A VISION ON FEMININITY IN THE ROMANTIC HISTORICAL NOVEL: WALTER SCOTT, *IVANHOE*

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Abstract

The study presents the role of femininity in the historical/heroic Romantic novel through a significant example*: Ivanhoe* by Walter Scott. With the help of the two women conceived in the mirror, the Scottish writer accomplishes a critical takeover of the mediaeval canon, Rowena being the inheritance of the chivalrous heroic structures and Rebecca – a perfect Romantic century character, the way to finding a moral transcendence that has nothing in common with the institutions created by people.

Keywords: historical novel, romance, femininity, chivalry, religious fanaticism

Literature and history in the Romantic view

Romantic historicism derives from a highly acute perception of time. In matters of vision, this is the most distinctive feature of the heterogeneous and proteiform Romantic movement that depicts life's dynamics artistically, destabilizing the artificial classical Eleaticism. One recognises that, epistemologically speaking, "in Romanticism, the border between history and literature is unstable and the interdependencies between the two fields are complex and mutual"[2]. Like the historian, the writer is a "child of the century" and the innovation Romanticism brings about in matters of historical novel is the national, patriotic and democratic feeling. Three ingredients blend aesthetically in this novelistic formula: heroic chivalry, the love for the ideal woman and patriotism. Heroic chivalry of mediaeval origin is dedicated to non-earthly ideals above all, while the Romantics place the ideal within the national context.

In a literature that seems obsessed with historical subjects, the hero, the genius personality, is very valuable, a reflex of the interest in everything that is great, grandiose, imposing, spectacular, amazing. The key character of the Romantics will be the Great Man, be he a poet, a priest, a warrior or a monarch. From Thomas Carlyle the philosopher, a contemporary of the Romantics who explained the whole history through heroes' deeds, to Tolstoy, with his national-popular concept, "a line crosses the spiritual globe and divides it in two parts"[3], questioning the role of individuality in the river of

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[2] Vera Călin, *Romantismul (Romanticism)*, Bucharest, Univers Publishing House, 1975, p. 62.

[3] Tudor Vianu, *Filosofia istoriei în **Războiul şi pace** (The Philosophy of History in **War and Peace**)*, in *Studii de literatură universală şi comparată (Studies of World Literature and Compared Literature)*, 2nd edition revised and enlarged, Bucharest, Academia Republicii Populare Române Publishing House, 1963, p. 516.

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becoming and every voluntary, conscious action oriented towards a purpose that is accessible to human intelligence.

In romanticism, heroism as a literary product matches historical evocation perfectly. After Cervantes, the heroic novel subsisted in structures blended with pastoral poems and the Hellenistic novel whose invincible model was Heliodorus' *Aethiopica*. Such are the works of Gomberville *(Polixandre*) or Madeleine de Scudéry (*Cyrus the Great*) and such are all the classical pseudo-historical novels that depict essentialized, "typical" and contemporary realities under historical disguise. The 18th century proved to be fundamentally anti-chivalric, promoting the hero *sine nobilitate*, and fundamentally anti-heroic, oriented towards social reform. Only at the beginning of the 19th century will the Romantics invent the historical novel as a way to recover the golden age for which the chivalric model is the most available example. Tempted by the Homeric posture, Scott signs the birth certificate of the genre, also establishing its specifics, its procedures, its medievalism with Ossianic features and takeovers from the dark novel, all this blended in a descriptive realism combination through which novelistic heroism gains credibility.

The Middle Ages is, not only for Scott, but also all Romantics, the heroic "etymon", this being the reason for the faithful worshipping of Gothic and primitiveness. Both Vigny in *Cinq-Mars* and Manzoni in *The Bethroted* chose pre-classical or non-classical epochs, the reappearance of Antiquity as a novel theme indicating a separation from Romanticism, as Flaubert also shows in *Salammbô*. The historical Romantic novel accomplishes two great goals simultaneously: it promotes the national cause by evoking a heroic past in which the ideal was active and it represents an evasive answer to the prosaic side and mediocrity of the contemporary world. For "instead of accepting that it was absolutely necessary for the noble souls to be defeated, the 19th-century idealist prose writers planned to discover and study the sociological and historical environment in which they could flourish"[4]. And traces of this ideal can be found in the historical past. The purpose of the novelist is not the antithesis arisen from grasping the excellence and the spectacular features of bygone times, as in the Gothic novel that uses the mediaeval framework strictly in its fantastic side, but the discovery, within this illustrative fragment, of the laws of history and social morality, laws that can be imported to serve the present. Consequently, fantasy is restricted by the norm of credibility and the past-addicted attitude promotes the Romantic idea of constant transformation.

As a product of the Biedermeier age, the historical Romantic novel develops a new concept on the universe, which intends to sound plausible by eliminating the contradictions of essential Romanticism through synthesis. The solutions differ from writer to writer, but they all deal with national regeneration as part of an integrating project of restoring spiritual values, either through the return to the code of chivalry, as Scott pretends, or the rediscovery of common people's morality, according to Manzoni.

[4] Toma Pavel, *Gândirea romanului (Thinking on the Novel),* Bucharest, Humanitas Publishing House, 2008, p. 226.

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History in the patterns of chivalry

In Scott's works, the pattern of knightly morality, fundamentally anti-utilitarian, becomes an "agenda" of fighting against bourgeois demoralization[5] in a novelistic texture whose specific feature is to harmonize Romantic imagination with realistic scruples in reviving old epochs. The essence of Scott's historical philosophy derives from the *confrontation of opposites*, always materialised in intermingling personal destinies. This confrontation is the fight either between the Saxons and the Normans (*Ivanhoe*), the Jacobites and the Hanoverians (*Waverley*, *Rob Roy*), the crusaders and the Saracens (*The Talisman*), the Stuarts and the Tudors (*The Abbot*), royalty and dissident aristocracy (*Quentin Durward*) or the old aristocrats and the newly rich (*The Bride of Lammermoor*). Love is the battlefield for these opposites, both after the model of the mediaeval epic and the Romantic key. In point of fact, love's triumph is the triumph of natural laws.

There are two types of knights in Scott's work. One belongs to an order, like Brian de Bois-Guilbert, a Templar knight, the other is a knight-errant, an outlaw with incognito appearances, living the life of a wanderer, a brigand, a pirate, a Romantic demonic character. At the same time, he is an apostle most faithful to justice and his own ideals – among which honour comes first – not to the prince or the monarch who are political beings first and only then knights. This rebel is given a restoration mission in the historical becoming, a mission that he will complete while attracted to a centre – the labyrinth-castle or infernal laboratory – by the mirage of love. Once the erotic impulse fulfilled, the central aggressive space is abandoned in favour of the secondary, original space – the knight's abode where time is circular and history flows into the Greater Time. The exceptional character is thus recovered by the great mass from which it was individualised, while the end marks the triumph of the bucolic charms of domestic life.

Such is the destiny of the Ivanhoe – Rowena pair that fulfils its mission as a mediator that this writer with conservatory views expects. It is the mission of bringing about the reconciliation between the Norman conquerors and their Saxon subjects. The knight, who is the right hand of the Norman king Richard Cœur de Lion, wins the heart of a true-born Saxon maiden, a descendant of King Albert. The idea of reconciliation and compromise and the model of bucolic society are fundamental for the late "Biedermeier" Romanticism, holds Virgil Nemoianu in *Îmblânzirea romantismului*[6], as a way of changing the concept of plenitude or synthesis that is typical of *high romanticism*. Even absolute love has, in the Biedermeier era, more suave tonalities and more credible circumstances and has no chance but to make room for the glorified domestic love in the bosom of one's family and peace of one's home.

The historical novel is the product of the English Biedermeier age exclusively, a consequence of abandoning the forbidden patterns of essential Romanticism, of adapting

[5] Tudor Olteanu, *Morfologia romanului european în secolul al XIX-lea (The Morphology of European Novel in the 19th Century)*, Bucharest, Univers Publishing House, 1977, p. 105.
[6] Virgil Nemoianu, *Îmblânzirea romantismului. Literatura europeană şi epoca Biedermeier (The Taming of Romanticism: European Literature and the Age of Biedermeier)*, Bucharest, Curtea Veche Publishing House, 2004, p. 240-241.

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the idea of Revolution to national microcommunities; the shift from general to more specific events, from cosmicity to historism, occurs through this novel. History is the divinity of late Romanticism that believes that the return to a paradise-like state is possible by going back to a certain moment in the past. Late Romanticism is the age that pursues the acceptable solutions of social amelioration rather than the solutions of the spectacular metamorphoses found in the works of Saint-Just, Blake or Hölderlin. Similarly, the idyllic vision upon life with its set of moral meanings is part of the system of moderate, miniature rational values bearing the mark of the Enlightenment century, reconciling idealism with pragmatism. Making the hero anonymous again is part of the same pattern that changes the ideal of uniqueness with that of community. The human model is resized to the dimensions of the possible, and the ideal is moderate. For Scott, greatness means adaptation and the recognition of the universal dialectic. The idyllic finality of his novels, as well as Manzoni's, although apparently utopic, is more plausible than the revolutionary visions, than paradise-like perfection, but equally complex, as it involves "the desire to restore or compromise without losing the hope of paradise completely"[7]. In its essence, Scott's philosophy is neither heroism nor revolution; it is their neutralisation through restoration.

The Lady of the Heart and the Disinherited Lady – mission *versus* heroic calling

Ivanhoe is the novel with two knights and two ladies, two pairs that develop complex relationships among themselves, each male character forming a love triangle with the feminine double: the ambitious Brian de Bois-Guilbert wagers that he will win beautiful and proud Rowena, but ends by falling in love with the Jewish maiden Rebecca; eventually, Ivanhoe will take his Queen of Love and Beauty, but he will always be filled with nostalgia for a feeling he has never allowed himself to have for Rebecca. Similarly, the Jewish maiden keeps loving him secretly, but gives up everything that might mean her fulfilment as a woman by giving her jewels to Rowena. Rebecca is the new element of the heroic journey, Rowena – the predictability and the end of the journey. The archetypal design does not deny itself, it brings a double heroine in the hero's way – the double is a Romantic obsession, as well as a figure of mythical heroism which Durand and Baudouin speak about[8] – a kind of Calypso and Penelope in a competing relationship of the Venus - Demeter type that breaks the classic "binomial" pattern of the obstacle-woman versus the target-woman.

Rowena is transparent; she does not suggest more than she shows. The Hero-Lady pair plays a merely heroic and national role, that is why the interest it stirs is only epic, not psychological. The two have been friends from childhood; the obstacle, which is

[7] *Ibidem*, p. 58.

[8] Gilbert Durand, *Realismul şi rezistenţa mitului: Lucien Leuwen sau eroismul pe dos (Realism and the Resistence of Myth: Lucien Leuwen or Reversed Heroism)*, in *Figuri mitice şi chipuri ale operei – de la mitocritică la mitanaliză* (*Mythical Figures and Faces of the Work – From Mythocriticism to Mythoanalysis)*, Bucharest, Nemira Publishing House, 1998, p. 179.

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necessary in any love story, is raised only when Cedric sends his son away from home to stop the evolution of feelings that might harm the Saxon cause whom he sees triumphing through the union of Rowena, the descendant of the legendary Alfred, with Athelstane, a chieftain claiming royal blood. The fact that Ivanhoe made a pact with the Norman king, Richard Cœur de Lion, and followed him in the crusade makes Cedric disinherit him. The solution to the familial intrigue is simple and, according to the adopted chivalric model that involves the triumph of morality, it can be only one: Athelstane himself gives Rowena up, knowing her reluctance, and she is rightfully given to Ivanhoe, the man who dedicated her his victory in the Ashby tournament. The knight and the lady cannot have their own share of complexity, they are both more and less than what they really are, that is to say they are both symbols and puppets in the scenario. She must be noble, faithful and proud, accustomed to exercise her authority, while he must place sacrifice, honour and generosity before any personal interests.

In this heroic fable, from which the woman's traditional inciting role cannot be absent, the distribution of the heroic matter occurs between to magnetic poles. This indicates not only that *the model of femininity is no longer unique, like in the chivalric novel*, but also that *the "institutionalised" model of the knight is amendable*. Rowena and Rebecca are in an antithetic relationship with variable poles: the power of noble origin and the lack of power of a despised and oppressed people, noble origin and noble soul, the pride of the chosen race and the dignity of the oppressed. Rowena lives an austere Saxon lifestyle, but without giving up the standards of her royal blood; Rebecca lives in luxury, but under constant threat, a fact that turned wiser a "temper which, under other circumstances, might have waxed haughty, supercilious and obstinate". Physically, the two heroines are also opposites: Northern and Oriental, suave and sensual, blonde and brunette, day and night, pale complexion and blue eyes, dark complexion and dark, sparkling eyes. One is an explosive beauty in a game of contrasts; the other is a quiet, subtly harmonized beauty. While Rowena appears authoritarian and unapproachable, Rebecca emanates a kind of sensuality, which explains why the men at the Ashby tournament feel instantly attracted to her. Her look suggests comparisons with the bride in *Song of Songs*, and King John, forgetting that she is Jewish, is ready to proclaim her the Queen of Love and Beauty. In this case "Nigra sed formosa" in the Biblical text becomes "Jewish, but beautiful", as we are in the middle of an epoch of religious vanity.

The difference between the two women lies not in their beauty – only taste can decide which of them is more beautiful – but in their impact on men. Morally speaking, the difference lies in revealing their inner strength and in this regard Rebecca is a "round" character. "The lady of the heart" does not have her own share of evolution or unexpected turns in her epic destiny: she waits for her lover to return from the crusade with the feeling of their predestination, she vouches for his honour, she patronizes the tournament after he has chosen her, and when the last hardship has been overcome, she finally becomes his wife. Rowena is a *donna angelicata*, by all means "cruel" in men's eyes; with her imposing stature and free nature, she looks "as if born to exact general

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homage". Her coldness, control, arrogance and air of superiority rouse men's ambition to conquer her – a test of virility and courtesy – but not their desire. Brian de Bois-Guilbert wants her because he is a conceited man, incited by Prior Aymer, De Bracy kidnaps her because he considers her a good match for his plans of personal aggrandizement. In contrast, Rebecca is obviously an Aphrodite-like being, she emanates sensuality involuntarily, she causes a storm of passions around her and in turn lets herself caught in the whirl of infatuation for Ivanhoe – the forbidden, "treacherous" passion. Her paralysing impact on men lies in not only her sensuality, but also mostly in what one can guess behind what is visible: the idea of the sublime, a non-human inner accomplishment that characterises the epiphany of the divine. Fascinated by the structures of chivalry, the novelist places her above the conventional, closer to eternal symbol: the integrating beauty that can make the world a better place will break down pride, shake discretionary powers and eventually lead to redemption. It staggers the perjurers, those "hardened and inflexible villains" who accuse her of witchcraft, and even the Grand Master, who is absolutely determined to turn her into an example of how to punish the low morality of the Templars' Order. In this game of representations, we come to wonder which of the two women is the known prototype of the ideal woman.

Scott was reproached with the fact that historical specificity does not develop also from his characters' psychology. They remain timeless characters, descriptive realism being manifest only in evoking the social framework and the diversity of social morals. Among the conventional lovers created by Scott, all indifferent to the described epoch, Rebecca and Brian de Bois-Guilbert make a distinctive pair, illustrating both the mentality of the mediaeval century and an idea very dear to the Romantics and used by Chateaubriand (*Les Martyrs*, *Atala*): the conflict between love and religion. In *Jerusalem Delivered*, Tasso subordinates the war-centred intrigue to erotic complications, Christian knights falling in love with pagan Amazons. It is Rebecca the Jewish maiden the one who manages to change a destiny and generate a typical Romantic story, the fable of the humanization of a disappointed, misogynistic being, victim of an old treachery. She proves the Templar that bravery, courage and the power to sacrifice yourself for an idea are not male features exclusively. Up to a certain point, Rebecca is the classical example of the weak woman at her conqueror's mercy and *Ivanhoe*, following the same logic of reversed symmetries, provides her alternative in Urfried, the classical "war booty". Urfried is the woman who, once Front-de-Beuf the Norman has taken her and her castle, becomes a tragic slave of pleasure, so that by the end of her lascivious life all she is left with is madness and the desire for revenge.

Rebecca *versus* Urfried is a kind of "what if…" story. The daughter of Isaac of York is also a victim of male persecution: kidnapped by Bois-Guilbert to retrieve her freedom by herself, through love and beauty, she is suggested to embrace Christianity so that she can become his favourite, but she would rather jump from the castle parapet than be dishonoured. The confrontation between her and her captor is the well-known war between nobility as a virtue and nobility by birth. The knight is overwhelmed by the

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"supernatural" moral strength of a defenceless being he admires and he undergoes a sudden transformation: he changes his threat to possess her against her will with the proposal to stand by her side as part of an exceptional destiny, that of Grand Master of the Templars' Order, in which case he could give her what her people has never had: power. His passion comes to the ears of the Grand Master of the order and, since in that century the border between feminine charm and witchcraft, between the art of healing and occult practices is unstable, the Templars' tribunal sentences her to death to pay for their brother's release. According to tradition, she can be saved only by a knight who is ready to fight against the knight assigned by the accusers; as an irony of fate, the assigned knight is Brian de Bois-Guilbert himself. The fight in his soul is the fight between love and honour, the eternal dispute between weapons and women: if he appears in the lists, she will be burned at the stake, if he does not, he will be a "dishonoured and degraded knight, accused of witchcraft and communion with infidels." Since Rebecca does not promise to love him and compensate for his losing his honour and being excluded from the Order, Brian de Bois-Guilbert accepts to confront her defender, Ivanhoe; a victim of his own strong, contradictory feelings, he dies in the lists before his enemy's lance even touches him. His death is the Romantic conclusion of a story about sacrificing one's career, power, life, and, eventually, the woman one loves.

Rebecca's "novel" demonstrates what fatal force can emerge from associating the Venus-type beauty with the Amazon nature. Medievalism is outdated, it has learnt something also from the voluntarism of the Renaissance women; the woman is no longer a decorative object that stimulates heroism by convention, because Rebecca's power to change a destiny focused on absolute social accomplishment comes from an internality that matches a masculine set of values ("proud as thou art, thou hast found in me thy match", says the Templar to Rebecca.) The superior woman as a Romantic asset, shows Scott, is the way to perfection and the gateway to a transcendence with which the institutions created by people, even the so-called religious ones, have nothing in common. If Rowena is the inheritance of the mediaeval canon, with "frigid", elitist and ostentatiously pious manifestations, Rebecca is a perfect Romantic century character placed in an intolerant, superstitious and rigid context that gives value to the force of the challenging spirit in the name of universal ideals.

Saxon and Norman, Christian and pagan. Criticising chivalry

The theme of religious fanaticism is at least as powerful as that of chivalry, which it adjusts in view of reconciliation and the evolution typical of the Biedermeier Romanticism. Scott's opinion on chivalry is marked by the modern era that throws away everything connected with conventions and unauthentic or ineffectual behaviour. One of the stronger conventions of medievalism is the "accredited" attitude towards women, an aspect that, in Scott's works, once again underlines the difference between the Saxon and the Norman knights. In *Ivanhoe*, the acts of domination over women combine, in the same perspective of the virility asserted by the Norman conquerors, with a code of

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French courteousness. The austere and direct Saxon morals despise this code for what it might hide – brutal, violating behaviour and debauchery. It is a code expressed in a frivolous language, full of cheap display of emotion. Divorce is deepened by the Templars' contempt for women. For them, women are but "toys", "frail baubles" which amuse the ambitious knights in their "lighter hours". Religious chivalry, with its set of restrictions, is unnatural and dangerous, says Scott, because by holding back the aspiration of natural individual fulfilment it deviates it towards the arrogant, ambitious masculinity and its excessive manifestations. From this point of view, the distant, melancholic, inconspicuous Ivanhoe is superior to the exuberant and polished Brian de Bois-Guilbert. This lasts until the brilliant Templar falls in love. Compared to his impetuous desire to win Rebecca, Ivanhoe's conformism resembles that of a mediocre mind suffocated by prejudice. The restlessness the latter feels when seeing Rebecca, the "healing angel" of the wounds he received in the Ashby tournament, vanishes as soon as he finds out she is Jewish, substituted by a behaviour suggesting nothing but gratitude. As a matter of fact, Scotts' opinion on chivalry is rendered in various ways. The arrogance of Ivanhoe, who believes that the values of chivalry can only be perceived by the Christians, since the concepts they are based on – sacrifice, generosity and honour – are Christian acquisitions, opposes the lack of rhetoric of a Jewish maiden, but also her courage and unsuspected devotion. Chivalry makes the difference between noble and low souls, but Scott proves that chivalry is not a political and religious institutions, but an inner dimension. The Jewish maiden challenges its moral resources and stereotypes, demonstrating that even a discredited being like her, even a woman can share ideals that shape a heroic vision on life. In a manner different from Cervantes', Scott speaks about the danger of formalism and exclusivist pride that threatens chivalry, deviating it from its higher purposes. If the knight's desire to fight is nothing but a rush for glory and a name for posterity, Rebecca denies it in the name of the values of life. "The fantastic chivalry of the Nazarenes" is nothing but vanity as long as it feeds on vanity, taking lives in the name of certain religious ideals that, seen from the other side of the barricade, are but a form of repression and fighting is justified only as a means of defence against oppression; the remaining superior values are the peace of one's home, love and happiness. A largely humanitarian perspective that transcends both the opposition between men and women and the one between pagans and Christians. Rebecca gives the two strong men a fitting rebuff and does this in a matter of fighting and honour, which makes it even more significant. In Romanticism, the chivalry model undergoes major changes through the appearance of the superior woman vested with a supervalue: she knows the "path" to the true core of existence, to a transmundane and universal essence. Hugo holds the same in his *Nôtre-Dame de Paris*, through Esmeralda. His knight, Phoebus, is a diurnal being, an unfortunate, common mediocrity without feelings, a shallow philanderer, smug and cynical. In Hugo's work, women mean totality and authenticity, while men represent flawed parts of a complete masculinity: intelligence (Frollo), soul (Quasimodo), beauty (Phoebus), creation (Gringoire the poet). Joining these virtues that gather the four men

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around Esmeralda leads to catastrophe. The woman is a sexual victim, but she is as strong as her torturer.

Is it by chance that, morally speaking, the most significant character of *Ivanhoe* as a "political novel" is this "stateless" maiden who renders the dispute between the Saxons and the Normans useless, turning it to glorifying values that belong to the generic human being? Between the two fighting parties, Scott seems to say, there is a free territory that has never been conquered either by Cedric, or by Richard, either by Prince John or the knights-errant, either by Templars or by Christians or pagans. It belongs to everybody and nobody. The idea of mediation, the foundation of Scott's historical philosophy, is, from the epic viewpoint, materialised into a woman, a mediating archetype by nature, the representative of an old nation spread throughout the world that shows that the values tradition has assigned to a historical institution – chivalry – are pan-temporal and pan-cultural. Chivalry, says the writer through this woman's voice, is not ambition, is not noble origin, is not religious belonging; it is an attitude towards life and history, a sum of virtues that the chivalric institution has cultivated but is now at risk of losing by deviating them towards external aims. Only by purging chivalry of this Party-principled spirit can chivalry serve the national ideals. For, according to Scott, chivalry for the sake of chivalry, non-aligned on behalf of goals above personal interest, is useless. Between Richard, the adventurer monarch, a knight rather than a king, "the brilliant, but useless character of a knight of romance", and Brian de Bois-Guilbert, the Templar who fights for the triumph of chimerical, segregationist ideas, between fighting for the sake of danger and glory and fighting out of pride, the solution is Ivanhoe, whose offensive is applied and subsumed under a progressive goal. He illustrates, as Lukács said, a conservative writer's preference for the "middle course", including the selection of the characters. Instead of the demonic, eccentric and socially useless hero, appears the common, honest and narrow-minded individual who is fair and capable of self-sacrifice, but cannot embrace an overwhelming passion for a great cause[9].

Through Scott's extraordinary intuition, an overcoming of Romanticism with its cult for heroes, a shift towards the superior level of realistic objectivity, takes place. Romanticism does not explain the epoch through its great representatives, but through depicting daily life. Situated between the upper and lower classes, between the ascetic noble Cedric and his thrall Gurth, between Richard and Robin Hood, Ivanhoe represents the life of the people as a totality and is the bearer of the idea of continuity and historical development. In this recuperating history, women play a civilising role, either as pieces of a totality of political and national representations that are materialised once the "lady" is gained, like Rowena, or trace, through Rebecca, the "absolute" path and meaning that fade away into the relative and the conjectural when masculinity deviates towards values that are unknown to eternal chivalry.

[9] Georg Lukács, *Romanul istoric (The Historical Novel)*, vol. I., Bucharest, Minerva Publishing House, 1978, p. 48.

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SOURCE TEXTS

Scott, Walter, *Ivanhoe*, vol. I-II, translation and foreword by Petre Solomon, Bucharest, Minerva Publishing House, 1970.
Scott, Walter, *Ivanhoe* [Online]. Available: http:// www.online-literature.com/...**scott/ivanhoe**/ [2012, March 10].

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