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SCOTT'S HI/STORY TELLING – A POSTMODERN READING OF *KENILWORTH*

JOANNA MACIULEWICZ

Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań

The coexistence of history and fiction is a defining characteristic of the historical novel. Numerous critics claim that the approach to the two conflicting elements constituting the genre has not been uniform. In the past, in traditional historical novels, the fictional character of the narrative was consciously concealed whereas in contemporary historical novels fictionality has been problematized (Hansson 1998: 114-115). However, James Kerr in *Fiction against history*, an influential study on the inventor of the genre, Walter Scott, proves that this distinction is an oversimplification. It is true that Scott was celebrated "as an accurate depictor of the past ... faithfully portraying the crucial social and political changes of British history". Yet, as Kerr emphasises, Scott was aware of "the fictionality of his narratives [and] he deliberately played fiction and history off against one another, not only as "artifice" and reality, but as codified forms of written discourse" (1989: 1-2).

In this presentation I will attempt to address three questions: firstly, the impact of the changing cultural perspective on the interpretation of classic texts, then the interrelation of history and fiction, so vital in postmodern theories, and finally the new meanings that a traditional text engenders when judged from the new perspective. To illustrate my points I will use Walter Scott's *Kenilworth*, published in 1821, a novel which is both a realistic account of past events and a self-conscious commentary on how strongly the account is permeated by fiction.

The fact that "in Scott's own time, the popularity of the Waverley novels rested largely on the perceived reality of his writing" (Kerr 1989: 2) proves that the nineteenth century reader was more likely to appreciate the fairly realist story of Amelia Robsart's death than the self-conscious remarks of how the story was actually constructed. The contemporary reader of today, bearing in

mind the postmodern revelations about the inherence of interpretation in any historical accounts, the significance of context in the determination of meaning, the intertextual interplay of meanings or about the diversity of sources out of which historical accounts are constructed, will probably concentrate on the dissolution of the boundary between history and fiction detectable in Scott's novels.

Thus, the perception of *Kenilworth* through the eyes of the contemporary reader will foreground those of its aspects that in traditional reading were underplayed. In the light of contemporary theories texts do not have inherent meanings. Quite the contrary is true, each text coexists with other texts, each is engaged in "intertextual weaving", a situation that Harvey describes in the following way: "writers who create texts or use words do so on the basis of the texts and words they have encountered, while readers deal with them in the same way" (1993: 49). Therefore, the same text can be differently interpreted depending on the context of its origin and reception, the best illustration of which was provided by Borges' story "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*". After Borges' story, where he demonstrates how disparate meanings the same excerpt of *Don Quixote* reveals depending on the cultural context in which it is inscribed, it is legitimate to read Kenilworth "as if it were posterior" to historiographic metafiction and to reveal meanings that so far have been latent in the text.

The relationship of history and literature has never been easy to define. Despite numerous endeavours to delineate a rigid boundary between the two disciplines, "history and fiction", to quote Hutcheon, "have been notoriously porous genres" (1993: 106). Aristotle, for instance, maintained that the governing principle of historical narratives should be time in contrast to plot which was to organise events depicted in literary narratives (Topolski 1998: 8). Since late medieval times it has become clear that time or, more specifically, chronology does not suffice to bind the recounted events into a proper historical account. As White put it, the "events must not be only registered within the chronological framework of their original occurrence but narrated as well" (1987: 5).

Although narrativity is the feature that makes history so conspicuously akin to literature, at least to its storytelling aspect, historians persisted in believing in the objective and scientific nature of their discipline (White 1987: 24), hence their negative reaction to the rise of the new genre: historical novel, a genre that blends facts and fiction. Also writers voiced objections to Walter Scott, a creator and chief representative of the new genre. Eventually, his novels were vindicated as they realistically portrayed past customs and manners.

Contemporary readers might well notice that Scott's historical novels, while constructing the appearance of reality also contain numerous indicators that it is but an appearance of reality, that they are as much stories as they are histories.

Scott does not conceal the fictionality of his narrative; on the contrary, he frequently stresses how his stories were constructed and how prone the sources of history were to alterations. It is the emphasis on the remoteness of his account of events from objective or factual reality that makes *Kenilworth* comparable to contemporary novels.

The authors of postmodern historical novels, like John Fowles, Julian Barnes, Jeanette Winterson or Peter Ackroyd, frequently undermine the reliability of their narratives by pointing to the indirectness of our access to the past. A similar strategy is employed in *Kenilworth* in which Scott presents the events that led to the death of Amelia Robsart, the first wife of the Earl of Leicester. The story of *Kenilworth* describes Leicester, a great favourite of Elizabeth I, as the murderer of his wife who constituted a chief obstacle to the earl's lofty ambitions of marrying the Queen. Yet, Scott in his vital introduction ensures his readers that this is but an interpretation of the events that might turn out to be unfair to Leicester.

> It is possible that slander, which very seldom favours the memories of persons in exalted stations, may have blackened the character of Leicester with darker shades than really belonging to it (Scott 1904: 3).

The helplessness in ascertaining historical facts is not the only impediment to presenting the past faithfully and objectively. Scott realises that each historical account is shaped by the circumstances in which the narrating subject is immersed. The importance of context of narration is, as Hutcheon in put it, one of "the lessons taught by the didactic postmodern fiction ... both forms of narrative representation [fiction and historiography] are, in fact, particularised uses of language (i.e. discourses) that inscribe social and ideological contexts" (Hutcheon 1993: 67). Scott's awareness of the contextual contamination of the narrated past manifests itself already in the first lines of the introduction to *Kenilworth*.

> A certain degree of success, real or supposed, in the delineation of Queen Mary, naturally induced the Author to attempt something similar respecting 'her sister and her foe,' the celebrated Elizabeth. He will not, however, pretend to have approached the task with the same feelings; for the candid Robertson himself confesses having felt the prejudices with which a Scotsman is tempted to regard the subject; and what so liberal a historian avows, a poor romance-writer dares not disown (Scott 1904: 3).

After the avowal, Scott expresses the hope that "the influence of a prejudice ... will not be found to have greatly affected the sketch he has attempted of England's Elizabeth", yet he admits that the prejudice is "almost as natural to him as his native air" (Scott 1904: 3), which is a more literary phrasing of Hutcheon's statement about the significance of the context of historical accounts.

Having acknowledged that it is impossible for both historians and novelists to make impartial interpretations, Scott invokes other texts to lend authority to his version of past events. He claims that his incrimination of Leicester follows from

> the almost general voice of the times [that] attached the most foul suspicions to the death of the unfortunate Countess, more especially as it took place so very opportunely for the indulgence of her lover's ambition (Scott 1904: 3)

which in turn is reflected in various texts from different times. Accordingly, he cites a fragment of Ashmole's "Antiquities of Berkshire" to corroborate the conviction that "there was but too much ground for the traditions which charge Leicester with the murder of his wife" (Scott 1904: 3), as well as pointing to the satire "Leicester's Commonwealth" and the play "Yorkshire Tragedy".

The meticulous analysis of the texts treating of Amelia Robsart's death to a great extent resembles historians' research, or to be more specific, the research of those historians who dabble in what Jenkins dubbed "history in the lower case",[1] that is

> the study of history in the ostensibly disinterested scholarship of academics studying the past objectively and 'for its own sake'. Lower case historians believe that by means of scrutinising original sources, that is documents, it is possible to reconstruct the past as it actually occurred, to produce 'true' knowledge of the past (Jenkins 1998: 6).

Yet, while Scott's way of constructing his story is similar to that of lower case historians, the type of documents he used was closer to the postmodern view that history exists only in the traces of the past and since none of them are perfectly reliable there is no use establishing their hierarchy as all of them contribute to our knowledge of the past. Among the sources of his stories there can be found inscriptions on tombs, legends, letters or inventories, and above all, other literary works. In the section entitled "Author's notes to *Kenilworth*" the sources of the story are listed only to be challenged in respect to their importance for the story or reliability. "Anthony Foster was something the very reverse of the character represented in the novel", acknowledges Scott (1904: 511).

Some of the texts are presented as hard objective evidence of the represented past, as is the case with the "extracts from Kenilworth Inventory, A.D. 1584"

[1] Jenkins identifies two approaches to history before the postmodern theories appeared: "upper case history", seeking for patterns in historical development, and "lower case history", realist and documentary in nature, whose principal aim was to discover "real" past (1998: 3-21).

which might be useful to the "antiquaries, especially, [who] will be desirous to see a more full of specimen [of the furniture of Kenilworth in the days of magnificent Earl of Leicester] than the story leaves room for" (Scott 1904: 516). However, the information that this inventory was communicated to the author by William Harper, Esq., makes the representation of the castle a little more indirect and remote that it might have been without the remark.

The effect of objective representation of the cited inventory is further weakened by the overt presence and control of the author in the process of the presentation of its items. The criteria the author applies in the selection of the items that the readers are presented with are by no means logical or well-justified. Quite the opposite is true, omitting of one item and citing the other depends on the author's idiosyncratic decision.

> I shall copy here that which stands at the head of the list ...
> One of each I will now specify ...
> I shall copy, verbatim, the description of what appears to have been one of the best (Scott 1904: 518).

The other sources are dismissed by Scott either on the grounds of their curiosity or unreliability of their authors.

> If we can trust Ashemole's "Antiquities of Berkshire" ... (Scott 1904: 3)
> Little is known of Robert Laneham, save in his curious letter to a friend in London, giving an account of Queen Elizabeth's entertainment at Kenilworth, written in a style of the most intolerable affectation, both in point of composition and orthography" (Scott 1904: 514)

Scott points to the sources' liability to more or less deliberate alterations: "but fiction has in this, as in other cases, taken the liberty to pillage the stores of oral tradition" (1904: 519), he states. Sometimes the source is adjusted so that it should be concordant with the purpose of the narrative.

> It is unnecessary to state the numerous reasons why the Earl is stated in the tale to be rather the dupe of the villains than the unprincipled author of their atrocities. In the latter capacity, which a part at least of his contemporaries imputed to him, he would have made a character too disgustingly wicked to be useful for the purposes of fiction (Scott 1904: 515).

The notion of fiction recurs in Scott's scrutiny of the sources of *Kenilworth*. For one thing, he emphasises the fact that the traces of the past do not by any means constitute a faithful representation of the past as it actually occurred. A theoretical description of the postmodern treatment of the accounts of the past provided by Jenkins might as well be a commentary on the way Walter Scott is presenting his sources. Jenkins explains that there are no objective checks on

historiography. Facts are constructed from "traces of the past", which are not very reliable in themselves, and later combined by historians into "synthetic accounts" (1998: 19). After the intervention, the real past seems very remote.

Not only are the sources "contaminated" by fictionality; fiction comes to the surface also at the level of ordering the recounted events into a narrative. Each narrative has got its own purpose, which is what Scott clearly acknowledges. Hutcheon explains that in contemporary novels the narrators are making their presence felt; they impose the order of events without pretending that there was some natural order to be found (1993: 66). In *Kenilworth* the figure controlling the narration is also clearly manifest.

The fictional character of the narrative is manifest already in the opening sentence of *Kenilworth*: "It is the privilege of the tale-tellers to open the story in an inn ..." (Scott 1904: 11). Throughout the narrative Scott reminds his readers that what they are reading is but a narrative. He compares his characters to actors, and indeed the misunderstandings and intricacies in which they are involved are of a similar nature to those depicted by the Renaissance playwrights. One of the characters, Wayland, is described in the following way: "[Wayland] found himself engaged far deeper than he had expected in a train of mysterious and unintelligible intrigues in which the actors seemed hardly to know their own course" (Scott 1904: 360). In Kenilworth, Leicester's castle, the characters appear not to be certain whether what they are observing is reality or a part of pageants staged in honour of the Queen. Elizabeth herself, meeting Amelia for the first time, is at a loss to which reality the encountered woman really belongs.

> From her dress, and the casket which she instinctively held in her hand, Elizabeth naturally conjectured that the beautiful but mute figure which she beheld was a performer in one of the various theatrical pageants which had been placed in different situations to surprise her with their homage, and that the poor player, overcome with awe at her presence, had either forgot the part assigned to her, or lacked courage to go through it (Scott 1904: 416).

The intermingling of the two planes of (fictional) reality as well as the role of the masque in revealing the truth about Leicester's secret marriage to Amelia Robsart call to mind the-play-within-the-play technique, which by the reference to theatrical conventions, makes the story even more remote from the objective/factual reality. Once the Queen declares that the "revels of Kenilworth are not yet exhausted ... we are here to solemnise the noble owner's marriage ... [and] the happy bride is Amy Robsart, the same who, to make up the May-game yesterday, figured in the pageant as the wife of his servant Varney" (Scott 1904: 486), which is not what we know from the novel, it becomes evident how easy the recounted event gets entangled in the interplay of various texts of reality and how multiplex the representation of the past is.

Walter Scott's *Kenilworth* is a clear illustration of, what Jenkins calls, "the dissolution of the referent into representation" (1998: 17) proclaimed by, to employ Hutcheon's term, the postmodernist "historiographic metafiction". Despite its apparent verisimilitude, history in the novel is self-consciously fictional. The readers can recognise figures, places and events familiar from historical accounts. Scott, however, makes sure that the readers realise that the past is absent, what is left are only its traces, out of which historians/narrators can construct histories/stories in accordance with their purposes.

Thus, although it is only in contemporary times that the affinity of story and history receives so much attention in historiographic metafiction, the issue appears to be as old as the historical novel itself. Even if Scott's story offers the readers a coherent plausible narrative, it does not fail to indicate that it is but a version of history, constructed of numerous, frequently contradictory sources, which themselves were already mediated by those who authorised them and by the context of their production. Therefore, although the story of Leicester's wife's death is fairly realist in nature, it also constitutes a good commentary on the process of constructing a history and the symbiosis of history and fiction.

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