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Teaching the Female Body as Contested Territory

Diane Long Hoeveler

I routinely teach Scott's novels in my graduate and undergraduate courses on Romanticism and gender, frequently pairing them for contrast with Jane Austen's novels: *Pride and Prejudice* with *Waverley* or *Northanger Abbey* with *Bride of Lammermoor* or *Persuasion* with *Redgauntlet* or *Sense and Sensibility* with *Heart of Mid-Lothian* or *Emma* with *Ivanhoe* or *Mansfield Park* with *Rob Roy*. Obviously, I do not have the space here to discuss all those novels or the many rich themes that emerge from these pairings, but I would encourage instructors to experiment with Austen and Scott in tandem in their own upper-level or graduate seminars (see Gottlieb's essay, in this collection). I have never taught more than one of Scott's novels in a course, so my discussion of the novels here is not intended to suggest that instructors would teach all these novels in one course (unless, of course, they were offering a specialized seminar on the novels of Walter Scott). Rather, what I hope to provide here are some points of theoretical departure that could be used to address the sometimes contested and constructed roles and identities of female characters in some of these novels.

To begin with my overriding approach: my course shows that the female body in the novels of Scott is most frequently presented as a bifurcated figure, a split woman who embodies both positive and negative aspects of a fairly stereotypical notion of "femininity" (what Nancy Goslee has identified as the "witch or pawn" syndrome in Scott). But to nuance this device and allow students to see that Scott frequently complicates this dichotomy, I demonstrate how in some novels the female characters are sometimes meant to be read as the embodiment of the Scottish nation in formation, both its real and historical legacies as well as its fantasized and imagined potentialities. Sometimes the female body is the privileged site of reproduction and future life, and therefore a topic of intense anxiety and control by the male power-elite. At other times in Scott's novels the female body is scarred and wounded, a site of national disgrace and ignominy. In some novels the female body is an object, almost a fetish, that is exchanged between men to consolidate male control of property. And finally, at other points the woman is a veiled screen, a performance of gender, and the male characters associated with her may clothe themselves as female in a sort of ritualized, or mock, gender display. These various approaches to the female body suggest, of course, some of the most basic ways that male authors have traditionally presented "the feminine" in their works. Scott is certainly no exception in dealing in gender stereotypes; the fact is that his depictions of women and appropriate gendered behaviors were tremendously influential during the early nineteenth century, in Britain, America, and throughout Europe. At the same time, gender was not a simple or unilateral sign during the period, just as it isn't in our own time, and in many ways Scott's novels complicate, challenge,

and even innovate a variety of gender constructions that were circulating in his society.

I begin my presentation of gender dynamics in Scott's works by providing Ina Ferris's very useful approach to the subject:

Waverley reading offered a compelling alternative both to female reading and to feminine writing. In particular, in this period of conservative reaction, evangelical revival, and the domestic-didactic novel, *Waverley* and its successors licensed a nostalgic male-inflected romance of history that offered the satisfaction of emancipation from the necessary restraints of civil society even as it effectually absorbed male subjectivity into those restraints. And central to that sense of liberation, the reviewers suggest, was release from a feminized space. . . . Even as it was marked by unfeminine "vigour," masculinity shared with femininity the "purity" that guaranteed its "healthiness," so that both genders were constructed under the sign of restraint and both in a sense lived on deferment. (*Achievement* 91-92)

As this passage suggests, masculinity during this period was constructed in at least two ways: as self-control (the idealization of the "pure" man) and as the bold and unrestrained man (the heroic, warrior ideal). Femininity was also constructed in at least two ways, as a paradoxically contradictory sign for emotion ("human sympathy") and self-control (abnegation and self-sacrifice). I also introduce the argument outlined in Nancy Armstrong's *Desire and Domestic Fiction*:

Men were no longer political creatures so much as they were the products of desire and producers of domestic life. . . . [T]he difference between male and female was understood in terms of their respective qualities of mind . . . that had formerly determined female nature alone. (4)

In short, the virtues of women, or domestic *virtú*, now became the source and standard for modern civic morality, so that idealized representations of nineteenth-century male literary characters were frequently presented as androgynous or feminized (see Armstrong, *Desire*; Hoeveler).

One of the most basic approaches to teaching the female body as a contested site of meaning is to introduce students to the concept of the "virgin-whore dichotomy" typically found in male-authored literature (not to say that it also isn't found in female-authored texts as well, e.g., Rossetti's "Goblin Market"). The composite figure of the split woman, one pure and one fallen (*Heart of Mid-Lothian*), one blonde and one dark (*Ivanhoe*), one victim and one victimizer (*Bride of Lammermoor*), is a long-standing device in Western culture. Students can readily understand the figure as troping anxieties toward the sexualized body of the female in contrast to the idealized presentation of a virgin, frequently depicted as having almost miraculous powers. In analyzing the split woman one

could resort to Sigmund Freud or Julia Kristeva for theoretical background, but I have found it most useful to simply locate the origin of the syndrome in the Bible. Students are familiar with two of the most dominant mythic depictions of the idea: the Old Testament Eve (fallen and sinful) contrasted with the New Testament Virgin Mary (the mother of the redeemer) or the Virgin Mary (miraculous mother of Jesus) contrasted with Mary Magdalene (whore reformed by Jesus).

The clearest example of the device can be seen in the Deans sisters of *The Heart of Mid-Lothian*. Effie and her sister, Jeanie, represent the potential of Scotland, as if Scotland were a female body to be colonized and controlled either by its own native traditions (David Deans; his surrogate Butler, Jeanie's husband; and, at the top of the patriarchal pyramid, the Duke of Argyle) or by a corrupt English aristocracy (George Staunton, who is the seducer of Madge and father of her murdered child as well as the eventual husband of Effie and the father of Effie's feral and parricidal child "the Whistler").¹ The history of the Deans sisters is remarkably rich and entertaining (Jeanie's "honesty" and her journey to England to plead for her sister's life before two other women, the queen and the king's mistress, and Effie's contrapuntal journey from seduced maiden to English lady). The conclusion of the novel may be hopelessly melodramatic, but it is important for developing the destinies of all the characters: the "pure" Jeanie's happiness, prosperity, and fertility contrasted to the "fallen" Effie's confinement in a convent.

To present to students some interpretive strategies for understanding Jeanie's journey to redeem her sister, I reprint a series of passages from Judith Wilt's discussion of Jeanie as a "Prince Errant" (*Secret Leaves* 129–42). Wilt's approach relies on a knowledge of *Waverley* (which I attempt to summarize for students who have not read the novel), as well as the allusions in the novel to *Pilgrim's Progress* (which students, at least my students, have not read, so I am once again summarizing the text as a context for them). Wilt usefully reads Jeanie as the hero/heroine of the novel:

As heroine her job is to incarnate the still center of the turning world, the blond domesticity that goads and rewards the hero for his journey of self-discovery and self-limitation. As hero; her job is to take that *Waverley* journey from "romance" to the "real history of her life." (134)

Halfway through the journey south,

Jeanie encounters her own particular Apollyon again, and undergoes at her/his hands a complex version of the typical *Waverley* hero's self-discovery—kidnapping, outlawing, escape back to the law with the power to destroy the outlaws, which, out of hidden sympathies, she does not use. Apollyon, falsehood, tempts her on the public road north of Grantham.

(138)

Charting the steps of Jeanie's journey as stages in an archetypal pilgrimage or quest-romance (from the initial challenge to temptations to final apotheosis) allows students to see how Scott adapted and transformed gendered stereotypes, creating a masculinized heroine who fully inhabits the historical novel in new and innovative ways.

Also important is Scott's depiction of another female pair, Madge Wildfire and her mother, Margaret Murdockson, alternately called "Mother Blood" or "Mother Damnable," dark doubles of the Effie-Jeanie configuration. Although the Deans sisters are Scottish, both venture onto English soil—one to redeem her sister's life and one to live as the wife of an English aristocrat. The fact that Effie's son, who should have been the embodiment of a reconciliation between classes and nations, kills his father and loses himself among the American Indians speaks to the challenges that faced England and Scotland as they sought at once to merge and retain their separate traditions. Students can be fruitfully directed to recognize the many aspects of the contested female body throughout this novel, displayed, for example, in the songs sung by both Effie and Madge ([ed. Lamont] 98, 303) or the gendered confusion of Madge's clothing and its assumption by George (306).

Jeanie's quest southward is punctuated by an attempted assault, captivity among thieves in a Gypsy's barn, and encounters with George and his father. I focus student attention on one particular episode of the journey: the church scene in which Madge dishevels Jeanie's clothing and hair to make her appear to be a madwoman and then leads her "in captivity up the whole length of the church" (323), kicking and punching her throughout the service. As Wilt has noted, in this "remarkable humiliation scene, pitched somewhere between farce and melodrama, the sensible unromantic Jeanie is fully 'womanized' at last, reduced to 'dishevelled hair, downcast eyes, and a face glowing with shame'" (324). The scene forces readers to see a "sisterhood" between Madge and Jeanie (Wilt, *Secret Leaves* 139), just as there is a sisterhood in seduction between Madge and Effie and a more literal sisterhood between Jeanie and Effie.

The split woman also functions in Scott's first novel, *Waverley*. In this novel I focus student attention on the female body as a sign under which the author can examine the temptations of nationalism and revolution as embodied in Flora MacIvor, a "Jacobite *femme fatale*" (Irvine 176), in contrast to the stability and promise of Lowland reconciliation with England represented by Rose Bradwardine.² Caught up in the events of the 1745 Jacobite uprising, Scott's quixotic hero Edward Waverley finds himself torn between his affections for Rose and her father the Baron of Bradwardine on the one hand and Flora and her brother Fergus on the other. In his various travels (again explained to students as a version of the archetypal quest-romance) and changes of heart, Waverley also enacts a nationalistic split that represents what I see as the logic of an embodied and homosocial politics. Rose and her father (as well as their estate Tully-Veolan) represent an idealized vision of a new community on the border between Lowlands and Highlands, a new, professionalized Scotland successfully absorbed

into a modernized, commercial, and capitalistic England. Flora and her brother, in contrast, represent a seductive family romance in which Edward is attracted as much to the gothically reactionary brother as to the sister. By the conclusion of the novel Scott appears to have erased the wild, homosocial Highland spirit; Edward has supposedly renounced his attraction to a Scotland that is rabidly and irrationally nationalistic, incapable of assimilation into Britain because of its seductive gothic legacy (the "Grey Spectre"): clan-based, barbarous, lawless, and isolationist. ("[H]e felt himself entitled to say firmly, though perhaps with a sigh, that the romance of his life was ended, and that its real history had now commenced" [283]). To explain the cultural contexts here, I spend some time summarizing Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's theory of the "homosocial" and Norbert Elias's theory of the "civilizing process" that took place when the middle class imitated, demonized, and gradually replaced the aristocracy as the dominant class.

Students can see the contrast between romance and history most clearly by considering the novel's conclusion in a companionate marriage between Edward and Rose, in which Edward is firmly entrenched in a domestic sphere, not a public or political one, at the close of his "romantic" adventures. This emphasis has caused a number of critics to position the novel within the private sphere and to see its real subject as the domestication and feminization of the hero. For instance, Robert P. Irvine has noted that the

governing opposition here is not between one type of politics and another, but between politics and domesticity; and . . . that opposition no longer coincides with a gender division, for domestic virtue is now as proper to the male as to the female. (182)

But *Waverley* also addresses both the conflicting claims of public and private domains and the proper alignment of both for the newly emerging upper-middle-class man. Edward ultimately marries into the "modernized," or "civilized," aristocracy by his alliance with Rose and her father and estate, but he has to face temptations, captivity, and trials before he can be restored to his rightful situation and identity.

One of the most blatant ways of illustrating to students the contrast between old and new versions of masculinity can be found in the portrait that Edward has commissioned of himself and Fergus. The two of them represent opposed masculine types (much like the Laird of Solway and Darsie in *Redgauntlet*), and their relationship throughout the novel is often strained. The portrait, in fact, stands in sharp contrast to the content of the novel: "It was a large and spirited painting, representing Fergus Mac-Ivor and Waverley in their Highland dress, the scene a wild, rocky, and mountainous pass, down which the clan were descending in the background" (338). Whereas the painting presents a sentimentally homosocial image of clan life and the hero's adventures, as Edward would nostalgically prefer to imagine them, the novel makes it clear that the actual

experiences of Edward and Fergus and by extension the processes of modernizing Scotland were far from idyllic.

Rob Roy concerns the 1715 revolution, the earliest event in the historical chronology of Scott's Jacobite novels, and once again features the device of the split woman.³ In this work, however, the two primary female characters are decidedly more ambivalent in their function as objects of exchange between men who contend for property and wealth over the bodies of women. Rob Roy's wife, Helen McGregor, is an Amazonian figure, a woman who literally takes to the battlefield and kills:

She might be between the term of forty and fifty years, and had a countenance which must once have been of a masculine cast of beauty; though now, imprinted with deep lines by exposure to rough weather, and perhaps by the wasting influence of grief and passion, its features were strong, harsh, and expressive. She wore her plaid, not drawn around her head and shoulders, as is the fashion of the women of Scotland, but disposed around her body as the Highland soldiers wear theirs. She had a man's bonnet, with a feather in it, an unsheathed sword in her hand, and a pair of pistols at her girdle. (349)

Wilt calls Helen a "Christian princess reverted under stress to a pagan deity" with a "savage Druidical nobility" about her (*Secret Leaves* 68). Her transgressive violence is explained by an earlier sexual assault on her, gingerly broached by Scott not within the text of the novel but in his later 1829 author's introduction:

It is said that [the] diligence of the law, as it is called in Scotland, which the English more bluntly term distress, was used in this case with uncommon severity, and that the legal satellites, not usually the gentlest persons in the world, had insulted McGregor's wife, in a manner which would have aroused a milder man than he to thoughts of unbounded vengeance. She was a woman of fierce and haughty temper, and is not unlikely to have disturbed the officers in the execution of their duty, and thus to have incurred ill treatment, though for the sake of humanity, it is to be hoped that the story sometimes told is a popular exaggeration. (Introduction 17-18)

In fact, according to local historical records, Helen was not only evicted and raped but also branded with hot irons; her rage against the English stems from this assault on her body and her honor.

In contrast, Diana ("Die") Vernon is presented as something of a virginal object of desire by the hero, although the reader can see that she may also be a compromised schemer, a Catholic and Jacobite rebel. In league with her mysterious father, Sir Frederick Vernon, who sometimes masquerades as a priest, she plots to overthrow the Hanoverian line and return Britain to its feudal,

Catholic past. Wilt notes that her nickname, Die, suggests both a "keenness of spirit [that] comes from a life lived at the edge of a kind of dying . . . and the dice determining her fate" (*Secret Leaves* 64). Diana says to Frank, "I should be rather like the wild hawk, who, barred the free exercise of his soar through heaven, will dash himself to pieces against the bars of his cage" (43). Students are familiar with the nineteenth-century representation of women as "birds in gilded cages," so they are able to understand Diana's more masculinized character; she is a frustrated quester who rebels against the limitations that the endogamous marriage market seeks to impose on her (a forced alliance with her odious cousin Rashleigh).

As Irvine has noted, one way to understand the differences between the two women in *Rob Roy* is to focus on their use of language and their conversations with others (Helen's eloquence as originating in the savage and Diana's recalling the *Spectator's* discourse of politeness and finances [164–67]). Students could fruitfully oppose this observation with the introduction to the Oxford World's Classics edition of the novel, in which Ian Duncan reads the two women in relation to the master discourse of the novel, economics:

The ordeal of a masculinity beset by eloquent Amazons—the lovely Die Vernon, the terrifying Helen MacGregor—culminates not in any clarity of action or self-possession but in a remarkable fit of hysteria, as an archaic feminine energy overwhelms the hero from within. (xvii)

Frank's "hysteria" occurs when he meets Diana on the road at night in the Trossachs and she hands over a packet of letters of credit before she leaves. Focusing on this scene and Frank's reaction to it as almost a voyeur of a sexualized exchange of goods, students may see how anxious the male establishment was about women gaining access to the public realm of economics and finance (through the free circulation of their "goods," i.e., sexuality).

Frank Osbaldistone's attraction to Diana is similar to Edward Waverley's attraction to Flora MacIvor, except that here the hero is allowed to claim his errant love object and redeem her in a marriage that returns him to his paternal estate. The differences in the endings of the novels can partially be accounted for by the presence of a father rather than a brother in Diana's history. If one were to look for excuses for Diana's revolutionary and conspiratorial behavior, one could claim that a dutiful daughter is much more acceptable to Scott and his readers than a willful sister in league with an uncontrollable and attractive brother. That Diana can pass directly from her father's control to Frank's makes her an acceptable object for matrimony, an unsullied object of exchange between men. Much has been made of the complete obliteration of the Osbaldistone brothers, which clears the way for Frank's inheritance of the estate; his marriage to Diana, a cousin and coequal heir, legitimates Frank's identity as lord of the Osbaldistone manor.

Redgauntlet, the last of Scott's Jacobite novels, concerns a fictitious revolutionary threat that in fact never occurred in 1765.⁴ The novel focuses on versions of contested manliness: Hugh Redgauntlet, the "Laird of the Solway Firth," represents an anachronistic form of masculinity doomed to extinction in the new Scotland (legalistic, professionalized, modern), while his nephew Darsie Latimer undertakes a journey that remasculinizes him and prepares him for survival in his rapidly changing society. Containing two particularly curious representations of the female body, *Redgauntlet* sets "the Green Mantle" (the feminine promise of fertility and new life) between the novel's two heroes, Alan Fairford and Darsie Latimer, suggesting the homosocial dynamic analyzed by Sedgwick in *Between Men*. Later in the novel, Green Mantle is revealed to be Lilius Redgauntlet, Alan's eventual wife and Darsie's sister—after she has functioned as a blank screen onto which Darsie projects his unknowingly incestuous desire.

In the second example of curious gender dynamics, Darsie himself undergoes a humiliating feminization. His uncle Hugh Redgauntlet, seeking to use Darsie as a pawn in his ill-conceived Jacobite plot, forces him to dress in female clothing:

Darsie permitted Cristal Nixon to place over his face, and secure by a string, one of those silk masks which ladies frequently wore to preserve their complexions, when exposed to the air during long journeys on horseback. He remonstrated somewhat more vehemently against the long riding-skirt, which converted his person from the waist into the female guise, but was obliged to concede this point also. The metamorphosis was then complete. (310 [ed. Sutherland])

Once under his uncle's control, Darsie is then stripped of his female clothing and ceremoniously remasculinized:

I restore you to yourself, and trust you will lay aside all effeminate thoughts with this feminine dress. Do not blush at having worn a disguise to which kings and heroes have been reduced. It is when female craft or female cowardice find their way into a manly bosom, that he who entertains these sentiments should take eternal shame to himself for thus having resembled womankind. (367)

Redgauntlet's words constitute a performative speech act, language that does what it says. This entire scene provides an opportunity to introduce students to Judith Butler's theory of the "performative," in (admittedly) a simplified manner for undergraduates. Drawing on the philosopher John Searle, Butler notes, "within speech act theory, a performative is that discursive practice that enacts or produces that which it names" (*Bodies* 13). Butler redefines gender as

a corporeal style . . . an act which has been rehearsed, much as a script survives the particular actors who make use of it, but which requires individual actors in order to be actualized and reproduced as reality once again. ("Performative Acts" 272).

Understanding gender as constructed and performed in order to impose heteronormative standards on individuals, Butler endorses a freedom from any essentialist understandings of gender or sex.⁵ In *Redgauntlet*, Darsie is extremely uncomfortable at the "feminization" he is forced to assume at the hands of his uncle, which exemplifies the performance of gender and its restrictive categories and codes.

This scene can also be used to demonstrate to students Scott's use of historical allusion. The cross-dressing scene would have recalled, for Scott's original readers, the story of Charles Edward Stuart's assumption of a maid's clothing to escape after the battle of Culloden in 1746 (K. Sutherland xx; *Redgauntlet* [ed. Sutherland] 461). This performance of gender by the would-be king might also have reminded Scott's readers of the tactic employed by the French rebels of dressing as women to storm the Bastille and rampage through the streets of Paris during the Revolution. Scott had used this association of men assuming female clothing when Robertson (the alias assumed by George Staunton) wears the female dress of Madge Wildfire to raid the Tolbooth prison in a failed attempt to free Effie in *The Heart of Mid-Lothian*. The bodies of women as well as their clothing take on transgressive and violent powers in all these examples. Although Hugh Redgauntlet's words appear to condemn women for "craft" or "cowardice," the passage suggests that when women cannot be demonized as witches ("craft") or pawns ("cowardice"), they are dangerous and antisocial forces to be reckoned with in the new nation.

Teaching the contested female body in Scott's novels allows students to see gender as a fluid sign in his as well as in our own society. The language and length of Scott's novels may be a challenge for them, but, by focusing on how gender defines and constrains the major characters and their interrelationships, students can see that Scott has preserved for future generations of readers a sweeping portrait of how one nation, Scotland, came to modernize itself while also memorializing its best imaginings and legends of its past.

NOTES

¹ There are many secondary articles on *The Heart of Mid-Lothian*, but I place on reserve for students Duncan's discussion of the novel (*Modern Romance* 146–76); J. Thompson; Morgan; and McCracken-Flesher ("Narrating").

² Of the many secondary sources available on *Waverley*, I place on reserve the discussion of the novel in Wilt (*Secret Leaves* 26–36); Hennelly; and Ferris (*Achievement* 94–104).

³ An excellent listing of secondary sources on the novel is available in Duncan's edition.

⁴ An excellent listing of secondary sources on the novel is available in K. Sutherland's edition of this text. The most detailed discussion of gender in *Redgauntlet* can be found in Irvine 200–15.

⁵ A useful pedagogical overview of Butler's theories and approaches to teaching them can be found in Felluga.