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A Critical Study of the Dramas of Four Major Romantic Poets

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Earl P., Jr.

1970

A CRITICAL STUDY OF THE DRAMAS
OF FOUR MAJOR ROMANTIC POETS

A Thesis
Presented to
the Faculty of the Department of English
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In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
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A CRITICAL STUDY OF THE DRAMAS
OF FOUR MAJOR ROMANTIC POETS

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The Romantic Period of English literature is generally conceded to have begun in 1798 with the publication of Lyrical Ballads, With a Few Other Poems by William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge and to have ended in 1832 with the death of Walter Scott. This period is recognized primarily for its lyrical poetry; it is also referred to as the low point of English drama.

Although the major poets of the Romantic era wrote plays, these plays have received little critical attention. When their dramas are examined at all, they are usually included in a discussion of the author's entire work and seen as a secondary expression of his philosophy. They are seldom viewed as separate entities worthy of investigation as drama.¹

Since little critical attention has been given to the dramas of this period, it would seem that further examination of them would be of value. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to investigate the dramas of the major Romantic poets in order to provide a new critical perspective on their plays specifically and Romantic drama generally. From this it is

¹See, for example, a discussion of this point with reference to Wordsworth in Carl Woodring, Wordsworth (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968), p. 16.

hoped useful conclusions can be drawn. The study will be limited to the plays of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Percy Bysshe Shelley, William Wordsworth, and George Gordon, Lord Byron. John Keats has been omitted from this group because his only drama was written in conjunction with Armitage Brown, a minor writer. The dramas chosen for this investigation are those which either have been produced on the stage or were submitted for production. If the author submitted more than one play, the play which the critics consider marks the summit of dramatic achievement of the author has been selected.² Included in this study are The Borderers by Wordsworth, Remorse by Coleridge, The Cenci by Shelley, and Cain by Byron. The dramas are presented for discussion according to the chronological order in which they were written.

The study will include an examination of the background against which the tragedies were written--the state of the contemporary drama, the stage, the plays, and the audiences. Those factors which may have affected the work--the author's thoughts, the facts of composition, and elements of Romanticism--will also be considered. In addition, both contemporary and modern criticism will be included. (The criticism beginning with that of George Bernard Shaw in 1886 will be classified as modern.) These criticisms will form the bases for evaluations of the plays.

²Samuel C. Chew, Byron in England: His Fame and After-fame (New York: Russell and Russell, Inc., 1965), pp. 76-77.

CHAPTER II

BACKGROUND OF THE ERA

After the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods, serious drama declined and never again attained the literary quality, dramatic excellence, or importance as a genre which it held during this time.¹ Only comedy flourished during the Restoration Age. The tragedies of the eighteenth century had very little literary merit, and drama reached "its lowest ebb since Queen Elizabeth's succession" in the early nineteenth century.² Playwrighting as an art also declined.³ No great tragedy was rendered by the early nineteenth century playwrights,⁴ and drama was kept alive only by the great acting of the period.⁵

During the Romantic period many interrelated causes

¹ David Daiches, A Critical History of English Literature (New York: Ronald Press Company, 1960), II, 1094.

² William Clark Smith, Chief Patterns of World Drama (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin Company, 1946), p. 809.

³ Benjamin Brawley, A Short History of English Drama (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1921), p. 197.

⁴ George E. Graecel, "The Decline of Tragedy in the Early Nineteenth Century," Dissertation Abstracts, IV, No. 2 (1943), 107.

⁵ John Gassner, Masters of the Drama (New York: Dover Publications, 1954), p. 342.

operated to hinder the development of higher drama.⁶ One of the major obstacles was the size of the theaters.⁷ After 1660, Drury Lane and Covent Garden were the only theaters permitted by law to produce "legitimate," or spoken drama; the other theaters, consequently, were compelled to present dumb shows, farces, musicals, burlettas, and such forms of entertainment.⁸ But the great size of Drury Lane and Covent Garden, which both Walter Scott and Joanna Baillie disparaged, made staging of dramas difficult.⁹ Subtle acting was impossible, and actors had to shout their lines in order to be heard.¹⁰ In addition, Nicoll adds, because of the bad lighting and lines of sight, as well as the vast size of the theaters, the only attention-holding device for the audiences of the period was the use of spectacle and extravaganza. In 1794 Drury Lane was rebuilt on a scale larger than any other European theater. The proscenium was forty-two feet wide and thirty-eight feet high, with a stage depth of ninety-two feet. On February 24, 1809, Drury Lane burned, but was rebuilt even larger, with a seating capacity of over 3200. Covent Garden was destroyed by fire on September 20, 1808 and reopened in 1809 with a capacity for

⁶ Allardyce Nicoll, A History of English Drama: 1660-1900, Vol. IV: Early Nineteenth Century Drama (Cambridge, England: University Press, 1955), p. 57.

⁷ Allardyce Nicoll, British Drama (5th ed., rev.; New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1962), p. 200.

⁸ Ashley H. Thorndike, Tragedy (New York: Cooper Square Publications, 1965), p. 330.

⁹ Nicoll, British Drama, p. 200.

¹⁰ Ibid.

2800 and 3000 spectators. The proscenium of Covent Garden after 1809 was forty-two feet wide and thirty-six feet high, with a stage depth of eighty-two feet.¹¹ Consequently, the only theaters permitted to carry on the tradition of English drama were so immense that spoken drama was impossible in them. Even Shakespeare, when performed in these theaters, was acted in such a ranting and raving manner that Hazlitt and Lamb came to view Shakespeare as a writer of closet drama; they preferred reading Shakespeare's plays to seeing them performed.¹² Thus the hope of serious drama, which is dependent upon subtle acting and the skillful presentation of words, was defeated because of the vastness of Drury Lane and Covent Garden.

Another reason for the decline of serious drama was the growing power of the theater managers.¹³ During the early part of the nineteenth century, the theater managers' powers had become dictatorial; they accepted or rejected plays as they wished. The flaw in this practice was that the managers put commercialism above dramatic art and catered to popular taste, which was not very discriminatory with regard to dramatic excellence,¹⁴ for the nineteenth century had brought with it a new audience.

¹¹ Allardyce Nicoll, The Development of the Theatre (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1957), pp. 185-87.

¹² Daiches, II, 1095.

¹³ Ibid., p. 1094.

¹⁴ Ifor Evans, A Short History of English Literature (London: Macgibbon and Kee, 1964), p. 109.

The audiences of this period were far less appreciative of drama as an art than preceding audiences had been.¹⁵ Prior to the nineteenth century, Samuel Chew observes, the "low classes had generally preferred more 'manly' amusements and the theatres appealed to a more educated public." When the managers discovered that it was to their monetary benefit to please the tastes of the lower classes, "the standards of theatre production deteriorated."¹⁶ Nicoll says that "the spectators in the larger theatre houses were licentious and debased while those in the minor theatres were vulgar, unruly and physically obnoxious."¹⁷ Moreover, Nicoll adds, Walter Scott called the audiences a "national nuisance."¹⁸ In his travelogue based on an 1826 tour of England, another author declared "the most striking thing to a foreigner in the English theatres is the unheard of coarseness and brutality of the audiences . . . the higher and more civilized classes go only to the Italian Opera."¹⁹ Thus the audiences of the early nineteenth century did not appreciate drama as an art form.

Drama was further hampered because Drury Lane and Covent Garden had "vested rights in stock plays and had to maintain Dryden, Otway and Shakespeare--offering no great inducements

¹⁵ Smith, p. 809.

¹⁶ Samuel C. Chew, The Dramas of Lord Byron: A Critical Study (New York: Russell and Russell, Inc., 1964), p. 26. (Hereinafter referred to as Dramas of Lord Byron.)

¹⁷ Nicoll, Early Nineteenth Century Drama, p. 8.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 11.

¹⁹ A. M. Nagler, A Source Book in Theatrical History (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1952), p. 476.

to young authors.²⁰ Consequently, vested rights, as well as commercialism, the power of theater managers, the size of the theaters, and the class of audiences all combined to seriously hamper the drama of the early nineteenth century.

Several other factors were also associated with the decline of serious drama. The great acting of the period had an adverse effect upon the stage, for more and more the theaters depended upon acting skill rather than scripts; eventually the actors, more than the plays, attracted people to the theater.²¹ In addition, the government was not concerned with the fate of drama²² and restricted it with rigid censorship.

For these various reasons, the drama, as an example of dramatic and literary excellence, was in a weakened state. The deterioration was further compounded by the fact that the great writers of the period, hampered by censorship, commercialism, and other difficulties, turned primarily to pursuits of literature other than drama. This period, for instance, saw the rise of the novel, but it, in turn, contributed to the decline of drama.²³

During the latter years of the eighteenth century and the early years of the nineteenth century, romance, musical plays, and German productions were introduced on the English stage, Thorndike points out. Because of the numerous forces opposing serious drama, the latter quickly deteriorated into farce,

²⁰ Thorndike, p. 331.

²¹ Daiches, II, 1094.

²² Evans, p. 109.

²³ Daiches, II, 1094.

melodrama, and spectacle. These German plays and "tales of terror" that were so popular during this time revealed the taste of the people in the field of drama. The great German playwrights--Lessing, Goethe, and Schiller--made little impression on the English stage.²⁴ Rather, the greatest German influence on the theater at this time was August von Kotzebue, whose plays from 1797 to 1801 had perhaps the greatest vogue ever in the history of the English stage.²⁵ The social and political themes he used were successful because they were dealt with sentimentally.²⁶ But sentimentality, which appealed to the uneducated masses, made weak dramas.²⁷ Moreover, none of Kotzebue's plays could be used as a "serious interpretation of life."²⁸ Even though his immensely popular plays are almost entirely forgotten today, however, his importance is not to be overlooked.

Matthew Gregory Lewis was also an influential force in the drama of this era. His play The Castle Spectre, written in prose and composed of various Gothic elements, was produced in 1797 and paved the way for the flood of "tales of terror" which followed.²⁹ This work, according to Gassner, marked the beginning of melodrama on the English stage. Originally

²⁴ Thorndike, pp. 326-30.

²⁵ Brawley, p. 194.

²⁶ Thorndike, p. 327.

²⁷ Daiches, II, 1101.

²⁸ Thorndike, p. 328.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 329.

defined as drama supported by music, melodrama later came to be associated with any play involving violent, superficial action supported or not supported by music.³⁰

In addition to Lewis, another important English dramatist of this period was George Coleman, whose very popular productions combined the elements of tragedy, farce, comedy, and opera to foster a new brand of stage production.³¹

The theater thus was the center of spectacle, melodrama, and farce, presented to satisfy popular demand.³² Sentimentality became the "principal criterion of dramatic excellence," and, coinciding with this, poetic justice became the concept of morality that filled the plays of the period.³³ The machinists became more important than the playwright,³⁴ and the plays, catering to popular taste, finally became of so little literary quality that they could be acted but not read.³⁵ As a result of these factors, the most successful of the plays on the contemporary stage, Chew contends, are "historically least important."³⁶

Closely related to the decline of drama during this period was the separation of the great poets of the Romantic

³⁰ Gassner, p. 342.

³¹ Thorndike, pp. 332-33.

³² Evans, p. 109.

³³ Daiches, II, 1094.

³⁴ Nicoll, Early Nineteenth Century Drama, p. 26.

³⁵ Thorndike, p. 338.

³⁶ Chew, Dramas of Lord Byron, p. 25.

era from the theaters.³⁷ The stage managers put the popular playwrights above men of letters,³⁸ while the major poets themselves tended to view the contemporary stage as unworthy of their talents.³⁹ This separation of the important poets from the theater, Thorndike feels, "seems to have been the main cause for the failure of the romantic movement in tragedy."⁴⁰

But in spite of the fact that the great poets of the era viewed the stage with some disdain, they did not entirely neglect the area of drama. All five--Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Byron, and Keats--took at least one excursion into the field of poetic drama. Although the dramatic attempts of these major poets were largely unpopular in their day, they are important in the study of literature and drama.⁴¹

³⁷ Nicoll, Early Nineteenth Century Drama, p. 214.

³⁸ Daiches, II, 1094.

³⁹ Nicoll, British Drama, p. 202.

⁴⁰ Thorndike, p. 362.

⁴¹ Coleridge is called the "father of Romantic drama," and The Borderers is said to mark the beginning of Romantic drama in blank verse (Richard M. Fletcher, English Romantic Drama 1795-1843: A Critical History [New York: Exposition Press, 1966], p. 20).

CHAPTER III

THE BORDERERS BY WILLIAM WORDSWORTH

Very little information is available regarding William Wordsworth's interest in the stage. It is assumed that he attended the theater when he was in London, and it is known that at one time he was associated with a group who wrote plays.¹ But the only drama Wordsworth wrote during his life was The Borderers, a Romantic tragedy involving Gothic elements and philosophic questions.

Although the extent of his knowledge of stage techniques is not known, Wordsworth himself has said, according to Miss George, that his play was "judiciously" rejected. He disclaimed any desire, other than monetary, to have it produced on the stage, stating that "it was so natural for me to shrink from public notice, that any hope I might have had of success would not have reconciled me altogether to such an exhibition." He added that had he written the play later in his career he would have made the plot more complicated and introduced more characters, but he would not have made any other changes because his "care was almost exclusively given to the passions and the characters . . . that the reader . . . might be moved, and

¹Peter L. Thorslev, Jr., "Wordsworth's Borderers and the Romantic Villain-Hero," Studies in Romanticism, V (Winter, 1966), 87-88.

to a degree instructed, by lights penetrating somewhat into the depths of our nature." In this he thought he had been successful.²

In conjunction with the play, Wordsworth wrote a short essay to illustrate "that constitution and those tendencies of human nature which make the apparently motiveless actions of bad men intelligible to careful observers."³ He composed this essay especially, he claims, to explain the character of Oswald,⁴ whom he compares to Ariosto's Orlando and Cervantes' Cardenio.⁵ In the essay he also emphasizes his disillusionment with the French Revolution because of the "transition in character" and the "changes through which the French Revolution had passed."⁶

Many critics feel that The Borderers is important for its biographical revelations.⁷ It not only shows Wordsworth's intellectual development, his knowledge of Godwinism, and his

² The Complete Poetical Works of Wordsworth, ed. Alice N. George (Cambridge ed.; Cambridge, Mass.: Riverside Press, 1932), p. 33. (Hereinafter referred to as Works of Wordsworth.) The quotations from The Borderers used in this study are taken from this edition.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Thorslev, p. 91, quoting Wordsworth's Preface in Ernest de Selincourt's Oxford Lectures in Poetry (Oxford, 1934).

⁶ Works of Wordsworth, p. 33.

⁷ See, for example, George McLean Harper, "The Wordsworth-Coleridge Combination," Sewanee Review, XXXI (1923), 258-74, stressing the Godwinian influence on Wordsworth and Coleridge; Herbert J. Grierson and J. C. Smith, A Critical History of English Poetry (London: Chatto & Windus, 1965), p. 308; and Works of Wordsworth, p. xxxiii.

disappointment with the French Revolution, it is claimed, but, associated with these, it reveals a moral crisis which Wordsworth apparently experienced at this time.⁸ This could have been caused by remorse over his abandonment of Annette Vallon.⁹ But, no matter what the reason, it is felt that the play does reveal the conclusion of the formative period of his life and the beginning of his creative years.¹⁰

Facts of Composition

By Wordsworth's account, The Borderers was written during the latter part of 1795 and the early part of 1796 while he was staying at Racedown in Dorchester.¹¹ Coleridge, who was living at Nether Stowey nearby while he was writing Osorio,¹² found the play "absolutely wonderful,"¹³ and he urged Wordsworth to revise it for the stage.¹⁴ After revising the drama, Wordsworth submitted it to Mr. Harris at Covent Garden some time before November 20, 1797 without "expectation of its

⁸ Thorslev, pp. 84-87. See also John Jones, The Egotistical Sublime: A History of Wordsworth's Imagination (London: Chatto & Windus, 1964), p. 54.

⁹ Oscar James Campbell and Paul Mueschke, "The Borderers as a Document in the History of Wordsworth's Aesthetic Development," Modern Philology, XXIII (May, 1926), 466. See also Jones, p. 54.

¹⁰ Works of Wordsworth, p. xxxiii.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 33.

¹² Ibid., p. xxxiii.

¹³ William B. Hunter, Jr., "The Borderers: A Critical Study" (unpublished Master's thesis, Dept. of English, Vanderbilt University, 1939), p. 5.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 1.

being accepted.¹⁵ It was rejected for production, and the piece lay unpublished until 1842 when the revised stage version was printed with other works in a book entitled Poems, Chiefly of the Early and Late Years.¹⁶ The original version of The Borderers (written before it was revised for stage production) has never been published.¹⁷

For background material for the play, Wordsworth read Redpath's History of the Borders, but found nothing useful.¹⁸ Part of the information for the setting came from a book about the Lake District by Gilpin.¹⁹ The model for the villain, Oswald, was possibly a man named Roger de Mortimer.²⁰ For the scene and period, Wordsworth says he chose a place and time in which there was no law or government "so that the agents might be at liberty to act on their own impulses."²¹ A similar setting was used by Walter Scott, Lord Byron, and by later Gothic novelists.²²

Plot Summary

The Borderers takes place in the thirteenth century during

¹⁵ Works of Wordsworth, p. 33.

¹⁶ Hunter, p. 1.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Works of Wordsworth, p. 33.

¹⁹ John Harrington Smith, "Genesis of The Borderers," PMLA, IL (September, 1934), 923.

²⁰ H. F. Watson, "Historic Detail in The Borderers," MLN, LII (December, 1937), 578.

²¹ Works of Wordsworth, p. 33.

²² Thorslev, p. 84.

the reign of Henry III.²³ The setting is the disputed border land between the Esk and the Tweed rivers.²⁴ Wordsworth particularly chose this period and place because of the "absence of established law and government."²⁵ The action of the play involves a band of borderers--outlaws--whose leader, Marmaduke, is the vacillating hero of the story.

Basically, the play is about a hero who, unwittingly, is coerced by the villain into committing a crime. More fundamentally, this plot serves as a vehicle for Wordsworth to pose moral and philosophical questions.

In Act I the main characters are introduced: Marmaduke, the leader of the borderers; Oswald, a member of the band of outlaws and the villain of the play; Idonea, Marmaduke's sweetheart; and Herbert, her blind and aging father. As the play opens, two members of the band are discussing their leader and Oswald. Referring to Marmaduke, Wallace says:

Rather let us grieve
That, in the undertaking which has caused
His absence, he hath sought, whate'er his aim,
Companionship with One of crooked ways,
From whose perverted soul can come no good
To our confiding, open-hearted, Leader. (I.5-10)

To this Lacy, the other member of the band, replies:

True, and remembering how the Band have proved
That Oswald finds small favour in our sight,
Well may we wonder he has gained such power
Over our much-loved Captain. (I.11-14)

²³ Works of Wordsworth, p. 33.

²⁴ Thorslev, p. 84.

²⁵ Works of Wordsworth, p. 33.

Then Wallace points out the mystery surrounding Oswald:

I have heard
Of some dark deed to which in early life
His passion drove him--then a Voyager
Upon the midland sea. You knew his bearing
In Palestine? (I.14-18)

And Lacy replies: "Where he despised alike/ Mohammedan and Christian" (I.18-19).

With these lines the characters of Oswald and Marmaduke are delineated; Oswald's influence over Marmaduke is established; and the tragedy is foreshadowed.

After the two borderers leave, Marmaduke and his servant, Wilfred, enter. Wilfred, too, does not trust Oswald, and he pleads with his master to be careful of him. "You know that you have saved his life" (I.27), Wilfred says, "and that he hates you" (I.29). But Marmaduke scoffs at Wilfred's fears.

When Oswald enters the scene, it develops that he has been the deliverer of a letter from Idonea to Marmaduke. In the letter, Idonea tells Marmaduke that she must give him up in order to devote herself to her aged and ailing father. This decision has been brought about through the machinations of Oswald, who has told Herbert lies about Marmaduke. In this scene, Oswald then begins to turn Marmaduke against Herbert by telling him that Herbert is an impostor--not a baron whose lands had been usurped while he was in Palestine, as Herbert claims. Oswald further plants the idea in Marmaduke's mind that Herbert has been plotting with Sir Clifford (a powerful landowner and, according to Oswald, a seducer of young women). By bribing a beggar woman to substantiate his story, Oswald leads Marmaduke

to believe that Herbert is giving Idonea to Clifford. The beggar woman (in accordance with Oswald's instructions) also tells Marmaduke that Herbert is not really Idonea's father. She claims that she had given Idonea to Herbert when Idonea was an infant. Marmaduke believes the woman and becomes upset. "These strange discoveries," he says to himself, "looked at from every point of fear or hope,/ Duty, or love--involve, I feel, my ruin" (I.548-50).

While Oswald is thus engaged in bringing Marmaduke under his control, Idonea and Herbert have been journeying to a court hearing where Herbert's claim to his title and property is to be established. Herbert becomes ill on the way, so Idonea leaves her blind, tired father at a hostel to rest while she continues the journey alone.

Act II reveals why Oswald is plotting against Marmaduke. He is jealous of Marmaduke because

They chose him for their Chief!--what covert part
He, in the preference, modest Youth, might take
I neither know nor care. The insult bred
More of contempt than hatred. (II.1-4)

And he plans to get Marmaduke in his power:

Now
For a few swelling phrases, and a flash
Of truth, enough to dazzle and to blind,
And he is mine for ever. (II.12-15)

Oswald wants Marmaduke to become like him--a man who lives by his own rules. "Happy are we," Oswald proclaims, "who live in these disputed tracts, that own/ No law but what each man makes for himself" (II.45-47). Oswald also has chosen Marmaduke to be the victim of his schemes because of Marmaduke's

qualities of leadership:

Yours is no common life. Self-stationed here
Upon these savage confines, we have seen you
Stand like an isthmus 'twixt two stormy seas
That oft have checked their fury at your bidding.

• • • • •
Your single virtue has transformed a Band
Of fierce barbarians into Ministers
Of peace and order. (II.55-62)

Then, elaborating, Oswald says:

But it is,
As you must needs have deeply felt, it is
In darkness and in tempest that we seek
The majesty of Him who rules the world.
Benevolence, that has not heart to use
The wholesome ministry of pain and evil,
Becomes at last weak and contemptible.
Your generous qualities have won due praise,
But vigorous Spirits look for something more
Than Youth's spontaneous products; and today
You will not disappoint them. (II.64-74)

In this scene, Oswald continues turning Marmaduke against Herbert, and he finally succeeds in goading him into the desire to kill Herbert. Together they plan to take Herbert to Sir Clifford's castle and murder him there. In order to persuade Herbert to go with them, Oswald, whom Herbert trusts, tells Herbert that they will take him back to the convent where he had been living. Herbert, who has been upset by the noise of the hostel, agrees to go with them. When they arrive at the castle, however, Marmaduke finds that he is unable to kill the blind, helpless old man.

In the third act, Oswald arouses Marmaduke's anger against Herbert by telling him once again that Herbert has given Idonea to Sir Clifford. Enraged, Marmaduke decides to

abandon Herbert on a moor so Herbert can undergo a trial by ordeal:

Here will I leave him--here--All-seeing God!
Such as he is, and sore perplexed as I am,
I will commit him to this final Ordeal! (III.258-60)

If Herbert is innocent, Marmaduke tells himself, someone will save him, as happened years before when Herbert, blinded and lost in a strange land,

Heard a voice--a shepherd-lad came to him
And was his guide; if once, why not again,
And in this desert? (III.261-63)

If no one saves Herbert, Marmaduke reasons,

Then the whole
Of what he says, and looks, and does, and is,
Makes up one damning falsehood. (III.263-65)

Forgetting that he had taken away Herbert's food some time before, Marmaduke goes away, leaving the old man helpless and alone.

Shortly thereafter Oswald finds Marmaduke in a wood on the edge of the moor. Thinking that Marmaduke has killed Herbert, Oswald is elated. He tells Marmaduke:

I feel
That you have shown, and by a signal instance,
How they who would be just must seek the rule
By diving for it into their own bosoms.
Today you have thrown off a tyranny
That lives but in the torpid acquiescence
Of our emasculated souls.

.
You have obeyed the only law that sense
Submits to recognise; the immediate law
From the clear light of circumstances, flashed
Upon an independent Intellect. (III.350-62)

Trying to explain his philosophy to Marmaduke, Oswald continues:

It may be
That some there are, squeamish half-thinking cowards,
Who will turn pale upon you, call you murderer,
And you will walk in solitude among them.

• • • • •

The Eagle lives in Solitude. (III.373-82)

In the midst of this discourse, Idonea enters, so Oswald leaves. From Idonea, Marmaduke learns that Herbert has had his title and lands restored and is, actually, a nobleman. Realizing that Idonea is innocent, he leaves to get an explanation from Oswald.

Act IV discloses Oswald's motive in wanting Marmaduke to become like him. In his youth Oswald had been unwittingly coerced into murdering an innocent man; instead of feeling remorse, however, he came to the conclusion that "every possible shape of action/ Might lead to good" (IV.129-30). In addition, he says,

I felt that merit has no surer test
Than obloquy; that, if we wish to serve
The world in substance, not deceive by show,
We must become obnoxious to its hate,
Or fear disguised in simulated scorn.

• • • • •

False Shame discarded, spurious Fame despised,
Twin sisters both of Ignorance, I found
Life stretched before me smooth as some broad way
Cleared for a monarch's progress. (IV.177-87)

Because he had thus been liberated, Oswald wanted Marmaduke to become the same, and he explains why:

Let us be fellow-labourers, then, to enlarge
Man's intellectual empire. We subsist
In slavery; all is slavery; we receive
Laws, but we ask not whence those laws have come;
We need an inward sting to goad us on.

• • • • •

The mask,
 Which for a season I have stopped to wear,
 Must be cast off.--Know then that I was urged,
 (For other impulse let it pass) was driven,
 To seek for sympathy, because I saw
 In you a mirror of my youthful self;
 I would have made us equal once again. (IV.205-16)

Oswald then confesses to Marmaduke that Herbert is innocent of any crime. Marmaduke rushes to the moor to save Herbert, but Herbert has died.

In the last act, Marmaduke tells Idonea what has occurred. Members of the band of borderers kill Oswald, and Marmaduke sets his own punishment:

A wanderer must I go,
 The Spectre of that innocent Man, my guide.
 No human ear shall ever hear me speak;
 No human dwelling ever give me food,
 Or sleep, or rest; but, over waste and wild,
 In search of nothing, that this earth can give,
 But expiation, will I wander on--
 A Man by pain and thought compelled to live,
 Yet loathing life--till anger is appeased
 In Heaven, and Mercy gives me leave to die. (V.327-36)

Wordsworth's Thoughts

There are many questions raised by a study of The Borderers, all of which are related to either Godwinism or Wordsworth's philosophy of Nature at this time. Since Wordsworth was profoundly interested in these problems at the time of writing the drama, it seems likely that his views on these subjects would be implicit in the play.

Most criticism of The Borderers centers upon Wordsworth's Godwinistic attitude at this time.²⁶ One critic says that The

²⁶ Carl Woodring, Wordsworth (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968), p. 16.

Borderers reveals Wordsworth's acceptance of Godwinism.²⁷

Another says that The Borderers shows Wordsworth's rejection of Godwinism by revealing its consequences.²⁸ Thorslev declares: "The consensus, therefore, is that there is a definite connection between Godwinism and The Borderers; there has been no such agreement, however, as to what that connection is." He discusses the three aspects of Godwinism advanced by scholars: (1) the play expresses a rejection of Godwinism; (2) the play is Wordsworth's acceptance of Godwinism; (3) the play shows Wordsworth's acceptance of Godwinism, albeit with some reservations--namely, the "tragic optimism" of the play.²⁹ Thus the critics do not agree upon Wordsworth's message about Godwinism in the play.

There are many aspects of Godwinian philosophy in the drama, since one of the themes of The Borderers is the "issue as to what part pure reason as distinct from the feelings should play in human behavior."³⁰ Hartman states that the central issue of the play is the problem of the intellect's yielding moral judgments.³¹ Hunter says that it is a drama of morality whose purpose seems to teach that rationality is

²⁷ Hunter, p. 2; see, also, Grierson and Smith, p. 308.

²⁸ B. Sprague Allen, "Analogues of Wordsworth's The Borderers," PMLA, XXXVIII (June, 1923), 267.

²⁹ Thorslev, pp. 86-87.

³⁰ Geoffrey H. Hartman, "Wordsworth's The Borderers and 'Intellectual Murder,'" Journal of English and Germanic Philology, LXII (1963), 765.

³¹ Ibid.

not a true moral guide.³² Oswald, of course, is the exponent of Godwinism in the play, and it is through him that scholars hypothesize Wordsworth's attitude toward Godwinism at this time. After a period of personal crises, Oswald decides that he should trust only his intellect. But Wordsworth, through Oswald, Thorslev contends, shows the problems inherent in trust of the intellect as arbiter of right and wrong--of the "dangers of this self-sufficiency of the individual mind." Wordsworth believes that Oswald's view would yield a universe "void of all value."³³ Furthermore, Oswald fails to convert Marmaduke to his view because of Marmaduke's belief in the "moral nature of the universe."³⁴ Once Marmaduke does reach the pinnacle of self-awareness, Hartman claims, he is faced with three alternatives: remorse, complicity, or exile, none of which is a very satisfactory alternative.³⁵ Marmaduke chooses exile, which is not a solution but merely an escape. As Hartman states: "The Borderers provides no solutions: it is Wordsworth's problem play."³⁶

Romantic Elements

In his study, Thorslev maintains that Wordsworth's drama "is his only experiment unequivocally in the Gothic mode,"

³²Hunter, p. 81.

³³Thorslev, pp. 93-94.

³⁴Ibid., p. 100.

³⁵Hartman, p. 766.

³⁶Ibid., p. 768.

and it is his "only attempt to portray villainous heroes or heroic villains of the type so characteristic of European Romanticism." Although Oswald is the villain, he can be placed in the category of the Gothic hero--a man whose only guide is his own intellect.³⁷ According to Hartman, Oswald "uses his intellect to bring others into enlightenment," and, as a result, he is "probably the first explicit proponent in literature of intellectual murder; that is to say, of a murder planned by the intellect for an intellectual result."³⁸ Oswald is also a typical Romantic hero in revolting against social conventions and in placing emphasis on individuality.³⁹ Moreover, the play is Romantic in that it, like Coleridge's drama, is a study of remorse, which was an important element in Gothic drama.⁴⁰ It is said that "after 1785 the villain in every Gothic play was a study in the agony of remorse."⁴¹

The Gothic, claims Thorslev, was used by the Romantics for a purpose other than sensationalism: it was used "to symbolize some of the darkest fears and the deepest questionings of the nascent Romantic mind." Wordsworth reveals this

³⁷ Thorslev, pp. 84-85.

³⁸ Hartman, p. 761.

³⁹ Samuel C. Chew, The Dramas of Lord Byron: A Critical Study (New York: Russell and Russell, Inc., 1964), p. 9. (Hereinafter referred to as Dramas of Lord Byron.)

⁴⁰ Fletcher points out that in their dramas the Romantic poets were primarily concerned with the "psychological analysis of character" combined with the "investigation of a single passion," p. 20.

⁴¹ Thorslev, p. 88, quoting Bertrand Evans, Gothic Drama from Walpole to Shelley ([Berkeley: University of California Press, 1947], p. 89).

attitude in The Borderers, Thorslev says, by asking whether there exists any basis, or "ultimate sanction," for human values--that is, whether the universe is intrinsically moral or amoral. This view thus "makes Oswald, the drama's villain, the focus of the reader's interest . . . since it is Oswald rather than Marmaduke, who comes to the startling conclusion that there are no moral values written into the universe, and who seizes the ultimate freedom which comes from realizing that, whatever values or rules of conduct we are to have, we must create for ourselves."⁴² Oswald, as the focal point, is within the realm of Gothic drama, for the villain always occupied a strong position in this genre.

In his article, Thorslev brings out other Romantic elements in the play. One element (that of psychological delineation of character), Thorslev contends, is enhanced by Oswald, as he examines his individual psyche for answers to the questions of "virtue and vice." Oswald becomes "dark, reserved, inclined to be morose, often with a part of mystery and secret sin, and yet he has an attraction and a personal magnetism immediately obvious, even to the casual observer. . . . He aims above all at freedom." But Wordsworth does not glorify this view of man, Thorslev says; instead, he believes Oswald to be wrong by showing "the terrible dangers of this self-sufficiency of the individual mind." Through Marmaduke, Wordsworth advances the argument against Oswald's conception

⁴² Thorslev, pp. 88-90.

by allowing that if the universe is what Oswald believes it to be, then the only answer is to "escape it as soon and in whatever way possible."⁴³

In the manner of the Byronic hero, Oswald releases himself from "shame and fame," Thorslev points out, and thus attains freedom from his past deeds and "the dependence upon the esteem of his fellow men." Since he has no conscience and no sense of social pressure, Thorslev notes, Oswald has "gone beyond good and evil." However, Oswald does not believe in expurgating himself of all suffering, for he believes that suffering is a valuable asset and has an "heroic value." Moreover, hedonism is not his ultimate goal, as it would seem to be in one released from conscience and social convention, says Thorslev. Rather, Oswald seeks freedom through a transcendence of traditional moral restraints by the intellect.⁴⁴

Further Romantic elements include the use of the supernatural. It is revealed in the form of a peasant woman who had had a child by Sir Clifford and who had been rejected by him, resulting in her becoming insane. This woman speaks to no one and every evening she walks in a circle around the grave of her child. Another element of Romanticism is the description of nature found in the play, such as the time Idonea and Marmaduke walk together through the woods, or the time when Herbert is stranded upon the moors. Wordsworth also shows the

⁴³ Ibid., pp. 91-94.

⁴⁴ Ibid., pp. 95-97.

peasants as being righteous and virtuous because they live close to nature. This, too, is a Romantic idea.

Contemporary Criticism

Since this play was never produced, the only available comments on it are those of Coleridge, mentioned previously.⁴⁵

Modern Criticism

Although much of the modern criticism of the play has dealt with the elements of Godwinism in it,⁴⁶ there have been comments on other aspects of it. Woodring feels that the play is confused because of Wordsworth's attempt at psychological analysis of character. He argues that this emphasis on character detracts from Wordsworth's purpose: to recommend social reform. However, he believes that Wordsworth is more successful in sublimating his social and political views than are Byron and Coleridge.⁴⁷ Like other critics, Herbert Read points out that The Borderers shows the change in Wordsworth's thoughts during his formative years and his intense interest in the passion of remorse.⁴⁸

As a play, Allen contends, The Borderers has many faults:

The characters have slight individuality, and in spite of the calamities that befall them, they evoke no sympathy. . . . The poem exhibits intellectual power. . . .

⁴⁵ Above, p. 13.

⁴⁶ Above, pp. 21-23.

⁴⁷ Woodring, pp. 14-18.

⁴⁸ Herbert Read, Wordsworth (London: Faber & Faber, Ltd., 1930), pp. 11-12.

Yet these robust merits are unhappily wedded to the mawkish ineptitude of contemporary literature.⁴⁹

Thorslev comments:

It has first the faults of all the Gothic dramas: the mystery too annoyingly protracted, the sentimentality of other scenes, and, more important, some of the stilted and unnatural blank verse so widespread on the stage of 1800. . . . sometimes exceedingly obscure . . . in the texture of the verse itself.⁵⁰

Another critic finds the play almost unreadable because of its "plodding intellectualism," lack of unity in the plot, and inconsistent characters.⁵¹

Some of the criticism centers around the character of Oswald. Thorslev draws some comparisons between The Borderers and Othello, Iago and Oswald occupying similar positions in their respective dramas by leading a man, through cunning, to his destruction. In addition, Thorslev points out, both Othello and Marmaduke debate their choices before acting. Othello, however, makes a decision and carries it through, but Marmaduke avoids reaching a decision and finally "sloughs it off onto Nature or God." Moreover, Thorslev maintains, Shakespeare does not idealize or absolve Iago, whereas Wordsworth mitigates Oswald by justifying his actions through a philosophical position. Wordsworth is more intellectually involved with Oswald than with Marmaduke, and he makes of Oswald "an introspective egoist, convinced above all of the powers of the individual self-sufficient mind."⁵² Oswald, Thorslev claims, sees himself as

⁴⁹ Allen, p. 267.

⁵⁰ Thorslev, p. 103.

⁵¹ Jones, pp. 54-55.

⁵² Thorslev, pp. 90-91.

an intellectual philanthropist, whereas actually his motives are jealousy and pride; Marmaduke, on the other hand, is a believer in the primary goodness of Nature. For instance, when Oswald succeeds in his plans to ensnare Marmaduke, Herbert is not slain by Marmaduke but is left by Marmaduke to a "righteous judgment" from which, supposedly, if Herbert is innocent, he will be saved by Nature. Thus, Thorslev feels, Wordsworth apparently is striving in the play for the philosophies of the benevolence of Nature that he later held. However, Thorslev adds, it is difficult to notice the benign influence of Nature in the play. Nature in the drama seems, at best, indifferent, and Marmaduke is helped neither by Nature nor by intellect. Instead, Thorslev observes, Marmaduke is remorseful and finds in his guilt his humanity. The view of Nature presented is not "mature Wordsworth," for the solution in the drama "is a simple faith in the traditional values of human sympathy and love in an alien and even hostile universe."⁵³

According to Abercrombie, Oswald is a "study of elements and motions out of which characters are made." As for the drama, he says it is weak in dramatic structure, with a poor plot not well told.⁵⁴ Miss Batho says that the play is unacceptable, but does have some fine poetry.⁵⁵

Hartman adds more about Oswald's character in his essay.

⁵³ Ibid., pp. 100-01.

⁵⁴ Lascelles Abercrombie, The Art of Wordsworth (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1965), pp. 68-70.

⁵⁵ Edith C. Batho, A Wordsworth Selection (London: Athlone Press, 1962), p. 193.

He calls Oswald a "special, a most modern villain." He goes on to say, "Oswald becomes a metaphysical villain who forces the hero to pass from a naive to a new and isolating consciousness." Furthermore, he declares, The Borderers is a mixture of "ancient tragedy and modern philosophical drama" in that "it projects . . . a myth of the birth of modern intellectual consciousness." Finally, he remarks, "Its real value is as a drama revealing the perils of the soul in its passage toward individuation, or from a morality based on 'nature' to one based on the autonomous self."⁵⁶

Evaluation

The Borderers has been shown by critics to be an important link in Wordsworth's development, even though they do not agree on his ideas expressed by the play. However, they have not said much about the play as a drama, as an entity by itself. Therefore, a brief evaluation of the play as a drama is necessary.

The drama is unwieldy as an actable play because of the manner in which Wordsworth unfolds the plot. Oswald's motivation is not disclosed until the fourth act, and even when it is introduced, it gives the reader a sense of doubt as to whether Oswald acts intellectually or through pride and jealousy. The stretches of soliloquy and dialogue which reveal character are handled from the point of showing intellectual motivation, and the speeches which try to depict psychological states of

⁵⁶Hartman, pp. 761-62.

the characters are dull, especially when they deal with philosophical concepts.

The plot suffers the same plight as that of most philosophical drama: the motivation does not seem adequate and therefore the plot is weak. Oswald is good for the embodiment of a philosophical comment, but not sufficient for good drama. Through Oswald's machinations, there is somewhat of a climax built and also a foreshadowing of the end, but the basic problem is that Wordsworth formulated a philosophy and fitted people to the concepts, instead of taking a story and letting the philosophy work itself out.

All great plays in the tragic mode reveal the downfall of the hero brought about through a "tragic flaw" in his character. Marmaduke, actually, comes to a tragic end because he lacks character: he is manipulated like a puppet and duped to his ignominious end by Oswald. Marmaduke is a weak hero, and his actions are not realistic. If he had believed Oswald explicitly, he would not have left Herbert's death to a higher authority--he would have slain him. On the other hand, if he believed his own conscience, he would have freed Herbert. But he vacillated between the two alternatives. He sought to absolve himself of blame, which is not the usual idea of a tragic hero, and, in consequence, we feel neither pity nor sorrow for him.

Oswald, however, has been cited by many critics as being an excellent embodiment of philosophical ideas. But this technique of using a character to embody concepts does not lead

to good drama. Oswald's speeches deal with states of thought, not reasons for action. This flaw makes for lack of plot and suspense.

The best plays, though, are concerned with universal truths, and The Borderers is no exception. It asks some profound questions about the concepts of good and evil, and the problem of social conventions versus the individual, problems which have always plagued man. To the extent, then, that The Borderers raises some very deep questions, it is good drama. Because it phrases these questions in long, involved speeches instead of actions, however, it is technically weak.

CHAPTER IV

REMORSE BY SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE

During his career, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, like the other major Romantic poets, turned to drama as a medium of expression. Having done many translations of Schiller, he was well acquainted with the popular Gothic German drama; and he, of course, had an abiding interest in the supernatural and the melodramatic, as witnessed by The Ancient Mariner, Christabel, and other poems. Thus, Coleridge was familiar with the popular modes of drama during his day: German sensationalism and Gothic melodrama. Consequently, Coleridge combined his interests with his poetic tendencies to write a drama entitled Remorse, which became a successful stage play.

Prior to his writing of Remorse, Coleridge had composed other plays, none of them successful. His first venture was The Fall of Robespierre: An Historic Drama, written in conjunction with Robert Southey in 1794. Coleridge claimed his "sole aim in this play [was] to imitate the impassioned and highly figurative language of the French orators, and to develop the chief actors on a vast stage of horrors."¹ It was

¹ Dramatic Works, Vol. II of The Complete Poetical Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge (London: Oxford University Press, 1912), p. 495. The quotations from Remorse used in this study are taken from this text.

never acted and, Nicoll claims, is "pitiful enough."² This drama is unimportant except as it reveals Coleridge's fascination with the French Revolution and his concern with individual freedom.

Coleridge's next venture into tragedy was Osorio, written in 1797 specifically for the stage at the request of Richard Sheridan. Sheridan, however, rejected the completed play as being unsuitable. Coleridge later revised this drama and called it Remorse.³ It was published and produced in 1813.⁴ This play, Fox states, is one which "has been deservedly neglected even by Coleridge enthusiasts."⁵

One important contribution of Osorio to English literature was its influence on Wordsworth. Wordsworth spent a great amount of time with Coleridge while Coleridge was writing Osorio, and because of their close relationship, each of their works had a reciprocating effect. Miss Hamilton believes there are many connections between Osorio and three of Wordsworth's works--specifically, The Idiot Boy, The Blind Highland Boy, and Ruth. Coleridge had planned to have an idiot

²Allardyce Nicoll, British Drama (5th ed., rev.; New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1962), p. 212.

³The Dramatic Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, ed. Derwent Coleridge (London: Edward Moxon, 1852), p. v. (Hereinafter referred to as Works of Coleridge.)

⁴The announcement of the publication of Remorse appeared in the Edinburgh Review, XXI (November, 1812-February, 1813), 257; and an announcement of its presentation at Drury Lane appeared in the Gentleman's Magazine, LXXXIII (January-June, 1813), 179.

⁵Arnold B. Fox, "Political and Biographical Background of Coleridge's Osorio," Journal of English and Germanic Philology, LXI (April, 1962), 258.

boy as a character in a poem, Miss Hamilton says, and one appears in Osorio and Remorse. In addition, Wordsworth's The Idiot Boy uses a waterfall, a cavern, and a hooting owl at midnight for a setting, just as Coleridge uses such a setting for a scene in Osorio. Miss Hamilton further delineates the similarities between lines in Osorio and The Idiot Boy, and goes on to say that Wordsworth's Ruth also owes much to Osorio. She hypothesizes that the sequel to The Foster Mother's Story from Osorio is Ruth and points out many similarities between the two.⁶ Thus, even though Osorio is relatively forgotten, it did play a role in Wordsworth's thought and further in Coleridge's works.

Remorse was important, too, in that it brought about a revival of poetic drama and influenced Shelley to write The Cenci.⁷ Coleridge also wrote another drama, Zapolya,⁸ but with the exception of Remorse none of his verse plays was ever acted.⁹

Facts of Composition

Remorse was written at Nether Stowey in the year 1797 at the instigation of Richard Sheridan, who thought that Coleridge

⁶ Marie Padgett Hamilton, "Wordsworth's Relation to Coleridge's Osorio," Studies in Philology, XXXIV (July, 1937), 429-32.

⁷ Samuel C. Chew, The Dramas of Lord Byron: A Critical Study (New York: Russell and Russell, Inc., 1964), p. 12. (Hereinafter referred to as Dramas of Lord Byron.)

⁸ Works of Coleridge, p. v.

⁹ Phyllis Hartnell, ed., Oxford Companion to the Theatre (3rd ed.; London: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 188.

would be well-suited for writing a successful drama. Coleridge protested that he knew nothing of drama, but Sheridan insisted, stating that he himself would make the necessary revisions.¹⁰

Coleridge decided to write the play, using as a source Schiller's Die Räuber, which had greatly impressed him.¹¹ He also apparently intended to take advantage of the current popularity of Gothic melodrama, Fox observes, for Coleridge said that the play, being "romantic and wild and somewhat terrible,"¹² would appeal to the "prevailing taste."¹³ Although he used Die Räuber for inspiration, Fox claims, Coleridge took elements of the plot from Schiller's Der Geisterseher. The History of the Reign of Philip the Second, King of Spain, was used as a source for the Gothic setting and for information on the Inquisition.¹⁴

According to Fox, Osorio was written when Coleridge was still politically inclined towards the French Revolution, and the play partially shows his views. The Spanish Gothic setting is used to include the Inquisition and its role in the suppression of freedom. Because Coleridge was for "free expression" and "free discussion of all public issues," he tried

¹⁰ Dramatic Works, p. 812.

¹¹ Fox, p. 258.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., p. 267.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 258.

to present these beliefs by portraying the Pitt government as the Inquisitors.¹⁵ The play, however, was rejected by Sheridan because of the "obscurity of the last three acts."¹⁶

Fourteen years later Coleridge revised Osorio and called it Remorse.¹⁷ Remorse was improved dramatically over Osorio; otherwise the differences between the two were small.¹⁸ In Remorse the names of the characters were changed from the original: Osorio became Ordonio; Albert, Alvar; Maria, Teresa; Velez, Valdez; Ferdinand, Isidore; Francesco, Monviedro; and Maurice, Zulimez.¹⁹ With the help of Byron and Mr. Whittbread, Remorse was brought to the stage in 1813.²⁰ It opened in Drury Lane on January 23, 1813 and ran for twenty-eight nights.²¹ The first edition in 1813 was a pamphlet of seventy-two pages. The second edition was enlarged to seventy-eight pages through the addition of an Appendix and twenty-eight other lines. This Appendix had been part of Act II, Scene iv, of Osorio and had been published separately as "The Foster-Mother's Tale" in Lyrical Ballads. The twenty-eight lines

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 259-61.

¹⁶ Ronald Gregg Coleman, "Coleridge's Osorio as a Play of Passion" (unpublished Master's thesis, Dept. of English, Vanderbilt University, 1948), p. 3.

¹⁷ Walter Jackson Bate, Coleridge (New York: Macmillan Company, 1968), p. 126.

¹⁸ Coleman, p. 9.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 6.

²⁰ Works of Coleridge, p. v.

²¹ Virginia L. Radley, Samuel Taylor Coleridge (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1966), p. 98.

were printed as a footnote to Act II, Scene ii, in Remorse.

The third edition was the same as the second edition.²²

Plot Summary

Remorse is introduced by a prologue written by Charles Lamb. Although it is not directly related to the drama, the prologue is interesting in that in it Lamb defends the size of the contemporary theaters, commends the contemporary audiences, and shows enthusiasm over the use of scenery.

Coleridge begins the drama with an epilogue spoken by Teresa, the heroine, in which she tells of her plight, saying that she has been waiting six years for her lover to return from his absence at sea. The epilogue also reveals something of Teresa's background. She was reared

'Mid mountains wild, near billow-beaten rocks,
Where sea-gales play'd with her dishevel'd locks,
Bred in the spot where first to light she sprung,
With no Academies for ladies young. (16-19)

The epilogue is written in rhymed couplets (as is the prologue), and in it Coleridge tells the audience

That he has wo'd your feelings in this Play
By no too real woes, that make you groan,
• • • • •
He'd wish no loud laugh, from the sly, shrewd sneer,
To unsettle from your eyes the quiet tear
That pity had brought, and Wisdom would leave there.
(37-44)

The play itself begins near the end of the action; the inciting force has actually taken place before the play begins. Alvar, the hero, and Zulimez, his Moresco attendant, have just

²² Dramatic Works, n. 1, p. 819.

landed on the shores of Granada. Alvar is returning to his homeland after an absence of several years. He hopes to arouse remorse in the heart of his brother, Ordonio, for Ordonio's attempt to have him murdered. Zulimez begs

Alvar:

Yet, yet give up your all too gentle purpose.
It is too hazardous! reveal yourself,
And let the guilty meet the doom of guilt! (I.i.11-13)

But Alvar responds that Ordonio is his brother and so "the more behoves it I should rouse within him/ Remorse! that I should save him from himself" (I.i.18-19). Alvar also wants to determine for himself whether or not his sweetheart, Teresa, who he believes has married Ordonio in his absence, was involved in the plot to assassinate him. He wavers between belief in her innocence and guilt, saying, "Guilt is a thing impossible in her!/ She must be innocent" (I.i.57-58). But he tells Zulimez that on the morning he left Teresa, she secretly gave him a portrait of herself, warning him not to tell anyone of it. However, Alvar says, the assassin knew about the picture. Even so, he exclaims,

Still as in contempt of proof and reason,
I cherish the fond faith that she is guiltless!
Hear then my fix'd resolve: I'll linger here
In the disguise of a Moresco chieftain. (I.i.86-89)

Moreover, Alvar adds, no one will recognize him because of his long imprisonment, a scar he has acquired since he left, his added maturity, and

Besides, they think me dead:
And what the mind believes impossible,
The bodily sense is slow to recognize. (I.i.107-09)

As Alvar and Zulimez leave for the hideout of a Moorish chieftain, Valdez, Alvar's father, and Teresa appear. This scene reveals that Valdez wants Teresa to marry Ordonio, but she refuses. She has remained faithful to Alvar and, even though she loves Valdez, she has no love for Ordonio. She tells Valdez:

Press me no more! I have no power to love him.
His proud forbidding eye, and his dark brow,
Chill me like dew-damps of the unwholesome night:
My love, a timorous and tender flower,
Closes beneath his touch. (I.ii.80-84)

While Valdez and Teresa speak, Monviedro, an Inquisitor, appears with Alhadra, a Moorish woman whose husband, Isidore, is suspected of not following the Christian faith. Consequently, Isidore is threatened with imprisonment. Alhadra appeals to Ordonio (who enters the scene) to vouch for her husband. On hearing Isidore's name, Ordonio is visibly shaken, but he quickly recovers and tells Monviedro that Isidore is a Catholic. The men leave the stage and while Alhadra talks to Teresa, Alvar enters. The women approach and speak to him. Alvar, trying to learn if Teresa is guilty or innocent of betraying him, tells them of a dream which he said he had had:

I dreamt I had a friend, on whom I leant
With blindest trust, and a betrothed maid,
Whom I was wont to call not mine, but me:
For mine own self seem'd nothing, lacking her.
This maid so idolized, that trusted friend
Dishonoured in my absence, soul and body!
Fear, following guilt, tempted to blacker guilt,
And murderer were suborned against my life.
But by my looks, and most impassioned words,
I roused the virtues that are dead in no man,
Even in the assassins' hearts! they made their terms,
And thanked me for redeeming them from murder.
(I.ii.278-90)

In Act II it is revealed that Ordonio had hired Isidore and two others to assassinate Alvar, but Ordonio had lied to Isidore as to the reason for his desire to have Alvar killed. Isidore says to Ordonio:

You know you told me that the lady lov'd you,
Had loved you with incautious tenderness;
That if the young man, her betrothed husband,
Returned, yourself, and she, and the honour of both
Must perish. (II.i.62-66)

Isidore then tells Ordonio that he had told this story to Alvar when they assassinated him. Isidore had also told Alvar about Teresa's secret gift of her portrait. Feeling betrayed by both his brother and his fiancee, Alvar had refused to defend himself, Isidore tells Ordonio. That the assassins did not kill Alvar, Isidore does not reveal to Ordonio.

Believing that Alvar is dead and wanting to prove it to Teresa so she will marry him, Ordonio asks Isidore to pretend to use magic to convince Teresa of Alvar's death. Isidore, instead, sends him to Alvar, who, disguised as a Moor, claims to be a sorcerer. Ordonio then asks Alvar for help. He tells Alvar that Teresa will believe Alvar is dead when she sees the portrait which she had given to Alvar, but which Alvar, fearing for its safety when he went to sea, had given to Ordonio for safe-keeping. Then Ordonio gives the picture to Alvar. Thus, unwittingly, Ordonio discloses that Teresa knew nothing of the crime and that she has been faithful to Alvar.

Act III begins in a Gothic setting--a hall of armory with an altar at the back. Soft, melancholy music is playing, and Alvar is wearing a sorcerer's robe. Alvar pretends to

be calling on the spirit of the dead Alvar and he asks Ordonio what would happen if the spirit of Alvar would appear:

What if thou heard'st him now? What if his spirit
 Re-enter'd its cold corse [sic] and came upon thee
 With many a stab from many a murderer's poniard?
 What (if his stedfast eye still beaming pity
 And brother's love) he turn'd his head aside,
 Lest he should look at thee, and with one look
 Hurl thee beyond all power of penitence? (III.i.88-93)

Alvar continues in this vein, talking to Ordonio. Teresa leaves and, as she does, the incense on the altar flames up, showing Alvar's assassination. Ordonio, startled, shouts, "Duped! duped! duped!--the traitor Isidore" (III.i.136), and suddenly Monviedro and the Inquisitors enter. They seize Alvar for practicing sorcery and throw him into a dungeon under the castle. Valdez tells Teresa of the picture of Alvar's assassination, but she still will have nothing to do with Ordonio.

In the meantime, Ordonio plans to get rid of Isidore and the sorcerer (Alvar). In Act IV he lures Isidore to a cavern and kills him. While this is going on, Teresa makes plans to free the Moor (Alvar) from the dungeon so he can tell her what he knows of the real Alvar. Meanwhile, Alhadra discovers Isidore's death and she calls the Moors together in order to avenge his death by killing his murderer, Ordonio.

Act V takes place in the dungeon where Alvar is being held prisoner. Teresa enters seeking information about Alvar's death, and Alvar reveals himself to her. At this instant Ordonio enters, carrying a goblet. Alvar tells him:

I see thy heart!
 There is a frightful glitter in thine eye

Which doth betray thee. Inly-tortured man,
 This is the revelry of a drunken anguish,
 Which fain would scoff away the pang of guilt,
 And quell each human feeling. (V.i.117-21)

But Ordonio scoffs at him. Alvar guesses that the goblet has poison in it and refuses to drink it. He calls Ordonio a villain:

Thou blind self-worshipper! thy pride, thy cunning,
 Thy faith in universal villainy,
 Thy shallow sophisms, thy pretended scorn
 For all thy human brethren--out upon them!
 What have they done for thee? have they given thee peace?
 * * * * *
 Yet, yet thou must be saved. (V.i.157-67)

Ordonio asks, "Saved? saved?" (V.i.167) To which Alvar replies, "One pang! Could I call up one pang of true remorse!" (V.i.167-68) Alvar then reveals his identity to Ordonio. Ordonio tries to kill him, but Teresa intervenes. Then Ordonio tells Alvar that he wants to die, and he tries to kill himself. Alvar and Teresa prevent this also. Finally Ordonio shows remorse for his crimes and asks Alvar's forgiveness:

O horror! not a thousand years in heaven
 Could recompose this miserable heart,
 Or make it capable of one brief joy!
 * * * * *
 Forgive me, Alvar!--Curse me with forgiveness.
 (V.i.209-14)

He admits that he killed Isidore, "He would have died to save me, and I killed him" (V.i.223). And he adds:

Let the eternal justice
 Prepare my punishment in the obscure world--
 I will not bear to live--to live--O agony!
 And be myself alone my own sore torment! (V.i.225-28)

Alhadra and the Moors enter; Alhadra stabs Ordonio and

he dies. Then Valdez enters and is reunited with Alvar.

The play ends with a moral:

Delights so full, if unalloyed with grief,
Were ominous. In these strange dread events
Just heaven instructs us with an awful voice,
That Conscience rules us e'en against our choice.
Our inward Monitress to guide or warn
If listened to; but if repelled with scorn,
At length as dire Remorse she reappears,
Works in our guilty hopes, and selfish fears!
Still bids, Remember! and still cries, Too late!
And while she scares us, goads us to our fate.
(V.i.285-94)

Coleridge's Thoughts

As stated previously, Coleridge used the story for its Gothic setting and for the expression of his political views.²³ Because of his desire for individual liberty and for "open and free discussion of all public issues," Coleridge was particularly opposed to the Inquisition and the persecution of the Moors. Moreover, at the time, many of Coleridge's and Wordsworth's friends were being spied upon by the Pitt government, and Coleridge apparently related Monviedro to Pitt.²⁴

Coleridge also used the play to present his idea of a drama based upon the abstract passion of "remorse." Nicoll states that Coleridge conceived of the idea of "remorse" and then decided to write a play dealing with this passion, in accordance with the popular "plays of the passions" of his time.²⁵

²³ Above, p. 36.

²⁴ Fox, pp. 258-62.

²⁵ Nicoll, British Drama, p. 211.

The theme of remorse intrigued both Coleridge and Wordsworth,²⁶ for, as Fox notes, Osorio (Remorse) is an "early treatment" of this theme, which Coleridge again used in The Ancient Mariner:²⁷ the idea that every living entity is responsible for all other living entities. Coleridge also shows in the play his passion for liberty and his disdain of organized religion.

Romantic Elements

Remorse contains many of the elements associated with the Romantic movement. One Romantic element is obvious from the beginning of the play--the Gothic setting. The scenes include the seacoast of Granada; a wild and tumultuous terrain; a hall with armor, an altar with incense, and melancholy background music; a chapel with painted windows; a cavern; and a dungeon. The play is removed in time and place from Coleridge's England, the events taking place in Spain during the Inquisition and the civil wars with the Moors. Coinciding with the setting is the use of magic and the supernatural, and the statement of Teresa's lack of faith in organized religion. As Ordonio says, "She hath no faith in Holy Church, 'tis true/ Her lover schooled her in some newer

²⁶ For Wordsworth's interest in this theme, see the discussion in John Jones, The Egotistical Sublime: A History of Wordsworth's Imagination (London: Chatto & Windus, 1964), p. 54; also Herbert Read, Wordsworth (London: Faber & Faber, Ltd., 1930), p. 12.

²⁷ Fox, p. 267.

nonsense" (II.i.35-36). Of Teresa's belief in the supernatural, Ordonio adds:

Yet still a tale of spirits works upon her.
She is a lone enthusiast, sensitive,
Shivers, and cannot keep the tears in her eye;
And such do love the marvelous too well
Not to believe it. We will wind up her fancy
With a strange music that she knows not off--
With fumes of frankincense, and mummery. (II.i.36-42)

Another Romantic element is the insistence upon psychological motivation. Alvar did not seek revenge, but rather "Remorse! That I should save him from himself" (I.i.19). This is an unusual thought, purely Romantic, not universal. It is a theme not used to provoke common interest.

The love of freedom is also incorporated in the play, and the Inquisition is pictured as evil. The Moorish woman, Alhadra, tells how her baby almost died when they were imprisoned by the Inquisition, and she proclaims that her husband would die if he were sent to prison:

A month's imprisonment would kill him
•
With gentle heart
He worships nature in the hill and valley,
Not knowing what he loves, but loving all. (I.ii.241-45)

The Romantic faith in nature is further brought out in Alhadra's lines:

Know you not
What nature makes you mourn, she bids you heal?
Great evils ask great passions to redress them.
(I.ii.227-30)

Contemporary Criticism

Although Remorse was a relatively successful stage production (having a run of twenty-eight nights, which was

considered a good record at the time), very little has been written about it. In a review of the stage production, The Times of London on January 25, 1813, commented that the play was too long (it lasted five hours), the plot was dull and lacking in reality, and the characters were "flat and declamatory."²⁸ A later reviewer called Remorse a work of great poetic grandeur primarily because of its metaphysical connotations; however, he stated "we confess that we are rather surprised that it should ever have been popular on stage. The plot has radical errors, and is full of improbabilities." He further said, "Greater defects than these may be overlooked. . . . the character of Ordonio is the masterly conception . . . but to be duly appreciated it must not merely be seen, but studied." In conclusion, he recommended Remorse to the reader and expressed the belief that it would "have success in the closet."²⁹

Lord Byron supported the play, and it was largely through his influence that it was produced. Byron believed it to "depict tragic passion," not horrific incident.³⁰ In fact, Miss Radley states, Byron wrote to Coleridge that "we have had nothing to mention in the same breath as Remorse for very many years."³¹

According to Derwent Coleridge, S. T. Coleridge remodelled

²⁸ Radley, p. 98.

²⁹ Review of The Remorse: A Tragedy by S. T. Coleridge, Quarterly Review, XI (April & July, 1814), 188-90.

³⁰ Chew, Dramas of Lord Byron, p. 10.

³¹ Radley, p. 103.

Osorio as Remorse with the hope of making the play a more effective presentation for the stage, but even then it was still more "adapted for mental representation than for a visible stage production." He concluded that as poetry "Remorse has long taken a place in the standard literature of the country."³²

In referring to the play in an 1813 letter to Southey, S. T. Coleridge himself said he thought the two best qualities of the play were the simplicity and unity of its plot and the metrics, Miss Radley observes.³³

Modern Criticism

Modern critics, likewise, have paid little attention to Remorse. One important critic, Samuel C. Chew, states that Remorse stands out in pleasing contrast to the typical stage play of the time. He believes it to have many meritorious passages. However, Chew feels, Coleridge singles out one passion and tries to have it override the complexity of human emotions. Coleridge adopts the emphasis on motive found in most Romantic drama, and, consequently, the action is stagnated by long stretches of dialogue, Chew claims. In Coleridge's conception, spiritual and psychological progress is presented through dialogue.³⁴ Nicoll reiterates Chew's idea

³² Works of Coleridge, p. vi.

³³ Radley, p. 102.

³⁴ Chew, Dramas of Lord Byron, p. 10.

by stating that for Coleridge it was the abstract passion that counted.³⁵

In Miss Radley's opinion, the play is plodding and melodramatic, and many actions are unbelievable. She finds the plot "confused and lacking in focus" and not likely to please present-day readers. She does believe, however, that Scene i in Act IV (the scene in the cavern) is memorable because of its portrayal of evil through Gothic elements. When Coleridge saw this scene performed, Miss Radley says, he found it difficult to believe that he had "created such a distillation of evil."³⁶

Like Miss Radley, Fletcher finds the play ill-suited for modern audiences, although he thinks the dramas of both Wordsworth and Coleridge were good for their time. It is his opinion that Remorse has "poetic art," but the frequent monologues, the many shifts of scenes, and the "absurd action" are detrimental to the drama.³⁷

Beer, too, feels that the modern reader will have little sympathy with a drama in which "innocence, by virtue of its own innate appeal, must necessarily awaken remorse in the evil doer."³⁸

³⁵ Allardyce Nicoll, A History of English Drama: 1660-1900, Vol. IV: Early Nineteenth Century Drama (Cambridge, England: University Press, 1955), p. 193.

³⁶ Radley, pp. 99-102.

³⁷ Richard M. Fletcher, English Romantic Drama 1795-1843: A Critical History (New York: Exposition Press, 1966), pp. 64-69.

³⁸ J. R. Beer, Coleridge, The Visionary (New York: Collier Books, 1962), p. 206.

Evaluation

Remorse was the only poetic drama of the major Romantic poets to have a successful run on the stage. However, the tragedy did not elevate the standards of drama mainly because Coleridge succumbed to the vogue of the day--namely, German sensationalism and Gothic melodrama.

There are other flaws in the play which were the result of the concepts of the time. One fault, for example, is the idea of a play's being written to distinguish a certain "passion." In Remorse, Coleridge wrote a play based upon the passion of remorse, and fit the characters and actions to draw out this emotion. This technique results in the actions' being contrived to fit the emotion; consequently, the actions and characters are unbelievable. Similarly, this concept of writing about a certain "passion" leads to the actors' revealing themselves through their thoughts, resulting in long stretches of dialogue rather than action.

Furthermore, at least in this specific play, the reader's interest is not engaged, for Alvar's intention is to arouse remorse in his brother rather than to seek revenge. In addition, the action takes place in a land far removed in time and place, and the plot to arouse remorse thus appears weak and unsuitable. It seems that Coleridge had a faulty value judgment on two counts: one is the theme of remorse for a play of this nature and setting; the second is the contriving of a play to fit the theme of remorse when it seems that the universal human experience in this instance would be revenge.

The success of the play originates probably from the fact that some suspense is incorporated in fairly good fashion, and some degree of irony is involved. However, the suspense is not one of conflict, of what will happen to the protagonist or how it will end, but rather the melodramatic suspense of when a certain action will occur, or when the hero will be discovered. The suspense appears to be contrived and coincidental, not gained by cause and effect.

Any great tragedy will contain either of two things, and usually both: a memorable story in which some universal essence of man is revealed, or some memorable passages which alter the viewers' or readers' aspect of these circumstances. Remorse contains neither: it does not alter the manner in which the reader views reality and it does not show any truth or reveal a universal aspect of man. The play does not ring true as to the nature of man or his character.

CHAPTER V

THE CENCI BY PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY

One of the most important works of Percy Bysshe Shelley, and one which is considered by some to be his greatest, is The Cenci,¹ Shelley's first attempt in the field of drama and his only drama written explicitly with the hopes of stage production.² In referring to The Cenci, Shelley wrote in a letter to his friend Thomas Love Peacock:

I am exceedingly interested in the question of whether this attempt of mine will succeed or no. I am strongly inclined to the affirmative at present, founding my hopes on this, that as a composition it is certainly not inferior to any of the modern plays that have been acted, with the exception of Remorse; that the interest of its plot is incredibly greater and more real.³

All attempts Shelley made for the presentation of The Cenci during his lifetime were unsuccessful, however, for it was not performed on the stage until 1886 by the Shelley Society.⁴ The first performance took place at Covent Garden,

¹ Ernest Sutherland Bates, A Study of Shelley's Drama The Cenci (New York: Columbia University Press, 1903), p. 1.

² The Complete Poetical Works of Shelley, ed. George Edward Woodberry (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1901), p. 206. (Hereinafter referred to as Works of Shelley.) The quotations from The Cenci used in this study are taken from this edition.

³ Ibid., p. 207.

⁴ Ibid., p. 206.

with Alma Murray in the role of Beatrice.⁵ The next production was not until 1921, at which time John Barrymore was a member of the cast.⁶ In 1922 it was produced by the New Theatre, with Sybil Thorndike as Beatrice, and in 1947 it was performed on radio, King-Hele states. The most recent presentation was from April to June, 1959, at the Old Vic Theatre.⁷

Primarily, the early efforts for the play's production were stymied because of the prudish attitudes of the censors of the day,⁸ for the play involved incest. The Cenci was severely attacked by the critics of Shelley's time because of its supposed moral degeneracy as well as the moral degeneracy of the author, Bates observes. Like Byron's Cain, it was denounced mainly for its subject matter, not for its dramatic worth.⁹ Shelley, however, claimed he wished to present no moralizing as he did in most of his poetry, stating that "The Cenci is a work of art; it is not colored by my feelings nor obscured by my metaphysics."¹⁰ He said that he tried to present in the play what he thought would be the true reactions of the characters involved.¹¹

⁵ Desmond King-Hele, Shelley: The Man and the Poet (New York: Thomas Yosleff Publishers, 1960), p. 135.

⁶ Walter Edwin Peck, Shelley: His Life and Work, Vol. II: 1817-1822 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1927), p. 123.

⁷ King-Hele, p. 135.

⁸ Robert F. Whitman, "Beatrice's 'Pernicious Mistake' in The Cenci," PMLA, LXXIV (June, 1959), 249.

⁹ Bates, pp. 11-13.

¹⁰ Works of Shelley, p. 208.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 210.

Facts of Composition

Shortly after he arrived in Italy in 1818, Shelley received a manuscript of the story of the Cenci family and saw in it the dramatic possibilities; later on, in Rome in 1819, he found that the legend of the family was already well-known and a topic of great interest.¹² He visited the Colonna and Doria palaces, where portraits of Beatrice, the heroine of The Cenci, were hung,¹³ and became enraptured with the portraits, which he described as follows: "a fixed and pale composure upon the features; she seems sad and stricken down in spirit, yet the despair thus expressed is lightened by the patience of gentleness."¹⁴ It is in this light that Shelley represents Beatrice in the play--a tragic heroine, a victim of fate and circumstances.¹⁵

Although Shelley believed the legend of the manuscript was historically accurate, this was not so.¹⁶ The manuscript that Shelley was handed portrayed Count Francesco Cenci as a sadistic tyrant, and Beatrice, his daughter, as the victim of

¹² Bates, pp. 3-4. (In note 2 on page 3 of his book, Bates points out that in the 1839 editions of The Cenci, Mrs. Shelley erroneously stated Shelley first received the manuscript in Rome in 1819.)

¹³ Works of Shelley, p. 206. (In notes 1 and 2 on page 4 of his book, Bates claims that the supposed portrait of Beatrice Cenci actually hung in the Barberini Palace and not the Colonna Palace as both Shelley and Mrs. Shelley said. Bates also notes that there is some doubt about the authenticity of the portrait.)

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 211.

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 210-11.

¹⁶ Bates, p. 31.

cruel circumstances.¹⁷ Actually, Cenci was a terrible man, but Beatrice was also involved in many crimes and intrigues.¹⁸ Nonetheless, Shelley portrays Beatrice as he believed her to be, an innocent and tragic heroine driven inexorably to her fate.¹⁹

In his introduction to the play, Woodberry observes that Shelley began work on the tragedy on May 14, 1819, and finished it August 8, 1819. In a letter dated July, 1819, to his friend Peacock, Shelley asked him to try to obtain the presentation of the play at Covent Garden. He wanted Miss O'Neil, the great actress, to play Beatrice, and Edmund Kean to play Count Cenci. However, Mr. Harris, the manager of Covent Garden, turned down the play because of its subject matter. Shelley had 250 copies of the drama printed in Italy. These, the first edition, came out in London in 1820.²⁰

Plot Summary

The story of The Cenci, Shelley says in the Preface, came "from the archives of the Cenci Palace at Rome and contains a detailed account of the horrors which ended in the extinction of one of the noblest and richest families of that city, during the Pontificate of Clement VIII, in the year 1599."²¹

¹⁷ Works of Shelley, p. 209.

¹⁸ Bates, pp. 32-33.

¹⁹ Works of Shelley, p. 210.

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 206-07.

²¹ Ibid., p. 209.

Although he thought the manuscript was historically correct, he "exercised a large artistic liberty" in dramatizing the narrative.²²

In The Cenci, Shelley, like most Romantic dramatists, tries to depict passions and abstract thoughts, giving a psychological account of the individual through dialogue.²³ Specifically in The Cenci, he examines the passion of revenge against an intolerable crime. Since much of the criticism of The Cenci involves the actions of Beatrice, it is necessary, in addition to giving the plot summary, to discuss Beatrice's actions.

Act I introduces Francesco Cenci, the Count, who, by paying the Pope, has kept his crimes unpunished. Cenci's character is well-portrayed in a speech he makes to Camillo, a messenger of the Pope:

All men delight in sensual luxury;
 All men enjoy revenge, and most exult
 Over the tortures they can never feel,
 Flattering their secret peace with other's pain.
 But I delight in nothing else. I love
 The sight of agony, and the sense of joy,
 When this shall be another's and that mine;
 And I have no remorse and little fear,
 Which are, I think, the checks of other men. (I.i.75-85)

He goes on to relate how earlier in life he derived enjoyment from killing a man but later found satisfaction came more from killing the spirit rather than the body of people. Cenci is

²² Bates, p. 34.

²³ Samuel C. Chew, The Dramas of Lord Byron: A Critical Study (New York: Russell and Russell, Inc., 1964), p. 10. (Hereinafter referred to as Dramas of Lord Byron.)

the typical villain of Romantic drama. He is so totally evil that he is the personification of evil. He is a cruel, sadistic man, who has no fear of retribution because of his great wealth and papal influence. Cenci actually is so wicked that he lacks credence; it seems that his unbelievability would lead to a weakness in the drama were it not based upon fact.

In Act I, Scene ii, Beatrice is introduced speaking to Orsino, a priest who loves her. Beatrice talks of her father, and it is here that the first conflict is unfolded. She says:

Great God! that such a father should be mine!
But there is mighty preparation made,
And all our kin, the Cenci, will be there,
And all the chief nobility of Rome. (I.ii.54-57)

No one, however, believes Beatrice and her family have been suffering evil deeds from the Count. Even Orsino says that "in all this there is much exaggeration" (I.ii.75).

In Act I, Scene iii, everyone is brought to a feast given by the Count at which all the guests remark how mirthful Cenci looks. Cenci speaks and tells why he is glad:

My disobedient and rebellious sons
Are dead! (I.iii.43-44)

This statement shocks everyone into seeing the true nature of the Count, and Beatrice supplicates the guests to take her and the family away from Cenci. Fearing Cenci's great power, however, the guests ignore her request and leave. The act ends with a quarrel between Beatrice and Cenci during which Cenci vows to cure her insolence.

The first act of The Cenci thus exhibits some good dramatic technique. The tension is built between Beatrice and her father, and their characters are revealed. Furthermore,

Beatrice states that she has attempted to change Cenci by "patience, love and tears" (I.iii.115) and by prayers, but none of these have succeeded. Then, at the end of Act I, Cenci threatens Beatrice, thereby setting the stage for the rest of the action.

The next day, Act II, there is a noticeable difference in the character of Beatrice. Cenci has threatened her and now she fears him; she listens for his footsteps and appears altered in her demeanor. Lucretia notices this change:

So daughter, . . .
How pale you look; you tremble, and you stand
Wrapped in some fixed and fearful meditation,
As if one thought were overstrong for you. (II.i.28-31)

Beatrice apparently is contemplating suicide, for she says:

'Twere better not to struggle any more
. . . before the worst comes of it,
'Twere wise to die; it ends in that at last.
(II.i.54-56)

In this manner Shelley introduces the reality that the heaviness of Cenci's tortures have forced upon Beatrice.

Until this time Beatrice had been the protecting shield for the rest of her family against the Count. However, the Count has now gained mastery over Beatrice, as shown when Cenci enters the room and Beatrice cries, "Hide me, O God!" (II.i.111) Count Cenci tells his family to prepare to leave for the Castle of Petrella where all his crimes will be safely hidden.

Act III begins with Beatrice's staggering in and speaking:

Reach me that handkerchief!--My brain is hurt;
My eyes are full of blood; just wipe them for me.
I see but indistinctly. (III.i.1-3)

Apparently, although it is never mentioned, the Count has sexually attacked her the night before. Beatrice comes to the conclusion that the only way to avenge this atrocity is by murdering the Count. Orsino and Lucretia both try to dissuade her, Orsino saying, "Accuse him of the deed/ And let the law avenge thee" (III.i.152-53). But Beatrice does not agree, for in her past experience she has never observed any justice. This is the climax of the drama--Beatrice's decision that murder, rather than faith in justice, alone will suffice. It is what has been called her "pernicious mistake," her tragic flaw.²⁴

Resuming her composure, Beatrice plans for Cenci's murder while they are moving to the Petrella Castle. She says of the assigned place, a passage which is often cited as particularly good imagery:

But I remember
Two miles on this side of the fort, the road
Crosses a deep ravine; 'tis rough and narrow,
And winds with short turns down the precipice;
And in its depth there is a mighty rock,
Which has, from unimaginable years,
Sustained itself with terror and with toil
Over a gulf, and with the agony
With which it clings seems slowly coming down;
Even as a wretched soul hour after hour
Clings to the mass of life; yet, clinging, leans,
And, leaning, makes more dark the dread abyss
In which it fears to fall; beneath this crag,
Huge as despair, as if in weariness,
The melancholy mountain yawns. (III.i.245-56)

Giacomo, one of Cenci's sons, is also contemplating parricide, and now Beatrice's plight has given him a reason to act. As

²⁴See, for example, Whitman's article and Shelley's Preface in the Works of Shelley, p. 210.

Giacomo, Beatrice, and Orsino discuss the murder, Beatrice assures everyone it is a moral act.

Act IV finds the Count in the castle. He has thus far escaped all plans to kill him. Cenci tells Lucretia that he wishes to poison and corrupt the soul of Beatrice and he sends a servant to summon her. When Beatrice refuses to come, Cenci curses her and then retires to his chamber. In the meantime, Beatrice has hired two assassins, Olimpio and Marzio, to kill Cenci. They murder him in his sleep and throw his body over the balcony.

Shortly after the murder, Savella, a messenger from the Pope arrives. He discovers the murder and finds a letter on Marzio implicating Beatrice. The irony of this scene is that Savella has brought a proclamation from the Pope for the execution of Cenci. Upon being confronted with the letter, however, Beatrice denies her guilt, and so all of the suspects are taken to Rome for questioning.

During Act V the problem of Beatrice's character is brought to focus. The trial begins, and Marzio, threatened with torture, implicates Beatrice. But Beatrice denies knowing him and makes a plea so guiltless that Marzio denies her part in the murder. As Marzio dies upon the rack, Beatrice seemingly feels no compassion for him. This is one of the ambiguities of her character. If she was so pure and innocent, driven to murder only by an unexcusable crime, how could she permit Marzio to die a horrible death? There are two opinions on this matter. One opinion, says Whitman, is that Beatrice

is a gentle, good girl driven to justifiable homicide, and in this light it is easy to imagine her as the Shelleyan heroine rebelling against tyranny and oppression. The other interpretation, Whitman states, is that she permitted Marzio to be put to death in order to protect herself. However, she considered herself innocent, for she actually saw herself as the instrument of a higher deity.²⁵

Then Lucretia and Giacomo are put on the rack, whereupon they admit their guilt and beg Beatrice to confess also rather than face torture. Beatrice finally exclaims:

I shall deny no more.
If ye desire it thus, thus let it be,
And so an end of all. Now do your will;
No other pains shall force another word. (V.iii.86-89)

Thus Beatrice is condemned to die, even though she cannot believe she is to die so young, especially since she believes in her essential innocence.

Shelley's Thoughts

In presenting the story of the Cenci family, Shelley sought to be as objective as possible. He stated: "I have avoided with great care in writing the play the introduction of what is commonly called mere poetry."²⁶ Consequently, contrary to most of Shelley's writings, The Cenci is not an impassioned outburst of poetic philosophy, but rather an attempt at dramatic composition²⁷ on a plane far above the

²⁵Whitman, p. 249.

²⁶Works of Shelley, p. 210.

²⁷Bates, p. 2.

common melodramas of the day. The play is Shelleyan in that it intellectualizes the question of justifiable homicide. Shelley believed Beatrice wrong because she sought revenge. In Shelley's view, she should have forgiven the injustices done her and reciprocated with love and kindness. Shelley said, however, that revenge was necessary in order to make Beatrice a tragic heroine²⁸ because a tragic heroine suffers an inexorable fate. Thus Beatrice brought her fate upon herself, yet the reader feels she was justified in what she did. But in his own belief, Shelley thought that Beatrice should be punished, for he stated that "the fit return to make to the most enormous injuries is kindness and forbearance and a resolution to convert the injurer from his dark passions by peace and love."²⁹ Therefore, Beatrice is sentenced to death in Shelley's version of the story (as in the manuscript), but he does not moralize about the fact of her punishment.

Romantic Elements

Some elements of the Romantic movement are evident in The Cenci. Especially clear is a plea for freedom from social and ecclesiastical repression. Shelley shows in The Cenci his disdain for organized religion and social tyranny brought about through papal power. Cenci, because of his wealth, was granted dispensations and was unpunished for his evil deeds until the end. Similarly, Gothic elements are readily seen,

²⁸ Works of Shelley, p. 210.

²⁹ Ibid.

particularly in the character of Cenci, in the use of old castles, and in the remoteness of time and place for the setting of the play. As Thorndike notes, however, this leads to a removal from realism and an abstraction from the life of the people of the time.³⁰

In accordance with the idealistic or Romantic theory of tragedy, Shelley "delineates an individual passion"³¹ and tries to show a spiritual or psychological struggle through dialogue.³² In Moses' view, this "sacrifices at crucial moments the external action for the spiritual struggle . . . it is too full of comment on life."³³ This technique stagnates the action and causes The Cenci to be essentially unactable.³⁴ Bates, however, believes that the "opportunities are there for acting of the highest order," at least in the roles of the major characters.³⁵

Contemporary Criticism

Because the play was not produced upon the stage until 1886, contemporary criticism was based upon copies of the play itself. Leigh Hunt, to whom the dedication of The Cenci was made, gave the first review. According to Bates, Hunt

³⁰ Ashley H. Thorndike, Tragedy (New York: Cooper Square Publications, 1965), p. 355.

³¹ Ibid., p. 358.

³² Chew, Dramas of Lord Byron, p. 10.

³³ Montrose J. Moses, British Plays from the Restoration to 1820 (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1929), p. 854.

³⁴ Chew, Dramas of Lord Byron, p. 10.

³⁵ Bates, p. 60.

stated in the Examiner on March 19, 1820 that the play was "the greatest dramatic production of the day." But a review in the Literary Gazette of April 1, 1820, Bates says, called it immoral, abominable, and atheistic, and claimed that "when we reached the last stage of the play, our minds were so impressed with its odious and infernal character that we could not believe it written by a mortal being for the gratification of his fellow-creatures on this earth." Bates further points out that the Monthly Magazine (April, 1820, No. 338, p. 260) remarked that the play was intended to arouse terror but actually aroused "only horror and disgust." The New Monthly Magazine (May 1, 1820, XIII, 550-53), Bates observes, objected to the bad taste and immorality of the subject matter and found the character of Beatrice unadmirable, stating:

Instead of avowing the deed, and asserting to justice, as would be strictly natural for one who had committed such a crime for such a cause--she tries to avoid death by the meanest arts of falsehood, and encourages her accomplices to endure the extremities of torture rather than implicate her by confession.

By Bates account, the London Magazine (May, 1820, I, 546-55) felt that the dramatic deficiencies of the tragedy were caused by the "fundamental immorality of the writer." The magazine further declared that a man such as Cenci should not be treated in drama and that the drama itself showed a "radical foulness of moral complexion." The reviewer did, however, find literary merit in some of the passages.³⁶

Leigh Hunt, though, defended The Cenci against its censurers, Bates notes. Hunt argued against the adverse criticism

³⁶ Ibid., pp. 11-13.

stemming from the subject matter, stating that "the moral of the terrible story of 'The Cenci,' . . . is a lesson against the enormities arising . . . from long-indulged self-will, from the impunitiess of great wealth and authority, and tyrannical and degrading notions of the Supreme Being." In defending Beatrice against her detractors, Hunt contended that the act for which Beatrice vowed vengeance was so horrible that she did not admit it actually happened. He also praised numerous passages which he considered worthy of literary note.³⁷

Bates also calls attention to two criticisms that appeared in 1821. The reviewer in the Monthly Review (February, 1821, XCIV, 161-68), although believing The Cenci had passages of literary power, attacked it as being in bad taste, calling it extravagant and wild. But probably the most vehement attack on The Cenci, Bates maintains, appeared in Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine (December, 1821, X, 696-700), which stated that the situation of the play was such that "in a true poet, might awaken a noble succession of distressful thought . . . in Percy Bysshe Shelley works up only this frigid rant."³⁸

While other writers of the period, for the most part, responded more favorably to The Cenci than to some of Shelley's other works,³⁹ it must be remembered that all the contemporary criticism was based upon a reading of the play, not a production of it.

³⁷ Ibid., pp. 13-14.

³⁸ Ibid., pp. 14-15.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 16.

Modern Criticism

The Cenci was finally presented on the stage by the Shelley Society on May 7, 1886, and was received enthusiastically by the audience.⁴⁰ George Bernard Shaw, who attended the performance, said The Cenci

is a failure in the sense in which we call an experiment with a negative result a failure. But the powers called forth by it were so extraordinary that many generations of audiences will probably submit to having the experiment repeated on them, in spite of the incidental tedium. And if the play be ever adequately acted, the experiment will not even be temporarily fatiguing to the witness.⁴¹

The theatrical critics, however, reacted with "horror, disgust, and weariness," Bates observes. He contends that most of them criticized the play "primarily on moral, and only secondarily on dramatic grounds, and the dramatic objections were often dragged in for the manifest purpose of bolstering up the moral prejudice."⁴² According to King-Hele, William Archer in the World commented that upon reading The Cenci one could see Shelley's abilities as a dramatist, but upon seeing it performed one became aware of the play's deficiencies.⁴³

In his investigation of The Cenci, made some years after the first performance, Bates maintains that The Cenci is the least studied of Shelley's major works.⁴⁴ He claims that

⁴⁰ Ibid., pp. 26-27.

⁴¹ Bert O. States, Jr., "The Cenci as a Stage Play," PMLA LXXV (March, 1960), 148, quoting George Bernard Shaw, Our Corner, June 1, 1886, pp. 371-72.

⁴² Bates, pp. 28-29.

⁴³ King-Hele, p. 135.

⁴⁴ Bates, p. 1.

while the literary excellence of the play has been assumed and the dramatic qualities have been neglected, much of the critical attention has been focused on the major characters of the drama.⁴⁵

Of the more recent critics, Allardyce Nicoll argues that as drama The Cenci is mediocre because the characterization of Beatrice makes her unbelievable and the long lines of dialogue slow down the action.⁴⁶ However, Nicoll comments, The Cenci is "the most beautiful thing given to us by the poetic dramatists."⁴⁷ Thorndike says it is "the only positive presentation of an idealistic tragedy,"⁴⁸ and King-Hele contends it has all the necessary requirements of a tragedy: "the sense of inevitability, tension, and characters of tragic stature."⁴⁹ As a stage play, it has been thought by some critics to be a good drama for acting,⁵⁰ but others believe it fails due to the spiritual action taking precedence over

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 21.

⁴⁶ Allardyce Nicoll, British Drama (5th ed., rev.; New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1962), p. 214.

⁴⁷ Allardyce Nicoll, A History of English Drama, 1660-1900, Vol. IV: Early Nineteenth Century Drama (Cambridge, England: University Press, 1955), p. 197.

⁴⁸ Thorndike, p. 360.

⁴⁹ King-Hele, p. 128.

⁵⁰ See Bates, p. 60; "The Cenci as a Stage Play," PMLA, LXXV (March, 1960), 147-49 in which Marcel Kessel argues this point and cites Kenneth N. Cameron and Horst Frenz in "The Stage History of Shelley's The Cenci," PMLA, LX (December, 1945), 1080-1105; and Arthur C. Hicks and K. Milton Clarke, A Stage Version of Shelley's Cenci (Caldwell, Idaho: Caxton Printers, 1945), pp. 28-29.

external action, causing long stretches of dialogue.⁵¹ These lengthy declamatory speeches slow down the action and bore modern audiences.⁵² King-Hele, too, finds the drama weakened by the use of the long soliloquies. In addition, he thinks the conversations seem contrived and the scene changes are too frequent. He believes the play is not successful because Shelley followed contemporary theatrical conventions.⁵³ Bates claims that Shelley failed in not understanding his audience and in not being able to handle dramatic requirements; he says, however, that Shelley was extremely successful with his characterizations.⁵⁴

Generally, modern critics agree that The Cenci is the best drama of the early nineteenth century. According to Peck, Swinburne considered The Cenci "the greatest blank verse tragedy since Shakespeare." Peck agrees that in "its simplicity, its naturalness, and the variety and beauty of the blank verse, it is a great achievement." He concludes, however, that it must be ranked in the category of a great closet drama rather than a drama to be acted.⁵⁵ King-Hele believes The Cenci the

⁵¹ Moses, p. 854. In "The Cenci as a Stage Play," PMLA, LXXV (March, 1960), 147-49 Bert O. States, Jr., replying to Marcel Kessel in the same article, clarifies his wording in "Addendum: The Stage History of Shelley's The Cenci," PMLA, LXXII (September, 1957), 633-44, stating that it still leaves much to be desired as a play for acting because it has so many major flaws.

⁵² Peck, p. 122.

⁵³ King-Hele, pp. 126-27.

⁵⁴ Bates, pp. 97-98.

⁵⁵ Peck, p. 123.

"best serious English play written between 1790-1890."⁵⁶ As

Bates says:

In spite of its defects, "The Cenci" remains a great work of art. Although Shelley failed, through ignorance and incapacity, in his initial purpose of writing a play suitable for the stage, he succeeded, through his deep emotional and imaginative sympathy with his subject, in writing a dramatic poem which must take rank among the chief English literary works of his era.⁵⁷

Evaluation

That Shelley, the most lyrical and least dramatically inclined of the major Romantics, wrote what many critics consider the best tragedy of the early nineteenth century is paradoxical. Shelley is praised for intense lyrical subjectivity, and criticized for his lack of objectivity. Shelley realized this and in writing The Cenci he tried not to let his philosophies interfere with the dramatic conflicts. However, any literary work is, to some extent, influenced by the age during which it is written and, of course, by the philosophies of the writer. Thus, any evaluation should first of all attempt to view The Cenci as an entity within itself, and then reveal how the age itself and the personality of the author helped or hindered the work. What qualities does The Cenci incorporate that rate it so highly among the early nineteenth century dramas, yet cause it to remain virtually unknown?

Shelley meant the theme of the play to represent the idea

⁵⁶ King-Hele, p. 127.

⁵⁷ Bates, p. 103.

that a person should forgive all wrongs done to him and respond with an attitude of love. This, of course, is why Beatrice was mistaken in seeking revenge, according to Shelley. But her punishment is contrived and made coincidental through the arrival of the Pope's messenger to punish Cenci at exactly the same time as Cenci's murder. Furthermore, the characterization of the Count indicates that no amount of love or forgiveness would change him. Consequently, at the juncture during which Beatrice plans the murder, it seems to the reader that she has no alternative. Shelley, therefore, had no opportunity to work his theme into the fabric of the drama in a manner that would be plausible.

The characterization of the Count is another factor detracting from the drama. He is a melodramatic villain, too monstrous to be real, and his motivations are unbelievable. There is no verisimilitude in a drama when a man of such character is used. He lives purely to inspire terror in others; there is no tragic flaw or human motivation, merely a sadistic villainy. As a result, there is no conflict of will between protagonists; the reader is presented pure evil in the form of Cenci, which evil is to be destroyed. The motivation of the Count is thus not logical, but melodramatic.

Furthermore, in any play, the characters should not drastically alter their characters unless such changes are readily explainable. Beatrice's refusal to save the assassin's life by confessing her guilt is not in character, and this facet of her personality is not understandable within the framework of the play. As soon as the reader reaches this part, he is

momentarily at a loss to explain this seeming reversal of personality.

Any tragedy which is great should reveal something of human nature. This is the area in which The Cenci is weakest. The Count, as stated before, is melodramatic and therefore difficult to accept as real. Shelley's major point, according to him, was to reveal that love and forgiveness, not revenge, should rule a person. This point is not shown in the play. The reader does not condemn Beatrice, as he would if Shelley's theme were well-taken. Shelley, however, does bring out several universal themes, such as the frailties of the Church, the question of justifiable homicide, and, of course, the conflict between good and evil.

Just as any age will have an impact on a contemporary author, so the early nineteenth century had an effect on Shelley and The Cenci. The Gothic setting, the Romantic themes, the use of motive over plot, the melodrama, the whole dramatic climate of the age affected The Cenci. Nevertheless, it is a good play for the closet, more because of the quality of the thought and the lyric excellence of the poetry contained in it than because of any dramatic qualities inherent in the play.

CHAPTER VI

CAIN: A MYSTERY BY GEORGE GORDON, LORD BYRON

Lord Byron was better acquainted with the intricacies of stage production and was more closely associated with the theater than any other prominent poet of the Romantic period.¹ According to Samuel Chew, while Byron was in college, he acted in many plays; moreover, he attended plays frequently throughout his life and was astute in his judgments of them. He was thoroughly familiar with the classical and English concepts of tragedy and in his journals makes reference to his interest in the theater. In his writings and poems, he also mentions the contemporary stage. When Whitbread, the manager of Drury Lane theater, committed suicide in 1814, the financiers of the theater appointed a sub-committee to oversee the productions, and in 1815 Byron was given a position on the committee. Thereafter he became increasingly active in his work relating to the theater.² As a result, Byron, who was the least subjective and most dramatically-inclined of

¹Allardyce Nicoll, A History of English Drama: 1660-1900, Vol. IV: Early Nineteenth Century Drama (Cambridge, England: University Press, 1955), p. 196.

²Samuel C. Chew, The Dramas of Lord Byron: A Critical Study (New York: Russell and Russell, Inc., 1964), pp. 31-34. (Hereinafter referred to as Dramas of Lord Byron.)

the major poets of his era, was also the most familiar with the complexities of stage production and thus was in a position to be the best dramatist of the age.³

But the contemporary English stage, with its melodramas and German horror tales, had an extremely negative effect on Byron.⁴ At one time, in fact, he vowed that he would never be associated with the stage, for he objected to the extravagance of the contemporary productions.⁵ Eventually, though, he proclaimed his intention to produce a "truly national drama,"⁶ based upon a "regular" English drama using the classical concepts of tragedy.⁷

However, there is a wide divergence of opinion regarding Byron's dramas⁸ that makes further investigation of them necessary, and since Byron, through inclination, personality, and technical knowledge, was the best equipped of the major Romantic poets to write for the stage, his failure to be a dramatist of repute will reflect to an extent the failure of the whole Romantic era in the field of drama.

Facts of Composition

During his stay in Ravenna, Byron wrote in his diary:

³ Nicoll, Early Nineteenth Century Drama, p. 157.

⁴ Chew, Dramas of Lord Byron, p. 30.

⁵ Ibid., pp. 36-37.

⁶ Ibid., p. 31.

⁷ Ibid., pp. 36-37.

⁸ Poetry, Vol. V of The Works of Lord Byron, ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge (Rev. ed.; New York: Octagon Books, Inc., 1966), p. vii. The quotations from Cain used in this study are taken from this edition.

"Pondered the subjects of four tragedies to be written. . . . 'Cain' a metaphysical subject."⁹ Furthermore, on the same day, January 28, 1821, Byron wrote in the same diary three lines entitled "Thoughts for a speech of Lucifer in the Tragedy of Cain":

Were death an Evil, would I let thee live?
Fool! Live as I live--as thy father lives,¹⁰
And thy son's sons shall live for evermore!

Despite the fact that these three lines do not appear in the finished drama, they indicate that Byron was contemplating this work before he began to write the drama proper, E. H. Coleridge says. Moreover, because of the similarities in many minor details in Byron's Cain and the German novelist Gessner's Death of Abel, E. H. Coleridge believes that Gessner's Abel, with which Byron was very familiar, was probably a source of Cain, even though, as the title of Byron's work indicates, the framework for the play is the Biblical account of Cain found in Genesis. Although these are the two primary sources of Cain, Byron took many liberties with the sources and his conception of the story differs widely from either of his known major sources.¹¹

Byron began to write the drama itself on July 16, 1821 and finished it September 9, 1821, at which time he sent a manuscript containing three of his plays--Cain: A Mystery.

⁹R. S. Babcock, "The Inception and Reception of Byron's Cain," South Atlantic Quarterly, XXVI (1927), 178.

¹⁰Poetry, pp. 199-200.

¹¹Ibid., pp. 200-02.

The Two Foscari, and Sardanapalus--to John Murray, his publisher, receiving £2710 for them.¹² Because of the author's scandalous activities and the so-called "blasphemies" contained in the drama, Cain proved to be very popular with the reading public; Murray, in fact, became involved in many law-suits dealing with pirated editions of the play.¹³

Plot Summary

In accordance with Byron's adherence to the classical conception of tragedy, the plot of Cain is kept relatively simple. Though simple, it is difficult to summarize, however, because he delineates the spiritual nature of the protagonist through psychological changes rather than through his actions. Byron characterizes Cain emotionally through dialogue and soliloquy. In conjunction with Byron's ideas of tragedy, he starts the drama "in medias res" and portrays Cain as a psychological outcast from society.

The setting for Act I is sunrise in the land without Paradise. Adam, Eve, Zillah, Adah, and Abel offer a sacrifice to God, but Cain refuses to participate because he questions the goodness and wisdom of God. He is skeptical of God because of the paradoxical way in which His wisdom and goodness have manifested themselves. Cain, in a soliloquy, asks:

'Twas His will,
And He is good. How know I that? Because
He is all-powerful, must all-good, too follow?
I judge but by the fruits--and they are bitter--
Which I must feed on for a fault not mine. (I.i.75-79)

¹² Ibid., pp. 202-03.

¹³ Babcock, p. 181.

During Cain's speech a figure approaches, a spirit described as one whose "sorrow seems half of his immortality" (I.i.97). This spirit, Lucifer, enters into a dialogue with Cain about the nature of God, His wisdom, the problem of death, and the problem of knowledge. Cain already questions these, and Lucifer serves as a catalyst for his skepticism. Cain finally asks Lucifer to teach him the answers to his questions. Lucifer agrees, but on the condition that Cain worship him rather than God. When Cain asks why he should worship one spirit instead of another, Lucifer replies, "He who bows not to him has bowed to me" (I.i.317). Cain agrees to follow Lucifer, but first, he says, he must help his wife, Adah, gather fruits. Adah instinctively mistrusts Lucifer, but in spite of her warning to choose love over wisdom Cain goes with his new master.

The next act opens with Cain and Lucifer journeying through the Abyss of Space. Lucifer shows Cain the vastness of space and makes Cain feel insignificant. Because Cain wishes to know the nature of death, they venture to Hades, where Lucifer describes the former generations that had lived on earth and the suffering to come for the future generations. Lucifer reinforces Cain's doubts and skepticism and tells him that only

One good gift has the fatal apple given,--
Your reason;--let it not be overswayed
By tyrannous threats to force you into faith.
(II.ii.459-61)

Act III, the last act, begins with Cain again on Earth and speaking with Adah about Enoch, their son. Cain wishes,

for a moment, to slay Enoch to prevent his suffering and propagating misery. Then Abel approaches and coerces Cain into offering a sacrifice to God. Cain does not wish to worship Him, but Abel finally persuades him to present an offering to the Lord. Because Cain is a tiller of the soil, he offers fruits from the earth; Abel, being a shepherd, gives the best of a flock of sheep. Cain's sacrifice is tossed down by a whirlwind, his altar demolished. Abel's fire, however, rises towards the heavens. Abel tries to persuade Cain to make an offering another time, but Cain refuses. During the argument which ensues, Cain reveals he will not worship a God who accepts blood offerings over the fruits of the earth. Cain wishes to destroy Abel's altar, but Abel stands in his way. Thereupon Cain hits him and Abel consequently dies. When the death is discovered, Cain is cursed by Eve and driven away from their home by Adam. The angel of the Lord marks Cain forever as a murderer.

Byron's Thoughts

In the view of some critics, Cain is merely another of Byron's works exhibiting the various aspects of the Byronic hero. This is true to a degree, for Cain does represent many of the facets of the Byronic hero. Cain is alienated from a society that offers him no definite place or no definite role, and by virtue of his alienation he is isolated.¹⁴ Thus he rebels against that society--"against the universal norm of

¹⁴ David Daiches, A Critical History of English Literature (New York: Ronald Press Company, 1960), II, 861.

things"¹⁵--and follows his own rules. In these aspects, then, Cain does exhibit facets of the Byronic hero.

Byron was an opponent of the dogmatic acceptance of doctrines, believing that logic should prevail over blind obedience to creed.¹⁶ This attitude is clearly delineated in Cain. Questioning, for example, the premise that underlies the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, Byron has Cain say:

The snake spoke truth; it was the Tree of Knowledge;
It was the Tree of Life; knowledge is good,
And Life is good; and how can both be evil?
(I.i.36-38)¹⁷

Throughout the play Cain questions most of the major concepts of Christian doctrine. He refuses to believe what he cannot reconcile with his understanding.¹⁸ He searches for answers to the problems of good and evil and seeks a universal truth that he is unable to resolve.¹⁹

Cain's search for knowledge also reveals "the inadequacy of man's state in his life to his conceptions."²⁰ Although man is a finite being, he is capable of infinite thoughts. Cain rejects his limited position as a human being and strives for something greater. Through Cain, Byron pleads for reason,

¹⁵ Chew, Dramas of Lord Byron, p. 149.

¹⁶ Daiches, II, 875.

¹⁷ This, of course, is Byron's interpretation of Genesis. See above, n. 11, p. 74.

¹⁸ Chew, Dramas of Lord Byron, p. 133.

¹⁹ Ashley H. Thorndike, Tragedy (New York: Cooper Square Publications, 1965), p. 359.

²⁰ Chew, Dramas of Lord Byron, p. 128.

for it is the only faculty man can trust. Cain is told by Lucifer:

One good gift has the fatal apple given,--
 Your reason;--let it not be overswayed
 By tyrannous threats to force you into faith
 'Gainst all external sense and inward feeling:
 Think and endure. (II.ii.459-63)

Romantic Elements

Many of the ideas associated with the Romantic era, as well as the motif of the Byronic hero, are found in Cain. For example, Cain is a man who luxuriates in sentimental contemplation. The action of the play, the spiritual progression of Cain's thoughts, centers about his soliloquies questioning the precepts of orthodoxy. Byron also uses, for relief in his play, a descriptive nature poetry when Cain and Lucifer travel through the Abyss of Space. Nature is very richly described and embellished in poetic ornamentation. Similarly, Byron returns to the idealized past for a setting. With the exception of the Byronic hero, probably the strongest Romantic element in the play, however, is the use of psychological characterizations and abnormal states of mind. This, of course, corresponds to Byron's conception of a "mental theatre" and the delineation of individual passion.

Contemporary Criticism

When Cain: A Mystery first appeared, it received unadulterated praise from Goethe,²¹ who said that "its beauty is

²¹ Although he does not explicitly state what influence Goethe's Faust or Marlowe's Dr. Faustus may have had on Cain, Nicoll does point out in his book British Drama, p. 214, that

such as we shall not see a second time in this world"; from Walter Scott, who commented that he "matched Milton on his own ground",²² and from Shelley, who felt that it was "apocalyptic; it is a revelation never before communicated to man," Ronald Coleman states.²³ For the most part, however, it was greeted with much alarm and indignation. Numerous pamphlets, poems, and criticisms were levelled against it, and preachers denounced it from the pulpits across all of England.²⁴ One critic in the Quarterly, Babcock states, was against Cain, for he thought it was a "deification of vice." This critic also believed the drama should have been censored because of the influence it would have on people not ready for the ideas found in it.²⁵

The reviewer in the Edinburgh Review attacked Cain on moral grounds, arguing that it would cause minds not accustomed to high thoughts to sink into impiety. Although he added that "it abounds in beautiful passages, and shows more power perhaps than any of the author's dramatical compositions,"²⁶ he objected

Byron himself was "shaped in the mould from which Marlowe's heroes were formed," and, further, that Byron's work Werner; or The Inheritance was dedicated to Goethe and clearly shows the influence of Goethe's Götz von Berlichingen.

²² Poetry, p. 204.

²³ Ronald Gregg Coleman, "Cosmic Symbolism in the Dramas of Lord Byron" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Dept. of English, Vanderbilt University, 1955), p. 10.

²⁴ Poetry, p. 202.

²⁵ Babcock, p. 184.

²⁶ "Lord Byron's Tragedies," Edinburgh Review, XXXVI (October, 1821-February, 1822), 437.

to Byron's arguing for the power of Evil but not offering a rebuttal from Deity.²⁷

Blackwood's Magazine of February 1822 reviewed Cain and criticized it as a "literary devil." According to the reviewer, "Byron shelters himself from all blame in disseminating unproved blasphemy, by asserting he cannot make Lucifer 'talk like a clergyman.'" Furthermore, the critic argued, the character of Cain and the poetic scenes in the Abyss of Space are unbelievable.²⁸

The Quarterly Review carried on the argument that Cain was a moral outrage, stating that "we are not only justified but compelled by every sense of duty, to unmask the sophisms which lurk under his poetical language."²⁹ In addition, this reviewer criticized Byron for calling the drama "a mystery" because Cain had no apparent resemblance to its prototypes.

The author of this article also derided the plot. In speaking of the journey to Hades, for example, he observed: "Hades, however, is a place in Lord Byron's description very different from all that we had anticipated." This is the only critic, however, who treated Cain from the viewpoint of dramatic technique, commenting: "The event which is the catastrophe of the drama is no otherwise than incidentally, we may say, accidentally, produced by those which precede it."³⁰ He

²⁷ Ibid., pp. 437-44.

²⁸ Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, XI (February, 1822), 215-17.

²⁹ "Lord Byron's Dramas," Quarterly Review, XXVII (April-July, 1822), 478.

³⁰ Ibid., pp. 508-13.

went on to praise the poetry of some of the passages, but asked if these lines would overcome the deficiencies of technique: the strained dialogue, the indistinct descriptions, and the characterizations. The rest of this review, like the other reviews, dealt with the problem of blasphemy and tried to uphold the side of Good.³¹

In another review of Cain, in Blackwood's, the writer branded Cain as "bald, thread-bare blasphemies." He believed that the play was "abandoned to the Radicals--and thank God, it was too radically dull to be popular even among them."³²

Thus it can be seen that, for the most part, the criticism of Cain: A Mystery, when it first appeared, consisted largely of a denunciation of Byron's philosophical concepts and a reaffirmation of orthodox faith.

Modern Criticism

Modern critical views of Cain vary widely. Fabre d'Olivet calls it "one of the most extraordinary productions of the Nineteenth Century."³³ According to Coleman, some critics believe the dramas of Byron are the most important in English literature between the seventeenth century and the present age,³⁴ and that together Cain and Shelley's The Cenci are the

³¹ Ibid., pp. 513-24.

³² Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, XII (July-December, 1822), 712.

³³ Fabre d'Olivet, Cain: A Dramatic Mystery in Three Acts, trans. Nayan Louise Redfield (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1923), p. 6.

³⁴ Coleman, p. 38.

greatest dramas of the nineteenth century.³⁵ In its symbolic and allegorical presentation of allegorical questioning, Cain keeps close to the essentials of great dramatic art, Thorndike declares.³⁶ Chew, on the other hand, believes that Byron's strict adherence to classical compactness causes him to lose a great amount of effective development.³⁷ He argues that a stagnation of action evolves in a play whose emphasis is primarily on spiritual progress that must be presented by much rhetorical dialogue.³⁸ "The combination of motive and character should lead to action, instead . . . he presents a maze of conflicting thoughts not realizing such thoughts cannot be cast into a truly dramatic form," Chew contends.³⁹ But Byron does show in Cain that he is basically a tragedian, Chew declares, because the core of tragedy is "the rebellion of the individual against the universal norm of things."⁴⁰ Although considering the play extraordinary, d'Olivet, like earlier critics, criticizes it from a moralistic point of view as a "blasphemous" production.⁴¹

Possibly, though, the most astute argument used by modern critics is that the drama is removed from realism and does not

³⁵ Ibid., p. 57.

³⁶ Thorndike, p. 353.

³⁷ d'Olivet, p. 6.

³⁸ Chew, Dramas of Lord Byron, p. 43.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 10.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 153.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 149.

reflect the attitude of the great mass of people. As Nicoll states, "The greatest drama is idealistic in essence, but fundamentally it lays bare the compassions and aspirations of mankind."⁴² Cain fails to achieve this ideal because, John Drinkwater observes, it is concerned with abstract ideas⁴³--the nature of death, the problem of evil, the wisdom of God.

Evaluation

Byron's drama Cain: A Mystery is weakest on the technical side. The play begins at the conclusion of the matter and thus loses much of the conflict which should be developed. Also, because of his concept of a "mental theatre," Byron issues many long lines of dialogue and long soliloquies which stagnate the action. If Byron had been more skillful, these lengthy passages might have been more effective. Shakespeare uses many lines of poetic beauty and lyrical quality, as Byron does, but Shakespeare's declamations help to clarify the characterizations and explain the actions. Byron's poetical lines are merely good poetry; they do not develop character or lead to action.

Also, the climax of the play--the murder of Abel--strikes the viewer as irrelevant. Apparently Byron introduced this action only to adhere to the Biblical account, for the murder is not plotted or truly motivated. Rather, a difference of

⁴² Allardyce Nicoll, British Drama: An Historical Study from the Beginning to the Present Time (New York: Thomas Y. Cromwell, 1925), p. 325.

⁴³ John Drinkwater, The Pilgrim of Eternity (New York: Garden City Publishing Company, Inc., 1925), p. 312.

opinion arouses Cain's anger and causes the murder. Cain does not lead logically in its action to the climax, and consequently the climax seems contrived rather than motivated.

Another flaw is that no overt struggle exists in Cain-- only a psychological one in Cain's mind. Lucifer and Cain agree on all questions, and there is actually no contest between good and evil throughout the play. Adam and Eve both symbolize dogma, but they are never given a chance to act as a foil for Cain or oppose him. The only foil is Lucifer, but Lucifer and Cain are in agreement.⁴⁴

Nicoll states that one of Byron's flaws as a dramatist is "preoccupation with themes ill-calculated to express the spirit of the age, his themes of past times."⁴⁵ In Cain, Byron shows this: his hero is of another era and does not show the sentiments of common man. Since the drama lacks reality, one cannot have empathy with the protagonist over his solitary musings.

Most great drama, however, is profound in its universal questioning. Byron accomplishes this in Cain. The play expresses man's universal concern with good and evil, death, and man's place in the universe; but to make his point, Byron resorts to philosophical dialogue rather than to action. This technique does not make for great drama. A great drama must present the important problems in terms of contemporary human involvements rather than in mere rhetorical philosophizing.

⁴⁴ Chew, Dramas of Lord Byron, p. 130.

⁴⁵ Nicoll, Early Nineteenth Century Drama, p. 168.

By clinging to his concept of psychological penetration, Byron loses the opportunity to develop his protagonist as a universal archetype, one with which the reader or spectator can truly identify himself.

Finally, the drama is incapable of being acted primarily because of the long stretches of soliloquy and long passages of dialogue. The characters are not developed, and, as a result, they are rather shadowy. The climax is unnaturally interjected merely to satisfy the Biblical account. For the same reason Byron includes the angel's branding of Cain, and so this scene, like the scene in which Abel is killed, seems contrived rather than well motivated. However, the elements of great drama are in Cain, for many profound questions are raised and explored.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSIONS

It is evident from this study that many interrelated factors contributed to the decline of drama during the Romantic Period. The major Romantic poets were writing at a time when drama was faced with unfavorable conditions. The size of the playhouses which were permitted by law to produce legitimate drama was too large for subtle acting; as a result, the actors resorted to bombastic displays supported by extravagant scenery and spectacles. Moreover, the theater managers had dictatorial powers and catered to popular demands, putting commercialism above artistic qualifications. Furthermore, the audiences of the early nineteenth century were not appreciative of drama as an art and preferred burlesque, melodrama, and spectacles. In addition, the fine acting of the period eventually led the theaters to depend more upon acting skill for attracting people than upon good scripts. Government censorship and the rise of the novel also played a part in the decline of serious drama. Finally, the great vogue of the time was for Gothic "tales of terror" and melodramas full of sentimentality. All of these preceding factors led the Romantic poets to view the stage with some disdain, causing a separation of these poets from the theater.

Consequently, both the theater and the poets suffered--the theater from a lack of writing talent and the poets from a lack of practical experience.

It was against this background that the Romantic poets attempted to write drama which they hoped would be somewhat above the general dramatic fare of the day.

Modern critics of The Borderers reveal that, for the most part, they are concerned with the biographical revelations of the drama. They are mainly interested in determining whether or not Wordsworth accepts or refutes Godwinism in the play and what this acceptance or rejection entails in his development as a writer. The critics further point out that The Borderers deals with psychological analysis of a rhetorical nature which, as in the other Romantic dramas, leads to little action. They also claim that the verse is stilted and the plot lacks unity. Most of the critics say the characters are slight, but some believe Oswald to be a strongly delineated character. However, they all reach the conclusion that the play is unactable.

There is little contemporary criticism of Remorse available, but that which can be found shows that the reviewers agreed the plot was weak, lacked verisimilitude, and contained improbabilities. However, one critic said that the characters were not adequately developed, while another stated that the character of Ordonio in particular was developed well. The critics did concur in the fact that Remorse contained much fine poetry and that it was more acceptable as a closet drama than as a stage play.

Modern critics, likewise, feel that the plot of Remorse is weak. They feel this is due primarily to the Romantic idea of focusing upon a single passion and presenting a psychological delineation of it. This, they comment, leads to stagnated and melodramatic action. They also cite the frequent changes of scenes and the many monologues as hampering the action. They declare, too, that the theme of remorse, which was so popular in Romantic drama, is difficult for a modern audience to believe. All the critics, however, do express the opinion that Remorse does contain some excellent passages.

Thus, both contemporary and modern critics believe that the plot is not well developed and that the action does not flow easily, due to the many long dialogues and the many scene changes. Most of them feel that the motivation is also implausible, especially to the modern reader. On the other hand, they do say that the play contains some excellent poetry and does stand out above the usual stage fare of its day.

Most of the adverse contemporary criticism of The Cenci arose from the moral indignation of the reviewers at the subject matter. They called the play immoral, foul, odious, and in bad taste. Although some of them did find passages of poetic beauty and literary merit, in general, the contemporary reviewers were concerned with the morality of The Cenci and said very little about its dramatic worth.

With the performance of The Cenci in 1886, critics were given the opportunity to see it on the stage. The criticism was varied, ranging from the enthusiastic acceptance by

George Bernard Shaw to the rejection of those who found it morally and dramatically objectionable. The more recent criticism is also controversial; some critics view The Cenci as a good drama for acting while others believe it fails because of its lengthy dialogues and lack of external action. But most modern critics do agree that it is the best of all the tragedies written during the Romantic period. As a stage drama, The Cenci does have flaws, many critics claim. In modern terms, the characterization of Count Cenci is an important defect. He is a ranting, melodramatic villain and unbelievable to modern audiences. Another defect is the seeming change in Beatrice's character after the murder. Although this change can be understood in the light of Shelley's philosophy, good drama should be comprehensible in universal terms rather than in the author's philosophy. However, the critics do agree that The Cenci is an outstanding play with respect to the excellence of the poetry and the quality of thought incorporated in it.

The criticisms levelled at Cain when it was first published ranged from the high praise of Shelley and Goethe to vehement denunciations. Most of the reviewers who did not appreciate the drama attacked it on the basis that it was blasphemous, not on the basis that it was deficient in dramatic qualifications. Those that attacked it as drama declared that the characterization of Cain was unbelievable, that the climax was not foreshadowed, and that the dialogue was unreal. The majority of these critics, however, did praise it for its passages of genuine poetic power.

Modern critics are also divided in their opinions about Cain. Some say that it is a very extraordinary drama; others say it is a failure. On the whole, they believe it has the essentials of great drama, such as conflict between good and evil, rebellion of the individual against the norm, and the question of man's fate. But Cain is judged as being weak in dramatic techniques. According to these critics, Byron, in emphasizing the mental aspects of Cain's conflict, uses an inordinate amount of rhetorical declamation and thus retards the action.

Both contemporary and modern critics thus concur in their analyses of Cain: although it contains lines of poetic beauty and has the basic elements of good drama, it fails in dramatic technique. One weakness of the play issues from Byron's concept of a "mental theatre," which leads to long soliloquies and stilted action. The other major weakness is caused by Byron's failure to have the climax at the end of a logical progression. Because the murder of Abel is not foreseen by the audience, it does not have the impact which a climax should contain. Furthermore, even though Cain has the basic themes of great drama, Byron does not present them in the form of a character with whom the audience can have empathy. So the profound questions lose their force.

One of the chief flaws in Romantic drama, exemplified by the representative plays in this study, derives from the theory of drama advanced by the Romantics. They base a tragedy solely on an abstract emotion or philosophy. In addition, they do not present these through action, but rather through

dialogue alone. By explaining in words upon the stage what his state of mind is at that moment, the actor slows down the action of the play. The best dramas render inner states by actions which are universal, but the Romantic dramatists merely narrate or describe each character's psychological state.

Related to this flaw is the difficulty of finding the motivation in the plays plausible. Cain's killing of Abel, for example, seems to be an accident because there is no foreshadowing of, or progression towards, the murder. The murder should have been the major point of the play, but Byron makes the climax incidental. In The Cenci, on the other hand, Beatrice's motivation is believable, for most people in her situation would have murdered the Count. But the character of the Count is difficult to conceive as real. Too, in Remorse, Alvar's motivation is not credible in universal human terms. Although remorse was a popular Gothic theme, this emotion does not plausibly follow a provocation of this nature. The villain, Oswald, in The Borderers is the least believably motivated of all in terms of usual human experience. It is difficult to imagine a man like Oswald existing except in the realm of philosophy. One questions Oswald's purpose in duping the hero, Marmaduke; his reasons seem flimsy because they are philosophically based. Consequently, none of the plots, except that of The Cenci, is motivated from understandable emotions. A good drama can have a philosophy permeating it, but the thoughts must be expressed in terms of common human experience, not in words of abstract philosophy. As a result,

even though the Romantic writers were primarily interested in motivation, not character or plot, the motivations of the characters are, to a large extent, untenable.

One dramatic fault occurs in both The Borderers and Remorse. By having two major characters in the plays, the authors make it difficult for the reader, or audience, to decide which of the two figures is more important. Most good tragedies have only one dominant character, but in The Borderers it is almost impossible to determine whether Marmaduke or Oswald is the protagonist. Moreover, in Remorse, it is hard to focus attention on Alvar when the play centers on the remorse of Ordonio. This lack of a central figure weakens the structure of the play by forcing the reader to decide which character the author wants to be preeminent in the drama.

Another point that should be considered in connection with these dramas is that none of the protagonists is depicted in the light of the "tragic flaw" and its consequences usually associated with great tragedies. Although Cain exhibits great pride through his intellectual strivings, in Byron's view this is not a flaw; moreover, Cain's downfall is the result of an irrational act, not a causal one. Marmaduke's reversal of fortune is caused not by any particular flaw, but by his weak, vacillating character and the machinations of the villain. According to Shelley, Beatrice has a "tragic flaw" in that she does not love her fellow man enough to forgive all acts. But this concept of a "tragic

"flaw" is one not generally found in tragedies, and thus the final catastrophe does not seem justified. Alvar's unsubstantiated belief in Teresa's guilt reveals a flaw in his character, but Coleridge does not use this defect as the central motivation for the action of the drama. Although both Ordonio and Oswald exhibit a fatal pride which leads them inexorably to their deaths, they are the villains of the plays and their deaths are not tragic.

In addition, none of the leading characters in these dramas achieves the greatness and nobility of character usually associated with true tragedy. Cain is an intellectual being who, if given a reasonable motive for the murder of Abel, might have been a good tragic character. As it is, he is not a great tragic hero because he murdered on impulse, in a fit of anger. Beatrice is perhaps the most tragic of the protagonists, for her suffering and fall are plausible and, to Shelley, inevitable. However, her denial of involvement in the crime shows a lack of nobility in her character. Neither Marmaduke nor Alvar exhibit any of the greatness of spirit associated with true tragic heroes. Ordonio and Oswald both have strength of character, but, as the villains, they are evil. These dramas, thus, lack major elements of great tragedy: noble heroes with "tragic flaws" that bring about their inevitable downfall.

In general, then, the dramas of the Romantic poets were hampered by the state of the contemporary stage, by the authors' use of Romantic ideas, and by the poets' lack of

theatrical experience. As a result, the plays are weak in elements that are essential to good stage drama. Thus it can be seen why the Romantic period is considered a low point in the history of drama. However, these tragedies are important to the study of literature and drama, for they reveal the influence of the Romantic theories on the dramas of the period and show how the philosophies of an age affect its art.

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