning devotion. In the "Boat Song" (II, xix-xx) Scott gradually constructs a total metaphorical identification between the chieftain and the pine, symbol of Clan Alpine. In the first stanza, the pine is a clan emblem on Roderick's banner; by the last stanza, however, the identification is complete, and the tree has become indistinguishable from the man:

Row, vassals, row, for the pride of the Highlands!
Stretch to your oars for the evergreen Pine!
O! that the rose-bud that graces yon islands
Were wreathed in a garland around *him* to twine!
(italics mine)

As the chorus of the song makes clear, Roderick has *two* names, a practical one for dealing with outsiders and a ceremonial one commemorative of the past. Unfortunately, he thinks of himself only as "Roderigh Vich Alpine dhu," and he fails to take into account the responsibilities that adhere to his Lowland name and status.

Roderick invokes his emblem in his declaration of loyalty to Douglas, who also becomes the emblem of *his* clan:

No, never! Blasted be yon Pine,
My fathers' ancient crest and mine,
If from its shade in danger part
The lineage of the Bleeding Heart. (II, xx)

Roderick's sense of obligation derives clearly from a strong consciousness of historical and familial continuity. He and the Douglas both lose their individuality, to a certain extent, as representatives of their respective houses; how-

ever, the individual's grandeur is not diminished but augmented as the result of this process of symbolization. Roderick owes his loyalty to Douglas not merely as a man, but also as the incarnation of an historical entity.

His motives, of course, are not entirely altruistic. He seeks not only Ellen's hand in marriage but also an alliance with the Douglas that will increase his power and hence his potential for violence and depradation. This propensity for violence is one of several tendencies that severely qualify Scott's admiration for Roderick. Despite his virtues, he is essentially anachronistic. He revels anarchically in his own power and defiantly opposes the extension of order and of the king's rightful sovereignty over what he regards as his own domain. Similarly, his irrational reaction to the murder of Murdoch appears paradoxical but is wholly consistent within an anachronistic Highland ethos that Roderick represents:

> Dark lightning flash'd from Roderick's eye:
> 'Soars thy presumption, then, so high,
> Because a wretched kern ye slew,
> Homage to name to Roderick Dhu?
> He yields not, he, to man nor Fate!
> Thou add'st but fuel to my hate:
> My clansman's blood demands revenge. (V, xiv)

Murdoch is a "wretched kern" barely worth mentioning, but his murder provides an excuse for Roderick to assert his position as leader and focus of clan loyalties. These same loyalties, colorful though they may be, obstruct the working of compromise, reason, and moderation by misusing the past to arouse dangerous passion. Scott regards this tendency toward violence as a basic flaw in the Scottish national character. His countrymen waste their energies, their substance, and their lives fighting over quarrels whose origins are, as often as not, obscured by the passage of time. Thus, Scott's heroes almost always are, or learn to be, men of peace.

Roderick's undisguised contempt for law also condemns him in Scott's eyes. He emphasizes several times that the chieftain is an outlaw who has slain a man in Holyrood Castle, the residence of the King; the location, of course, compounds the villainy of the deed. Roderick, however, justifies his act with utter contempt for formal procedures and prohibitions; vengeance and justice and honor must carry their own sanctions:

> 'What reck'd the Chieftain if he stood

On Highland heath or Holy-Rood?
He rights such wrong where it is given,
If it were in the court of Heaven.' (V, vi)

In much the same way, he rationalizes the life of systematic plunder led by the men of Clan Alpine. The fertile plains of the Saxon, he argues, "were once the birthright of the Gael," and the effort to redeem them is only "retribution true" (V, vii). Roderick fails to realize that his rationalization rests on a delusion designed to obscure the actual moral issue involved. The exploitation of the Highlanders clearly does not license their subsequent cruelty. This disregard of statutory right for the sake of a questionable natural right violates Scott's deep faith in the humane rule of law. Since ordered society dependent on law is man's natural state, he cannot condone the anarchistic elements of Roderick's character. The Highland chieftain embodies many of the virtues of the old order—unyielding loyalty and an instinctive attachment to ritual and tradition—but, in the last analysis, he stands as a formidable obstacle to progress, and Scott reluctantly acknowledges that he cannot be permitted to endure.

Roderick's opposite is, of course, King James, who, as head of state, quite naturally advocates the extension of law, order, and royal sovereignty. Although he does not wholly approve of James, on this issue Scott stands squarely on his side. Roderick severely misjudges James, whom he calls "this tyrant of the Scottish throne" (II, xxviii), and Scott corrects this distorted view in Note XXIV to the poem, in which he praises James' civilizing efforts. James' antipathy to the Highlander derives from his instinctive fear of anarchy; he speaks as the voice of the establishment with its respect for the observance of law and due process. Law for Scott is one of the finest fruits of progress, and the King's devotion to its cause stands clearly in his favor.

James represents, too, the less tangible virtues of polish, moderation, and civilization that Scott associates with progress. James is a Lowland Scot, a "Saxon," who calls himself throughout the poem by the Norman name of "James Fitz-James." He has been educated in France and embodies an enlightened cosmopolitanism that the Highlanders clearly lack. This background has provided him with an invaluable capacity for moderation. The disagreement between Roderick and James over the rule of law has its parallel in the actual combat a few stanzas later. James pleads for compromise and the possibility of settling their differences without bloodshed, but Roderick rejects the possibility for negotiation and insists on physical combat. His mis-

take is quickly made clear. Roderick, the relatively unschooled man of simple passions and fiery temper, although stronger, is inadequate to the King's superior swordmanship:

> For, train'd abroad his arms to wield,
> Fitz-James' blade was sword and shield.
> He practised every pass and ward,
> To thrust, to strike, to feint, to guard;
> While less expert, though stronger far,
> The Gael maintained unequal war. (V, xv)

Primitive brute strength must bow to expert strategy, just as the colorful grandeur of the Highlands and its culture must eventually submit to the less flamboyant modes of the newer civilization. The refusal to accept progress can result only in destruction.

Scott, however, does not endow James with his unqualified approbation. He has to overcome clearly defined limitations, and the events of the poem constitute a learning experience for him. James must learn to recognize the possible value of an alien way of life that he does not readily understand, and, to a certain extent, he must learn to assimilate its values. The advantages of progressive civilization are not unalloyed. In his landscape description at the beginning of Canto I (xi-xiv), Scott emphasizes the untamed primitive grandeur of the Loch Katrine country, "so wondrous wild, the whole might seem/ The scenery of a fairy dream." He then introduces the as yet unidentified hunter, whose observations on the scene that has just been described immediately reveal the overly romantic, almost decadent aspects of his character that will subesquently cause trouble. James can enjoy the scene only by transforming it into a version of eighteenth-century picturesque complete with hermits and bowers, articulated in a highly stylized diction wholly inappropriate to the actualities of Highland scenery. He later attempts to romanticize Ellen Douglas in much the same way. Like Staunton and Effie Deans after their return from France in *The Heart of Mid-Lothian*, James is pre-eminently the representative of a highly polished society that has been over-civilized, and his meditation upon the landscape clearly reflects these deficiencies in his character. Although he is a prudent sovereign, in his personal conduct he tends to be heedlessly rash, subject to the impulses of "hasty love or headlong ire" (I, xxi). His experience in the Highlands will mellow his character, and he will learn, through Ellen, Douglas, Roderick, and Allan-Bane, the supreme value of fidelity and the ties of loyalty. These "northern" virtues are not held in

particularly high esteem by the progressive "southern" society that James represents:

> 'Little we reck,' said John of Brent,
> 'We Southern men, of long descent;
> Nor wot we how a name, a word,
> Makes clansmen vassals to a lord.' (VI, xi)

To convey James' growth in sensitivity, Scott uses an extended metaphor, the hunting motif that pervades the poem from beginning to end. Scott associates hunting primarily with James and never with Roderick. The King is dressed throughout in a hunting suit of Lincoln green; he enters the poem as a hunter; and one of his last acts is to serenade Ellen with the "Lay of the Imprisoned Huntsman" (VI, xxiv). Two other songs that are addressed to him, "Soldier Rest" (I, xxxi) and the "Song of the Lonely Isle" (II, ii-iii), depend heavily on James' assumed role as hunter. On the other hand, Roderick is continually associated with war. He regards James' hunting, the traditional "silvan war," only as a ruse designed to give him martial advantage (II, xxviii). Scott several times emphasizes the parallel between the two activities. Douglas explans to Ellen, "My child, the chase I follow far,/'Tis mimicry of noble war" (II, xxvi). Hunting emerges as the *civilized* counterpart of warfare, a distinction that is particularly important for Scott's distaste for violence. Both, of course, are traditional activities with highly elaborate rules. That James is a devoted huntsman and Roderick a devoted warrior indicates that their basic temperaments are fairly similar. The differences between them lie in training, background, and national character, and Scott makes it clear that he much prefers James' abilities to direct his energies to a relatively less destructive channel.

The hunting motif also serves to delineate the King's moral development. James enters in hot pursuit of a noble stag, the antler'd *monarch* of the waste" (I, ii, italics mine), which, significantly, he fails to capture. The epithet prefigures the later reversal of roles. The stag initially suggests the exiled Douglas, whom Allan-Bane likens to "a stricken deer" (II, xii) and Malcolm compares to a "hunted stag" (II, xxxvii). Eventually, however, the King himself will share with the stag the role of hunted victim, and inadvertently recapitulate the deer's experience. No longer able to flee, the exhausted animal hides "in the deep Trossach's wildest nook" (I, viii). In a similar situation, fleeing from his pursuers, James compares himself to his earlier intended victim:

But hark! what means yon faint halloo?
The chase is up, but they shall know,
The stag at bay's a dangerous foe. (IV, xxviii)

Like the stag in Canto I who takes solitary refuge among "cold dews and wild flowers," he too must yield to bodily weakness and seek shelter:

Heartless, fatigued, and faint, at length,
From lack of food and loss of strength,
He couch'd him in a thicket hoar,
And thought his toils and perils o'er. (IV, xxviii)

Immediately afterward he reconsiders his position and resolves to indulge in no more "rash adventures" and "frantic feats." The experience measurably increases the King's capacity for empathy, because he learns first-hand how the outcast and hunted victim responds. He now treats Roderick as a noble opponent, worthy of dignity, and he is eventually enabled to adopt as his own the Douglas' values of loyalty and gratitude. The hunting metaphor, then, has two functions; it extends the contrast between James and Roderick and hence between the historical periods they represent, and it accounts both figuratively and literally for James' increased powers of empathy.

The minor characters also function, to a certain extent, as representatives of historical forces. Ellen contributes simplicity to high birth, and Scott admires his heroine's ability to make herself at home on a Highland isle or in court; she is thus a mediating figure between Roderick and James. Like Malory's Lady of the Lake, who offers Excalibur to Arthur not as an outright gift but as an opportunity to be pursued, she teaches the sovereign a lesson in kingship; or, more accurately, she provides him with an opportunity to teach himself. His infatuation for Ellen prompts James to return to the Highlands, where he learns his crucial lesson, that he must not allow natural affection and civil loyalty to become mutually exclusive in his kingdom.

Malcolm Graeme shares the shortcomings of all Scott's passive heroes, but unlike Edward Waverley or Henry Morton, he is given little or no opportunity to redeem himself. Malcolm is tall, slender, blond, swift, and thoroughly uninteresting, and his tendency toward sentimental rhetoric (II, xxxv) does not help matters. However, as the passive hero who gets the girl and wins in the end, he represents Scott's somewhat reluctant approbation of the ability to adapt one's energies to the relative tranquility of the new order. As a native Highlander who has become the King's ward, he embodies the wisdom of

acquiescence to historical circumstances. Like Ellen, he functions as a mediating figure between the values of James' court and Roderick's highland lakes.

The consistent parallelism between public (or historically significant) and private plots allows Scott to illustrate his idea of historical development without transforming the poem into a polemic. The old must give way to the new; and Roderick Vich Alpine, like Scott's other unfortunate representatives of the old order, must be destroyed by the changing progression of history which he resists in vain. But Roderick's death is not totally unmitigated, because his confrontation with James teaches the monarch an important lesson in prudence, compassion, and respect for the values of loyalty and fidelity. The representative of the present has assimilated the values of the past and will presumably henceforth reign accordingly. Malcolm, the passive hero, receives the due reward for his acquiescence to the course of events, and his survival and reward are not without honor.