

1972

Villainy in Scott's Fiction

George W. Boswell
University of Mississippi

Follow this and additional works at: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/ms_studies_eng



Part of the [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Boswell, George W. (1972) "Villainy in Scott's Fiction," *Studies in English*: Vol. 13 , Article 7.
Available at: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/ms_studies_eng/vol13/iss1/7

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at eGrove. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studies in English* by an authorized editor of eGrove. For more information, please contact egrove@olemiss.edu.

Villainy in Scott's Fiction

by George W. Boswell

The natural disposition and career of Sir Walter Scott were so generally sunny that only a small handful of his many critics have seriously faulted any aspects of his character. Occasional objections have been adduced to the mystification and possible harshness of his business dealings with the Ballantynes, the maintenance of his incognito with respect to authorship of the Waverley novels long beyond any credible reason for it, his jealousy of Robert Burns (though if existent this is certainly not very noticeable), and some of his Chesterfieldian letters to his son and heir; but these have seemed to pale into insignificance when set alongside his moral virtues. The latter include his industry, his openhandedness, his capacity for extensive friendships, his civil services, the generous praise of the literary productions of his contemporaries, and above all the heroic stoicism with which "in his fifty-sixth year, already in uncertain health, he assumed a mountain of debt and sentenced himself to a lifetime of servitude"¹ in order to avoid bankruptcy and its stigma. These strengths have moved his latest biographer, Edgar Johnson, to write, "Of all the British men of letters of the nineteenth century he is the noblest and the wisest."²

Such a nature and life honored by unbounded adulation would not appear propitious to the preparation of a novelist, who is expected to be able to delineate among other states the deepest depravation of the human heart. Some of this deficiency may indeed be seen in Scott. Not altogether inappropriately Hutton calls him "a conventional moralist,"³ Fischer writes that "his novels bear no intimate relation to his own convictions or experience,"⁴ Baker adds that "sheer villainy he never could understand; it always landed him in the bog of

¹ Edgar Johnson, *Sir Walter Scott: The Great Unknown* (New York: Macmillan, 1970), p. 971.

² *Ibid.*, p. 1279.

³ Richard H. Hutton, *Sir Walter Scott* (New York: Harper [1878]), p. 125.

⁴ Frank Elmer Fischer, "Social and Political Ideas in Scott's Fiction," *Dissertation Abstracts*, XV (1955 [1950]), 581.

melodrama,"⁵ and according to Henderson, "His merely villainous creations, whether of the diabolically clever order like Rashleigh, or the somewhat commonplace sort of Lord Dalgarno, or the low and depraved kind of his eminence of Whitefriars—grossly impressive after a fashion though he be—are all a little stagey."⁶ But these observations are simplistic and superficial; closer scrutiny reveals a considerable trenchancy, realism, and variety among Scott's villains.⁷ He has no Iago—but who has except Shakespeare? But he has a Richard Varney, a Valentine Bulmer, a Henbane Dwining, a Lady Ashton, and an Edward Christian. The present article is designed as an essay in analysis of evil among the many characters⁸ in his twenty-six novels and additional handful of short story-like pieces, partially to set the record straight but primarily to throw light on Scott's evaluation of villainies at least on the evidence of his prose fiction.

In the "Introductory Note" to *A Dictionary of the Characters in The Waverley Novels of Sir Walter Scott*⁹ M. F. A. Husband wrote, "No fewer than 2836 characters are comprised in the Dictionary, and these include 37 horses and 33 dogs." It may be assumed that close to two thousand of the human characters appear at sufficient length to evidence their nature. Among them we can classify 111 as villains, of which only seventeen are major villains. Subjective distinction must play a part in these figures. For example, though obviously at least one member of the precious law firm of Greenhorn and Grinderson in *The Antiquary* is a grasping knave, he is omitted here because of his insignificance. Major villains differ from minor mostly in the extent to which they are displayed. Fewer than 1% of his characters, then, are major villains, and only about 5% tend substantially in that direction. One of the novels (*Castle Dangerous*) includes no villains at all, half of them no major villains, and only one (*The Fair Maid*

⁵ Ernest A. Baker, *The History of the English Novel* (London: Witherby, 1935), VI, 210.

⁶ T. F. Henderson, "Sir Walter Scott," in *The Cambridge History of English Literature* (Cambridge: University Press, 1915), XII, 21.

⁷ Who certainly merit a short study if his protagonists deserve a book, like Alexander Welsh's *The Hero of the Waverley Novels* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963).

⁸ "Scott has the most crowded canvas of any European novelist"—Christina Keith, *The Author of Waverley* (New York: Roy Publishers, 1964), p. 171.

⁹ (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1910.)

of *Perth*) contains three major villains.¹⁰ In chronological order of publication let us get the facts before us.

- * *Waverley*. No major, five minor
 Richard Waverley, political plotter
 Fergus Mac Ivor, not really evil, just proud and high-handed
 Malcolm Bradwardine, greedy
 Donald Bean Lean, robber, turncoat
 Balmawhapple, vengeful carouser
- Guy Mannering*. No major, three minor
 Sophie Mannering, deceitful, scheming
 Gilbert Glossin, ambitious, unscrupulous (but not totally evil)
 Dirk Hatteraick, brutal smuggler
- The Antiquary*. No major, two minor
 Herman Dousterswivel, swindler
 Joscelyn, Countess of Glenallan, magisterial, selfish, unyielding
- The Black Dwarf*. No major, three minor
 Willie Graeme of Westburnflat, unforgiving raider
 Sir Frederick Langley, ambitious, traitorous
 Richard Vere, selfish, deceitful, ambitious
- Old Mortality*. Two major, four minor
 JOHN BURLEY, cruel religious enthusiast
 BASIL OLIFANT, ambitious grabber
 Claverhouse, harsh warrior
 Francis Stuart, also not really evil, just a swaggering adventurer
 Habakkuk Mucklewrath, insane preacher
 Ephraim Macbriar, religious enthusiast
- Rob Roy*. One major, two minor
 RASHLEIGH OSBALDISTONE, scheming, licentious traitor
 Joseph Jobson, unscrupulous lawyer
 Andrew Fairservice, boastful, cowardly
- The Heart of Midlothian*. No major, four minor
 John Porteous, cruel officer
 Meg Murdockson, inveterate hater
 George Staunton, not really evil, just a willful young rake
 Whistler, victim of circumstances, environment
- The Bride of Lammermoor*. One major, three minor

¹⁰ Similarly, only *King Lear* among Shakespeare's plays has four major villains.

- LADY ASHTON, heartless tyrant
 Bucklaw, reckless adventurer
 Captain Craigenfelt, capitalizing toady
 Ailsie Gourlay, deceptive fortune-teller
A Legend of Montrose. No major, three quite minor
 Marquis of Argyle, underhanded, cowardly
 Allan McAulay, violent, ungovernable enthusiast
 Ranald MacEagh, vindictive, violent
Ivanhoe. Two major, five minor
 BRIAN DE BOIS-GUILBERT, religious hypocrite
 REGINALD FRONT-DE-BOEUF, cruel tyrant
 Prince John, cowardly traitor
 Waldemar Fitzurse, ambitious traitor
 Maurice de Bracy, reckless self-seeker
 Ulrica, frenzied avenger
 Lucas de Beaumanoir, persecuting enthusiast
The Monastery. One major, two minor
 JULIAN AVENEL, lawless, grasping nobleman
 Christie of the Clinthill, swaggering dependent (by no means altogether bad)
 Sir Piercie Shafton, not really evil, just boastful and proud
The Abbot. No major, two quite minor
 Roland Graeme, protagonist, willful, haughty
 Lord William Ruthven, also not really villainous, stern, harsh
Kenilworth. One major, four minor
 RICHARD VARNEY, revengeful, murderous self-seeker
 Michael Lambourne, swaggering, drunken crony
 Anthony Foster, religious hypocrite, grasping
 Leicester, ambitious, selfish
 Alasco, complaisant alchemist
The Pirate. No major, three quite minor
 Bryce Snailsfoot, deceptive peddler
 Neil Ronaldson, avaricious, dishonest
 Mrs. Swertha, petty plunderer, cheater
The Fortunes of Nigel. One major, two minor
 MALCOLM DALGARNO, hypocrite, heartless
 Captain John Colepepper, coward, murderer
 Lutin, liar, thief, murderer

- Pevevil of the Peak.* One major, six minor
 EDWARD CHRISTIAN, revenge
 Duke of Buckingham, reckless traitor
 Dr. Titus Oates, religious liar
 Colonel Thomas Blood, murderer
 Tom Chiffinch, luxurious pander
 Captain Dangerfield, self-seeking informer
 Captain of Newgate, spidery, grasping
- Quentin Durward.* One major, five minor
 WILLIAM DE LA MARCK, cruel nobleman
 Campo-Basso, ambitious, toadying
 Tristan L'Hermite, cruel executioner
 Oliver le Diable, unscrupulous counsellor
 Hayraddin Maugrabin, double-dealing atheist
 John Cardinal Balue, proud traitor
- St. Ronan's Well.* One major, one minor
 VALENTINE BULMER, ambitious, heartless hater
 Sir Bingo Binks, ill-tempered, brutish nobleman
- Redgauntlet.* No major, three minor
 Cristal Nixon, brutal traitor
 Thomas Trumbull, hypocritical smuggler
 Father Crackenthorp, conspirator
- The Betrothed.* No major, three minor
 Prince John (again), irritant, trouble-maker
 Randal de Lacy, black sheep, ambitious supplanter
 Wild Wenlock, licentious brawler
- The Talisman.* No major, two minor
 Conrade, Marquis of Montserrat, trouble-maker
 Giles Amaury, murderous traitor
- Woodstock.* No major, five minor
 Charles II, self-indulgent
 General Harrison, cruel, ambitious enthusiast
 Roger Wildrake, not really evil—dissolute, brawling, swaggering
 Joseph Tomkins, enthusiastic, licentious hypocrite
 Merciful Strickalthrow, cruel enthusiast
- "The Two Drovers." No major, two minor
 John Fleecebumpkin, unscrupulous trouble-maker
 Ralph Heskett, bad-tempered, overbearing

- "The Highland Widow." No major, one minor
Miles MacPhadraick, selfish
- "The Surgeon's Daughter." No major, five minor
Prince Tippoo Sahib, self-indulgent
Richard Middlemas (protagonist), ambitious hater
Richard Tresham, double-dealer, deserter
Adela Montreville, wrathful, self-indulgent
Tom Hillary, hater
- The Fair Maid of Perth.* Three major, three minor
DUKE OF ALBANY, ambitious, deceitful
SIR JOHN RAMORNY, vindictive murderer
HENBANE DWINING, sadistic, atheistic, traitorous
Duke of Rothsay, willful, profligate
Conachar, coward, quarrelsome
Anthony Bonthron, unfeeling, drunken
- "My Aunt Margaret's Mirror." No major, two minor
Sir Philip Forester, selfish, heartless
Baptista Damiotti, quack
- Anne of Geierstein.* One major, four minor
COUNT ARCHIBALD VON HAGENBACH, grasping, cruel
Count de Campo-Basso (again), traitor
Ital Schreckenwald, cruel, unscrupulous
Rudolph Donnerhugel, ambitious warmonger
Brother Bartholomew, robber, hypocrite
- Count Robert of Paris.* One major, two minor
MICHAEL AGELASTES, ambitious hypocrite¹¹
Nicephorus Briennius, licentious, ambitious
Achilles Tatius, ambitious, cowardly
- Castle Dangerous.* None at all.

Scott is too wise a writer to depict his characters in only blacks and whites.¹² As is evident above, many of those we have labeled as evil are only partially so; and ever so many of the virtuous people, even protagonists, have their faults. Roland Graeme and Henry Smith are full-bodied studies in mixed traits, Waverley and Nigel seem really weak and unpromising, and even Morton might have selected his

¹¹ "Agelastes masquerades as a stoic philosopher but is a secret voluptuary . . . ; now he schemes to ascend the throne as the embodiment of Plato's dream of a philosopher king." Johnson, p. 1212.

¹² "My rogue," he says, "always, in despite of me, turns out my hero."

principles with a steadier hand. Callum Beg tried to kill Waverley from ambush, Rob Roy was a large-scale reiver, Sir William Ashton serves as a pale satellite to his masterful wife, and the pride and prejudices of such men as Richard I, Colonel Philip Talbot, Guy Mannering, Claverhouse, and Count Robert of Paris caused them great unnecessary trouble. Among Scott's strengths are his humorous originals: Bradwardine, Sir Geoffrey Peveril, Sir Arthur Wardour, Jonathan Oldbuck, and David Deans.

Now, in order to arrive as best we can at an overview of the species of villainy with which he most concerns himself, let us classify the characters by principal infraction. Major villains only, by types:

1. Ambitious traitors: Albany, Rashleigh Osbaldistone, Agelastes, Olifant
2. Scheming noblemen: Ramorny, Dalgarno, Varney, Bulmer
3. Reckless, lawless barons: De la Marck, Front de Boeuf, de Hagenbach, Julian Avenel
4. Offenders against religion: Bois-Guilbert, Burley
5. Haters: Christian, Dwining
6. Women: Lady Ashton (overbearing hater)

and by fault:

1. Greed, ambition: Varney, Rashleigh, Bulmer, de Hagenbach, Albany, Front de Boeuf, Olifant, Avenel, Agelastes
2. Cruelty, callousness: Dalgarno, De la Marck, Burley
3. Pride: Ashton, Dwining
4. Revenge: Christian, Ramorny
5. Hypocrisy: Bois-Guilbert

At least most of the villains appear in the following table. Major figures head the list.

1. Ambitious traitors: Albany, Rashleigh, Agelastes, Olifant, Campo-Basso, Tatius, Conrade, Balue
2. Scheming noblemen: Ramorny, Dalgarno, Bulmer, Charles II, Prince John, de Lacy, Argyle,¹³ Briennius, Langley, Vere
3. Reckless noblemen: De la Marck, Front de Boeuf, de Hagenbach, Avenel, Buckingham, Bucklaw, Balmawhapple, de Bracy, Staunton
4. Religious hypocrites, enthusiasts: Bois-Guilbert, Burley, Gen-

¹³ Scott "hardly ever—and only when, as in the case of the marquis of Argyle, his political prejudices are strongly stirred—manifests an unfairness that verges on spite." Henderson, p. 21.

- eral Harrison, Amaury, Beaumanoir, Oates, Trumbull, Strickalthrow, Mucklewrath, Macbriar, Foster, Tomkins
5. Companions: Varney, Lambourne, Wildrake, Nixon, Christie, Craigengelt, Bothwell, Fitzurse, Schreckenwald, Chiffinch
 6. Ruffians: Bean Lean, Hatteraick, Bonthron, Fleecebumpkin, L'Hermite, Dangerfield, Blood, Colepepper
 7. Haters: Christian, Dwining, Forester, Middlemas
 8. Women: Ashton, Glenallan, Murdockson, Gourlay
 9. Lawyers, magistrates: Glossin, Jobson, Ronaldson
 10. Scientists, quacks: Alasco, Dousterswivel, Damiotti

One of his critics writes, "He could not effectually use the same subject twice."¹⁴ When he endeavored to repeat a similar villainous character, as in another area Norna of the Fitful Head is something of an unsuccessful copy of Meg Merrilies, did he normally fail? His lawless barons, Front de Boeuf, Julian Avenel, William De la Marck, and Archibald de Hagenbach, are certainly tarred with the same brush. Likewise, compare unfavorably Lady Glenallan with Lady Ashton, Ailsie Gourlay with Meg Murdockson, Merciful Strickalthrow with Habakkuk Mucklewrath, Cristal Nixon with Christie of the Clinthill, and Joseph Jobson with Gilbert Glossin.

Judging from the number of semi-major villains who are primarily guilty of them, this is the order of enormity among Scott's figures:

<i>Rank</i>	<i>Infraction</i>	<i>Number of Villains</i>
1.	Greed	16
2.	Cruelty	10
3.	Treason	7
4.	Recklessness, dissipation	7
5.	Morality, sex	6
6.	Pride	4
7.	Religious enthusiasm	3
8.	Superstitious fraud	3
9.	Revenge	3
10.	Cowardice	2

Do they correspond closely to the medieval Seven Deadly Sins? Not very.

¹⁴ Hutton, p. 96.

Avarice	16
Anger	10
Gluttony	7
Lust	6
Pride	4
Envy	2 (except generally, as combined with ambition)
Sloth	0 (Scott's villains are by no means lazy)

And how about the Christian virtues?¹⁵ Violation of:

Unworldliness	32
Purity	25
Benevolence	20
Humility	14
Obedience	13

How do Scott's villainous characters compare with those of another author, for example Shakespeare? There are only twenty-six of the latter, or an average of 2/3rds of one per play. They may be listed as follows:

Richard III	Claudius
Tyrrel	Achilles
Aaron	Iago
Proteus	Angelo
Tybalt	Edmund
John	Goneril
Shylock	Regan
Prince John	Cornwall
Don John	Macbeth
Scroop	Lady Macbeth
Duke Frederick	Cloten
Oliver	Cymbeline's Queen
Cassius	Antonio

and their principal evil:

<i>Fault</i>	<i>Number of Characters</i>
Ambition	5

¹⁵ As formulated in *The Encyclopaedia Britannica*, eleventh edition (1910), IX, 821.

VILLAINY IN SCOTT'S FICTION

Greed	4
Cruelty	4
Jealous Hatred	4
Lechery	4
Pride	2
Lying	2
Treason	1
	26

Of course, in the same way that few villains are as whole-hearted as Dalgarno and De la Marck,¹⁶ there is, as implied above, appreciable actual or potential evil scattered among the favorable characters. Unlike Shakespeare, who used three villainous protagonists (of course, all kings, they were imposed on him by their plots), Scott uses none. The closest he comes is in Roland Graeme, merely impetuous and willful, and Henry Smith, who is merely a roisterer and fighter. Edgar Ravenswood possesses no bad qualities except excessive family pride. If Louis XI were a protagonist the practice would be imperiled, for his character has little to recommend it; but (like Oliver Cromwell in *Woodstock*) he is only a background figure for Quentin Durward. Similar figures are Alexius Comnenus, Byzantine emperor who holds his position by craft and guile; James I, credulous, cowardly, eavesdropping; Redgauntlet, single-minded Jacobite; and Charles the Bold, ambitious, splenetic, and overbearing. Cadwallon dedicated himself to the extermination of his lord's enemy, Effie Deans remained selfish and inconsiderate, Nelly Christie yielded to the seductiveness of Lord Dalgarno, Nanty Ewert was drinking himself to death, Hispeth Mucklebackit committed and concealed guilty deeds, Helen MacGregor condemned a defenseless man to death in cold blood, and Ursula Suddlechop delighted in backstage wirepulling. Hardly anything favorable can be advanced for the characters of Lady Binks, Thorncliff Osbaldistone, and Kate Chiffinch.

Taking into consideration the operation of all kinds of evil in circumstance, society, hero, villain, and supporting characters, we arrive at the following list. At least for purposes of his fiction it may be thought of as Scott's weighted evaluation of enormity.

¹⁶ "William the Boar, enemy to every kind of order and humanity." Francis R. Hart, *Scott's Novels* (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1966), p. 232.

Rank	Infraction	Appearance: in Number of Novels
1.	Application of force or corruption ¹⁷	12
2.	Greed, covetousness, ambition	11
3.	Religious enthusiasm, intolerance, superstition ¹⁸	8
4.	Cruelty ¹⁹	7
5.	Rebellion against government (Jacobitism)	5
6.	Treason ²⁰	4
7.	Feudal oppression ²¹	3
8.	Pride, willfulness	3
9.	Hatred	3
10.	Profligacy ²²	3
11.	Discord, gossip	2
12.	Suspicion, deception	2
13.	Cowardice ²³	2
14.	Revenge	1
15.	Undisciplined education ²⁴	1

68

As Fischer says, "The novels . . . do reveal . . . a contempt for all those who would trample on tradition and dissolve man's attachment to his family, his religion, and his country" (p. 581). Treason, rebellion, hypocrisy, quarrelsomeness, and dishonesty loom high indeed in Scott's obloquy, to the extent that he almost seems to be writing parable, to be seeking characters who objectify on the personal level public faults; but ambitious greed is at the very top of the hierarchy. There is a delicious irony here in that his contemporaries accused

¹⁷ Mostly of a girl to marry an unloved suitor, as is *The Black Dwarf*, *The Bride of Lammermoor*, *Quentin Durward*, *St. Ronan's Well*, *The Betrothed*, and *The Talisman*; occasionally of a young man, as of Nigel and Darsie Latimer.

¹⁸ As in *Old Mortality*, *Ivanhoe*, and *The Abbot*. "Of enthusiasm in religion Scott always spoke very severely," Hutton, p. 126.

¹⁹ As in the Porteous riots, the treatment of Mary Queen of Scots and Amy Robsart, and *Quentin Durward* and *The Fair Maid of Perth*.

²⁰ Prince John and Fitzurse in *Ivanhoe*, Buckingham in *Peveeril of the Peak*, Nixon in *Redgauntlet*, and Agelastes, Briennius, and Tattius in *Count Robert of Paris*.

²¹ In *Guy Mannering* (Ellangowan's removal of the poachers), *The Monastery*, and *Anne of Geierstein*.

²² In *The Pirate*, *The Fortunes of Nigel*, and *The Fair Maid of Perth*.

²³ Argyle and Conachar.

²⁴ Waverley.

him above all himself of that very fault. Even as early as 1808 (published 1809), a half-decade before his first novel, in *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* Byron was sneering as follows:

And think'st thou, SCOTT! by vain conceit perchance,
On public taste to foist thy stale romance,
Though MURRAY with his MILLER may combine
To yield thy muse just half-a-crown per line?
No! when the sons of song descend to trade,
Their bays are sear, their former laurels fade,
Let such forego the poet's sacred name,
Who rack their brains for lucre, not for fame. . . .
And thou too, SCOTT! resign to minstrels rude
The wilder slogan of a border feud:
Let others spin their meagre lines for hire.

(ll. 171-178, 911-913)

Could it be that greed was Sir Walter's besetting and almost sole fault and that he placed it foremost in his fictional villainy in ironic effort at expiation?