



University of Dundee

Walter Scott's Late Gothic Stories

Cook, Daniel

Published in:
Gothic Studies

DOI:
[10.3366/gothic.2021.0077](https://doi.org/10.3366/gothic.2021.0077)

Publication date:
2021

Document Version
Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication in Discovery Research Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Cook, D. (2021). Walter Scott's Late Gothic Stories. *Gothic Studies*, 23(1), 43-59.
<https://doi.org/10.3366/gothic.2021.0077>

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in Discovery Research Portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Walter Scott's Late Gothic Stories

Daniel Cook, University of Dundee

Abstract

While 'Wandering Willie's Tale', above all of Walter Scott's shorter fictions, has often been included in Gothic anthologies and period surveys, the apparently disposable pieces that appeared in *The Keepsake for 1829*, renegades from the novelist's failed *Chronicles of the Canongate* series, have received far less attention. Read in the unlikely context of a plush Christmas gift book, 'My Aunt Margaret's Mirror' and 'The Tapestryed Chamber' repay an audience familiar with the conventions of a supernatural short story. But to keep readers interested, The Author of *Waverley*, writing at the end of a long and celebrated career in fiction, would need to employ some new gimmicks. As we shall see, the late stories are not literary cast-offs but recastings finely attuned to a bespoke word-and-image forum.

Keywords

Walter Scott; the Short Story; Ghosts; Supernatural Fiction; Phantasmagoria; Keepsake

In 1818, *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* published a bizarre short story in which the banal plot is overshadowed – quite literally – by a supernatural narrator, a sentient shadow who whiles away his days reading books on the occult sciences in his library at the eerie Castle Shadoway, safe from the deadly sunlight that had killed his father. No narrator in literary history seems better placed to deliver a tale of terror – but 'Phantasmagoria' is not that story. There is a ghostly prophecy. But it is wholly benign. Even the hero dies peacefully in old age, off the page, after a long military career. In any case, the story's author, Walter Scott, kept coming back to the Gothic. In *The Bride of Lammermoor* (1819), most notably, and other historical novels, The Author of *Waverley* incorporated plot points, tropes and other conventions common to the mode, up to and including the unfinished Calabrian tale *Bizarro* (1832; first published in 2008).¹ Some of the multivolume novels even include extended, extractable tales of terror: 'The Fortunes of Martin Waldeck' in *The Antiquary* (1816), a Germanic folktale about human greed and demonic callousness; 'Wandering Willie's Tale' in *Redgauntlet* (1824), a Burnsian horror story of bedevilled legacies; and 'Donnerhugel's Narrative' in *Anne of Geierstein* (1829), a supernatural take on the cursed marriage plot. At the

same time, Scott's career as a short story writer was brief and, by his high standards, unsuccessful.² *Chronicles of the Canongate* (1827), his only collection of short fiction, sold so poorly that he quickly rejigged the planned second series to adhere instead to a more familiar format, the multivolume novel, with *The Fair Maid of Perth* (1828). More novels soon followed. While Scott's position in the emergence of the mainstream British short story tradition has long been underplayed, largely as a result of the financial fallout of *Chronicles*, it should be no surprise that such an experienced storyteller should also excel in short-form prose, particularly in the Gothic style that had proven so popular in *Blackwood's* and other Scottish outlets in the early nineteenth century.³

While 'Wandering Willie's Tale', above all of Scott's shorter fictions, has often been included in gothic anthologies and period surveys, two apparently disposable pieces from the failed *Chronicles* series have received far less attention.⁴ Read in the unlikely context of the plush Christmas gift book in which the stories eventually appeared, *The Keepsake for 1829*, 'My Aunt Margaret's Mirror' and 'The Tapestry Chamber' repay an audience familiar with the conventions of the supernatural short story. A phantasmagoric tale and a ghost story, respectively, each delivers the core motifs we demand: a magic mirror and a ghost. That said, neither piece is a straightforwardly gothic work, I wish to argue; nor are they miniature parodies or pastiches, as such. If anything, they advocate the mild supernatural strain of the mode, to adapt the phrasing of the first text's chief storyteller, the eponymous Aunt Margaret.⁵ Her magic mirror titillates us, but plot-wise it is redundant. 'The Tapestry Chamber' glimpses a ghost of a long-dead murderer, but similarly, her presence is no more haunting than the family painting that captured her evil demeanour while alive. To keep loyal readers interested, The Author of Waverley, writing at the end of a long and celebrated career in fiction, would need to find some new gimmicks.

Gothic Keepsakes

Scott intended to include 'My Aunt Margaret's Mirror' and 'The Tapestry Chamber' in the second series of *Chronicles of the Canongate*. But the publisher, Robert Cadell, rejected them. These pieces were later reunited with *Chronicles* in the 1829-32 Magnum Opus edition of Scott's works, largely for logistical reasons as the third text in the first series, *The Surgeon's Daughter*, was simply too long. At the time, after some protracted reluctance, Scott eventually sold the stories to Charles Heath for inclusion in *The Keepsake*. Communal authorship, even in the ornate format of a miscellany gift book, made little financial sense to Scott: 'one hundred of their close printed pages, for which they offer £400, is not nearly equal to one volume of a

novel for which I get £1300 and have the reversion of the copyright'.⁶ Heath and his associate Frederic Mansel Reynolds even invited Scott to edit the series on generous terms. 'No', the author wrote in his journal, 'I may give them a trifle for nothing or sell them an article for a round price but no permanent engagement will I make'.⁷ He informed Heath and Reynolds of his decision the next day at breakfast, much to their disappointment. After nearly three weeks of writing, proofing and correcting his own work for the Magnum Opus edition, Scott wrote to Reynolds with a counteroffer: £500 outright for one hundred print pages – more than enough to pay a year's salary for a professional. Finally, on 29 March 1828, Scott received an agreement to his demands.⁸ Such demands included clearly defined rights of ownership: Heath could republish the texts as often as he liked but only in *The Keepsake*, and Scott could reprint them in his own edition after three years.

The *Keepsake* pieces ought to be read in the purview of the Christmas gift book's largely bourgeois audience, the sort of readership Scott's publishers sought for the handsome, definitively recast Magnum Opus edition at the time.⁹ Costing a pretty guinea, nearly 20,000 copies of the 1829 volume were sold in less than a month.¹⁰ But, equally, the stories retain a vestigial connection with the *Chronicles* series. After all, most nineteenth-century editions of Scott replicated the rejoining of the *Keepsake* pieces with *Chronicles*. There is also the strong possibility that 'My Aunt Margaret's Mirror' was actually intended for a different audience, *Blackwood's* in 1826, as Graham Tulloch and Judy King ponder. 'I wrote nothing to-day but part of a trifle for Blackwood', Scott tantalisingly wrote in his journal on 21 July that year.¹¹ This is not to suggest that Scott merely took advantage of a business opportunity, that he simply moved surplus stock (two substantial stories rejected by Cadell the previous December) over to a willing buyer, as Wendell V. Harris assumes.¹² On the contrary, Scott provided extra pieces ('Death of the Laird's Jock' and 'A Scene at Abbotsford') in the same 1829 issue, 'The House of Aspen' (a drama) a year later, and 'A Highland Anecdote' in 1832.

We might also add 'The Tapestry Chamber' to the list of original items, since there is little definitive evidence that Scott had substantially written it (rather than merely planned the story out) before Cadell changed the direction of *Chronicles*.¹³ Even the already written material would have been reworked for the new format, though Scott privately downplayed the labouring by retaining his self-image of gentlemanly amateurism: 'Amused myself by converting the Tale of the Mysterious Mirror into "Aunt Margaret's Mirror", design[e]d for Heath's What dye call it', he writes in his journal on 13 April 1828.¹⁴ Coleman O. Parsons has also suggested that Scott penned for *Blackwood's* a text that superficially appears to be a shorter version of 'The Tapestry Chamber' called 'Story of an Apparition', which, if the author did

work it up for the new forum, would further indicate an opportunism in Scott's *Keepsake* contribution.¹⁵ The story signed 'A. B.' certainly bears a striking resemblance to the gift book version printed a decade later. Alan Lang Strout assigns the story to Alexander Blair.¹⁶ Either way, readers of the forum in which Scott's stories did appear, *The Keepsake*, would have been more mindful of his looming authorial presence. Under the familiar label of The Author of Waverley, his stories took top billing among many notable peers, such as the Shelleys, Wordsworth, Coleridge and Thomas Moore.

Not that it was necessary by 1829 but he is also named outright, as Sir Walter Scott, at the front of the List of Contributors. As communal fora for short fiction these sorts of books did not allow for the same anonymity of the experimental, character-driven periodicals like *Blackwood's*. Gift book prose and poems might reasonably be construed as safe, homely works attached to dependable authors; that was the view taken at the time by *The New Monthly Magazine*, at least: 'though they may contribute little or nothing to the stock of our national literature, they are useful as records, from year to year, of the changes in literary taste and style which are for ever taking place amongst us'.¹⁷ However, Scott's *Keepsake* stories, especially 'My Aunt Margaret's Mirror' and 'The Tapestry Chamber', are not merely pendants to the Waverley Novels either. They are not cast-offs but recastings finely attuned to a bespoke word-and-image forum. To keep readers interested, The Author of Waverley would need to employ some new tricks – as well as the old ones – within the condensed space of short-form fiction.

'My Aunt Margaret's Mirror'

'My Aunt Margaret's Mirror' conforms to Scott's career-long approach as a short story writer (in the guises of Wandering Willie, Chrystal Croftangry, and others): taking up hints from familial legends and placing a figuration of the main authorial source within the story itself. Despite Cadell's rejection of the work, Scott believed in the quality of his material: 'The tale is a good one and is said actually to have happen[e]d to Lady Primrose, my great grandmother having attended her sister on the occasion'.¹⁸ Aunt Margaret has a compelling presence, like the late Mrs Baliol of *Chronicles*, a fictional storyteller from whom Croftangry (the nominal author) garnered his Highland tales 'The Two Drovers' and 'The Highland Widow'. And like *Chronicles*, 'Margaret's Mirror' opens with its own version of an account of the proprietary storyteller (namely 'Croftangry's Narrative'), though it is not marked off from the story proper in the same way. The unnamed narrator praises Aunt Margaret, to whom children of their large, extended family went for various benefits (the dull and peevish were sent to her to be enlivened, the boisterous to be quietened, and the stubborn to be subdued by her kindness). Whereas Baliol

entertains the literati with her stories, Aunt Margaret diverts the children. Now those children have grown up and gone: ‘not one now remains alive but myself’ (48).

Everything around her is changing. Much to the disgust of the nephew, huge patches of the family’s land have been sold off for commercial ventures, ‘torn up by agriculture, or covered with buildings’ (48). Such change matters little for the story, other than to flag up the narrator’s resistance to progress; rather, such details allow Scott to make a salient point about the vulnerability of cultural memory. As the surrogate tale-teller heads to his aunt’s surviving home, his imagination comes alive again: ‘as I stop, rest on my crutch-headed cane, and look round with that species of comparison between the thing I was and that which I now am,—it almost induces me to doubt my own identity’ (49). The incidental detail of the cane ages the narrator, and his thoughts at large indicate the importance of his presence within the text: to keep alive the local legends currently left in the hands of the aunt. Not merely an amusing caregiver, a subject fit for a character sketch, Aunt Margaret is a waning agent of Scottish folk memory. Her stories, like her honeysuckle home, offer comfort. But the dwelling now looks wonky with ‘its irregularity of front, and its odd projecting latticed windows’, and, like her, out of place with the modernised surroundings. Aunt Margaret herself looks timeless: ‘The old lady’s invariable costume has doubtless some share in confirming one in the opinion, that time has stood still with Aunt Margaret’ (50). A benign phantom of yesteryear, she wears a chocolate-coloured silk gown with ruffles that looks not merely dated for 1826 but would have been considered old even by 1780, according to the nephew.

In conversation Aunt Margaret has little interest in the present or the future: ‘We therefore naturally look back to the past; and forget the present fallen fortunes and declined importance of our family, in recalling the hours when it was wealthy and prosperous’ (50). Politically, as she recognises, she is out of step: ‘I am, as you know, a piece of that old-fashioned thing called a Jacobite; but I am so in sentiment and feeling only; for a more loyal subject never joined in prayers for the health and wealth of George the Fourth, whom God long preserve!’ (52). Even when confronted with perhaps the most arresting *memento mori* of all – a recently recovered gravestone bearing one’s own name, as shared with a sixteenth-century namesake – thoughts of death comfort rather than frighten her: ‘It soothes my imagination, without influencing my reason or conduct’ (51). Such sentiment shapes her aesthetic, which, to adopt her words, we might call the mild supernatural:

All that is indispensable for the enjoyment of the milder feeling of supernatural awe is, that you should be susceptible of the slight shuddering which creeps over you, when

you hear a tale of terror—that well-vouched tale which the narrator, having first expressed his general disbelief of all such legendary lore, selects and produces, as having something in it which he has been always obliged to give up as inexplicable. (53)

Subtler responses to stimulus as exhibited here will stay with you long after the story has ended, causing you to avoid looking into a mirror when you are alone at night: ‘I mean such are signs which indicate the crisis, when a female imagination is in due temperature to enjoy a ghost story’ (54).

In terms of genre, whether she knows it or not, Aunt Margaret comes closer to Radcliffean terror than to Lewisian horror. A lively imagination can affect our perception of even an everyday domestic object such as the unilluminated mirror: ‘That space of inky darkness seems to be a field for Fancy to play her revels in’ (54). Outwardly a quaint vignette about cultural memory as embodied by an old-fashioned if amiable old woman, the ‘slight introduction’ of Aunt Margaret can also be used as a readerly frame for the story of the mirror (50). We might read the ensuing story within the context of her sentimental Jacobitism, for example. Or we might profitably regard it as a charming tale of terror delivered by a familial, living ghost. Products of her askew imagination, or waking dreams, as Aunt Margaret calls them, have more value than actions. (Unlike Elspat, the eponymous figure of Scott’s *Chronicles* story ‘The Highland Widow’, the elderly figure before us can mould her narrative as she so wishes, using it to define her community or even to articulate her own experiences.)

With the story proper almost immediately underway, the reader will bear in mind the aunt’s reticence about the mirror. As the title of the story makes plain, as well as the retitling above the line break ahead of chapter one (‘The Mirror’), it will become the central motif. We will not see it again for some time, let alone the mild supernaturalism for which we have been primed. Instead, the aunt opens in a different genre, one for which we have also been prepped: ‘sketches of the society which has passed way’ (54). One such figure is Sir Philip Forester, a late-seventeenth-century Scottish libertine whom she immediately likens to a character in Colley Cibber’s comedy *The Careless Husband* (1704), Sir Charles Easy, an unfaithful but ultimately repentant husband, and to Samuel Richardson’s Lovelace, a man of fashion who brings about the death of the virtuous Clarissa Harlowe, the titular heroine of the bestselling 1748 novel *Clarissa*. Which literary character will Sir Philip ultimately resemble, we might wonder? Aunt Margaret casually hints that he comes closer to the unscrupulous Lovelace as one poor girl ‘died of heart-break’, but ‘that has nothing to do with my story’ (55). Eventually

he married Jemmie Falconer, the meek younger sister of the headstrong Lady Bothwell, Aunt Margaret's grandmother. Growing bored, 'the adventurous knight' seeks excitement with the military overseas. Reminding him that he is a husband and a father, Lady Bothwell inadvertently raises our expectations: surely he will die fighting for the Duke of Marlborough's European campaigns.

Later, in the denouement of the first named chapter, we might anticipate the worst from a small aside: 'A single letter had informed her of his arrival on the continent—no others were received' (60). Ending there, with Lady Forester's agitation representing the sufferings of war widows, the story would be effective. But chapter two bears the bulk of the story. Lady Bothwell and her sister make inquiries to the army's headquarters. They soon learn that Sir Philip 'was no longer with the army' (61). The cause remains unknown. At the same time, a mysterious Italian doctor, Baptista Damiotti, arrives in Edinburgh. Rumours circulate about his use of 'unlawful arts', even in a city 'famed [...] for abhorrence of witches and necromancers'. The narrator even suggests that the Paduan Doctor, as they call him, 'could tell the fate of the absent, and even show his visitors the personal form of their absent friends, and the action in which they were engaged at the moment'. 'This rumour came to the ears of Lady Forester' – the satanic connotation of the phrasing seems apt – and she resolves with her sister to visit Damiotti's premises in the capital. The ominous, atmospheric description of the scene would not look out of place in an Ann Radcliffe novel: 'The two ladies found themselves in a small vestibule, illuminated by a dim lamp, and having, when the door was closed, no communication with the external light or air' (63). (Aunt Margaret had warned us that a slight shuddering would creep over us.)

When Damiotti finally arrives in the story, though, he is disappointingly ordinary: 'There was nothing very peculiar in the Italian's appearance' (63). Dressed in the universal costume of the medical profession, and referring to himself as a doctor throughout, he nevertheless has otherworldly powers. Apparently, he reads Lady Bothwell's thoughts. There is a deft metafictional joke here as *we* have just "read" her thoughts too:

Lady Bothwell, considering this rejection of her sister's offer as a mere trick of an empiric, to induce her to press a larger sum upon him, and willing that the scene should be commenced and ended, offered some gold in turn, observing that it was only to enlarge the sphere of his charity.

"Let Lady Bothwell enlarge the sphere of her own charity," said the Paduan. (65)

Parroting her thoughts back to her, Damiotti is an uncanny reader – not so much an audience surrogate, in the way the narrator is, but a hijacker of our experience. He even turns the ladies into obedient readers as they must experience his visions without interfering: ‘if you can remain steadily silent for the seven minutes, your curiosity will be gratified without the slightest risk; and for this I will engage my honour’ (65). He assumes the position of an author, and we (the ladies included) must quietly enjoy or endure the experience. The experience is not entirely silent but rather multisensory, if taken literally: ‘In a few moments the thoughts of both were diverted from their own situation, by a strain of music so singularly sweet and solemn’ (66). The doctor reappears in new clothes – a more fanciful doublet of dark crimson silk – suggesting a move away from science toward theatricality.

Led into a large room decorated ‘as if for a funeral’, with human skulls and books adding to the deathly ambiance, the sisters are most struck by a tall and broad mirror. Gazing into it, they become mesmerised: ‘It no longer simply reflected the objects placed before it, but, as if it had self-contained scenery of its own, objects began to appear within it’ (67). The objects are not clear – ‘at first in a disorderly, indistinct, and miscellaneous manner, like form arranging itself out of chaos’ – until the Paduan Doctor manipulates them: ‘at length, in distinct and defined shape and symmetry’ (67). Damiotti is effectively a magic lanternist. Our immediate question seems unanswerable: is this mere puppetry, or does he channel supernatural forces? Is he a scientist or an artist? In fiction, what is the difference? What would the diverting, nurturing Aunt Margaret wish us to believe? When the image settles the women witness a bridal scene. They see an extremely beautiful girl, aged no more than sixteen, but they cannot see the bridegroom’s face. Soon enough, as the performance develops, they ‘frightfully realised’ it was Sir Philip himself when he is attacked by his brother-in-law Captain Falconer. Wringing her hands and casting her eyes to heaven, Lady Forester cannot be comforted. A young physician later attends to her, damning ‘this Italian warlock’, noting that ‘this is the seventh nervous case I have heard of his making for me, and all by effect of terror’ (70). Whether the image of the bridal scene was genuine or not is immaterial, other than in terms of narrative closure. It is the effect on the audience – like the vicarious effect of reading a tale of terror more generally – that matters more.

Besides, a letter soon arrives in which it is confirmed that Captain Falconer *had* stumbled across Sir Philip’s bigamous nuptials. More than that, the letter (the written word) can elaborate far more detail than the projected image. Challenging the cad to a duel, Captain Falconer had been shot and killed. The written letter can even give us the pre-story: Sir Philip left the army suddenly due to gambling debts, changed his name, and gained the hand of an

heiress to an ancient and rich burgomaster. The wronged wife seems to be more affected by the letter than the mirror image, it must be said: 'Lady Forester never recovered the shock of this dismal intelligence' (71). The central visual motif, the magic mirror, frustrates the truthfulness of the tale. Even Aunt Margaret has to 'maim one's story' by conceding that the event depicted in the mirror had taken place 'some days sooner than the apparition was exhibited' (72). By implication the Paduan Doctor may have concocted a phantasmagoria show based on prior knowledge, an elaborate prank to be sure, and one that throws doubt on any supernatural explanations, mild or otherwise. Read within the context of Ina Ferris's apparitional poetics, which prioritises Scott's language of the senses, this nominal ghost story extends rather than contradicts the generative power of the realist mode.¹⁹ Fiction is performative. Reading historical fiction and supernatural short stories alike demands a participatory response.

For some time Scott had been reworking the phantasmagoric motif, from Thomas Nashe's sixteenth-century picaresque novel *The Unfortunate Traveller* (if not more directly from Agrippa's *De occulta philosophia libri tres*), in *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* and elsewhere.²⁰ In *The Bride of Lammermoor*, Scott aligned the magic mirror more overtly with gothic demonism:

it was charged against her, among other offences, that she had, by the aid and delusions of Satan, shewn to a young person of quality, in a mirror glass, a gentleman then abroad, to whom the said young person was betrothed, and who appeared in the vision to be in the act of bestowing his hand upon another lady.²¹

Significantly, though, the form and content of the vision of the bigamist shown in Dame Gourlay's mirror glass is merely hearsay based on incomplete records, a trick or reality, as the reader must for themselves infer. By contrast, in 'Margaret's Mirror' the spectral if hardly hidden author beneath the text, Scott, does show us the vision, and elicits genuine astonishment from the characters' point of view. But plot-wise the vision is redundant. Although stunned by the supernaturalist theatrics, Lady Forester seems more concerned with dealing with the fallout of a libertine's caddishness, thereby committing herself to the wronged woman genre that proved especially popular in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Since the letter (a basic element of earlier amatory fiction) solves the mystery of the absent husband, we might wonder if the magic mirror serves little more purpose than as a gothic gimmick aimed at titillating Scott's longstanding readership. Or, viewed the other way round,

we might wonder if the story has become a parable about the ultimate triumph of the word over image. The latter interpretation would be especially pertinent, if unkind, in the context of *The Keepsake*, as the proprietors prided themselves on the inclusion of nineteenth or so ornate prints per volume. Irrespective of form (whether a written text augmented with visual imagery or a word-and-image story) or genre (amatory fiction or the supernatural or neither), the narrative refuses to provide closure: the main villain (Sir Philip) and the supplementary villain (if Damiotti is in fact a fraudster) evade punishment. Damiotti scarpered without leaving a trace. Sir Philip lived into old age, though apparently haunted by a semblance of guilt: years later, he visited Lady Bothwell in disguise to ask for forgiveness – though his real motivation might be to see if he would be allowed back into the country. When she recognises him, the cad flees with ease. E. Portbury's engraving of J. M. Wright's 'The Magic Mirror' – which illustrated Scott's story, depicting the sisters' dismay at the bridal scene – is impeccable. But this is a static print-based medium: the characters' immersive experience in the funereal apartment cannot be replicated other than through the words of Aunt Margaret, a distanced witness relying on exaggerated rumour. Of course, Scott was more than a little disingenuous when he claimed in the *Magnum Opus* introduction to the story that 'it is a mere transcript, or at least with very little embellishment, of a story that I remembered being struck with in my childhood'.²² Such a transcript comes alive in the telling and retelling of it.

'The Tapestry Chamber'

Printed almost eighty pages later in *The Keepsake for 1829*, 'The Tapestry Chamber' has the same sort of innocuous title as 'My Aunt Margaret's Mirror'. For readers of modern anthologies of ghost stories it certainly remains a familiar enough staple of the genre.²³ Flicking through the gift book, though, a reader from any period would be struck by a ghoulish image drawn by F. P. Stephanoff and engraved by J. Goodyear. The image depicts the main event of the story, a nocturnal visitation by The Lady in the Sacque. Against the numbed startlement on the faces of the sisters in Wright's 'The Magic Mirror', Stephanoff's image deftly captures the demonic demeanour of the lady in the centre of the frame and the haunted look of the young man in the bed. If anything, the image threatens to spoil the reader's first experience of the plot, even if the plot would have been familiar enough – *Blackwood's* had published in September 1818 'Story of an Apparition', a similar ghost story sometimes attributed to Scott, though it is more likely the result of a common source.²⁴ But at least the image endorses the claim made at the outset by the narrator: 'I will not add to, or diminish the narrative, by any circumstance, whether more or less material, but simply rehearse, as I heard it, a story of supernatural

terror'.²⁵ The story, he says in the beginning, comes from his mentor Anna Seward, whom Scott visited in 1807.²⁶

'Margaret's Mirror' depicts the emotional turmoil on Lady Forester caused by her husband's bigamy, which happens to be revealed first in a theatrical phantasmagoria and secondarily, with no less authority, in an official letter. If the mirror in that tale is an incidental motif, at least in terms of plot, the central though unannounced motif of 'The Tapestry Chamber' anchors its plot more emphatically: a ghost story needs a ghost or a ghost-like figure. Ghosts are by definition historical – haunting traces of a past made manifest. Simon Hay usefully examines 'The Tapestry Chamber', along with 'The Highland Widow', as a species of historical fiction in which Scott lingers on the horrific aspects of a communal past:

The historical novel sees a benign inheritance glossed by nostalgia, a narrative of sympathy for the past that allows the past to be abandoned, substituting the benevolent spectator and the present for the object of that sympathy in the past. The ghost story insists that no such successful inheritance, no such substitution is possible. All we can do with the past is repress it: board up its rooms and try to forget its events, whether those events are the brutality of the aristocracy or the passing of the aristocracy, the loss of the Americas to an upstart rebellion or the passing of aesthetically idealized English village life.²⁷

General Browne, in this kind of reading, represents a middleclass nostalgia for rural stability and order, an Englishness exhausted by foreign war and domestic industrialisation. Defeated in the American War of Independence, he seeks sanctuary on a tour of the western counties of England. Taking a closer look at an intriguing castle in a quaint little town, he soon learns that it happens to belong to the new Lord Woodville, an old schoolfriend. Delighted to see Browne again, Woodville invites him to stay for a week or more. He shows him to his comfortable if quirkily old-fashioned chambers, much to the delight of the General, who, to use Hay's phrasing, favours a heterochronic version of modernity over an industrialised one.

Late for breakfast the next morning, much to Woodville's dismay, Browne eventually appears 'fatigued and feverish' (81). Significantly, we have not actually witnessed the cause of his distress: 'contrary to the custom of this species of tale, we leave the general in possession of his apartment until the next morning' (81). So far, Scott refuses to square the action with the expectations of the genre: it is a ghost story, but we are not allowed to see the ghost (textually, at least). We have to wait for Browne's first-hand retelling, a momentary narratorial

disengagement that only further serves to ramp up the readerly tension associated with this ‘species of tale’. In company, he claims to have slept well – a blatant lie that ironically marks him out as an honourable, discreet guest in the aristocrat’s home, and therefore as reliable a narrator as we can hope for. Only when Woodville takes him aside, many paragraphs later, does he admit that he has been greatly shocked by something unknown: ‘what happened to me last night is of a nature so peculiar and so unpleasant, that I could hardly bring myself to detail it even to your lordship’ (83). Building on Hay’s reading, I want to lay more stress on the structural importance of Browne’s subjectivity. Like an earnest actor in a melodrama, the General must ground a preposterous story through his authentic narration.

The ghost motif, like the photorealistic phantasmagoria of ‘Margaret’s Mirror’, also sanctions a metagenic commentary on the formal suitability of different storytelling fora (the spoken word, the written word, and a full-page etching), all of which perpetually tell and retell one character’s experiences. Which of the fora would be most effective in conveying the ghastliness of the ghost, for both the character living through the experience and for the reader experiencing it after the fact? Only the etching in *The Keepsake* shows us the ghost; but even that vision is remediated through the artist’s imagination and through a third-party gaze. The tapestried chamber, the titular motif, becomes for the General an immersive painting. For us, it snapshots his experience. ‘I will proceed with my story as well as I can’, Browne eventually says in the morning after the event, ‘relying upon your candour’ (83). Woodville takes up the position of the audience’s surrogate, mediating for us a suitable response to the tale-teller’s unaccustomed delivery by remaining ‘silent and in an attitude of attention’ (83). The reported event took place during the night, in the tapestried chamber. Reminiscing about his shared childhood with his host, Browne could not sleep. Suddenly, the sounds of a rustled gown and the tapping of high-heeled shoes on the floor disturb him. Drawing back the bed’s curtain he saw ‘the figure of a little woman’ but could not see her face (84). Taking the rational view that an elderly resident of the house had mistakenly wandered into the room, presumably out of habit, he coughed in order to alert her to his presence.

Adopting the fits and starts of Matthew Lewis’s Gothic grammar, the tale-teller immediately changes the mood: ‘She turned slowly round—But, gracious heaven! my lord, what a countenance did she display to me! There was no longer any question what she was, or any thought of her being a living being’ (84). His perspective becomes ghastly: ‘The body of some atrocious criminal seemed to have been given up from the grave, and the soul restored from the penal fire, in order to form, for a space, an union with the ancient accomplice of its guilt’ (84-85). Not only does Browne paint in words an image of the supernatural vision, he

vividly records his physical reaction to it: 'I felt the current of my life-blood arrested, and I sank back in a swoon, as very a victim to panic terror as ever was a village girl, or a child of ten years old' (85). Beyond that, he cannot 'pretend to describe what hot and cold fever-fits tormented me for the rest of the night' (85). In effect, Browne takes on all three of the basic roles in a ghost story: he is the authoritative storyteller, despite some perceived failings ('There was no longer any question what she was'); a character affecting the story ('I moved myself in bed and coughed a little'); and even the reader affected by the story ('I felt my hair individually bristle', 85). In his theoretical position on literary supernaturalism Scott claimed that the 'imagination of the reader is to be excited if possible, without being gratified'.²⁸ 'The Tapestry Chamber' instead self-gratifies Browne. Startled by what he hears, Woodville now believes the extraordinary rumours that he had casually dismissed in a dramatic aside to himself a few paragraphs earlier.

The General has inadvertently become a compelling tale-teller, the aristocrat a compelled reader: 'Strange as the general's tale was, he spoke with such a deep air of conviction, that it cut short all the usual commentaries which are made on such stories' (86). The unnamed, third-party narrator, anticipating the needs of the gift book readers, instead offers a series of explanations as they dismiss them: 'Lord Woodville never once asked him if he was sure he did not dream of the apparition, nor suggested any of the possibilities by which it is fashionable to explain apparitions into vagaries of the fancy, or deceptions of the optic nerves' (86). Earlier, Scott refused to match the action with the expectations of the genre: he left the haunted protagonist shut away in what we only later learn had been the site of the ghostly visitation, the key marker of the mode. Now he repeatedly refutes any substantial engagement with the make-believe realities of the Gothic. Put another way, though, Scott upholds the *sine qua non* of the explained supernatural: the truth is rarely more interesting than the experience itself. An early and representative example of the ghost story that developed in the nineteenth century, says Srdjan Smajic, 'The Tapestry Chamber' stages complex negotiations between faith and doubt in the epistemological value of sight amid the declining influence of metaphysical philosophy and the emergent dissemination of ideas through physiological science.²⁹ A physiological explanation would indicate that such visions were the functions of a sound mind and eye, even if it is an optical illusion, rather than a sign of an overactive, even unhealthy imagination.

However, such an approach downplays the metonymic function of the literary ghost: here, to stimulate Browne's imagination and therefore compound his storytelling capabilities. The ghost's textual presence becomes manifest, verbally at least, in the General's retelling of

the experience to his friend – and to us, the readers of *The Keepsake*, by extension. That experience also shapes his thwarted appreciation of another visual trace of the female figure. The aristocrat takes the distracted General to his gallery of paintings, purportedly to calm him. But this is a ruse. He knows full well that if his friend unwittingly sees a portrait of The Lady in the Sacque – and reacts with horror – he will finally validate the curious claims. This time we witness with Woodville the unmediated reaction of his guest in real time: ‘he beheld General Browne suddenly start, and assume an attitude of the utmost surprise, not unmixed with fear, as his eyes were caught and suddenly riveted by a portrait of an old lady in a sacque, the fashionable dress of the end of the seventeenth century’ (88). (Browne’s reaction is just as static as the portrait upon which he gazes; in effect, he is doomed to repeat the dynamic of Stephanoff’s plate.) ‘There she is—’, he exclaims, with a dash textually mimicking the pointing finger. ‘That is the picture of a wretched ancestress of mine’, Woodville candidly reveals, ‘of whose crimes a black and fearful catalogue is recorded in a family history in my charter-chest’. ‘The recital of them would be too horrible’, he continues; ‘it is enough to say, that in yon fatal apartment incest, and unnatural murder, were committed’ (88).

Woodville refuses to verbalise the horrid backstory of The Lady in the Sacque as recorded in the official documents. The ancestor’s portrait in the castle’s gallery, meanwhile, preserves without prejudice her position in the family. The tapestried chamber is boarded up again: no longer an immersive painting of sorts, the room becomes an unvisited mausoleum. Browne takes the story – his story – with him but intends to forget it completely. Ghost stories need ghosts. But it is the haunted who tell and retell the tale, if they so choose. Scott’s pieces in *The Keepsake* do not parody or even pastiche the Gothic in any straightforward way. Nor are they aggressive homages that seek to revitalise stale literary formulas. After all, Browne’s earnestness convinces Woodville and therefore us. Rather, Scott hushes up but does not fully bury his connection with the genre. Recasting his texts for *The Keepsake*, a bespoke word-and-image forum, Scott found novel ways to keep his readers interested. He uses gothic gimmicks – a magic mirror that serves no real purpose in the plot and a ghost that is no more interesting than the gruesome painting that depicts its living form – to tell familial and familiar stories anew.

¹ On Scott’s Gothic imagination in *Redgauntlet* see Fiona Robertson, *Legitimate Histories: Scott, Gothic, and the Authorities of Fiction* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), pp. 246-64. See also Robertson, ‘Gothic Scott’, in Carol Margaret Davison and Monica Germanà (ed.), *Scottish Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), pp. 102-14, and Ian Duncan, ‘Walter Scott, James Hogg, and Scottish Gothic’, in David Punter (ed.), *A Companion to the Gothic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 70-80. Scott

-
- smuggled an unmarked miniature tale of terror into a new 1830 introductory chapter for the Magnum Opus edition of *The Bride of Lammermoor*; this has been separately anthologised in Barrett H. Clark and Maxim Lieber's frequently reissued collection *Great Short Stories of the World* as 'The Bridal of Janet Dalrymple'.
- ² Scott's trust of creditors received a decent enough amount, £2,228, for the first series of *Chronicles* (8,750 copies printed), but £4,200 (8,500 copies) for the second. *Woodstock* (1826) and *Anne of Geierstein* (1829), two historical novels written by Scott in the same period, brought in £6,075 (9,850 copies) and £4,200 (8,500 copies) respectively. See *The Journal of Sir Walter Scott*, ed. W. E. K. Anderson (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1998; first published in 1972), p. xxxiv.
- ³ See Robert Morrison, "'The Singular Wrought Out into the Strange and Mystical": *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* and the Transformation of Terror', in *Scottish Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion*, pp. 129-41.
- ⁴ In a major anthology of Scottish shorter fiction, Carl McDougall rehearses the old idea that Scott 'is not primarily remembered as a short story writer', as he puts it in the headnote to 'Wandering Willie's Tale', but 'two of his stories are as satisfying as anything he wrote' (the other tale he has in mind is 'The Two Drovers'): *The Devil & The Giro: Two Centuries of Scottish Stories* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1991; first published in 1989), p. 370. See also *The Penguin Book of Ghost Stories*, ed. by J. A. Cuddon (London: Penguin, 1984), pp. 90-104.
- ⁵ Walter Scott, 'My Aunt Margaret's Mirror', in *The Shorter Fiction*, ed. by Graham Tulloch and Judy King (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), p. 53. All subsequent quotations are from this edition, and page numbers will follow in brackets in the text.
- ⁶ *Journal of Sir Walter Scott*, pp. 473-74. For a discussion of *The Keepsake's* position in the literary annuals marketplace see Katherine D. Harris, *Forget Me Not: The Rise of the British Literary Annual, 1823-1835* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2015), pp. 147-54.
- ⁷ *Journal of Sir Walter Scott*, p. 474.
- ⁸ *Journal of Sir Walter Scott*, p. 489.
- ⁹ See Richard J. Hill, 'Scott, Hogg, and the Gift-Book Editors: Authorship in the Face of Industrial Production', *Romantic Textualities: Literature and Print Culture, 1780-1840*, 19 (2009). http://www.romtext.org.uk/articles/rt19_n01/
- ¹⁰ 'Annuals', *The Bookseller*, 29 November 1858, p. 498.
- ¹¹ Quoted and discussed in the 'Essay on the Text', in Scott, *Shorter Fiction*, p. 154.
- ¹² Wendell V. Harris, *British Short Fiction in the Nineteenth Century: A Literary and Bibliographic Guide* (Detroit MI: Wayne State University Press, 1979), p. 25.
- ¹³ See the 'Essay on the Text', in Scott, *Shorter Fiction*, pp. 151-52.
- ¹⁴ *Journal of Sir Walter Scott*, p. 513.
- ¹⁵ Coleman O. Parsons, 'Scott's Prior Version of "The Tapestry Chamber"', *Notes and Queries*, 9 (1962), 417-20.
- ¹⁶ Alan Lang Strout, *A Bibliography of Articles in 'Blackwood's Magazine', Volumes I through XVIII, 1817-1825* (Lubbock, TX: The Texas Tech Press, 1959), p. 45.
- ¹⁷ *The New Monthly Magazine*, 26 (October 1829), 478.
- ¹⁸ *Journal of Sir Walter Scott*, p. 513.
- ¹⁹ Ina Ferris, "'Before Our Eyes": Romantic Historical Fiction and the Apparitions of Reading', *Representations*, 121:1 (2013), 60-84, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1525/rep.2013.121.1.60>.
- ²⁰ See Scott, *Shorter Fiction*, pp. 190-94.
- ²¹ Walter Scott, *The Bride of Lammermoor*, ed. by J. H. Alexander (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), p. 241.
- ²² Quoted in Scott, *Shorter Fiction*, p. 191.
- ²³ 'The Tapestry Chamber' appears in *The Twelfth Fontana Book of Great Ghost Stories*, ed. by R. Chetwynd-Hayes (New York: Fontana, 1976). All subsequent quotations are from Scott, *Shorter Fiction*, and page numbers will follow in brackets in the text.
- ²⁴ The *Blackwood's* version appears in full in Scott, *Shorter Fiction*, pp. 196-99.
- ²⁵ Scott, *Shorter Fiction*, p. 76.
- ²⁶ On Seward's mentorship see Robert Mayer, *Walter Scott & Fame: Authors and Readers in the Romantic Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 38-44.
- ²⁷ Simon Hay, *A History of the Modern British Ghost Story* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 53.
- ²⁸ Walter Scott, 'On the Supernatural in Fictitious Composition', in *Sir Walter Scott on Novelists and Fiction*, ed. by Ioan Williams (London: Routledge, 2010; first published in 1968), p. 314.
- ²⁹ Srdjan Smajic, 'The Trouble with Ghost-Seeing: Vision, Ideology, and Genre in the Victorian Ghost Story', *ELH*, 70:4 (2003), 1107-1135, doi: DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/elh.2004.0010>