Cloaking and Hiding: Dressing up in Robert Louis Stevenson's 'The Master of Ballantrae'

By Susan Oliver

According to Jean Baudrillard's now classic 1970s definition, a fetish is a fabrication. As a metaphor, an artifact and a social hieroglyph it is based on signs and appearances. The fetish attracts belief and worship. While some may have a phenomenal existence, the consciousness with which such phenomena are endowed is false, or deceptive. The fetish must be decoded if it is to be understood.[1] More recently, Bruno Latour has argued that for 'moderns', belief is not so much a state of mind as an activity resulting from the need for relationships between people.[2] We are social creatures needing to believe in others in order socially to exist, but are compelled to explain away the strangeness of a worship that we cannot objectively justify. As such, believing is itself a form of fetishistic behaviour. Even Latour's agnostic is obsessed with explaining the apparent disjunction between a willing belief in what is irrational and a desired counter-belief in a material world understood as factual and therefore real. The implications of these theories for literary fiction can be explored through their relevance to a novel that focuses on a master of deceptive appearances. That the same novel is written by an emigré Scot, about a migrant Scottish family and the disasters it suffers through an obsession with appearances is the subject of the rest of this essay. As Peter Logan has pointed out, Scottish writer Thomas Carlyle claimed in his philosophy of clothing *Sartor Resartus* (the tailor retailored, the very title a Latin 'cloak') that one can write fetishes, in the form of torments to the soul, while Ralph Waldo Emerson argued that the fetish can be a figure of speech for anything revered and given an overlay of decorum.[3]

In Stevenson's *The Master of Ballantrae*, the process of mythologizing the title character as a Scottish antihero depends upon a series of dramatic costume changes. James Durie, also known as The Master confounds the efforts of those seeking to consign him to the grave and to history by returning in a series of ever

new disguises. To the dismay of his younger brother Henry, he is an expert in keeping up appearances of the kind that fascinate everyone who meets or reads about him. Manufacturing a cult of personality, the Master of Ballantrae transforms his appearance from a Jacobite hero with a 'white cockade in his hat' (he is later revealed to be an enemy agent), into a pirate, a smuggler dressed in 'a sea-cloak', a diamond- and-lace adorned, cane-carrying French fop, an Indian Nabob, a piecework New York tailor, and finally a Scottish emigrant dressed in animal skins seeking his fortune in the forests and mountains just south of the US–Canadian border.

The Master's capacity for thwarting death through dramatic reinvention, his consumption of his family's fortune and dissipation of their estate, and his final burials (there are two) dressed in an animal skin in the frozen soil of upstate New York also reveal many of the attributes of that nineteenth-century creature of fetishistic consumption, the vampire.[4] All of his appearances ironically erect — only to deconstruct — Romantic stereotypes of Scottishness, from the brave and loyal Jacobite who fought in the '45, to the swashbuckling adventurer and explorer, to the Imperial entrepreneur. The Master's outward appearance is mercurial. Shape-shifting to take best advantage of circumstances defined by whomever he finds himself with, he evades reduction to a singular identity even in death. But under his costumes lies evidence of less glamorous problems faced by his family and his nation: the reality of insolvency, the sale of land, violent cultural division, and emigration.

In order to understand the literary implication of the Master's serial regeneration, it is helpful to compare him with another character from nineteenth-century Scottish literature, with whom he shares a title and to whom Stevenson was surely responding. Edgar, the Master of Ravenswood in Walter Scott's novel *The Bride of Lammermoor*, written and published sixty years earlier in 1819, contrasts with Ballantrae in that he has only one set of clothes: an old campaign cloak that he wraps about him, and a Spanish-style, slouched hat with a black feather, from which matted and dishevelled locks of hair finally straggle into view shortly before he dies. Ravenswood's cloak is easier to read. It hides a starving body, and when it slips from his shoulder, the appalling reality of his otherwise romantic life is revealed. Living in a dilapidated castle on the edge of a cliff, with quicksand running along the shore beneath, he is going nowhere. Edgar has no food, no money, and no future. He enters the novel looking into 'the charnel vault'

containing the bones of his ancestors. The 'mouldering coffins' are dressed in the remains of 'tattered velvet'.[5] Beneath the Romantic shabby chic of Ravenswood's cloak and family past is a man who lives on impossible dreams. The following three examples demonstrate the agency of his clothing:

> The Master of Ravenswood entered the room … his cloak muffled around him … his looks stern, and at the same time dejected. He flung his cloak from him, threw himself upon a chair, and appeared sunk in a profound reverie.[6]

Here Edgar's cloak performs a vital function, making possible the interaction of its wearer with the world around him. Without it, Edgar retreats into a world of interiority.

> "Well, well, Caleb," replied the Master, "help me on with my cloak."[7]

In this instance the Master's last remaining servant is invited to participate in a process of concealment that completes the construction of the doomed Romantic hero. It is crucial that Caleb partake in that process, for Edgar cannot survive through autofetishisation. In accordance with theories of the fetish, he exists in Scott's novel as a creature inhabiting an uncanny contact zone between two unevenly empowered, conflicting cultures.

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Scott's Master — like Stevenson's — is a creature of the night and the imagination. His ubiquitous cloak not only acts as an outer disguise, but also as a means of enclosing secretive desires. There is no possibility of him marrying Lucy, or of reconciling the cultural conflict that has created him and made him what he is.

Read comparatively, dressing up in both *The Bride of Lammermoor* and *The Master of Ballantrae* draws attention to Scotland's glamorous love affair with itself and what might be termed a fetishisation of its own past, but also to what is concealed and why there might be such reluctance for it to be seen. These literary tropes of cloaking and hiding — whether furtive covering up, or just attempts at keeping up appearances — represent the violence of fractures in cultural identity at the same time that they promulgate the exportable myth of an enduringly Romantic nation. The Master of Ravenswood cuts a tragic figure in order to survive, and the paradox is that his eventual death-without-a-body ensures his

survival *as a hero*.

Meanwhile, Ballantrae is never what he appears to be or what most people believe him to be. But what does this say about Scotland, its obsession with its own literary traditions, and its fascination with reinvention through metaphors of clothing?

At opposite ends of the nineteenth century, Scott and Stevenson employ tropes of dressing up as a narrative device that impels the wearer ever further away from ties with the earthy fabric of the land they call home. Both Masters end their lives with a return to the soil, but in alien locations where conventional commemoration is rendered impossible, or at least problematic. In other words, their cloaking finally slips to reveal a profound homelessness at the same time that it makes national tales out of their displacement. In Scott's *Bride of Lammermoor*, Edgar does not join his ancestors in a vault in the aisle of a disused chapel, but disappears into the shifting quicksand of the Lothian shore. A black feather floats ominously on the tide. There is no body. *The Master of Ballantrae* ends his life with a double burial in North America, no longer wearing fine clothes but wrapped in a buffalo skin. A stone commemorates his accomplishments, but also states that he "Lies here forgotten", in a grave shared with the brother identified as "his fraternal enemy".[9] In both cases, the real memorials are the stories themselves, authored out of sewn-together and recirculated fragments of narrative, to be told and retold in ways that perpetuate their myth and belief in the Romance of Scotland.

Let us look more closely at two of Ballantrae's appearances. One involves clothing associated with the cultural excesses of libertinism or dandyism, while the second signifies the opposite and is altogether more primitive.

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been extorting so much money from the family estate that land has had to be sold to support his lavish lifestyle. In order to pay off a monster, there has to be belief in its existence. Mackellar shows a fascination with the creature that now stands before him, along with a sense of its inappropriateness:

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The Master's taunting of Mackellar raises the matter of authorial responsibility: "I divined these very clothes upon your hand of writing, Mr. Mackellar […] You may call me Mr. Bally: it is the name I have assumed." Mackellar wrote the letters that ensured the Master's cash supply — described as blood money — to keep him from returning to Scotland. He believes that in doing so he has created the being that now, to return to Carlyle. torments his soul. But has he? For Bally — James Durie … the Master … 'the Bonnie laddie' … he has many names — has simultaneously been extracting income from other sources, including the British Government for whom he worked as an agent and betrayed the Jacobite army. The secret agent is another of his fetishistic personas.

Bally's glamour, a word that in his 1805 poem *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* Walter Scott explicitly linked to the power to inspire belief through the use of words and grammar, contrasts with the dullness of his honest but despised brother Henry. While nobody believes, or believes in, Henry, the Master's appeal to everyone that subscribes to Scottish heroism grows exponentially along with his impudence and effrontery.

However, the lace, velvet, and diamonds do not last. That encounter ends with the Master apparently dying after being run through by his brother's sword in a duel. His blood appears to soak Scottish soil for a second time. However, by next morning the body has disappeared and no blood is to be seen. Henry's credibility, even as a storyteller, sinks to an all-time low.

While that violent confrontation takes place on home soil, the final face-off between these two conflicting identities involves a transatlantic journey symbolic of Scottish North American migration. Henry moves his family to New York to

make a new life. But the Master is already there, setting up in business as a tailor with the intention of embarrassing his brother into supplying more money. The trope of sewing is more than a plot device; it draws attention to the theme of fabrication that is at the heart of novel. For the Master is a dab hand at altering clothes: 'he had acquired some quickness with the needle — enough, at least, to play the part of tailor in the public eye.'[12] 'Busily stitching', he plans his final adventure: the recovery of his earlier, hidden pirate fortune, buried in the mountains above Albany. The map of the treasure's location had been drawn in his own blood on the inside of his hat. But we know by this point that the Master's blood has a habit of disappearing. The question that has to be asked is whether he is a real being, or merely the bloodless projection of the fantasies of those around him. The treasure is never found.

In the final chapter, the Master and his brother (who has planned his murder) head still further from home, deep into the North American wilderness and winter. A man named Mountain, representing the backwoodsman archetype of American literature, leads James's party into the forest. Native Americans raid their camp at night, murdering and scalping members of the party. All are afraid for their lives. Stories abound. The difficulty of distinguishing fiction from fact, romance from anthropology, adds to the thrill of the denouement. The servant Secundra Das overhears the plan to murder his Master and introduces an 'old trick' from India that requires the ultimate in submission to belief between cultures. He persuades the master to put on a last suit of clothing — not a costume of European refinement, but an American buffalo robe (a full buffalo skin). Taking a drug to slow his heartbeat, the Master allows himself to be declared dead and to be buried in the frozen soil. This time, he actually becomes what he appears to be, which is not what is intended. The space between fabrication and fact that Baudrillard identifies and that Latour critiques, collapses. When Secundra returns to dig the Master from the soil so that they can escape, Ballantrae's skin is white and bloodless. For a moment, his eyes flash open — inducing a fatal heart attack in his brother, who believes he has once again risen from the grave. But despite more than a day and night of attempts to revive him, the Master is declared deceased.

One interpretation is that the Master symbolises Scottish participation in the British Empire, particularly in India, the habits and practices of which cannot simply be transplanted in the soil of North America. An alternative reading could

focus on the westward extension of the frontier in North America. The Master dies cloaked in a signifier of American primitivism and the frontier. By the time of Stevenson's novel in 1889, the North American buffalo had gone the way of the old-style Scottish Jacobite hero: it was virtually extinct, while still admired for its noble grandeur. Its prairie habitat was being lost to farming and the cultivation of pastoral America. Even the forests were being stripped of old-growth trees by a lumber industry that was industrial both in scale and practice. Mountain men, the old native forest, Buffalo, and 'Indians' had become an essential part of the growing western myth, icons of belief in an ideal: that is, in the sanctity of a vast and primitive land, which in actuality was being changed beyond recognition. In other words, all had acquired the characteristics of the fetish.

The Master of Ballantrae ends with an excess of fetishism that celebrates Scotland's transnational agency. That the Master's story is summarised — written — in stone in the American wilderness far from home marks his success, rather than his demise. It gives him an Emersonian overlay of decorum that, as with Scott's Master of Lammermoor, ensures his metamorphosis into a Scottish literary legend. But it does more. Stevenson's post-Scott export of Scottish storytelling raises questions for Baudrillard's fabrication fetishists and Latour's modern agnostics: does the limned space between a desire to go on believing in magic and the reliance on earthy materialism engender any greater understanding of the trauma that underpins the glamour of Scotland's literary and cultural tradition? Is that liminal space a junction where the concept of a Scottish fetish ultimately turns into an object of self-referential reverie? Or, do those possibilities displace a tormented soul and leave ongoing critical enquiry as the only way forward?

References & Further Information

[1] Jean Baudrillard, 'Fetishism and Ideology', in *For A Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, transl. and Intro. Charles Levin (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1981), pp.88, 89; 95-98.

[2] Bruno Latour, *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009). p.x.

[3] Peter Logan, *Victorian Fetishism*, (Albany: SUNY Press, 2009), pp.43-44; Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'The American Scholar', in *Ralph Waldo Emerson: the Major*

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[4] For example see Franco Moretti's reading of *Dracula* in 'The Dialectic of Fear' in *Signs Taken for Wonders: Essays in the Sociology of Literary Forms* (London: Verso, 1988. First published 1983), pp.83-108.

[5] Walter Scott, *The Bride of Lammermoor*, ed. J. H. Alexander (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1995), p.20.

[6] *Ibid*. p.52.

[7] *Ibid*. p.77.

[8] *Ibid*. p.120.

[9] Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Master of Ballantrae*, ed. Adrian Poole (London: Penguin Classics, 1996), p.187.

[10] *Ibid*. p.33.

[11] *Ibid*. p.40.

[12] *Ibid*. p.142.

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