

Ivanhoe and Abolition

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ABSTRACT

Since the early 1950s, the metal collars on *Ivanhoe*'s serfs have been occupying literary historians. I argue that Gurth and Wamba's collars owe as much to Abolitionist rhetoric as they do to antiquarianism. Comparing slavery with the repudiated institution of serfdom was a staple of Abolitionist discourse, and Abolitionists like Granville Sharp and Thomas Clarkson frequently confronted audiences with the physical restraints—including collars—used on enslaved Africans. When *Ivanhoe* was published in 1819, the transatlantic slave trade was outlawed—but slavery in the British West Indies was entirely legal. Simon J. White makes a persuasive identification of *Ivanhoe*'s Prince John with Britain's Prince Regent. As I trace Abolitionist discourse through *Ivanhoe*, I examine the scenes of feasting on imported delicacies with Prince John in light of the Abolitionist boycott of West Indian sugar, rum, and produce, comparing *Ivanhoe*'s with other Regency feasts. My paper then focuses on the figure of Ulrica, an elderly female serf frequently referred to as a "Saxon witch"; her story suggests both the history of sexual violence directed particularly at female slaves and the role of Obeah in slave uprisings as she sings heathen Saxon songs while burning her captor's castle down.

KEYWORDS: serfs, slavery, abolition, collars, sugar, Obeah

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Published between the outlawing of the transatlantic slave trade in 1807 and the official abolition of West Indian plantation slavery in 1833, *Ivanhoe* vividly depicts a Britain that is heavily economically dependent on the unpaid labour of serfs, with a flamboyantly incompetent Prince Regent in charge. It is so unlike Scott's earlier novels, all set in the eighteenth-century Highlands, that when Scott published *Ivanhoe* in December, 1819, his readers were astonished to find that *Ivanhoe* is set around 1199, during "a period towards the end of the reign of Richard I" after the Third Crusade, and in a "district of merry England" (Scott, *Ivanhoe* 15). *Ivanhoe* plays up its medieval set-pieces: castle feasts, knightly tournaments, and chivalric rescues of beautiful damsels. At the same time, the novel shows its contemporary relevance by using the language of slavery in the Atlantic world to talk about apparently medieval abuses of power. More specifically, Scott's historical novel draws upon British Abolitionist tropes to depict serfdom and uses the debauched Prince John to critique the Prince Regent's gluttonous profligacy and its connections to slave labour, finally invoking images of Obeah and its connections to the spiritual practices of enslaved women to show the plight of women in *Ivanhoe*'s medieval context.

Traditionally, scholars of transatlanticism and Scott have not focused at all on chattel slavery in the British Caribbean, instead tracing the literary lineage of Scott's Highlanders back to late eighteenth-century accounts of Native Americans. From the 1760s on, "the romanticization of the Highlanders . . . portrayed ancient Scots in the image of modern Indians" (Fulford 7). Scott, too, projected the romanticized image of Native American chiefs and warriors of his own day centuries backwards to create the Highland "hunter and warrior, brave and chivalrous," and to depict the Highland "wilderness landscape, bleak and mountainous," in *The Lady of the Lake* (Fulford 9). Susan Oliver demonstrates how Scott was poignantly aware of "the exchange of Canadian trees for Scottish people" during the early nineteenth century, and investigates the "interrelations between Scott's writing, the Highland clearances, growth in the transatlantic lumber industry, and the export to Britain of live trees" from the Canadian Maritime provinces (119, 115).

Reception studies on the transatlantic Scott do foreground slavery. Ritchie Devon Watson Jr. explains how the slave-owning South in the United States embraced *Ivanhoe* and treated the novel as a blueprint for its own identity, and even went so far as to re-establish jousting, with combatants using characters' names from *Ivanhoe* as their own *noms de guerre* for the day (47). To justify

itself in the face of “a growing wave of criticism . . . from the whole Western world” over “chattel slavery,” the American South had to “reshape” its “acknowledged difference into a claim of superiority” (Taylor 17-18). “No writer was more fully or more enthusiastically incorporated into” this claim of an “antebellum southern romantic” identity “than Sir Walter Scott” (Watson 47-48), and “of all his works *Ivanhoe* had the strongest impact on the expression of southern race mythology in the 1850s” (53). *Ivanhoe* makes its enslaved characters prominent in an era when many Britons owned slaves in the West Indies; to understand *Ivanhoe* in its historical context, it is necessary to find transatlanticism in the text itself, not solely in its reception history.

The dearth of scholarship on this topic may have something to do with the fact that, compared with his friends Lord Byron and Thomas Moore, Sir Walter Scott appears as one of the more politically conservative poets and novelists of the Romantic era. Immediately after writing *Ivanhoe*, Scott wrote in support of the magistrates and militia who had occasioned the Peterloo Massacre of 1819 (White 209, 211). He was on very friendly terms with the arch-Tory Prince Regent, first dining with him in April, 1815, finding the Scottish crown jewels and regalia for the prince in February, 1818, and receiving a baronetcy at his hands in December, 1818 (“Scott, Sir Walter”). After the Prince Regent was crowned as George IV in 1820, Scott master-minded the new King’s visit to Edinburgh in 1822—a Royal visit that cemented the pomp and power of an ultra-traditional Crown (Duncan 3-6).

Nonetheless, in *Ivanhoe*, Scott creates an extremely popular text that is also highly reformist. William Hazlitt observed that Scott “who is an aristocrat in principle, is popular in his writings” (179). When Scott means to take “a fling” at *Ivanhoe*’s twelfth-century “mob,” Hazlitt goes on to observe, the reader is far more likely to “kindle . . . with indignation” at the “priests, kings, and nobles” who kept the so-called “rabble” in a state of ignorance (169-70). As Michael Tomko writes, *Ivanhoe* is a real “condition of England” novel: “In depicting a land that cannot form itself into a nation across its ethnic, religious and geographic faultlines, *Ivanhoe* tacks back and forth between issues surrounding the aftermath of the Norman Conquest in 1193 and the domestic unrest of England in 1819” (152-53). Scott uses the medieval institution of serfdom to talk about plantation slavery in the British West Indies. Just as Debbie Lee argues that “slavery was such an intimate part [of the British Romantic] imagination” that it “permeates [the] entire literary period” (6), then, we need

to consider *Ivanhoe*'s place among Romantic texts that engage meaningfully with Romantic-era slavery debates. Doing so, moreover, complicates Scott's playful self-presentation as an old-fashioned, conservative laird; in reading *Ivanhoe* as a deeply progressive text, we remind ourselves not always to take Scott's droll self-fashioning completely at his word. To read *Ivanhoe* as a British Abolitionist text is also to invite radical new ways of reading Scott's whole oeuvre, and to remind ourselves that British Romanticism often addressed slavery even when that address was not overt.

James Chandler argues that "shifting" the "geographical ground" of the Waverley Novels in *Ivanhoe* "prompted" Scott to "offer the most extensive account of his new historiographical form" in the "Dedicatory Epistle" (132-33). This prefatory writing certainly offers the reader a powerful key to reading *Ivanhoe*. The "Dedicatory Epistle" nudges the reader to look for images of slavery. I quote one particular passage in full because it frames *Ivanhoe* in the language of distance that is crucial to Romantic writing on slavery, and even introduces the explicit mention of "slaves":

[A] worthy [English] person, when placed in his own snug parlour, and surrounded by all the comforts of an Englishman's fireside, is not half so much disposed [as a Scot] to believe that his own ancestors led a very different life from himself; that the shattered tower, which now forms a vista from his window, once held a baron who would have hung him up at his own door without any form of trial; that the hinds, by whom his little pet-farm is managed, a few centuries ago would have been his slaves; and that the complete influence of feudal tyranny once extended over the neighbouring village, where the attorney is now a man of more importance than the lord of the manor.

(Scott, *Ivanhoe* 7-8)

Although the landed Englishman may believe that he lives "a very different life" from "his own ancestors," they have one very significant feature in common: the right to own other people, whether they are the "slaves" or serfs working the English farm in the Middle Ages, or the enslaved Africans far across the sea in the West Indies in 1819, under a comparable "tyranny." As the historian Mark Salber Phillips writes, "as the term is generally used, 'historical distance'

assumes a strong analogy between time and space” (4). *Ivanhoe* invites us to consider a long stretch of historical time between an Englishman in 1819 and “slaves”; this in turn foreshortens what Lee calls the “psychological distance” between Britain, Africa, and the West Indies (13). As a result of that psychological distance, Scott’s “worthy” English reader no longer sees the presence of slavery because it is not part of the current “vista” from the window of “his own snug parlour” (7).

While the “Dedicatory Epistle” focuses on the prosperous English landowner, the very first lines of dialogue in *Ivanhoe* belong to two enslaved men. The first two characters who speak are Gurth and Wamba; Wamba is a jester, Gurth is a swineherd, and both of them are serfs belonging to the Saxon nobleman Cedric. Scott provides them with a suitably striking setting, sitting on a ruinous Druidical monument in a forest glade (Scott, *Ivanhoe* 17-18). As Gretchen Gerzina documents in *Black London*, part of Abolitionist rhetoric was to compare the institution of slavery in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to the despised institution of serfdom, also known as villenage, in the Middle Ages (101, 125). Scott draws on Abolitionist tropes that predate *Ivanhoe* by decades, yet that remained powerful and relevant throughout the Romantic period. Thomas Clarkson was a renowned British Abolitionist, who had been campaigning actively since the 1780s; eight years after Scott’s death, Clarkson was “a frail octogenarian,” yet his familiar message and arguments were still powerful and relevant when he addressed the Anti-Slavery Convention of 1840, which planned the global abolition of slavery (Olusoga 235).

Granville Sharp was a great Abolitionist legal strategist; the fourth, culminating chapter of his 1769 work, *A Representation of the Injustice and Dangerous Tendency of Tolerating Slavery*, is entitled “Some Remarks on the ancient Villenage, shewing, that the obsolete Laws and Customs, which favoured that horrid Oppression, cannot justify the Admission of the modern West Indian Slavery into this Kingdom.” Naturally, Granville Sharp’s astute legal and historical analyses would appeal to the advocate Scott. “What . . . can excuse the . . . behaviour of our modern lawyers,” demands Sharp, “in attempting to revive the oppressive doctrines of Villenage [in order to justify slavery], which their honest predecessors always labored to abolish?” (107, 121-22). By 1772, when counsel for the enslaved James Somerset presented it in court, the argument that “villenage had gone out with Henry VI,” and that slavery in Britain was therefore equally unconstitutional, was already “familiar

territory” (Gerzina 125). If Britons accepted slavery on Caribbean plantations, how was it different from the serfdom that they were proud to have left behind? To begin *Ivanhoe* with the voices and thoughts of serfs is quite radical in the era of West Indian plantation slavery.

As well as Wamba and Gurth’s position in the text, let us take a look at their dress. According to the narrator, one element of Gurth’s turn-out

is too remarkable to be suppressed; it was a brass ring, resembling a dog’s collar, but without any opening, and soldered fast round his neck, so loose as to form no impediment to his breathing, yet so tight as to be incapable of being removed, excepting by the use of the file. On this singular gorget was engraved, in Saxon characters, an inscription of the following purport: —“Gurth, the son of Beowulph, is the born thrall of Cedric of Rotherwood.” (Scott, *Ivanhoe* 18-19)

Wamba’s collar is silver (19). Now this really is remarkable. As William W. Heist wrote in a 1953 article, these “metal collars . . . must often have puzzled [*Ivanhoe*’s] readers” (362). Heist is among the first to suggest that Scott was inspired by cases of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Scottish felons, forced to wear a collar and into indentured servitude as part of their sentences (363-64). Graham Tulloch traces Scott’s antiquarian sources, including Joseph Strutt, who wrote of “collar[s] of iron” as the “token of bondage” in Saxon society (510n18.39-43, 502). I suggest that we also look again to the Abolitionist movement. Indeed, Sharp approvingly notes how Englishmen during the reign of Edward VI rejected with disgust an attempt to force “vagabonds” to wear “a ring of iron round their necks, arms or legs” and to “perform” whatever “labour” they were “commanded” (144-45).

Two kinds of collar dominate eighteenth-century iconography of the slave trade: the heavy iron collar of the brutalized slave in the West Indies, and the silver collar of the slave treated as a status symbol in metropolitan Britain (“Silver Service Slavery”). *Ivanhoe* recollects both collars. The Abolitionists Granville Sharp and Thomas Clarkson both believed in displaying the iron shackles, chains, and collars that were used on board slave ships and on plantations (Gerzina 104-05; Wilson 33; “What Did Clarkson Bring?”; “Thomas Clarkson”). These horrifying objects spoke directly and powerfully to

eighteenth-century viewers. The first volume of Clarkson's 1808 book, *The History of the Rise, Progress, and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave-Trade by the British Parliament* includes only two illustrations. The first is a fold-out map. The second is an inserted page of engravings that illustrate some of the slave trade's paraphernalia: not a collar, but handcuffs, shackles, thumbscrews, and a *speculum oris* for force-feeding (Clarkson 374-75). "I bought these" in 1787, declared Clarkson, to help audiences "conceive how the unhappy victims of this execrable trade were confined" (375-76).

So potent was Clarkson's strategy that displaying such "standard equipment" of slavery has become a template for slavery museums and exhibitions up to the present—including a "wrought iron punishment collar" in the Slavery Museum of Liverpool (Wood 228, 220-21). In the early nineteenth century, the restraints on slaves, including metal collars, came to act as a synecdoche for slavery itself. On the stroke of midnight between July 31 and August 1, 1838, West Indian slavery and its successor, "apprenticeship," were legally dead. The Baptist preacher William Knib's black congregation in Falmouth, Jamaica, held a ceremonial midnight mock-burial, featuring a coffin whose contents included the loathsome icon of slavery, the iron collar (Olusoga 231). If *Ivanhoe* is aiming to bring the distant medieval past nearer to readers in 1819, it is safe to say that neck collars occupy the terrain both of medieval serfdom and of nineteenth-century West Indian slavery.

The eventual removal of Gurth's collar at the end of *Ivanhoe*, then, highlights the slavery that had previously gone unacknowledged. At Wamba's instigation, the Saxon nobleman Cedric declares that he will "pardon and reward" Gurth, "who stole a week from [Cedric's] service," but only "to bestow it on [Cedric's] son," *Ivanhoe* (Scott, *Ivanhoe* 273). Cedric formally pronounces Gurth to be a freedman: "Theow and Esne . . . no longer" (273). Scott's use of Saxon legal terms here is noteworthy. "Theow," in Anglo-Saxon, indicates the "one group" that were "unambiguously . . . viewed as chattels" and that had "both the fewest rights and the heaviest obligations" under the law (Pelteret 3). Medievalist David A. E. Pelteret finds it "significant" that "Anglo-Saxon translators equated [theow] with the Roman *servus*, the Latin word most widely used to denote a slave" (3). In a state of exultation, Gurth's very first words are "a smith and a file to do the collar from the neck of a freeman!" (Scott, *Ivanhoe* 273). Immediately afterwards, he expresses his redoubled loyalty to his "noble master"—but in the instant when Gurth first recognizes "a free spirit in my

breast” and declares that he is “a man changed to myself and all around,” his very first thought is to rid himself of the collar (273). Gurth’s continuing loyalty to Cedric and Ivanhoe provides a reassuring and encouraging message to readers who are in a position to help end slavery; in *Ivanhoe*, granting legal freedom to the enslaved does not result in loss of service or of loyalty, let alone bloodshed. It also sends a powerful message about the enslaved themselves; Gurth does not need a period of transition, re-education, or “apprenticeship,” but finds himself instantly ready to live as a free man. *Ivanhoe* suggests that the enslaved—like Gurth—do not lack the capacity for legal autonomy, but are in fact entirely ready to take up the opportunities and responsibilities of freedom.

Scott’s surprising radicalism does not even stop at his veiled criticism of Britain’s dependence on slave labour. James Chandler makes Percy Shelley’s sonnet “England in 1819” the keystone of his study of Romanticism’s *annus mirabilis*. Shelley refers to “Princes, the dregs of their dull race” (line 2), and *Ivanhoe* makes an equally unflattering portrait of princes. We first meet Prince John in *Ivanhoe* at a tournament—where he is busy alienating his subjects, and intermittently anxious that his elder brother, King Richard I, will return from the Crusades and exact retribution for his unscrupulous abuses of power (Scott, *Ivanhoe* 66, 73-74, 76, 86-87). As Simon J. White argues, “if the interregnant state in *Ivanhoe* represents that which existed between 1811 and 1821, Prince John embodies the Prince Regent. . . . Like John the future George IV was never popular and during the Regency was believed to be responsible for the brutal manner in which the government responded to any kind of social unrest” (215-16). White particularly draws attention to the gluttony and fiscal recklessness of both John and George. In the Regency period, gourmandizing on sugar was inextricable from slavery.

Ivanhoe shows how John’s weaknesses spread through the court and English society: “Prince John, indeed, and those who courted his pleasure by imitating his foibles, were apt to indulge to excess in the pleasures of the trencher and the goblet” (Scott, *Ivanhoe* 127). That could be a delicate description of the Prince Regent’s own excesses, for an obsession with luxury foodstuffs characterizes both Scott’s Prince John and Britain’s Prince Regent in 1819. On January 18, 1817, at the Royal Pavilion in Brighton, Prince George hosted a banquet for the Grand Duke Nicolas of Russia, at which chef Antonin Carême presented one-hundred-and-twenty-one dishes over nine courses, including such sugar-laden delicacies as rose ice cream, “eight centerpieces

patisserie” featuring a replica of the Pavilion in pastry, and a “tower of caramelized profiteroles”—not to mention “spun sugar diadems” and an apple and rum pudding (“Regency Feast”). While British caricaturists and satirists found Prince George’s over-indulgence and corpulence an easy target, he was not the primary victim of these excesses. The actual victims are the labourers who helped produce the foodstuffs. “Sugar,” writes Vincent Brown, “was a murderous commodity”; it was “a cornerstone of Caribbean slavery and the slave trade” (117). While sugar was a crucial ingredient in turning Great Britain into an eighteenth-century “economic colossus, . . . the cost of this development was paid largely by men, women, and children on colonial plantations” (117). According to late eighteenth-century estimates, 33% of captives from Africa died during “seasoning,” or their first exposure to the Caribbean climate and disease organisms (Sherwood 6). For those who survived, “the average life span of a field hand was around five years” (Cottrell 200). “When Africans first came into the hands of European slave traders, the captives often believed that the whites would eat them,” recounts Brown; “we can now say, with only slight exaggeration, that this assumption was ultimately proven correct” (118-19). Gurth and Wamba speak the first lines of dialogue in *Ivanhoe*, including Wamba’s quip that “when the brute [i.e., swine] lives, she goes by her Saxon name; but becomes a Norman, and is called pork, when she is carried” to the Normans’ “feast” (Scott, *Ivanhoe* 21). Wamba’s joke about Saxon livestock ending up as a delicacy on a Norman table has a very dark echo during the Regency.

A very different fictional feast takes place in Thomas Love Peacock’s 1817 philosophical novel, *Melincourt* (a novel best known for including a cultivated orangutan being elected to Parliament). Peacock’s admirable Mr. Forester hosts an “anti-saccharine fête” (186). On this occasion, Mr. Forester decides “to make luxury subservient to morality, by showing what culinary art could effect without the intervention of West Indian produce” (186). “What would become of slavery,” demands Mr. Forester, “if there were no consumers of its produce?” He thus persuades a “very considerable number” of people to join his Anti-Saccharine Society and pledge to boycott slave-grown sugar (190, 198). Peacock’s 1817 novel rather accurately reflects Abolitionist history; in the early 1790s, 300,000 British people began to boycott West Indian sugar and rum, and some kept up the boycott until 1833 (Wilson 72-74).

When *Ivanhoe*'s Prince John and his guests sit down to "various delicacies brought from foreign parts" (Scott, *Ivanhoe* 127), then, there is a further subtext of morality about the unsociable spirit in which imported luxury foodstuffs are eaten in *Ivanhoe*. When the two Saxon noblemen, Cedric and Athelstane, do not know quite the right etiquette, the Norman nobles sneer at them (127-28). More preoccupied with epicurean foods than with the welfare of their social inferiors, these uncaring nobles take us back once more to that well-trodden "neutral ground" that is "common" to 1819 and to medieval "ancestors" (9). The excesses of this princely banquet are so disturbing because they act as a microcosm for a whole English society that is riven with division and tipping into degeneracy. The idea that civilizations begin to lapse into decadence with luxury goods is a common one. "Writers from Defoe to Pope to Nicholas Amhurst expressed alarm that foreign imports rendered the English weak, broke, effeminate, and incapable of having children who would grow up to defend the country" (Molineux, "Hogarth" 499). It gains an additional sting after 1807, when Britain's Parliament has acknowledged that slavery is an evil and a blight, but when many British consumers are still purchasing luxury goods, like sugar, that depend on slave labour in their manufacture. This background makes it particularly clear why Scott chooses to present the luxurious feast as a demonstration of a dysfunctional and unprincipled society, starting with the reigning prince.

Scott equips one of his repugnant Norman nobles, Sir Brian de Bois-Guilbert, with two servants that the novel describes as "Saracens" (Scott, *Ivanhoe* 47, 182) but also as "black slaves" (180, 25). These two men's presence explicitly introduces race into *Ivanhoe*. "One of the foremost British authorities on race in the period was the comparative anatomist and surgeon, William Lawrence" (Kitson 16). Lawrence's *Lectures on Physiology, Zoology and the Natural History of Man* was published in 1817, and suggests what the word "black" would connote to *Ivanhoe*'s earliest readers. Lawrence "argued that generation and heredity, not environment, were the sources of racial formation," and that all races had a common origin (17). He was "an opponent of the institution of slavery but not an advocate for human equality" (Kitson 17). Although Lawrence believed that Abolitionists were mistaken in their minimization of inter-racial differences, he condemned the anti-Abolitionists far more strongly: the "opponents" of Abolition "committed the more serious moral mistake of perverting what should constitute a claim to kindness and

indulgence into justification or palliation of the revolting and antichristian practice of traffic in human flesh; a practice branded with the double curse of equal degradation to the oppressor and the oppressed” (as quoted in Kitson 17). However, “the primary arguments” of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries for the slave trade “were not racial but economic” (12). Roxann Wheeler writes that “historians have debated whether . . . slavery result[ed] from racial prejudice” or whether “race and racism as we know them today developed as a justification for enslaving Africans” since “at least as early as Eric Williams’s 1944 postulation that ‘racism was the consequence of slavery’” (239). In his recent *Stamped from the Beginning: A Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*, Ibram X. Kendi firmly argues that using scientific racism to denigrate blackness is the result, not the cause, of the highly profitable slave trade. *Ivanhoe* seems to support Williams’s and Kendi’s position.

In writing of the “Saracens” or “black slaves,” in “Note B: Negro Slaves,” Scott rather hedges his bets. While acknowledging that black slaves cannot “be proved to have absolutely existed” in late twelfth-century England, he argues that it is “plausible and natural” that “the Templars . . . should use the service of the enslaved Africans, whom the fate of war transferred to new masters.” In this instance, the enslaved Africans are very unlucky indeed in their new captor. Sir Brian boasts that even the most “fierce and intractable . . . captives” are “made . . . humble, submissive, serviceable, and observant of your will” after “two months . . . under the management of [his] master of the slaves” (Scott, *Ivanhoe* 29). Since the seventeenth century, British portraiture has often featured a black slave “in the rich livery of the elite” to demonstrate the wealth, power, and status of the portrait’s subject, and to add a touch of the “exotic” (Molineux, *Faces* 27). Scott initially describes the two enslaved African men riding in Sir Brian’s train as “two attendants, whose dark visages, white turbans, and the Oriental form of their garments, showed them to be natives of some distant Eastern country . . . silk and embroidery distinguished their dresses, and marked the wealth and importance of their master” (*Ivanhoe* 25). This description perfectly fits the portraiture tradition, adding pageantry to Scott’s narrative and aggrandizing the power of one of his villains. Like Wamba, moreover, these slaves “wore silver collars round their throats” (25). Although their role in *Ivanhoe* is markedly different, their use as status symbols gives the “Negro Slaves” a meaningful momentary alignment with their Saxon counterpart. By so clearly linking “negro slaves” with the witty Saxon Wamba,

Ivanhoe invites us to ask ourselves why, when Saxon serfdom is unthinkable in the world of 1819, should West Indian plantation slavery be acceptable? The shared ethnicity of Saxons serfs and thanes rather undermines the scientific racism of the later eighteenth century, which claimed that slavery was rooted in the “biological inferiority” of the enslaved (Hudson 251). Indeed, if serfdom proved that Saxons were racially inferior, that would make deeply uncomfortable reading for many Englishmen in 1819. Over a century before Eric Williams’s 1944 postulation, *Ivanhoe* challenges notions of black inferiority, and seems to subscribe to the idea that racial theories simply mask the ruling class’s economic self-interest.

Ivanhoe’s darkest vision of slavery comes through Ulrica, a Saxon noblewoman who, unlike the other female characters, is no longer young and beautiful, and therefore does not concern the chivalric hero. Decades before the action of *Ivanhoe*, as part of the Norman occupation of Saxon England, the Norman Front-de-Boeuf family besieged the castle where Ulrica grew up, killing her father and her brothers, and making her a captive. Like the Africans who were abducted and transported to the Americas for enslavement, she even has her birth name taken from her, as her captors call her “Urfried” instead of Ulrica. They jeer that she “has had [her] day, but [her] sun has long been set”; it is time, they say, for her to “amble off” like “an old war-horse turned out on the barren heath” (Scott, *Ivanhoe* 193). “Urfried” is “ironic” and a “misnaming,” writes medievalist Chris Jones, as this name—which Scott made up—“presumably would have to mean something like ‘Original-peace’” (59). Ulrica’s own, original name is both more “Scandinavian-sounding” and more true to her nature and her family name of Wolfgang, as it is “perhaps intended by Scott to mean something like ‘wolf-power’ or ‘wolf-ruler’” (59).

At one point, the Jewish heroine Rebecca is a captive in the castle, and “on being thrust into the little cell, she found herself in the presence of [the] old sybil,” Ulrica, who “scowled at the fair Jewess” (Scott, *Ivanhoe* 193). A sibyl is a prophetess, a fortune-teller, or a witch (“Sibyl”); as Ulrica herself remarks, “what a true prophet” is her “evil conscience” (Scott, *Ivanhoe* 220). Indeed, Ulrica is well able to prophecy the downfall of Torquilstone Castle because she will take an active, enterprising role in the destruction of its “blood-cemented” walls (256). Yet Ulrica discloses even more of the horrifying past of Torquilstone Castle than she predicts about its future, forcing a reluctant Cedric to hear sibylline truths that he does not want to know about her captivity and

her subterfuges and revenge (216-21). Ulrica describes herself as a “wrinkled, decrepit hag” (216); a hag may be either “an evil spirit, in female form” or “an ugly, repulsive old woman: often with implication of viciousness or maliciousness” (“Hag”). “Hag” is also a word used to describe female Obeah practitioners. Scott signals to the reader that “evil conditions” have contributed to Ulrica’s hag-like “malignant envy” of Rebecca and perhaps to the decay of her looks (Scott, *Ivanhoe* 193). Slaves’ bodies can appear ugly in their captors’ eyes because of the very injuries that overwork, illness, and the scarring punishments of their captors inflict. Ulrica explains that, when she was younger, “these fiendish features” appeared like “the mask of a spirit of light” as she used her beauty deliberately to “set at variance the elder Front-de-Boeuf and his son Reginald”—yet, soon afterward, according to Ulrica, “age, premature age” ruined her appearance, leaving her nothing but an “impotent hag” as far as Reginald Front-de-Boeuf was concerned (218). Having suffered as a low-status, wrinkled, hag-like older woman, Ulrica is about to embody the demonic power of the supernatural “hag” as she pursues a righteous vengeance.

Abolitionist discourse often worked on the emotions by reminding the British that slaves were torn away by violence from their beloved families (Kriz 105), and when relating her own grim history to Rebecca, Ulrica describes how her “father and his seven sons defended their inheritance” from Sir Reginald Front-de-Boeuf’s father until “there was not a room, not a step of the stair, that was not slippery with their blood. . . . [T]hey died every man; . . . and ere their blood was dried, I had become the prey and the scorn of the conqueror!” (Scott, *Ivanhoe* 194). In describing herself as “prey” that is treated with “scorn,” Ulrica is using only the minimum of a euphemism to refer to sexual violence and abuse—which, as Kay Dian Kriz writes, were also hallmarks of the slave trade and featured prominently in the Abolitionist William Wilberforce’s 1792 testimony to Parliament (102-03). Thanks to his jester Wamba, Cedric is escaping Front-de-Boeuf’s castle disguised as a friar—and Ulrica waylays the supposed cleric to reveal her history further (Scott, *Ivanhoe* 216). Ulrica confesses herself to Cedric—whom she takes for a cleric—that she lived on “in these halls, stained with the noble and pure blood of my father and my brethren” as “the paramour of their murderer, the slave at once and the partaker of his pleasures” (217). Cedric declares that “there is guilt even in thy living to tell it . . . [W]as there no poniard—no knife—no bodkin” (217) that she could have used for suicide? Indeed, he thinks that “the sword of a true Saxon” should have

killed Ulrica, “the daughter of Torquil living in foul communion with the murderer of her father” (217). Cedric’s unreasonable judgment, his un-Christian urging of suicide, and his un-Christian rejection of Ulrica throw a cold light on the injustice of *Ivanhoe*’s medieval world, where the Normans commit terrible crimes, and the shame of those crimes adheres to Saxon women. This injustice extends to an Atlantic world that enforces the same shame on enslaved black women. Cedric’s horror at Ulrica for having survived sexual violence is so strong that it even makes him oblivious to how Ulrica has nonetheless managed partially to avenge her murdered family. “Long had I nursed, in secret, the unnatural hatred” between “the elder Front-de-Boeuf and his son Reginald,” explains Ulrica, until “it blazed forth in an hour of drunken wassail, and at his own board fell my oppressor by the hand of his own son” (218).

Like the enslaved black women of the Americas, moreover, Ulrica manages to frighten her white male captors and even assert herself using her distinct cultural knowledge. As a native of the castle, for instance, Ulrica knows of the “magazine of fuel” stored underneath Sir Reginald Front-de-Boeuf’s “apartments,” and uses it to set the castle ablaze (Scott, *Ivanhoe* 257). She then reclaims her identity as Ulrica, “the daughter of the murdered Torquil Wolfgang” and “the sister of his slaughtered sons” (256). By invoking the Saxons’ pre-Christian faith, Ulrica uses her foreign spiritual identity against her captors, in a manner familiar to *Ivanhoe*’s readers. By 1819, British readers had consumed decades of frightening depictions of Obeah and other black Caribbean spiritual practices. Ulrica would hardly be the first English literary character to echo the female Obeah practitioner. Samuel Taylor Coleridge explicitly credited the account of “*Oby*” in Bryan Edwards’s *An Historical Survey of the French Colony in the Island of St Domingo* (1797) with inspiring his and William Wordsworth’s literary ballad, “The Three Graves” (Richardson 14). Furthermore, Alan Richardson argues that Wordsworth’s “Goody Blake and Harry Gill” is “perhaps [even] more closely related to most literary versions of obeah” in the Romantic period (15). As Richardson demonstrates, Obeah “had indeed become notorious toward the end of the eighteenth century when it held the British reading and play-going public under its spell for a decade” (3). Stephen Fuller presented his 1788 “Woman of the Popo Country” “to the British Parliament as a factual report detailing the impending crises of colonial production” (Cottrell 202). Nonetheless, it is a “sensationalizing” narrative that “locates obeah’s power materially in the bodies and spaces belonging to

enslaved women” (202). Ulrica also has a particularly illustrious predecessor in Nanny, a historical Obeah practitioner who was one of the principal Maroon leaders who defeated the British in Jamaica’s First Maroon War in 1739 (Sharpe 1, 3). In his 1790 *Memoirs and Anecdotes*, Philip Thicknesse describes how “he and his men feared that at any moment” during the last days of the First Maroon War, “that horrid wretch, their Obea woman would demand their deaths,” and calls the “Obea woman” an “old Hagg” (as quoted in Sharpe 27). Thicknesse “characterizes this authoritative woman as a malevolent and blood-thirsty hag” (Sharpe 27). According to oral histories, Nanny’s signature battlefield move was to “catch bullets between her buttocks and fire them back at her enemies” (12). Ulrica might well recognize the tactic of turning her body into a weapon.

In setting the house afire, moreover, Ulrica effects a slave revolt, and for a Romantic-era reader, the connection between slave revolts, Obeah, and other practices that whites dismissed as “witchcraft,” goes back at least to 1780. In that year, a Jamaican slave named Jack Mansong, whose birth name was probably Karfa, led a slave revolt and became the leader of “a group of escaped slaves,” who became “a feared band of robbers and marauders” (Rzepka, par. 1). During his daring life, he lost two fingers on one hand, earning him the sobriquet of “Three-Fingered Jack.” Part of Jack’s leadership was his reputation for excelling in Obi, or Obeah, “a West African form of sorcery” (par. 4). Jeffrey Cottrell characterizes Jack’s mother Amri, in William Earle’s 1800 novel *Obi, or Three-Fingered Jack*, as “an obeah practitioner” whose “family obeah . . . dies with her” (207). Dr. Benjamin Moseley’s *A Treatise on Sugar* (1799), William Earle’s epistolary novel, *Obi; or, the History of Three-finger’d Jack* (1800), and the extremely successful pantomime *Obi, or Three-Finger’d Jack* (first performed at the Little Theatre in the Haymarket, 1800) popularized Jack Mansong’s story, and, indeed, the pantomime’s popularity continued “for at least the next three decades” (Rzepka, par. 1, par. 5), making slaves’ religious practices a part of the Romantic cultural lexicon.

Traditionally, scholars of *Ivanhoe* have focused on Rebecca’s trial for witchcraft after she heals the wounded Ivanhoe with Eastern medicine; Ulrica’s fiery vengeance is as spectacular, has even more of an impact on the Norman ascendancy, and links *Ivanhoe* once more to the history of slavery and of resistance to slavery. When she invokes the ancient Saxon religion, Ulrica is simultaneously taking the readers back to the ruined Druidic monument of the

opening scene, with Gurth and Wamba, and transporting readers across the Atlantic to the British West Indies, where witchcraft and slave revolt are inextricable. Fittingly, Ulrica's last appearance in the novel positions her on the turret, simultaneously embodying classical and Saxon heathendom: one of the three "Fatal Sisters" with her distaff, "one of the ancient Furies," and "yelling forth a war-song, such as was of yore chaunted on the field of battle by the scalds of the yet heathen Saxons" (Scott, *Ivanhoe* 269). Ulrica "perished in the flames which had consumed her seducer," yet the moment is one of triumph for her, of "wild exultation, as if she reigned empress of the conflagration which she had raised" (271).

When William Hazlitt read parts of *Ivanhoe* as an accidental indictment of all that Walter Scott held dear, he cleared a path for us to read Scott against the grain, and to read him as a liberal rather than a conservative. Scott begins *Ivanhoe* by belying its radical break with his previous novels, and ends the second volume by burning the castle down. In its treatment of distance, of the evil paraphernalia of slavery, of the connections between princely incompetence, luxury foodstuffs and slave labour, and its treatment of women, sexual coercion and resisting through Obeah or heathen religion, *Ivanhoe* uses Abolitionist arguments and tropes to speak powerfully about England and its empire in 1819. *Ivanhoe* suggests a common ground between the enslaved workers on British West Indian plantations and Saxon serfs: that their slavery has nothing to do with biological inferiority and everything to do with economic, military, and political power; and that they are ready to live in legal freedom from the moment that their chains and collars are stricken off.

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