

**THE SYNTAX OF SIGNIFICANT HISTORICAL
PROCESSES BEHIND THE STRUCTURES OF KEN
FOLLETT'S *THE PILLARS OF THE EARTH* AND SIR
WALTER SCOTT'S *KENILWORTH***

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ABSTRACT

*Historical narratives are metaphorical looking glasses on the world, both synchronically and diachronically. They have certain processes that blend history and imagination, using the latter as a tool to excavate the truth and expose the fictions surrounding truth. Marx's n-d model and the Base-Superstructure relationships are two such processes that undermine truth though the ancient pages of chronicles and stand out with the truth. This paper is a research on two similar historical narratives written by writers who lived centuries apart yet their emplotments are, surprisingly, not on medieval or feudal worlds, but ours. The contemporary world is viewed through the medieval in these narratives. Ken Follett's *The Pillars of the Earth* and Sir Walter Scott's *Kenilworth* transcend time and the characters are metaphors of the modern man. These books are proof in the sense that history repeats itself.*

Keywords: New Historicism, Metahistory, Ken Follett, Sir Walter Scott, The Medieval Period, Feudalism

Historical writing, though not anything like its past structures, has exceedingly changed through the ages. History was restricted to myths in the ancient glory days of battle as in *Beowulf*, where the culture of the Scandinavians is incorporated into the Anglo-Saxon. Romanticism and the Gothic introduced the fear of the unknown based on history like Maria Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent* and Sir Walter Scott's *The Talisman* is an instance of the Crusades gone awfully wrong. History bends around the legends of King Arthur and his Round Table where Arthur, supposedly England's one and only King, is shown as a tyrant ordering peasants to the dungeons and sending his poor knights to search for a means to stay immortal. Contemporary historical writing has improved to an extent of piercing the shades of history itself. These novels are bold enough to expose the unnatural and the forgotten. Wilbur Smith's *Pharaoh* is a volume of bloodshed and unrest behind the glorious Luxor of Ramses II. Ken Follett's *World Without End* states that the Black Death entered England because of the innovative methods of Edward III – using diseased corpses to fend off French soldiers in the Battle of Crécy. Dame Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall* series excavates the plot of Henry VIII and to frame Anne Boleyn for adultery as he was terrified of her prowess. While the historical elements of the past exposed only the follies of monarchs, those of the present shimmer light on how history itself was distorted by tyrants. Contemporary

historical writing analyses the subtle nuances of multiple experiences – those of framed victims, public suffering under feudalism and bribes on a battlefield. This paper researches some of the structures used in writing these giants that wander between fact and fiction, and compares the processes of an antique and a modern writer. *The Pillars of the Earth* (1989) and *Kenilworth* (1820) are similar pieces, when it comes to their historical core, though written centuries apart by very different writers. Ken Follett (1949-) is a Welsh writer who dares expose the truth hidden after extensive research. His novels range in themes from the reasons behind the murder of Saint Thomas à Becket to the real causes of the First World War. Sir Walter Scott (1771 – 1832) is a medieval antiquarian fond of exposing the drawbacks of chivalry and the tainted reign of great monarchs. His fiction have a wide variety of subjects: bloodthirsty tournaments when the kingdom needed peace, selfishness of rulers, and cruelty of the aristocracy towards Jews and Anglo-Saxons and the Crusades run by a group of ambitious and self-centered fools. Metahistory is real-life application of new historicism as explicated by Hayden White in his revolutionary newreading outcome of the same name. One good example of practical metahistory is the discovery of Troy by Henrich Schliemann off the coast of Hisarlik. The ruins left behind by history are devastating indeed, and metahistory excavates beyond history, beyond ruins and castle walls to the hidden truth. Metahistory exhumes the glory behind the Camelot of King Arthur and comes out with his dungeons, specially built to torture peasants. The Inquisition, in reality, was a wave to purge the Western society of rationality and logic. The Coliseum is a symbol of the tyranny of Rome, rather than the splendour of the kingdom. Metahistory has come out with the naked truth behind the outcome of battles; enemy soldiers being friends, soldiers bribed for a piece of bread and weapons sold off to enemy artillery. Hayden White propounds that all historical documents are written through chronicle, story, mode of emplotment, mode of argument and mode of ideological implication. All history is antidialectic – all history exists in a delicate balance between good and evil. White emplots the arguments of Alexis de Tocqueville who believed that public opinion tends toward oppression and that democracy can be as tyrannical as the rule of a despot. *The Pillars of the Earth* has in its tyrannical core, the hard and fast Stephen of Blois who gets to rule England because his friends sabotaged “The White Ship” and drowned William Adelin, the heir of Henry I. Maud, or Matilda, contests for the throne too but she cannot rule because her husband is an Angevin. The mob behind the civil war selects Waleran Bigod as bishop and William Hamleigh as Earl of Shiring. These are worse than Stephen himself. Henry of Blois, Stephen’s brother, is disgusted because the new king has cast away ecclesiastical policies, and this meant people like himself were in danger of being tried by the King. *Kenilworth* focuses on Queen Elizabeth, the virgin monarch who dallies around after pleasantries and is hardly the Elizabeth people expect. The reign of Elizabeth and “merry old England” (Scott 1) have enemies in the form of mobs and coups as well.

Civil wars and social unrests lead to the despiritualization of man; the straying off from the path towards humble obedience and settling down for riot and revolution: If man himself could be made the object and measure of all thought and art, it would be possible, Tocqueville believed, to create a new cultural vision that was neither Idealistic nor Materialistic, but a combination of the two... (White 198) *The Pillars* exposes the twelve-year period of prolonged war and riots because of the clash between the Norman Stephen and the Angevin Maud. *Kenilworth* appears to be a celebration of Elizabeth’s monarchy, but it topples her from the tower of power. Elizabeth, as Queen, cannot decide on the issue of Mary, Queen of Scots, who is imprisoned with luxury in her court. She cannot choose between suitors and exterminates anyone who dares oppose her. The situation of

Scotland gets worse everyday while the Queen visits castle parties. The revels at Kenilworth castle are a good example of how little the queen cared for her subjects. There is nothing “merry” (Scott 1) in the pots and pans getting swindled from villages for the feasts – the pots and pans were never returned. Whole roads were blocked and taxes collected to redesign Kenilworth when the people of Scotland starved. Highwaymen wandered in joy to rob people going to the Queen’s revels because they must have a lot of money to get into Kenilworth. Scott points out the towers and dungeons of the castle that held Edward II prisoner; Mervyn’s Tower has a ghost of Arthur Mervyn who was starved in turn by Edward. Elizabeth, like King Arthur, tries to make a Camelot out of a dungeon but fails miserably. Historical narratives view human nature and the human consciousness as crucially flawed: When the historian of aristocratic ages surveys the theatre of the world, he at once perceives a very small number of prominent actors who manage the whole piece. These great personages, who occupy the front of the stage, arrest attention and fix it upon themselves; and while the historian is bent on penetrating the secret motives which make these persons speak and act, the others escape his memory (Tocqueville 90). Follett’s creation of the mad Jacques Cherbourg and Scott’s designing of the neurotic Amy Robsart are indeed examples of the fatal results of aristocracy. Cherbourg is framed for stealing a golden goblet from the monastery; a monastery where he had never set foot. The truth is that he had been the only witness to sabotage, one involving the heir of Henry I. Everyone accepts his guilt because Cherbourg was French. He was French at a time when England was torn between the ruling French and the submissive Anglo-Saxons who hated the French-Normans with all their heart. Cherbourg is a metaphor of a man trying to survive in a foreign land. He is the hard working average fish in a bowl watched over by the aristocratic cat, ready to spring. Amy Robsart, the woman who brings tragedy upon herself, is a typical metaphor of the modern slave who does not know he is one. The Cherbourg types know they are being suppressed but the submissive Amy types do not know anything about their dominants; in fact, they hardly know anything about themselves. The historical process responsible for creating the historical consciousness focuses on men who seem bound to win their kingdoms upon this Earth. Desire for gold, territory and resources are common objects in the historical field ever since the prehistoric times. Both Stephen of Blois and Henry II are hell bound to capture the whole of Aquitaine, France’s heart of wine and salt. Henry II organizes fleece fairs in England when he actually wants Aquitaine to be the market of goods produced in England. All the predecessors of Henry II were obsessed with ruling France from an island tower, England. France was their home but England their hearth. Queen Elizabeth’s passion for colonies in America was limitless. She sent Walter Raleigh on a mission to return with at least one colony named after her and thus came Virginia into existence. She did not care a dime about the Irish rebelling around England or that the Scots were without a monarch. All that mattered to the Virgin Queen were the pleasures of the court and territories in her name abroad. The principles behind emplotting a historical narrative fall into agitation, tyranny, treason, betrayals and religious domination. Agitation in the field is the first phenomenon observed in a historical plot. The timeline is written to match these agitations broken up into separate events that string up the plot. With *The Pillars*, the agitation begins as soon as Stephen and Maud quarrel for the throne. Riots erupt all over England leading to civil war which the nobles laugh at. Agitation breaks out when the aristocratic Waleran is appointed Bishop. *Kenilworth* hints at coups and rebellions in Ireland. Feasts and taxes are two arms of a tyrant – the royal feast exhibits his status and the taxes suck the people dry. This kind of exhibitionism is examined by Stephen calling up the clergy for royal banquets. The poor are levied peasant tax,

the merchant with trade tax and the rest with bridge tolls, road tolls and church tolls in the selfish feudal system. Follett depicts William Hamleigh, knight and lord for Henry I: The serfs were William's property, and could not do anything without his permission. They owed him so many days' work at certain times of year, plus a share of their own crops. The free men just paid him rent, in cash or in kind (Follett 494). King Stephen releases prisoners and pardons them if they enlist in the war against Maud. Queen Elizabeth pardons Robert Dudley because she likes him. Religion has designed history many a time. Stephen, Waleran and Alonso are the typical representations of religious fanatics. With Stephen, the clergy enjoy freedom. With Waleran as Bishop, the clergy have command over everyone. Alonso, though an alchemist, has Robert Dudley in his thrall. Scott's historical consciousness draws the misfit Wayland Smith as opposed to the religious Alonso. In a way, Scott persuades the reader to estimate religion for what it is through the eyes of the atheist Smith and the alchemist Alonso. The Liberal Mask is a concept of Tocqueville that conceptualizes civilians blindfolded by the ruling class – be they aristocrats or democrats. History prepares the society through a realistic future; it casts away the blindfold. Behind the bloody mask of anarchy, lies the brutal mask of liberty, the one thing that never exists because it is an illusion. Tom Builder and his family wear the Liberal Mask and cannot take it off. Jack's ambitions to become master builder are ruined. Ellen is the only one who tears off the mask but she is cast aside as a witch because of her intelligence and sensibility to understand the plans of the rulers. The narrative ends in a tone of doubt – all is not well that ends well. Jack is uncertain of his future as a half-breed in a land of vultures. On the other hand, Tressilian dies abroad in Virginia. He falls for the illusion but does not desire to break it when he travels abroad. Amy Robsart deliberately wears the Liberal Mask to enjoy an opulent life. Even Varney is under the illusion because he desperately desires the crown of an Earl. Wayland Smith is the only one who survives the illusion. Queen Elizabeth creates her own illusion by dallying around with the hearts of lords and laymen, all the same: She will accept love-tokens – ay, and answer them too – push gallantry to the verge where it becomes exchange of affection – but she writes *nil ultra* to all which is to follow, and would not barter one iota of her own supreme power for all the alphabet of both Cupid and Hymen (Scott 184).

The historiography of social mediation always shifts “from the tyranny of the elite to the tyranny of the mob” (White 206). The elite aristocrats like Stephen and Elizabeth give in to private mobs of Waleran and Varney respectively. The Base, which produces labour and income for the state, suffers because of this transition. Equality is a mirage that traps the Base into jumping into it. The Superstructure is impatient of regulation. William Hamleigh hates his pathetic life and wants to become an Earl. He could do that by marrying Aliena, daughter of the Earl of Shiring. Once he becomes Earl, he could change feudal rules and extract as much tax as he wanted. Varney wants to become Earl too. He plans of murdering Amy and marrying the Earl to the Queen. The objects are wearied by permanence. Henry of Blois plans to overthrow his own brother when clergy requirements are not met with. Robert Dudley has another selfish and adulterous desire of marrying the Queen for power. All the objects – the Base and the Superstructure – desire power in a historical narrative. Aliena desires power through wool business, Jack through that of construction, Amy through that of a Countess, Tressilian through that of a knight and Smith that of God himself. The objects die either of too much power or of too less. Nobody is virtuous or perfect. The objects hate those who wielded power and elude the powerful. Ellen and Jack live like animals to elude the powerful ruling class, not because they were cast away. Equality is denied because if granted, it would lead to anarchy.

The social hierarchy that is part of a historical process lays down various forms of hegemony: Slavery in the past, feudalism in the middle ages and capitalism in the contemporary period. The words have changed but the meaning has not. Monarchy and democracy are both promoters of governments designed into slave-owner relationships for their convenience. Their historical field changes without development – it deteriorates into riots, battles and spirit-infested wastelands: The aristocratic band sees *nothing* but movement, color, agitation in the historical field, and therefore cannot credit duration and continuity. The democratic band sees the *same thing behind* all apparent movement and change, and therefore cannot perceive any essential development at all (White 202). It resists innovation – the rulers never listen to any useful suggestions offered by builders like Jack that would save time and money. Everyone is materialistic – Jack builds the Kingsbridge Cathedral for money and to impress Aliena; he would make more money as the husband of the Earl's heir. Amy Robsart marries Dudley for his riches and status. Elizabeth must remain a virgin because she wanted all of England, not to mention colonies abroad, for herself. History repeats itself over the ages and each time it repeats, it is a synecdoche with the whole massive and greater than the parts. All the objects either learn from it or learn it to change themselves accordingly. But they are certain of illusions that lie ahead and determine their lives, like black holes that cannot be seen but felt.

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