

Feast and Structure in 'The Bride of Lammermoor'

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THE BRIDE OF LAMMERMOOR has enjoyed at least two excellent reappraisals in recent years,¹ and this article offers an expansion of the insights of Professors Gordon and Cameron, especially the former, by suggesting that much of the novel's undoubted power derives from Scott's use of traditional images, particularly that of the feast, and from a structure of remarkable precision and symmetry.

I

The Scotland of *The Bride of Lammermoor* is in a state of moral and political chaos to which Scott gives the weight of biblical authority: 'In those days there was no king in Israel' (ch. 11).² It is characterized by the delegation of 'the powers of sovereignty . . . to the head of an aristocratic faction', which is reflected in little in the Ashton family, where the wife controls and manipulates the husband. Lady Ashton appears to be 'a dutiful wife . . . But there was something under all this which rung false and hollow'; and a paragraph earlier she has been compared to a falcon: 'It was seen and ascertained, that, in her most graceful courtesies and compliments, Lady Ashton no more lost sight of her object than the falcon in his airy wheel turns his quick eyes from his destined quarry'. Her willingness to destroy extends even to her family — to the death of Lucy; and the predatory falcon image makes a more elaborately explicit appearance in this

¹ R. C. Gordon, '*The Bride of Lammermoor*: A Novel of Tory Pessimism', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, xii (1957), 110-24; and Donald Cameron, 'The Web of Destiny: The Structure of *The Bride of Lammermoor*', in A. Norman Jeffares (ed.), *Scott's Mind and Art* (1969), pp. 185-205.

² Judges, xvii.6, xviii.1, xix.1, and xxi.25. Quotations from *The Bride* follow the Everyman text, as do the chapter numbers.

connection in ch. XXIX, with the following exchange between Lucy and her brother Henry over his new falcon:

'... she's going to prove, after all, nothing better than a rifler — she just wets her singles in the blood of the partridge, and then breaks away, and lets her fly; and what good can the poor bird do after that, you know, except pine and die in the first heather-cow or whin-bush she can crawl into?'

'Right, Henry — right, very right,' said Lucy, mournfully, holding the boy fast by the hand, after she had given him the wire he wanted; 'but there are more riflers in the world than your falcon, and more wounded birds that seek but to die in quiet, that can find neither brake nor whin-bush to hide their heads in.'

Over against the representatives of the new Scotland we have Edgar Ravenswood and, more especially, Blind Alice, whose role as symbol of order in a disintegrating world is well established on her first appearance in ch. IV when Sir William and Lucy Ashton¹ visit her. They find her sitting 'near to the bee-hives':

'This is a fine morning for your bee-hives, mother,' said the Lord Keeper . . .

'I believe so, my Lord,' she replied; 'I feel the air breathe milder than of late.'

'You do not,' resumed the statesman, 'take charge of these bees yourself, mother? — How do you manage them?'

'By delegates, as kings do their subjects,' resumed Alice; 'and I am fortunate in a prime minister — Here, Babie.' . . .

'Babie,' said her mistress, 'offer some bread and honey to the Lord Keeper and Miss Ashton . . .'

The point about delegated authority is unobtrusively managed — later on, in ch. VIII, Caleb is called Edgar's 'premier'. Domestic economy represents the economy of the kingdom in microcosm, and the bees express the same idea, carrying with them as they do

¹ Edgar is dark (e.g. ch. V) and Lucy has 'locks . . . of shadowy gold' and 'a brow of exquisite whiteness' (ch. III), indicating that the two, and the families they represent, are opposed even on the level of physiognomic detail. It is therefore probable that Scott intended the surnames to be understood as symbolically reinforcing this opposition, black 'Ravens-wood' being answered by the implied silver-grey of 'Ashton', since the latter means 'place of ash trees'. This anticipates the similar opposition of name and character in *Wuthering Heights*: dark Heathcliff and Earnshaw on the one hand, and pale Linton (place of flax) on the other. For a suggestive account of the affinities between the two novels, which go much further than this, see F. R. and Q. D. Leavis, *Lectures in America* (1969), Appendix D.

their Virgilian and post-Virgilian significance as emblems of ordered government and the well-ordered state. It is fitting, too, that Alice should spontaneously offer Sir William and his daughter bread and honey, since the gesture itself becomes emblematic in its context of basic hospitality and primitive simplicity.

The meal traditionally implies good fellowship and communion. On a larger scale the banquet is expressive of social order, because the guests are usually seated in hierarchical fashion — though even with Alice's offer of bread and honey Scott manages neatly to associate food with political and domestic order. We may thus expect eating to take on a symbolic significance in the novel; and the predatory imagery already noticed in connection with Lady Ashton is part of this much larger thematic pattern. The essential thing about the new Scotland is that it cannot feast with exuberance and in orderly fashion: when the usurpers, the politicians, give a formal meal they are immediately seen to be engaged in an exercise in disorder. Alice enquires of Edgar in ch. XIX: 'Are you prepared to sit lowest at the board which was once your father's own . . . Are you ready . . . to gnaw the bones of his prey when he has devoured the substance?' 'Prey' and 'devoured' are significant, and 'gnaw' takes on a resonance of its own as well, since it echoes Edgar's earlier reference in ch. XVI to 'the grasping severity of the creditor, and . . . the gnawing usury that eats into our lands as moths into a raiment'. Perhaps most telling of all is the replacement, in ch. XVIII, of the Ravenswood family portraits in the drawing room of the castle by, among others, 'the pictures of the Lord Keeper's father and mother . . . the latter, sour, shrewish, and solemn . . . ; the former, exhibiting beneath a black silk Geneva cowl, or skull-cap, which sate as close to the head as if it had been shaven, a pinched, peevish, puritanical set of features, terminating in a hungry, reddish, peaked beard, forming on the whole a countenance, in the expression of which the hypocrite seemed to contend with the miser and the knave'.

Scott, like Caesar, mistrusts those who have 'a lean and hungry look'; and the oppositions — seen in terms of feast and inability to feast — are clear. Ancient hospitality — the subject of one of Scott's own notes to the novel — is juxtaposed against Ashton values, and nowhere more clearly than at the beginning

of ch. III where we encounter Sir William 'seated in a spacious library, once a banquetting-room in the old Castle of Ravenswood . . . On the massive oaken table and reading-desk, lay a confused mass of letters, petitions, and parchments . . .'. Banquetting-room has become library; paper and parchment adorn the table instead of food. It is no accident, then, that the previous chapter has seen the attempted 'interruption of the funeral solemnities of the late Lord Ravenswood' by warrant of the Lord Keeper — funeral solemnities which include 'sounds of joviality and debauch . . . The tables swam in wine, the populace feasted in the courtyard, the yeomen in the kitchen and buttery'. Food and hierarchy are linked again, as aristocrats are separated from yeomen, and yeomen from populace.

Just as the novel begins with an interrupted ritual, that of the November-morning Scottish Episcopalian funeral with its attendant feast, so does it end with one — the Presbyterian wedding and its banquet and dance. For there are two interruptions here: first, the shock of noticing 'that the picture of Sir William Ashton's father [has been] removed from its place', which is now occupied by 'that of old Sir Malise Ravenswood' (which reminds us of the tradition recounted in ch. III that Sir Malise had regained Ravenswood Castle from a usurper by disrupting 'a costly banquet'); and second, the stabbing of the chief guest, the bridegroom Bucklaw, and the death of Lucy herself, whose funeral again takes place on a misty November morning (ch. xxxv).

The wedding turned funeral — the intimate linking of creation and destruction — is a symbolic expression of Scott's pessimistic realization that the old heroic Scotland has passed for ever; that it cannot compromise with the new world of the politicians. Sir Malise had regained his estate by interrupting the usurper's banquet; the novel ends with an interrupted ritual which leads to the death of the last of the Ravenswoods. And Scott is being particularly allusive here. Sir Malise's, and Edgar's, actions recall Odysseus's return home and his battle with the suitors, leading (the parallel with Edgar is bitterly ironic) to his reunion with Penelope. Even more obviously, Scott had 'The Ancient Mariner' in mind. Coleridge's poem had provided the epigraph to ch. x, and it is echoed in ch. xxxiv when we are told 'that

Bucklaw had arisen from the bed of sickness a sadder and a wiser man than he had hitherto shown himself'. We recall that 'The Ancient Mariner' concerns a wedding guest who is prevented from joining in the ceremony and the feasting, the noise of which periodically punctuates the Mariner's narrative.¹

More important as a general allusive background, though, is *Macbeth*, with its interrupted and discontinued banquet of III. iv which begins with a parody of order — 'You know your own degrees' — and ends in 'most admired disorder'. Scott follows Shakespeare in saying that the politic mentality, which disregards old and hallowed ties for its own selfish advancement and which sacrifices everything to ambition, is inimical to the feast and particularly to the ordered ritual of the banquet. And that Scott intends *Macbeth* as a significant commentary on *The Bride of Lammermoor* is clear from his connection of the self-seeking and destructive Lady Ashton with Lady Macbeth in ch. II: 'it was believed that [Sir William's] ambition and desire of extending his wealth and consequence, found as strong a stimulus in the exhortations of his lady, as the daring aim of Macbeth in the days of yore'. This also emerges from a further reference to the play later on in the novel where Edgar's encounter with the three old women who are on their way to guard Blind Alice's corpse 'reminded him of the meeting betwixt Macbeth and the witches on the blasted heath of Forres' (ch. xxiii).

As Gordon commented in his article on *The Bride of Lammermoor* (cited in footnote, p. 66), Scott associates Edgar throughout the novel with ritual; but, specifically, with food and the characteristically aristocratic gesture of hospitality, or attempted hospitality. This being so, the Ashton's inadequacy as masters of Ravenswood Castle is emphasized in yet another way: by their attitude to entertainment and hospitality. Thus, of Lady Ashton we are told that 'her hospitality was splendid, even to ostentation' (ch. II); and of Sir William that 'the Lord Keeper only received society out of policy or ostentation, and was by nature rather reserved and unsociable' (ch. v). Their inadequacy in this respect is reflected in the similar social unease manifested by Lord

¹ *Lamia*, too (which was also published in 1819, and derives from Burton's *Anatomy*, III. ii, l. 1), ends with an interrupted wedding banquet, and a 'marriage robe' becoming a shroud.

and Lady Bittlebrains: 'They were received with an excess of hospitality; and the most marked attention was offered to the Master of Ravenswood, in particular, by their noble entertainers' (ch. xviii). Those who are ill at ease in their new social rank try to compensate for their sense of inadequacy by 'ostentation' and 'excess' — and in view of the emphasis on food in the novel, even Ashton's incidental remark in the next paragraph that 'no man knows so well as Bittlebrains on which side his bread is buttered; and he fawns on the Master like a beggar's messan on a cook' plays its part in the overall scheme of appetitive imagery.

The emphasis continues in ch. xix, where Edgar is feasted by Ashton in his old family home: 'The feast of Ravenswood Castle was as remarkable for its profusion, as that of Wolf's Crag had been for its ill-veiled penury'; just as, at the end (ch. xxxiv), the wedding between Lucy and Bucklaw is characterized by 'a banquet of unbounded profusion, the relics of which, after the domestics had feasted in their turn, were distributed among the shouting crowd . . .' Here, however, there is also an ominous echo of the 'large and profuse' funeral entertainment of ch. ii. But Scott's most biting comment on the unaristocratic pre-occupation with ostentation and petty detail comes in ch. xxi:

[Sir William] loved the ostentatious display of his wealth, less as a man to whom habit has made it necessary, than as one to whom it is still delightful for its novelty. The most trivial details did not escape him; and Lucy soon learned to watch the flush of scorn which crossed Ravenswood's cheek, when he heard her father gravely arguing with Lockhard, nay, even with the old housekeeper, upon circumstances which, in families of rank, are left uncared for, because it is supposed impossible they can be neglected.

'I could pardon Sir William,' said Ravenswood, one evening after he had left the room, 'some general anxiety upon this occasion, for the Marquis's visit is an honour, and should be received as such; but I am worn out by these miserable minutizæ of the buttery, and the larder, and the very hen-coop — they drive me beyond my patience; I would rather endure the poverty of Wolf's Crag, than be pestered with the wealth of Ravenswood Castle.'

With splendid irony, Scott gives this chapter an epigraph from *A New Way to Pay Old Debts*, III. ii:

Marall. Sir, the man of honour's come,
Newly alighted —
Overreach. In without reply,

And do as I command. —
 Is the loud music I gave order for
 Ready to receive him? —

As with *Macbeth*, Scott clearly intends the thematic relevance of Massinger's play to extend to the novel as a whole.

In contrast to the ostentation, and Lady Ashton's refusal to entertain Edgar and the Marquis (ch. xxii), is the entertainment of the two by the cooper's family at Wolf's-hope (ch. xxvi), even though it is prompted to a large extent by vanity and self-interest: Mr and Mrs Girder 'remained standing in the apartment, and acted the part of respectful and careful attendants on the company. Such were the manners of the time'; and after itemizing the contents of the Marquis's bedchamber Scott comments: 'We therefore commit that eminent person to his night's repose, trusting he profited by the ample preparations made for his accommodation, — preparations which we have mentioned in detail, as illustrative of ancient Scottish manners.' Scott's irony — for example, 'the apartment seemed victualled against a siege of two or three days' — should not blind us to the genuine and, in a sense, characteristically Augustan nostalgia which surrounds his concern for the ritual of eating and its correlate, social order. In Pope's *Epistle to Burlington* social disorder and ostentation manifest themselves in Timon's inability to feast his guests; and Smollett expresses the same notion in identical fashion in *Humphry Clinker* when Bramble and his family visit the Baynards (see Bramble's letter of 30 September), as does, to cite a further example out of many possible ones, Langhorne in his *Country Justice*, I, 105 ff.:

Here, where, of old, the festal Ox has fed,
 Mark'd with his weight, the mighty horns are spread:
 Some Ox, O Marshall, for a Board like thine,
 Where the vast Master with the vast Sirloin
 Vied in round Magnitude — Respect I bear
 To Thee, tho' oft the Ruin of the Chair.

These, and such antique Tokens, that record
 The manly Spirit and the bounteous Board,
 Me more delight than all the Gew-gaw Train,
 The Whims and Zigzags of a modern Brain . . .

Pope, Smollett, and Langhorne were writing in the 'Penshurst' tradition, a tradition which, to some extent at least, was still alive

for Scott. For the mid-eighteenth century the contrast between ancient simplicity and heroic worth on the one hand, and contemporary luxury and degeneracy on the other, had been archetypally embodied in the *Odyssey*, with its emphasis on feasting and hospitality.¹ The possible echo of the *Odyssey* noted above in Scott's treatment of Sir Malise and Edgar, who appear to recall Odysseus and the suitors, perhaps suggests that he links the Ravenswoods with the Homeric, and heroic, ideal of the feast, and Sir William with the suitors, the new men. But if the *Odyssey* is at the back of *The Bride*, it is used sensitively and in no way schematically. Scott has indeed anticipated Cedric H. Whitman's reading of it in chapter XII of his book *Homer and the Heroic Tradition* (1958) as a poem fundamentally illustrative of change.

II

If Scott is so concerned with ritual and hierarchy in *The Bride of Lammermoor*, then we might expect this to be reflected in the novel's structure.² Such things as the Mermaid's Well, for instance, which connects Lucy with the drowned nymph and bloodstained water, and becomes a recurrent motif (Cameron, p. 203), and the insistence on feasting described above, together with such minor matters as the juxtaposition of the ruinous and sea-beaten tower of Wolf's Crag at the beginning (ch. II) over against Lady Ashton's tombstone, an apt emblem of her implacability, at the end³ — such things contribute to *The Bride's* unity on the imagistic level. But there is also, and more surprisingly, when we recall the circumstances of its composition,⁴ an exact formal symmetry in the novel which seems too pervasive to be the result of chance. One example of this is the interrupted funeral in ch. II, which is answered in ring-compositional manner by the interrupted wedding in the second chapter from the end (ch. xxxiv). Other instances abound. Thus, Scott was probably

¹ See Donald M. Foerster, *Homer in English Criticism: The Historical Approach in the Eighteenth Century* (1947), pp. 69 ff.

² See Donald Cameron, 'The Web of Destiny: The Structure of *The Bride of Lammermoor*', p. 185 n. for critical acclaim of *The Bride's* structure.

³ Scott makes this juxtaposition explicit, since Lady Ashton's 'marble monument', ch. xxxv, is mentioned only a couple of pages after Edgar has called himself 'a falling tower'.

⁴ Edgar Johnson, *Sir Walter Scott: The Great Unknown* (1970), I, 645-6, recounts the matter in detail.

Augustan enough to be aware of the traditional significance of the central position in poem, narrative, and triumphal procession, all of which were exploited to symbolic ends as late as Fielding.¹ It is surely by deliberate strategy, then, that he has Edgar return to Ravenswood Castle exactly half way through the novel, in the eighteenth chapter out of a total of thirty-five. This chapter is also thematically central in that it contains the rhyme alluding to the wooing of 'a dead maiden' and the death of 'the last Laird of Ravenswood . . . in the Kelpie's flow', and Henry Ashton's connection of Edgar with 'the picture of old Malise of Ravenswood, . . . he is as like it as if he had loupén out of the canvas'. This looks back to ch. III and forward to ch. xxxiv; and the fact that, in ch. xviii, Henry's tutor is absent at a wedding provides an additional link with the end of the novel. In ch. xix Lucy leads Edgar to Blind Alice, approaching her with her true master, just as earlier, in ch. iv, she had led her father, the false master, to Alice's cottage. The balance here is less exact, as it is also, for example, when Scott recapitulates, in the supposed fire of chapters xxv and xxvi, the thunderbolt of chapters x and xi which, Caleb claims, has spoiled the meal he had prepared for the Ashtons. A feeling of symmetry is nevertheless maintained, to be reinforced by yet more rigorous parallels which become apparent when ch. xviii, Edgar's return to his ancestral home, is regarded as dividing the novel into two equal halves of seventeen chapters each, so that the second half begins at ch. xix. For halfway through Part I — in ch. ix — there is an arrival to correspond to Edgar's central and climactic return: Sir William and Lucy are led by Edgar to Wolf's Crag, temporary home of the Ravenswoods and symbol of their decayed fortunes; and halfway through Part II — in ch. xxvii, the ninth chapter of the second half — there is a significant departure: Edgar has left Wolf's

¹ Alastair Fowler, *Triumphal Forms: Structural Patterns in Elizabethan Poetry* (1970), discusses the history of the tradition up to the eighteenth century. For Fielding and the central position, see the present author's 'Symbolic Numbers in Fielding's *Joseph Andrews*', in Alastair Fowler (ed.), *Silent Poetry* (1970), pp. 234-60. It is probably relevant that Scott has placed Henry 'in the centre of the gallant train' of the wedding procession (ch. xxxiv), for he is a central figure because of his association with Edgar's and Lucy's fates throughout the novel: in ch. xx, after Edgar and his sister have become engaged, he kills the raven that proleptically stains her dress with blood; in ch. xxxiv Lucy stabs Bucklaw with the poniard Henry should have worn at the wedding, etc.

Crag and, when it appears that his fortunes are on the mend, he leaves Scotland itself on a mission for the Marquis, Sir William now being out of power.

In similar fashion, ch. v contains Edgar's rescue of Sir William and Lucy from the bull, his placing of Lucy 'by the side of a plentiful and pellucid fountain', the legend of the Naiad, and Lucy's explicit association with the legend:

It was on this ominous spot that Lucy Ashton first drew breath after her long and almost deadly swoon. Beautiful and pale as the fabulous Naiad in the last agony of separation from her lover, she was seated so as to rest with her back against a part of the ruined wall . . .

In ch. xxiii, the fifth chapter of Part II, Edgar approached the fountain and 'discerned a female figure, dressed in a white, or rather greyish mantle, placed on the very spot on which Lucy Ashton had reclined while listening to the fatal tale of love'; a figure which turns out to be 'old blind Alice', and whose dress 'rather resembled a shroud, than the garment of a living woman'. To reinforce the parallel, the incident in ch. v occurs while Lucy and her father are returning from a visit to Alice.

Finally, in the fifth chapter from the end, xxxi, Scott presents us with a physically and mentally declining Lucy in the charge of the witch Ailsie Gourlay, who recounts 'the story of the fatal fountain . . . at full length, and with formidable additions . . . The prophecy . . . concerning the dead bride, . . . and the singular circumstance of the apparition, seen by the Master of Ravenswood in the forest'.

It would be unwise to draw too many conclusions from the symmetries noticed here until we are in a position to know whether *The Bride* is unique in this respect or whether such patterning is, in fact, a hitherto unremarked characteristic of Scott's fiction. Nevertheless it is possible to suggest that the symmetry may be regarded as a structural complement to the novel's preoccupation with hierarchy and order; and that it also contributes to its determinism, our feeling that the characters are in a very real sense imprisoned, or enmeshed, by fate. Moreover, if Edgar Johnson is right in saying that *The Bride* represents an imaginative release for Scott — 'his imagination dredged up primitive tremors from primordial deeps' (*Sir Walter Scott*, I, 670) — perhaps these symmetries fulfil an additional role as

deliberately imposed elements of rational control. In that case, there is an interesting analogue in *Wuthering Heights*, where there is a contrast between subject matter on the one hand, and the formalized structure on the other. This is a novel which, as was mentioned earlier and as Mrs Leavis has pointed out in *Lectures in America* (Appendix D), has strong affinities with *The Bride*, not least in its opposition of an almost elemental hospitality, embodied in the warm, living farmhouse of Wuthering Heights, with the costive world of Thrushcross Grange, where the living quarters are difficult of access, and Edgar spends much of his time, like Sir William, in the library.

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