Theater Figures

Allen, Emily

Published by The Ohio State University Press

Allen, Emily.
Theater Figures: The Production of the Nineteenth-Century British Novel.
The Ohio State University Press, 2003.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/28456.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/28456
In January 1824, ten years after he had burst onto the novelistic scene as “The Great Unknown” whose unprecedented popularity forced a string of changes in the literary market, Sir Walter Scott published St. Ronan’s Well, his first and last foray into what he would later call “light literature” (St. Ronan’s Well, xvii). The novel was a spectacular failure. Indeed, the publication of what John Ruskin would call “the entirely broken and diseased St. Ronan’s Well” (292) marks the nadir of one of the most successful careers in nineteenth-century publishing history. While Scott appears to have thought he was simply following female authors like Frances Burney and Jane Austen into the novelistic breach, contemporary critics considered his trespass on domestic ground an emasculating breach of literary etiquette, if not national security. But if St. Ronan’s Well was reviled as an unmanning of the Author of Waverley, Scott’s follow-up novel secured the immediate restoration of his literary reputation. Published in December 1824, Redgauntlet marks Scott’s return to the proven ground of the historical romance and thus operates as a retaliatory strike in the battle over cultural and authorial legitimacy. Acting out a remasculinization of the novel in an elaborate autocommentary, Redgauntlet stages a comeback for the “Wizard of the North,” the virile historian of Britain, the Author of Waverley.

What happens in the transition from the domestic yet sensationalized narrative of St. Ronan’s Well to the historical narrative of Redgauntlet is a self-conscious reversal of the very process of privatization we witnessed in chapter 1. Both
individually and as a pair, *Evelina* and *Mansfield Park* enact a turning inward toward domestic and psychological interiors. The pairing of *St. Ronan’s Well* and *Redgauntlet*, on the other hand, enacts the very novelistic dilation that made Scott a success in the first place. As Ina Ferris explains Scott’s rise as a novelist, his success depended on a “manly intervention” into a female novelistic field dominated by two kinds of texts: novels of female reading ("diseased" novels that fed a female addiction to sensation) and novels of female writing (the “proper” novel in which sensationalism gave way to didacticism). According to Ferris, *Waverley* brought the novel under the male sign of history, offering “a generic doubleness that allows male subjectivity to enter into a female genre without losing its masculine purchase on truth and fact” (88). The Waverley Novels as manly historical romance thus offered a “healthy” version of the diseased sensationalism infecting the “common novel” and gave release from the narrow restraints of proper novels.

*St. Ronan’s Well* was greeted as a feminizing lapse of this centrifugal drive, an unfortunate collapse into the confinement of the domestic sphere that managed to yoke the narrowness of the proper novel to the low sensationalism of the common novel. The peculiar generic mix of *St. Ronan’s Well*—domestic realism, melodrama, comedy of manners, sensational tragedy—pleased very few critics. What is of interest for this book is that *St. Ronan’s* is not simply an unevenly domesticated novel, but it is also a novel of private theatricals and masquerade. When *Redgauntlet* overturns its predecessor, or rather turns it inside out, it does so by reworking the very anti-theatrical ground on which Burney and Austen were able to establish their claims to the novel as female form. While *Evelina* and *Mansfield Park* construct the novelistic and the feminine in putative opposition to the public realm of theater, *Redgauntlet* comes to associate femininity with masquerade and performance. Scott is still concerned with the security of naturalized identity over and against the threat of the performative, but for him male identity must remain unmarked. Where Burney and Austen disassociate femininity from theatricality, Scott reassociates the two in order to claim both essential “nature” and the novel as male territories. Men may role play in *Redgauntlet*, but they do so as a form of political action. Even the novel’s hero, Darsie Latimer, who would seem in his passivity to repeat Fanny Price’s “No indeed I cannot act,” turns the refusal to act (in both senses) into a form of political power.

The first part of this chapter, “Realism, Romance, and the Politics of Reputation,” addresses the critical reception of Scott’s novels of 1824 and examines the extended literary allegory with which *Redgauntlet* stages Scott’s restoration. As a response to the *St. Ronan’s Well* fiasco, *Redgauntlet* encodes a very partisan account of its generic history and of its forecasted reception that
Chapter 2

is every bit as panic-stricken and reactive as the generic self-consciousness of *Evelina*. Indeed, we might consider the dyad of Scott’s 1824 novels as enacting a generic hysteria that is displaced across the span of two novels. The second part of the chapter, “Political Performance—from Stagecraft to Statecraft” treats the persistent theatricality that characterizes *St. Ronan’s Well* and provokes *Redgauntlet*. The latter novel repudiates what it characterizes as a feminized theatricality by rewriting the private theatricals of *St. Ronan’s Well* as sweeping political drama. Masquerade, the prevailing trope of *St. Ronan’s*, becomes in *Redgauntlet* the very antithesis of naturalized, masculine identity. Scott’s revalorization of the novel as a masculine form, that is, turns on the reformation of its relationship to performance. The petty stagecraft of *St. Ronan’s Well* is rejected in *Redgauntlet* for the manly statecraft that Scott claims as the true field of the historical novel.

By reading the success of *Redgauntlet* against the theatrical excess of *St. Ronan’s Well*, we will investigate the citational practices by which both generic and gender identities are formed. As we saw in the previous chapter, generic identity is constructed in accordance to certain regulations or laws of generic form. A given text assumes generic status by citing these laws and by advertising its adherence to historical precedent. The mark of this adherence, what Jacques Derrida calls the “mark of genre,” is a sign of identity and of the vulnerability of identity, since, as Derrida puts it, “the mark of belonging doesn’t belong” (“Law of Genre,” 65). When a text stands outside itself to self-designate, it introduces the very self-contamination, or “degenerescence,” that is the very condition of genre: “At the very moment that a genre or literature is broached, at that very moment, degenerescence has begun” (66). As we saw in my reading of *Evelina*, this inherent instability is also the very condition of gender, since the “mark of gender” is at once an identifying trait, a mark of adherence to the rules of gender, and a sign of gender’s performative impurity. When a body demonstrates its adherence to the laws of gender, the very act of citation opens up the space of disidentification, of gender’s ultimate degenerescence. In *Evelina*, the process of self-marking (gendered and generic) took place through an allegory of form in which both text and eponymous heroine came to be properly identified by citing genealogical origins. The performative trace, however, the reminder of the novel’s ties to theater and Evelina’s ties to her theatrical grandmother, remained as a disidentifying irritant to the process of self-definition.

Like *Evelina*, *Redgauntlet* is concerned with the overlap of gender and generic identity; also like *Evelina*, it attempts to fix its own identity in an allegorical narrative of restored legitimacy. While *Evelina* is prompted to such self-referential methods by the generic intruder within, however, *Redgauntlet* reacts
Staging a Comeback: The Remasculinization of the Novel

to a previous generic transgression. Scott’s attempt to change genres with *St. Ronan’s Well* branded him as a generic outlaw and provoked an identity crisis to which *Redgauntlet* is the anxious response. Determined to prove itself a law-abiding citizen of the Waverley community, *Redgauntlet* continually remarks upon itself, baring its mark of genre to the world and designating itself as belonging to a specific novelistic species in an allegory of literary evolution. The novel’s narrative of lineage and legitimation, however, hinges upon the hero’s citational ability. What we might call the gendering of Darsie Latimer—his acceptance of a patriarchal heritage and his assumption of the name of the father—enacts the performative gender marking that is both the triumph of essentialism and its unmasking. While *Redgauntlet* would turn the theatrics of *St. Ronan’s Well* into a theater of manly political action, it cannot quite overcome the semantic instability inherent in the term *performance*.

Realism, Romance, and the Politics of Reputation

We should begin by considering how Sir Walter Scott came to be crowned “King of the North” and what his coronation meant for the Romantic literary market. As Jon Klancher has shown, that market was radically destabilized by an influx of new readers, and Romantic-era writers and critics were uncertain about and anxious over who would read their books and how. While arguing that a taxonomy of reading audiences is not possible, since audiences are not distinct groups but rather overlapping ones that mutually produce categories of identity, Klancher nevertheless focuses on four emergent and “strategically crucial” audiences: “a newly self-conscious middle-class public, a nascent mass audience, a polemical radical readership, and the special institutional audience—that Coleridge called the clerisy—that assumed its first shape in this contentious time” (4). Not surprisingly, it was the mass audience that caused the most concern, and Klancher discusses various attempts to turn the threatening and unknowable image of the crowd—“the mob, the rabble, *la canaille*” (77)—into a less frightening and more orderly mass public: “when ‘crowd’ becomes ‘audience,’ it must be quieted, the dialogic murmer of its innumerable voices displaced by proxy of the mass writer himself” (80). While less popular writers had some room to negotiate what Klancher calls the “poignant moment of cultural transformation” (14) between the eighteenth-century reading public—a public that could still be conceived of as unified and knowable—and the fractured reading *publics* of the nineteenth century, the first literary superstars of this brave new market were plunged straight into the limelight produced by millions of reflecting eyes. Indeed, it is worth
noticing the language of theatricality that Klancher uses to describe the experience of mass adulation: “Lord Byron and Walter Scott awakened to something hardly imaginable to the writers who thought and wrote in terms of a deliberately formed compact between writer and audience. This vast, unsolicited audience asked of a writer that he perform, construct myths of ‘the author,’ become a public event in his own right” (172). This image of the mass author as public performer, catering to the wishes of the crowd for more and better amusement, all the while commodifying himself in the bargain, seems to be precisely the spectacular model of authorship that Burney and Austen most feared. One recalls the horror that Burney felt over having *Evelina* eyeballed at the circulating library by “any & everybody.” In the previous chapter, I argued that Burney and Austen dealt with their anxieties about public authorship and the exploding print market in a number of ways—including hiding the fact of authorship (as Burney at first did with *Evelina*), instructing the “individual” reader in methods of absorptive reading, and allegorizing the novel’s power to produce literary capital and to negotiate its position as market commodity. Yet Scott’s relationship to his market was significantly different from Burney’s and Austen’s relationship to theirs, both because his market was different (larger, more diverse, more voracious) and because he was a male author.

Without doubt, masculinity had its privileges when it came to the market. At the most obvious level, men had a different relationship to intellectual property than did women—they could enter into the literary market as producers without compromising either themselves or their gender. Negotiating (in) the public sphere, as eighteenth-and early-nineteenth-century social theory had it, was what men were designed to do and what they did best. And yet there is a tremendous difference in being active in the market and being for sale on it, and the massive popularity that turned Scott into what Klancher calls “a public event in his own right” threatened to turn him into a market commodity instead of a captain of literary industry. To become a pawn of the market meant to enter it, in effect, like a woman, and we can glimpse something of the feminizing effect this had on Scott in the powerlessness that Klancher associates with his explosive popularity: “Scott awakened to . . . a massive audience for which [he] would perform, but a public [he] had never attempted to make” (14). In order to keep some kind of control over himself, Scott needed, basically, to “be a man” about the whole thing, and he did so in a number of ways. First, he chose to remain anonymous—even after his secret was out. One way for us to understand Scott’s insistence on an authorial masquerade that kept him out of the brightest part of the spotlight is that it allowed him a certain space between authorial self and authorial product. However theatrically, and however imperfectly, Scott produced “The Author
of Waverley” as a market commodity, while he enjoyed the fiction of his anonymity.

Another and more self-defeating way in which Scott resisted the feminizing and degrading effects of the mass market was to hold himself aloof from matters of trade. While Scott took an eager interest in his book sales—as with the famous and most likely legendary scene in which Scott’s publisher Archibald Constable pitched him a plan to revolutionize the publishing industry with a cheap monthly volume that would sell “not by thousands or tens of thousands, but by hundreds of thousands—ay, by millions!” (Lockhart, 273)—there were certain aspects of his financial situation that he chose not to know or understand. He seems not, for example, to have understood how far overextended he was just prior to the famous “crash” of 1826, and when Constable went bankrupt and took Scott with him, Scott refused to take the one avenue that would have put him back on his financial feet: file for trade bankruptcy. Scott would not, could not, be labeled a tradesman, and so he chose instead a path that would lead to long-term financial difficulty for himself and his heirs (Sutherland, The Life of Walter Scott, 290–98).

More importantly for our purposes, Scott was able to skirt the feminizing influence of the market by being crowned its king. Periodical reviews of the time—especially those reviews that catered to a middle-class audience: Blackwood’s, the Monthly and New Monthly magazines, and the Edinburgh and Quarterly reviews—met the specter of feminization with the rhetoric of domination. So the Author of Waverley became known by a number of other empowering pseudonyms: The Wizard of the North, The Great Unknown, The Genius of the North. These titles both gave Scott the kind of iconic celebrity that can best be used to sell products and elevated him above the market by turning it into a scene of aesthetic triumph rather than vulgar commodification. Transforming market value into literary capital, the period’s reviews granted Scott a form of magical and monarchical power.

Why the periodical reviews chose Scott to ascend the literary throne is a question that critics have discussed for many years—although early critics phrased the question in terms of Scott’s popularity with readers, not reviewers. Ina Ferris shows how Scott’s authorship of the Waverley Novels allowed the intellectually elite reviewers to execute a number of ideological projects, which included marking the novel as a legitimate object of critical scrutiny, legitimating the existence of the reviews as a “literary” as opposed to commercial enterprise, and disentangling the novel’s association with female readers and writers from a retroactively posited canon of eighteenth-century male novelists—a canon that, unsurprisingly, led right to Scott. The coronation of the “King of the North,” then, was in part an act of self-defense on the part of
Chapter 2

the reviewers, as it gave them the opportunity to construct their own discipline and to stave off association with the novel, which Ferris calls the “commercial sister and demeaning double of the gentlemanly reviewer” (4). As we witnessed in the previous chapter, the novel was itself at pains to stave off its relationship to the commercial materiality of print culture, and that attempt in part yielded the division that Ferris characterizes as one between the “ordinary novel”—associated with the mass market, consumptive female reading, overwrought and artificial female writing, rampant reproduction, and (we might want to add) theatricality—and the “proper novel,” which was associated with private female virtue, restraint, decorum, and social utility. Whereas proper novelists like Burney and Austen constructed their fictional realm as one of deep interiority, canonizing reviews of Scott’s novels shifted the terms so that proper novels came to occupy the relatively superficial zone of manners and quotidian domestic concerns. As Ferris writes,

By activating the canonical move, the reviews thus open up a space—higher, deeper, broader than that of women’s writing—for the critic and the male reader and writer of novels. And into this space, answering certain key male anxieties, came the not-so-anonymous Waverley Novels, products of a noted man of letters and hailed from the outset as restoring to the novel fact, variety, and sublimity—in short, all the breadth, depth, and centrality that the contemporary novelistic field was defined as lacking. (78)

The most impressive maneuver is how Scott was represented as the solution to the problems posed by both kinds of female novels: the Waverley Novels were at once healthfully romantic—which countered the diseased romanticism of the ordinary novel and the confinement of the proper novel—and authentically realistic. Theirs were not the petty truths of the proper novel’s domestic realism, but the deep truths of history, politics, and public life.²

What Scott’s Waverley Novels and the reviews that hailed them as the saviors of the literary sphere managed to pull off was the difficult task of rehabilitating one of the very genres (romance) that the eighteenth-century novel passed over on its way to elevation. And, further, this rehabilitation needed to erase the evidence of its work, so that Scott’s historical romances appeared both grounded in canonical (male) literary heritage and brand new. The former was a matter of linking up Scott with Samuel Richardson and Henry Fielding, which was handily done by creating a canon that excluded the many women writers of the eighteenth century, and the latter was accomplished by eradicating Scott’s debt to the women writers whose national tales were the forerunners of his historical novels.³ But romance was not without its dangers. It

72
was not only the genre associated with what Ferris calls the ordinary novel—and, so, strongly marked by a bodily tradition of eroticized female reading—but also the constituent other that elevated and proper novels needed both to preserve and cancel. As Laurie Langbauer states, “English novels, attempting to define their form, use ‘romance’ . . . to refer to what the novel (hopes it) is not, deploying the term in an attempt to draw off contradictions and problems of coherence that undermine the novel’s incorporation” (3). Langbauer also ties the romance form to the figure of woman, noting how both are used to shore up representational economies (genre/gender) in which the normative term is defined by its apparent opposite (3). Of course opposites have an inconvenient way not only of attracting, but also of showing up within the very thing whose borders they would guard. And so it is with the novel and the romance: their mutually generative dance produces not only generic identities, but also various confusions that it was the job of reviewers and novels (particularly those novels called “antiromances”) to police.

Scott’s first novel, Waverley, solves the romance problem in two main ways. First, it brings the manly genre of history to the feminized romance, which cures the romance’s silliness, fantasy, and eroticism, while leaving its vigor and breadth. Second, the first novel to bear the name of Waverley is itself both a romance and an antiromance. The novel’s hero, Edward Waverley, must learn to put down his romantic reading for what Scott calls the “real history” (415) of his life, which in this case means the manly pursuits of politics and property ownership. Scott’s “innovation,” then, was to bring realism to the romance, and to make both safe for the reader and for the market.

The publication of Waverley in 1814 was a watershed moment for the formation of the literary canon, for the rise of the novel narratives that articulated that formation as a developmental history, and for the book market. Scott’s continued success with critics and readers turned him into both a high cultural and a mass-market phenomenon. As Lee Erickson describes it, this success brought about (and was in part brought about by) a number of changes in the publishing industry. Both the triple-decker format that would later dominate Victorian publishing, for example, and the first “cheap” editions were both popularized by Scott’s fiction. The Waverley Novels were able to appeal to a polite middle-class audience, which tended to patronize the circulating libraries where one might subscribe for two guineas a year, and to a mass audience, which bought up the cheap reprint editions of Scott that began appearing in the 1820s. While Scott may not have had control of these disparate publics, he did cash in on their appetites. Using the proceeds from his novels to finance the building of his grand Estate at Abbotsford (and later to recover from his financial crash), Scott was keen to be sold—even on the cheap—as
long as he himself was not made cheap by the experience. When Constable laid out his plans to market inexpensive monthly reprints to “hundreds of thousands—ay, millions!” of new buyers in language that recalls Burney’s nightmare of improper circulation (“Twelve volumes, so good that millions must wish to have them, and so cheap that every butcher’s callant may have them, if he pleases to let me tax him sixpence a-week!” [Lockhart, 273, my italics]), Scott responded not with scopophobic horror but with a clubby approval. As Lockhart tells it, he handed Constable a scotch and the two got down to business. What Scott did worry about was exhausting his market, which was a clear danger with his rapid-fire production and somewhat formulaic romanticism. It was this fear that led Scott, paradoxically, to the greatest misstep in his crowd-pleasing career: the present-day narrative of St. Ronan’s Well.

1824, PART ONE

The initial reaction to St. Ronan’s Well, early copies of which began appearing in late December 1823, was one of disappointment. St. Ronan’s tells the tragic tale of Clara Mowbray, the beautiful, willful, and ultimately insane daughter of the Laird of St. Ronan’s. Seven years prior to the opening of the novel, Clara met and fell in love with Francis Tyrrel, the (supposedly) illegitimate son of a nobleman. The lovers planned a secret marriage, but Tyrell’s evil half-brother, Valentine Bulmer, disguised himself as the groom and married Clara. Upon discovering the deception, Tyrell forced Bulmer to leave St. Ronan’s but only after agreeing never to see Clara again. When the novel’s action begins in about 1811, Tyrrel has returned to St. Ronan’s, having been warned that his half brother, now the Earl of Etherington, has returned to the village with plans to remarry Clara and secure the fortune that falls to the brother who weds her. Clara’s brother John, now the Laird of St. Ronan’s, tries to force his sister to marry the Earl in hopes of saving himself from financial ruin. Clara goes insane and dies of a brain fever. John Mowbray, having learned the truth about Clara’s past, kills Valentine Bulmer (now revealed as the illegitimate son), and Francis Tyrrel leaves for the continent, too distraught to claim his lands or title.

The unfortunate romance of Clara Mowbray and Francis Tyrell struck most reviewers as both confined and ordinary. Even the Scots Magazine and Literary Miscellany, a great supporter of the Author of Waverley, haltingly owns that “St. Ronan’s Well has, we must say, in some measure, disappointed us” (739). The novel’s genre is singled out as the culprit: “Still, however, to con-
fess the truth, we are disposed to regret that the author should have quitted the high ground of historical romance, to descend into the humbler arena of novel writing. Every one must have felt that it was there he stood alone; imitated, yet inimitable” (738). Less partial critics condemned the novel outright. The Literary Gazette, which (like other London reviews) did not receive an advance copy of the text and so ran an initial review borrowed from the Leeds Intelligencer (Dec. 27), begins its second notice (Jan. 3) like this: “We rejoice to have been spared a Review of this Novel” (6). Referring to the Minerva Press that was infamous for its sensational novels and its voracious female readers, the piece goes on to say that “these three volumes appear to be hastily conceived, and hurriedly put together ideas of a mere commonplace order. The tragic characters belong to the Minerva Press, the comic to the Life in London caste” (6).

The main complaint against St. Ronan’s Well was that it is not really a Waverley Novel at all. The Literary Gazette claims that “when the works of the Author of Waverley are wanted, St. Ronan’s Well will be an incumbrance, if not left off the list” (6). With it, the Author of Waverley descends from the Highlands of historical romance and critical accolade to the level of the female popular novelists that The British Critic refers to as “a minor class of authors” (17). Reviews of the novel set out to send Scott packing—back to his proper literary sphere and away from the lower realm of women’s fiction. The British Critic writes, “we hope that this will be his last career upon a beaten track where so many of his inferiors have figured with considerable success, and that he will no longer stray from that magic circle where none can tread without failure” (17). To enforce generic boundaries, without compromising Scott’s status as greatest living novelist, the reviews perform a double gesture. They make clear St. Ronan’s inferiority to Scott’s previous work (“We unequivocally and decidedly rank it below every one of its predecessors”) while maintaining its superiority over other novels of its kind (The Examiner, 2). When the Scots Magazine reviewer laments that the characters in St. Ronan’s are mere sketches, for example, he adds this explanation: “Sketches, no doubt, of masterly power and freedom, and as superior to the finished compositions of ordinary writers, as an outline of Raphael or Michel Angelo to the most elaborate effort of weaker heads or feebler hands, but still sketches, in relation to that standard by which no author can in justice refuse to be tried—his former works” (739). This strictly hierarchical view of the literary landscape (Scott’s worst is better than his inferiors’ best) authorizes the dubious logic with which the Scots Magazine review sums up: St. Ronan’s Well is “superior to others, even when inferior to itself” (739).

Perhaps the most telling criticism of St. Ronan’s Well is a piece by William Hazlitt—originally published in April 1824, in The New Monthly Magazine,
and later as a chapter in *The Spirit of the Age*. It is remarkable for its inclusion and manipulation of nearly all the prevailing critical tropes of the period. Hazlitt writes of Scott that, although he is “undoubtedly the most popular writer of the age,” he “is just half what the human intellect is capable of being: if you take the universe, and divide it into two parts, he knows all that has been; all that is to be is nothing to him” (279). There is more than one way to divide the universe into two parts, of course, and Hazlitt wastes no time in gendering his rhetoric when he claims that Scott’s “speculative understanding is empty, flaccid, poor, and dead” (279). The vigorous Scott, “full even to bursting” when he addresses the past, is rendered impotent by the present, what Hazlitt calls “the land of pure reason.” Indeed, writes Hazlitt, “Sir Walter would have made a bad hand of a description of the Millennium, unless he could lay the scene in Scotland five hundred years ago, and then he would want facts and worm-eaten parchments to support his drooping style” (279).

Hazlitt offers little explanation for Scott’s odd incapability—he hardly needs to, since it had long been accepted that Scott was at his best when writing “histories.” What interests me is the uncommon gusto with which Hazlitt restates the case. It is worth noting that Hazlitt had political reasons for painting the Tory Scott as a reactionary, a point made clear in the long diatribe that closes the essay; his view of the novels, however, seems motivated by generic, rather than party, politics. Writing with almost religious zeal of Scott’s historical romances, Hazlitt exclaims, “What a list of names! What a host of associations! What a thing is human life! What a power is genius!” He concludes that Scott’s “works (taken together) are almost like a new edition of human nature. This is indeed to be an author!” (286). This quasi-divine Scott, god of the historical romance, works miracles of healing on the reading body: “Highland manners, characters, scenery, superstitions, Northern dialect and costume, the wars, the religion, and politics of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, give a charming and wholesome relief to the fastidious refinement and ‘over-laboured lassitude’ of modern readers, like the effect of plunging a nervous valetudinarian into a cold-bath” (283). The English reader, figured as a feminized invalid, is restored to health by the “Scotch Novels”—but not by *St. Ronan’s Well*. Hazlitt writes that Scott’s “latest work . . . is romantic in nothing but the title page. Instead of ‘a holy-water sprinkle dipped in dew,’ he has given us a fashionable watering-place—and we see what he has made of it. He must not come down from his fastnesses in traditional barbarism and native rusticity: the level, the littleness, the frippery of modern civilization will undo him as it has undone us!” (284). Rhetorically coded as feminine, Scott’s latest effort unveils the god as charlatan. The “fashionable watering-places” of the
domestic novel are presented as a kind of petty sinkhole for masculine genius: the “flaccid” present.

Scott was acutely aware of St. Ronan’s treatment by the press. He recalls in his introduction to the 1832 Magnum Opus edition of the novel, for example, that “the author was publicly accused, in prose and verse, of having committed literary suicide in this unhappy attempt” (xxi). He puts much of this bad press down to envy—“An unusual tract of success too often provokes many persons to mark and exaggerate a slip when it does occur” (xxi)—and English nationalism. Despite this effort to diminish the importance of St. Ronan’s critical failure by questioning the validity of the reviews, however, Scott was clearly wounded by the attacks made on both novel and author. His 1832 introduction to St. Ronan’s operates as his apologia for the novel, defending his decision to trespass on the female grounds of the domestic novel even while he distances himself (and his other works) from the genre. He begins by characterizing St. Ronan’s as a personal aberration: “The novel which follows is upon a plan different from any other that the author has ever written, although it is perhaps the most legitimate which relates to this kind of light literature” (xvii). Here, as in the rest of the introduction, Scott tries to have it both ways; while the phrase “light literature” rhetorically codes the novel as belonging to a feminized and trivial species, Scott is still eager to own St. Ronan’s as a legitimate effort, even as he disowns it as an exception to the Waverley canon. St. Ronan’s, in fact, occupies much the same position as its hero, Francis Tyrell: both are the privileged bastards of an aristocracy (in the novel’s case a literary one), recognized yet unlawful. As a domestic novel from the Author of Waverley, St. Ronan’s Well breaks the law of genre as it pertains to Scott. Like Francis Tyrell, the novel in which he appears was apparently conceived on the wrong side of the sheets.

The most interesting part of Scott’s 1832 apologia is the way he positions himself as a masculine interloper on a female generic field. St. Ronan’s was intended, he writes, “celebrare domestica facta—to give an imitation of the shifting manners of our own time, and paint scenes the originals of which are daily passing round us, so that a minute’s observation may compare the copies with the originals” (xvii). Scott, however, had no hopes of “rivaling the many formidable competitors who have already won deserved honours in this department” (xvii). After all, his competitors have the advantage of gender: “The ladies, in particular, gifted by nature with keen powers of observation and light satire, have been so distinguished by these works of talent, that, reckoning from the authoress of Evelina to her of Marriage, a catalogue might be made, including the brilliant and talented names of Edgeworth, Austin [sic], Charlotte Smith, and others, whose success seems to have appropriated this
province of the novel as exclusively their own” (xvii). “It was with a sense of temerity,” he concludes this catalogue, “that the author intruded upon a species of composition which had been of late practised with such distinguished success” (xvii). As Ferris notes of this passage, “[Scott] recognized and acknowledged the femininity of the field he entered. . . . What all this underscores is that in the early decades of the nineteenth century, the anxiety of influence for a male novelist was inevitably shaped by gender” (253). Since Scott appears mainly anxious to exonerate himself for the failure of St. Ronan’s, he explains his generic faux pas through a recourse to “natural” gender divisions: “the ladies” are “gifted by nature” to write domestic fiction. Not only is the domestic novel allied with female authors by way of literary tradition, but it is also inherently suited to female powers of observation. To drive this point home, Scott figures the author as (male) mining engineer: “It is not, however, sufficient that a mine be in itself rich and easily accessible; it is necessary that the engineer who explores it should himself, in mining phrase, have an accurate knowledge of the country, and possess the skill necessary to work it to advantage. In this respect, the author of Saint Ronan’s Well could not be termed fortunate” (xx). The rhetoric of this passage seems strangely at odds with its sense. While Scott was probing fertile and yielding ground, he could not “work it to advantage” because he was not, well, female. The admission of failure, of lack, seems to prompt the language of phallic mastery, even though that lack signifies culturally as plenitude—Scott is too masculine to write domestic fiction.

1824, PART TWO

Although Scott thought St. Ronan’s a “hit or miss” proposition prior to its publication, he apparently thought worse of it after the novel’s critical failure and wrote to James Ballantyne in March 1824, “I never liked Saint Ronans—this I think better of—.” “This,” of course, was Redgauntlet, published six months after St. Ronan’s Well. Originally, Scott had planned to follow up St. Ronan’s with a novel called “The Witch”; he decided instead to return to the proven ground of Scottish political history. Scott began a novel called “Herries,” but finally let Ballantyne and Constable persuade him to change the title to “Redgauntlet.” In March 1824, he wrote to Ballantyne that “I think your name of Redgauntlet is excellent. One fault it may have—that of inducing people to think the work is a tale of Chivalry—and disappointment is a bad thing.” Perhaps because Scott was still smarting from the public’s disappointment with St. Ronan’s Well, Scott appended Redgauntlet with a clarifying subtitle: “A Tale of
the Eighteenth Century.” Not only does the subtitle rule out chivalric romance, but it also clearly signals a return to the historical past of the Waverley Novels. “This may not be Ivanhoe,” the subtitle suggests, “but it’s not St. Ronan’s Well, either.”

The appearance of Redgauntlet in June 1824 was greeted with a collective sigh of relief. Although the novel received mixed reviews, critical reviewers generally agreed that Redgauntlet was far superior to St. Ronan’s Well. The New Monthly Magazine, for example, finds that “if the new novel does not in every respect rise to the level of Quentin Durward, or the earlier productions of the same pen, it does not exhibit any of those apoplectic Archbishop-of-Toledish symptoms, which afflicted its readers in St. Ronan’s Well” (95). Health and prowess restored, the Author of Waverley is once again described in terms of hyper-masculine potency. Although Scots Magazine finds Redgauntlet “a most unequal production,” it still contends that the author’s “first freshness is unimpaired,—his fancy unrelaxed,—his vigour undecayed,—his riches unexhausted” (642). The language of phallic insufficiency that so marked Hazlitt’s essay is conspicuously absent in the reviews of Redgauntlet. Indeed, the London Literary Gazette claims that “The day for criticising the productions of this great and fertile author has gone by, except when perhaps he may mistake his powers upon a subject, and fall short of his own high standard. As this however has not happened in the present instance, we are happily absolved from that sort of official task which is no less disagreeable to reviewers than to writers” (389). Redgauntlet, then, lets the literary police relax—the novel signals Scott’s return to his rightful estate, the potent field of historical romance.

Since the “remasculinization” (and generic re-marking) that Redgauntlet effects operates partly on the level of plot, let me rehearse the story: Darsie Latimer, unwitting heir to the house of Redgauntlet, leaves his study of law in Edinburgh and journeys to Solway Firth, a no-man’s land between Scotland and England. He is discovered and kidnapped by his uncle, the fanatical Jacobite Hugh Redgauntlet, who hopes to enlist Darsie’s participation in a third Jacobite uprising. Darsie is forced to dress as a woman, bound in an iron riding mask, and is ridden cross-country to meet with “the Pretender,” Charles Edward. Meanwhile, his best friend and correspondent, the lawyer Alan Fairford, journeys to England to rescue Darsie from Redgauntlet. In the end, Darsie must remove his female clothing and assert his masculine prerogative as the true Sir Arthur Redgauntlet. He backs the Hanoverian establishment, the uprising fizzles, and Alan marries Darsie’s sister.

It is not surprising that the novel that works Scott’s literary “restoration” is a highly self-conscious one, replete with references to other novels, to reading, and to writing. What is surprising, perhaps, is that Redgauntlet begins as an
epistolary novel, the very form that stands as literary ancestor to the domestic novel and as breeding ground for the sentimental heroine. Indeed, the novel’s hero bears a striking resemblance to Richardson’s Pamela Andrews, the ur-heroine of the domestic novel. Kidnapped and incarcerated, Darsie is overcome by the “rage of narration” and writes “to the moment” and to his best friend and would-be rescuer, Alan Fairford. Like Pamela (and Clarissa after her), Darsie draws strength from the act of writing: “The exercise of my pen seems to act as a sedative upon my own agitated thoughts and tumultuous passions. I never lay it down but I rise stronger in resolution, more ardent in hope” (219). Also like Pamela, he worries that his letters will be violently torn from him by his “enemy,” the darkly masculine Hugh Redgauntlet, and so hides them on his person—performing the sentimental gesture of textualizing the material body. When he claims power over his own subjectivity, declaring to Redgauntlet, “My thoughts are my own . . . and though you keep my person prisoner, these are beyond your control” (216), Darsie sounds like no one so much as Clarissa Harlowe. Indeed, when Darsie compares himself and Alan to Lovelace and Belford (26), the reader can be excused for thinking Clarissa Harlowe and Anna Howe a likelier match.

While both Darsie and Alan are feminized—Redgauntlet describes Alan as a “bundle of bombazine,” and the narrator remarks that he “inherited from his mother a delicate constitution” over which “care, to the verge of effeminacy,” was taken—the practical Alan nonetheless represents the new masculinity of the modern legal system. Early in the novel, Alan describes the difference between his aspirations and Darsie’s as the difference between law (a legal bench) and romance (a Gothic throne): “You smile, Darsie, more tuo, and seem to say it is little worth while to cozen one’s self with such vulgar dreams: yours being, on the contrary, of a high and heroic character, bearing the same resemblance to mine, that a bench, covered in purple cloth, and plentifully loaded with session papers, does to some Gothic throne rough with Barbaric pearl and gold” (24). While Alan enjoys reading the romantic adventure that Darsie’s letters relate (“If you can work mysterious and romantic heroes out of crossgrained fishermen, why, I for one will reap some amusement by the metamorphosis,” 46), his taste for loftier reading signals his serious cast and high moral fiber. When the hymnbook he turns to for consolation turns out to be “Merry Thoughts for Merry Men; or Mother Midnight’s Miscellany for the small Hours,” Alan is “seized with disgust” at the profligate tales and “[flings] it from him, as far as he could, into the sea” (268). Darsie, on the other hand, fails to show a similar high-mindedness in his reading. He writes to Alan that “I tried [two] collections; the first consisted entirely of religious and controversial tracts, and the latter formed a small selection of history, and of moral writers,
both in prose and verse. Neither collection promising much amusement, thou hast, in these close pages, the fruits of my tediousness; and truly, I think writing history (one’s self being the subject) is as amusing as reading that of foreign countries, at any time” (76). While Alan seeks edification and relief, Darsie reads for amusement. His concept of history, at this point early in the novel, is personal rather than political.

In his distaste for official history, the feminized Darsie advertises his resemblance to yet another fictional character: Catherine Morland, the heroine of Jane Austen’s 1818 satire of Gothic novels and their readers, *Northanger Abbey*. Austen’s novel, which was among Scott’s favorites, follows her heroine’s recovery from an addiction to sensational fiction and champions domestic realism over the excesses of the Gothic, encoding a generic conversion and educating its own reading audience. Like the unreformed Catherine Morland, or like any other quixotic hero/ine of an antiromance, Darsie Latimer has an overly active imagination; the sunset appears to him, for example, like “a warrior prepared for defence, over a huge battlemented and turreted wall of crimson and black clouds, which appeared like an immense Gothic fortress, into which the lord of day was descending” (32). Alan’s father, Saunders Fairford, finds Darsie unfit company for his son because “he goeth to dancing houses and readest novels,” (21), and Alan himself warns his friend “beware! See not a Dulcinea in every slipshod girl. . . . Do not think you will meet a gallant Valentine in every English rider, or an Orson in every Highland drover. View things as they are, and not as they may be magnified through your teeming fancy” (25). Like Austen’s Catherine, or like Arabella from Charlotte Lennox’s *The Female Quixote*, Darsie finds he has misread his situation. Unlike them, he finds “reality” much more thrilling and adventurous than his imagination. Similar to previous antiromances, *Redgauntlet* thematizes a process of generic conversion, but here the similarities end. Scott’s hero awakens not to domesticity but to a form of political realism reached only through the (male) province of romance, and which rewrites the domestic under the sign of history, politics, and law. In other words, *Redgauntlet* encodes a teleological history of the novel that begins with Richardson’s epistolary fiction and ends with the historical fiction of Walter Scott.

This generic transformation, an allegorical inscription of generic identity, takes place on two levels: form and plot. Formally, the epistolary correspondence between Darsie and Alan, which makes up the first third of the novel, gives way to a bifurcated narrative strategy—Darsie’s epistolary journal (written to Alan in hopes of finding a way to send it) precedes what Scott calls “narrative”—the third-person narration of Alan Fairford’s adventures. Scott himself uses an aggressively masculine simile to describe his double
narrative mode: “The course of storytelling which we have for the present adopted, resembles the original discipline of the dragoons who were trained to serve either on foot or horseback, as the emergencies of service required” (141). The true warfare, however, might be said to take place between narrative forms, as the outdated epistolary format of the sentimental hero duels with and finally gives way to the omniscient narration aligned with the man of law and the modern rational world. “Fancy,” that is, yields the novelistic field to the historical imagination.

It does not, however, give it up without a fight. A closer examination of the novel’s narrative strategy discloses the skirmishes (and slippages) between competing narrative forms. While the 1832 edition would add an introduction that frames *Redgauntlet* in historical and political terms, the novel as first published in 1824 opens as pure epistolary tale: a letter from Darsie Latimer to Alan Fairford bewails his friend’s absence. The tone of loss, longing, and accusation that characterizes this first letter, in fact, marks the novel as belonging to a species of writing that Linda Kauffman has labeled “amorous epistolary discourse.” *Redgauntlet* continues as an epistolary tale of adventure and thwarted love until the end of the first of three volumes. At the proof stage, Scott added the following sentence after the final letter: “From the circumstances, to be hereafter mentioned, it was long ere this letter reached the person to whom it was addressed” (140). The first volume closes, then, with the intervention of an editorial voice, relating the literal interruption of correspondence and ushering in a new narrational mode: omniscience.

Scott begins the second volume with the heading “Chapter One: Narrative,” and defends the change like this:

The advantage of laying before the reader, in the words of the actors themselves, the adventures which we must otherwise have narrated in our own, has given great popularity to the publication of epistolary correspondence, as practised by various great authors, and by ourselves in the preceding chapters. Nevertheless, a genuine correspondence of this kind (and Heaven forbid it should be in any respect sophisticated by interpolations of our own!) can seldom be found to contain all in which it is necessary to instruct the reader for his full comprehension of the story. (141)

Aligning himself with Richardson (the “great author” whose “interpolations” to *Clarissa* became more and more frequent—and disciplinary—as readers failed to interpret his novel “correctly”), Scott characterizes his turn to narrative as a pedagogical necessity.
In the voice of narrator-as-educator, Scott begins to fill in the background to the letters that make up the previous volume, focusing specifically on Saunders Fairford, Alan’s father and an acolyte of the law. Old Fairford “secretly rejoiced” at Darsie’s journey, as it “afford[ed] the means of separating Alan from his gay companion, at least until he should have assumed, and become accustomed to, the duties of his dry and laborious profession” (143). Indeed, Alan’s father has only one narrative in mind for his son: “He would have shuddered at Alan’s acquiring the renown of a hero, and laughed with scorn at the equally barren laurels of literature; it was by the path of the law alone that he was desirous to see him rise to eminence, and the probabilities of success or disappointment were the thoughts of his father by day, and his dream by night” (142). The law—Alan’s chosen profession and his father’s religion—embodied here as the Law of the Father, separates Darsie’s romantic adventures from the legal discourse that Alan must master. When Alan begins to argue his first case before the Edinburgh court, however, Darsie’s narrative disastrously interrupts the proceedings. When his father accidentally hands him a letter that details Darsie’s disappearance, a letter the elder Fairford had suppressed, Alan flings down his legal brief and rushes from the courtroom. Here, the epistolary node that brings Darsie’s story back into the novel literally interrupts the omniscient narration of Alan’s legal triumph, along with Alan’s developmental narrative as prescribed by the father. Darsie’s romance reasserts its hold on the narrative, and, after a chapter detailing Alan’s departure from Edinburgh in pursuit of his friend, omniscient narration gives way to the first-person narrative of Darsie’s journal—what Scott calls “a form somewhat different from direct narrative and epistolary correspondence, though partaking of the character of both” (160).

The remaining narrative traces the gradual triumph of retrospective omniscience over subjective, epistolary narration. Darsie’s epistolary journal gives way to “The Narrative of Alan Fairford,” which is followed by “The Narrative of Darsie Latimer” (omniscient narration focalized through a single character); Alan’s narrative again succeeds Darsie’s and then the novel’s final section is demarcated only as “Narrative Continued.” The novel’s epilogue, consisting of a letter from the historian “Dr. Dryasdust” to the Author of Waverley, both marks and mocks the takeover of the epistolary voice—a voice originally associated with the romantic hero—by the editorial voice of the historian. As an allegory of form, Redgauntlet can be read as a developmental history of the novel—culminating, of course, in the historical novel—and as a lament for an older novelistic form that cannot resist the desiccating march of literary progress.
Chapter 2

This developmental allegory operates at the level of plot, where Darsie is transformed from feminized, sentimental hero to “masculine” Waverley hero at novel’s end. Literally, he sheds his female traveling dress—the sign of his powerlessness—and assumes his rightful position as Sir Arthur Darsie Redgauntlet. Metaphorically, he takes his position under the sign of history and law, legitimized as the heir to a rich masculine heritage. As his uncle says, relieving Darsie of his skirt and iron mask, “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” (367). Darsie’s “restoration,” however, backfires. He does not back the Jacobite cause, as his uncle desires him to do, but instead backs (at least verbally) the modern political establishment. Like Edward Waverley before him, Darsie turns out to be the “new man,” the “Waverley hero” described by Alexander Welsh as being less a hero than an ideal citizen of the new, commercial Britain: “He represents . . . a social ideal, and acts or refrains from acting according to the accepted morality of his public. Law and authority are the sine qua non of his being” (35). When Darsie abandons the anachronistic, romantic heroism of his uncle and stands committed to “prudence and the superiority of civil society” (in Welsh’s words), he marks the passing of an age and its now outdated model for masculinity.

As an embodiment of the passive Waverley hero, Darsie is able to accomplish the validation of Hanoverian political authority by doing absolutely nothing. The Jacobite uprising peters out before it can begin when General Colin Campbell, the deus ex machina of civil society, saunters in, forgives the rebels, and sends the Pretender back to the continent. As Bruce Beiderwell has noted of this fairytale denouement, Campbell is a kind of “good angel” of Hanoverian fairness and equanimity whose actions reflect, indeed represent, the benign justice of the modern state (102). What interests me most about Redgauntlet’s totalizing vision of ideological closure is the overdetermined way it acts out as the cultural work of the Waverley Novels. In David Daiches’s well-known formulation (“Scott’s Achievement as a Novelist”), the novels mediate between the old world of heroic action and the new world of commerce and legality, reconciling the citizens of that new world to the necessity of progress. Darsie’s triumphant inaction so insistently signals the victory of “civil courage” over the masculine heroics of a bygone era that the denouement begins to look like self-parody. What the neat optimism of Redgauntlet’s denouement tells us, above and beyond the sheer rightness of Hanoverian rule, is the Author of Waverley’s willingness to fulfill his audience’s generic expectations, to give them a Waverley Novel. Scott’s very pseudonym illustrates the extent to which he was invested in what his audience recognized as a certain
kind of novel, and *Redgauntlet* aims to please. While some nineteenth-century critics wondered why Scott had chosen to return to the perhaps overly familiar territory of the Jacobite uprising, the novel’s hypergenericity allows us to read this return as a re-marking of identity on the privileged historical grounds of *Waverley*, the novel that inaugurated the series and set generic expectation. *Redgauntlet’s* denouement functions as the last word in a running autocommentary that seeks to ensure the novel’s place among its kind.

Thus the romantic excess of Hugh Redgauntlet and the hopeless Jacobite cause is quickly replaced by a form of social, or political, realism aligned with the Hanoverian establishment and the modern legal system.¹¹ The domestic—as represented by Darsie’s search for family and the meager romance between Darsie’s sister, Lilias, and Alan Fairford—is subsumed within the political. Indeed, Darsie’s family plot turns out to be the political history of Scotland: the “curse” of the House of Redgauntlet, that every generation shall defy the former, mimics the shifting allegiances of Scotland’s national(ist) politics.¹² The marriage between Lilias Redgauntlet and “Alan Fairford, Esq. Advocate of Clinkdollar,” remains something of an afterthought—we are informed of it in Dr. Dryasdust’s letter after the novel proper has closed—and stresses commercial contract over romance.¹³ Indeed, Alan’s courtship of Lilias operates as an allegory for the novel’s subsuming of domestic concerns within the legal and the political. Presuming on his position as legal counselor to Lilias, Alan seizes the opportunity to be alone with her: “He disposed of Darsie Latimer’s riding skirt, which had been left in the apartment, over the back of two chairs, forming thus a sort of screen, behind which he ensconced himself with the maiden of the green mantle” (389). Darsie’s skirt, the sartorial sign of the feminine, and by extension the domestic, acts as a “screen” for Alan’s maneuvering, the business of love. While we might be tempted to see business as a prelude and excuse for romance, we would be more correct to consider this romance as a species of business contract—one that fulfills this Waverley Novel’s contractual obligation to the reader by bringing about a “marriage” between tradition (the House of Redgauntlet) and modernity (the new law of the land). Behind the screen of the domestic—and through the undercover agency of the domestic novel’s mainstay, the marriage plot—the world of politics performs its inexorable drive towards “progress.” While this may sound suspiciously similar to the domestic novel—the marital narratives of which always perform political work, as Nancy Armstrong has shown—the difference here is that *Redgauntlet* is never interested in what goes on behind the screen—only the marital (i.e., political) closure that comes out of it.

Alan’s marriage to Lilias, whom Darsie also loves but then discovers to be his sister, repeats and replaces, by displacing to the margins, the romantic
Chapter 2

triangle at the center of *St. Ronan's Well*. *Redgauntlet*, in fact, retells *St. Ronan's* romantic conflict (two brothers in love with the same woman) as political saga. In the latter novel, the two men are only brothers by affection and domestic habit, and they represent the historical and political poles that it is the Waverley Novel's cultural labor to reconcile: the mysterious Greenmantle's convenient transformation into Lilias Redgauntlet allows the two men a legal and familial union. While the petty family politics of *St. Ronan's Well* ends in death and destruction, with Tyrell unwilling or unable to fill his position as the embodiment of a reformed aristocracy, the family (and marriage) plot of *Redgauntlet* ushers in nothing less than a new world order.

As a literary response to the unfortunate and unlawful *St. Ronan's Well*, *Redgauntlet* constructs and encodes a history of the novel that displaces the domestic altogether. Indeed, we might call it a literary version of ontogeny recapitulating phylogeny—with an agenda. The individual novel ensures its place within the novelistic species by seizing the opportunity to narrate the development of that species. *Redgauntlet* claims direct ancestry from Richardson, the grand patriarch of the novel, and casts out its rival sibling by appropriating both realism and romance for history, not domesticity. Scott names himself as Richardson's rightful heir, and the historical novel as his rightful domain. Since *Redgauntlet* obsessively marks itself as generically legitimate, it can come as no surprise that the “proof” of Sir Arthur Darsie Redgauntlet's legitimating lineage is nothing other than a birthmark. Darsie's forehead bears the “sign” of the House of Redgauntlet—the distinguishing trait that confers belonging and encodes the family's violent history. As family legend holds, Sir Alberick Redgauntlet (Darsie's ancestor and a fierce Scottish loyalist) killed his own son when they met in battle, the father's horse treading across the son's forehead. When Sir Alberick's second son was born, “The evidence of his father's guilt was stamped on the innocent face of the babe, whose brow was distinctly marked by the miniature resemblance of a horseshoe” (210). What is this “fatal sign” that all Sir Alberick's descendents bear but the mark of genre? And what is the family legacy of intergenerational conflict but the anxiety of influence inscribed in the ancestral line? Naturalizing identity as birthright, the Redgauntlet “stamp” both establishes individual identity and insists upon that individual's place within an historical tradition. It identifies the single subject as belonging to a species. *Redgauntlet* similarly bears the mark of genre—the sign of Waverley—and in re-marking upon its own generation, naturalizing genre as genealogy, it signals Scott's restoration as masculine novelist. This prominent self-display, moreover, bares the self-conscious operation by which all texts mark themselves as belonging to a generic kind and thus mark themselves as literary. When *Redgauntlet* proclaims its obedience to the
law of genre, it thereby thematizes the auto-commentary by which texts give
themselves the stamp of approval.

Political Performance: From Stagecraft to Statecraft

So far I have discussed the “staging” of Scott’s comeback in terms of Redgaunt-
let’s literary allegory, but we can be more literal in our use of the metaphor. One stage on which Scott performs his return to generic potency is a theatric-
al one, or rather the stage is theater itself. As I previously suggested, Redgauntlet’s revalorization of the novel form as potently male turns upon its repudiation of the feminized theatrics of St. Ronan’s Well. Scott is eager to leave behind the trivial dramatic action of St. Ronan’s for the epic political action of its successor. The masquerades and private theatricals that make up much of the plot of St. Ronan’s, however, do not simply disappear when the scene changes to Redgauntlet’s historical highlands: theatricality persists in Redgauntlet, transfigured and politicized, if discredited. This transformation allows us to read Scott’s efforts to “cure” the diseased theatrical energies of St. Ronan’s Well, to redeem “acting” for and as “action.”

One of the most striking things about St. Ronan’s Well is its overwhelming theatricality. The text seems cobbled together from various plays that Scott admired: King Lear (Francis and Valentine acting out the parts of Edgar and Edmund, two brothers in disguise); Hamlet and Macbeth (which inspire character and provide dialogue); A Midsummer Night’s Dream (a performance of which gives the novel its turning point); and Thomas Otway’s The Orphan (which lends the novel its elaborate seduction plot).14 But St. Ronan’s does not merely allude to or even borrow from theatrical productions; the novel goes so far as to thematize performance as the very modus operandi of the brittle, artificial world of the health spa and its inhabitants. To begin with, virtually everyone in St. Ronan’s acts an assumed “character”: in the novel’s prehistory, Tyrrel and Bulmer masquerade as cousins, while Bulmer masquerades as Tyrrel; in the novel proper, Bulmer assumes the title of the Earl of Etherington, Touchwood pretends to be a disinterested stranger, and Lady Penelope Penfeather allows herself to be mistaken for Clara Mowbray in order to learn the younger woman’s “secret.”

This kind of outright impersonation, however, is only an aggravated ver-
sion of the social performance that constructs what passes for character in the novel. Take, for example, the case of Lady Bingo Binks—the social climber as actress. Miss Rachel Bonnyrig, a beautiful and conniving Scottish lass, assumes the title of Lady Binks by first assuming the role of giddy enchantress and then

87
Chapter 2

maneuvering a pompous, supercilious English Baronet into marriage. Lady Binks “had made her catch-match, and she was miserable. Her wild good-humour was entirely an assumed part of her character, which was passionate, ambitious, and thoughtful” (85). We never glimpse this presumably “true” identity, however, since she appears to have “swopt” it for “new-fashioned finery” (280). Rather than being forced to act out of character, as her misery initially suggests, Lady Bingo Binks seems to have lost her “own” character entirely. She slips in and out of various roles throughout the novel, as when she is thwarted by Clara “both in her former character of a coquette and romp, and in that of the prude which she at present wore” (114). Lady Binks’s plight illustrates the novel’s persistent use of theatrical metaphor to critique the empty theatrics of social posturing, but it also goes a step further to impugn the very idea of “character.” Where all character is ultimately impersonation—where the only difference between Lady Binks performing Lady Binks and, say, Valentine Bulmer pretending to be the Earl of Etherington is a point of legality—a universal lack of character signals not only moral bankruptcy but an ontological problem.

The most tragic victim of this ontological uncertainty is Clara Mowbray, who loses first her character and then her mind to the shifting sands of identity. Clara’s story reads in fact like a parable about the dangers of masquerade: while dressed as a country wench to surprise a tenant family, Clara is accosted by “a country fellow . . . [who] saw not the nobility of blood through her disguise” (395). Francis Tyrrel rescues her—and her “character,” since that is precisely what is at stake in a sexual assault—but further imperils Clara by involving her in a chain of assumed identities that finally culminates in the groom-swapping deception that destroys her faith in character altogether. (In the original version of the novel, Clara actually “loses her character” in the deception, having lost her virginity to one brother and having married the other.) As the fibers of identity unravel on and in Clara, she slips into a private world where she understands her experience in terms of performance. While previous critics have read Clara’s insanity as a response to disappointment in love and the stress of keeping a shameful secret, they are only half right. The symptoms of Clara’s madness (namely, making a spectacle of herself) point to a kind of excess of theatricality. If Clara is undone, she is undone by an instability of character, by an ontological confusion that plays itself out as her alienation from “reality.”

For example, when Clara reencounters Tyrrel after seven years, she is unsure if he is living flesh or an “apparition,” one of the “wandering visions” that plague her. Passing behind Tyrrel, unseen by him, she whispers, “Are you a man?” (126). To drive home the allusion to Macbeth (III, iv, 58), the narrator
comments that “not the thrilling tone with which our inimitable Siddons used
to electrify the scene, when she uttered the same whisper, ever had a more
powerful effect upon an auditor than had these unexpected sounds on him to
whom they were now addressed” (126). Not only does Scott conceive of
Clara’s meeting with Tyrrel as essentially theatrical (he in fact modeled Clara
on Sarah Siddons and lamented that Siddons never performed in a theatrical
production of *St. Ronan’s Well*), but *Clara does too*; she understands her own
experience in terms of the *theatrum mundi*: as she says to Tyrrel, “I do carry on
the farce of life wonderfully well—We are but actors, you know, and the world
but a stage” (143). The very staginess of Clara’s insanity leads her enemies (and
some friends) to label her no more than a mere actress, an impersonator. The
evil Bulmer—himself a man who “might have got him a fellowship in a cry of
players” (325)—claims that her madness “is all a trick . . . all an assumed char-
acter to get rid of me, to disgust me, to baffle me” (497). But Clara’s madness
is not so much an act as it is a response to acting, the direct result of living in
a hall of mirrors (or, rather, a theatrical hall). While Clara resists the most obvi-
ous role available to her—the mad Ophelia—she still finds herself mouthing
that Shakespearean heroine’s lines. When asked if she will see a doctor about
her agitated nerves, Clara replies, “I shall be no Lady Clementina, to be the
wonder and pity of the spring of St. Ronan’s—No Ophelia neither, though I
will say with her, Good night ladies—Good night, sweet ladies!” (116).

Clara’s breakdown is a result of her confusion over the constitution of the
subject; as her own subject disintegrates in response, Clara turns to the pre-
scribed utterances of dramatic convention as a kind of stable prescription
against the disease of ontological instability. The catch is that her cure is also
her curse. If Clara’s breakdown represents a flight from the performativity of
social life and mores, it also represents a new series of constraints, for there are
two leading roles open to her as a nineteenth-century woman on the lam from
society: the “fallen woman” and the hysteric. As the fallen woman, a role she
rejects by keeping her past secret, Clara would lose her character in the public
eye; as a hysteric, she simply “loses it.” The paradox of Clara’s condition is that
in her attempted escape from performativity she only has roles to fall back on;
she finds herself reading from Ophelia’s script because her culture casts her as
its favorite madwoman, as “real” madwomen would in fact be posed as Ophe-
lia for the camera’s enquiring eye later in the century.15 The suspicions that
Clara is “acting” her role as a hysteric are in a sense correct. In an effort to act
out her refusal of the world around her, Clara turns to theatrical narrative but
is threatened with conscription as the doomed heroine. It is no coincidence,
then, that when Clara goes missing at the end of the novel she is immediately
presumed to have drowned herself, as all Ophelias do.
Chapter 2

What disturbs the inhabitants of the spa about Clara is not simply that she is suspected of acting, but that she acts inappropriately. In the performative world of St. Ronan’s, Clara’s madness uncovers the very performativity at the heart of normative culture. Perhaps this is why the mad pose such a threat to the “sane”: the madman’s (or madwoman’s) inappropriate role playing exposes the naturalness of identity as a necessary fiction. What inappropriate role playing threatens to discover are those appropriate roles that must be misrecognized as inherent, “natural” identities. The self-conscious repetition of theatrical utterance (“Good night, sweet ladies!”) uncovers the cliche at the heart of cultural discourse. Theatrical recitation turns out to be no different from the recitations that make up everyday speech and action. If culture depends on naturalizing citation as original, idiosyncratic expression, then the repetitive, denaturalizing use of theatrical dialogue must either undo culture or be rejected as the “unnatural.” So Clara is either an actress or a madwoman, both “unnatural” roles for proper daughters of the aristocracy. We are left with a tautology that both covers and discloses the performativity of everyday life: Clara is mad because she acts mad, and she acts mad because, of course, she is.

Given the overt theatricality of the text, it is only fitting that the novel’s centerpiece be an amateur theatrical performance—what Bulmer calls “a sort of bastard theatricals, at Mowbray’s rat-gnawed mansion” (411). As St. Ronan’s previous critics have noted, this masquerade operates as a microcosm for the conniving theatrics of the spa. When Lady Penfeather first proposes “acting a few scenes of some popular drama,” the plan runs aground on a boundless egotism: everyone insists on playing the lead. It is next proposed to produce a “Comedy of Character,” in which the actors, playing predetermined roles, supply their own dialogue extemporaneously. This plan meets with less favor than the first, perhaps because it strikes too close to home: what is daily life at the St. Ronan’s Well, after all, if not a Comedy of Character? It is finally fixed upon, instead, to perform a dumb-show version of A Midsummer Night’s Dream, a “dramatic picture” in which “fine clothes and affected attitudes supplied all draughts upon fancy and talent” (307). Clara, who has already painfully learned the lesson that clothes make the man, finally consents to participate, but only “as a piece of the scene, not as an actor” (320).

As there is no time to construct theatrical sets, the Mowbray mansion provides the backdrop: “The old fashioned hedges and walks of the garden at Shaws Castle must necessarily serve for stage and scenery” (304). In an effort to erect some kind of boundary between home and stage, John Mowbray promises to “contrive some arrangement which should separate the actors in this mute drama from the spectators” (307); a “temporary screen” is constructed to distinguish the costumed players from the similarly costumed
Staging a Comeback: The Remasculinization of the Novel

guests. What this screen covers over is a kind of characterological or ontological void; it allows the audience’s identity to be misrecognized as inherent, contradistinct from the assumed characters on stage. The theatrical space, whose borders are usually demarcated in this period by curtains, displays the performative void at the heart of character, but in its role as oppositional space it also allows for the very reconstruction of naturalized character. Mrs. Blower’s puritanical diatribe against stage plays perhaps illustrates this dual function best: “It’s a mere blasphemy for folk to gar [sic] themselves look otherwise than their Maker made them; and then changing the name which was given them at baptism, is, I think, an awful falling away from our vows” (311). Because she mistakes the imaginative nature of theater, because she doesn’t understand the conventional separation of space that the screen is supposed to perform, Mrs. Blower interprets theater as a threat to naturalized identity. At the same time, however, her own sense of identity is reconstituted in her refusal to participate in the “blasphemy” of play-acting. Despite the screen that functions for all but Mrs. Blower as a cordon sanitaire around the theatrical space, the most important costume drama happens offstage. Angry because Clara has a more beautiful costume, Lady Penfeather cajoles Clara into giving up her Indian shawl. When Josiah Cargill, the reverend who officiated at Clara’s marriage to Bulmer, mistakes the older woman for Clara, Lady Penfeather tries to get him to betray Clara’s secret. Although the details remain vague, Lady Penfeather learns enough to defame Miss Mowbray’s character. It is precisely these accusations against her good character, based on information extracted by Lady Penfeather while in character, that precipitate the novel’s tragic closure. Once again, Clara has fallen victim to masquerade, to performative strategies that refuse to remain on the other side of the screen.

The master of these revels, the deus ex machina who unveils himself as the narrative’s directorial agent in time to unravel its mysteries, is “the Nabob,” Touchwood. Unknown to the actors in St. Ronan’s tragic drama, Touchwood (who turns out to be none other than Mr. Scrogie, a cousin of Bulmer and Tyrrel) has been stage-managing events for his own amusement. Having bribed Bulmer’s trusty manservant, Touchwood has been able to stay one step ahead of the action. As he says, “By this fellow’s means, I have counterplotted all his master’s fine schemes. For example, as soon as I learned Bulmer was coming down here, I contrived to give Tyrrel an anonymous hint, well knowing he would set off like the devil to thwart him, and so I should have the whole dramatis personae together, and play them off against each other, at my own pleasure” (580). Touchwood’s “pleasure” is in controlling a cast of characters who hardly realize that their plotlines are fixed. As the embodiment of fate turned director/producer, Touchwood engineers “scenes” for an audience of one.
Chapter 2

Touchwood’s production, however, turns into tragedy when he loses control of the narrative. In the absence of his directorial hand, and thus in the presence of Scott as executive producer, the novel loses none of its theatricality; indeed, the novel’s denouement now unfolds in a series of dramatic set pieces. Fleeing from her brother’s threats to institutionalize her in either marriage or an asylum, Clara escapes from Shaws Castle and appears at the deathbed confession of Hannah Irwin, the woman who helped Bulmer deceive her: “[Hannah Irwin] started . . . with a faint scream; for slowly, and with a feeble hand, the curtains of the bed opposite to the side at which Cargill sat were opened, and the figure of Clara Mowbray, her clothes and long hair drenched and dripping with rain, stood in the opening by the bedside” (608). Parting the curtains that are closing on Hannah’s final performance, Clara materializes as an “apparition” of herself. What Clara’s ultimate role as spectral presence illustrates, I believe, is her position as ghost within the performative system of St. Ronan’s Well, the haunting reminder of performativity (that is, performed identity) gone mad. In her final and most theatrical scene, Clara makes a spectacular entrance into Tyrrel’s chamber, bearing a candle. He believes at first that she is an apparition, but we recognize her immediately as the Lady Macbeth of the famous sleepwalking scene. This lady is not sleeping, however, but raving: is she Clara as Ophelia as Lady Macbeth, or Lady Macbeth as Ophelia? Regardless, there is only one closure open to her, and so Clara sinks into death, offstage.

As Clara’s death illustrates, St. Ronan’s Well is very much concerned with the dangers of performativity. What it fails to provide, however, is any alternative to the performative disintegration of character—in the novel’s closing paragraph, even the spa buildings are dismantled as a final gesture of ruin. In the face of such total annihilation, one can imagine even the stalwart Mrs. Blower finding very little to anchor a renewed faith in character. While St. Ronan’s is clearly meant, in part, as a critique of the performativity of modern social life, the novel takes its deconstruction of naturalized identity past any reasonable point of return. Such a return, however, is made in Redgauntlet. While theatricality persists in Redgauntlet as a thematics of impersonation, the novel ultimately tries to reinstate “true” character as a matter of birthright and masculine prerogative.

There are two main masqueraders in Redgauntlet: Darsie, who involuntarily masquerades as a woman, and “the Pretender,” Charles Edward Stewart. As his “title” suggests, the Pretender is not only a claimant to the throne, but also the embodiment of political pretense. He appears as an imposter many times over: as Charles Edward Stewart, he “pretends” to be the king in exile; as the Pretender, he arrives in England disguised as a Catholic priest, Father Buon-
venture; as Father Buonaventure, he wears a military uniform that Alan assumes to be a costume, since “a military disguise was very often assumed by the seminary priests, whose visits to England, or residence there, subjected them to legal penalties” (296). Under these layers of identity, however, the Pretender refuses to perform convincingly. Certain of his own birthright, Charles Edward acts like royalty, not like a priest or even like a pretender. When Alan Fairford encounters him at Fairladies, the convent where he secretly awaits the rebellion, the young advocate is repeatedly struck by the discontinuity between Charles Edward’s role (priest) and behavior (regal): “There was something of majesty, depressed indeed, and overclouded, but still grand and imposing, in the manner and words of Father Buonaventure, which it was difficult to reconcile with those preconceived notions which imputed subtlety and fraud to his sect and order” (303). In other words, the Pretender does not pretend very well, since (paradoxically) he does not appear to dissemble. Another way to put this is that the Pretender acts his role of exiled royalty so well that his other masquerade fails. Charles Edward believes so strongly in his “rightful” identity that he is no fraud. As he tells Alan (speaking of himself), “No doubt, however, that person is a pretender; and some people think his pretensions are not ill founded” (298). In this sense, pretense is not equated with falsehood or make believe, as the Hanoverian government would have it, but with the assertion of a right.

Unfortunately for Charles Edward, the reigning political system defines the terms and casts the roles; the unsuccessful uprising makes his “pretensions” to the throne a wish and a lie. But what causes the Jacobite uprising, the last stand of a heroic masculinity, to falter? What (or who) turns such noble pretensions into false pretense? Several answers apply (cowardice, bad timing, treachery), but one is the most direct: a woman. The Pretender’s mistress, a “beautiful but capricious dame,” becomes the condition upon which the uprising runs aground. Seeking a way to back out of rebellion, the last Jacobites offer their support on condition that Charles Edward abandon the woman they believe to be a spy (“She puts his secrets into her workbag and out they fly whenever she opens it. If I must hang, I would wish it be in somewhat a better rope than the string of a lady’s hussey,” 372). The Pretender is unwilling to relinquish his “rights as a sovereign and as a man” (378), and so the rebellion simply dissolves. As Judith Wilt has remarked of this section, “The power of woman, now pure ‘condition’ . . . becomes the point on which sovereignty and manhood hinge” (127). There is no way that Charles Edward can respond to his would-be subjects’ “condition” with his manhood and sovereignty unscathed. Either he agrees to the condition (in which case he has been forced to “purchase that allegiance, which, if you owe it to me at all, is due to
me as my birthright," 379) or he disagrees (in which case, “a female influence predominates”). The very fact of his mistress, then, renders Charles Edward a perpetual pretender; unmanned by his association with a woman, Charles Edward brings about “the feminization, and hence erasure, of the Stuart political line” (Wilt, 118).

In his treatment of the Pretender, Scott clearly wants to have it both ways; he represents Charles Edward as noble, majestic even, but finally a political has-been, a fraud. The heroic Jacobite cause is not entirely bankrupt, therefore, but it is foolhardy. What Wilt calls “the feminization of the last Scottish king” finally labels Charles Edward’s royal pretensions a political drag act. With his birthright revealed as imposture, since might confers right for the political exile, the last hope of the Jacobites leaves England forever and returns to France. It is precisely this movement, from true king to drag queen, which Darsie Latimer’s story reverses. If he does not exactly become king, he at least emerges from his feminizing masquerade to claim a title (the name of the Father) and the lands that are his by birthright. And there is nothing contingent about Darsie’s true identity as the rightful Laird of Redgauntlet: it is stamped right between his eyes. What this mark assures us of is identity naturalized as physiology. Not only does identity inhere within the body, it is legible on the body’s surface. Darsie’s readability, the corporeal sign system that declares his identity irrevocable, compensates for the suspiciously contingent nature of kingship. As Charles Edward deconstructs the idea of divine birthright—it is power, not genealogy, that makes kings—Darsie reconstructs the idea of character as more than political. While the Pretender falls victim to a world of shifting political identities, Darsie’s restoration represents the triumph of essentialism.

As much as this naturalizing restoration occurs as a response to the performativity of political identity, however, it is also driven by a virulent case of gender panic, which sets in when the performativity of female or feminized character threatens to compromise the citadel of essentialized masculinity. Darsie’s mark (of gender, since only males of the House of Redgauntlet bear it) operates as a defense strategy against the deconstruction of naturalized male gender. Yet we can see that this mark of gender, a phallic signifier placed squarely between the brows, is always already the sign of vulnerability and threatened gender integrity.

Consider the “history” of the mark. Although Darsie’s facial mark supposedly signals gender’s inherence within the body, he must be taught to read it from without. In fact, Darsie does not even know he has the mark until he learns to recognize it in the following scene: while held prisoner by his uncle, known only as Herries of Birrenswork at this point, Darsie is startled by the
older man’s “extraordinary look” and “answer[s] him by a look of the same kind” (199). “Catching the reflection of my countenance in a large antique mirror,” Darsie writes to Alan, “I started again at the real or imaginary resemblance which my countenance, at that moment, bore to that of Herries” (200). In his own belated mirror scene, Darsie begins the process of self-identification; the real or imaginary resemblance between the men occurs in fact as Darsie’s “answer” to his captor’s scowl, a kind of mimicry. When his uncle later catches Darsie observing himself in the glass, shortly after the maid-servant has witnessed him “moulding [his] visage like a mad player,” he instructs his prisoner to “doubt not that it is stamped on your forehead—the fatal mark of our race” (208). Herries/Redgauntlet then proceeds to narrate their family history, to provide Darsie with a story that explains the mark. What we have here, clearly, is a scene of instruction and the concomitant construction of identity. Darsie’s all-important “mark” means nothing and is apparent to no one until it is given an interpretive context. Darsie cannot read the mark that confers familial and gendered identity until he knows what it is supposed to mean. Like all other marks of gender, the sign of Redgauntlet means nothing naturally; it only signifies socially. Like all sign systems, then, even corporeal ones, gender marking requires interpretation and is therefore vulnerable to reinterpretation, which is exactly what Darsie’s mark is designed to forestall: the sign that signifies “nature” must cover over its own nature as arbitrary sign. The mark of gender, therefore, operates as its own inadequate defense against the very vulnerability it encodes.

Redgauntlet, then, can be read as a novel in the grips of two kinds of panic: gender and genre. To shore up its masculinity on both fronts, the text embeds itself in the public discourses of law, politics, and history—discourses it attempts to disentangle from the language of performativity. What separates the masquerades in Redgauntlet from those in St. Ronan’s Well is that they all serve political ends: not the petty personal politics of the spa, but the epic politics of the state. The false identities of Redgauntlet, including the string of aliases adopted by the Jacobites to elude discovery, are all a function of statecraft, not stagecraft. Charles Edward’s remaining Jacobites are not actors, but political actants. In the end, the defeat of the Pretender whose political pretensions authorized their pretense renders these alternate identities, including the political identity of “Jacobite,” mere falsehood. The machinations of the rebels are replaced by the scrupulous honesty of men like Darsie and Alan Fairford. Indeed, Alan’s version of “walking the boards” (25)—in a court of law rather than on a theatrical stage—becomes the answer to fraudulent stagecraft and wily statecraft. The embroidered silk gown of the advocate becomes the only acceptable kind of dress-up for the new masculinity.
Chapter 2

As the theatrical energies of masquerade are channeled into the more appropriate format of the law court, the benign justice of the Hanoverian government hands down a death sentence to the theatrics of punishment. General Colin Campbell, this novel’s answer to Touchwood as *deus ex machina*, declines to hang the rebels and simply sends everybody home. As Bruce Biderwell has remarked, comparing the pardon of Hugh Redgauntlet to the execution of Evan Dhu in *Waverley*, “although he is not less loyal or courageous than Evan, the old Jacobite’s rebellious energies can find no means of expression in defeat. The government will not give him a gallows for a stage” (116). With this deliberate suppression of spectacle, the denouement of *Redgauntlet* is about as thrilling as its aborted rebellion—a fact that might help explain why all efforts to stage the novel were failures.18

The attempt in *Redgauntlet* to neutralize performance and to naturalize performative identity stands in direct contrast to the highly spectacular, theatrical world of *St. Ronan’s Well*. The subterfuge and play-acting that construct and deconstruct character in *St. Ronan’s* are characterized in Scott’s subsequent novel as feminized and anachronistic, even as they are turned to political ends. While Scott peoples his only domestic novel with performers, aligning modernity with theatricality in an undercutting of contemporary “character,” he retreats to the highlands of masculine historical romance and essentialist identity in *Redgauntlet*. The Author of Waverley’s reinvestment in essential masculine character, his celebration of male birthright restored, might of course have something to do with the critics’ suggestion that *St. Ronan’s Well* had revealed him as a kind of literary pretender. By definition, the Author of Waverley wrote the Waverley Novels, and most critics agreed that *St. Ronan’s Well* was not really a Waverley Novel. With his authorial identity impugned by his own hand, Scott stages his comeback, as I suggested in the first half of this chapter, through an allegory of restored legitimacy. But what does this mean for an author whose very pseudonym declares his authorial role to be a kind masquerade?

If the Pretender’s fate demonstrates the dangers of pretense, Darsie’s stamp of legitimacy attempts to establish a naturalizing ground for performative relations. Darsie’s story, ostensibly a fable of essentialism’s triumph over performativity, suggests that identity is more than a matter of costume changes or pseudonyms, that masculinity cannot finally be tainted by a short stint in a dress or a brief expedition into female novelistic territory. *Redgauntlet’s* anxious attempt to redress the generic cross-dressing of *St. Ronan’s Well* perhaps doubles as an assurance of Scott’s own intact identity, masked but not erased by his pseudonym and undiminished by his effeminizing brush with “light literature.” While Scott defends the fortress of the male authorial ego from the
threat of his *alter auctor* (and actor), performativity gets trundled offstage as a nasty reminder of the real drag that *St. Ronan’s Well* turned out to be.

The publication of *St. Ronan’s Well* provoked another fascinating reaction, proving that even in Scott’s romantic world truth could be stranger than fiction. The people of Innerleithen, the place on which Scott had modeled the novel’s eponymous village and which had once had a bustling spa, immediately recognized their home in the pages of Scott’s novel and decided to cash in on their visibility. Reading rather perversely against the novel’s grain—*St. Ronan’s Well* is, after all, about a doomed village whose glory days are clearly a thing of the past—the locals discussed changing the name of their village to St. Ronan’s to lure tourists and reestablish their spa trade. They settled on changing the name of their mineral spring—Doo’s Well—to St. Ronan’s Well, and by the miraculous power of the King of the North the tourists returned. As part of their program of self-promotion, the people of Innerleithen arranged for a yearly festival in celebration of the “St. Ronan’s Border Games,” which Scott himself attended for several years as a master of the revels (*Memoirs*, 513–14). What interests me about this anecdote is how directly it speaks to the issues of commerce and theater that existed at the heart of the *St. Ronan’s Well* debacle and how quickly it turns the scene of national pageant into commodity spectacle. The St. Ronan’s festival played off the public media event that was the Author of Waverley to produce itself and the village of Innerleithen as commodities for the spectacular tourist—proving that there are more forms of cultural capital than can be accounted for by literary reviewers. In at least one way, then, Scott’s attempt to stimulate the market that he feared he had flooded with his Waverley romances was a financial success, although the proceeds did not find their way into Scott’s pockets as he had hoped. Scott’s mistake with *St. Ronan’s Well* appears to have been in misunderstanding the constitutive limits of his particular brand of novel, which could only produce literary capital under specific conditions—one of which was avoiding the open market in light (i.e., women’s) literature. If nothing else, however, the blunder rekindled audience desire for a proper Waverley Novel. But then, on some perverse and unacknowledged level, this might have been just what happened: not a “literary suicide” for Scott, but a killing misrecognition and mixing of the genres of women’s fiction that produced a novel so unappealing it called for the immediate return of the King. By injecting a fatal dose of theatricality into the domestic, Scott may have failed on the high literary side of the popular
Chapter 2

market (where Burney and Austen succeeded by expelling such theatricality), but he managed to necessitate his own cure: a return to historical romance that allowed him to reclaim his corner of the literary market and to carry the literary field for another day. As the agent of that reclamation, *Redgauntlet* is not any less commercial than *St. Ronan’s Well*—it is more so—but it is a different kind of spectacular commodity, one with national pageantry included. The performances in *Redgauntlet*—and the literary performance that is *Redgauntlet*—are ennobled by their contact with politics and history, which is much more than can be said for the sad performers of *St. Ronan’s Well*, who turned out to be the discarded supernumeraries of the Waverley cast of characters.

I have argued that Scott staged his critical comeback around a much different figure of theater than we saw in chapter 1. While Burney and Austen used theater’s image to draw off the less savory aspects of the novel—its status as mass-market commodity, its connection to vulgar amusements, its exhibition of both character and author—and, in so doing, defined “the novel” by its domesticated effects, Scott inverts the relationship between domesticity and theatricality to realign the literary field towards his own historical and romantic novels. We could say that Scott uses *domesticity* to draw off the less savory aspects of theatricality—and, in so doing, opens up performance as a legitimate masculine activity and reopens the market in romance. As dominant as Scott’s romances were on the literary market, however, even kings cannot live forever. When Scott died in 1832, on the threshold of the Victorian age, his romances became history. The market crowned a new king, whose long and successful reign had much to do with his able negotiation of the novel’s complex relationship to theater, and to whom I will turn in the following chapter.